

# On the Origin of Sri Lankan Dancing: Between Spirit Beliefs and Great Tradition, Appeasement of the Gods and Healing Methods

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## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to reconstruct the legendary and historically-discoverable preconditions of the forms of Sri Lankan dances. In this regard, gender is a particularly interesting subject, for although most of the world's dance traditions are performed by women, Sri Lanka's dance landscape is rich in, and famous for, dances performed by men. In recent times this has been changing due to new developments and influences.

This article seeks to refer as much as possible to the orally-transmitted tradition without losing the perspective of detached observation, which engages with the so-called "hard facts" in a western scientific context. As this article employs Martina Claus-Bachmann's constructivistic view with respect to the character of cultural systems, provable facts must be observed with respect, but they are not considered the main shaping force of culture. The main shaping force of culture is the human mind, with its constructive fantasies and deconstructive analyses, as well as reconstructive arguments and speculations. The condition of a cultural system is the totality of the mental conditions of those persons who are recently responsible for it.

Though a number of books exist in Sinhala language concerning dance, information in English and other western languages is still scarce. This article seeks to address some of the open questions, mainly those concerning the nature of the fusion of Buddhist, pre-Buddhist or non-Buddhist forms of expression in Sri Lankan dancing. The study is focused mainly on the dances of the Sinhalese ethnic group which, comprising 74% of the population, is the most populous group on the island; but it should be noted that there are also other ethnic groups<sup>1</sup> which maintain their own dance traditions.

## Introduction

There is no doubt that dance is an important element of cultural identity. Dances are the embodied, physical and visible habits of movement of a culturally-unified group, projected into public space, and demarcating one group from others. The history of Sri Lankan dances seems to have begun approximately 2,500 years ago, but written sources we can refer to, especially the *Mahavamsa*, go back to the time when early Buddhism spread in Sri Lanka. Seneviratna likewise draws on primary sources on dance: "King Pandukabhaya (377-407 B.C.) caused gods and men to dance before him and took pleasure in the joy and merriment at festivals, performed in honour of Citaraja and Kalavela demons" (1984: 10).

Two main categories of dances can be found:

- dances related to religious rituals, and
- dances performed to ease illness.

Both categories have local varieties, and the ritual dances connected to religion can be further separated into two subgroups:

- the group shaped by pre-Buddhist or non-Buddhist influences, and
- the group shaped by Buddhist developments in the Great Tradition.

In Sri Lanka, and also in other Theravada Buddhist countries, it is often not easy to separate pre-Buddhist customs from the ritual customs of the so-called Great Tradition of Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> The deities, ritual practices, symbols, and other forms of Buddhist expression in Sri Lanka are too closely affiliated with influences of both the Theravada and Mahayana schools, and also pre-Buddhist animistic and astrological rites. Because of the particular character of the fusion of Sri Lankan Buddhism, some scholars identify a unique Sinhala Buddhism:

Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka has always coexisted with various forms of other religious practices oriented to deities, planets, astrology and demons, and some of these often figure in the Hindu tradition as well. . . . This non-Buddhist part of the religion of Sinhala Buddhists has no unifying label within the Sinhala culture. Obeyesekere and Gombrich suggest that it should be called "Spirit religion." Like Theravada Buddhism, this religion also has its own traditional roles and institutions (de Silva 2000: 18-19).

### **I. Dances in a Pre-Buddhist/Non-Buddhist or Spirit Context**

We can assume that people who lived in the pre-Buddhist era<sup>3</sup> had their own practices and beliefs of worship. Widely spread were beliefs in supernatural powers of natural phenomena, weather conditions, and illnesses, which were personified in divine images together with the sun, moon, and fire god. Magical rituals had to be conducted for these deities, and offerings and sacrifices had to be given to them in order to win their hearts. It was a supernatural world in which the people lived, and each material object could be seen as animated by a spirit. Resident deities lived within nature's objects, such as the trees, rocks, mountains, ponds, and reservoirs. There was also a belief that the spirits of those who had passed away could cause or bring back calamity. It was customary to overcome these supernatural forces through engagement in magical rituals, in which sound and movement generally played an important role. In Sri Lanka can still be found today a small community of people, the Veddha—or Wanniyala-aetto as they call themselves<sup>4</sup>—who are understood to be the indigenous inhabitants of Sri Lanka. Despite processes of modernization, they retain, in many respects, a Neolithic mode of living, according to some anthropologists. And although they are officially Buddhists, they have preserved animistic beliefs. In recent days, the drastically-reduced community (approximately 2,000 people in total) can be found in small jungle areas which still exist in Sri Lanka, near Mahiyangana and Dambana. Wijesekera enumerates twelve occasions in which dances are performed by the Veddha community.<sup>5</sup> Although initiatives have been undertaken to preserve the cultural heritage of this oldest Sri Lankan community, the music and dance traditions of this group have not yet been described properly or completely. Also, in recent times the basic struggles of daily survival occupy the primary attention of this group, and cultural forms of expression are losing their roles and importance. From time to time, from decade to decade,

western researchers have shown an interest in the group. One hint is a report on the so-called “coastal Veddhas” from Seligmann 1911:<sup>6</sup>

The dance we saw rehearsed at Vakarai was said to be performed for sickness and in thanksgiving when a good harvest had been gathered. The dance took place at night, the men dancing in relays till daylight, the women squatting on the ground, but taking no part. No food is taken during the dance, but some is placed upon the “altar” *kudaram* (lit., cage or small shed) which is eaten by all in the morning.

Another description of Punchedewa seeks to give an introduction to the Kirikoraha Veda Dance:<sup>7</sup>

.. They placed the arrow heads on their heads, now and then again on the shoulders, alternatively. All of them while dancing began hopping, making half turns and while engaged in these movements swept their arms. They placed the axes across their shoulders, especially chieftain Handuna. All of them chanted supplications to the desired spirit in sonorous and synchronising voices, while they danced to the beat of the drum played by drummer old Punched Banda of Paile.

In a high pitched voice, Handuna's son Randunna recited the stanzas which were repeated by the other participants. Handuna clasped the coconut in his hands, now and then kept it on his head, and danced round and round. Taking a katty, he kept the coconut on the mortar and split it into two equal halves. It should split into two identical halves, otherwise it was a bad omen. The coconut water filled the vessel—the Kiri Koraha. He then brought the coconut scraper, a locally improvised one made from the jungle itself. A forked branch was taken and the two points acted as legs, while the other end was sharpened to make the “teeth” of the coconut scraper.

The coconut milk so extracted was splashed on his body, on the participants, and on us—the onlookers. The balance milk was put into the vessel. In doing these acts, Handuna and the others danced round and round sweeping their hands and making about turns and reciting the stanzas. When the participants were reaching the climax, Handuna who was now in a semi-trance, with his axe slung across the shoulder ran to his wife, plucked the necklace and bangles (all imitation ones-presented by tourists).

Encircling the necklaces and bangles in his hands, Handuna fell into a trance, muttering and shaking his body and limbs.



**Fig. 1.** Veddha dancer falling into trance<sup>8</sup>

In these performances, Handuna was making those about turns and half turns (the necklaces and bangles were taken as offerings to the Una Pane Kiri Amma, a female spirit who had to be also appeased).

Handuna now immersed his right hand in the vessel. He allowed the coconut milk to trickle down his arms and continued his dancing. These he did vigorously sweeping his hands, while the drum was played to the tune of his synchronizing steps and song. The indication of pouring the coconut milk down his arm was that game was perceived and the animal was shot and was bleeding—the latter manifested by the pouring of the coconut milk. This was also an inference that the Kiri Koraha was successful and that Kande Yakka

(Mountain Spirit) was appeased.

The rest of the assembly of *gam veddas* kept on dancing and reciting the incantations and ended up by falling on each other's shoulders. Handuna then fell on the shoulder of another. Afterwards, he ran immediately to the Kiri Koraha, removed the vessel, and kept it on the ground. This when twirled with his fingers, rotated on its own axis and then became stationary, an indication Handuna told us that all the spirits and demons were well pleased with their offerings and prayers! ...

Also Wijesekera, mostly referring to Seligmann, mentions Veddha dances:

There are two motives underlying the dances of the Veddas. The exceptional purpose is to invoke the Ne Yaku<sup>9</sup> for favours. But the most common purpose is ceremonial. ... Another interesting feature of the Vedda's dance is the technique and method of its execution. ... The dance always begins slowly and gently, the back foot touching the ground while that foot with which the step has been made performs the double pat so that just at first it is little more than a shuffle, soon, however, the feet are raised more and more longer paces are taken, the back foot no longer remains on the ground while the double pat is made and the swaying and bending of the body is greatly increased (Wijesekera 1964:162-63).

For the most part, descriptions of dance, in the absence of live recording or videotape, cannot provide a clear image of the event or allow one to grasp its intangible aspects. Available descriptions also do not offer much insight into the interrelationships between Veddha dances and Sinhalese dances. The only common feature we can see is the ostensible fact that Veddha dances are performed by men and the women are passive onlookers. It would be a great ethnomusicological task for Sri Lankan or other researchers to record the traditional dances of the Veddha while they are still available. This could become an archived basis for comparative studies with Sinhalese dances, which developed after the introduction of Buddhism.

## 2. Legendary Elements in Dance History

The third century B.C. is understood to be the period in which Buddhism was established in Sri Lanka. That does not mean that a radical change took place in all aspects of rituals and the related dances; instead, there was a gradual introduction of Buddhist features into rites carried out for supernatural forces. Forms of worship emerged, called *shantikarma*, associated with dancing.<sup>10</sup>



Fig. 2. and 3.:

Lime-cutting and mantra-reading at a *shantikarma* ceremony in Sri Lanka, in 2000. (Photograph by Claus-Bachmann.)

The forms of worship called *shantikarma* seem to originate back in the legendary Maha Sammatha era, as they are evidently prevalent among artists following oral traditions.<sup>11</sup> Disclosed in the original source texts on rituals is detailed information on the detrimental charms and acts of “voodoo” said to have been carried out with motives of revenge by certain individuals—individuals supposed to have been distinguished persons in the eyes of the kings and queens living in the period of the Maha Sammatha.<sup>12</sup> It is a widespread belief of practitioners that the offerings and related dance forms, which were well-known rituals, eventually came to be known as medical treatments, as practitioners conducted ritual blessings for kings and queens who became critically ill.<sup>13</sup>



**Fig. 4.** Avändume, a danced part of the Kohomba Kankariya which goes back to a legendary healing ceremony for an ill king; danced by the winning group of an all-island competition held in 2000, guided by Kanthi Shilpadhipathi. (Photograph by Claus-Bachmann.)

The dances, which were presented on the basis of these beliefs, focused on various deities, male and female demons. They also focused on celestial bodies such as the sun and moon—which were favourites—and also Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn, Rahu and Ketu.<sup>14</sup> The dance events presented on these occasions were dedicated only to such supernormal forces as demons and the nine planets. Offerings or *pujas* are still conducted today under the three categories of godly rituals, devil-dancing, and planetary rites. Since ancient times, dances associated with ritual *puja* were rooted in the convictions of competent dance exponents and based on regularized and systematic forms.

### 3. The Rise of Buddhist Influences in Dancing

Because of this strong, pre-existing tradition, it was not possible fully to realize pure and straight Theravada Buddhist doctrines, such as the precept to refrain from dancing, singing, music.<sup>15</sup> Instead, the strategy was to refer as much as possible to Buddhist concerns on special occasions.

According to a request made by King Devanampiya Tissa (247-207 B.C.), Sangamittha Thera<sup>16</sup> brought with her the *bo* sapling to Sri Lanka. On planting the sapling in the Mahamevuna Uyana in Anuradhapura, the Bodhi Puja tradition commenced in Sri Lanka. Specialists of the oral tradition believe that, at the same time, Hevisi Puja—which is performed with drummers—and also the dance tradition affiliated with these rituals commenced and became compulsory, and there was an expansion of the performance of dances, especially during annual religious festivals.

According to some sources, Prince Danta and Princess Hemamala, from the Kalinga Province of India, brought the Tooth Relic of the Buddha to Sri Lanka during the reign of King Kirthi Siri Meghavarna (301-328 A.D.). Once the Tooth Relic was instituted in the Dalada Maligawa in Kandy, it was made compulsory by Buddhist monks and the king at that time, who held guardianship of the Tooth Relic, to conduct offerings and rituals on behalf of it. These rituals involved procedures similar to those adopted for the Sri Maha Bodhi in Anuradhapura. These presentations were dual, in the sense that they were daily and annual, and they were identified by the term *Theva* (religious service). The presentation of dances as a form of *puja* became a compulsory feature of the *Theva* procedures. Apart from the daily *Theva* for the Tooth Relic, it was also customary to present dances at each Buddhist festival held annually. The fact that dances were presented at the new Sahal Mangallaya (April), the Nekath or Karthika (auspicious) festival (May) and the Esala Perahera (August) contributed to an expansion of the dance traditions of Sri Lanka.

The ancient dance artists had a strong attachment to the *Jataka* stories—the stories of former life periods of the Buddha<sup>17</sup>—and accordingly dances were created relating to these tales. Of foremost importance in relation to these dance events were song recitals that were created in such a way as to stimulate faith in the Buddha. This form of dance was known as the “Great Twenty-four Enunciations” and the “Enunciations of Seven Weeks”; it is an enunciating drama-*puja* conducted before twenty-four Buddha statues and other statues around the *bo* tree. It became common to conduct dances as part of every activity associated with Buddhism; for example, dances were presented on occasions of the setting of the eyes of the Buddha statues, and also the Dorakada Asna (presentation of the epistle) ceremonies that were held at the end of seven-day sermons.

Buddhist pilgrimage involved embedded dances, which were conducted according to Buddhist beliefs and faiths. These early dances focused on the adoration of the Buddha and on conceptions of deities. Dance artists have long considered these dances to comprise a valuable, traditional heritage or canon, and this canon has been continually stabilized by exponents of dance schools in accordance with custom. Any attempt to modernize such traditional dance forms is taboo.

It is generally accepted that there are three main regionally-separated types of dance form in Sri Lanka.<sup>18</sup> But within all of them can be found subcategories, reflecting numerous local customs. There is the up-country-type, including the Kandy style and the customs of the districts of Udunuwara, Yatinuwara, Dumbara, Udadumbara, Paata-dumbara, and Harispattuwa; two subgroup traditions emerged in the Kegalle and the Kurunegala district. Also the Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Puttalam, and Moneragala districts belong in this category.

The low-country dance tradition can be found in Galle, Matara, Tangalla, Ambalangoda, and Bentara, covering the Kalutara district. This is also called the Ruhuna dance tradition, and its subcategories are the Matara, Bentara, and Raigam Korallaya traditions.

The Sabaragamuwa dance tradition has spread in close proximity to the Ratnapura and Balangoda district. The Uva dance tradition has extended up to Badulla, Bandarawela, Nuwara Eliya, and Welimada.

All these types and subtypes have their own fashion, dance technique, method, and way of expressing themselves. In common is the intention to pay homage to the Buddha and to the deities, and to dispel sickness.

The Sri Lankan kings of the kingdom era bestowed upon dance and music artists dry and muddy land, where they had the duty to live. They had no permission to travel from one area to another without the sanction of the king. As a result, the Sri Lankan dance traditions expanded only within a limited area. This resulted in a variety of local forms, but all developed with respect to the Great Tradition.

In general, it is customary to begin extended dance proceedings a little before evening, and to continue the performance until about half-past two the following afternoon. The place is prepared in a particular way: a shed thatched with coconut leaves is constructed, and dancers and drummers, as well as a group of people who supply certain required objects, are brought to the place. The dancer is the main individual in religious as well as healing practices, and holds responsibility for the ritual process. The twenty-four Enunciation dances are conducted only before Buddha statues in Buddhist places of worship: *dagobas* and *bo* trees. Before the dance is performed, a Buddhist monk offers flowers and light refreshments to Lord Buddha, and the dancers and devotees are made to observe the Five Precepts.<sup>19</sup> A noteworthy aspect of the tradition is that the dancers also initially engage in reciting *gathas*, *Sanna Seheli* (various forms of recitation) in praise of the Buddha, and reminiscences of wisdom and Buddhist sermons, while also worshipping the Triple Gem and contemplating the power and virtues of the Buddha. Following is an example of a *gatha* and *sloka* recited on such occasions:

Samma Sambuddha Gnanena

Samma Sambuddha Deshana

Samma Sambuddha Lokathiming

Samma Sambuddha The Namu

Merung Virajitha Samang Viya Buddha Raja

Shri Dantha Sagara Samang Viya Dhamma Raja

Shri Sathkula Pabbatha Samang Viya Sangha Raja

Shri Buddha Dhamma Sangha Pavarang Sirasa Nama mi.

The Baliyaga, a ritual of offerings and sacrifices to gods that is believed to be held in common by all dance traditions in Sri Lanka, includes a dance, which expresses praise of the Lord Buddha, in addition to the Twenty-four Enunciations and the Enunciations of the Seven Weeks. Here too recitals of songs take place while the dance is performed in a simple manner. This is also a ritual to cure patients in which the exorcist, or leading dance artist, shows the patient indirectly that his illness would be cured through praise singing and dance movements. An example of this is given below in the form of two verses connected to the *pirith hooya*, or the thread chanted with *pirith*, which is presented in the Baliyaga as an expression of the bestowal of blessings or as a verbal poem:

Kusinara Purayena – Weda Hinda Yahana Sethapena

Sak Devi Kendavima na – Pirith Penhooya Devvavigasi na

Wadala Panathata – Kala Anuhas Balen Thu ta

Adath Me Athuran Hata – Pirith Noolen Dosa Duruko ta

With the wisdom of the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, today too, with the glory and majesty of taking the *pirith hooya* into the hands, all planetary afflictions will be dispelled.

After the *pirith noola*,<sup>20</sup> or after the *pirith hooya* is handed to the patient, the exorcist or leading dancer recites the blessings or verbal poem in such a form.

De Silva, in his brilliant analysis of the Bali ritual, describes a performance of dancers during the second phase of the two-day practice:

The dancers assembled in a circle in the middle of the arena and the drummers responded by breaking into a slow and forceful rhythm (*tala*). Suddenly all was sound and movement as the dancers moved around in a circle. Twisting, stamping and bending, they moved around the arena, first clockwise, then anti-clockwise. One dancer broke the circle to act his master steps ... and then another, and another, until each had made his contribution. Recitation commenced as they danced. ... The rhythm of dancing was fast and with the conclusion of each sequence of verses, the dancers performed a series of steps before the patient, amidst the ringing of the bell, and wished long life to the patient (De Silva 2000: 72-73).



**Fig. 5.** Dancers during a Bali ceremony (p. 72).

Although the dance forms vary in sound patterns, drum techniques, rhythmic patterns of recitation, instruments played, costumes, and dance techniques, they are unified in purpose: to give respect to the Buddha and deities, and sometimes to heal illness. The occasions to pursue these purposes are the various *puja* activities, which involve not only the temples but also daily life. For example, the Bhairava Pujava is conducted at instances when a building is constructed, in alms-giving ceremonies, and after harvesting paddy in the month of April—the first portion of paddy being set aside on behalf of the Buddha and the gods. Following a period of public display of a *panda*<sup>17</sup> (which is erected in the month of May for the Vesak festival), there is also a custom in which ceremonies, known as Garamadu, Gammadu, or Pathinimadu, are carried out.

## Conclusion

Since the most ancient times, the art of dancing has been a significant means of inspiring Buddhist-orientated living and of inspiring and constituting an ideal form of spiritually-based morality. As in the small Veddha community described above, the task of conducting rituals is mainly reserved for men. There have been many changes, due to lack of public interest and government support,<sup>21</sup> and also due to the influence of media such as television or the film industry. As a result, audiences have undergone western influences, including some changes favourable to women. Still, the radiation of the traditional Sri Lankan art of dance remains powerful and fascinating. The mindful onlooker can recognize the character of fusion which is typical of so many cultural and expressive forms in Sri Lanka, based on spirit beliefs, Buddhist tradition, appeasement of the gods and healing rituals.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic society, consisting of Sinhalese (74.0%), Tamils (18.2%) and Muslims (7.1%); the remaining 0.7% are Chinese, Moors and Burghers of Dutch and Portuguese origins. A very small number (approximately 2000) of indigenous people are called Veddhas, who live mainly in the dry zone of the northeastern and southeastern provinces. The majority of Sinhalese are followers of Buddhism (69.3%), followed by Hinduism (15.5%), Islam (7.6%) and Christianity (7.5%).  
(<http://www.mssrf.org/fris9809/srilanka-ch1.html>).

<sup>2</sup> Here, "Great Tradition" refers to the Theravada doctrine in its canonical form:

"Theravada / Hinayana (The great tradition or the way of the elders):

Practised in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos and sticks firmly to the teachings of the Vinaya Pitaka. It teaches that Buddha was a man, a very special man, a very special person but nevertheless human.

Theravada teaches that there is no reality corresponding to the concept of God that we can rely on for salvation. The monastic *sangha* (assembly) is at the heart of the practice and as well as working towards realization and enlightenment for themselves, the role of Theravada monks is to preserve and spread the Buddhist teaching (the *dharma*).

Lay Theravada Buddhists live to support monks and attempt to live a life of morality, generosity and detachment, turning to Buddhism for religious ceremonies. Theravada is very individualistic. Its key virtue is wisdom and its ideal is Arahant (saint). They see Buddha as a saint.

Theravada emphasizes the life of the monk and serious meditation practices that demand extended time and isolation which became difficult for millions and as Buddhism moved into new countries outside India it also had to compete with other religions. A new strand developed which was known as Mahayana. ..."  
(<http://www.racialjustice.org.uk/Types%20of%20Buddhism.htm>).

For further information concerning the fusion of spirit religion and the Great Tradition in Sri Lanka see the (regrettably) unpublished Master's study of Rainer Kurka. The author presents some details at: <http://www.muz-online.de/religion/daedimunda.html>.

<sup>3</sup> The following websites offer a historical overview of Sri Lanka:  
[http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/SSEAL/SouthAsia/sahist\\_srilanka.html](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/SSEAL/SouthAsia/sahist_srilanka.html) or <http://lakdiva.org/codrington>.

<sup>4</sup> For additional information, see the following webpages: <http://members.tripod.com/~hettiarachchi/veddha.html> and <http://vedda.org/wanniyalaetto.htm> or <http://vedda.org>.

Wanniletto's address to the UN is also of interest:  
[http://www.arcangeloni.com/adventure/sri\\_lanka\\_2003/sri\\_lanka\\_vedda.shtml](http://www.arcangeloni.com/adventure/sri_lanka_2003/sri_lanka_vedda.shtml).

"The very land we, the Wanniyala-aetto, shared with other beings (-aetto) is also shared by our ancestor forefathers, gods and goddesses and forest spirits. We are now alienated from them. Our very name, the Wanniyala-aetto have no meaning if we cannot live in the forest. By the loss of the jungle and our subsistence we

can no longer call ourselves Wanniyala-aetto, the forest-being and we have come here to find a solution to this. We want to survive not only as a people but also as a culture. The solution of our problem and those of other indigenous people in similar situations is very simple; let us go back to our traditional land. Those of us who recognize our need to return as the only answer for our survival as the Wanniyala-aetto should at least be given the opportunity to do so. We are not members of the majority people, we are not Sinhalese, neither Tamils nor are we criminals. We are simply a humble people attempting to remain true to who we are.”

<sup>5</sup> These are: 1. Arrow dance, 2. Kirikoraha ceremony, 3. Ne Yaku ceremony, 4. Bambura Yaka ceremony, 5. Pata Yaka ceremony, 6. Dola Yaka ceremony, 7. Rahu Yaka ceremony, 8. Wanagata Yaka ceremony, 9. Alut Yaka ceremony, 10. Ruwala ceremony, 11. Kolamaduva ceremony, 12. Avana ceremony (Wijesekera 1964: 164).

<sup>6</sup> The report is published on the webpage: <http://vedda.org/seligmann-coastal-veddas.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.lankalibrary.com/cul/veddha/veddha\\_4.htm](http://www.lankalibrary.com/cul/veddha/veddha_4.htm).

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.arcangeloni.com/adventure/sri\\_lanka\\_2003/pictures:the\\_vedda.shtml?795773915609.136](http://www.arcangeloni.com/adventure/sri_lanka_2003/pictures:the_vedda.shtml?795773915609.136). Although the author has no ethnological intentions, he provides a short video of Veddha dance on his website.

<sup>9</sup> “Ne Yaku” seems to be a collective term for the spirits of the ancestors (see Wijesekera 1964 and [http://emuseum.mnsu.edu/cultural/oldworld/middle\\_east/vedda.html](http://emuseum.mnsu.edu/cultural/oldworld/middle_east/vedda.html)).

<sup>10</sup> *Shantikarma* has been translated in a Tantric context as “action of peace.” In Sri Lanka, the term is used for all rituals which are performed to bring benefit to the participant. These rites, which may be short or long, are primarily performed by healing specialists who have shamanistic skills, including the ability to enter easily into a state of trance, or to perceive the future, etc. Sri Lankans make use of these rites relatively frequently, in virtually any life situation, such as preparing for exams or weddings, or to help cure illnesses; see Figures 2 and 3.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with the late Suramba R. W. G., authority on up-country Kohomba Yakkangkariya, Mahanuvara Madhyama Lanka Nrthya Mandalaya, in 1980.

Interview with C. P. G. Heenilame of Ratnapura, Hidella Galukagama, authority on Sabaragamuwa Madu Shantikarma, in Colombo, on May 3, 2000.

Interview with Fernando Edin, authority on low-country Shantikarma, Institute of Aesthetic Studies, Colombo, July 8, 2000.

Publication: Dissanayaka 1993: 22-24 and 122-178.

<sup>12</sup> Maha Sammatha is a legendary king of Sri Lanka, who is mentioned in the *Asadrusa Vannama* as the one who created the arts. An English translation is found in an article by Claus-Bachmann, at the website: <http://people.freenet.de/dr.martina/gamini.html> (on page 3). Unfortunately, the name was also chosen by a rather chauvinist/right-wing party in Sri Lanka, the Sinhala Maha Sammatha Bhoomi Puthra (Sinhala's Sons of the Soil), which fortunately plays little role in the contemporary political landscape: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/jun2000/slat-j28.shtml>.

<sup>13</sup> An example is the so-called Avändume, a part of the legendary basic ritual of all Sri Lankan music and dance forms called Kohomba Kankariya. Avändume is based on the following myth: Panduvas Devu, a successor of King Vijaya, had an illness. The gods of Sri Lanka created a pig, which ran to India, to King Maleya. The pig destroyed the plants in the royal garden and the king became very angry. He tried to catch the pig and to kill it, but the pig immediately ran back to Sri Lanka and, upon arriving there, it was transformed into a hill (like Sigiriya). Maleya took note of the illness of the King Panduvas Devu and promised to help him. Then he began to perform this dance, Avändume, as a kind of healing ritual.

<sup>14</sup> The following webpage explains the significance of Rahu and Ketu, which play an important role in the Sri Lankan astrology: <http://www.sanskrit.org/Astronomy/Rahu.html>

“In Hindu mythology there is a wonderful story that describes how the gods and the demons once formed an alliance to produce a nectar that could give them immortality. This is the story of the churning of the milk-ocean and the descent of Lord Viṣṇu as the *Kurma avatara*, the divine tortoise. When the nectar that was churned from this ocean was being served to the gods, a demon, disguised as a god, sat between the Sun and the Moon in an attempt to procure the nectar. When he was detected by the Sun and the Moon, Lord Viṣṇu immediately severed his head from his body. Unfortunately, it was not fast enough, for the demon had already tasted a small quantity of the nectar and had become immortal. Ever since, this demon is said to wreak vengeance on the Sun and Moon whenever they come near. The head of this great demon is known as *Rahu* and his tail is known as *Ketu*.

In Hindu astrology *Rahu* and *Ketu* are known as two invisible planets. They are enemies of the Sun and the Moon, who at certain times of the year (during conjunction or opposition) swallow the Sun or the Moon causing either a solar or a lunar eclipse. In Sanskrit this is known as *grahaṇam* or seizing.

What perhaps sounds like a childish story is a powerful metaphor for what actually happens when an eclipse takes place. *Rahu* and *Ketu* are the astronomical points in the sky respectively called the north and south lunar nodes.”

<sup>15</sup> The ten precepts are found on the following page: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/ptf/dasasila.html>; the seventh precept is: “*Nacca-gita-vadita-visuka-dassana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyam*”: “I undertake the precept to refrain from dancing, singing, music.”

<sup>16</sup> “The desire of the Princess Anula with her attendants to enter the Second Order, or that of nuns, led to an embassy to the Court of Asoka with a request for the dispatch of Mahinda’s sister Sanghamitta, a member of that Order, with the right branch of the *bo* tree, under which Gautama had attained Buddhahood. The branch, which miraculously severed itself from the parent tree, was conveyed down the Ganges together with Sanghamitta, and arrived in Lanka at the port of Jambukola (Sambiturai in the Jaffna peninsula), where it was received with all honour by Devanampiya Tissa. Conveyed to Anuradhapura it was planted in the Mahamegha garden, where it still exists, the oldest authenticated tree in the world” (<http://lakdiva.org/codrington/chap01.html#B307>).

<sup>17</sup> See an article concerning the recent use of *Jataka* stories in daily Sri Lankan life: “*Jataka* Narrations as Multimedial Reconstructive Embodiments of the Psychic System Buddha Shakyamuni.” *The World of Music* 44(2) (2002): Body and Ritual in Buddhist Musical Culture, guest ed. Paul Greene, pp. 115-34. See also the webpage: <http://people.freenet.de/mclba/jataka.html>, which also contains an explanation of Vesak-pandals: large, wooden or bamboo constructions with painted scenes representing *Jataka* tales.

<sup>18</sup> “Today it is popularly held that there are three distinct geographical and historical entities constituting the Sinhalese dance. Kandyan dancing (Udarata Nätum) which takes its name from the hill country and the seat of the ancient Kandyan Kingdom; the low country tradition of dancing (Pätarata Nätum) confined to the Southern lowlands of Sri Lanka; and Sabaragamuwa of mid-country dancing (Sabaragamu Nätum)...” (Seneviratna 1984: 25-26).

<sup>19</sup> The Pancasila is provided on the webpage: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/ptf/pancasila.html>.

**1. Panatipata veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami**

I undertake the precept to refrain from destroying living creatures.

**2. Adinnadana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami**

I undertake the precept to refrain from taking that which is not given.

**3. Kamesu micchacara veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami**

I undertake the precept to refrain from sexual misconduct.

**4. Musavada veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami**

I undertake the precept to refrain from incorrect speech.

**5. Suramerayamajja pamadatthana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami**

I undertake the precept to refrain from intoxicating drinks and drugs which lead to carelessness.

<sup>20</sup> Pirith noola: single-thread bracelet of Buddhist religious significance: <http://www.crazylanka.com/dictionary.htm>.

<sup>21</sup> An interesting article, titled “Save their last dance,” is on the following webpage: <http://origin.sundayobserver.lk/2001/08/05/fea02.html>.

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