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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen
Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société
Suisse-Asie**

Band (Jahr): **8 (1954)**

Heft 1-4

PDF erstellt am: **06.05.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-145557>

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AN EPISODE IN KANDYAN DANCE – NOBLESSE OBLIGE

BY BERYL DE ZOETE

LONDON

One of the strangest episodes in the history of dance must surely be the introduction of Kandyan dancing to Europe as part of the menagerie of Mr. Hagenbeck, member of a famous family of showmen who as a young man came to do business in Ceylon at the close of the last century. It must have been at the Kandy Perahera, when these human specimens of Sinhalese 'wild life' would be clad in all their ceremonial splendour, that he conceived the idea of a really sensational novelty in the way of performing animals. The names of some of the *Wannams*, which describe the beautiful Jataka stories of the animal incarnations of the Buddha: Elephant, Horse, Hare, Hawk, Cobra, may have suggested themselves as especially appropriate to a circus. (In the Perahera too there would be stilt-walking, stick-dancing, whip-cracking etc., which possibly to one whose interests were not primarily choreographic might not seem so very different from the grand ceremonial *Ves* dances with their essentially religious content.) The Kandyan dancers, whose organic place in society vanished with the break-up of the Kandyan Courts, no doubt jumped at this opportunity of seeing the world and escaping for a while from the poverty and monotony of their daily life in the villages, and certainly no one in Ceylon at that time was interested enough to offer them any alternative. Stories are current of the way in which their supposed «wildness» was exploited, but though they complain of the cold they suffered during the rigours of a European winter, I have not yet met any who regretted the adventure. And we may be sure they danced no less splendidly as part of an exotic entertainment in the Jardin des Plantes, alongside the plate-lipped women of a savage African tribe than when performing, as recently, a religious service in the train of the San-

chi relics; for nothing can vulgarise these noble artists. They remain proud of their experiences and anxious to show off the few words of French, Spanish or German which together with the names of European and American cities, and of the various casinos, circuses and exhibitions at which they appeared, remain as linguistic relics of their strange adventure. Strange though it seems that these magnificent interpreters of a great dancing and musical tradition should have first appeared in Europe in a menagerie of wild animals, their presence there was hardly more incongruous than that of Pavlova at the London Hippodrome, of Diaghilev's Russian Ballet as a Coliseum turn, or of the great Spanish dancer Argentina as an item of entertainment in a fashionable London night-club, to occupy the eyes of Society while it chatted over its supper: *Noblesse oblige*.

The really strange thing is that their Western adventure did nothing to spoil these dancers. Their style lost nothing of its integrity, partly perhaps because what they saw in the way of dancing was too remote from their own experience. I doubt if they even had a glimpse of the ballet which is said to have influenced some of them. They are more likely to have adopted certain tricks of circus acrobats as amusing variations, on their own often remarkably acrobatic evolutions. It would interest one more to know what impression those of them who appeared at the Exposition Coloniale in Paris in 1931 received from the Balinese and Cambodian dancers, and particularly their reaction to the music of the *gamelan*, to the Kathakali of Malabar or the *Bharata Natya* of South East India. It seems improbable that Hagenbeck would have attempted to rope these into a circus spectacle. For the esoteric in these dances is as obvious as in the *bali* and *thovil* ceremonies of Ceylon. The religious significance of the Kandyen dances does not lie on the surface, nor is it expressed in hand gestures or the movements of the eyes, cheeks or neck. But behind their brilliant evolutions, and inspiring what some regard only as magnificent foot-work, there is a very definite though not easily definable relation to the religious service in virtue of which they originally existed; not easily definable, unless one has had the

good fortune to assist at that very beautiful ceremony, the *Ves Bandhima*, the first binding on of the headdress of a Ves dancer who has qualified for that honour. It seemed to me the most moving Confirmation service I have ever seen. But indeed one discovers that all dances, even all games, in Ceylon as in other Eastern countries have a certain religious significance, not easily comprehended by the profane world of the West.

We surmise that all the court and temple dances of Ceylon came originally from India; the dance sculptures of the great ruined cities of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Yapahuwa bear a very evident relation to the *Natya Sastra* poses of Indian sculpture. The *Chulavamsa* and the *Ballads* bear witness to the same dance tradition, as do the centuries later *vihare* frescoes of Ambalangoda, for example, which a vandalism more cruel than Time's decay is allowed to efface because they are too 'late' to be of interest to archæology. Possibly the acute social and spiritual disturbances caused by the invasions of three separate Powers with a totally alien tradition were responsible for a complete disruption of the old, expressive dance of India, as practised till then in the Hindu temples and courts of Ceylon; and that in the fastnesses of the Kandyan chiefs a new and warlike style of dance developed. For I cannot help feeling that the *Ves* dancers, like the Balinese *Baris* dancers of whom they most remind me, have in their pride of bearing and equipment and their exuberant power, something of the nature of a battle dance; just as round the language of the drums which is undoubtedly one of the glories of Ceylon, there clings the challenge of battle. We know indeed that *Pantheru* dancers and drummers did go out to battle with the army; and we know of historical cases where battle orders, royal proclamations and even appeals of emotional rhetoric were made by the drums, as from end to end of Africa today. I sometimes feel that one comes nearest to the soul of the Sinhalese people in their drumming than at any other time, and that these glorious musicians are among the true nobility of Ceylon. That the Kandyan tradition is still alive and the wonder of all the great dancers of the world who have seen it we owe

almost entirely to the dancers and drummers themselves, a service which is only now beginning to receive an inadequate recognition. An effort is also being made to forge new links between India and Ceylon by sending Sinhalese dancers to study the dance arts of India, particularly *Kathakali*, *Bharata Natyam* and *Manipuri*. This is no doubt a very good thing, so long as they are not supposed on their return to teach those great arts, each of which required many years of profound study. But it seems really a pity that the many varieties of Kandyan dance and drumming should not come first in the estimation of the Sinhalese. There are some famous dance schools here and there in the country, and splendid teachers who having a small competence prefer their independence to a government grant. There are also one or two amateur patrons, whose whole life has been devoted to music and dance, and to encouraging the arts of Ceylon. Among them, some of the very beautiful dance forms, such as *Pantheru*, *Udekki* and *Nayyadi*, which no longer appear as often as they should, may still be found in a high state of perfection. If these dances, rather than imperfect versions of so-called 'Oriental' dances, were to be given at weddings and receptions, what an encouragement it would be to the true Sinhalese dancers. And there are other varieties, not all Kandyan, which Free Ceylon should take a pride in reviving, for they express various aspects of the genius of this plastically most gifted people, which an emancipated nationalism should be eager to show the world. Personally I have been disappointed that several dances which it would have been of great importance to see on the ground of comparison alone, are said, on closer enquiry, to be forgotten or no longer practised. The display of *Kolam* masks at the Arts Festival in 1949 whetted one's appetite, but alas one heard that 'they had forgotten how to wear them'; and we actually only saw one dancer in action. I am sure that a little encouragement would revive the faded memory, as has been the case with far longer forgotten dances and ceremonies even in England¹.

1. The Folklore Society of Ceylon, founded in 1950, seems to be doing exactly this.

One great Kandyan ceremonial dance drama, the name of which began to haunt me soon after my arrival in Ceylon, I did, however, see thanks to the co-operation of the Tourist Bureau, and of two already hard-worked dance teachers, Malagammana and Sederaman, who not only most generously gave their services, but succeeded in enlisting some among the finest drummers and dancers in the Kandyan province for the performance of a *Kohomba Kankaria*; in an abbreviated form, it is true, for a full performance lasts at least three days and demands extensive and very expensive preparations. This great rite, which includes a most magnificent display of drumming and *Ves* dancing, as well as a great variety of offerings, trance dancing, the erection of those beautiful and ephemeral structures called *maduwas* which are the wonder of every *thovil* and the recitation of five mythical Indian stories, which as far as I know only occur in Ceylon, is familiar enough as a name and even as a spectacle to many Kandyans, but entirely unknown even as a name to most of the inhabitants of Colombo. In three fascinating but too sketchy articles which he contributed on the subject of this mysterious ceremony to the Ceylon Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Mr. Godakumbura tells us that it is supposed to have been first performed during the reign of the second Sinhalese king, about the fifth century B. C., but that the earliest literary accounts of the cult do not date back further than the 15th century A. D. The *olas* containing the full text of the *Kohomba Kankaria* are jealously guarded by the families of the dancers who officiate in it, but by the generosity of two of them I have been able to trace the sequence of the proceedings, and to understand what it is all about, as far as the story goes. It must not be thought of as a drama in which the action is portrayed in the gestures of the dancer. It is a drama in the sense that the recitation of Christ's Passion in Holy Week is a drama. The recited or chanted story accompanies the dance but is not interpreted by it. The dance has its own shape which is not modified by the course of the story: a procedure with which every student of Eastern dance drama will be familiar. In the performance I saw the

story only became visual during a comic episode in which a wild boar, a magic transformation of a god, very important in the drama, is slain. The boar was represented by a roughly made toy boar, shaped out of plantain and mounted on four little sticks for legs, which after interminable back-chat was pierced by an arrow and fell over. All the dancers and drummers who take part in the ceremony should know the whole enormous text by heart, though perhaps this is only literally true of the older performers, one of whom on this occasion danced indefatigably all night, and at seven in the morning seemed good for another twelve hours. I believe that as many as 60 dancers and 120 drummers may take part in a really first class *Kohomba Kankaria*, and from the magnificence of the much smaller spectacle I saw I can imagine what the grandeur of the ritual must be. It certainly remains in my mind as the most splendid manifestation of dancing and drumming I witnessed in Ceylon, and I long to have the privilege of assisting at a complete performance of this astonishing and beautiful ritual, which by an operation of genius extending over centuries has built a myth of India into a Kandyan origin-mystery play of extraordinary splendour. The superb Kandyan scenery is still full of its echoes; for it was on the fantastic hill of Hantana which dominates Kandy that the first *Kohomba Kankaria* was held, and the rock of Urugalle, which forms part of the same range, still bears the mark of the arrow with which the Male Raja killed the boar under whose guise the god Rahu had lured him over the sea to Lanka; for it was only the Male Raja born of a lotus flower who could cure the sickness of King Panduwas. And it was at Matale, not many miles from Kandy, that a little boy of seven was chosen by the Male Raja as a fit recipient for his magic, when he returned to India after the cure. This little boy was the Kohomba god. Some say that the retinue of huntsmen the Male Raja left behind are those very Veddas (huntsmen) who still draw ethnologists to Ceylon, even though we are assured by the greatest authority on the Veddas that the last pure Vedda is dead.