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## What influence do the Sri Lankan Folk theatre and Dance traditions have on Sri Lankan society?

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**Abstract.** *Mahavamsa*, the most widely cited historical Pali chronicle, records information about the performing arts of the *Yaksha* and *Naga* tribes who lived even before the advent of Vijaya to Sri Lanka in 543 BC. With the introduction of Buddhism and Hinduism to Sri Lanka (250 BC), ritual and religious based ceremonies inspired by India developed and the performing artists played a significant role in those ceremonies. Because of the subjugation of Sri Lanka to Portuguese rule in 1505, the Dutch in 1658 and the British in 1815 several changes took place in Sri Lankan art. With the Sinhalese-Buddhist policy declared in 1956, the main ethnic groups of Sinhalese and Tamil separated into two distinct groups with the result that a civil war lasting more than twenty-five years ensued. Along with this, the performing arts divorced itself from the common ethnic background and separated into two as Sinhalese and Tamil. This directly impacted on the arts with the changes in the social, cultural, political and economic fields allied to the agrarian economy that occurred under each period of colonisation. This paper will analyse and discuss how some of the Sri Lankan Folk theatre and Dance traditions and artists have overcome issues such as caste, ethnicity and gender in their practice and how, in overcoming such obstacles, this can contribute to an improvement in ethno-religious cohesion in wider society.

**Keywords.** Sri Lankan arts, Performing arts, Folk Theatre, Traditional dance

### *1.0 Introduction*

In studying Sri Lankan performing arts there are several primary sources and *Mahavamsa* points out that its history goes back to a period even before the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka in 543 BC (Geiger, 1912:3). There is evidence in *Mahavamsa* about dancing and music among the tribes of *Yaksha* and *Naga*, before the advent of Buddhism and afterwards these arts merged with Buddhist rituals. The artists also became a theme for the decoration of walls, mouldings and ceilings of Buddhist and Hindu temples. During the Polonnaruwa period (1017 AD -1255 AD) a Tamil-Hindu religious art merged with the Sinhalese-Buddhist art and became established with the South Indian Tamil administration giving birth to a performing art of mixed Sinhalese-Tamil ethnicities. An important crossroads of this society of mixed religious and national status is the emergence of colonial rule with the subjugation of Sri Lanka to the Portuguese in 1505 AD and later to the Dutch (1658 AD) and finally to the British in 1815. This directly impacted on the arts with the changes in the social, cultural, political and economic fields allied to the agrarian economy that occurred under each period of colonisation. This paper will analyse and discuss how some of the Sri Lankan Folk

theatre and Dance traditions and artiste have overcome issues such as caste, ethnicity and gender in their practice and how, in overcoming such obstacles, this can contribute to an improvement in ethno-religious cohesion in wider society.

To undertake more in-depth research, an ethnographic methodology was adopted to collect data. For the collection of this research data, many collection methods such as observation, participant observation, interviews, (one to one, and group), focus groups, documentary evidence, and oral history, were employed. Emic, or insider, as well as etic, or outsider, perspectives were helpful for me to identify and analyse data obtained through several means. Thus, I was able to collect and interpret the data as an insider and also as an outsider which can be a feature of “Ethnographic Research” (see –Wolcott: 2005, Pole and Morrison: 2003, Hammersley and Atkinson: 2007, Atkinson et al: 2001, Arya: 2017).

## 1.2 Sri Lankan folk theatre

The three Sinhalese-Buddhist folk dramas *Sokari*<sup>1</sup>, *Kolam*<sup>2</sup> and *Nadagam*<sup>3</sup> and *Kooththu*<sup>4</sup>, with Tamil-Hindu inspiration could be identified as Sri Lankan folk drama. These folk dramas provide the opportunity to study the beliefs, customs and manners in Sri Lankan society and the castes and *Rajakari*<sup>5</sup> obligations associated with them, Ethnic integration, and how art is used as a tool for social criticism can also be examined. Most researchers identify the three folk dramas as being associated with Sinhalese-Buddhism, just as they do in the case of Sri Lankan dance and tend to overlook the existence of the folk drama of the Tamil-Hindu group. As Sri Lankan folk drama consists of not only Sinhalese-Buddhist art but also of the Tamil-Hindu art the present research concentrates also on Tamil-Hindu art.

### 1.2.1 Sokari

The *Sokari* drama could be regarded as an instance where domestic squabbles, the manner in which authority derived from caste is used to expose social discrimination, and sexuality and women are directly discussed. The performing artiste seems to be given the chance through the *Sokari* drama to discuss how married women are persuaded to commit sexual transgressions and subject the elite in society to ruthless criticism using his authority derived for his/her caste.

The *Sokari* folk drama, which is indigenous to the Kandyan region and the Vanni (Dissanayake, 1994:278; Sarachchandra, 1956:84, Raghavan, 1967:158), is, according to certain researchers, (Sarachchandra: 1952, Dissanayake: 1994) the most ancient folk drama in Sri Lanka. In the *Sokari* dance, primary place is given to music and dance and the drama itself centres on the character *Sokari*. The story revolves around three main characters namely, a husband, his wife and their servant. *Sokari* is a drama, which depicts the attempts made by a

<sup>1</sup>The artiste of the Kinnara caste has the exclusive right to perform this drama, which depicts both inter-ethnic and inter-religious cohesion. The artiste of the Kinnara caste contributes in many ways in *Sokari* such as preliminary preparations, acting in the play, and the supply of mats and other equipment. Explaining this relationship between the Kinnara caste and the *Sokari* drama Nurnberger states, “In the popular Sinhalese folk-play of the mat-weaver caste (Kinnaraya) which is known as ‘*Sokari*’ (Nurnberger, 1998:85) the main task of the Kinnara caste is the weaving of mats, kalala, baskets, trays etc. using reeds.

<sup>2</sup> This folk drama prevalent in the low country areas is marked by the fact that all characters wear masks. The term *Kolam* is used to denote the drama and the term *Kolama* to denote each character. For instance, the term police *Kolama* is used to denote a police officer.

<sup>3</sup> *Nadagam* is a distinct feature in the folk drama of Sri Lanka and is assumed to have been influenced by the therukuttu dramas in southern India. In the beginning English and Catholic stories were used but latterly Sinhalese and Tamil stories have been used in these dramas.

<sup>4</sup> A folk drama prevalent among the Tamils in Southern India as well as in the northern, eastern and mountainous regions of Sri Lanka. Among the *Kooththu* dances performed based on stories in the Mahabharata and Ramayana, there are various deviations such as *vadimodu* and *therukungu*.

<sup>5</sup> These were the services that were held for the state during the Sri Lankan dominion.

Tamil family that has migrated to Sri Lanka from South India, to adjust to Sinhalese society. Therefore, there is a certain discourse about ethnic integration as it shows how Sinhalese and Tamil ethnicities attempt to live together. The other noticeable factor here is the relationship of the *Kinnara* caste to *Sokari*. One of the lowest castes in the Sri Lankan caste hierarchy, the *Kinnara* caste, uses the character of the *vedarala* (physician) to criticise the wrongdoings of the elite in society. Thus, the *Sokari* drama is important in determining the place the artiste enjoys in the caste hierarchy and showing how the authority the artiste derives from the performing arts is used as a tool for social criticism.

The other important factor here is the religious coexistence that is displayed. *Sokari* is performed on a *Poya*<sup>6</sup> day seeking the blessings of the Tamil-Hindu gods *Dévā/Deviyo* as well as the blessings of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, the Triple Gem. Sarachchandra points out the *Sokari* drama performed on behalf of Goddess Pattini and God Kataragama is held for seven days consecutively in the months of May and June after the Sinhalese New Year. The *Sokari* drama is not performed again until the next year and usually the festival ends with a *Sokari* perahara held on the full-moon (*Poya*) day of September (Sarachchandra 1952:84-85).

Finally, the other importance of *Sokari* within the Sri Lankan performing arts is the ethnic cohesion implicit in it. Describing the *Sokari* drama, Sarachchandra points out its Indian connections. He states that there is a similarity between *Sokari* drama and the Tamil Kuththu (Kooththu) (Sarachchandra, 1952:92). Although Sarachchandra points out a similarity between *Sokari* and *Kooththu* in the general structure of the dramas, what is more important is that it centres on an emigrant family from South India (Raghavan, 1967:158). Although *Sokari* is introduced as a Sinhalese folk drama it would not be incorrect to say that it reflects more Tamil identity rather than Sinhalese nationality because the Sinhalese society has completely appropriated an Indian family, its life story and also Hindu gods like Kataragama and Pattini. Therefore, an Indian story and an India drama structure has been established in Sri Lanka as a process of receiving blessings of Hindu but ‘Lankanised’ gods. Consequently, it is more appropriate to introduce *Sokari* drama as a folk drama with a Sri Lankan identity rather than a mere Sinhalese or Tamil drama. Perhaps it could be said that ‘the symbolism of the reunion and reconciliation of a husband and wife’ (Sarachchandra, 1952:93) as shown by Sarachchandra is actually a reunion and reconciliation between the two major ethnic groups, the Sinhalese and Tamils. Therefore, in considering *Sokari* drama it is correct to say that it depicts a religious as well as ethnic relationship between Buddhist and Hindu and Sinhalese and Tamil, irrespective of the objective of the performance of the drama or the caste that performs it.

### 1.2.2 Kolam

There is perhaps nothing more hilarious and joyous in the whole range of Sinhalese folk arts than the *Kolam*, the masquerade of the South-West (Raghavan, 1967:77).

*Kolam* is a sarcastic folk drama in which the artistes employ the authority derived from their caste in order to criticise the wrongdoings of various personalities of the elite in society. Many scholars have traced the origin of *Kolam* to the Indian state of Tamil Nadu (Raghavan, 1967:78, Nurnberger, 1998:116, Dissanayake, 1994:286, Sarachchandra, 1952:61). Interpreting the meaning of the word *Kolam*, Nurnberger says that in South Indian languages the word means disguise or dress but not in the sense of a ‘mask’ (Nurnberger, 1998:116). She adds that the art of *Kolam* is related to ‘*Kolam thullal*,’ which is a Kerala mask demon dance (Nurnberger, 1998:116). This idea expressed by Nurnberger is implied in the comments made

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<sup>6</sup> The *Poya* is a very important day for Buddhists when they refrain from partaking of meat and engage in religious observances including the observance of the ten precepts, which is the highest religious observance that a lay person can observe.

concerning *Kolam* thullal by Raghavan, “In Kerala, nevertheless, it never developed into a play for amusement, nor did it inspire the rich lines in art of mask-making that it developed into, in Ceylon” (Raghavan, 1967:79). In so far as the origin of *Kolam* is concerned, it shows an Indo-Sri Lankan base and Sinhalese-Tamil ethnic cohesion. So, within the Sri Lankan performing arts, the *Kolam* is an art form that constitutes a Sinhalese-Tamil ethnic base. On the other hand, it is used as a tool for social criticism where the wrongdoings of various personalities in high society are exposed. All characters that come on the stage line up in order of the highest to the lowest in the caste hierarchy. Each character wears a mask, the carving and wearing of which is the sole prerogative of the *karava*<sup>7</sup> caste. So, the presentation of characters, the carving of masks, music and singing and acting revolve around the *karava* caste. Characters in *Kolam* appear on the stage in a most attractive manner for which there is a prescribed traditional style.

Accordingly, the first part of the drama consists of ‘the preparations prior to the arrival of the royal dignitaries’; the second part comprises ‘the various dances of human and animal characters’; and the third is ‘dealing with the enactment of a story – usually a story dealing with the life of Buddha – through song, speech, verse dialogue and mimicry (Goonetilleke, 1978:162-163). Joining this discourse, Manukulasooriya, in analysing the mask worn by the various characters entering onto the *Kolam* stage, and states that they can be divided into various groups. In this division, he bases his analysis on the power granted to them by their ‘caste’ in society. Accordingly, the first group is the highest consisting of royalty and personages attached to the royal entourage whose characters are the king, queen, minister, clerk, policeman and soldier. The second group consists of the drummer, washer man, drummer’s wife, peasants, money lender, Negro woman, king’s dhoby and lower down in the social order are other human beings. He then analyses the number of characters such as *raksha*, *sanni* and *gara* in the demon mask of *Kolam* (Manukulasooriya, 2005:11).

Describing the present situation of the *Kolam* tradition, Amarasinghe and Kariyakarawana point out a distinct feature. They observe that although the authority for the performance of *Kolam* and the carving of the *Kolam* mask is vested with the *Karava* caste, at present it is being sustained in a wider social framework. “Namely the origin of mask drama cannot be traced by means of one particular caste. It is a mixture of multi-ethnic and multi-religious cultural elements” (Amarasinghe and Kariyakarawana, 2014:56). Therefore, as they point out, *Kolam* may be taken as an instance where multi-ethnic and multi-religious as well as caste-linked performing practices are found in one place. Therefore, it may be surmised that this folk mask drama is not confined to Sinhalese-Buddhist or Sinhalese-*Karava* but is a Sri Lankan folk drama and represents various religious, ethnic and cultural features.

### 1.2.3 Nadagam

Once a woman belonging to one of the most respectable of the village wished to take two or three relatives who had come from Colombo to see a ‘*Nadagamä*’, and sought her husband’s permission. It is shameful that women should go to the ‘*Nadagampola*’ which even gentlemen do not frequent was his response (Goonetilleke, 1984:2).

Quoting the above passage from *Apegama* by Martin Wickremasinghe (1960), Goonetilleke, observes that *Nadagam* was loosely and erroneously associated with simple comedy and farce, a kind of opera buffet and therefore looked down upon as being not socially

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<sup>7</sup> The ‘fishing caste’ of the Sinhalese probably represents a rather late invasion from South India. While there are isolated villages to be found in the highlands, this is exceptional. They are heavily concentrated in the coastal areas from Chilaw to Hambantota. Evidence of their late Tamil origins is certainly present in the mixed usage of Tamil and Sinhalese languages among Sinhalese fishermen in the Chilaw and Negombo areas and in their unique marriage customs probably of Indian origin (Ryan, 1953:103-104).

respectable (Goonetilleke, 1984:2). This opens the door for a discussion concerning the origin of the performing art form called *Nadagam*, its structural features and the changes that occurred to it because of its cross-cultural association. In the area of Sri Lankan performing arts, the *Nadagam* tradition may be introduced as the only art form where, apart from Sinhalese-Buddhist and Tamil-Hindu influences, Roman Catholic and western traditions too have contributed to the development of the tradition. The other notable factor here is that the concept of caste that is seen in other dances and folk drama is absent in the *Nadagam* tradition. In fact, it becomes an art form where not only *Berava*<sup>8</sup>, *kinnara* or *karava* caste members, but also any other social group, can participate. The plots, costumes, themes and also musical instruments used reveal that it has come under heavy western influence. As *Nadagam* was created and sponsored particularly by the Roman Catholic churches, the art form that existed up to then, which was centred on the caste system, seems to have undergone a change embracing people belonging to all castes and speaking various languages.

It seems that *Nádagamä* has been a bridge between the traditional Sri Lankan drama and the modern stage (Goonetilleke: 1984, Sarachchandra: 1952). Goonetilleke points out that the *Nadagam*, which developed during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries had acquired a “distinctive form” and “structure” by the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Goonetilleke, 1984:4). In this regard, he comments that it could be regarded as the country’s first fully fledged Sinhalese theatre.

Joining this discussion Nurnberger points out that the traditional *Nadagam* came to Sri Lanka from Bombay in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and embodied Indian or Arabian sources in Parsee theatre troops and Shakespearian themes like Othello or Romeo and Juliet and backdrops attractively coloured, entered onto the stage or *Nurtiya* (new theatre) (Nurnberger,1998:154). Nurnberger, commenting on the evolution of *Nádagamä* from tradition to the modern stage, observes that in the thirties in Colombo, a growing middle class had established itself and turned towards the urban theatre with an increasing thirst for entertainment (Nurnberger, 1998:154). Therefore, it appears that, in the process of conversion from a traditional drama to a contemporary practice, the *Nádagamä* is actually the turning point by which the traditional features of folk drama have been assimilated and developed into urban theatre.

Another important feature in the *Nadagam* tradition is that it has become a Sri Lankan drama without any distinction such as Sinhalese, Tamil, European or Buddhist, Hindu or Christian. Most of the researchers who have studied the *Nadagam* tradition are of the view that the influence of European missionary activity and the Buddhist *Jataka* tales are prominent. In discussing the origin of *Nadagam*, almost all researchers such as Nurnberger (1998), Sarachchandra (1952), Goonetilleke (1984), state that it has been inspired by the South Indian folk drama. Particularly, Goonetilleke, discussing both the literary and the philological aspect of the word, observes the Tamil word for theatre, *Natakam* (*Nadagam*), is cognate with the Sinhala word *Nádagamä*. It has been pointed out that *Natakam* is a Tamilicised expression for the Sanskrit word *Nataka* (Goonetilleke, 1984:7). Sarachchandra adds that the Sinhalese *Nádagamä* appears to have been modelled originally, on a variety of South-Indian folk plays known as *Terukkuttu* in the Tamil Nadu and as *Vithi Nataka* in Andhra (Sarachchandra, 1952:116). Nurnberger expresses a view that the drama is very close to the idea of the South Indian *Kuttu* (Kooththu) and Andhra folk drama as pointed out by Sarachchandra, who states that the origin of the *Nádagamä* can be traced back to the South Indian dance theatre *Bhagvata Mela* or *Yakshagana* in the Telegu region. She adds, “It did not come directly from one of these sources to Sri Lanka. The actual origin of the Sinhalese *Nádagamä* goes back to the theatre

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<sup>8</sup> The term ‘Berava’ is used to refer to the caste called Berava, and the artiste are known by the term Beravayo.

form of the *Nattu Kuthu* (Tamil: dance theatre)’ (Nurnberger, 1998:153). Therefore, the Indian Tamil-Hindu influence is noticeable in *Nadagam*.

In addition to this South Indian Tamil cultural affiliation, the other important view expressed by scholars is its relationship to Christian missionary activity. In this connection, Goonetilleke mentions that the origins of the *Nádagamä* theatre in Sri Lanka is meaningfully related to the activities of the Christian missionaries who visited the island in the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries (Goonetilleke, 1984:26). Analysing this relationship between *Nádagamä* and Christian missionary activity, Nurnberger points out the relationship between the *Nadagam* and Catholic Church *Pasku* Drama (passion play). She notes that the *Nádagamä* has initially a Catholic character and resembles a passion play. The passion plays of the Sri Lankan Roman Catholic Church are called *pasku* (Nurnberger, 1998:154). So, we can see that while the *Nadagam* tradition has been inspired by South Indian tradition it also assimilated Catholic inspiration during the colonial period particularly from the Portuguese, Dutch and English and was a medium for the dissemination of that religion. Therefore, the entertainment aspect of this dance form is, in fact, a dance form based on faith during the colonial period and it can also be seen that its custody has been shifted to the Church.

In addition to the Tamil and European inspiration, Dissanayake points out that a Sinhalese-Buddhist complexion has also been added to the drama. Dissanayaka points out that there are among them. Buddhist Jataka tales such as *Vessantara*, *Sandakinduru* and also Sinhalese national stories such as *Parakramabahu*, *Buvanekabahu* and *Sinha Seevali* promoting the Sinhalese nationality (Dissanayake, 1993: 294). Goonetilleke too expresses a view similar to Dissanayaka’s that the *Nadagam* has a connection with Buddhism and the Sinhalese nation. He also points out that *Nadagam* has in its repertoire the Buddhist *Jataka* tales such as *Vessantara*, *Vidura* and stories with a Sinhalese national fervour as *Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe*, and Prince Weerasena (Goonetilleke, 1984: 64). So, *Kolam* may be identified as an art form in the Sri Lankan performing arts that developed as a result of Sinhalese, Tamil as well as western cultural influences and Buddhist, Hindu and Catholic religious influences. Apart from depicting national and religious cohesion it also stands out as an art form which allows participation of all in society irrespective of their ethnicity or caste.

#### **1.2.4 Kooththu (Kutthu, Kuththu)**

In the Sri Lankan performing arts, *Kooththu* drama is the only folk drama that is related to Tamil ethnicity as evidenced by the manner in which it was made use of during the nearly twenty-five-year civil war to boost Tamil morale. This fact will be explored in more detail later in this thesis.

*Kutthu*, ‘*Kooththu*’ (Thompson, 2005:14) or ‘*Koothu*’ (Iyer, 1966:14) used in various ways has the meaning ‘play’ (Iyer, 1966:14). The *Kooththu* folk drama, when used and performed regionally, seems to take various forms. Thompson points out that this drama is known as ‘*Tenmodi Kooththu*’ in the Southern region and as ‘*Vadamodi Kooththu*’ in the Northern region (Thompson, 2005:76). In addition to the *Tenmodi* and *Vadamodi kooththu* drama pointed out by Thompson there is also a kind of street drama known as *Teru Kooththu* (Iyer, 1966: 13) or *Terukuttu* (Frasca, 1990: 50). This street drama which originated in Tamil Nadu, as Frasca points out, contains several regional categories. These divisions are known as ‘*Vatapanku*’ or the Northern style and ‘*Tenpanku*’ or the Southern style (Frasca, 1990:50). Although there are regional differences in *kooththu* drama, the performers are careful not to change its main structure.

Another important feature of this drama is its relationship with Hinduism in addition to Tamil ethnicity. This is evident in the origin of this dance form, in terms of the stories selected

for the performance, the location of the performance, the characters and the drama's main objectives. On my visit to the north-eastern regions of the country regarding this research, the *kooththu* drama I watched contained plots and characters from Hindu religious epics such as Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Bhagavad-Gita. Commenting on *Kooththu* drama and its relation to Hinduism, Iyer observes that these folk plays were not intended to be mere pleasant entertainment (Iyer, 1966:13). Similarly, they were not performed in a particular season connected with local temple festivals and had a religious and ethical purpose behind them. This shows that there is a moral purpose too in performing this drama.

As observed by Thompson, the *Kooththu* was useful in passing on knowledge, particularly on moral or religious topics. Thompson states "Clearly the stories of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana are thick with value judgements which, it is less than clear that this group would support" (Thompson, 2005:74). In addition to these religious and moral aspects, Thompson points out the significant issue of how far this *kooththu* art form is a factor regarding a matter like marriage. Thompson underlines a factor on the *Kooththu* drama similar to that described by Reed (2010) about the relationship of the upcountry dance with the marriage market:

It was for enjoyment; people came together. It was an opportunity for creativity, and taking a role gave them special status in the village. The point they most wanted to make was that good male performers were liked by women. A *Kooththu* rehearsal period starts with the question 'how many marriages will come out of this?' (Thompson, 2005:74).

Particularly during the post-colonial period, social themes were embodied into the religious basis of *Kooththu* and it was diverted towards new pathways. As a result of the civil war between the Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan government, a new pathway appears to have opened up. The Tamil Tigers attacked the mythic fountainhead of Sinhala domination (Thompson, 2005:32) and the *Kooththu* drama was used to support the demand to create a separate Tamil Elam state. As Thompson observes, the army and the LTTE did not interfere in *Kooththu* rehearsals. Nevertheless, they did create a social *Kooththu* for the Tigers involved in the battle for the A9 (Thompson, 2005:85). However, this art dropped the Hindu stories taken from Hindu epics such as Mahabharata and Ramayana during the war and focused on contemporary themes such as 'Tamil nationalism', 'Elam state' and anti-Sinhalese attitudes. What is noteworthy here is that the artistes have used the *Kooththu* tradition to discuss contemporary social themes and transmit them to Hindu-Tamil society without harming the *Kooththu* structure.

Thus, the *Kooththu* drama bound with Tamil ethnicity makes a valuable contribution in political, religious and social fields and the entertainment needs of society in the Sri Lankan performing arts. The information provided by it is a rich source in terms of understanding the socio-cultural status of the Sri Lankan performing artiste.

### **1.3 Sri Lankan dance traditions**

Sri Lankan performing arts are entirely identified as a Buddhist art process related to the Sinhalese ethnicity. In this identification, three main art traditions namely, upcountry, low country and Sabaragmu are observable. In addition to this, the Bharathanatyam tradition linked to Tamil-Hindu ethnicity could be identified as a fourth tradition. This research will also inquire into how far the *guru parampara*, dances, music, gesture, the art of mask making, singing and folk drama are linked to the gender, caste and ethnicity of the performing artiste.

### 1.3.1 Kandyan Dance Tradition

Kandyan dance or “upcountry dance” (Reed, 2010:10, Nurnberger,1998: XXIII, Sederaman,1962:5, Dissanayake,1994:35), which is one tradition of the Sri Lankan dance traditions, is the dance form prevalent in the area called upcountry of Sri Lanka, namely Mahanuwara, Udunuwara, Yatinuwara, Sat Korale, Satara Korale, Dumbara and Harispattuwa (Dissanayake, 1994:35). Reed comments that Kandyan dance is the most prominent among the Sinhala dance forms, and while its roots are in the Kandyan region, the dance is now identified as a “national” dance, as it is performed and practised throughout the Sinhala-dominated regions of the country (Reed, 2010:11). According to Reed, this dance form has surpassed all others and has been accepted by Sri Lankan society as the “national” dance form.

This national dance is entirely bound with Sinhalese ethnicity and Buddhism and its concept is observable in the *Kohomba kankari*<sup>9</sup>, which is the main healing ceremony of the tradition. Here, the founder king of the Sinhalese race, according to *Mahavamsa*, is directly bound with this ritual, especially the chasing of Kuveni by Sinhala King Vijaya, and the curse pronounced by her upon Vijaya is passed on to King Panduvasudeva who succeeded King Vijaya (Geiger, 1912: 57- 62). The *Mahavamsa* states that *Kohomba kankari* was performed to revoke the curse it (*Divi Dósaya*). However, both Reed and Nurnberger point out that it is a ritual performed more for the protection of agriculture than merely as an art form with a Sinhalese ethnic base. Therefore, we can identify a more practical necessity for its performance than a mere ritual connected with the father of the Sinhalese nation as *Mahavamsa* points out. Thus, it would seem that the modern objective in performing the *Köhömbá Känkáriyá* is primarily for success in agriculture and the warding off of illness.

The upcountry dance tradition is wholly male-centred, which is evident not only in the dance itself but also in the costumes used, the exercise (*Dandiya haramaba*), methods of ritual, and the teaching of the dance. In fact, females are not allowed to even touch let alone wear the main costume used in the *Köhömbá Känkáriyá*. The costume comprises 64 parts or *su seta abharana* (Nurnberger, 1998:43, Reed, 2010:40, Gunawardhana, 1977:173, Dissanayake, 1994:84) and it can be worn only by a male pupil who has mastered the techniques of the dance and after the *ves tabeema*<sup>27</sup> or the “investiture ceremony” (Nurnberger, 1998:42). The most important detail that Reed points out in this discussion is the “*Guru-sisya paramparava*” or teacher-student lineage, which operates within this process namely “*Köhömbá Känkáriyá* was passed down from generation to generation through these lineages” (Reed,2010:83). Therefore, through this teacher-pupil practice, the artists of the *Berava* caste pass on this art of the Kandyan dance and the allied practices and customs to the next generation, which helps them to stamp this art form with their own identity and maintain it on a long-term basis.<sup>28</sup>

### 1.3.2 Low Country Dance Tradition

The low country dance tradition could be identified within the performing arts as an art hereditary to the *Berava* caste. The low country dance tradition is the other Sri Lankan dance tradition that is deeply bound with Sinhalese-Buddhist rituals. The low country dance tradition which is considered to be a main tradition of the classical dance traditions of Sri Lanka (Reed, 2010:10, Nurnberger, 1998: XXXIII, Suraweera, 2009:2, Dissanayake, 1994:123) is prevalent in the southern and western provinces of Sri Lanka (Suraweera, 2009:1, Dissanayake, 1989:123, Reed, 2010:11). According to Suraweera three sub-traditions of the dance can be recognised, which he classifies as “Raigama”, “Bentara” and “Matara” (Suraweera, 2009: 2). However,

<sup>9</sup> The main healing ceremony in the upcountry dance tradition, this is considered to have been used to cure King Panduvasudeva (504-474 BC) of a disease called divi dosha. This healing ceremony performed by dancers in the ves costume with drummers is now held to invoke the god of fertility.

according to Dissanayake those traditions are classified as “Bentara”, “Matara” and “Colombo” (Dissanayake, 1993:145-146). The main reason for the sub-traditions seen in the low country tradition is the regionally-based teacher generations and the customs related to caste held by those generations. This dance tradition is also referred to as “*pahatarata*” (Reed, 2010:10), “*pahatarata netuma*” (Nurnberer, 1998: XXIII), and “*Ruhunu*” (Reed, 2010:10). Because of the diversity of the caste generations connected to this tradition and the competition between generations, each tradition is eager to exhibit the best performing items, which assures better entertainment. A noticeable feature in the low country tradition is the technical expertise of the respective castes in the areas of singing, music and dance. This expertise solely possessed by the *Berava* caste cannot be learnt by an outsider. The transmission of this expertise is from generation to generation and is considered to be the responsibility of that caste. What is noteworthy here is that only a male of six years of age can aspire to join as an amateur artiste. Several scholars have focused their attention on the path of an apprentice hoping to become an “exorcist dancer” or an “*edura*” (Acura) (Wirz, 1954: 1822, Nurnberger, 1998:112114, Kapferer, 1983:5267, Suraweera, 2009:86-93). Quoting from a discussion Nurnberger had with a low country dancer she states, “apprenticeship to a whole series of dancing masters is necessary in order to obtain an overall view of the entire field of knowledge that is required for the performance of a demon-dance (*yak natuma*) or a healing ritual (*Tovil*)” (Nurnberger, 1998: 112). Thus, to acquire an overall knowledge in dance, music and singing (*Kavi*) it is necessary to receive the necessary training. Such an apprentice would sooner or later become a specialist and to become a specialist it is necessary to acquire skills in drumming, ritual decoration, acrobatic dances and exceptional recitation of texts and also to possess psychic powers. To become such a specialist, Wirz states, “It is not difficult, but takes a long time to become an *edura*” (Wirz1954:18). In terms of the apprentice who studies the art, Kapferer observes, “*Berava* exorcists vary widely in the skills they bring to the several arts of exorcism” (Kapferer, 1983: 56). Becoming an ‘exorcist dancer’ within the low country dance tradition is an exceptional achievement because the dancer must possess the necessary experience to conduct all the rituals within it and be an expert in singing, music and dance. In this process, maintaining the traditional art and bequeathing it to the next generation is an onerous task belonging to the respective generations of artiste. Healing ceremonies conducted by males without ‘pollution’ is the other special feature in the low country tradition. Women, who are supposed to be contaminated with ‘pollution’ caused by monthly menstruation, giving birth to children, and attaining puberty, are never allowed to participate in these ceremonies. Males appear even in the female character roles in the ceremony. It is compulsory for males who participate in these ceremonies not to associate with women for seven successive days beforehand. Thus, the low country dance tradition is entirely male-centred and it seems to be a traditional practice linked to the *Berava* caste.

### **1.3.3 Sabaragamu Dance Tradition**

The Sabaragamu dance tradition, which is considered to be one of the main Sri Lankan dance traditions (Reed: 2010, Nurnberger: 1998, Dissanayake: 1993, Delgoda: 1959), belongs to the region called “Sabaragamu” (Dissanayake, 1994:202) and is primarily prevalent in Ratnapura, Pelmadulla, Balangoda, Kalawana and Godakawela. Among Sinhalese-Buddhist dance traditions the Sabaragamu tradition holds an important place because it is the only tradition where there is direct female participation. This is evident in the *Digge* dance in the *Digge* (long hall) of the Saman *Déválaya* where god Saman dwells. Dissanayake explains that the females dance with a lamp in one hand without turning their back to the god and that the players of instruments do so in keeping with the singing and dancing without looking at the

female dancers (Dissanayake, 1994:205-206). Nurnberger expresses a similar view about these females who dance to the accompaniment of drums and songs as described by Dissanayake. In this regard Nurnberger remarks:

The text contents of these performances were mainly concerned with the heroic deeds of the gods. The males sang and played the cymbals, drums and other instruments while the females danced (Nurnberger, 1998:17).

It must be noted that females who participate in the *Digge* dance derive hereditary authority. This is an important dance in the Sri Lankan tradition because it displays how the gender contribution of the artiste and the hereditary right are connected to the performing arts. Dissanayaka points out that the artiste who perform this dance belong to several caste hierarchies. According to him, the performers belong to caste groups including *manikya mahage*, *egoda kuttame manikya mahage*, *hunuwala manikya mahage*, and *kirikandeniya manikya mahage* (Dissanayaka, 1994: 205-206). It should be noted that only those from these castes can perform the *Digge* dance.

#### **1.3.4 Bharathanatyam**

Bharathanatyam is an Indian dance form. Indians do Bharathanatyam. We have nothing to do with Bharathanatyam. Instead our focus is on our dance, Sri Lanka's dance called Kandyan dance. I am curious as to why you are working on Bharathanatyam. Wouldn't you go to India to study that? (Satkumaratnam, 2009:58).

In terms of identifying the Bharathanatyam dance form and its application, the above extract from Satkumaratnam provides an opening to define it as a Sri Lankan dance form. Identification of the Bharathanatyam dance form as a Sri Lankan art form and the study of its "Lankanisation" have escaped the research eye. As an explanation, Satkumaratnam states that it has been identified as an Indian identity distinct from a Sri Lankan art form. She adds that Bharathanatyam has an exclusive Indian identity and labels the dance form's predominantly female practitioners "Indian" (Satkumaratnam, 2009:58). It is therefore necessary to investigate how the Bharathanatyam dance form of Indian origin came to be established as a Sri Lankan dance form and what its use is.

Recognised as one of the Indian traditional dance forms (Reed: 2010, Nurnberger: 1998, Devi: 1998, Satkumaratnam: 2009, O'Shea: 2007, Gaston: 1996), researchers point out that it has developed from a female-centred temple dancing tradition known as *Déavadási* (Satkumaratnam, 2009:11, Katrak, 2011:26, Devi, 1998: 442). Satkumaratnam points out, "The *Déavadási* who were married to the Hindu temple deity yet permitted to keep discreet relationships with a king or priest were considered jewels of the temple and court and epitomised freedom for women outside of castes" (Satkumaratnam, 2009: 12). The institutionalisation and extension of the *Déavadási* dance in its shift from the middle class to the upper class needs to be investigated because, as a result of this institutionalisation, this traditional dance seems to extend beyond India. In India this institutionalisation of Bharathanatyam began to be increasingly studied and performed by individuals who did not necessarily hail from the hereditary classes and the newly-educated middle classes began to show more and more interest in this art form. The Kalakshetra launched by Rukmani Devi paved the way for the Bharathanatyam, which was indigenous to India, to find its way to the outside world (Meduri, 2004:15). As Meduri points out, because of the Bharathanatyam becoming globalised, the Sri Lankan female artistes too were given the opportunity to study it.

With regard to the arrival of this dance form and its establishment in Sri Lanka, some researchers express the view that in the process it acquired a more "Tamil" or "Indian" or "Hindu" identity than a Sri Lankan identity (Satkumaratnam, 2009:61). This Bharathanatyam

form, which is bound with Tamil culture, seems to have been “Lankanised” through, as Satkunaratanam, states, “cultural preservation” (Satkunaratanam, 2009:50). Nurnberger has discussed the influence Bharathanatyam has had on the Sri Lankan performing arts, which is indeed immense, and how it has affected the Sri Lankan arts. Her main concern here is the new items that were added to the Sri Lankan performing arts. “The dancers brought with them from India not only various mythical ideas connected with dance but also aesthetic categories and dance techniques” (Nurnberger, 1998:87). Joining the discussion Reed states that in addition to the new items being added to the Sri Lankan arts, the Bharathanatyam provided stimulation to the “Sinhalese” arts of Sri Lankan society and Buddhist women. Reed observes “That Bharathanatyam has largely been the model for feminine Kandyan dance has served as a primary resource and inspiration for its transformation into a suitable feminine form for the middle and upper classes” (Reed, 2010:212). Elaborating on this she adds that the stimulation was such that “expressive facial gestures” and “smiles and movements of the eyes and hips,” which were feminine, modified the Kandyan dance which was until then “masculine.” Moreover, this modification can primarily be recognised “as the influence of the emotionally expressive and feminine Tamil form, Bharathanatyam, which is popular among both Sinhala and Tamil elites in Colombo” (Reed, 2010:203).

Bharathanatyam bound with Tamil ethnicity and Hinduism influenced Sri Lankan arts in several respects. A most important factor is the stimulus that the women received with the introduction of a female-centred art form instead of the prevalent male-centred art form. This led the way for not only Tamil-Hindu women but also for Sinhalese-Buddhist women to study this Tamil art. This trend also marks the beginning of a feminine art form with *Lasya* features instead of the predominant masculine features of the Sri Lankan arts. Therefore, Bharathanatyam is a rich source in the study of the gender contribution of the Sri Lankan performing artiste.

#### **1.4 Influence of Arts on the reconciliation of Sinhalese and Tamil nationalities**

In almost all Sri Lankan ritual ceremonies, offerings are made to Hindu gods, chief among them are Natha, Vishnu, Kataragama, Pattini, and Kali. Moreover, the origin of healing ceremonies using dance and music traditions in all cases is of Indian origin. All stories such as Malaya in *Kohomba Kankariya*, Pattini of *Devol Maduwa*, and Mangara of *Pahan Maduwa*, and of the folk dramas *Sokari* and *Kolam* and *Nadagam* are linked to the South Indian Dravidian culture. Thus, the Sri Lankan performing arts described as Sinhalese-Buddhist do in actual fact reflect aspects of the Hindu-Tamil culture. Syllabuses designed by universities and higher seats of learning give pride of place to themes that give equal status to both ethnic groups and to promoting reconciliation between them. So, through the reconciliation linked to the performing arts, tolerance between the ethnic groups is increased and it also enhances the ability to work with each ethnic group and community. Guetzkow points out that the arts build community identity and pride that leads to positive community norms such as diversity, tolerance and free expression (Guetzkow, 2002: 3).

In addition, the Sri Lankan performing arts can provide a platform for the artistes and audiences to develop their understanding of each other’s religion and culture. Particularly dance, singing and music art forms and sculpture, carvings and paintings associated with Buddhist as well as Hindu religious rituals seem to illuminate Buddhist and Hindu religious themes. Referring to the process whereby Buddhist themes are presented to society through dance, music and folk drama, Sarachchandra observes, “Kandyan dancers sing and dance the *suvisi vivarana* and *vannam* celebrating events in the life of the Buddha. The *Dalada Sinduva* sings the praises of the Sacred Tooth to the tune of the *Gajaga Vannama*” (Sarachchandra, 1952:

11). He adds that folk plays began to depict Buddhist stories like the Sandakinduru Jataka and Maname *Katava*. In addition to describing the impact of the performing arts on Buddhism, he also describes how Roman Catholicism was introduced to society. He shows that in the Roman Catholic Passion play, “Pasku” characters such as Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, Saint John and Veronica are portrayed, and Christian church music is used for the purpose (Sarachchandra, 1952: 125-126). Gaston, referring to the connection between art and religion in the South of Sri Lanka and South Asia, points out “Religious dance can range from spontaneous individual movement, to highly formalised symbolic movements that appear in ritual and ceremony as part of structured religious services” (Gaston et al, 2014: 02).

When considered culturally, the Sri Lankan performing arts may be seen as a medium that maintains both Sinhalese and Tamil culture. Guetzkow points out that through the arts a sense of collective identity and efficacy increases (Guetzkow, 2002: 3) and adds that through it, community image and status are improved. As he points out, several examples can be seen regarding collective identity and efficacy in Sri Lankan society. In fact, all ritual systems of dance, singing and music of the upcountry, low country, Sabaragamu and Hindu traditions happen on collective participation of each group. Describing this collective participation Sarachchandra points out that when a *Gam Maduwa* or *Kankariya* is performed the talent and co-operation of all in society are focused on one objective. He adds that the people who join together to achieve this one objective perform in one place tasks such as dance, singing, music, drama, and the carving and painting of masks (Sarachchandra, 1952: 33-34). Just as in maintaining the culture of each group, this collective effort is obvious in the manner in which *Kula parampara* (caste generations) take the lead in maintaining such art forms. Here, an artiste who participated in the research observed:

As those belonging to the *Berava* caste we do not dance or play the drum as a *Rajakari*. It’s more an obligation of ours than a *Rajakari*. We are duty bound to maintain the culture, which our ancestors bequeathed to us, for the future.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, it is evident that the artiste across generations are concerned with the preservation, maintenance and the handing over of the dance modes, music patterns, costumes, carvings, invocations, and singing modes to the next generation.

In addition, the Sri Lankan performing arts exert a direct positive impact on the Sri Lankan economy. The performing arts releases itself from the function of religious rituals and transforms itself into an art form to entertain tourists. What is important in this instance is that within the tourist industry the production of a mixed form of art without a division between Sinhalese and Tamil exists. This is evident particularly in the Kataragama and Kandy *perahera*. Upcountry *ves* dance, Hindu Bharathanatyam, low country mask dance, drumming and fire dance have become quite popular among the tourists and places of dance such as Kandy, Bentota, Galle, Kataragama, Jaffna and Hikkaduwa, have become popular tourist destinations. The arts seem to work as a sort of medium to draw foreign exchange. Commenting on the arts and its impact on the economy, Guetzkow describes it as an ‘export industry.’ He adds that because of the tourists visiting a community for art events, they directly pay money for these and “may also shop, eat at a local restaurant and stay in a hotel in the local community”. Therefore, “the dollars brought into the community for an arts event will have indirect multiplier effects on the local economy” (Guetzkow, 2002: 8). This process as shown by Guetzkow is evident at the *Perahëra*<sup>10</sup> sponsored by the Kandy Tooth Relic Temple and *Perahëra* sponsored

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<sup>10</sup> The *Perahëra* is a popular ‘procession’ primarily centred on the sacred relics of the Buddha. This is a Buddhist religious activity where the sacred casket carried by a ceremonial tusker is accompanied by elephants, dancers, and musicians who roam the streets.

by the Kataragama *Déválaya*. There is an increase in the arrival of tourists during the *Perahëra* season, and trade in the relevant towns, temporary boutiques, the leasing of houses and the booking of places for watching the *Perahëra*, seem to increase. This ‘export industry’ brings in money from outside the local economy. Here a direct positive impact is received by the town’s economy and “indirectly, this spending has what is called a ‘multiplier effect’ to the extent that those dollars re-circulate in the local economy as a result of spending on local goods and services by the festival and other business” (Guetzkow, 2002: 09). Thus, it may be concluded that the art of the *Berava*, *Kinnara*, *Karava* castes has a direct as well as indirect impact on the Sri Lankan economy.

In describing the impact of the Sri Lankan performing arts on Sri Lankan society, it is also important to study the impact it has had on aspects of the Sri Lankan political process. In particular, a new ‘social drama’ seems to have emerged, based on the Sri Lankan folk plays *Sokari*, *Kolam*, *Nadagam* and *Kooththu*, which analyses economic and political problems. Describing the politicisation of indigenous drama that took place in the early 1960s and in post-independent Sri Lanka, Fernando observes, “In the early 1960s, several young playwrights attempted to bring social problems to the stage, paving the way for the politicization of the comparatively young modern Sinhala theatre” (Fernando, 1999: 65). The unrest that the young had to face subsequent to the political and social changes that took place in the 1960s seems to have been expressed through the performing arts. The plays were based on hopeless conditions in society and the oppression in private boarding houses such as Henry Jayasena’s *Janelaya* (1961) and Sugathapala de Silva’s *Boardingkarayo* (1962) and bring social problems to the stage for the first time. Through the *veedi natya* (street plays), similar in form to the Tamil *Kooththu* drama tradition, the dramatist seems to take the lead in analysing social problems. Fernando points out that foremost among the themes that the young playwrights of the new generation tackled were problems related to students, slum dwellers, those created by the open economy, the impact of the tourist industry on traditional society, unemployment, state and other forms of terrorism, the abuse of women and ethnic issues (Fernando, 1999: 67). With youth unrest in 1971 and 1989 and the conflict with the state, thousands of young lives were destroyed and the use of drama, dance, singing and drums to protest against the state was perceptible. In fact, the works of the artistes of the new generation had as their main objective agitation and propaganda (Fernando, 1999:71). Just as the arts have been used to analyse and criticise modern political and social problems, folk plays such as *Sokari*, *Kolam* and healing ceremonies such as *Ura Yakkama* were used to analyse and criticise administrative systems, corruption and fraud in the Sinhalese society in the pre-colonial and colonial periods. The *kankari* performer who saw through the society used his performance as an opportunity to protest against caste discrimination, the gap between the haves and have-nots, and various injustices committed against ordinary people by the ruling classes (Dissanayaka, 1994: 37). Even the *Sokari* play depicts this injustice committed by the ruling classes against society. Some verses in the play refer to *Sokari* who went to a physician to get treatment for her husband *Guruhamy* who had been bitten by a dog; the physician takes her to some place and sexually assaults her.

His mind is with *Sokari*.”

“She’s now in the physician’s house

Taken there by force”

Thus, art seems to expose corruption committed in the fields of politics and administration through political power.

### **Conclusion**

Through the traditions of the Sri Lankan performing arts, much information can be gathered relating to the Sri Lankan performing artist's caste, gender, ethnicity and religious adherence. A study into the Sri Lankan performing arts traditions also reveals the influence the performing artist has on such social concepts as caste, gender and ethnicity linked to socio-cultural norms. A Buddhist-Hindu art form associated with Sinhalese-Tamil ethnicities has developed and is performed without any conflict. So, this art form becomes a medium for social and ethno-religious cohesion.

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