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Dance Characteristics Shown in the Rituals of Modern Aborigines of Sri Lanka

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Abstract:

This research explores the ritualistic dance practices of the modern Vedda community, the indigenous people of Sri Lanka, to uncover the cultural and spiritual significance embedded within their movement traditions. The research highlights how the Vedda people's ritual dances rooted in prehistoric practices and beliefs in ancestral spirits function as communal expressions of devotion, healing, protection, and survival. Drawing on historical chronicles such as the Mahavamsa, archaeological findings, and ethnographic data, the study contextualizes these dances within broader religious systems of demon worship and ancestor veneration. Through an in-depth analysis of key rituals such as Kiri Koraha, Hatme Dance, and Ne Yakun Pidima, this paper outlines distinct dance features, including pantomimic expression, trance possession, circular spatial patterns, body percussion, and organic rhythmicity generated through physical movement. The research also identifies

symbolic gestures, the absence or minimal use of musical instruments, and the ceremonial involvement of the Kapurala (ritual leader) as defining traits of these performances. Furthermore, it examines the cultural fusion between Vedda traditions and mainstream Sri Lankan dance forms, showing how indigenous ritualistic movements have influenced Kandyan, Low Country, and Sabaragamu traditions. Ultimately, this study affirms the significance of Vedda ritual dances as vital expressions of indigenous identity, spirituality, and resistance to socio-cultural change, while offering insight into their impact on the evolution of Sri Lankan dance heritage.

Key words: Vedda Ritual Dance, Indigenous Identity, Ancestral Worship, Cultural Fusion, Sri Lankan Dance Heritage

01. Introduction

This study explores the ritualistic dance practices of the modern Vedda community, the indigenous people of Sri Lanka, to uncover the cultural and spiritual significance embedded within their movement traditions. The research highlights how the Vedda people's ritual dances rooted in prehistoric practices and beliefs in ancestral spirits function as communal expressions of devotion, healing, protection, and survival. Drawing on historical chronicles such as the Mahavamsa, archaeological findings, and ethnographic data, the study contextualizes these dances within broader religious systems of demon worship and ancestor veneration.

The primary **objectives** of this research are:

1. To identify and analyze the characteristic features of dance as expressed in key Vedda rituals.
2. To examine the influence of these indigenous dance elements on the broader spectrum of Sri Lankan traditional dance forms, including Kandyan, Low Country, and Sabaragamu styles.

The **significance** of this research lies in its contribution to preserving and understanding an often-overlooked aspect of Sri Lanka's intangible cultural heritage. By documenting and analyzing these ritual dances, the study not only affirms the value of Vedda spiritual and artistic expression but also reveals their ongoing role in shaping national cultural identity and resisting socio-cultural erasure.

02. Literature review

The ritual traditions of the Vedda community have been widely discussed by anthropologists, historians, and cultural researchers as important expressions of Sri Lanka's indigenous heritage. Early studies by Seligman (1909) documented Vedda religious beliefs, hunting practices, and ceremonial performances, highlighting the central role of ancestor worship and spirit appeasement in ritual life. Archaeological and anthropological research conducted by Deraniyagala (1991) and Kennedy (1970) further traced the origins of the Vedda people to prehistoric populations of Sri Lanka, suggesting that many of their ritual practices have deep historical roots. These studies provide valuable insights into the cultural and spiritual foundations of Vedda society, although they offer limited analysis of dance as a performative practice.

More recent studies by Somasundara (2006), Lokkuhewa (2009), and Ranasinghe (2009) have documented various Vedda rituals, including Kiri Koraha, Hatme Dance, and Ne Yakun Pidima, emphasizing their social, religious, and healing functions. These scholars have also identified connections between Vedda ritual traditions and mainstream Sri Lankan dance forms such as Kandyan, Low Country, and Sabaragamuwa traditions. However, existing literature largely focuses on ritual structures, beliefs, and cultural significance, leaving a gap in the analysis of specific dance characteristics such as movement vocabulary, spatial patterns, rhythmic organization, and trance performance. Therefore, the present study seeks to address this gap by examining the distinctive dance characteristics manifested in contemporary Vedda ritual practices.

03. Research methodology

The **methodology** employed is qualitative in nature, utilizing a multidisciplinary approach that includes ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, semi structured interviews with ritual practitioners such as the *Kapurala*, and analysis of visual recordings of performances. Historical and textual sources, including chronicles and folklore, are also reviewed to trace the evolution and continuity of these dance practices.

Through an in-depth analysis of key rituals such as *Kiri Koraha*, *Hatme Dance*, and *Ne Yakun Pidima*, this paper outlines distinct dance features, including pantomimic expression, trance possession, circular spatial patterns, body percussion, and organic rhythmicity generated through physical movement. The research also identifies symbolic gestures, the absence or minimal use of musical instruments, and the ceremonial involvement of the *Kapurala* (ritual leader) as defining traits of these performances. Furthermore, it examines the cultural fusion between *Vedda* traditions and mainstream Sri Lankan dance forms, showing how indigenous ritualistic movements have influenced broader traditions.

Ultimately, this study affirms the significance of *Vedda* ritual dances as vital expressions of indigenous identity, spirituality, and resilience, while offering insight into their impact on the evolution of Sri Lankan dance heritage.

04. Result and Discussion

Historical and Cultural Background of the *Vedda* Rituals

Indigenous cultures across the world have significantly contributed to the diversity of human expression. The Australian Aborigines, Maori of New Zealand, Native Americans, Eskimos of the Arctic region, and the Andaman Islanders represent societies with rich and unique cultural heritages. Among them, the *Vedda* people of Sri Lanka are regarded as the island's earliest known inhabitants. Terms such as *Vedda*, meaning *archer* and *Vanniyalatto*, meaning *forest dwellers*, help define their cultural identity. (Somasundara, 2006:02)

Scholars and researchers have long shown interest in the indigenous peoples of Sri Lanka. The earliest written references to the *Vedda* people appear in the *Mahavamsa*, a historical chronicle of Sri Lanka. According to verses 59–74 of the *Mahavamsa*, the *Veddas* are said to be descendants of a native *Anarya* woman named *Kuveni*. These accounts trace *Vedda* lineage back to the mythical figure *Kuveni*, suggesting their indigenous origins predate Aryan migrations to the island.

This research paper seeks to investigate the ritualistic dance traditions of the *Veddas*, which are deeply rooted in their spiritual and communal practices.

A distinctive feature of Sri Lankan culture is its history of cultural fusion. The *Vedda* culture retains indigenous characteristics that have existed in Sri Lanka for centuries. Various dances, rituals, and beliefs associated with *Vedda* traditions reflect influences from all three major Sri Lankan dance forms: Kandyan, Low Country, and Sabaragamuwa. This indicates that *Vedda* culture has both influenced and been shaped by the evolution of Sri Lankan dance traditions.

Although these dances are often generalized under the term “devil rituals” or *Shanthikarma*, they represent a broad spectrum of religious expressions involving deities, spirits, ancestral beings, and healing practices. This research discusses the origins, structures, and symbolic elements of these rituals and highlights their influence on mainstream Sri Lankan dance traditions particularly those of the Kandyan, Low Country, and Sabaragamuwa styles.

Every person in the world is a social part. In that social segment, they behave based on a cultural order. The Sri Lankan *Vedda* people live according to a lifestyle unique to their tribe and they have tried to maintain their style of behavior unchanged even in the face of strong social changes such as invasions and migrations that happened to Sri Lanka throughout history. There are various ideologies, legends and beliefs about the origin of *Veddas* in Sri Lanka. There are evidence that they are descended from the aborigines who lived in Sri Lanka in prehistoric times. As Dr. Shiran Deraniyagala points out, in 500 BC or later, in addition to advanced human groups such as the Sinhalese, Veddans belonging to the Balangoda human race, who are among the historical human factors of Sri Lanka, lived in safe places such as caves. (Daraniyagala, 1991: 4950) Anthropologist AR Kennedy states that the physical characteristics of the Balangoda man, which is among the historical human factors of Sri Lanka, are similar to the Austroloid people and they are undoubtedly biologically descended from the Balangoda man who represents a generation. (Daraniyagala and Kenady, 1970:18-23) In the study of the origin of the *Vedda* people and the practices of the early *Vedda* people, certain factors are important among the prehistoric human era. In places like Batadomba Caves and Pahianga where ancient human remains are found in Sri Lanka, the remains of humans who lived 40,000-30,000 years ago are found in ancient burial grounds. When the bodies are buried in the Batadomba cave, the body is covered with a coating made of guru stones and the dead bodies are colored in some way. (Palliyaguru, 2012) There has been an opinion about whether they followed such a method on the basis of some religious ritual. If these

were done on the basis of religious belief, there must have been a community pattern and it can be thought that there would have been dances, singing, playing, hymns in them. However, there are no other factors that can be found in history regarding the nature of those dances, songs, and rituals, and it can be pointed out that the beginning of the ancestor worship or devil beliefs among the *Vedda* people took place through these prehistoric factors.

The religion of the Sri Lankan *Vedda* people is demon worship. *Devilism*, though not a specific religious concept, was a simple yet powerful form of belief. They believe that the dead *Veddas* are possessed to the trees and stones of the forest. They believed that it was the dead relatives who brought them good and bad, and they constantly tried to please the dead. Also, they firmly believed that since all diseases and accidents are caused by dead relatives, prevention of diseases should also be done by dead relatives themselves. Accordingly, it can be identified as one of the main cultural characteristics of the *Veddas* to perform sacrifices with dancing, singing, and playing to appease the deceased.

The strong belief in the dead in Sri Lanka is a result of beliefs about the dead that existed among the tribes more than 2000 years ago. The belief in the dead, which was not found in Arya society, existed not only in Lanka but in every prehistoric tribe of the world. Basic information about ritual dances based on the belief in the dead of *Vedda* people is mentioned in the annals. It was a belief during the Pandukabhaya kingdom of Sri Lanka that great people of the society were worshiped as *yaku* after death.

In the history of Sri Lanka, during the reign of Pandukabhaya, when the king was in the womb, the dead demons *Chittaraja* and *Kalavela* who were the protectors of his mother were deified and to honor them by offering high seats similar to the throne were placed and a beautiful ceremony was held with dancing and singing. It is mentioned in the Mahavamsa which contains the historical information of Sri Lanka. (Mahavamsa, 1946:36) It is said that in this ceremony, the king sat on the same height seats with *Chittaraja* and engaged in sexual games by making gods and humans dance. After Vijaya's visit to Sri Lanka, this was the highest dance and song ceremony held in Sri Lanka and is known as the "Sacrificial Festival of Devil Worship". (Kulathilaka, 1974:68)

Belief Systems and Deity Concepts

As described above, it appears that the practice of devil worship among the *Vedi* people has a long history. The practice of offering dead relatives and believing in devils is still present in the popular dance traditions of Sri Lanka with the evolutionary features of *Shanthikarma* and religious beliefs.

The main livelihood of the *Vedda* people in Sri Lanka is hunting. Among the related devils they believe in, *Kande yaka*, *Billilu yaka* and *Idagolla yaka*, it is customary to take a vow to those devils in the forest. *Kanda yaka* is the chief among the related devils and *Veddas* dance *Badi Yakuma* for him to make successful hunting. The concept of *Kohomba Deva*, which is the main deity worshiped in the popular *Kohomba Kankariya* in the *Udarata* Provinces of Sri Lanka, was joined to the *Shanthikarma* system from this *Vedda* folk belief. Although female divinity is not strongly related to the practice of

devil worship, there is a strong belief among *Vedda* people in the concept of female deities called "*kiri ammawarun*". Among the *Yaka* deities among the *Veddas* are "*Bilidu Yaka*" and "*Ranale Yaka*" who are offered for giving protection to women during childbirth. Based on these concepts of demons and gods, *Vedda* people perform ritual dances and religious beliefs for various purposes.

It is based on the dances, singing, musical performances, sacrificial dances and rituals of the *Vedda* people.

The religious system of the *Veddas* revolves around ancestor spirits and nature-associated deities, often referred to as *Yakshas* (devils). Unlike institutional religions, *Vedda* beliefs are experiential, oral, and performance-based. The spirits of deceased ancestors are thought to inhabit forests, rocks, and trees. Misfortune, illness, or poor hunting are believed to stem from their displeasure, necessitating ritual dances to appease them.

Primary deities include:

- *Kande Yaka* – Guardian of the forests and patron of hunting.
- *Bilindu Yaka* – His brother, associated with fertility and protection.
- *Kiri Ammawaru* – Female deities invoked during childbirth or illness.
- *Ranale Yaka*, *Idagolla*, *Bambara Yaka*, and others each with specific functions and rituals.

Core Dance Rituals and Their Characteristics

Veddas Traditional ritual dance moments

1. *Thele* dance
2. *Kirikoraha Shanthikarma*
3. Ritual practices of offering relative devils
4. Supplication to the *Bambara Devil*
5. Offering *Patta* devil
6. Offerings for *Dola* devil.
7. *Yadinna* for *Rahu* devil
8. Offering wild devils
9. *Aluth Yakagama Puja*
10. *Ruwal Puja*
11. *Kolamadu Puja*
12. *Awana puja*
13. *Hadde* dance/ *Haadme/ Hathme* dance
14. *Nee yakuma* or *Aluth yakkama*
15. *Ela yakinna natum maduwa*
16. *Kadaim* dance
17. *Bath yahan Maduwa*
18. *Hagale panama*
19. *Mirisge mula*
20. *Pahadun yadima*
21. *Malagiya attange natuma* (Ranasinghe, 2009), (Somananda, 2006), (Binaragama, 2008), (Lokkuhewa, 2009)

Ritual practices of offering relatives

The *Vedi* people of Sri Lanka perform the "*Ne Yakun Pidima*" three or four days after the death of a relative. (Lokuheva, 2009: 184) Relative demons are the ghosts of dead *Veddas*. On the fifth day after the death, it is customary for the *Veddas* to pray to all the dead relatives, including the spirit of the deceased relative. This community dance is performed by *Kapurala*, the person who builds the connection between the demons. *Kapuralas* perform this devil sacrifice dance around a *pideni thattuwa* filled with wild yams and water. "*Pideni*" means food prepared for animals. The place prepared for storing this food is known as the *padeni thattuwa*.

Kapurala dances around the *pideni thattuwa* which is placed on three supporting posts, carrying the community instrument called "*Audhe*" and chanting *yathika*. Here *Kapurala* dances with a big arrow as "*Aude*". Taking that arrow, *Kapurala* dances while the rest of the group gathers around it. *Kapurala* becomes obsessed with the dead relative, *Kandade Yaksha* or *Bilidu Yaksha*, and the dead relative who is possessed by him promises to give yams, honey to his living relatives no less. This community dance ends with a blessing by sprinkling the relatives of the deceased with coconut milk or water from the *piden*.

Hatme dance/ Hanme dance/ Hadme dance

The *Hatme* dance, which is among the sacrificial dances among the *Veddas*, is performed only once a year. There are several elements to this dance which is conducted for two days under the leadership of *Veddas* leader. It is customary to perform this puja dance before the annual *Esala* procession held at the *Mahiyangana Vihara* belongs to the Uva province and Badulla district of Sri Lanka. Accordingly, this is held two days before the procession. This is done by remembering dead relatives like *Kukulapola Kiri Amma*, *Kohomba Goddess Kalu Bandara*. They perform worship dances for the instruments and ornaments such as bows, arrows, axes, necklaces, bracelets belonging to the demons. (Lokuheva, 2009: 187) This *shantikarma* is performed to reduce diseases, improve farming, meet animals during hunting, prevent accidents from wild animals, and expect rains to be received at certain times and fertility.

Drums are also played on occasion for this community dance. For that, a very old musical instrument popular in the Uva province of Sri Lanka, a drum called *Daula* is used, and a *gejji* is used to set the tune. When there is no drumming, it is customary for other dancers to tap their naked bellies and dance to the beat.

Kiri Koraha dance

Among the *Vedda* people, one part of the craft known as *dadayam yakuma*, *badi yakuma* or *kala yakuma* is still in use today under the name of "*Kiri Koraha*". This is held to win the favor of the demon *Vannia* of the mountain, who is considered the hero of hunting, and his brother *Bilidu Yaka*. *Kirikoraha* may be known as an imitation dance. "*Kiri koraha*" means a tub filled with milk. (Seligman, 1909)

The *Kiri Koraha* dance serves three main purposes.

1. To make the hunt successful
2. To prevent diseases affecting cattle raised in the backyard
3. Protecting children from diseases (Somasundara, 2006;183)

Every year, *Kiri Korah Shanthikarma* is held to appease dead relatives. There are two essential elements of the *kiri koraha shanthikarma*. The first is to offer coconut milk and other foods to the *kande yaka*, the *bilidu yaka* and other devils under them. The second is *kapurala* or priest, who is possessed by the *Kanda Yaka* ghost of *Kanda Vannia*, imitates show that follows the path of an ox and kills the ox. (Ranasinghe, 2009: 305)

The *Kiri Koraha* dance begins with the "*Nanumura*" of jewels of gods. To "*Nanumura*" is to wash and cleanse all things. Then the *yatika* is performed and the dance is performed till midnight. As midnight dawns, the dancers are possessed by demons and bless their friends. Then the *yatika* and dances is performed till midnight. As midnight dawns, the dancers are possessed by demons and bless their patient. The next morning, *Maha Kapurala* takes a coconut in his hands and dances and recites poems and mantras. Then he breaks the coconut and take the two halves of the coconut in his hands and start dancing. The broken coconut is ground with a *hiramana* and placed in a container called *kiri koraha* and covered with a towel. Then the towel is placed on the head and the coconut is squeezed and danced around. Everyone dances around the *kiri koraha* and scatters the liquid milk around with *na* leaves and performs

Summary of Major Ritual Dances

Ritual Name	Purpose	Deity Involved	Key Features
Thele Dance	General healing	Ancestor spirits	Fire elements, rhythmic chants
Kirikoraha Shanthikarma	Hunt success, protection	Kande Yaka, Bilidu Yaka	Ox imitation, coconut milk offering
Bath Yahan Maduwa	Food blessing	Ancestor devils	Cooking-related rituals
Hadme (Hatme) Dance	Annual tribute before Esala	Kukulapola Kiri Amma	Symbolic dance, drumming, body percussion
Nee Yakuma	Funeral-related appeasement	Dead relatives	Trance dancing, ritual chants, spirit possession
Ela Yakinna Natum	Spirit invocation during illness	Forest devils	Stamping, swinging arms, howling

(Ranasinghe, 2009; Somasundara, 2006; Lokuheva, 2009)

Dance Characteristics of Vedda Rituals

Despite lacking classical codification, *Vedda* ritual dances exhibit identifiable characteristics:

- **Pantomimic Movement:** Symbolic gestures represent hunting, farming, illness, or possession.
- **Circular Spatial Dynamics:** Most dances follow a circular formation to signify cosmic continuity and inclusivity.
- **Possession States:** Dancers enter trance states to channel spirits, often accompanied by bodily shudders, loud howling, and falling.
- **Bare-Bodied Percussion:** Dancers slap their bellies to create rhythm due to the absence of instruments.
- **Unbound Hair:** Signifies ritual release and spiritual openness.
- **Crescendo Form:** Begins slow, gradually intensifies to physical climax (possession) and ends in cathartic collapse.

These dances are community-centered, with active participation from both genders, though often led by male shamans.

05. Conclusion

At the present time, the *Vedda* people of Sri Lanka have spread from the early generations of the *Vedda* people to various areas according

to their own lifestyles. Although the early cultural characteristics of some *Vedda* people can be identified only to a certain extent, most of the *Vedda* people have mixed characteristics of Sinhala society. Hence the early features of their rituals and craft have largely departed from them, and there are often only some fragments of the early sacrificial rites. Also, many of the traditional dances of the *Vedda* people existed in a society that made a living by hunting. In modern times, most of the people have not built their daily life only by traditional hunting and they are engaged in various livelihoods including agriculture. Due to these cultural variations in their normal life existence, their early behaviors and related dances, songs, and rituals can be identified with evolutionary characteristics.

The ritual dances of the *Vedda* people, deeply rooted in ancestral worship and nature spirituality, stand as unique expressions of Sri Lanka's indigenous heritage. Far from being mere relics of the past, these performances reveal a living tradition rich in symbolism, functionality, and artistic form. Their influence on mainstream traditions such as *Kohomba Kankariya* and *Sanni Yakuma* reflects a cultural continuum from indigenous beliefs to organized ritual art.

In a time where modernization threatens the survival of such traditions, studying, preserving, and integrating *Vedda* dance rituals into broader cultural discourses is imperative not only to protect indigenous identity but also to enrich the cultural mosaic of Sri Lanka.

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