

SRI LANKAN TRADITIONAL DANCING & DRUMMING WORKSHOP

School of Music, Theatre, and Dance – Kansas State University

Monday, February 25th from 8 am to 9:20 am in Nichols Hall

In Sri Lanka, there are three main types of traditional dance which are originally derived from healing and exorcism rituals. They are Upcountry (Kandyan), Low country and Sabaragamuwa dance forms. Additionally, there are other folk dances which are based on Sri Lankan day to day life.

The origin of Sri Lankan dances goes back to ancient times of Sri Lankan history. According to a Sinhalese legend, Kandyan dances originate, 2500 years ago, from a purification ritual (kohombayak kankariya) that broke the spell on a bewitched king. Kohombayak Kankariya is one of the most revered and elaborated traditional dance rituals in Sri Lanka which held to invoke the blessings of the twelve deities. It is an all-night event that commences in the evening and continues into the following morning. Today, a Kohombayak Kankariya is performed to bring about peace and prosperity to a household, village community or the country, and to invite the blessings from deities to ward off evil. The historical roots of the ritual, performed since ancient times, is connected to the legendary tribal queen of Sri Lanka 'Kuveri', and Prince Vijaya (who became Sri Lanka's first King). The dancers who are performed these rituals called as Ves dancers (yak desso). The dance was propitiatory, never secular, and performed only by males. The elaborate Ves costume, particularly the headgear, is considered sacred and is believed to belong to the deity Kohomba or King of Malaya. In the nineteenth century, Ves dancers were invited to perform outside the traditional rituals and women started to perform Kandyan dance. Nowadays the masculine Kandyan dance techniques have been adapted for female dancers, and it has served as the basis of Sri Lankan contemporary dancing.



Low country dances are highly ritualistic. This dance style derived and originated in the coastal belt of southern parts of the country. A 'Devol Madu' or the ritual structure which is an essential part of the whole process and it is a parallel representation of the famous Kandyan Kohombayak Kankariya mentioned above. More popularly the 'Yukk' drum is played in this dance. Mainly the low country dance is performed to appease evil spirits which causes sickness and thus called "Devil Dance." The dancers wear different



types of masks depicting forms of birds, demons, reptiles, etc. In this ritual, they use different masks for different kinds of rhythms (drum & dance) to exorcize various types of diseases caused by evil spirits. It is believed unseen hands cause certain ailments and those should be chased away to safeguard the patients. Therefore, those devil dancers perform a Thovil ritual to get cured the individual, who is harassed by unseen hands.

The simple version of the devil dance ritual usually starts in the morning with the building of the stage decorations and preparation of the costumes. The performers build and intricate the stage before the dancing commences. The stage consists of a wall made of freshly cut natural materials such as coconut palm tree and banana tree trunks. There are different types of



ceremonies in a low country dance, mainly Mahasohon samayama and Gara yakuma. The former relates to the belief in a gruesome and hairy monster of gigantic proportion, called Mahasohona, the demon of the graveyard and the latter is associated with a group of demons referred to as Garayaku.

The Naga Raksha mask, also known as the Snake Demon, uses a lot of colors and patterns in it. The most noticeable and attractive pattern is the hair which is shaped into cobras; therefore, it is named as Snake Demon.

Percussion has always played an integral role in Sri Lankan society. The monarchy employed drums as a method of transmitting proclamations. Traveling from village to village, drummers used special rhythms - which the inhabitants were also familiar with - to communicate messages. The Kandyan and Low Country dances of Sri Lanka depend on percussion. The exorcism rituals, folk dance, harvesting, the commemoration of death, a wedding or a public function - all are punctuated by the beat of a drum.



It is recorded that there were 33 types of drums in the past, only ten of which are extant today. The Geta Bera (bera is the generic term for "drum"), is the most significant. It is the main accompaniment of traditional Kandyan dancing and plays an essential role in Kandyan wedding ceremonies. The distinctive Geta Bera is slung with straps at the stomach level of the white-and-red costumed and turbaned drummer. Played with both hands, the drum is capable of an infinite variety of tones as the right-hand membrane is tauter than the left and produces a louder, higher pitch. The dynamic and varied sounds of this sophisticated instrument provide an appropriate aesthetic counterpoint to the dance. Sri Lanka's drums were formerly made of Maditiya (red sandalwood), but scarcity has led to the introduction of wood of other species, such as Ehela (Indian Laburnum), Kohomba (margosa) and Kos (jack). Unlike the Geta Bera, which is identified with the Hill Country, specifically the Kandy region, the yak bera is a product of the southern coastal area, the Low Country. Long, cylindrical and played with both hands, it usually accompanies dances of the Low Country performed at exorcism rituals to propitiate demons and other supernatural beings.

There is an ensemble known as the Hevisi, which includes a two-drum combination used in a Buddhist ceremony and for secular reasons, such as to announce social functions. One drum is the Davula (or dowla), a double-headed cylindrical instrument suspended horizontally from the waist



and played with either sticks or hands. The Tammattama, also known as the "twin drum," is the companion drum of the davula. Nowadays, the art of playing and making drums is more for aesthetic than ritualistic purposes. Many governments and private institutions, such as the University of Visual and Performing Arts and the school systems, are involved in teaching, training and encouraging people of all ages to play these traditional drums, mainly for aesthetic purposes.

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