

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The tea dance: a choreographic representation of Tamil tea plantation workers within the modern Sri Lankan folk dance repertoire

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Abstract: This paper reports on an ongoing research project on the popular dance choreography, “The Tea Dance.” In the 1980s and 90s, the tea dance was incorporated in a large number of cultural shows put up in Sri Lanka and abroad. As such, the tea dance often appears in the Sri Lanka National Day celebrations held in foreign countries. The Sinhala dance teachers in the public schools of Sri Lanka introduced the tea dance to their students as a folk dance of the Up-country Tamils of Sri Lanka. However, while exploring the genealogy of Sri Lankan dance critically, I realised that there was no such dance called the “tea dance” among the Tamils. Based on the several interviews I had with artists, the documentary evidences gathered from libraries, the visuals witnessed in video form and my own personal experience as a dancer, this research study examines the so-called tea dance and traces its relatively recent origins. The history of the choreography of the tea dance within the context of the Sinhala folk dance discourse in Sri Lanka was studied. It was revealed that the tea dance presents a seriously problematic portrayal of the Up-country Tamils of Sri Lanka. It is argued that Sinhala choreographers such as Panibharata, Sri Jayana, and K.S. Fernando created the “tea dance” for the first time to represent Sri Lankan Up-country Tamils on stage in the 1970s, under the choreographic model used to create the Sinhala “folk dances.” In effect, they choreographed their imagination of the lifestyle of the women and men who work on tea plantations, portraying them comically, and ignoring the stark socio-economic realities they are forced to struggle with.

Keywords: Tea Dance, folk dance, nationalism, Sinhala, Up-country Tamil

INTRODUCTION

“*Jenaku jenan, tanaku jenan, Jenaku jenan, tanaku jenan...*,” the fast-moving, fun beat dominant in the “The Dance” (*te dalu nātuma*) takes me back to our dance training sessions in the 1990s when we used to enjoy it. To create the rhythm of the music, we used the *thammattama*, the *geta beraya* and the *yak beraya*, three drums used in traditional dances practised by the Sinhala people of Sri Lanka.

In the program of a dance troupe which travelled to the US to celebrate the Sri Lanka National Day in 2000, the tea dance was mentioned as “Tea Plucker Dance” (‘Folk Dances of Sri Lanka’, 2000). This tour was organised by the Ministry of Cultural and Religious Affairs, Sri Lanka. In 2011, at the 63rd Independence Day Celebration concert sponsored by the Sri Lanka Consulate in Los Angeles, USA, and the Sri Lankan diaspora, the Swara Dahan Dance Troupe staged the tea dance performance. The compeer announced, “Ceylon tea, with its distinct taste and character has now become every consumer’s favourite cup. The next performance reflects a typical picture of tea pluckers and their supervisors” (Nalika, 2011).

When I studied in a Sinhala-medium government school in Sri Lanka in the 1990s, our dancing teachers

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introduced the tea dance as a folk dance that portrayed the Up-country Tamils of Sri Lanka. One of my dance teachers choreographed the tea dance for a stage show in which I played the role of a supervisor on a tea plantation (a *kangāni*). When I reflect on my past experience, I notice a certain formula for choreographing the tea dance. Female tea pluckers (as they were called) and their sexually abusive male supervisors were imagined and choreographed in the tea dance, which was presented as a romantic dance with a fast beat. Ignorant of its gender and political connotations, at that time, I thought the tea dance was an extremely amusing and funny type of dance. Although it was such for a Sinhalese like me, the tea dance actually presents a very controversial portrayal of the Up-country Tamils of Sri Lanka.

Although there were various ethnic groups in Sri Lanka by the 19th century, adding increased diversity to the country, British colonial administrators brought groups of Tamil people from India for plantation work in Sri Lanka between the 1830s and 1930s. They had to operate as indentured labourers and were officially identified as “Indian Tamils” by the colonial government, and today, they are loosely identified as “Up-country Tamils.” They have also been referred to as Malayaha Tamils, hill country Tamils, or plantation Tamils. Even today, most of the Up-country Tamils live and work on tea plantations (Bass & Skanthakumar, 2019, p. xv). Although some of them have been able to move away from tea plantation work, a significant proportion of their population lives and works on the tea estates and is paid very low wages.

In her book *Tea and Solidarity: Tamil Women and Work in Postwar Sri Lanka*, Mythri Jegathesan (2019) mounts a powerful critique of the stereotypical image of the Tamil plantation workers. She criticizes the manner in which the representation of plantation women has been reproduced for commercial purposes, without considering the lived experiences of those women. In contrast with the fixed narratives about plantation workers, Jegathesan (2019) highlights the desires and future expectations of the youth living on plantations. The tea plantation community has been socially, politically, and economically exploited and one of the most marginalised communities in both colonial and postcolonial Sri Lanka, despite the fact that they have so long played a significant role in both colonial and postcolonial economies. Their marginalisation is evident by their very low socio-economic indicators. As Martin (2020, p. 5) points out that Up-country Tamils suffer from food insecurity and malnutrition and their women have the lowest Body-Mass-Index (BMI) in the country. After the independence, there were legislative moves

to deny Sri Lankan citizenship to the members of these communities. The tea dance exemplifies that even their cultural life has been appropriated. Instead of portraying the stark realities that the plantation community is faced with in everyday life, the majoritarian Sinhala choreographers have theatricalized plantation workers, exoticizing and sexualizing them.

After the country gained independence from the British in 1948, Sri Lankans struggled to define their national identity as an independent nation, like many other former colonies. Since most English-educated ruling elite in the country were Sinhalese, Sri Lanka was re-constructed as a Sinhala nation (Reed, 2010) in the 1950s. The Sinhala nationalists, who embarked on defining the Sinhala cultural landscape in the second half of the 20th century, attempted to develop their own national arts going by their folkloric roots. In the Sinhala national cultural milieu, the Sinhala elite promoted dancers and choreographers such as Panibharata, Sri Jayana, and K.S. Fernando who were encouraged to create a dance repertoire (unique) to Sri Lanka. These “Sinhala folk dances” showcased Ceylon/Sri Lanka in international cultural events. After the 1970s, the tea dance emerged and developed into a “folk dance”, romantically showcasing the Up-country Tamil livelihoods.

After the 1970s, various dance repertoires were staged, representing the different ethnic groups in Sri Lanka under the banner of “multi-cultural shows.” The organisers and choreographers staged the tea dance to represent the Tamil people of Sri Lanka, while they staged the Kandyan, Lowcountry, and Sabaragamuwa dance forms to represent the Sinhala people. At school, I was taught that their everyday occupational life inspired the villagers to perform Sri Lankan folk dances such as the rice harvesting dance (*goyam nātuma*), winnowing-fan dance (*kulu nātuma*), water pot dance (*kalagedi nātuma*), and tea dance (*te dalu nātuma*).

Moreover, as a dance student, I internalised that the “tea dance” is a Tamil folk dance as it was omnipresent on stage representing the Tamil people in Sri Lanka. It has also become a very popular dance, especially among the Sri Lankan diasporic performers. It seems to appeal to the Sinhala people living abroad because of its connection with Ceylon Tea. Only later did I begin to question the definitions and choreographies of Sri Lankan “folk dances” and realised that there is no dance called “tea dance” performed by the Tamils.

According to dance scholar Mudiyanse Dissanayake (2009, pp. 109–110), the Up-country Tamil communities practice folk dances such as *karagam*, *kolattam*, *pinnal*

kolattam, kummi, sembu, ulawar nadanam, deepa nadanam, oyil attam, wal nadanam, kurawar nadanam, sulangu nadanam, villu pattu, and silambadi. However, they have nothing to do with the tea dance. As a person who has worked on Up-country tea plantations, Dissanayake (2009, p. 144) confirms that no government has supported the arts belonging to the Tamil plantation workers although they are rich with numerous cultural forms. Instead, Sri Lankan governments promoted the tea dance through Independence Day celebrations.

This ongoing research intends to deconstruct the so-called tea dance and trace its recent origins. The research methodology includes a number of data collection methods: interviews; with the artists, archival research; documentary evidence gathered from libraries and videos, and the visuals witnessed. My personal experiences as a dancer and a choreographer have also been utilized to understand this dance form. Although the tea dance stages a deeply controversial portrayal of the Up-country Tamils of Sri Lanka, the pedagogy of the choreography used in it lies elsewhere. Therefore, in this paper, I examine the history of the choreography of the tea dance within the context of the Sinhala folk dance discourse. I argue that using the choreographic model they used to fashion Sinhala “folk dances,” the Sinhala choreographers created the “tea dance” to represent the Sri Lankan Up-country Tamils on stage. In this dance, they choreograph the imagined life of the women and men who work on tea plantations, portraying it comically, and ignoring the stark reality behind their lives. The collective imagination of the national elite and their invention of the traditions can be theorized with reference to the works of Benedict Anderson (1991), Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983). However, to analyse the cultural national choreographic processes within the tea dance, it is necessary to move beyond such theoretical assertions.

Tea Dance within Sri Lanka’s folk dance framework

The invention of the folk dance in Sri Lanka needs to be discussed against the backdrop of the Sinhala nation-building process in the early and mid-twentieth century. As Benedict Anderson (1991) argues, it is the individuals of a community who imagine the constructs of their nation, and therefore, the nation is actually an imagined political community. Thus, it is accepted that the image of a nation is constructed through artistic, literary, and cultural products. Accordingly, in the tea dance, which I am going to characterize later, the Sinhala majoritarian choreographers have not only formulated their own Sinhala cultural identity through Sinhala folk dance but also have gone up to the imagining of the Up-country Tamil identity as well as the multicultural identity of Sri

Lanka, on a rather superficial level. This can be perceived with reference to Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), who convincingly assert, that while theorising the invention of tradition, some cultural practices that appear to be old and are considered traditional, can be recent inventions.

Accordingly, the tea dance, in which the Sinhala dancers impersonate the Tamil tea plantation workers, has won a traditional status within the practice of performing arts in Sri Lanka. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s, the national-level cultural shows organised by the Sinhala communities rarely missed the tea dance from their repertoires. This exemplifies Jill Lane’s (2008) premise about the connection between the theatrical impersonation and national representation, in which she asserts that this can be identified as ‘ImpersoNation’, as a central cultural practice that has contributed to the development of various national discourses. This, as a cultural practice, applies to Sri Lanka as well, in the context of her multicultural folk dance concerts.

To perceive what happens in the tea dance in Sri Lanka, we need to build a new framework combining and expanding the theoretical articulations of Anderson (1991) and Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983). Combining their two theoretical articulations, we can assert that the Sinhala choreographers invented most Sinhala folk dances to satisfy their imagined community. However, to understand the tea dance that represents the Up-country Tamils, we need to come up with a combined theorisation, using Anderson (1991) and Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983). Because the tea dance is not an invention of the Up-country Tamil community of Sri Lanka, and in fact, it is an invention by the dominant Sinhala community representing “the other”. Here, the Sinhala majoritarian community imagines and invents a dance form supposedly of the Up-country Tamils to demonstrate the work and lifestyle of the Tamil community identified with the plantation system. The Sinhala dance community seems not only to have imagined themselves and their own dance forms but also have gone on to imagine and invent a dance form to represent another ethnic group with whom they have limited interaction.

In post-independence Sri Lanka, there developed separate Sinhala and Tamil revival movements that used to be in competition with each other. The Sinhala majoritarian government did not accept the Up-country Tamils as part of the citizenry. Even the Sri Lankan Jaffna Tamils did not accept the Up-country Tamils as an authentic component of the populace of Sri Lanka. After the Sinhala Buddhist landslide election victory in 1956, the Buddhist religion and the Sinhala language received official status through the legislation commonly called “Sinhala only Act.” The Sinhala cultural identity was

hierarchically placed higher than the Tamil identity by the nation-state. Harshana Rambukwella (2018, p. 137–152) asserts, the notion of “cultural authenticity” has always been politically motivated in post-independence Sri Lanka. One of the ways in which the Sinhala elite promoted authenticity was by connecting it to the village and the so-called folk culture and thereby promoting village dancers and drummers.

In the 1950s, with the emergence of Sinhala cultural nationalism, various artistic expressions were produced through theatre, film, music, painting, and dance. As I discussed elsewhere, against the backdrop of Sinhala cultural nationalism and national economic discourse, the Sinhala dancer, drummer, and the dance educator Panibharata invented a “folk dance” called the *goyam nātuma* (rice harvesting dance) to romantically portray the Sinhala rural community, consistent with the idea that “racial impersonation is the key to a persuasive sense of authentic national performance” (Lane, 2008, p. 1730). Thus, the Sinhala elite supported the fabrication of different kinds of folk dances to represent their national identity. In his *goyam nātuma*, Panibharata depicted the village as a simple, romantic, and joyous place which Shay (2002) identifies as “fun in the village” evident in the national folk dance ensembles in many countries. The *Goyam nātuma* became an archetype of the Sinhala folk choreography, where hardworking farming men and women were depicted as happy young people, establishing and promoting a romantic view of the various types of livelihoods of different communities.

Later Panibharata’s model of folk choreography became a pedagogical model for teaching folk dance in the public schools and dance academies in Sri Lanka. After his rice-harvesting dance, Panibharata, and his followers, created many different folk choreographies based on the different types of livelihoods of the people of Sri Lanka. The dissemination of Panibharata’s folk dance model also facilitated the Sinhala choreographers and dancers to create the so-called tea dance portraying the work and life of the Up-country Tamils.

Different choreographies of the tea dance

The Sinhala choreographers use romanticised and commercialised images of the tea plucking Tamil woman in the posters, magazines and travel promotions, to promote Ceylon Tea. The repertoire of the “tea dances” performed in Sri Lanka and elsewhere demonstrate at least four different categories of choreographies: 1) a dance that represents female tea plantation workers and their male supervisor (*kangāni*) performed to instrumental music popular among the Sinhalese; 2) a dance that represents female tea plantation workers and

the superintendent of the tea estate (*watte mayattaya*) to the popular Sinhala hit “Te Kudaya Pite Bendan Numba Enawa Kanda Udin”¹ sung by the two popular artists Freddie Silva and S. Kalawathi; 3) a dance that represents female tea plantation workers performing to other popular songs in Sinhala; 4) a dance that represents female tea plantation workers performing to instrumental music popular among the Sinhalese.

Although the tea dance was labelled as a Tamil dance, it should be noted that in all four of these tea dance categories, the choreographers and dancers who impersonate the Tamil plantation workers are Sinhala. Most of the time, the musicians are also of the Sinhala ethnic background. Professional dancers or dance students generally perform the first and the fourth categories of choreographies and mostly, non-professionals are involved in the second and third categories of choreographies produced for informal entertainment at events such as talent shows, elders’ club socials, and pre-school concerts.

The first category of choreography uses the *yak beraya*, *geta beraya*, *thammettama*, *daula*, and *horanewa*, the traditional musical instruments specifically associated with the Sinhala rituals and dance forms. In the dance, the females who impersonate Tamil plantation workers, enter the stage and engage in tea-plucking movements before the *kangāni*, the supervisor enters.

The second choreographic category is performed to the popular Sinhala song “Te kudaya pite bendan numba Enawa Kanda Udin” composed by the Sinhala lyricist and the music was composed by Stanley Peris (Bandara, 2021). The lyrics are in the form of a conversation between a tea estate superintendent and a young Tamil female tea plantation worker. The superintendent tries to insinuate the young woman to visit him secretly to initiate a sexual relationship and she refuses to cooperate with him with numerous excuses. This category is usually choreographed as a duet or as a group dance where a male character (representing the superintendent) interacts with a group of women.

In the third category of choreography, only the female tea plantation workers are represented. Choreographies of this category of tea dance are based on popular Sinhala songs such as “Udarata kandukara siriya paradana rubara muhuna obe” by Chithra Somapala and P.L.A. Somapala. This category generally romanticises the female plantation worker and her duties and acknowledges the contribution she makes to the national economy of Sri Lanka.

Professional female dancers generally perform the fourth category of choreography mentioned above.

Like in the first category, the music for this category is produced by instruments such as the *yak beraya*, *geta beraya*, *thammattama*, *daula*, and sometimes, *horanewa* which are associated with the Sinhala music. From the four categories of the tea dance mentioned above, the first category has been created and popularised by the Sinhala choreographers: Panibharata, Sri Jayana, and K.S. Fernando.

Panibharata, K.S. Fernando and the origin of the tea dance

The evidence suggests that the first ever tea dance was staged between 1977 and 1979. K.S. Fernando staged a tea dance around 1979, as witnessed by Waidyawathie Rajapaksa (2020), a former Lecturer at the University of the Visual and Performing Arts (UVPA). But it is challenged by (Dhammika Lankatilake 2021-personal communication 22 January), another Lecturer at the UVPA who claimed to be a dancer in the first tea dance. She claims that the tea dance, for the first time, was choreographed by Panibharata or Sri Jayana and staged at the Rama Krishna Hall in Colombo between 1977 and 1978 (Dhammika Lankatilake 2021-personal communication 22 January). Although both these individuals choreographed a number of tea dance performances, Lankatilake said she cannot exactly recall who did the first choreography, as she danced under both these choreographers around this time. However, according to Lankatilake, Panibharata's student Rajini Selvanayagam, also helped in training dancers. Without much evidence to support it, there is another claim that the first tea dance was staged in 1958 as a folk dance within a dance drama created by another Sinhala choreographer Premakumara Epitawala (Dissanayake & Kariyawasam, 2004, p. 155-156).

Panibharata choreographed the folk dances portraying the livelihood of the Sinhala villagers in the 1950s and made an extension by creating the tea dance to portray the occupational life of the Up-country Tamils. From the reports made by Rajapaksa (2020) and Lankatilake (2021), these choreographies belong to the first category of the tea dance where the female tea plantation workers interact with their supervisor (*kangāni*) to music produced with the instruments popular among the Sinhalese. It is possible that K.S. Fernando popularised the tea dance through the dance show organised to celebrate his 50th birthday.

K.S. Fernando is known as a dancer from a traditional dance family in the Southern coast of Sri Lanka. He showed a great interest in learning the traditional dance and staging it for modern audiences. Later, he became well-known for his choreographies on stage. Between

1957-1967, K.S. Fernando travelled to Russia, India, the United Kingdom, and Canada with well-known stage dancers such as Nittawela Gunaya, and Chitrasena Dias under the State Dance Ensemble of Sri Lanka (Dissanayake and Kariyawasam, 2004, p. 66–67). During these tours, he represented the Sri Lankan life, art, and culture through the medium of dance. This exposure and experience might have inspired him to popularise the tea dance to cater to the national and international audiences.

Among his other dance choreographies, K.S. Fernando staged his tea dance in 1979 or 1980 at his 50th birthday celebration at the Lumbini Theatre, Colombo (Rajapaksa, 2020). He choreographed Sinhala dancers representing Tamil female tea plantation workers with their supervisors to musical instruments popular among the Sinhalese. Rajapaksa (2020) stated “Mr. Fernando told me that he wanted to choreograph a tea dance because tea plucking is very famous in Sri Lanka and abroad. He wanted to display the high-quality work done by Tamil people in tea estates. He brought this message to Colombo 7”.

The tea dance was imagined as the representation of the everyday life of Up-country Tamil people. As I mentioned earlier, when we were learning about the “folk dance” during our public-school days, we were taught that everyday life and work inspired the rural villagers to perform Sri Lankan folk dances. It was only later that I realised that not all the “folk dances” we learned were actual folk dances that these villagers performed. There is a difference between folk dances that existed in villages, such as the *kalagedi nātuma* (the water pot dance), and “folk dances” created for the stage, such as the *goyam nātuma* (rice harvesting dance), that imagined and recreated the lives of villagers. According to Rajapaksa (2020), Panibharata created the *goyam nātuma* to stage in the 1950s when the Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain arrived in Sri Lanka. In the late 1970s, Fernando and other Sinhala choreographers staged the tea dance portraying the value of the labour of Up-country Tamil workers. Therefore, the tea dance was not an actual folk dance that existed among Up-country Tamil people, but a representation of their lives as imagined by Sinhala choreographers and dancers. At the time when the folk dance was introduced to the public schools and universities, the tea dance was introduced as an agriculture-related (*krushikārmika*) dance (Rajapaksa, 2020).

It was easy for Sinhala choreographers to stage so-called folk dances as they used professional dancers. As Rajapaksa (2020) claims, Fernando choreographed the tea dance using dance students of then College of Fine

Arts (now University of Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo), and used low country drums popular among the Sinhalese. Both Panibharata and K.S. Fernando used professional dancers and skilful dance students in their choreographies. Therefore, it was relatively easy for them to represent their imagined “folks,” whether Sinhala or Tamil.

After the establishment of the Sri Lanka Rupavahini (T.V.) Corporation (the State Television Network) in 1982, the Sinhala song “*Te Kudaya Pite Bendan Numba Enawa Kanda Udin*” sung by Freddie Silva and Kalawathi Sinnasamy., has been telecasted. The T.V. network produced a visual with the two performers, Samanthi Lanerolle (as the young, female plantation worker) and Freddie Silva, the singer himself (as the superintendent of the tea estate). Whatever the creators’ intentions were, this song popularised the so-called ‘romantic’ relationship between the female tea plantation worker and the estate superintendent, as well as the tea dance itself.

Some problematic aspects of the tea dance

The Sinhala choreographers did not stop at choreographing Sinhala folk dances but went on to choreograph the folk dances of the ethnic others in the 1970s and 80s focusing on the Upcountry Tamils. The Sinhalese choreographed the tea dance to represent this subaltern community and their imaginary life in the tea plantations. The tea dance enacts many problematic aspects, two of which are now analysed; the tea dance sexualizes the Tamil female body; and it tries to represent the Up-country Tamil people without their participation.

Sexualizing the female body

Women on the tea plantations have been historically sexualised and made vulnerable to sexual harassment. Drawing on Valli Kanapathipillai’s work, Martin (2020) claims that tea plucking was “historically regarded as being better suited for the ‘nimble fingers’ and sex-stereotyped qualities of patience and dexterity that women supposedly possess. The objectification and commodification of women’s bodies within the plantation economy, dating back to colonial times, remains well alive today” (Martin, 2020, p. 7). The laws in the plantation sector have made females vulnerable to harassment. Labour laws and Collective Agreements affecting plantation workers in Sri Lanka do not offer adequate legal provisions to prosecute incidents of sexual violence (Martin, 2020, p. 17). Unfortunately, disregarding this social injustice the lives of the female plantation workers have been theatricalized romantically and comically through the tea dance.

The tea dance sexualises the female body and presents it to the taste of the male audience. This was possible because Sinhala choreographers had experience in creating female dances for the male gaze. One of the talents of K.S. Fernando was to identify and extract attractive dance components from low country rituals and choreograph them for stage performances. *Suramba Valliya* and *Giri Devi* are the two such dance choreographies that he extracted from rituals and the first choreographed for the stage (Dissanayake & Kariyawasam, 2004, p. 67). It appears that most of his popular dances were choreographed for the male gaze, idealising an attractive female body. His choreographies, such as *Suramba Valliya*, *Rati Raga Vannama*, *Nāarilatā Kōlama*, and *Giri Devi*, are all designed for female dancers. Of these, *Suramba Valliya* is considered as the attractive female dance of the Low Country dance tradition. Catering to the male gaze can also be identified in his tea dance choreography.

When Sinhala choreographers stage the tea dance, consciously or unconsciously, they romanticise sexual abuse, exploitation, and violence on the Tamil female body. The Sinhala male imagination of the Tamil plantation workers is theatricalized through the tea dance. That is why my dance teachers, when they choreographed me as the supervisor (*kangāni*) in a tea dance, directed me to approach the tea-plucking women in a romantic mood.

Portraying the other without her/his participation

The tea dance essentialises Up-country Tamils as the tea estate workers. Sinhala choreographers have not asked Up-country Tamils whether they would like to represent as the tea estate workers. These people’s work on tea plantations also involved trapping them in the tea estates and preventing them from joining other types of work, and this has been a significant bottleneck for Up-country Tamil people. Most importantly, the tea dance ignores the stark reality of the extremely gruelling lives of the tea estate workers in Sri Lanka. For example, among all the different categories of workers, they are the most underpaid and most exploited. Although up-country Tamil people have various traditional songs that express their stories, histories, and feelings (Selvaraj, 2021 Personal communication 20 November), none of these have been incorporated in the tea dance.

Sinhala dancers and choreographers representing the Tamil people coincide with the exacerbation of ethnic tensions in Sri Lanka. Thus, representations of the “Tamil folk dance” by Sinhala choreographers and dancers resonate with the Sinhala majoritarian denial

of Tamil identity and cultural specificity. When Sinhala choreographers stage the tea dance representing Tamil people without their input and involvement, it denies Tamil people's right to represent themselves and portray their own culture. Moreover, through the appropriation of the dance, Sinhala choreographers have become the 'voice' of the Tamil people.

The popularity of the tea dance (in the 80s and 90s) coincides with the civil war between the Sinhala majoritarian government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), an organisation with a stronghold in Northern Sri Lanka. The tea dance was used to portray the Tamil people of Sri Lanka, while the relationship between the Sinhala people in the South and the Tamil people in the North was fraught with tension. There is a rich diversity among Tamil groups in Sri Lanka from different castes, different regions and different socioeconomic backgrounds and tea dance does not reflect this complexity and cultural diversity. However, for the purposes of multicultural shows, Sinhala choreographers have decided to portray only Up-country Tamil people through the tea dance. Although they belong to the larger Tamil category, clearly the Up-country Tamils are culturally different from the Tamils of the Northern and Eastern Provinces. Therefore, a question arises as to why Sinhala choreographers have chosen to portray Tamil people in Sri Lanka through the stereotypical tea dance.

One argument would be that irrespective of their location in the North or Up-country, in the Sinhala choreographic consciousness, Tamil people in Sri Lanka are culturally uniform. The other argument would be that Sinhalese choreographers, consciously or unconsciously, choreograph the tea dance to represent the Tamil people of Sri Lanka, because of the potential threat that a unified Tamil identity and self-representation of their culture would pose to the Sinhala national and cultural hegemony. The tea dance was also connected with the economic order since it promotes one of the most lucrative export commodities of the country; the Ceylon Tea. However, in the same manner that the attractive label with a smiling female plantation worker covers the "Ceylon Tea" package, the tea dance, with its disarmingly romantic flavour, hides the exploitative nature of the plantation economy and poor living conditions of the plantation workers.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

By historicising Sri Lankan folk dance, it is possible to understand how Sinhala choreographers and dancers portrayed the Up-country Tamil people in the so-called

tea dance. Influenced by Sinhala cultural nationalism, Sinhala choreographers such as Panibharata became the folk-dance pedagogues, and their technique of romanticising the livelihood of villagers became a formula for creating folk dances. Panibharata's pedagogy of folk dance later helped him and other Sinhala choreographers like Sri Jayana and K.S. Fernando to create the imagined Tamil folk dance – the tea dance – to represent the Tamil ethnic community in Sri Lanka. Despite the gruelling and bitter reality of the tea plantation work, Sinhala choreographers have always attempted to portray a romanticised version of the life of Up-country Tamil workers through the tea dance.

The act of choreographing the tea dance by Sinhala choreographers denies Tamil people's right to choose the image they desire to portray of themselves because Sinhala choreographers and dancers have become the 'voice' of Up-country Tamils, and by extension, of Tamil people in Sri Lanka. On the other hand, the tea dance sexualises the female plantation workers, and romanticises the exploitation and sexual abuse of the Up-country Tamil women. Therefore, the tea dance incorporates some serious and controversial assumptions, interpretations, and projections about the Up-country Tamil people and Tamil people in general, in Sri Lanka.

As a Sinhala dance student in the 1990s, the tea dance was one of my favourite dances. Now, whenever I witness any form of tea dance, I am shocked to realise how ignorant I was to assume that it was an enjoyable and rather "fun" dance. I am also alarmed when I contemplate the serious impacts that a seemingly innocent and fun creative work can have on our lives. The tea dance exemplifies a problematic aspect of cultural nationalism when it attempts to invoke the nation from a majoritarian perspective and portray a majoritarian view of minority ethnic groups without the latter's participation. The tea dance also reveals how public education has shaped, and continues to shape, the perspective of a generation of Sri Lankan citizens.

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END NOTES

1 "You come down from the mountain with the tea basket on your back" (my translation)

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