

**Performance Of Sri Lankan Kandyan Dance
And Dance History Before 1017 AD**

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Aim of Study

This paper has been admitted studying the dance as a performance, which had been in use during the period before 1017AD, and the history of dance in that period is also included in the writing. Our main source of information on Sinhalese history is the sacred chronicle Mahavamsa. But in Mahavamsa it is mentioned about the dance and music performance, but the name of the dance style had not been mentioned clearly.

Even in the book “Sinhala Natum (dance)” compiled by Mr. M.D. Ragawan too mentioned the dance style name as ‘Sinhala’.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to convey that the dance style which has been performed during the above time period is the present Kandyan Dance.

Research Methodology

Keeping these constraints in view, we have adopted in our study, the method such as

Historical Method and Empirical Method

The historical method is mainly employed to ascertain and analyze the origin and the history of the Kandyan dance form in performance. The history and performance of dance in Sri Lanka are compiled adequately, though not comprehensively, from the data and relevant material available. The empirical method is useful in analyzing the performance aspects of Kandyan dance. Figures of musicians and dancers are very often found in temples, on sculptural friezes, and in murals. The method of data collection is through the primary sources and the secondary sources.

Scope and Limitation of the Paper

This paper deals with the Kandyan dance history in the period before 1017 AD. Kandyan dance is one of the main classical dances in Sri Lanka. Before the arrival of Prince Vijaya to Sri Lanka there was a dance style that was in use in the island of Ceylon. This paper does not mention the other classical dances and does not exceed the time period mentioned above.

Literature Survey

The origin of Sri Lankan dance goes back to the immemorial times of Aborigines and Yakkas. As said above according to Mahavamsa dance originates 2500 years ago from a magical ritual

that broke the spell on a bewitched King. It is knowledgeable, to begin with, the thin outline provided for us by historical writing and to fill in the details from the literature, where the latter seems to bear out the information found in the histories.

INTRODUCTION

Scientifically speaking, all physical and human phenomena in the universe have a certain rhythm and pattern. The rhythm is inborn in all living beings. The movements flow from the mind's action and emotion. Man has to live by the dictates of nature. He has only a little control over it. The mornings and the evenings, sun and rain, sea waves and floods all have their own rhythm. No amount of scientific progress is capable of controlling such natural phenomena. Similarly, it is difficult to control the biological functions of the body. The interaction between movements and mental activity is expressed by means of emotion.

This emotion drives human beings to perform art. The performing arts are arts such as music, dance, and drama which are performed for an audience. Artists who participate in performing arts in front of an audience are called performers. The act, the play, the concert, or other form of entertainment which is done by performers are named a performance.

Dance as a performing art form is the earliest vehicle of expressions of the innate feelings of human beings. Dance, in particular, was perceived by some people as "Imitating the animals, others the hunters, was ritual as well as a practice in the field, a drill in the technique of the hunt"¹. The later developments of ballet and drama grew out of this after a considerable period of time in human history. The dances performed during the primitive stages can be termed tribal dances which are related to hunting, functions, and experiences related to life. The change in the nature of their lifestyle also brought a change in the themes through the inclusion of agricultural functions into the dance, which often contained original tribal functions.

The island of Sri Lanka, separated from the Indian peninsula by a shallow strip of sea about twenty miles in width, falls within the precincts of Indian culture. Sri Lanka's eighteen million people reflect the nation's rich and diverse past whose ancestry goes back to the followers of Prince Vijaya who settled on the island over 2500 years ago. The inhabitants of the Island at the

¹ Kosambi, D.D., The culture and civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline, Delhi, 1976, P.No.31

time of his arrival were a mix of mainly two communities namely Yaksha and Naga; so, called because they were worshipers of demons and cobras of mythical proportions. The known history since then of the Island can be classified into 9 periods.

The history of Sri Lankan dances seems to have begun approximately 2500 years ago, but written sources we can refer to, especially in Mahavamsa. In that period two main categories of dance styles can be found dances related to religious rituals and dances related and dances related to enjoyment. This can be divided into two categories again as-Prehistorical period and the post-Buddhist period.

An ancient chronicle Mahavamsa states that when Prince Vijaya landed in Ceylon which is today, Sri Lanka in 543 BC, he heard the sound of music and dancing from a wedding ceremony.² Sri Lankan dance and its history are embedded in its paintings, sculptures, and literature. Therefore, the focus of this paper is mainly on the PERFORMANCE OF SRI LANKAN KANDYAN DANCE AND DANCE HISTORY BEFORE 1017 AD.

The traditions of dance in Sri Lanka are four-fold. The well-known tradition of Kandyan dance embraces all the typical forms of traditional dance that have survived in the central hill country of Sri Lanka. In Sinhala, this dance form is known as “Udarata Natuma” which literally means dance of upcountry. The term Kandyan Dance derived its name from the city of Kandy which was the seat of government of the last King of Sri Lanka.

CONTENT

SRI LANKAN KANDYAN DANCE

The Kandyan Dance is considered the most popular of all indigenous dance forms of Sri Lanka and is known to have its many roots in and around the regions in the central hills named Sathkorale, Udunuwara, Yatinuwara, Madinuwara, Dumbara, Hevahata, Harispaththuwa, Haguranketha, and Kothmale.

However, this dance form did not confine its practice to the regions mentioned above but spread to most of the parts of the country moreover. This art, which was invented according to the different situations in history is now connected to every event of man’s life. He uses dance to

² Ph.D. Geiger, Wilhelm., Mahavamsa, Buddhist Cultural center, 4th Edition, 2014, Page no.57

express happiness as well as to get rid of sorrow, worship gods, commemorate religious events, respect religious leaders, and accomplish aspirations. In this background, the Kandyan dance has many performance patterns of the dance.

Movements and Exercises

The Kandyan dance has a variety of cadences (saraba) each of which is identified by a given name. Accordingly, the cadence of foot movement is called “*Pa Saramba*” while the training includes arms as “*Goda Saraba*” which has to be practiced only after completion of the footwork training.

Upon completing these exercises, the practice begins in what is called “*Vattam*” and “*Vannam*” (recitals of phrases and praises). This Vattam includes 4 in number and Vannam in 18 numbers. Vattam is only the steps to be practiced according to the time measurement (tala), but Vannam is more of a performance element. The name Kandyan dance consists of four distinct types. The *Ves*, *Naiyadi*, *Pantheru* and *Udakki*. However, the term *Kandy Dance* has now come to be associated with the VES dancer in his full regalia. Therefore, to know about the Kandyan Dance one has to go back to one of the most ancient Folk ceremonies of Sri Lanka, the elaborate ritual known as the *Kohomba Yak Kankariya*. Through the period of 2500 years, the Kandyan dance has acquired dignity and individuality that has become the wonder of the world.

Instruments used in Kandyan dance

This dance depends on the musical instruments. The main percussion musical instrument in the Kandyan dance is *Gata Beraya*. It is made out of hardwood such as Jack, Ahala (Cassia Fistula), and Gansooriya (Thespesia Populnea). *Thalampota* (cymbals) a well-known musical instrument that is made out of heavy metal and of the same size are connected together by a string that is running through the center of each plate. This instrument is used by the player to keep the rhythm of the performance. *Thammattama* is also a kind of a drum some name it *Pokuru Beraya* due to its semi-spherical units attached together. This twin instrument is played with two sticks called “*Kadippuwa*”.

Costume of Kandyan Dance

In Kandyan dance the main costume is “*Ves*”. Only men are allowed to perform the Ves Dance and the costume which is worn is known as *Ves Costume*. The costume of the Ves dancer is styled, the *Su Sata Abarana*, the sixty-four ornaments. Though not all sixty-four can be counted on the person of the dancer today, about half the number has been reckoned in the gorgeous costume of the Yakdessa, the dancer.

Kohomba Kankariya- Prime Aspect of Kandyan Dance Tradition

Kohomba Kankariya is the treasure house of the Kandyan Dance. Its inception is connected to the course of Yakka woman Kuweni who was married to King Vijaya. King Vijaya was cursed by Kuweni but the curse affected King Panduwasdev who ruled the country after King Vijaya. King Malaya came to Lanka to cure King Panduwasdev who was seriously ill due to the curse said above. After the recovery from the sickness King Malaya was thinking of returning back home. But before that, he selected a Prince and transferred him to be worshipable, being given the art of the ritual which was been performed for the king.

“Kari” the word in the Sinhala language means action. “Kohomba” is the prominent god of the ritual. Their offerings to “The God Kohomba” is the main action of this ritual. It is said that the ornaments have been worn by King Malaya had come across to be the main costume for the Kandyan dance.

PRE-HISTORICAL PERIOD

The people who lived in the pre-historical period had their own practices, rituals, and beliefs of worship. ³ There are some unique sources of reference for the study of the Kandyan Dance. They can be classified as archaeological and literary evidence. The sources other than folklore and legend belonged to the period before and after the advent of Arhath Mahinda.⁴ We can assume that the people who lived in the pre-Buddhist era had their own practices and beliefs of worship.

³ http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/SSEAL/Southasia/sahist_srilanka.html.

⁴ Arhath Mahinda was a Buddhist Monk depicted Buddhist sources as bringing Buddhism to seSri Lanka.

⁵ Even prior to the arrival of Prince Vijaya there were several human communities inhabited of this land by their tribal name such as Yakka⁶, Naga,⁷ and Deva⁸.

MYTHOLOGICAL REFERENCE

There was a ruler by the name of *RAWANA* in Sri Lanka. His realm covered many regions. Valmiki's Ramayana an Indian composition written in the 4th and 2nd centuries B.C. include the fascinating story of Rama and Seetha connecting to the island of Sri Lanka. ⁹

The compositions of King Rawana, Kumara Thanthra, Nadi Pariksha, Shiva Thandava, and Udis Thanthra were called Rawana Thanthra as one unit. In this compilation, the Shiva Thandava Sthothra was compiled to elaborate on the dance of Lord Shiva with holding Damaru in his hand. ¹⁰

The story of Ramayana further narrates that King Ravana had known and mastered all forms of dance and had become the expert in every dance form which were known to the God Ishvara. Rawana was learned in Thandava and Ardhanaree the styles of dance.¹¹ One day while Ishvara was performing Bahuree, thought of cracking a joke, and he shook the mountain Mahameru. As a result, Ishwara was furious. Then King Rawana immediately composed a lyrical eulogy appraising Ishvara and recited it to please Ishwara. Being heard this eulogy and receiving many worshipful respects from Rawana and also being satisfied with Rawana's singing, Ishvara taught his all forms of dancing to Rawana appreciating Rawana's art skills. ¹²

Without any doubt and accepting legendry recordings, it is believed that Rawana was a member of the Yakka tribe and this tribal people were well civilized according to the facts given in Buddhist chronicles. ¹³

⁵ Senevirathna, Anuradha., Dance in Sri Lanka, Ceylon Tourist Board, p.7

⁶ The Mahavamsa says these members of Yakka tribe were made to settle down in Giri Island leaving their former land by the Gauthama Buddha who visited Mahiyanganaya (the place Gauthama Buddha visited Sri Lanka for the first time) before the arrival of Vijaya, it was 40 years back.

⁷ As many legends reveals Naga tribes were well civilized human who lived in Lanka very early age before the arrival of King Vijaya and followers.

⁸ There was a clan lived in Samanala the mountain, a forest domain.

⁹ Aritadasa, Senevirathna., Sri Lanka Rawana Rajadaniya, Samayawardhana Prakashakayo, 1991, p. 131-136

¹⁰ Mahinda, Vijethilaka Mathugama., Adam Sinhalayeki, Sadeepa Prakashakayo, 1999, p. 34

¹¹ Peiris, Chanasiri., Narthanaya, Vasana Printers, 2012, p. 278

¹² Sedaraman, J.E., Udarata Natum Kalawa, M.D. Gunasena and sons, 1992, p.5

¹³ Pro.Obesekara, Mirando., Rawana Amaraneeyai, Samanthi Publications, 2016, p.10

According to the history of musical instruments, it is believed that King Ravana was the first to make a violin called *Rawanahatha*.¹⁴

Mahavamsa

However, the written history of Sri Lanka begins with the civilization of the country by the people including 'Vijaya' who came from 'Lata Rata' in India.¹⁵ According to the information found in the chronicle Mahavamsa, there were some characteristics of the well-grown culture of Yakka and Naga cultures before the arrival of Prince Vijaya. So, Mahavamsa reads thus,

“As the night went on, he heard the sound of music and singing and asked the Yakkini who was lying near him what means this voice?”¹⁶

“Here there is a Yakka city called Siravasthupura and for the wedding, there is a festival. Therefore, there is this noise”

On grounds of ancestral racial and cultural heritage, the Veddas are aborigines of this island. In Sri Lanka, they can still be found in the place called Mahiyanganaya today as a small community of people. There are twelve occasions on which dances are performed by the Veddas. They are Arrow dance, Kirikoraha ceremony, Na yak ceremony, Bvambura Yaka ceremony, Pata Yaka ceremony, Dola yaka ceremony, Rahu Yaka ceremony, Wanagata Yaka ceremony, Aluth Yaka ceremony, Rueala ceremony, Kolamaduwa ceremony, Avana ceremony. The way of performing all the above does not offer much insight into the interrelationship between the Veddas dance and the Sri Lankan Kandyan dance. But the only common thing we could see here is that we had our own style of dance before the arrival of Aryans in the motherland.

As it is recorded in legends that a sort of ritual intended to evoke blessings on King Paduvasdev who suffered from a disease called “Dividoshaya” was performed. Lately, this evolved as Kohomba Kankariya occult ceremony.¹⁷ The recitations of Kohomba Kankariya in its early days was performed as an offering to an unseen power.

¹⁴ Kulathilaka, C. De S., Lankave Sangeetha Sambavaya, Lake House Investment, 1974, p.104

¹⁵ Dr. Geiger, Wilhelm., Mahavamsa Buddhist Cultural Center, 7th chapter, 339-43 stanza, p. 57

¹⁶ Ibid, 7th chapter, 30-31 stanza, p.57

¹⁷ Sedaraman, J.E., Udarata Natum Kalava, M.D. Gunasena and sons, 2012, p.8

In the reign of King Pandukabhaya dancing, singing, and music together with Buddhist devotions and offerings were highly regarded as social activities. There is information about faiths, beliefs, offerings details about Yakka and Yakkini recorded in the Mahavamsa.

“He settled the Yakka Kalavela on the east side of the city”¹⁸

The information with regard to the fact that Yakkas was worshiped during the time of Pandukabhaya. They underwent worship, temples were built for them, sacrificial offerings were made for them and also King watched dances together with God and men¹⁹. Very importantly further they disclose that the King enjoyed watching dances and thereby it supports the concept that dances were performed in the royal courts because the King was very fond of them.²⁰

POST BUDDHIST EPOCH

Post Buddhist epoch begins from the year 247-207 B.C. in which Maharajah Mahinda Thero established the Buddhist order in Lanka and was lasting for the undo the time when the Anuradhapura Kingdom had come to pretty pass 1017 A.D.

There is evidence that the performing arts may have been used in various ways for another festival in Sri Lankan culture called “Nakath Keli”. It is reported that on the day of Maharajah Mahinda Thero’s arrival, the King announced the auspicious time and left for the mountain Missaka for the festivals.²¹

In the Anuradhapura epoch royal celebrations and festivals took place with the participation of ministers and other distinguished men and women. They enjoyed participating in watching dancers, singing, and playing music and water sports.

In Saddarmalankaraya, a book of Buddhist literature says about the “Nakath Keliya”

“In such and such places musical instruments like veena, drums, Mihingu Bera, were taken into-----”²²

¹⁸ Dr.Geiger, Wilhelm.,Mahavamsa ,Buddhist Cultural Center, 10th chapter, 84 stanza, p. 74

¹⁹ Ibid, 10th chapter, 86-87 stanza, 1959

²⁰ Peiris, Chanasiri., Narthanaya, Vasana Printers, 2012, p. 283

²¹ Thero. Devundara,Vachissara., Thupavamsaya, M.D. Gunasena and Sons, 1941, p. 35

²² Manamperi, Sirithilakasiri Premadasa., Saddarmalankaraya, Rathna Publication, 2009, p.101-102

It is said that there was a music band by the name “*Talavachara*” that played the King’s official ceremonies and affairs of war.²³

It is also mentioned that various instruments were played during the Bodhi Pilgrimage during this period and that the Bodhiya was accompanied by the “*Thalavachara*”.²⁴

In this context, it appears that by this time a state band was formed in Ceylon, and they were employed under the direction of the King on special occasions in the country.

Everyone acknowledges that the development of industry and technology in Sri Lanka was due to the 18 casts of people who migrated to Ceylon with the Bodhi tree. Here is Prince Chandra Guptha who came to this country with Bodhi Tree,

“Prince Chandra Guptha was given the title of King of Malaya,
and was ordered to play drum-----”

And he was obtained as the chief among the people of the eighteen castes.

On planting the sapling in the Mahamevna Uyana in Anuradhapura, the Bodhi Pooja tradition commenced in Sri Lanka. Specialists of the oral tradition believed that at the same time, Hevisi pooja (the daily traditional sound offerings) which is performed with drums and also the dance tradition affiliated with this ritual commenced and became compulsory and there was an expansion of the performance of dances especially during annual religious festivals.

The great chronicle Mahavamsa described how King Dutugamunu participated in the ceremony of Tooth Relic, who was escorted by actresses.

“The King supported in order of their rank, by many ministers,
richly clothed as befitted their office. Surrounding by many dancers
richly clothed like celestial nymphs.”²⁵

²³ Peiris, Chanasiri., Narthanaya, Vasana Printers, 2012, p. 286

²⁴ Thero. Devundara, Vachissara., Thupavamsaya, M.D. Gunasena and Sons, 1941, p. 42

²⁵ Dr. Geiger, Wilhelm., Mahavamsa, Buddhist Cultural Center, 29th chapter, 23, 24, 25 stanza. 192, 193,

Further, the Mahawamsa reads the story of how the relics were enshrined in the chamber of Chethiya.

“Mahabrahma stood there holding a silver parasol and Sakka carrying out the consecration with the Vijayuttara shell, Pancasikha with his lute in his hand, and Kālanāga with the dancing girls and the thousand handed Māra with his elephants and train of follower’s”.²⁶

This description reveals how was the dancer’s presence and this praise reveals how the band rolled its drums and played other instruments.

“On the fifteenth Uposath-Day in the evening (the king) glad at heart, well versed in the duties of kings, arrayed in all his ornaments, surrounded on every side of all his dancing women and his warriors in compel armor.”²⁷

The above eulogy explains how the king received relics and kept them in the chamber.

“While the earth seemed as it were rent as under by all manner of sounds from various instruments of music.”²⁸

This short paragraph reads how the band rolled its drums and sound rent the air.

All the prescriptions mentioned above open our minds to believe that there were official lady dancers who were well dressed and attached to the royal court as well as king was escorted by them to the parade. There were different kinds of drums to be rolled at Buddhist celebrations and these instruments were played as offerings.

Further drums were used as a means of communication too. For instance, it was used to inform devotees about the auspicious time in which the relics had to be enshrined in the Chethiya.²⁹

²⁶Ibid, p.204

²⁷ Dr.Geiger, Wilhelm.,Mahavamsa ,Buddhist Cultural Center, 31st chapter, 36-38 stanza p. 212

²⁸ Ibid, 43 stanza, p.212

²⁹Ibid, 114-115 stanza, p.218

OTHER INSCRIPTIONS

“Upashaka Nata Thishasha Da Ne”

Upasaka nalu thissage dane

The generosity of devotee Thissa the dancer

“Gapathi Nata Chudaha Gapathana- Shamudaya Nata Chaluya Kditha”

Gruhapathi NatakaChudage Swami Diyaniya vu Samudhaya

NatakaDaughtr of Chalu the dancer who is Samudhaya the wife of dancer

Gruhapathi

“Nata Chulaha Kditha Nata Dama Kditha Samudaya”

Natya Shilpee Choolage Diyaniya Vu Natya Shilpee damma Samudrage

Baryava Dancer damma, is the daughter of Chula the dancer and she is the wife of Samudra

“Bharatha Thishaha Lene Natikana Shadi Shapathike”

Natya Kandayamata Ayath Pradana Thissage lena

This the cave of Thissa the chief of the drama troupe³⁰

Inscriptions are read about the play or dancers and their families found in many places such as Githaragama, Kothalakibiyava, Sasseruwa, etc. Named “Nata” or “Natika”, the term may refer especially to not only dancers but also orchestrators-hence an advanced dance- playing culture and group of artists dedicated to the same art. It is clear therefore that even under the early Aryan civilization of the early Anuradhapura period, there was an advanced culture of dance-playing and a group of craft men who devoted themselves to the same art.

There is a lot of information about the art of playing and dancing in the chronicles describing the pre-Cristian era. King Kavanthissa of the Dathuwamsa to the Seruwila Dagaba it is said that a great pooja was performed and the women of the drama performed a great pooja with panchathoorya (percussion instruments).³¹

³⁰ Sanskruthika Puranaya, Devana Veluma, 7 Edition, 1997 July-September, p.29

³¹ Thero, Makuluduwe Piyarathana., Dhathuvamsam, Colombo, 1941, p.21

Chronicles describes the reign of King Dutugamunu, it is said that every special occasion of the King was accompanied by dancing, singing, and chanting, it is further stated that every journey of the King was accompanied by dramatists and musical bands.³²

It is also said that King Dutugamunu was so closely associated with dramatists and musicians that at the last moment the King was surrounded by theatrical people and after the death of the King it was the dramatists who took off the crown.³³

It is said that during the great pooja performed by King Bhathikabhaya to the Mahathupa, various dancers and various Panchangika bands were performed.³⁴

In the Silapathikaram epic written in South India around the 2nd century AD, there is evidence that theatrical performers in that country practiced a dance form called “*Sinhala*.”³⁵

During this period Ceylon was known as *Sinhaladveepaya*. Hence the dance in this country is no doubt called ‘Sinhala’. It is clear that by this time Sri Lanka had a distinct form.

Thus, although there was an indigenously developed dance music culture during the Anuradhapura period, by the end of Anuradhapura there were various influences from the invasions and migrations of south India as well as from the Malaya-Vijayanagar empires. It seems that due to this, foreign influence gradually joined the local arts.

³² Dr.Geiger, Wilhelm.,Mahavamsa ,Buddhist Cultural Center, 30st chapter, 92-93 stanza

³³ Thero. Devundara,Vachissara., Thupavamsaya, M.D. Gunasena and Sons, 1941, p. 81

³⁴ Dr.Geiger, Wilhelm.,Mahavamsa ,Buddhist Cultural Center, 34th chapter, 60-64 stanza

³⁵ Dharmadasa, K.N.O., Sinhala Sahithyayen Pilibibu Vana Narthana Kalawa, Kala sagarawa, Lanka Kala Mandalaya, p.9

Conclusion

Since ancient times the art of dance has been a significant means of inspiring one's way of life. There is some evidence of the existence of indigenous dance in Lanka (now Sri Lanka) even before the times of Vijaya's invasion. However, unfortunately, due to a lack of evidence, it is difficult to recognize the name this dance was registered or accepted in ancient days. Chronicles state that King Vijaya, with his fellow men established a kingdom in Lanka, with the help of an indigenous girl by the name of Kuweni or Kuwana, who also became his wife. Afterward, tales mention that Kuweni cursed King Vijaya and all his successors due to her being forced to leave the king and royal comforts. However, when King Vijaya wasn't affected by the curse, dance as a ritual was first performed to cure the curse and illness which was thought to have affected King Vijaya's successor King Panduwasdew. This dance is identified by the terms Kandyan dance or Udarata Natum, which also included rituals that were intended to invoke blessings upon Panduwasdew. Since then, this style of dance established itself and paved its way to prevail for centuries in Sri Lanka as a reputed form of dance. In our pursuit, this discussion provides evidence to prove that the current form of dance, which is known as Kandyan dance, existed as a performance-related art prior to 1017 AD. For the purpose of confirming this evidential fact we earnestly present this compilation in full length.

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