



Panibharata and the Invention of Sinhala Folk Dance Repertoires in Post-Colonial Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the history of the Sinhala folk dance genre and its connection to Sinhala cultural nationalism in Sri Lanka. This paper aims to examine the formation of Sinhala folk dance as a tradition in the context of the rise of Sinhala nationalism during the 1940s and 1950s. Although performing arts were commonly practiced by villagers, the genre named Sinhala Folk Dance (Sinhala *gemi nāṭuma*) did not emerge until the 1930s in Sri Lanka. Around 1956, in the midst of the rise of Sinhala cultural nationalism, it is believed that the stylistic choices that preceded the modern creative work of the new nation were drawn from “folk” sources. A classic example of this genre is E.R. Sarachchandra’s play *Maname*, which became the marker of modern Sinhala theatre, and which was based on the folk theatre tradition, the *nadagama*. Here, the assumption is that folk art already existed in the villages, and that the Sinhala literati merely borrowed from it to create new performing art forms that represented the nation. However, this assumption is an oversight in folk dance in Sri Lanka, as demonstrated in this article which presents an alternative interpretation of the history of performing arts in Sri Lanka, a history which has not been highlighted in the 1956 cultural revolution discourse. As I demonstrate in this article, Sinhala choreographer Panibharata invented certain dances which are considered Sinhala folk dance today. Sinhala nationalists groomed Panis, a village drummer and dancer, considered to be a low-caste,

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underprivileged individual into Panibharata, a cosmopolitan artist. Fulfilling these nationalists' desires, Panibharata created repertoires of "folk dance" that portrayed village life in an exotic and romantic guise, which is aptly exemplified in his *goyam nāṭuma* (rice-harvesting dance). Panibharata's model of folk choreography continues to be interpreted as the genuine and only Sri Lankan folk dance tradition, a narrative that was institutionalized and disseminated through the system of public education. In contrast to that canonical narrative of the Sinhala folk dance tradition, I argue that the staged model of Sinhala folk dance is a fairly recent invention. I analyze archival records, dance curricula, and secondary sources and interpret them according to my personal experiences as a dancer. To contextualize the purely Sinhala folk dance tradition, I compare the Russian folk dance and the Morris dance of England, that developed as separate national folk dance traditions.

Keywords: folk dance, Sri Lanka, Sinhala nationalism, invention, *goyam nāṭuma* (rice-harvesting dance)

Introduction

I was born into a Sinhala family, which is the dominant ethnic group in Sri Lanka. Since I grew up in a Sinhala family, and was schooled in a state-funded government school, I studied and practiced Sinhala folk dance repertoires. Our teachers taught us and tested us on the characteristics of folk dance in our school examinations. I learned that the everyday work and life of Sinhala villagers inspired them to create and perform Sri Lankan folk dances such as the *goyam nāṭuma* (rice-harvesting dance), the *kala-gedi nāṭuma* (water pot dance), and the *kulu nāṭuma* (winnowing-fan dance). During inter-school dance competitions, while we were competing in the folk dance category, we often had arguments about how we should perform those folk dances authentically without corrupting their "folkness" (*gāmikama*). We were well aware that this was a skill that the judges would look for, and a criterion based on which they would award points. Only later did I start to question the very concept, characteristics, and historiography of Sinhala folk dance. Thus, the historical analysis of folk dance choreography in Sri Lanka during the latter part of the 20th century is vital in understanding the ideological forces and individuals behind the contemporary folk dance in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka, earlier known as Ceylon, is a diverse country comprising of three main ethnic groups: Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim. However, not until the twentieth century did there appear to be a sense of "nationhood" uniting these various groups. The country gained its independence from Britain in 1948 after 133 years of colonial rule. Two major Sinhala cultural revival movements can be identified during the British colonial and post-independence eras. The first was the Sinhala Buddhist revival movement led by Anagarika Dharmapala, which emerged in the 19th century, and the second, the Sinhala cultural nationalist movement led by

S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike in the mid-20th century. As historian Kumari Jayawardena asserts, the rise of the Sinhala bourgeoisie during the British colonial period (Jayawardena, 2000) was instrumental in the Sinhala Buddhist national and cultural renaissance. This bourgeoisie included English-educated Sinhala elites. Although both Dharmapala's and Bandaranaike's movements were intimately bound with colonialism, the first emerged before independence and the second after independence. Therefore, while Dharmapala's attempts were anti-colonial, Bandaranaike's movement took a more nationalist approach that openly promoted Sinhala culture. Since the country received independence in 1948, a majoritively agreed-upon Sinhala cultural identity became solidified after it. The power of Sinhala cultural nationalists was established by the landslide victory of Bandaranaike at the general election in 1956. Soon after this massive victory, Bandaranaike enacted the "Sinhala-only" bill, making Sinhala the official language of Sri Lanka.

There was a need to identify and define an authentic dance of Sri Lanka to represent the identity of the newly independent nation. One of the ways in which the Sinhala elites promoted authenticity was by connecting it to Sinhala village and folk culture, thereby promoting village dancers and drummers. Finding and representing authentic Sinhala "folkness" (*gāmikama*) in folk dance was certainly a concern among Sinhala elites. As cultural studies scholar Harshana Rambukwella (2018) asserts, the notion of "cultural authenticity" has always been politically motivated in post-independence Sri Lanka. Rambukwella critically engages with these two concepts, "ourness" and authenticity, in his discussion of Sinhala cultural nationalism (2018, 1-5). He demonstrates how the idea of ourness (*apēkama*) has been conflated with authenticity in cultural productions such as Sinhala music in the post-independence era. Moreover, Rambukwella convincingly demonstrates that Bandaranaike himself was cosmopolitan, marking a paradox in Sinhala authenticity (2018, 73-101). Thus, even though authenticity was portrayed as a folk/village tradition, Sinhala folk dance had cosmopolitan influences, as I demonstrate in this article. The final output was a theatricalized form of Sinhala folk dance. The roles played by Sinhala intellectuals and traditional dancers were crucial in this choreographic process of the theatricalization of Sinhala folk dance.

In the 20th century, English-educated Sinhala intellectuals undertook the role of educating the people and increasing public awareness of the "nation" and national identity. According to the cultural anthropologist Susan Reed (2010) Since most English-educated ruling elite in the country were Sinhala, Sri Lanka was constructed as a Sinhala nation. These intellectuals used the arts such as dance, music, theatre, painting, and literature to demonstrate the Sinhala heritage, which thus became the symbol of a Sri Lankan identity both within and outside the country. In the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, against the backdrop of the Sinhala

nationalists' quest for a national art, Kandyan Dance, particularly ves dance, moved into the limelight in the Sri Lankan dance scene. Ediriweera Sarachchandra, one of the greatest and most recognized Sinhala intellectuals of post-Independence Sri Lanka, claimed that "Kandyan dance emerged as the national dance of Sri Lanka because it received the patronage of Kandyan chieftains" (1995, 63). Susan Reed (2010) convincingly demonstrates in her book *Dance and the Nation* that since the majority of the elites in power were Sinhala, they elevated Kandyan Dance to the position of the national dance of Sri Lanka. In this article, I focus on the Sinhala folk dance genre, which developed under the shadow of the Kandyan dance.

I study the forces and individuals involved in choreographing folk dances and their repertoires in terms of methodology. The theoretical framework for this study is based on the idea of the "invention of traditions" discussed in cultural studies. As two historians, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983) brilliantly demonstrated in their book *The Invention of Tradition*, some cultural practices that appear to be old and are considered traditional are, in fact, recent inventions. Inventing new traditions went hand in hand with the nation-building process that took place globally. When a nation-state is formulated, its traditions are also being redefined. Therefore, to position Sinhala folk dance historically, I compare it with two other folk dance traditions – the Russian folk dance and the Morris dance of England - that evolved through somewhat similar trajectories.

This article analyzes the genealogy of the choreography of the Sinhala folk dance genre in Sri Lanka. The objective of this paper is to examine the ways in which the "Sinhala folk dance" rose to the fore and onto the stage in Sri Lanka in the context of the rise of Sinhala cultural nationalism and against the backdrop of the global folk dance tradition during the 1940s and 1950s. Although writings on Sinhala folklore began to appear during the British colonial period, it was only after the mid-twentieth century that the national history of folk dance was canonized officially and disseminated through the system of public education. This official history links folk dance to a pristine, uncontaminated, pure dance form of an imagined Sinhala village community and its so-called typical folkness (*gāmikama*).

Panibharata's historical contribution towards the "folk dance" has not been articulated enough. Contrary to the narrative of a pristine Sinhala folk dance that we have been fed through the public education system, I argue that the staged model of Sinhala folk dance is a more recent invention, and that Panibharata, supported by Sinhala national intellectuals, played a significant role in actually inventing the Sinhala folk dance. Indeed, performances such as the *kala-gedi sellama* (water pot play/game) and the *li-keli sellama* (stick play/game), that are considered folk dances, existed among the Sinhala people way before the

twentieth century. However, it is noteworthy that these dances have not been initially choreographed for the stage. Moreover, a genre called the “Sinhala folk dance” did not exist before the twentieth century, and popular folk dance repertoires such as the *goyam nāṭuma* and *kulu nāṭuma* are inventions that took place around the 1950s. Inspired by nationalistic efforts, Sinhala dancer, drummer, and choreographer Panibharata portrayed an exotic and romantic village in his “folk choreographies.” In these choreographies, Panibharata portrayed the farmers overtly as happy folks dancing with captivating smiles on their faces in a romanticized village milieu, even though the lives of the real farmers in villages were extremely difficult. Although these folk dances are considered Sinhala, their choreographic elements are really quite cosmopolitan.

Panibharata’s model of folk choreography has continued to be interpreted as Sinhala national folk dance by Sri Lankan intellectuals. State-funded schools institutionalized Panibharata’s folk choreographies as a pedagogical model for creating and teaching a typical Sri Lankan folk dance. As a Sri Lankan dancer and researcher, I challenge this narrow concept of the “folk dance” that I have gathered from my Sri Lankan dance education and argue that it is actually quite a modern invention.

Folk Dance in the Context of Nationalism: A Global Perspective

The development of Sinhala folk dance should be discussed in the context of the development of the world folk dance scene in the early twentieth century. Therefore, using two cases from England and Russia in this section, I demonstrate the characteristics of the folk dance that developed outside of Sri Lanka against the backdrop of nationalism.

Cultural nationalism contains within it a romantic drive that seeks to glorify the past. This character of cultural nationalism is not unique to Sri Lanka. Ethnographer Andriy Nahachewsky observed that romantic nationalism, combined with cultural nationalism, influenced folk dances in many parts of Europe (90-94). Romantic nationalism saw the adverse effects of industrialization on traditional cultural practices. Romantic nationalists were primarily based in developing cities and looked towards village life for authenticity. The basic assumption of Romantic nationalism was that “because of their isolation, the peasants’ cultures still reflected that wholesome primordial national spirit that had been lost in the cities...” (Nahachewsky 91). Inspired by romantic nationalism, some middle-class elites began to study the cultural past of their countries. Research was conducted about village life, peasants, and their ritual practices. As Nahachewsky observed, “the Romantics noticed that the peasants’ lives were full of customs and rituals that originated in the past beyond memory”

(91). Therefore, Romanticists decided that the dance and movements associated with villagers were an excellent means of representing the nation.

Folk dance embodies the distinctiveness of the people of a nation. Through national cultural centers, Ministries of cultural affairs, Departments of folklore, and Ministries of education, Romantic nationalists around the world launched their projects to create national dances. These projects promoted dances related to folk customs and folklore as national dances. In this process, village customs, movements, practices, and rituals have been transformed into entertainment modes that satisfy the tastes of middle-class elites and the nation-state. When it comes to nationalist ideological influence on folk dances in the twentieth century, many similarities can be seen between England, Russia, and Sri Lanka, although these countries are, of course, geographically distant.

The Morris Dance of England

Widely known as an “ancient” “English” dance, the Morris dance has become a highly complicated cultural performance. Folklore scholar Michael Heaney observed that the Morris dance went through a religious, commercial, and political journey to transform into the kind of dance that inspired the nation in which the Elizabethan Englishman desired to live (Heaney). In nineteenth and twentieth-century England, the Morris dance represented the nationalistic image that the Englishman wanted to project. It is not an accident that nationalists picked the Morris dance to portray a quintessential “Englishness.” The Morris dance has a folk/traditional quality, and at the same time, it has been recorded as a means of entertainment worthy of the royalty and aristocracy, even in medieval England (Sponsler 84–85). Therefore, nationalists calculated the significance of the dance well when they picked the village seasonal ritual called Morris dance and promoted it as an “ancient,” “English” dance.

English nationalists transformed the ritualistic Morris dance into an English national dance. Historian Roy Judge (1993) and theatre scholar Claire Sponsler (2010) have studied how English nationalists revived and reshaped the Morris dance as an “Ancient” “English” tradition. The manner in which nationalists transformed the ritualistic Morris dance into the English Morris dance can be analyzed through Partha Chatterjee’s notion of a nationalistic audience. Chatterjee articulates that nationalist art and culture have been defined for the middle-class taste by middle-class elites/scholars (127-147). Although Chatterjee bases his theory on Indian nationalism and reaches his conclusions through this means as well, the theory works well for English nationalism and Sinhala nationalism too.

English Middle-class nationalist scholars such as Cecil Sharp and Mary Neal transformed the ritualistic Morris dance into the English Morris dance with the

support of the English Folk Dance Society. Sharp articulated the Morris dance as a dance that reflects the essence of utopian England, also called the Merrie England that many Englishmen revered and wanted to live in (1909). Though the author John Cutting recognizes Sharp's revivalist view of the English Renaissance as the "Golden Age Syndrome," Sharp's interpretation contains little truth and more of invention (Cutting 2). As Sponsler argues, the history of the English Morris dance contains many lacunas, and the narrative created by the nationalist revival movement makes it difficult to study the history of the Morris dance (Sponsler) as the former insinuates itself into the latter narrative. However, Nationalist discourse on the Morris dance has succeeded in dominating its existing historical archive.

The Russian Folk Dance

Russian supremacy as a political ideology created a new national identity for the former USSR by blending dance and movements from regional communal rituals. These dances were represented on the stage as folk dances with a new identity and purpose. These new types of folk dances were developed into the folk dance ensemble of the USSR. Russia did not acknowledge this new dance form as a ritual dance for two reasons. Firstly, "folk dance" was the accepted term in the twentieth century used to represent the country's communal dance. Second, Russia's communist political ideology did not favor religious rituals. The state wanted the dance ensemble to represent the 'national' identity of Russia and the USSR, which it desired to be a political identity. However, an individual Russian's sense of national identity was different to this 'official' version, given the country's historical links with the former USSR and its political relationship with the other countries that comprised the former Soviet Union. Thus, through its national dance ensemble, Russia wanted to represent the other countries of the Union as well, but simultaneously, desired to project, and in doing so, perpetuate Russian supremacy. The Moiseyev Dance Company achieved this goal, and this company later became The Moiseyev State Folk Dance Ensemble of the USSR, an official vehicle of Soviet culture.

The Russian state politically choreographed the Soviet Union's national identity through The Moiseyev State Folk Dance Ensemble of the USSR. The highly skilled and reputed choreographer, Igor Moiseyev, was the founding artistic director of The Moiseyev State Folk Dance Ensemble of the USSR. According to dance scholar Anthony Shay "perhaps no nation in the history of the world has supported dance to the extent that the former Soviet Union did, both financially and politically" (62). This statement explains Russia's investment in dance as an instrument that fostered its national political ideology. The Russian state had a clear agenda about what they wanted to do with the dances that represented Russia and the USSR. It discovered the potential of the communal

ritual dance to be considered the foundation for its national dance ensemble, a purpose which the State achieved through The Moiseyev State Folk Dance Ensemble of the USSR.

To create the form of expression that the Russian state desired, Moiseyev blended different communal ritual dances from across the USSR and choreographed a new folk dance ensemble. As Shay observes, “dancing in most of the rural areas of Eastern European (sic) was a group phenomenon and an important social and ritual event” (65). Thus, group dance was a common event during communal rituals like wedding ceremonies. For example, *charsash*, is a group ritual dance in Yugoslavian wedding ceremonies (Nahachewsky 15). These were huge communal rituals where hundreds of people came together and danced, sometimes till dawn. There are varieties of dances that can be observed across the USSR, as the country spreads through a vast geographical area, including different cultures. For example, the Uzbek Muslim choreographic patterns are different from the Ukrainian choreographic patterns. The main form of choreography in Muslim-dominated areas was the solo (Shay 65), which took the form of a group dance in a country like the Ukraine. Moiseyev blended these different choreographic patterns and created a new character for his state folk dance ensemble. Yet, although the name of the company was officially known as the “State Folk Dance Ensemble of the USSR,” not all countries that were part of the USSR were happy with Moiseyev’s representation of the USSR. Some of them saw it as an expression of Russian supremacy. This is because Moiseyev used specific choreographic strategies that went well with Russia’s political ideology.

Moiseyev choreographed the ideal ‘Soviet Man’ in the manner that the Russian government fantasized. This Soviet Man in Russia’s fantasy was a non-complaining, young, happy-go-lucky fellow living in the village. Moiseyev expressed this idea brilliantly in his dance ensembles. Anthony Shay described this as “fun in the village,” and explained it as a “simplistic and romantic depiction of village life where even work is a game – a hangover from nineteenth century images of peasants – [which] stands in stark contrast to the grim reality of village life” (9). For the former rulers of the Soviet Union, over the rural workforce was crucial. Firstly, the Russian authorities understood the power of rural workers since the village was a site where communist ideology could be used to mobilize the rural workforces against the Emperor. Secondly, to sustain and expand the USSR, Russia desired the rural workforce to be strong. Portraying young, virile, happy men and women working and living in the village (Girls and Boys, as Shay identifies) was also a part of Russia’s agenda for other countries in the Soviet bloc and for the rest of the world.

Comparing the development of the Morris dance in England and the Russian dance sheds light on many similarities between these two dance forms and the development of Sinhala folk dance in the context of nationalism. In Sri Lanka, too, the middle-class elites and the state supported the folk dance and wanted it to represent the nation. Like Moiseyev was supported by the Russian state, Sinhala intellectuals and the Sri Lankan state machinery supported Panibharata in his quest to choreograph Sinhala folk dance repertoires.

The Rise of Sinhala Cultural Nationalism and Finding Identity through Folk Art

Sinhala nationalists, who embarked on an anti-colonial quest for cultural expression, eventually developed national art through its folkloric roots. However, Sinhala traditionalists and middle-class Sinhala elites generally ignored folk art in Sri Lanka until they thought the time was ripe when folk art could be used to represent the nation. As the idea of the “nation-state” is a recent phenomenon, most Sri Lankans living before the 19th century did not have a sense of “nation-state” that was solely gathered around their ethnicities as Sinhala, Tamil or Muslim. Later, Sinhala cultural nationalism played a defining role in identity formation, as the nation-state Ceylon/Sri Lanka was imagined primarily through a Sinhala ethnic point of view.

Although nationalist consciousness started to emerge during the late nineteenth century, it was not until the first half of the twentieth century that the Sinhala nationalist movement seek its Sinhala cultural roots in the arts. Until the 1940s and 1950s, most Sinhala nationalists, who comprised of Buddhists, traditionalists, and English-educated Sinhala elites, had little appreciation for folk dance or music. As ethnomusicologist Wolfgang Laade observes, while Buddhist traditionalists associated music with the low castes and imagined, quite erroneously, that Buddhism was averse to music per se, English-educated progressivists disregarded folk music traditions (Laade 62). However, after independence from British rule, the need arose to establish a unique cultural identity for the nation-state of Ceylon/Sri Lanka, particularly because it needed to be distinguished from European cultural domination. One way to decolonize dance was to downplay its European influences and highlight and strengthen its folk character.

Constructing a national identity through Sinhala folk art became a priority for Sinhala cultural nationalists in the second half of the twentieth century. In the 1940s and 50s, a strong interest developed among middle-class Sinhala elites to patronize and enjoy folk music, dance, and theatre, and to find the “Sinhalaness” in these performing arts expressions. Ediriweera Sarachchandra noted that:

there was a growing awareness among the English-educated section that the folk arts of the country must be studied and to some extent, patronized, in order to prevent their complete extinction. With this end in view, in 1950, there was formed the Folklore Society of Ceylon, the primary aims of which were to make documentary films and photographs of folk plays, folk ceremonies, and folk dances, to record folk songs and to commit to writing the oral legends and beliefs of the people, in order to preserve the material on which future studies of village organization and culture could be made (Quoted in Laade 63-64).

Later, Sarachchandra himself became interested in folk performing arts traditions. He was one of the co-founders of the Folklore Society of Ceylon (Reed 245). He studied Sinhala folk drama (for example, Sarachchandra (1953) *The Sinhalese Folk Play and the Modern Stage* and Sarachchandra (1966) *The Folk Drama of Ceylon*) extensively and created a theatrical style for the Sinhala audience of post-independence Sri Lanka. In this Sinhala cultural nationalistic context, Sinhala elites promoted a few talented village dancers and drummers, and elevated them to become national icons. Panibharata is one such village drummer and dancer who was privileged enough to receive patronage from Sinhala middle-class elites.

Panibharata's Story: from Village Drummer to Cosmopolitan Artist

Sinhala national elites elevated Panibharata from village drummer to cosmopolitan artist. Here, it should be noted that the ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino uses the term “cosmopolitan,” the common understanding of which is – “of the world,” in a culturally specific way. Turino defines “cosmopolitan” as “objects, ideas, and cultural positions that are widely diffused throughout the world and yet are specific only to certain portions of the populations within given countries...cosmopolitan cultural formations are therefore always simultaneously local and translocal” (Turino 7). Theatre and performance studies scholar Rustom Bharucha uses the term “inter-Asian cosmopolitanism” to characterize Rabindranath Tagore’s intellectual world (Bharucha 12) as he draws from and contributes to cultural practices across Asia. Taking into consideration both Turino’s and Bharucha’s use of the term “cosmopolitan”, we can safely claim that Panibharata is a cosmopolitan artist.

“Panibharata” is the adopted name of Panis, born in the village of Algama in the Kegalle district between Kandy and Colombo (Sirisena). He was born into the *beravā/nākatī* caste, which was mainly associated with drumming, dancing, and ritual priesthood. The *beravā* caste is considerably lower in the hierarchy of the Sinhala caste system. Although the caste system was discouraged during the colonial period, social mobility for so called lower caste people, remained difficult, even after Sri Lanka’s independence. Those who were considered as low

caste had to deal with the power relations of the bureaucracy and the caste consciousness of the elites. Young Panis, who had inherited traditional dance and drumming from his family, would have typically performed in and around his village of Algama. However, with the support of English-educated Sinhala elites and educated Buddhist monks, the social status of Panis was elevated from low-caste ritual drummer and dancer to reputable artist, educationist, dance administrator, and national choreographer.

Meeting English-educated Sinhala elites, J.D.A. Perera and his wife Chandralekha Perera, in 1937 marked a significant turn in Panis's life. J.D.A. Perera was the head of the Heywood College of Fine Arts² located in the capital city of Colombo. Since Chandralekha had become interested in traditional dance, she wanted an accompanist to play the drums for her. In 1938, Chandralekha took Panis to India as her drummer, and this journey marked a turning point in his career as an artist (Dissanayake and Kariyawasam 40). There, he learned Indian dance from dancer Gopinath (Wickramasinghe 7). Perera brought Panis from the village of Algama to the capital, Colombo, and provided him language training by sending him to Lorenz College in Maradana to learn Sinhala and English and to Vidyalankara Pirivena (a Buddhist institute of higher education, now known as the University of Kelaniya) to learn "Oriental" languages (Wijesekara 42). During the period 1930s to 1950s in Sri Lanka, it was nearly impossible for a comparatively less-educated (school education), lower-caste drummer to move up the social ladder. However, Panis was able to do just that because of the support he received from intellectual Sinhala national elites.

In Colombo, Panis was encouraged and supported by several other English-educated Sinhala nationalists like S.L.B. Kapukotuwa, Professor Gunapala Malalasekera, and Mudaliyar Amarasekara. They helped Panis expand his worldview as an artist. In 1944, Kapukotuwa, with the assistance of C.W.W. Kannangara, Minister of Education at that time, awarded Panis a Sri Lanka government scholarship to study at Visva Bharati University in Santiniketan, India, the university that Rabindranath Tagore created. A Bengali artist, Tagore was a cosmopolitan intellectual and the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. His vision for fine arts education was carried out through Visva Bharati University.

Visva Bharati University enriched Panis's knowledge and experience of dance forms that are considered Indian national dances. During his studies at Visva Bharati University from 1944-1948, Panis studied Indian dance forms like Kathakali, Manipuri, and Kathak and musical instruments like the tabla, esraj, and

² The Heywood College of Fine Arts later in 1974 became the Institute of Aesthetic Studies which was funded by the government.

mridangam (Wijesekara 43). When he returned to Sri Lanka in 1948 after his training in India, Panis assumed the name, Panibharata. His new name, “Panibharata,” pointed to Panis’ Indian exposure and his new identity. He kept “Pani” as part of his original name and added to it “Bharata,” which means “India.”

Sending Panis to study at Visva Bharati University, the educational institute that Tagore created, can also be considered as an attempt to decolonize Sri Lankan dance. As dance scholar Sally Ness observes, the “undoing of [the] colonial aesthetic experience” is linked to the decolonization efforts of dance (68). The English-educated Sinhala intelligentsia supported Panis’s attempt to decolonize and nationalize the Sri Lankan folk dance. For inspiration for national art, Sinhala nationalists turned to Tagore, the intellectual that Kirin Narayan identifies as the “nationalist folklorist of India’s colonial period” (186). Therefore, Sinhala nationalists embraced and promoted Tagore’s approach to Sri Lanka’s national arts, and sent Panis to study in Visva Bharati University so he can be an ambassador for Sinhala culture and art. After returning to Sri Lanka, the traditional dancer and drummer Panibharata also became a choreographer, cultural ambassador, dance administrator, and dance educator who played a significant role in choreographing Sinhala folk dances.

Between the 1950s and 1970s, Panibharata turned out to be an illustrious cultural ambassador for Sri Lanka. He toured Germany, Russia, England, Czechoslovakia, Canada, Pakistan, India, and Japan. Panis, whose spectacular dance and drum adaptations won high acclaim, was honored internationally by Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Emperor Hirohito (Goonatilleka 30). As expected by most Sinhala nationalists, Panibharata spread Sri Lankan culture across the world through Sinhala dance and drumming.

Although it was an impossible task for other dancers or drummers who were considered lower caste and not educated enough to receive national attention at the time, Panis, who had only completed the 4th Grade at Algama Medagama Central College, became the head of the dance section of the Government Art Institution in 1952. At that time, J.D.A. Perera, the Sinhala intellectual who introduced Panibharata from the village to the capital Colombo, headed the Government Art Institution. This gives us some sense of how Sinhala middle-class elites facilitated the dramatic change that occurred in Panibharata’s career. In the next section, I argue that Panibharata subsequently invented a staged Sinhala “folk” dance repertoire that catered to the taste of his mainly Sinhala

Inventing a Tradition of Folk Dance

The common understanding of Sinhala dances is that Sinhala folk dances emerged from the daily routine of villagers. These dances are commonly known as “*gemi nāṭum*” which means “dance of the villagers.” Although the common view is that there is a tradition of Sinhala folk dance in Sri Lanka, evidence suggests that this is a mere invention that took place in the 1940s and 1950s. Panibharata’s model of Sinhala folk dance exemplifies Hobsbawm’s and Ranger’s concept of “the invention of traditions,” presented earlier.

As mentioned earlier, there were movement practices such as *kala-gedi sellama* and *li-keeli sellama* that existed in pre-colonial times and could have been considered “folk dance” traditions. Moreover, Sinhala peasants performed communal dance and music forms when the harvesting season ended. They performed these dances and music during the break between the two harvesting seasons. Villagers also performed different types of games, dramas, dance, and music during their leisure. However, some Sinhala nationalists were not really interested in actual folk performances as the latter did not depict what they imagined, in other words, the romanticized life of the village. Elites at the time thought that actual folk music was made with the drum, and that the issuing three or four notes were particularly harsh (Laade 62). Thus, those performances were not the type of “folk dance” that Sinhala nationalists wanted to identify with. This is because those pre-colonial dance practices did not really convey the type of ideology that Sinhala nationalists wanted. Indeed, they were more interested in showcasing the pride of Sinhala national identity through folk dance. Therefore, Panibharata took on the responsibility of choreographing for the stage the type of “Sinhala folk dances” that Sinhala nationalists desired, and that were truly close to their hearts.

Goyam Nāṭuma (Rice-Harvesting Dance)

Panibharata choreographed the *goyam nāṭuma* in the 1950s. However, there were earlier attempts to create dance portraying harvesting Panibharata’s choreography became widely popular. His *goyam nāṭuma* portrayed the ideal working men and women espoused by Sinhala nationalists and their government. The portrayal of happy, young farming men and women living in idyllic villages was in line with Sinhala nationalist Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike’s promise to decolonize the colonial economy and to promote a national agriculture-based economy in the 1950s.

After S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike became the Prime Minister of Ceylon and ushered in a Sinhala nationalist backed government in 1956, the ideal of the Sinhala common working man and woman was the farmer. Therefore, the village was

idealized as the country's significant economic site. This political-economic and ideological shift is clearly visible in the folk dance choreographies that had sprung up at the time. Village farmers were portrayed as hardworking, yet cheerful men and women who helped in the country's rice production. Therefore, the *goyam nāṭuma* is an idealized folk choreography created by Panibharata, a choreography of a romantic village where countrymen and women are depicted as happy, agrarian workers.

In his folk choreographies, Panibharata portrayed “fun in the village” and those repertoires were consisted of what anthropologist David Guss defines as “the hegemony of the smile” (Guss 163–65), a constant never-ending smiling face directed at the audience, found specifically in staged folk performing arts events around the globe. Romanticizing folklife through the use of folk dance and music has always already been an integral part of the nation-building strategies of many nations. However, Sinhala intellectuals, dancers and choreographers realized that there were very few folk dance repertoires that had pre-existed among the Sinhala people and even if they did, that they did not possess such a common feature like the “fun in the village,” found in state folk dance ensembles in other nations. This was when Panibharata arrived on the folk dance scene to create the “Sinhala folk dance” that represented the Sinhala national identity, in order to cater to the tastes of Sinhala nationalists as well as international audiences.

Panibharata found a way to satisfy his patrons by inventing a *goyam nāṭuma*. Sinhala culture included folk songs, called *goyam kavi* (harvesting songs), associated with rice cultivation. However, they did not have a folk dance called the *goyam nāṭuma* (rice-harvesting dance). Panibharata created it by utilizing the traditional rice-harvesting songs and choreographing dances that involved theatricalized movements that depict rice farming.

Panibharata's *goyam nāṭuma* choreography contains common features and standards that state folk dance ensembles of other countries followed in the 1940s and 1950s. In his *goyam nāṭuma*, Panibharata used all three dance features that Shay had observed in state folk ensembles of Russia and Eastern Europe, namely, fun in the village, innocent depictions of village boys and girls, and simplistic and romantic depictions of village life (Shay 9). Firstly, the dance depicted the simplicity of the Sinhala village in a romantic vein. Secondly, it showcased innocent young boys and girls enjoying life in a Sinhala village. Thirdly, taken in its entirety, the *goyam nāṭuma* portrayed the boundless joy of living in a Sinhala village. Therefore, this ‘invented’ Sinhala folk dance actually satisfied the taste of Sinhala nationalists who were eager for a dance form that was unique to their culture and that expressed their primeval longing for oneness and belonging.

Embracing the New Folk Dance

New and innovative dance genres evolved in the shadow of the Kandyan dance. In the Sinhala cultural nationalist context, the idea of a “folk” tradition began to assume importance, and even felt authentic to some nationalist scholars. However, as I argue, the “folkness” portrayed in twentieth-century dance is purely an invention, and these dances are, in reality, cosmopolitan. Although the subject matter depicted in those folk choreographies were drawn from village milieus, inspiration for this particularly staged form of folk dance could have come from outside Sri Lanka – India, perhaps, or Russia, and/or Europe. Sinhala choreographers created such convincing folk dance repertoires that the Sinhala public and educators internalized those invented dance repertoires to produce authentic Sinhala traditional performances that expressed and symbolized “*apēkama*” (ourness), “*gāmikama*” (folkness), and “*emakama*” (authenticity).

We cannot fathom exactly whether Panibharata consciously adopted folk dance characteristics from Eastern Europe or Russia. However, we can speculate that he had witnessed Eastern European folk dances when he toured Russia and had been influenced or inspired by them. Under Prime Minister Bandaranaike in the 1950s, Sri Lanka established strong diplomatic relations with Soviet Russia. In 1957, Prof. Malalasekara was sent to Soviet Russia as Ceylon’s first ambassador, resulting in Sri Lanka establishing strong cultural contacts with Russia (Nissanka 158–59). As I mentioned before, Malalasekara was among the English-educated Sinhala elites who supported Panibharata to become a cosmopolitan artist.

When Panibharata choreographed folk dance repertoires, female dancers in his ensemble became the representatives of the idealized village woman. Through the *goyam nāṭuma*, Panibharata intended to depict the fun times enjoyed by Sri Lankan villagers, and his choreographies were influenced by the hegemony of the smile, a constant, never-ending, never-fading smile on the faces of the rice harvesting dancers. However, most dancers in Panibharata’s folk dance group were not village peasants but dance students, professional dancers, and drummers. Therefore, we can speculate that it was not a difficult task for Panibharata to theatricalize the ideal village woman of the time – the farming woman.

After dance was introduced into the public-school curriculum in the 1950s, Panibharata’s model of folk choreographies became a pedagogical model for teaching folk dances. After his *goyam nāṭuma*, Panibharata, and later, his followers, created many different folk choreographies based on the different livelihoods of the Sinhala people. These included choreographies based on *patal* (mines), *kobu*

(coir), *dimara* (fishing), *pol* (coconut), and *wēwāl* (cane). Panibharata's model of folk choreographies used different traditional tunes and rhythms taken from various rituals, festivals, and games to theatricalize the imagined livelihood of the different communities in Sri Lanka.

The perception of Panibharata's model of folk choreographies as "Sri Lankan folk dance" has become a common feature of Sinhala society and continues to be perpetuated primarily through state dance education. Although the folk choreographies of Panibharata's model were invented in the 1950s, public schools still teach and create similar dances, referring to them rather facetiously as folk dances (*Dance Teachers' Guide - Grade 8*; *Dance Teachers' Guide - Grade 12*), without historically contextualizing Panibharata and his invention of the "folk dance." Sinhala choreographers did not stop at choreographing Sinhala folk dances but went on to choreograph the folk dances of their main ethnic "other" – the Tamils. Panibharata's pedagogy of folk dance later helped Sinhala choreographers and dancers to create the imagined Tamil folk dance – the tea dance – to represent the Tamil ethnic minority (see Mantillake). They invented the "tea dance" (*te dalu nātuma*) to represent the Tamil people and their imagined idyllic lives on tea plantations.

Conclusion

During the period when Sri Lanka was moving towards independence and post-independence, Sinhala nationalists searched for cultural expressions such as dance and music to represent the identity of the newly independent nation. Folk music, dance, and drama were thus studied and experimented with to find national modes of performing arts expressions. In this context, Sinhala nationalists groomed Panis, the so-called low-caste village drummer who had only completed the 4th Grade in school, into a cosmopolitan artist and a national icon named Panibharata. In the 1950s, he invented a tradition of "folk dance" by choreographing the *goyam nātuma* (rice-harvesting dance), which he presented to national and international audiences. This dance portrayed the imagined life of the Sinhala agrarian villagers. His *goyam nātuma* became a model folk choreography that exemplified the imagined livelihood of various communities, and the model has been disseminated as the archetype of Sinhala folk dance in Sri Lanka, largely through the system of public education.

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