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Performing arts & Ethnicity: Sinhalese and Tamil ethnicity influences the performing arts and the artiste's practice in Sri Lanka

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Abstract. This paper describes how far Sinhalese and Tamil ethnicity influences the performing arts and the artiste's practice. Here a further description will be given about the particular changes that took place regarding ethnicity during the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods and how such changes affected the artiste. Attention is paid to the separate establishment of ethnic groups such as Sinhalese and Tamil across the plantation economy during the British colonial period and how the Sinhalese-Tamil political divisions influenced the artiste and the arts.

Keywords. Sinhalese and Tamil ethnicity, performing arts, Sinhalese-Tamil political divisions, race, ethnicity, Nationalism, the pre-colonial era, the colonial era, the post-colonial era, Sinhalese-Buddhist and Tamil-Hindu artiste, ethno-religious cohesion

1.0 Introduction

Problems and themes linked to ethnicity, race and nationalism are the main subjects in academic discussions of Sri Lanka (Olzak, 1989; Yinger, 1985; Harrison, 1995; Kohl, 1998; Friedland, 2001). There is an inter-relationship among ethnicity¹, race² and nationalism³ and a

¹ There is much debate about the definition of ethnicity (Yinger, 1985). According to De Lima, ethnicity is defined primarily as "An alternative means of conceptualising human diversity which is more rooted in the social and/or cultural" (De Lima, 2008:29). Commenting on this definition, Wan examines it in two ways, "ethnicity is a function of deeply rooted and durable affiliation based on kingship, shared territory and tradition" and also "ethnicity as amorphous and malleable, constantly adapting to changing climates and circumstances, not limited to a particular race, genealogy, or ecology" (Wan, 2000:197-198). This interpretation given by Wan is particularly relevant to Sri Lankan society in terms of defining ethnicity.

² In defining 'race' in relation to Sri Lankan society, Little points out that "Beliefs about racial superiority, which gained prominence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the West, undergirded the attitude of the colonial government and the missionaries and eventually had a profound, if complex, effect on the self – understanding of the Sri Lankan people" (Little, 1994:15). Stewart and Strathern express a similar view. "The classification of the Sinhalese language as Indo-European or Aryan was seized upon by Sinhalese nationalists as a mark of their superiority to Tamils" (Stewart and Strathern, 2002:143). An important factor emerges from this concept of "racial superiority" referred to by Little. With the migration of South Indian Tamil labour to work on the tea plantations during the colonial era, the Sinhalese became the majority and the Tamils became the minority, which resulted in a perception of "racial superiority" within Sri Lanka.

³ Spencer, describing nationalism, points out that "Each nationalism is based upon the assumption that people are naturally divisible into different kinds – known as nations and ideally each kind should have the responsibility for its own governance" (Spencer, 1990: 283). Whereas Spencer discusses how people become naturally divided into different kinds within nationalism, Gellner shows how boundaries operate within it. According to Gellner nationalism is not only a theory of political legitimacy but also "(it) requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones, and, in particular, that ethnic boundaries within a given state - a contingency already formally excluded by the principle in its general formulation - should not separate the

cross-fertilisation between the performing arts, sociology, anthropology and history and other disciplines such as language, economy, religion, caste, and gender. Therefore, how ethnicity, race and nationalism linked to Sinhalese-Buddhists and Tamil-Hindus are integrated will be discussed.

For the purpose of this study, the performing artiste and the art form are divided into three eras. The first era considered is the period from the arrival of Vijaya in 543 BCE⁴ up to the subjugation of Sri Lanka by the Portuguese in 1505. This period is identified as **the pre-colonial era**. The period between 1505 CE up to 1948, when Sri Lanka became independent of British rule, is referred to as **the colonial era**. The period subsequent to 1948 is identified as **the post-colonial era**.

The term Sri Lankan used to describe the Sri Lankan performing artiste in this research is used to denote the two main ethnic groups Sinhalese and Tamil. In describing the Sri Lankan nationality, Reed too identifies Sinhalese and Tamil as the two main nationalities in Sri Lanka. Reed further shows that the island's inhabitants belong to two ethnic groups that were of Indian origin; seventy-four per cent of the population were of the majority Sinhala ethnic group and the rest originated from two minority Tamil groups (Reed, 2010:9).

To undertake more in-depth research about the Performing arts in Sri Lanka & Ethnicity, an ethnographic methodology was adopted to collect data. For the collection of this research data, many collection methods such as observation, participant observation, interviews, 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; Sanjeeva, 2018).

1.1 Pre-Colonial Era: Stabilisation of Sinhalese and Tamil Ethnicity and its influence on the Performing Arts

In any discussion concerning the performing arts in the colonial era, it is important to pay attention to the suppression of the local people and the colonisation and stabilisation of the Tamil identity which happened with the South Indian aggression that took place during the period. Concerning the colonisation of Sri Lanka, *Mahāvamsa* notes that there were two tribes namely *Yaksha* and *Nāga*⁵, and Vijaya⁶, having defeated them, established his authority within Tambapanni. Describing the colonisation *Mahāvamsa* states:

When those who were commanded by Vijaya landed from their ship, they sat down wearied, resting their hands upon the ground – and since their hands were reddened by touching the dust of the red earth that region and also the island were (named) Tambapanni. But the King

power-holders from the rest" (Gellner, 1997: 1). The separation of ethnicity and the boundaries within it as described by Spencer and Gellner are important in discussing Sri Lankan nationalism. In discussing Sinhalese and Tamil nationalism and its disputes, the separation of Sinhalese and Tamils and the boundaries that came into being are important because it eventually led to the over twenty-five-years civil war between the two nations.

⁴ Both *Mahāvamsa* and *Dipavamsa* explain the establishment of settlements in Sri Lanka by Vijaya and the consequent establishment of the Sinhalese race.

⁵ The Buddhist monk of yore who wrote the ancient chronicles of Sri Lanka in the Pali language signified with the words 'Yakkha', 'Raksha (god/demon) or 'Naga' (snake/totem, god/demon) obviously the 'non-believers', the indigenous tribes of ancient Sri Lanka who followed various non-Buddhist belief (Nurnberger, 1998:66).

⁶ He is the first recorded King of Sri Lanka. According to the *Mahavamsa* "Vijaya, Son of King Sinhabahu, is come to Lanka from the country of Lala together with seven hundred followers" (Geiger, 1912:55).

Sinhabahu, since he had slain the lion (was called) Sinhala and, by reason of the ties between him and them, all those (followers of Vijaya) were also (called) Sinhala (Geiger, 1912:58).

The concept of “the people of the lion” as shown by the compiler of *Mahāvamsa* becomes a major factor in not only the subsequent nationalist struggle between the Sinhalese and Tamils but also in the division of the performing arts into Sinhalese arts and Tamil arts. This has marginalised Tamil-Hindu ethnicity and its arts. Discussing this “lion people” concept, Rotberg points out a significant issue:

Vijaya, reputedly the offspring of a lion and human female, designates the Sinhala as ‘the people of the lion’, whose primary obligation ever after is to preserve Buddhism, by violent means if necessary. Accordingly, the special honour and dignity of the Sinhala in comparison with other people is sanctified together with their right to political and military authority in Sri Lanka (Rotberg, 1999:43-44).

Because the Sinhalese nation received this special ‘honour’, the Tamil nation became marginalised which led later to conflict with the Sinhalese nation that eventually resulted in civil war in the 20th century. In discussing Sinhalese and Tamil ethnicity in the pre-colonial era, a significant landmark is the stabilisation of Tamil ethnicity as a result of the South Indian aggression. With the South Indian aggression, the Sinhalese-Buddhist Anuradhapura Kingdom broke down, and an administration with Tamil ethnicity was begun in the Polonnaruwa period (1017 CE -1255 CE). This fall of the Sinhalese-Buddhist administration and the stabilisation of the South Indian administration is discussed in detail by Holt. He further points out that the aggression of the South Indian Cola Empire caused almost total demolition of Anuradhapura’s civic and monastic infrastructure. He adds that the South Indian Cola power established itself in Sri Lanka and that “The Colas maintained their position for many decades into the eleventh century, before the Sinhalese captured Polonnaruwa and turned it into their own capital” (Holt, 2011:11).

In the description of the South Indian aggression, the compiler of the *Mahāvamsa* seems to show singular affection for the Sinhalese Dutthagamini probably because the compiler of the *Mahāvamsa* was a Sinhalese Buddhist monk. The Sinhalese-Tamil or Dutthagamini-Elara war is described by the *Mahāvamsa* as an ‘ordinary incident’ but De Silva argues that it was a decisive factor in the subsequent struggle between the Sinhalese and Tamil nations, “It is likely that the authors of *Mahāvamsa*, living and writing at a time when Sinhala–Tamil tensions were high, had re-interpreted the story of Dutthagamini in the light of contemporary events” (De Silva, 1987:27). The civil war that developed as a result of Sinhalese-Tamil tensions, as pointed out by De Silva, created a division between the Sinhalese-Tamil nations and this is reflected also in Sinhalese-Tamil arts. Moreover, the “Sinhala lion” consciousness that originated as a result of this stabilisation and the Sinhalese-Tamil struggle for power as described by *Mahāvamsa* became the main factor in the nationalist struggle in modern Sri Lanka.

The relationship between this stabilisation of nations, ethnicities and the performing arts has a very special significance, especially the influence of Indian arts on Sri Lanka after this period of Indian colonisation and aggression. *Mahāvamsa* mentions that several guilds of artisans accompanied Theri Sanghamitta⁷ when she brought the Bodhi tree to Sri Lanka. So, it appears that the guilds of artisans mentioned in the *Mahāvamsa* included dancers, singers and musicians. The carvings, sculpture and paintings of the relevant Anuradhapura period, produced

⁷ Regarding the establishment of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and the bhikkhuni sasana Theri Sanghamitta occupies an important place. King Asoka who lived in the third century BCE had two children, Mahinda a son and Sanghamitta a daughter. Within the king’s dharma vijaya policy his son and daughter entered the Order and Thera Mahinda introduced Buddhism to Sri Lanka. Theri Sanghamitta established the bhikkhuni sasana within Sri Lanka and brought the right branch of the Sri Maha Bodhi to Sri Lanka (Geiger, 1912).

by local artistes, depicted dancers, singers and musicians and reveal gestures (mudra), musical instruments and dance styles of Indian origin. Similarly, the Shiva *Dēvalaya*⁸, Nissankalatamandapa, Sarasvati Pavilion, and Vatadage, in the Polonnaruwa kingdom (1017 CE-1255 CE) that was established after South Indian aggression clearly show the South Indian influence in their construction. Thus, two significant incidents occurred in Sri Lankan society with the establishment of the administration following Indian colonisation and aggression. Sinhalese-Tamil and Buddhist-Hindu influences - cultural, political, social and economic institutions were established in Sri Lanka. In the case of the art, Sinhalese-Buddhist art with Buddhist religious rituals and Tamil art with Hindu religious influences were established, giving rise to a Sinhalese-Tamil fusion art. This cultural reconciliation is clearly seen in carvings, sculpture, and paintings, in Buddhist temples inspired by Tamil art and the works of art in Hindu sacred places inspired by Sinhalese art.

1.1.1 Performing Arts in the pre-colonial era and nationalist representation

As mentioned in the previous chapter, stone inscriptions, chronicles, carvings, paintings and sculpture provide much valuable source material. In studying these, several significant facts emerge. Before the founding of arts linked to Sinhalese and Tamil ethnicity in Sri Lanka there are several factors that suggest the existence of an earlier art linked to the *Yaksha* and *Nāga* tribes. Evidence of this is provided by *Mahāvamsa*:

Year by year he had sacrificial offerings made to them and other (Yakkha); but on festival days he sat with Cittaraja beside him on a seat of equal height, and having gods and men to dance before him, the king took his pleasure, in joyous and merry wide (Geiger, 1912:74).

Particularly in the description of a festival with dance and music conducted by King Pandukabhaya and Chittaraja, art linked to the local population is revealed. In the sacrificial offerings and in the description of the arrival of Vijaya to Sri Lanka as mentioned in *Mahāvamsa*, there is information about a form of performing arts that existed among the *Yaksha* tribes. As shown by *Mahāvamsa*:

As the night went on he heard the sound of music and singing and asked *Yakkhini*, who was lying near him: "What means this noise?" And the yakkhim thought: 'I will bestow kingship on my lord and all the yakkhas must be slain, for (else) the yakkhas will slay me, for it was through me that men have taken up their dwelling (in Lanka).' And she said to the prince: 'Here there is a yakkha-city called Sirisavatthu; the daughter of the chief of the yakkhas who dwells in the city of Lanka has been brought hither, and her mother too is come. And for the wedding there is high festival, lasting seven days; therefore there is this noise, for a great multitude is gathered together (Geiger, 1912:57).

A significant factor is that with the arrival of Buddhism to Sri Lanka the performing arts of the tribes *Yaksha* and *Nāga* began to take a new direction. The performing arts as well as the artiste were seen as directly linked with Buddhist ritual art. In the descriptions of certain religious rituals described in the chronicles *Mahāvamsa* and *Dipavamsa*, the description in *Mahāvamsa* of the building of the Maha Thupa by King Dutthagamani, a close association of the performing arts with Buddhism is noticeable.

And moreover, urged by faith, he ordered year by year perpetually a great festival (for the renewing) of the plasterwork; and festivals also of the great Bodhi-tree (in honour) of the watering of the Bodhi-tree, and furthermore twenty – eight great Vesakha – festivals, and also divers mimic dances and concerts, with the playing of all kind of instruments of music (in honour) of the Great Thupa (Geiger, 1912:242).

⁸ Deity shrine. This place dedicated to the Dēva(gods) is known as Dēvalaya.

The performing arts linked to the Sinhalese-Buddhist religious background as shown by the *Mahāvamsa*, however, is totally replaced by an art with a Tamil-Hindu religious background by the beginning of the Polonnaruva period. This is a consequence of the fall of the Anuradhapura kingdom, which was subject to South Indian aggression in its last phase, and the establishment of a South Indian administration with Tamil ethnicity in the Polonnaruva kingdom. Across this Tamil ethnic stabilisation, the influence of South Indian art was also visible within their performing arts. Several musical instruments belonging to the Bharatanatyam dance tradition such as *mridangam*, *daburu*, flutes, *natuvangam*, and hand gestures (mudra) like *alapadma*, *katakamukha*, and *Dolahasta*, are revealed in the visual sources such as paintings, murals and carvings, in the Hindu buildings erected during the period. Verification of the Tamil-Hindu art that stabilised in the Polonnaruva period can be obtained from such archaeological evidence as the dancing girls in the Dedigama *eth pahana*⁹, figures in the vatadage in Polonnaruva, and the image of a dancing God Shiva in the Polonnaruva museum.

The other significant factor that could be seen during the pre-colonial era is the co-operation of Sinhalese and Tamil nations and ethnicity in the performing arts. The signs of Hindu art in Sinhalese Buddhist temples and the signs of a Sinhalese art seen in Hindu temples bear testimony to this co-operation. Holt points out that a Sinhalese-Buddhist and Tamil-Hindu national and religious blend is also seen in the art found in buildings of the fourteenth century.

The increased mixing of Hindu and Buddhist elements seen, for example, in the architecture and ritual practices of the Gadaladeniya and Lankatilaka temple complexes constructed during the Gampola (near Kandy) period of the fourteenth century (Holt, 2011: 12).

Thus, as shown by Holt and through archaeological evidence¹⁰ it is seen that artistic expressions emerged showing Sinhalese-Tamil co-operation during the Polonnaruva period but alongside this the separate existence of the art of the local tribes, *Yaksha* and *Nāga* continued.

1.2 Colonial Era: Stabilisation of European Hegemony, Freedom Struggle and Special Characteristics of Performing Arts

Following the hydro civilisations of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruva, the sixteenth century saw Sri Lanka come under western hegemony through Portuguese rule (1505-1658) followed by Dutch rule (1640 -1796), and English rule (1815 – 1948). Under the subjection of Sri Lanka to European hegemony, several changes occurred in Sri Lankan society, including its culture. “In Sri Lanka the colonial experience has had a profound impact on its culture, its traditions and its development and indeed on its national identity” (De Silva, 2011:135). De Silva highlights the impact based on ethnicity and art during the colonial era, in other words, the considerable impact which colonial hegemony had on the development of behaviour, dress, language, rituals, and food.

Other social changes also occurred within Sri Lankan society under the hegemony of the three European powers. During the Portuguese period, Roman Catholicism was introduced by the missionaries, which resulted in the building of a large number of churches throughout Sri Lanka, and such Portuguese surnames as de Alwis (Alves), de Mel, de Saram, Corea, de Zoysa, de Fonseka, Gomes, Mendis, Perera, Rodrigo, etc. were adopted by the Ceylonese. The Portuguese language spread through the country and several Portuguese words were added to the Ceylonese language. A notable feature that happened in the performing arts was the introduction of ‘Baila’ (rhythmic instrumental dance music) which even today is a most popular item in Sri Lankan music. Even during the Dutch period Roman Catholicism was further

⁹ The lamp resembles the figure of an elephant.

¹⁰ Such as stone inscriptions, pillar inscriptions, copper plates, sannas or offerings to temples.

consolidated and the most significant feature during the period was the introduction of the Roman-Dutch Law, which streamlined the Ceylonese law. In addition, Dutch architecture was introduced to the country and a large number of buildings in the Dutch style were built throughout the country, which added a new dimension to Sri Lankan architecture. During the British regime the plantation economy was introduced and plantations growing tea, rubber and cinnamon were most common. Road and rail networks were laid for the transportation of the produce of those plantations and additional labour was brought in from India. In addition, schools and universities were built that imparted education in the English medium which added a new dimension to Ceylonese education. Thus, many aspects with Portuguese, Dutch and English hegemony were introduced to Ceylonese society.

On the one hand, western colonialism and Christianisation took place within Sinhalese-Buddhist and Hindu-Tamil society and on the other a Sinhalese and Tamil ethnicity revolted against it. Among these forces lining up against western colonialism, the Uva-Vellassa rebellion (1817-1818) takes prominent place. Herath describes this rebellion, a freedom struggle, launched by Kandyan Sinhalese, Buddhist leaders who fought together with the rebels. "As the rebellion gained momentum, a few Kandyan traditional chiefs, including Keppetipola and Madugalle, broke ranks with the British and joined the rebels" (Herath, 2002:29). After the Uva-Vellassa rebellion, the British government took action against the Sinhalese nation and Buddhism, "It conceded that there was an obligation to initiate and supervise the performance of specified legal functions, especially with regard to the Buddhist temporalities" (De Silva, 1981:281). After the Uva-Vellassa rebellion, the action taken by the British government mainly affected Buddhist temples and *Devālaya* and the Christianisation that occurred was another factor which led to Sinhalese Buddhist forces lining up against the European administration. "The Buddhist revival movement at the time was primarily designed to counteract the Christian missionary threat to Buddhism, especially in the areas where the Christian missionaries were most active" (Herath, 2002:34). In this struggle against European hegemony not only Sinhalese-Buddhist but also Tamil-Hindu nationalist and religious groups joined together:

From about 1890 there had been harmony among these leaders. Their words and action had shown a sense of common commitment to bring all the people of the country under one banner within the context of one nation, a Ceylonese (Sri Lankan) nation. They evolved a concept that Sinhalese (Kandyans and Low-Country Sinhalese together) and Tamil were 'two majority communities' in the country and appeared to have looked forward to a future where both Sinhalese and Tamils would embrace and cherish one single national identity (Herath, 2002:42).

With the declaration of the two main ethnic groups expressing a single Sri Lankan national identity, not as Sinhalese or Tamil, Sri Lanka obtained independence from Britain in 1948. The Sinhalese-Buddhist forces which revolted against western hegemony received the support of Tamil-Hindu nationalist and religious groups that eventually led to the formation of a national united front. As discussed in this section several cultural, political and economic changes occurred in Sri Lankan society during the colonial era. As will be shown in the next section the colonial era also contributed to changes in the performing arts.

1.2.1 The performing artiste, Ethnicity and the Colonial era

There were many changes in art and ethnicity during the colonial period. The main feature is how the performing arts separated into "Sinhalese Art" and "Tamil Art." Sri Lankan performing arts, or an art linked to the national-religious unity that existed during the pre-colonial era separated during the colonial era into "Sinhalese" and "Tamil" art. The reason for this separation is the bringing of South Indian labour to Sri Lanka in 1847 to work on the tea

estates (Peebles, 2006:59), and their settlement and the subsequent “major race” and “minor race” attitude was created. Although there was a united front consisting of Sinhalese and Tamil nationalists in the freedom struggle, De Silva (1998) describes the separation between the “major race” and the “minor race” that had taken place by 1922. Through this creation of “major race” and “minor race” communities, art also seemed to separate and develop independently as Sinhalese and Tamil. Both groups seemed to try to develop and present traditional and authentic arts. Commenting on this, Reed observes “This general movement towards the construction of an ethnic identity by both Sinhalese and Tamils set the stage for the cultivation and presentation of ‘traditional’ and ‘authentic’ arts” (Reed, 2010:131). In the stabilisation and presentation of traditional art within this “major race” and “minor race” separation, Reed points out that the Tamil nation played a greater role than the Sinhalese (Reed, 2010:131). With regard to the emergence of Tamil art over Sinhalese art in the first half of the 1930s, Russell points out “The one aspect of their culture to which Ceylon Tamils seems particularly attached, and which played an important part in the renaissance of Tamil culture in Ceylon, was the puranic Tamil forms of music and dance” (Russell, 1982:120). To develop art linked to Tamil ethnicity several arts societies such as the Jaffna Oriental Studies and the Jaffna Oriental Music Society were inaugurated (Russell, 1982: 121), which pioneered the development of Tamil literature, music, dance and drama.

During the hegemony of the three European powers, western influence deeply impacted the Ceylonese society through Catholic conversion and education, which affected even the arts. This influence, is obvious in dancing, singing and music, carvings, sculpture and painting. The paintings and sculptures in the Buddhist temple named Purvarama at Ahangama bear testimony to this. There are several striking examples such as British soldiers, people carrying the insignia of Britain and colonial parasols in the Buddhist *Perahera*¹¹, women and children dressed in the fashion of the Victorian era, social get-togethers and the playing of drums and harps at those gatherings, and men dressed in western clothes playing musical instruments. Through these paintings, it is possible to gain knowledge of the modes of practice of the performing arts and the western influence on the instruments played and ritual practices in the contemporary colonial era.

The other development in the performing arts was the addition of Dutch stories into the *Kolam* folk drama during Dutch colonialism. Among important items are the ‘police *kolama*’ and the ‘Dutch couple’. Dela Bandara, referring to the Dutch couple ‘Nona’ and ‘Singho’ who come on the stage wearing masks, hypothesises that during the period when the Dutch held sway in the coastal areas, they entered the field of folk drama. Thus, the Portuguese, the Dutch and the English nations have directly influenced the Sinhalese and Tamil performing arts as there are several western characters included and masks were for the Singho couple, Singho and Nona, and the Policeman *Kolama*¹². Dela Bandara, commenting on this folk drama *Kolam* states, “Another *Kolama* introduced later is the police *Kolama*. Police was a public service established during the English rule and the police *Kolama* may have been a role added lastly to this tradition”(Dela Bandara,2000:75)

¹¹ The *Perahera* 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.

¹² 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. Singular: *Kolama*. Plural: *Kolam*

1.3 Post-Colonial Era: The Sinhala Only Policy, and the marginalisation of Tamil ethnicity

In studying the performing arts and ethnicity during the post-colonial era¹³, it is necessary to pay attention to the ethnic separation between the two major races and the factors that led to it, particularly because the impact this separation had on the Sri Lankan arts was immense. The main objective here is to find the main causes that led to the ethnic separation and how it affected the arts and ethnicity.

The Sinhala Only Policy of Bandaranaike played a key role in the separation of the two ethnic groups of Sinhalese and Tamil. However, Herath (2002) points out that this separation was an inheritance from the colonial period. This language problem was not merely something that developed after independence but, according to Herath, was a dark shadow inherited from the colonial period.

Language was one of the important issues in focus in all the communities, as both Sinhala and Tamil speaking people had suffered under the English language during the time of the British. Even at the time of independence, only about one percent of the population could speak and write in English. Yet no one could send a telegram in Sinhala or Tamil, even at a time of an emergency. In the case of Indian Tamils, the issue of impending enfranchisement had not been settled. Unlike in some other colonies, the British did not accept them as their own citizens at the time of granting independence. Instead, the British washed their hands of the problem and asked the independent Sri Lankan government to find a solution. Thus, the challenges that lay ahead at the time of independence were diverse and complex in nature (Herath, 2002:45).

The climax of this process culminated in the political revolution in 1956 and the political policies of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike. In fact, the year 1956 is a noteworthy one in the island-nation's history (Satkunaratnam, 2009:86) with the Sinhala language becoming the official language (The Sinhala Only Policy). Bandaranaike was successful in gaining power by defeating the United National Party and obtaining the support of 'bhikkhus-farmers-Ayurveda-physicians-labourers' (Sangha, guru, govi, veda, kamkaru). Commenting on this, Manor points out that in 1956, Bandaranaike had attracted the votes of underprivileged castes that had rarely before participated in elections (Manor, 2011:600). It is apparent that because of this Sinhala Only Policy Bandaranaike came to power but various problems arose regarding the representation of minorities. Commenting on this situation, Peebles points out that 'hartal' protests were staged in Tamil areas on 5th June 1956 when the Sinhala Only Policy was introduced and that the Sinhalese mobs then attacked the Tamils in Colombo; violence broke out in Trincomalee and Jaffna. The worst incident occurred in the Gal Oya Colonisation Scheme when Sinhalese thugs annihilated between 100 to 150 Tamils (Peebles, 2006: 110). This ethnic struggle continued and commenting on this clash Wijetunga et al. observe, "The Official Languages Act in particular triggered a series of events that culminated in the communal riots of 1958" (Wijetunga et al., 2004: 387). The eventual result of these riots was the formation of the largest, most powerful and wealthiest of the guerrilla groups, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam or LTTE, who were seeking a separate homeland within the Sinhalese state (Rajanayagam, 1994: 171). This led to the war between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan Government that lasted for over twenty-five years and the resultant damage to life and property was incalculable. Describing this damage and the clash between the Sinhalese and the Tamils, Reed observes, "In May 2009, after more than twenty-five years' conflict, the government of

¹³ Post-colonial era refers to the period from 04th February 1948 when Sri Lanka gained independence from British rule up to the present time.

Sri Lanka defeated the LTTE. The death toll from the war is estimated at nearly 100,000; the suffering engulfed millions” (Reed, 2010:10). Therefore, it is important to examine what effect the war which raged between the Sinhalese and Tamils for nearly three decades had on the performing arts.

1.3.1 Performing arts in the post-colonial era and the activity of ethnicity that affected it

There are several special features that can be identified in the performing arts in the post-colonial era and the ethnicity expressed within it. The main among them is the negotiation between the Sinhalese-Tamil arts as part of the attempt to rebuild the nation.

One method to identify the respective ethnic identities in Sri Lanka is to examine the different geographical zones in which respective ethnic groups are separated (Holt, 2011; Sabaratnam, 2001; Reed, 2010; Peebles, 2006). People of these particular ethnic groups “live in the Northern and Eastern provinces, and the rest are concentrated in the Central highlands and the urban areas outside the Northern and Eastern Provinces” (Herath, 2002:1). The Tamil people who live concentrated in the Central highlands “have separate identities as Indian Tamils” (Herath, 2002:1). The main reason for the Tamil ethnic group in the Central highlands acquiring an Indian cultural framework is the development of the state economy during the British colonial administration. In obtaining employees for the state industry, “The planters imported Tamil labourers, not from Jaffna but from South India” (Sabaratnam, 2001:86). In terms of this expansion of the Tamil ethnicity and its establishment in urban areas, Sabaratnam points out the ‘occupational mobility’ which took place. “The growth of a public and the recruitment of native Ceylonese to various jobs resulted in a Tamil migratory pattern that could be called an internal brain-drain. There was less to be earned in Jaffna, while the skills were in demand in other parts of the colony. Thus, Tamils moved to Sinhala areas within a colonial ambit” (Sabaratnam, 2001:112). Thus, with the establishment of Tamil ethnicity in the North Eastern Central highlands and Colombo and its suburbs, an art connected with that nationalism began to grow. By the mid-1930s an example of this is that “The study of occidental music and dance had been replaced by Carnatic music and Bharata Natyam dance in the curricular of most colleges in the (Jaffna) peninsula” (Russell, 1982:122). The relationship between Tamil nationalism and Tamil artistes enjoys a prominent place in society. Russell’s view of these artistes and the Tamil social system suggests that “The long, arduous and rigid self-discipline necessary to acquire an expertise in Carnatic music and Bharata Natyam dance endow the artiste in these mediums with an immense respect and renown” (Russell, 1982:121). This expansion of Tamil nationalism and the establishment of the art that emerged reflects Tamil nationalism and its identity to such an extent in the middle-upper class in Colombo that studies of Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music was considered to be important. Moreover, studying this music was, “considered essential for a young Tamil woman making her Arangetram (debut) into Tamil society” (Wilson, 2000:36).

Just as the establishment of the Tamil-Hindu art was connected with Tamil nationalism and ethnicity, a Sinhala-Buddhist art was established. The Sinhalese art, particularly the Kandyan dance, became a “well-established subject on the school curriculum, and is taught in almost every school in the Sinhala-dominated southern and central regions of the country” (Reed, 2010:128). Similarly, for the study of that art and “to meet the demand for Kandyan dance teachers, a number of aesthetic teacher training institutes have been established” (Reed, 2010:128). Within this expansion of Sinhala nationalism three forms of Sinhalese art emerged in relation to the Kandyan tradition based in Kandy, Satkorala and Satarakorala, namely the low country tradition based on Matara, Hambantota in the Southern province and the Sabaragamu

tradition based in Ratnapura and Kahawatta. Quite apart from the representation of Sinhala arts, the Kandyan dance tradition “is preeminent among the Sinhala dance forms, and while its roots are in the Kandyan region, the dance is now identified as a “national” dance” (Reed, 2010:11). This concept of a national dance, and the awakening of a Sinhala nationalist identity in 1956, was established as Sinhala-Buddhist art. Here, Sri Lanka was not only considered a ‘land of the Sinhalese’ but as Reed points out, “Myth and ritual trace the origins of the dance to the colonization of the island by the Sinhala people and even the name of the dance, evoking the royal city of the last of Lanka’s kings, suggests links to the country’s dominant ethnic group” (Reed, 2010:11).

The division of art into Sinhalese and Tamil arts seems to have been a great impediment to the formation of a Sri Lankan art. This was expressed by one of the interviewees:

I am a *pahatharata* (Low country) dancer. This is our art. This is our culture. This is one method by which we can show our ‘Sinhaleseness’. Our ‘Sinhaleseness’ has been preserved with this art. Tamil arts have come from outside. How could you reckon them as Sinhalese art?¹⁴

The definition of the performing arts as Sinhalese art or ‘only a Sinhalese country’ and to ‘build up a road towards a Tamil state’ seems to prevail during the period:

North and East are our own motherland. Since the past this land is ‘Tamil- Hindu- ours’. We went into a war to win over this land. Our Kuttu drama, Bharatanatyam and Mrdanga show that there was a Tamil culture in this country. During the period, we were engaged in the war this art was a support for us to show Tamil strength.¹⁵

It is evident that the provincial separation of ethnicity and nationalist art seems to be an important factor. Although this separation could be seen only provincially, in the religious ritual system, a national conciliation seemed to take the place of that separation.

Although much information was gathered in areas where either only Sinhalese or Tamils are living, the situation in Colombo and the suburbs is different. In this research in eleven out of the fifteen interviews held in Colombo and the suburbs, the artistes were studying and practising arts connected with both Sinhala and Tamil nationalism. They pointed out that Sinhala or Tamil nationalism was not an impediment to art:

In this institution of mine both Bharatanatyam and Sinhala dance are taught. The fact that it is Sinhala or Tamil is not a problem to me. Due to the separation of Sinhala and Tamil, animosity develop between them. What we have to do now is to find a solution for that disaster even through art. I have no consideration on nationalism in my art.¹⁶

Although this national negotiation is observable in art centred in the main cities such as Colombo and Kandy, it takes a different form in the north-east where Tamils mostly live and the south where the Sinhalese live. This concept of an art with ethnic cohesion seems not to exist except in the cities. In fact, the data gained during the research confirmed this as in the following example. During an arts festival at Jaffna University (16th July 2016), the Sinhalese students who presented a *ves* dance were assaulted by Tamil students and this illustrates that the opportunity to present a Sinhalese-Buddhist performance in a Tamil-Hindu university is indeed limited. What happens to Hindu art in an environment of Sinhalese-Buddhist art was described by one of the interviewees:

No, no. We don’t want to include Tamil dances into this (dance performance). How many were killed by them in our country? Destroyed? They turned the beautiful north into a

¹⁴ Interview (INT/HB/01/M)

¹⁵ Interview (INT/JF/08/M)

¹⁶ Interview (INT/COL/09/M)

land of landmines. What they want is to separate this small country. So, we can certainly manage without those Tamil dances. I'll never include any dance by them into this¹⁷.

This rejection of Sinhalese ethnicity by the Tamils in the north and the rejection of the Tamil ethnicity by the Sinhalese in the south has led to the rejection of a Sri Lankan art that signifies unity.

The other important factor to be noted is that the Sinhalese-Tamil arts linked to rituals frees itself from the rituals and transforms itself into an 'exhibition art' or a form of popular entertainment. In this situation, instead of particularised ethnic features, such as Sinhalese or Tamil, a concept of a Sri Lankan art seems to emerge; that is, the emergence of a Sinhala Tamil mixed national art form to entertain foreigners and foreign tours. One of the artistes points out that the main reason for this is the social demand for such things:

When persons asked me for dance items they never say to give them either Sinhala or Tamil dances. What they say is whether what I present could be watched by the spectators without feeling bored. Every dance item of mine is a Sinhala-Tamil mixed production. Within that, there is no racial or religious basis. My art is for all. The present stage demands art free from petty national and religious frameworks¹⁸

This Sinhala Tamil mixed national art which has emerged is found active not only in 'exhibition art' but also in universities and teacher training institutions where the concept of 'national unity through mixed forms of art' is adopted in teaching and creating.

One of the main objectives of our university courses is to refer students to an art where there is Sinhala Tamil unity. We always try to create a unified Sri Lankan art form without a gap between languages, ethnic and religious barriers. If we do not do this just as we suffered from a war that spread 30 years our future generations too would suffer the same fate. Our ideal is towards a Sri Lankan art there is neither Sinhala nor Tamil within that.¹⁹

Therefore, although in exclusively Sinhalese or Tamil rural areas art grew as a separate entity, in the cities it has become a Sinhalese-Tamil mixed art. Thus, Sinhalese or Tamil ethnicity has become a major factor in the Sri Lankan performing arts, but it is also a major issue affecting ethno-religious harmony. What is obvious during the postcolonial period, in this tragic land separated into Sinhala and Tamil, is the attempt made by some performing artistes for unification using the arts as a bridge.

1.4 Conclusion

Sri Lankan ethnicity and the Sri Lankan performing arts, which were divided during different periods for various reasons, are not easy to reunite. However, realising this dream, that is the development of Sri Lankan performing arts by the government and the educational institutes does not seem to be too far away. The realisation of this dream depends on the understanding of each other's language and culture, the building up of the concept of equal ethnicity instead of the division of majority race and minority race, the equal distribution of resources and opportunities that will lead to the realisation of this dream of a Sri Lankan nation.

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¹⁷ Interview (INT/ANU/12/M1)

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