

Tradition amidst the Challenge of Change: The Dance Ritual of the Eighteen Vannams in the Twenty First Century

SinhaRaja Tammita-Delgoda

Abstract

The theme of this paper is preservation and safeguarding of traditional knowledge and cultural expressions in the face of change and modernity. The established attitude towards the preservation of traditional culture is to record and document. There is another, more proactive approach; to keep the tradition in place while it is still alive, to nourish and sustain these forms of knowledge and expressions before they die out, to give them a place and a value in modern society. This article studies the performance of a traditional dance ritual conceived in this spirit.

The most famous indigenous dance form in Sri Lanka, Kandyan dance derives its name from Kandy, the last bastion of the Sinhala Kings. The expression of an ancient tradition, the culture which sustained this dance form was founded on ritual, religion, custom, service and history. As these foundations have eroded, the nature of this art form has changed. Like all traditional forms of cultural expression, it is in danger of losing its identity and perhaps its very essence.

Traditional Knowledge generally refers to knowledge systems embedded in the cultural traditions of regional, indigenous, or local communities. Some forms of traditional knowledge are expressed through stories, legends, folklore, rituals, songs and even laws. In many cases, traditional knowledge has been passed for generations from person to person purely by word of mouth. Dance is one of these forms.

The theme of this volume focuses on the preservation and safeguarding of traditional knowledge and cultural expressions in the face of change and modernity. The established attitude towards the preservation of traditional culture is to record and document. “We must document it before it dies out- so that we will know what it is” (Garg 2011). Even if it does die out, we will at least remember. What we are left with is a study, a monument to the past. At times this is all we can do. However, this is only a reactive measure. The question I ask, is this enough?

There is another, more proactive approach; to attempt to keep the tradition in place while it is still alive, to nourish and sustain these forms of knowledge and expressions before they die out, to give them and their practitioners a place and a value in modern society. This presentation studies the performance of a traditional dance ritual conceived in this spirit.

Patrons, Practitioners, Practice, Place, Purpose and Public

These factors lie at the very heart of the challenges which traditional cultural expression faces in our societies. If we can understand and recognise their importance, their role and their place, perhaps we can help safeguard tradition and cultural expression as a living force for the future. As a task it presents a much greater challenge, requiring a multifaceted approach grounded in tradition, learning and knowledge, which is at the same time aware of the changing patterns of society.

The *Vannama* is the most recent of the great Kandyan dance rituals. The word *vannam* comes from the Sinhala word *varnana*, meaning descriptive praise (Mantilleke 2010). According to traditional knowledge, the *Vannam* dates back to the eighteenth century, to the reign of the Kandyan King Narendrasinghe (1707-39 CE), who was renowned as a great lover and patron of the art.

There are 18 *Vannams* in the Kandyan Dance tradition. Each *vannama* is a kind of recitation. Inspired by nature, history, legend, folklore, art and religion, they can be considered a repository of traditional knowledge and belief.

The eighteen classical *vannams* are the *Gajaga*, the dance of the Elephant, the *Thuranga*, dance of the Horse, the *Mayura*, dance of Peacock, the *Gahaka*, dance of the Conchshell, the *Uranga*, dance of the Reptiles, the *Musaladi*, dance of the Hare, the *Ukusa*, dance of the Eagle, the *Vairodi*, dance of the Precious Stone, the *Hanuma*, dance of the Monkey, the *Savula*, dance of the Cock, the *Sinharaja*, dance of the Lion King, the *Naiyadi*, dance of the Cobra, the *Kirala* dance of the Red-wattled lapwing, the *Iradi*, dance of the Arrow, the *Surapathi*, in praise of the goddess Surapathi, the *Ganapathi*, in praise of the god Ganapathi, the *Udara* expressing the pomp and majesty of the king and the *Asadhruva*, extolling the merit of Buddha and the Triple Gem.

Each dance is composed and interpreted in a certain mood (*rasaya*) or expression of sentiment and involves several dancers, drummers, cymbal players

and one or two singers. The dancers take the centre stage while the drummers, cymbal players and singers stand to a side.

These rituals were usually enacted within the grounds of the Buddhist temple or *vihare*, in the presence of symbols associated with the Buddha, like the Bo Tree or the *Chaitya*. They were performed by hereditary families of drummers and dancers who were endowed with lands in return for their service. Although the society which once sustained them has disappeared, many of these families still survive to this day and are considered the master practitioners and teachers of this art form.

There remains a strong connection between Kandyan dance and Buddhist culture. During the Medieval period, at the order of the King, it was the duty of dancers and drummers to perform for the temple. In return, they were provided with land to cultivate and a house to live. In other words, Kandyan dance was patronised by temple which also helped to maintain the families of the dancers. Today, although feudalism no longer exists, traditional dance families like the *Amunugama* and the *Tittapajjala* remain highly dedicated to the traditions of Kandyan dance (Mantilleke 2010).

Over the last hundred years these foundations have been almost entirely eroded with the result that modern performances have become barely recognisable. Today the Patron is usually the state, a foreign academic or tourist organization, consequently the social dynamics are entirely different. So is the relationship between patron and performer. The Practitioners too, the drummers, the dancers, singers and cymbal players, often have very little historic or social connection with the ritual. For many it is merely part of a learned repertoire. Performed whenever, wherever and for whomever, it has little meaning and even less relevance. The Practice or ritual too is often shortened or adulterated for reasons of time, space and money. The result is that sometimes key ritual aspects are left out, ignored and even forgotten. The temple, the traditional space, is no longer The Place where these rituals are performed; it usually takes place in hotels and auditoriums. This cannot fail to have an effect on the nature of the ritual itself, the performers and the manner of their performance. As the Patron changes so the Purpose too must change. Instead of a being ritual enacted for the sake of it, it becomes a show or a spectacle, designed to entertain foreign visitors, generate funds or public support. The Public too in these cases is now very different. Instead of being the local community, it would now be an urban or foreign

audience with very little connection to the ritual, for whom this would be yet another form of entertainment.

On 30th January, 27th February and 27th March 2010, or Vannams were re-enacted under the stars, at the historic royal temple of Degaldoruwa, near Kandy. The intention was to re-enact the full performance of the *Vannam* ritual in the traditional setting in the traditional manner. The dances were performed in the same setting and same manner as in the heyday of the Kandyan Kingdom, by the descendents of some of the same families who once danced for the Kings.

Today the dancer is no longer given the opportunity to perform in the traditional manner and he has been forced to adapt himself and his art form to conform to the demands of space, time and place. The objective was to revive the traditional form of Kandyan dance and purify it of the influences which have been forced on it by modern society: to show how the ritual should be performed and to provide a proper stage and a model for masters, practitioners and students of Sinhala dance and drumming which will enable the art to continue

The key people associated with this undertaking embody the balance which must be maintained between the past and the present, the ancient and the modern. At many levels it represents a marriage between Modern Knowledge and Traditional Knowledge. One of the key figures was Sudesh Mantillake, a Lecturer at the Department of Fine Arts, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya. A researcher, dancer and experimental choreographer, he is trained in Kandyan dance, Kathak and contemporary dance and is an authority on the theoretical and practical aspects of dance.

The drummers and the dancers were organised by Vaidyavathie Rajapaksha, whose family has danced for the Kandyan Kings for hundreds of years. Vaidyavathie is the daughter of the great dance master and drummer Amunugama Suramba and still maintains her family dance school in Amunugama, Kandy. Degaldoruwa is the temple where her ancestors were accustomed to perform.

The other principal element was the priests of the historic temple of Degaldoruwa (Delgaldoruwa Raja Maha Vihare, Sirimalwatte, Kandy, Sri Lanka), the High Priest, Ven. Amunugama Dhammarathana and its Chief Teacher, Ven. Ananda Thero. Both were conscious of the cultural and historic role played by the temple in the traditional patronage of dance and went to great lengths to support the event.

This ritual was held over three days over a period of three months. This was to enable all the participants to commit themselves fully and to ensure as far as possible that the whole ritual was fully enacted. The re-enactment of such a ritual on such a scale in such a venue raised many issues which will interest all those involved in keeping traditional knowledge and its art forms alive.

Historic and Traditional Venue

The royal temple of Degaldoruwa was a venue where the dancers were accustomed to performing in historic times up till very recently. Not only did it have historic value, it still remains the centre of cultural and religious life in the village. Many of the dancers and drummers were from traditional families in the area who would once have performed for the king and the temple. For many Degaldoruwa was their ancestral village and the temple its centre, so it was here that their ancestors would have danced. They were performing in the setting they felt they were entitled to. Renewing their sense of history, it reinforced their sense of identity and place, imbuing them with pride and giving meaning to the traditional practice. Some troupes had never performed in a traditional setting before and for them this was a new experience; even they however recognised the dimension which this gave to the meaning of their art.

The Rural Location, in the heart of the village of Degaldoruwa, made a considerable difference. Here in the village, these rituals were not merely a show, but were part of a living memory and still had meaning. In some places they are still a part of daily life. In the case of the local drummers and dancers it clearly helped enhance their status in their own communities.

Traditional Space

Ves dance was customarily performed inside the temple courtyard, in the shadow of the Bodhi Tree or the *Dagaba (chaitya)*. This courtyard was usually a sanded space- as a space it was sacred, communal and informal. There was no distinction here between the Performer and Audience, who seated themselves in a wide in a semi-circle around the drummers and dancers.

Modern Space vs. Traditional Setting

Today most of these performances take place in a Theatre or Auditorium. A lot of the time this is more practical and more convenient. It is easy to arrange, easy to organise and easy to control. The main drawback is the lack of context. This cannot but help to undermine the sense of meaning and significance. More often as not it is just another performance.

The temple courtyard in which such recitals were enacted was usually a sanded space. Sand affords freedom of movement, rotation and flexibility. It is also easier on the limbs. In an auditorium however, space and movement tend to be more restricted and performers would only find themselves facing the front. The audience too was set back in rows and was usually located much further away from the performance, making the whole arrangement much more distant and formalised.

A Traditional Venue however, is much more complex. As a ritual or religious space it is governed by customary rituals which cannot always be changed or moved. Arrangement and organisation can be complex and involved. There are certain things which cannot be done at certain times. It is a completely different atmosphere to the stage or theatre where everything takes second place to the needs of the performance. Being in the open air, it is also vulnerable to the vagaries of weather.

The open air setting of the temple courtyard also had the effect of highlighting the Traditional Decoration and Lighting which was normally used on these occasions. Woven from coconut flowers and fronds, it was simple, minimalistic and participatory. The dancers, the villagers and their children all involved themselves in weaving and twisting the complex patterns into shape; an act of worship and participation by the whole community. Interwoven with Local environment and culture many of these traditional forms and motifs would not have featured in a modern production in an auditorium, for there would have been no need. What is Ritually and Culturally Significant in Traditional Context would clearly not have mattered in another environment.

In a theatre performance lighting is easy to arrange and control. Not only is it consistent and more reliable, it is also cheaper. The use of traditional methods like coconut lamps and torches lit by coconut oil creates a very different effect. Lacking the sharpness and clarity of artificial light, it is natural and soft.

Illuminating and reflective, its effect is gentle, bringing out the forms and shadows in flickering hues and tones. However it is far more labour intensive and much more costly. Unlike artificial light it is also irregular-for it is subject to the fluctuations of the weather, and exposed to the wind and the rain.

When an event takes place in a temple, the element of ritual and worship is an integral part of the recital. Although it is rendered meaningless in a theatre, it is important to remember that all the great ‘Kandyan dances’ are fundamentally rooted in the Buddhist tradition. The lighting of lamps is customary, so is the element of worship. There is also the sense of participation-something which the whole community joins in, to ensure the successful performance of the ritual and to make sure that the fullest benefit is received by all. Grounded as it is in the Buddhist tradition, the question that one must ask is what will happen to ritual and meaning when it moves away from its foundation. When tradition is tied to ritual and worship, these forces help it to keep it alive and vital. How much does tradition mean when it no longer has this foundation? Can it survive without it? Or will Kandyan dance, like ballet or tap dancing in the west, merely become another form of entertainment.

People: Village vs Town, Community vs Audience.

The nature of the audience is also a key factor. It is they who will decide and it is their faces which will reveal whether they are watching a Spectacle, a Ritual or Show? If the audience feels part of the ritual, identifies with it and understands it, then it will have meaning as a living ritual. If the audience is unfamiliar and uninvolved, what they see will be novel and exciting but it will remain a show.

These are some of the questions which are faced by any lover of traditional culture and any practitioner of traditional knowledge. Re-enactment is always fraught by complexity and it raises issues of many kinds, some of them political, some of them intellectual. To attempt to restore and to resuscitate is an ambitious undertaking. How can we be sure that we are achieving Authenticity? As Master drummer Ravi Bandu (2013) warns, “How can we be sure that we are not perpetuating folklorica?”

May be the best answer lies in the words of our keynote speaker, distinguished environmentalist Professor Sarath Kotagama. “We try to preserve through the law, we can do it through recognition and place” (Kotagama 2013).

If we seek to attempt to keep a tradition in place while it is still alive, perhaps this is the best we can do.

References

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