

Classical Dances of Sri Lanka by Sicille P C Kotelawala



The origin of Sri Lankan dances goes back to immemorial times of aboriginal tribes and "yakkas" (devils). According to a Sinhalese legend, Kandyan dances originate, 2500 years ago, from a magic ritual that broke the spell on a bewitched king.

An ancient chronicle, the *Mahavamsa*, states that when the culture hero Vijaya landed in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) in 543 BCE, he heard the sounds of music and dancing from a wedding ceremony. Dance is still of

paramount importance in Sri Lankan (Sinhala) arts. There are three main styles: the Kandyan dance of the hill country, known as *uda rata natum*; the low country dance of the southern plains, known as *pabatha rata natum*; and *sabaragamuwadance*, or *sabaragamuwa natum*.

Kandyan dance takes its name from Kandy, the last royal capital of Ceylon, which is situated about 72 miles (120 kilometers) from the modern capital at Colombo. This genre is today considered the classical dance of Sri Lanka. In Sanskrit terminology it is considered pure dance (*nrtta*); it features a highly developed system of *tala* (rhythm), provided by cymbals called *thalampataa*. There are five distinct types; the *ves*, *naiyandi*, *uddekki*, *pantheru*, and *vannams*.

Ves Dance. *Ves* dance, the most popular, originated from an ancient purification ritual, the Kohomba Yakuma or Kohomba Kankariya. The dance was propitiatory, never secular, and performed only by males. The elaborate *ves* costume, particularly the headgear, is considered sacred and is believed to belong to the deity Kohomba. (See Kohomba Kankariya and Ves Dance.)

Only toward the end of the nineteenth century were *ves* dancers first invited to perform outside the precincts of the Kankariya Temple at the annual Kandy Perahera festival. Today the elaborately costumed *ves* dancer epitomizes Kandyan dance. (See Kandy Perahera.)

Naiyandi Dance. Dancers in Naiyandi costume perform during the initial preparations of the Kohomba Kankariya festival, during the lighting of the lamps and the preparation of foods for the demons. The dancer wears a white cloth and white rurban, beadwork decorations on his chest, a waistband, rows of beads around his neck, silver chains, brass shoulder plates, anklets, and jingles. This is a graceful dance, also performed in Maha Visnu (Vishnu) and Kataragama Devala temples on ceremonial occasions.



Uddekki Dance. *Uddekki* is a very prestigious dance. Its name comes from the *uddekki*, a small lacquered hand drum in the shape of an hourglass, about seven and half inches (18 centimeters) high, believed to have been given to people by the gods. The two drumskins are believed to have been given by the god Iswara, and the sound by Visnu; the instrument is said to have been constructed according to the instructions of Sakra and was played in the heavenly palace of the gods. It is a very difficult instruments to play. The dancer sings as he plays, tightening the strings to obtain variations of pitch.

Pantheru Dance. The *pantheruwa* is an instrument dedicated to the goddess Pattini. It resembles a tambourine (without the skin) and has small cymbals attached at intervals around its circumference. The dance is said to have originated in the days of Prince Siddhartha, who became Buddha. The gods were

believed to use this instrument to celebrate victories in war, and Sinhala kings employed *pantheru* dancers to celebrate victories in the battlefield. The costume is similar to that of the *uddekki* dancer, but the *pantheru* dancer wears no beaded jacket and substitutes a silk handkerchief at the waist for the elaborate frills of the *uddekki* dancer.

Vannams. The word *vannam* comes from the Sinhala word *varnana* (descriptive praise). Ancient Sinhala texts refer to a considerable number of *vannams* that were only sung; later they were adapted to solo dances, each expressing a dominant idea. History reveals that the Kandyan king Sri Weeraparakrama Narendrasinghe gave considerable encouragement to dance and music. In this Kavikara Maduwa (a decorated dance arena) there were song and poetry contests.

It is said that the *kavi* (poetry sung to music) for the eighteen principal *vannams* were composed by an old sage named Ganithalankara, with the help of a Buddhist priest from the Kandy temple. The *vannams* were inspired by nature, history, legend, folk religion, folk art, and sacred lore, and each is composed and interpreted in a certain mood (*rasaya*) or expression of sentiment. The eighteen

classical *vannams* are *gajaga* ("elephant"), *thuranga* ("horse"), *mayura* ("peacock"), *gabaka* ("conch shell"), *uranga* ("crawling animals"), *mussaladi* ("hare"), *ukkussa* ("eagle"), *vyrodi* ("precious stone"), *hanuma* ("monkey"), *savula* ("cock"), *sinharaja* ("lion"), *naga* ("cobra"), *kirala* ("red-wattled lapwing"), *eeradi* ("arrow"), *Surapathi* (in praise of the goddess Surapathi), *Ganapathi* (in praise of the god Ganapathi), *udubara* (expressing the pomp and majesty of the king), and *assadhrusa* (extolling the merit of Buddha). To these were added *samanala* ("Butterfly"), *bo* (the sacred *bo* tree at Anuradhapura, a sapling of the original *bo* tree under which Buddha attained enlightenment), and *hansa vannama* ("swan"). The *vannama* dance tradition has seven components.

Accompaniment. The *vannams* tradition is to sing *thanama*, a note of the melody to each syllable. *Thitha*, the beat indicated with the cymbals, gives the rhythmic timing. Other elements include *kaviya*, the poem vocalized by the dancer; *beramatraya*, the rhythm of the drum; *kasthirama*, the finale of the first movement of the dance; and *seerumarauwa*, the movement in preparation for the *addawwa*, the finale of rhythmic body and foot movements, the last embellishment.

The drum is an integral part of Kandyan dance, and sanctity is associated with drums and drumbeats. The notes of the basic drum scale, *tha-jī-thoh-nun*, are salutations to Buddha, the gods, the master (*gurunnanse*) or the preceptor, and the audience, respectively.

The most important drum for Kandyan dance is the *gete-bere* (*gete* means "boss"); it is also called *magul-bere* (ceremonial drum) since it is used for all festive and ceremonial occasions throughout the country. It is believed to have been constructed under the directions of the Maha Brahma, the supreme god. The cylinder is scooped out of a single block of wood twenty-seven inches (67 centimeters) long. The skins are monkey skin on the right and oxhide on the left, to give very different tones. The braccs are made of deerskin and are adjusted to give the desired tension in tuning. The drum is slung around the waist of the drummer and is played with both hands. The *ḍavula* and the *thammattama* are other drums that are also used in temple ceremonies, rituals, and road pageants, called *pereberas*. With the patronage of the Sinhala royalty, Kandyan dance has flourished over the years as an institution vital to the socio-religious life of the people of Sri Lanka.

BIBILIOGRAPHY

Amunugana, Sarath. Notes on Sinhala Culture, Colombo , 1980. Boers, Faubion. Theatre in the East; A Survey of Asian Dance and Drama, New York, 1956.

De Zoete, Beryl, Dance and Magic Drama in Ceylon. London, 1937, Disanayaka, Mudiyanse. Udarata santikarma saha gami natya sampradaya. Colombo 1990.

Gunasinghe, Siri, Masks of Ceylon, Colombo, 1962. Kotelawala, Sicille P.C. The Classical Dance of Sri Lanka. New York, 1974. Makulloluwa, W.B. Dances of Sri Lanka, Colombo, 1976. Molamure, Arthur. "The Outlook for Kandyan Dancing," In Some Aspects of Traditional Sinhalese Culture, edited by Ralph Pieris, Peradeniya, 1956.

Nevill, Hugh. "Sinhalese Folklore." Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Ceylon Branch 14 (1971) : 58-90.

Pertold, Otaker. Ceremonial Dances of the Sinhalese (1930), Colombo, 1973.

Raghavan, M. D. Dances of the Sinhalese. Colombo, 1968.

Reed, Susan A. "The Transformation of Ritual and Dance in Sri Lanka; Kohomba Kankariya and the Kandyan Dance." Ph.D.diss., Brown University, 1991.

Sarachchandra, Ediriweera R. The Folk Drama of Ceylon. 2d ed Colombo 1966

Sedaramn J. I. Nrtya ratnakarya Colombo 1992

Sendrama J. I. et al. Udarata narum Kalava Colombo, 1992

Seneviratna, Anuradha, Trdinal Dance of Sri Lanka, Colombo 1978.

ARCHIVE, of special interest to the student of Kandyan dance are the Palm Leaf Manuscripts held in the National Muscum, Colombo; Bera Davul Tammattam Adiya Upata (82, v.16), Davul Upata (82, v.1, v.5), and Udakki Upata (82, v.1 ,v.5)