

CLASSICAL DANCES OF CEYLON

THE historical record of the Sinhalese, the Mahavamsa, tells us that the Aryan Prince Vijaya listened to music on the day he landed on the shores of Shri Lanka in 600 B. C. Since then the songs and dances of Ceylon have persisted in spite of foreign invasions and internal unrest. The purest form of Sinhalese dancing is found in the ceremonial dances associated with religious and public festivals. This form of dancing, commonly known as Kandyan Dancing, is vigorous and virile. It is a synchronization of movement, words, sound and emotions. The movement is an open one, particularly masculine, and keeps time with the incantations and invocations of the deities or of great men or of birds, beasts, and reptiles.

The art of music was considered incomplete without the three elements of dancing, singing and the playing of musical instruments. Percussion instruments take a predominant place amongst the variety of musical instruments used. The art of drumming is, therefore, highly developed and is taught through a system of mnemonics, that is, spoken sounds of syllables which are imitated by the hand and fingers on the drum. Of the wind instruments, the horaneva (oboe, large and small), vies for equal importance with the drums. Metal percussion instruments such as the penteru, (brass tambourine), are used to accompany the dance.

2,500 Years Old

Kandyan Dancing dates back to pre-Buddhist times, which makes it at least 2,500 years old. It is historically a hereditary profession, practised by families of the present exponents for over 1,000 years. The original families were presented with lands in perpetuity by the Sinhalese Kings who first sponsored the Perahera on the condition that each generation should train its males in the traditional dance and ritual observed at the annual procession, when the Holy Tooth Relic of Lord Buddha is carried in procession around the Lake at Kandy in an unforgettable

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scenic splendour which has not altered since it first began.

The Kandyan Dancers have, therefore, been land-owning peasants with a repertoire of folk dances second to none in the world. The life of the village and the surrounding jungle has been their fundamental source of inspiration and material for interpretation. From this background comes a vigour and realism which can seldom be seen on a stage. The present origin is also reflected in the simplicity of their music ; a single drum provides all the accompaniment that is needed but with rhythms of an astonishing variety.

The analytical critic will next observe the kingly flavour of the performance, a formality and magnificence which could only be maintained by those who had for generations to entertain at court. This is reflected in the ornate dresses and more subtly in the themes of some of the dances which show how these official performers were used not only to flatter and amuse the king but also to communicate royal wishes to the people. It is believed that this use of dancing and mime as a technique of persuasion and propaganda is unique.

18 Vannamas

The Vannamas, 18 in number, have a great fascination for Ceylon audiences because they depict the movements of animals and birds and are connected with traditional lore, much of it coming from both Buddhist and Hindu Mythology. The 18 Vannamas are :

1. Gahaka.....How the (God) Sakkaraya blew the conch.
2. Naiadi.....The cobra creep.
3. Seula.....The cockeral strut.
4. Musalady.....The Hare's walk, and how it eats and stands.
5. Ukkusa.....The flight of the Hawk.
6. Hanuman.....The monkey walks.

7. Naga.....The Cobra dance of the Buddha when he was a captive of the Gypsies.
8. Gajaga.....The Tusker's walk.
9. Singharaja.....The Lion Prowl.
10. Thuranga.....The Horse's walk.
11. Kirala.....The cry of the Kirala.
12. Sera.....Swimming of the Teal.
13. Maiyura.....Peacock.
14. Eradi.....Arrow.
15. Surapathy.....In search of Suraya Devi.
16. Asadusa.....Best of all wannamas.
17. Wairody.....Precious stone.
18. Udara.....King's walk.

The most popular of the above are :
Thuranga, Gahaka, and Udaravannama.

Kandyan Dancing could be divided into the following categories :—

Ves Netuma, Naiandy, Pantheru, Udekki and Hewisi.

These were the traditional and classical dances that were used both at public entertainments and religious ceremonies and places of worship. The orchestral music was known as the Pancha Suraiya Nada consisting of the Conchshell, Horanewa, Daula, Thammattama, Thalampota and Bera. These were the present survivals of a highly developed art which had 72 instruments (27 drums, 28 flutes, 8 Vinas and 9 other instruments like cymbals, Silambu, Thaliya, and gigiri of different kinds).

Folk Dances

The following are folk dances of the Kandyan style :

Lee Kelli, Kalagedi Netuma, Sawarang Kelli, Kadunetuma, Thalampata Netuma and Harvest Dance. The Ves Dance is the highly ritualistic dance.

Kohamba Kankariya: The costumes worn by the dancers due to perform today belonged to a highly ritualistic dance known as the Kohom-bayacum-Kankariya originally meant to exercise



Guru Guneya giving a demonstration of the Kandyan dance.

an evil spirit which had affected one of our kings. The costume itself was known as the VES costume and the headgear you would see worn by the dancers was known as the "VESTHATTUWA", and was kept at a dewale or temple which housed the particular deity under whose auspices the dance was initiated, is made of pure silver and studded with Ceylon stones.

It was never performed for public entertainment and was used, as already pointed out, for ritualistic purposes. The costume was so attractive and glamorous that one of the temple chiefs thought of introducing it to the annual procession in Kandy, known as the Kandy Perahera. The temple chief requested a naiandy dancer to wear this costume and dance at the annual Kandy Perahera connected with the Temple of the Tooth Relic. The innovation was so attractive that it was in demand everywhere in Ceylon today so much so that it had displaced other highly skilled dances in our National Dance technique, such as Udekki and Pantheru.



*The Ceylon artists receiving
the Akademi's gifts from
Shrimati Kamala Devi
Chattopadhyaya.*

We are very sorry, we are not able to enlighten you with more technical details and data about our dances at the moment, as very little research work has been done on the subject. What we have given you is a brief history of the present position of Kandyan dance style as practised by our Nittawala School of National Dancing, Nittawala, Kandy, Ceylon.

12 Basic Steps

The following are the 12 basic steps in Kandyan technique (the National Classical Style):

Namaskara—Theiyath, Theiyath, Theiyath, Tham, Thei, Thei, Thath, Thath, Theiyath Tham.

Ist step or Saramba—Thei, Thei, Thei, Thei.

II step—Thei, Kitha, Thei Tham, Thei Kitha Thei Tham, Thei Kitha, Thei Kitha, Thei Kitha Theitham.

III step—Thei Kitha Thei Tham, Thei Kitha Thei Tham, Thei Kitha Thei Kitha, Thei Kitha Thei Tham.

IV step—Thei Kitha, Thei Tham, Thei Kitha, Thei Tham.

V step—Thei Kitha, Thei Tham, Thei Kitha Thei Tham.

VI step—Thei Kitha, Thei Tham, Thei Kitha Thei Tham, Thei Kitha, Thei Kitha, Thei Kitha Thei Tham.

VII step—Thei Kitha, Thei Tham, Thei Kitha, Thei Tham, Thei Kitha, Thei Kitha Thei Kitha, Thei Tham.

VIII step—Thei Kitha, Thei Tham, Thei Kitha, Thei Tham, Thei Kitha, Thei Tham, Thei Kitha, Thei Tham, Theikitha, Theikitha, Theikitha, Thei Tham.

IX step—Thei Kitha, Thei Tham, Thei Kitha, Thei Tham, Thei Kitha, Thei Kitha, Thei Kitha Thei Tham.

X step—Tha Thei Theitha Thatha Theitha, Tha Thei Theitha Thatha Theitha.

XI step—Domikitha Kitha Domi, Domikitha Kitha Domi, Domikitha Domikitha, Domikitha Kitha Domi.

XII step—Thakkada Tharikita Jeeji Kunda, Thakkada Tharikita Jeeji Kunda, Thakkada Tharikita Jeeji Kunda, Gaththaku Jeethathan Gajeethaku Jiththan, Tharikita Jeeth, Tharita Domikita Tha.

Kasthirama—Ron thaka jeeth thaka tarikata kundan. Ron thaka jeeth thaka tarikata kundan. Ron thaka jeeththaka tarikata kundan. Thak gajeeththaka Tharikita Kundan. Thak gajeeththaka Tharikita Kundan. Ron

thaka jeen jeen Thaku thaka jin jin. Ron thaka jeeth thaka tharikita Kundan. Thag gajeeth thaka tharikita kundan. Ron thaka jeeth thaka tharikita kundan-tha. This Kas-thirama is done at the end of a dance.

Thirumanama—Thaku Thaka jee jee kunda, thakata theiya thak, gajeen gatha kunda kunda thak, kunda kunda thak, kunda kunda thaak gajeetha thaka tharakita kundan gajeek kunthaka tharikita kundan tha. This Thirumanama is done immediately after a Kas-thirama to fill up the gap before doing an adauwa.

Adauwa—Thak kada Tharikita jeeji kunda thehintha thehintha kunda thehin.

Thakada jikkada dongada tharikita. Tha jik kadathaka thaka jeek Kada thaka thakun thaku jeek jeega thaku thaka thehin jig Thakkada jeegekada dongada tharikita jeega thaku thaka the thein jig.

The above Adauwa brings the dance to a complete finish.

No Mudras

We do not pay much attention to *Hastha Abhinayas* or *Mudras* in our dancing as we always sing a vannama or tell the audience the story of the dance in verse and explain a part, dance that part of the story and then continue to sing and dance again till the story is over. Owing to this style, we have not given any place for the *Mudras* and *Abhinayas* like in the Indian style of dancing.

The difference in the Kandyan style and Indian style is shown mainly in this aspect. It has been the practice up to now to sing the vannama before dancing, and dance it to illustrate all the movements and the meaning of the dance.

Our efforts to save the National Classical Style of Ceylon (Kandyan Dancing) started in earnest in 1947 with the return of Ananda Cooke from England, and with Sir Richard Aluwihare as President of the Ceylon Arts Council, an ardent admirer and supporter of Kandyan Dancing. Both of them and I started the Nittawala School of National Dancing in Ceylon. Mulyakdessalage Guneya,

whom you saw dancing at this Seminar, was one of the pioneers who helped us with his expert knowledge, and with the choreography provided by Ananda himself, created two new Vannamas in the traditional style, obeying each principle laid down, which depict the age-old stories of the movement of butterflies in their visit to Adam's Peak, and the bringing of the sacred Bo Tree to Ceylon. These two dances were the first attempts in centuries to add to the limited repertoire of a Ceylon dancer.

We found that our dance recitals were far too long, and the dancers themselves indulged in monotonous repetitions of movements and song. Certain modifications were made to suit modern tendencies and audiences, but still with the traditional style untouched.

It is with pride we have come before you, having stabilised our dance forms which even now have made vast strides with an increasing patronage each day.

Cultural Contacts

We thank you for the invitation sent to us and we are glad to participate in this Seminar which has been a great experience for us, from which we have derived much knowledge and ideas which we hope to put into practice. Seminars such as this are invaluable to bring about international accord, harmony and understanding among our people. Cultural contacts are about the best contacts we can establish because they know of no race, colour or creed.

Ceylon takes a pride in tracing her known history to the Asoka period, when that great Emperor sent his own son and daughter as the first missionaries who gave to our people the inestimable gift of the Buddha Dharma. You will see, therefore, that we are racially and culturally one, although Ceylon has developed the Indian culture she inherited on her own distinctive lines.

I thank the Chairman of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, especially its Vice-Chairman, Shrimati Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya, for inviting us to this Seminar. I thank you once again, on behalf of our group of Kandyan Dancers and Sri Lanka, for your cordial welcome and generous hospitality.