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Dance and the Nation: Performance, Ritual, and Politics in Sri Lanka

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Susan A. Reed. *Dance and the Nation: Performance, Ritual, and Politics in Sri Lanka*

Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010. xv + 280 pages. Bibliographical references, index, map, black and white photos, DVD companion. Paperback, US\$29.95. ISBN-13: 978-029923164-4; ISBN-10: 029923164-x.

GENERATED through almost four years of fieldwork, fifty hours of documentary video, and extensive historical research, Susan Reed's *Dance and the Nation* is a labor of love that stands as a model for historical ethnography of postcolonial performance from below. The book is written from the perspective of Sri Lanka's low *berava* (drummer) caste performers, the traditional practitioners of Kandyan dance, the national dance of Sri Lanka. "Since 1956, when Sinhala Buddhist nationalists emerged victorious in national elections, Kandyan dance has played a critical role in the construction of Sri Lanka as a nation of the Sinhalas" (11). *Berava* performers have both benefited and suffered in this process. State support for Kandyan dance after 1956 made it possible for *berava* dancers to be hired in the hundreds as dance teachers in state schools and to appear in almost every kind of

official celebration and festival requiring presentation of the Sri Lankan nation embodied as Sinhala Buddhist cultural heritage. Yet, the new respectability afforded to Kandyan dance also caused further marginalization of *berava* performers, since it subjected them and their dance to familiar processes of rationalization, classicization, and accommodation of middle-class values and tastes.

The “Introduction” outlines the main arguments of the book and situates Reed’s fieldwork in the violence and terror caused by ongoing ethnic and political conflict in Sri Lanka, including Sinhala-Tamil fighting, JVP uprisings, and state counterterrorism in the late 1980s. She explains that the violence profoundly impacted her fieldwork and the lives of the people she worked with. Nevertheless, it does not form a major subject of the book, which instead is concerned with offering a critical subaltern perspective on national dance. “While national dances are often derived from the practices of the rural peasantry, lower-class urban groups, and indigenous communities, the role these communities play in their development—and the impact that the appropriation of their practices has on them—is often overlooked” (14). In offering a subaltern perspective, Reed exposes forms of economic, symbolic, and cultural violence that exist alongside overt political and ethnic violence, including the marginalization of those very groups held up as cultural icons and protectors of the nation and its heritage.

In keeping with her stated goal of offering a *berava* perspective on the history of Kandyan dance, Reed starts out in Chapter 1 (“Kohomba Kankuriya as Village Ritual”) by providing a detailed description of the technique, structure, and ritual meanings of the Kohomba *kankuriya*, the village ritual complex that most *berava* performers see as the origin and foundation of Kandyan dance. This is by far the densest and most difficult chapter in the book, and it reveals the extreme depth of specialized knowledge Reed acquired through years of study and documentation of Kandyan performance with ritual masters such as Tittapajjala Suramba. As Reed shows later in Chapter 6 (“Kohomba Kankuriya as Spectacle”), much of the spiritual and ritual world in which the traditional Kohomba *kankuriya* exists—that of *yakas* (malevolent spirits), *devas* (gods), and *vas* (magical force)—has been largely transformed or eliminated in the repurposed *kankuriyas* of the 1980s. Reed observed eleven full-scale *kankuriyas* and one Vadiyak *kankuriya* between 1986 and 1989 (Appendix 3), of which only three were performed “primarily for traditional purposes” (180). These later transformations and the *berava* responses to them cannot be appreciated or understood without a description of the ritual in its village context. The older generations’ outrage when later generations defile the sacred *ves* headdress (by doing flips while wearing it, shoving it under bus seats, allowing women or the non-initiated to wear it, or wearing it out of context, for example) is made palpable by this initial explanation of the Kohomba *kankuriya*. Through Reed’s vivid descriptions of each segment of the all-night ritual, one visualizes the movements of the dancers’ bodies and hears the rhythms of the drums; most importantly, Reed makes clear the ways in which each segment of the ritual is embedded in Kandyan folk religion: “The goal of a *kankuriya* is to please the gods and the human audience” (35). This chapter can be paired with the “Ritual Performance” section of the DVD Companion, which includes most of the sections Reed discusses in full audio-video format.

While Chapter 1 is likely to appeal most to dance ethnologists or to those with an interest in religious and formal concerns of ritual performance, the remainder of the book is a veritable feast for anyone interested in Sri Lankan cultural history, the emergence of national dances as a global phenomenon in the twentieth century, or postcolonial processes of nation-building as they relate to class/caste, gender, and ethnic and religious identities. Chapters 4 (“Dance, Ethnicity and the State”), 5 (“Performing the Nation”), and 7 (“Between Purity and Respectability”) present Reed’s arguments on ethnicity, nation, and gender, respectively, in dialogue with anthropologists and cultural theorists such as Partha Chatterjee, David Guss, Michael Herzfeld, and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. Throughout these chapters Reed “reads” her ethnographic and historical field along with the classic texts on Sri Lankan performance, including DE ZOETE (1957) and SEDARMAN (1968). The voices of the older male *berava* performers are contrasted with competing views by younger, higher caste, and female performers who are coming to replace them in the increasingly bureaucratized and bourgeois world of Kandyan dance. Caste, class, religious, geographic, and generational differences provide complexity to the main themes of ethnicity, nation, and gender.

The section of the book most relevant for wider audiences is Chapter 3 (“A History of Kandyan Dance, 1875–1948”). Through an examination of contemporary accounts of the Prince of Wales’s 1875 visit to Ceylon printed in the London illustrated paper *The Graphic*, Reed shows that “*ves* dancers performed outside the *kankariya* at least forty years before the earliest date noted in accounts of Kandyan dance (1916)” (101). Reed uses lively primary source material to show the role of Kandyan dance in US and European “ethnographic exhibitions” (104) such as those of German animal trainer Carl Hagenbeck, the adoption of Kandyan dance into American modern dance through the work of Ted Shawn’s Denishawn Dancers, and the enormous impact of Bengali cultural figure Rabindranath Tagore and his Sri Palee arts school in stimulating the resurgence of interest in Sri Lankan dance forms in the 1930s and 1940s, culminating in the founding in 1946 of the Ceylon National Dancers and their first performance at the Sri Lanka Independence Day celebrations of 1948. This chapter is a must-read for scholars of South Asian performance and it would serve well as a stand-alone article for undergraduate global studies and post-/colonial history courses.

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