Dances of Sri Lanka By Hemasiri Premawardene

There are three classical dance forms and several folk dances in Sri Lanka the classical dance forms are known as Kandyan dancing Ruhunu dancing and Saparagmu dancing; Kandyan dancing is practiced in the central hills of the island, Ruhunu in the coastal or low country areas, and Saparagamu in the province known as Saparagamuwa, particularly in the district of Ratnapura, world-famous for its gems.

The three classical dance forms differ in their styles of body-movements and gestures, in the costumes worn by the performers, and in the shape and size of the drums use to provide rhythmic sound patterns to accompany the dancing.

The drum used in Kandyan dancing is known as the GETA BERE, the drum in Ruhunu dancing as the YAK BERE, and drum in Saparagamu dancing as the DAVULA (the word BERE or BERAYA in Inhale means “Drum”) The Geta Bere is beaten with the hands as is also Yaka Bere, while the Davula is played with a stick on one side and with one hand on the other side; the Geta Bere has a body which tapers on both sides while the Yak Bere and the Davula both have cylindrical bodies.

The main distinguishing feature between Kandyan and Saparagamu dancing, and Ruhunu dancing, is that Ruhunu dancers wear masks.

The classical dance forms are associated with the performance of various rituals and ceremonies which are centuries old and are based on the folk religion and folk beliefs going back to times before the advent and acceptance of Buddhism by the Sinhalese people in the third century B.C. These rituals and ceremonies reflect the values, beliefs and customs of an agricultural civilization.

The pre-Buddhistic folk religion consisted of the belief in a variety of deities and demons who were supposed to be capable of awarding benefits and blessings but also causing afflictions and diseases. Accordingly they had to be either propitiated or exorcised with offerings and the performance of rituals and ceremonies.

The repertoire of Dances in Kandyan dancing has its origins in the ritual known as the Kohomba Kankariya, which is performed to propitiate the deity known as Kohomba for the purpose of obtaining relief from personal afflictions or from communal calamities such as pestilence. Although this ritual is rarely performed at the present the various dances associated with its performance could be seen in the Kandy Perahere, and annual religion-cultural event which takes place in the city of Kandy in honor of the sacred tooth-relic of the Buddha housed in the Delude Malaga, the Temple of the Sacred Tooth.

The repertoire of Ruhunu dancing has its origins in the rituals of Devol Maduwa to propitiate a deity of the same name, and in the exorcistic rituals known as Rata Yakuma and Sanni Yakuma. Rata Yakuma and Sanni Yakuma are associated with various demons who are supposed to cause a variety of afflictions and incurable illnesses.

Saparagamu dancing is associated with the ritual known as the Gam Maduwa, which is performed to propitiate a deity called Pattini, a female. The purpose is to obtain a good harvest or to ward off evil or to be rid of and infectious disease.
Apart from the classical dance forms there are also folk dances, which are associated with folk activities and festivities. Leekeli (stick dance), Kalageldi (pot dance) and Raban (a hand drum) folk dances prevalent at the present time.

There is also in the low country a dance-drama called Kolam in which the performers wear masks depicting animals or people such as kings or high officials, and provides amusement and social satire. It has been suggested by scholars that Kolam may have developed from the ritual known as Sanni Yakuma and had later become a dance-drama independent of ritual elements.