



## Performing Politics: State Power, Ethnicity, and Gender in Sri Lanka

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**PERFORMING POLITICS: STATE POWER, ETHNICITY,  
AND GENDER IN SRI LANKA**

**JANET O'SHEA**

*Dance and the Nation: Performance, Ritual, and Politics in Sri Lanka*  
(Studies in Dance History)

By Susan A. Reed. 288 pp. with DVD.

Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009. \$29.95 paper. ISBN-13: 978-0-29923-164-4.

*Dance and the Nation* offers an important contribution to dance anthropology and South Asian studies. The work is interdisciplinary in scope, aligning itself with critical dance studies, dance history, ethnomusicology, and folklore and heritage studies, and it will be useful to readers in those fields as well as to those with an interest in anthropology, South Asian studies, and/or postcolonial studies.

Reed's focus is primarily ethnographic: she emphasizes the cultural meanings that adhere to the upcountry Sinhalese practices that are included under the umbrella term Kandyan dance. Reed brings forward the voices of dance practitioners, patrons, and educators, and provides a wealth of detail, highlighting the specific events she attended, performances she watched, and dance material she learned. In a sense, this work is as much an ethnography of upcountry Sinhalese culture as it is a study of dance in Sri Lanka.

The text shifts among approaches that are rooted in ethnography, history, and heritage studies. Chapters become less strictly anthropological as the book progresses. While the first chapter examines the cultural meanings associated with Kandy village ritual practice and the second chapter charts relationships between *berava* (drummer-caste) dancers and their elite patrons, the third chapter investigates how colonialism encouraged the reconceptualization of the dance as "exhibition, culture, and 'art'" (p. 16). The subsequent chapters become more issue-based, exploring

state intervention in dance pedagogy and the significance of competing cultural revivals (chapter 4), the impact of middle-class nationalist values on *berava* communities (chapter 5), the reconfiguration of ritual as display (chapter 6), and, finally, the gender politics of including elite women in the form (chapter 7). The chapters are augmented by a DVD of Reed's field footage.

As a critical dance studies scholar, I am interested in the ways in which this text roots its analysis in the histories of specific movement practices. I am also interested in postcolonialism, heritage politics, and the status of dance studies as a discipline. Therefore, I am reviewing this text from the perspective of postcolonial studies and with an eye to changes in dance studies as a discipline.

Reed tells her readers of the process through which a set of lower-caste ritual practices were reconfigured in the interest of the nation. The dance form was standardized, claimed by elites including both Sinhalese and mixed-race Burghers, practiced under nationalist auspices, embraced by middle-class women, and provided with a new respectability. This process, at first glimpse, appears so complete that the image of the Kandyan dancer became a "floating signifier of Sinhala tradition" (p. 12). However, the reconfiguration of Kandyan dance took place through the augmentation of an already existing set of intercaste relationships. Thus, the elite celebration of the form first came through patronage, then through the practice of the form by elite men and by women of a range of backgrounds. As such, Kandyan dance took on a number of conflicting meanings: middle-class nationalist values versus lower-caste pride, Sinhalese ethnic identity versus Burgher identification with the nation, spectacular tourist shows versus the display of state power, and gender emancipation versus sexual objectification, among others.

On the one hand, this process is familiar. A number of postcolonial movement forms—tango, samba, capoeira, Filipino folk dance, *bharata natyam*, *kathak*, and *odissi*, among others—have followed the same trajectory from cultural margins to the center, from disreputable to respectable, from local practice to nationalist statement, from the disenfranchised classes to an alignment with elite values through the involvement of middle-class practitioners, especially women. Caste, race and ethnicity, and/or religion further complicate this process of legitimization. Reed's text

illustrates the patterns of reclamation and validation that form a global discourse of national identity production.

On the other hand, Reed draws our attention to issues specific to Sri Lanka. For instance, the nationalist reclamation of Kandyan dance was not limited to the involvement of patriotic individuals or to state-funded arts organizations as, for example, was the case with dance revivals in India.<sup>1</sup> Instead, in Sri Lanka, the state took an active role in standardizing dance pedagogy, incorporating a syllabus-based dance training system into public school education. Moreover, the nation-state includes Kandyan dance processions in nearly all official events, drawing on the pool of young dancers it helped create (p. 147), and augmenting the aesthetic value of the production by requiring the participation of dance teachers. As Reed points out, there is a feudal element to this arrangement since dancers are considered “servants of the state.”

The gendered overtones of this reclamation process also differ from other postcolonial forms, especially those from other parts of South Asia. Forms like *bharata natyam*, *odissi*, and *mohini attam*, for instance, were the domain of relatively lower-caste women. Through a system of courtesanship and the aesthetic codes of the *bhakti*, or devotionalist, movement these practices were connected with eroticism. The conventions and associations of the forms ran counter to the norms of elite society, but they nonetheless confirmed the femininity of the practice. While upper-caste *bharata natyam* dancers distanced their practice from its erotic associations, female Kandyan dance practitioners had to make a case for dance as suitable for women at all. Kandyan dance was associated with lower-class men, it eschewed eroticism and dramatic expression more generally and featured dynamic movement, a strong use of weight, and rhythmic movement and abstraction. The presence of elite, respectable women in Kandyan dance confirmed its significance as a nationalist practice. Yet the aesthetic values of the dance—assertiveness, a commanding presence, dominance over surrounding space—contradicted the modesty, restraint, and decorum on which Sri Lankan, especially Sinhala, femininity relied (p. 201). As Reed demonstrates, women adopted a number of strategies for negotiating these contradictions.

The reconfiguration of Kandyan dance as a symbol of the nation, like many dance revivals, was incomplete. In this case, the presence of the original, lower-caste ritual practitioners in the dance sphere complicated the standardizing and classicizing process. *Berava* practitioners continue to play a role in the teaching and performance of Kandyan dance. Reed emphasizes the roles of caste and class differences. Frequently, studies of the process through which dance forms are reinvented in the interest of the nation criticize the elite appropriation of the form but do not focus on the nonelite experience. Reed's project departs from such an approach by highlighting the *berava* perspective on a practice that has come to operate as a symbol of middle-class nationhood. Reed refers to this approach as "attending closely to the voices, the interpretations, and the roles of nonelite performers" (p. 14).<sup>2</sup>

Another point of departure between Kandyan dance and other postcolonial forms is the decades-long civil war in Sri Lanka, which heightened the stakes of cultural representation.\* This book demonstrates the contentious struggles that can occur when culture in its most visible forms becomes objectified and canonized as part of community heritage. Reed points to intersections between Kandyan dance and Sinhala identity production, which takes on political overtones in a situation where community affiliations are overtly politicized and defined in polar opposition. Yet "ethnicity has not always been a divisive factor in Sri Lankan society" (p. 130): not only did the early twentieth century witness harmony and cooperation between Sinhalese and Tamils, but both Sinhalese and Tamil were identified as majority ethnic groups with other ethnicities identified as minorities (p. 130). By the mid twentieth century, however, "national culture' . . . meant Sinhala culture; the Tamils were now considered a 'minority'" (p. 136). While the process through which culture emerges as "a unique, bounded entity" (p. 136) is familiar to postcolonial studies scholars, dance studies readers may be less aware of the brutal implications of the Sri Lankan nation-building project. Likewise, scholars in other fields may not be aware of the extent to which dance is entangled in these contests over history and identity.

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\*Reed's fieldwork overlapped with not only the period of conflict between Tamil separatists and the Sri Lankan state, but also the uprising of the Sinhala antigovernment organization, the JVP.

In this case, the claim that dance is political is not simply a disciplinary assertion that allows scholarly investigation of identity categories that can be read in the dance work but rather it demonstrates that dance is—almost literally—on the frontlines of civil war and ethnic conflict.\* In this regard, I see this work as part of a new phase in dance studies. Theorization about the social implications of dance has moved from the race, class, national, gender, and sexual politics of a work to issues of citizenship, state policy, migration, and shifting economic conditions affecting the production and circulation of works.<sup>3</sup>

It is in such contentious usages of the dance that the interdisciplinarity of Reed's text becomes crucial. Significantly, although she uses ethnographic methods, she does not employ an ahistorical notion of an ethnographic present. As such, this text aligns itself with earlier projects in dance anthropology in which authors relied on cultural description while also locating the practices they studied historically.<sup>4</sup> Reed indicates that her attention to history was less a disciplinary choice than an approach the subject matter demanded. In keeping with her dual focus on Sinhalese culture and Kandyan dance, she demonstrates that this intertwining of methods emerges both out of the changing social and political circumstances of Sri Lankan life and the process through which dance was legitimized in Sri Lanka.

My criticisms of this text are few. The most significant is the lack of an overall conclusion, which, to me, is a missed opportunity for reflection across a broad span of time, practices, and contexts of performance. Having read an exciting introduction that raises issues of interest to scholars of many disciplines, I looked forward to a conclusion, epilogue, or afterword that would frame the issues raised by the diversity of practices and divergence of meanings that Reed presents. I was disappointed to find this missing.

The skill with which Reed interweaves anthropology, heritage studies, ethnomusicology, and South Asian studies and the ways in

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\*In my research in Sri Lanka, Jaffna residents told me of situations where dance was almost literally on the frontlines of conflict: the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (the LTTE or Tamil Tigers) sponsored dance performances that included revolutionary choreographies when they held control of the Jaffna peninsula. The performers included LTTE cadres as well as civilian performers.

which she indicates the intersecting histories of particular dance forms, testify to the rigor of her project. This interdisciplinary skill also substantiates the idea that dance studies can augment such established fields as anthropology. Projects like this, which reach across disciplines and unite methodologies through dance, illustrate the dynamism and flexibility of dance studies.

### Notes

1. See Purnima Shah, "National Dance Festivals in India: Public Culture, Social Memory and Identity." Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 2000.
2. For another examination of nonelite perspectives on a reclaimed dance form, see Davesh Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India* (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming) as well as the performance work of Soneji, Hari Krishnan, and Srividya Natarajan.
3. See Janet O'Shea, "Roots/Routes of Dance Studies," in *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, ed. Alexandra Carter and Janet O'Shea (London: Routledge, 2010).
4. Examples include Francesca Castaldi, *Choreographies of African Identities: Negritude, Dance, and the National Ballet of Senegal* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Sally Ness, *Body, Movement, and Culture: Kinesthetic and Visual Symbolism in a Philippine Community* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992); Cynthia Novack, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); Marta Savigliano, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995).