

PERFORMING INTRA-CULTURAL IDENTITIES AT THE SHARED SPACE OF THE RUHUNU KATHARAGAMA ASALA PERAHERA PROCESSION

Tharanga Chinthana Dandeniya¹



Abstract

This research paper discusses the complexity of performing, emphasising one's traditional arts and belongings to claim and represent one's cultural capital or to meet the stereotypical anticipations of 'others' in shared cultural spaces, particularly in the context of sociocultural parades. This research also briefly delves into how the dynamics of disempowerment and empowerment of subcultures affect representing identities in shared spaces. It employs archival observations to analyse the *Ruhunu Katatharagama Dewala Asala Perehera* procession in Sri Lanka. In particular, the study exemplifies the representation of the identities of the contributing sub-cultures ethnic communities and performance groups of Sri Lanka through their residual, modified and stereotypical cultural performances including the performances by Sinhala, Tamil and Indigenous communities representing Buddhist, Hindu, and other religious beliefs and ideologies.

Keywords

Cultural-religious Parades, Performance Identity, Ruhunu Katharagama Asala Perahera, Shared Space, Interculturalism

¹ Tharanga Chinthana Dandeniya (PhD), Senior Lecturer, Department of Theatre, Ballet and Modern Dance, University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Sri Lanka. Email: tharanga.d@vpa.ac.lk



Introduction

Parades, rallies, or processions are gatherings and experiential performance practices of communities in Sri Lanka as well as many communities or nation-states of the world. Sri Lankan communities also experience and witness different types of parades on national, cultural, religious and political demands. Cultural parades or processions are mobile displays of cultures in open public spaces for local and foreign spectators. They generally represent bodies, socio-cultural expressions, belongings, beliefs, and achievements.

This paper is a theoretical discussion of how cultural parades represent processions in intracultural and intercultural public spaces in the context of the Ruhunu Katharagama Asala Perahera parade in Sri Lanka. It discusses the complexity of performing and emphasising one's traditional arts belongings to claim and represent one's cultural capital or to meet the stereotypical anticipations of 'others' in shared cultural spaces. This research briefly looks at how the dynamics of disempowerment and empowerment of subcultures affect representing identities in shared spaces. Along with the theoretical discussion on performance identity and inter-intra-cultural practice, publically available archived audio-visual documentaries of the annual Ruhunu Katharagama Asala Perahera parades between 2019 and 2024 will be analysed.

Perahera Parades

In the Sri Lankan cultural and religious context, parades or cultural processions are known as *perahera*. However, the *perahera* is contextualised differently depending on the celebration, religious and cultural events, funerals, or political movements. *Perahera* as an act of devotion for Buddha, Jesus, deities, and saints or celebrations, of Sri Lanka is generally conducted in shared performing spaces for lined-up spectators at the sides of a pathway of the procession. Though performers and spectators who have individual and socio-cultural separate embodiments are seen as binary entities in this performative context, they are interwoven and interchanging their roles as well as co-existing to make *perahera* performance as Erika Fisher-Lichet describes (2008) and that co-existences are generated through the strong ground of shared faith.

According to the *Mahawamsa*,² an ancient historical chronicle of Sri Lanka, the earliest religious-cultural parades can be traced back to the time of the King Devanampiyatissa of the ancient kingdom of Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, in the 3rd century BCE (Geiger, 1912., Mendis, 1996). The king made a royal parade to carry the right branch of the Great Bodhi tree he received from Emperor Asoka of India³. *Mahawamsa* further describes how King Devanampiyatissa decorated the road from the ancient Jambukola Fort of Sri Lanka to the Anuradhapura Kingdom for the procession by hanging banners with different flowers and flower garlands, layering the path of the procession with white sand, and then carrying the branch of the Great Bodhi on a decorated chariot (Geiger, 1912).

Since the *perahera* signifies religious attachment, such procession types have been developed throughout history as a medium to express devotion to Lord Buddha or the deities of Sri Lanka. Annually, thousands of *perahera* events are conducted by Buddhist monasteries, Hindu temples, and abodes of gods in Sri Lanka by adopting more or less similar arrangements (Senarathna, 2012).⁴

The most prominent annual religious-cultural parades, particularly processions of *dewala* (shrine of deities) which are named the “Asala Perahera” are conducted in July and August. In traditional belief, *Asala* (July) is the month that celebrates the victory of the *sura* (Gods) over the *asura* in a battle that ended millennia ago. It is also the month when the Buddha gave his first Dharma talk to five seekers and gods/deities (Soratha, 2009). Other than the divine relation, perhaps there could be a practical reason for conducting these processions during these months as records indicate that there is less chance of rainfall in the country in July and August. (Burt & Weerasinghe, 2014). Traditionally, in the ancient Buddhist monastic practice, Buddhist monks must avoid travel and stay in a chosen monastery for three months to observe *vassana* (*vas*) for annual rain retreats in the South and Southeast Asian regions between July and August, and October and November depending on the monsoon (Nalanda, 2012., & Senevirathna, 2000). In recent Buddhist practice, most monasteries typically conduct parades

² Buddhist monks maintained chronicles of Sri Lankan history from the 3rd century BC to the modern era. The first part of *Mahawamsa* (from 6 BCE – 5 CE) was written using historical references such as *Sinhala Atthakatha*, *Mahavamsa Tika*, and *Dipavamsa – Island Chronicles*

³ Gothema Buddha stayed under the Great Bodhi tree for seven weeks since he was enlightened as Buddha the right branch of the tree, is remaining over two millennia in the Anuradhapura city of Sri Lanka as the main Bodhi tree no longer exists.

⁴ In general observation, parades of some catholic churches in Sri Lanka adopt some performative elements from Buddhist parades.

on a small or large scale. These parades are known as *vas perahera* or *katina perahera*, and are usually conducted at the end of the *vassana* (rainy) season.

Among religious-cultural parades in Sri Lanka, the Kandy *Asala Perahera* and the Katharagama *Asala Perahera* are significant national events. These parades are renowned for their cultural sensitivity, historical value, and elaborate processions, which are conducted over nearly a fortnight each year with considerable national attention and media coverage. Both parades are conducted in July and August. The Kandy *Asala Perahera* is a grand procession held to honour and pay respect to the sacred tooth relic of Gautama Buddha which could be dated back to the 3rd Century CE (Silva, 2005). The Ruhunu Katharagama *Asala Perahera* is also an annual parade in Katharagama, a town in the district of Monaragala belonging to the ancient kingdom of Ruhuna. The Katharagama *perahera* is dedicated to the god Katharagama - also known as *Kanda Surindu* or *Skanda Kumara*- by Sinhala communities (Soratha, 2009). Tamil communities of Sri Lanka and South Indians named him *Murugan* or *Murukan* (Harrigan, 1998).⁵ Sri Lankan Tamils also celebrate Lord *Murugan* in annual parades at the Temple of Nallur in Jaffna, which is just as nationally significant as the previously mentioned two parades. This paper primarily focuses on the Ruhunu Katharagama *Asala Perahera* because the parade creates a common space for Sinhala, Tamil, and Indigenous ethnic communities, fostering shared beliefs and preserving historical practices.

Ruhuna Katharagama Asala Peraraha Parade

According to the documentation and analysis of the Ruhuna Katharagama *dewala* rituals by Althweva Soratha (thero) (2009), three festivals are conducted annually: the *Bak* festival which celebrates the Tamil-Sinhala New Year and the harvest in April; the *Asala Perahera* in July; and *Nakath* festival in the traditional month of *ill* (meaning the month of November).

The Ruhunu Katharagama *Asala Perahera*⁶ is a significant cultural event that attracts people from various communities in Sri Lanka, including Sinhalese, Tamils, indigenous Vaddhas, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Catholics, and people from other faiths. It also draws visitors

⁵ As per the legend, the god Katharagama helped another prominent Sinhala king of Sri Lanka, King Dutu Gamunu who governed from 101 to 77 BCE (Mendis, 1996). The god helped the king to win the war from Indian invaders. As a result, King Dutugemunu ordered the construction of a shrine in the name of the god and appointed the Sinhala ethnic community to conduct this service for the god.

⁶ The name will be abbreviated as Katharagama Perahera in this paper.

from abroad. As a ritualistic practice, some devotees from Jaffna in the North, North Central, and East provinces (and also from South India) annually undertake a pilgrimage known as the *pada yatra*, travelling in small groups on foot, to the island's southeastern coast in time for the Kataragama Perahera. This journey is made to express their devotion to the deity Murugan, whom they revere (Harrigan, 1998., Piyarathne, 2021).



Figure 1: A small group enters Kathragama in Pada Yathra, the annual holy pilgrimage. Photo by K.D Dewapriya.

Today, the Kathargama Perahera is organised by a committee that dominantly represents the Katharagama *dewala* (shrine), the Kiri Wehera monastery, and other local government bodies. According to traditional customs, the Kataragama Perahera typically takes place in July or August, depending on the full moon of the *Asala* month and the auspicious timing. Approximately 60 days before the *Asala* full moon day, rituals begin on the full moon day of Vesak (usually in May). This involves ceremonially cutting a specific tree log, transporting it back to the shrine of the god Katharagama with a small procession, and placing it in front of the shrine in preparation for subsequent rituals (Soratha, 2009).

After, 44 days of the initial ceremony, the *perahera* runs for fifteen days each night (Soratha, 2009). In the first five days, the parade travels from the main shrine to the Valli Ama Dewalaya, as a symbolic visit to one of the god's two wives, and returning to its point of origin (Senarathna, 2012). Next, the procession grows in grandeur with various performance elements and expands its route. It also follows additional customs, including the Basnayaka Nilame, the elected authority of the Ruhunu Katharagama Dewala, dressed in full traditional attire, accompanying the procession throughout its journey (Soratha, 2009., & Senarathna, 2012). After 12 days from the *magual perahera*, the parade enters into the next stage as it features two stages of possessions. The parade covers more than 4 kilometres per day. The last three days of the procession are named the *maha perahera* which is more elaborate and grand compared to the ones that precede it. The firewalking starts on the thirteenth day of the parade and the final day's procession showcases the most spectacular performances. The main ceremony is completed with a water-cutting ritual (*diya kapeeme mangallaya*) on the sixteenth day⁷.

Performance Sequence of the Final Day of the Katharagama Asala Perahera Parade 2024

The chronology of the Katharagama Asala Perahera 2024 is described based on the archived audiovisuals of the live telecasts and the commentaries produced and telecast by the Sirasa Television Channel (Sirasa TV, 2024), The subject expert commenter was a veteran dancer and an academic, Emeritus Professor Mudiyanse Dissanayake.

Starting on 6th July 2024, the Katharagama Perahera procession was scheduled to conclude on July 21, 2024. The analysis is based on the second half of the parade commencing on the sixteenth day of the procession. In 2024, the Katharagama Perahera took place the day after the full moon day, extending an extra day as the procession was conducted on the 16th day. Such an extension is a rare occurrence, typically due to the parade committee identifying an auspicious time deemed ideal for the parade.

The final parade has a specific tradition as it carries two relics on two tuskers, one relic of the God Katharagama from the shrine, and the relic of Buddha kept in the Kiriwehera Temple in Katharagama. The final preparations for the parade began when the great tusker, who carries the

⁷ Water curring is a traditional ending ceremony of such parades conducted to bring about a good rainy season and prosperity.

relic of the Buddha in the procession, visited the Kiri Wehera Temple to receive blessings. The Kiri Wehera Temple, where this offering takes place, is historically significant as it houses one of the first eight branches of the great Bodhi tree brought to Sri Lanka and is believed to be a site visited by the Buddha. This is another example of interwoven religious practices in Sri Lanka under the influence of Buddhism. The great tusker who carried the relic of the god Katharagama was taken to the shrine of the god for spiritual blessings.



Figure 2: The Great Tusker who carries the relic of the God Katharagama. The Basnayaka Nilame and other traditional duty holders of the shrine walk in front of the tusker. Photo by K.D. Dewapriya

Later, two prominent tuskers and the other tuskers who walked in the processions were adorned with specially made costumes for the event. Generally, for each day of the parade, the colour of the costume is different. As a final preparation for the two tuskers, a sacred casket was placed as placed on the top of the tuskers' backs to respectfully carry the relic inside.

The Bsanayaka Nilame of the Ruhunu Katharagama Dewalaya, the elected official custodian of the *dewalaya*, entered the shrine for worshipping and got symbolic permission from the god to initiate the procession. The custodian was accompanied by spear holders, who act as

protectors, along with drumming performers from both Kandyian and Low-country traditions. The sacred relic, a symbol of the god, was carried out from the inside of the shrine after performing certain rituals most of which were not publicly visible to the masses. As the sacred relics were placed on the tuskers, the procession started.

The first performance teams were whip crackers followed by fire torchbearers. This is a common element of most parades in Sri Lanka. Subject expert commenter of the live telecast, Dissanayaka commented on this as it is a ritual for seeking rain by ending the dry season for starting agricultural work (Sirasa TV, 2024).⁸ On a practical level, whip-cracking is used to clear the path, while fire torches provide lighting for the procession, reflecting traditional practices during the event.

The information about the dancing groups and the traditions was gathered from the commentary of the live television broadcast. The following is the order of the procession in the 2024 parade:⁹

- Fire torch-based performance, Gamineeura Kalayathanaya¹⁰.
- *hewisi*, drum performance of the Sabaragamu dance tradition team, Ravinethra Kalayathanaya in Rathnapura
- A cart carrying a *trishula* (a type of trident) and pots that distribute smoke of frankincense
- A team of young females dressed in kandyian style *oseri*- dress, carry national flags.
- A cart carried a statue of King Dutugamunu, who is believed to have built the Katharagama Dewala
- A team of young females from a *dhamma* school dressed in *oseri* dress, performed traditional percussion instruments with a western drum similar to a modern-day school band.
- Performance of the *dawul* drum and *horane* wind instrument, a sound offering for the relic by Samagi Kalayathanaya.
- The tusker, carrying the sacred relic of Buddha.

⁸ The sound of the whip signifies the thunder and fire for lighting.

⁹ This paper will list the names of the dance groups based on the commentary.

¹⁰ Kalayathanaya (arts school)

- A group of Buddhist monks walked behind the tusker.¹¹
- A team of young females from Sumanathissa Dhamma School in Kathragama dressed in *oseri* dress, performed traditional percussion instruments with a western drum similar to one which is used in a modern-day school band.
- A team carried a replica of the weapon of the god Katharagama, *threeshula/kolayuda* representing fire walkers of Badra Kali Amman¹² Kovila who travelled from Jaffna to Katharagama more than five hundred kilometres on foot.
- Adaptation of *surambavalli* dance by young females followed by low-country drum players represent Madhu Gee Kalayathanaya in Mapalagama.
- *khombhaa halla* dance by young females followed by drum players represent Sirisara Kalayathanaya in Manaragala.
- Young females performed the *salu padaya*, a dance adaptation from the Kandyan tradition, followed by drum players representing Ravishakithi Kalayathanaya in Ratnapura.
- The Peacock Dance, performed by young females dressed as symbolic peacocks—divine animals of the God Katharagama—was followed by a male band playing modern tunes, represented by Rantharu Kalayathana in Bandaragama.
- A tusker was included in the procession at this point.



Figure 3: Peacock dance. Photo by K.D. Dewapriya

¹¹ This also symbolically represents King Dutu Gemunu's ancient journey from the Ruhunu Kingdom to the Anuradhapura Kingdom on his way to war. In that war procession, 500 Buddhist monks were included, strategically settled in the villages along his route as part of King Dutu Gemunu's political strategy.

¹² Godeese Kali/Durga

- *giridevi* dance, an adaptation dance sequence from Kolam dance of the Low-country tradition by female dancers accompanied by male drummers of the same tradition from Sirimewan Kalayathanaya in Ingiriya.
- The *mangalam* dance sequence from the Kandyan dance tradition, performed by a female dancing team from Ragaprabha Kalayathanaya was accompanied by male-dominant drummers of the same tradition.¹³
- The *polmal* (coconut flower) dance sequence, an adaptation of *mal padaya* from the Kandyan dance tradition, was performed by a young male team from Vinthra Kalayathanaya in Ratnapura, followed by male drummers from the same low-country tradition.¹⁴
- The *kulu* and *dedekathi* dances by dancers from Sahaspathi Kalayathanaya symbolize harvesting and prosperity. During the performance, a group of males imitated playing traditional drums (*bummadi*), while another group of males held traditional sickles and females carried winnowers.
- The *sembu* dance imitates the enactment of Tamil females fetching water with small pots. This is a modernised folk dance of the Tamil ethnic communities. The performance was made by a young female team and male music players who played a Tamil music tune. These performers were from the Vihara Ranga Kalayathanaya in Udawalave.
- A tusker came next in the procession
- The *mal asna*, a dance sequence dedicated to Goddess Paththini from the *suniyam yagaya* of the Low-country dance tradition was performed by A female dance troupe of the Nadun Malee Kalayathanaya in Kamburugamuva. The dance performance was accompanied by male drummers from the same dance tradition.
- The *mal padaya*, a dance sequence of the Kandyan dance tradition was next in line. A female dance team performed this item. They danced while holding coconut flowers in their hand and were accompanied by male drummers. This team was from the Bathiya Lalitha Kalayathanaya in Wellawaya.
- The *lichchawi nathanaya*, an enactment of the Lichchavi royal community in ancient India. This is a dance sequence belonging to the *suniyam yagaya* of the Low-country

¹³ A crucial dance sequence of the Kandyan dance. Disanayaka mentioned that this was the first time he had seen the Mangalam Dance sequence in a perahera procession.

¹⁴ This dance sequence was introduced to the Dalada Asala Perahera 10 years before.

dance tradition. It was performed by both male and female performers from the Narthana Kalayathanaya in Panadura.

- Male performers from the Sri Sarasavi Kalayathanaya of Kaduwela executed a dance that created complex patterns through their body movements and the lengthy canes held in their hands.
- The *kudhirattama* Tamil dance, an enactment of horse riding using decorated horse structures extending from the dancers' bodies, reminiscent of Tamil movies. This dance, accompanied by *thavil*, *thappu*, and clarinet-based Tamil Karnatak music, was performed by Sanisa Kalayathanaya in Minuwangoda.
- A tusker was included in the procession
- The *vishunu mal asna* of the Low-country dance tradition, dedicated to God Vishnu was performed by male and female dancers of the Shanthi Kalayathanaya in Piliyandala.
- The pantheru nartanaya, an adaptation of the Kandyan dance tradition for worshipping the Lord Buddha, was performed by male performers from Soorya Kalayathanaya. This dance involved singing poetry and playing a rhythmic hand-held tumbling type of traditional percussion instrument.
- Dance steps of Bharatha Natyam accompanied by Tamil drums performed by Sarasavi Kalayathanaya in Katharagama.



Figure 4: Bharatha Natyam performance. Photo by K.D Dewapriya.

- The *sindu vannam* dance of the Low-country dance tradition which is dedicated to God Vishnu, was performed by female dancers and male drumming performers from the Thilini Kalayathanaya.
- A tusker joined in the procession
- The *bulath padaya*, a dance sequence from *kohomba kankariya* of the Kandyan Dance Tradition was done by the troupe of performers from the Thajith Kalayathanaya, Diyathalawa.
- The *pathuru* dance and a Kandyan drumming performance was staged by the male performers of the Thajith Kalayathanaya in Diyathalawa
- The dewol dance sequence of the dewol madu ritual of the Low-country dance tradition followed suit. The dancers were accompanied by a drumming performance dedicated to the gods Devol.



Figure 5: A dance from the low-country tradition. Photo by K.D. Dewapriya.

- A tusker was included in the procession
- The *uddakki* drum performance from the Kandyan dance tradition was performed.



Figure 6: Kohomba Kala Dance and the paradegoers. Photo by K.D Dewapriya.

- The *Karagam* dance, also known as *kohomba kala* dance, is a dance of Tamil origin. Performers dance while holding four pots decorated with hanging flower garlands on their heads.
- A tusker joined in the procession
- The *salamba shanthi* dance adapted as a ritualistic dance, involved performers holding fabric and *salamba* jewellery in their hands to enact the goddess Pattini. This performance by female dancers was accompanied by *dawul* drumming from Prabhavi Kalayathanaya.
- Male and female were dancing and drum performing sequences from the *kohomba kankari* ritual of the Kandyan dance tradition followed suit.
- *thalam natuma*, a percussion-based folk dance adapted from the *suniam yaga* ritual of the Low-country dance tradition was performed by male and female performers from the Sirimanna Kalayathanaya in Kosgama.
- The *wadiga patuna* dance, imitating the Sikh people of Punjab, is a dance sequence from the low-country dance tradition performed by Methsanda Kalayathanaya in Weligama.



Figure 7: Kavadi dance. Photo by K.D Dewapriya.

- A peacock dance of presented by female dancers, was an adaptation of the *mayura wannama* of the Kandyan dance tradition. They belonged to the Sithra Ranga Kalayathana in Palwaththa.
- The *kavadi* dance, an adaptation of *kavadi* rituals dedicated to the god Kathragama, was next.
- The *paththini* dance, adapted from the *gammadu* and *dewol madu* rituals of the Low-country dance tradition and dedicated to goddess Paththini, was performed by a female dance group and drumming performers from the Vihanga Neth Vivara Kalayathanaya in Boralasgamuwa.
- A Male and female *wes* dancing and drum performing sequence from the *kohomba kankari* ritual of the Kandyan dance tradition was the next item. It was performed by the group from the Pahansilu Kalayathanaya, Matara



Figure 8: A dance sequence based on Kandyan dance tradition. Photo by K.D Dewapriya.

- A dance sequence by a female dance group adapted from the Kandyan dance tradition.
- The *sanda samayama*, A traditional dance sequence from *suniyam shanthi karma* rituals of the Low-country dance tradition was performed by members of the Nadunmalee Kalayathana in Kamburugomuwa.
- A tusker was included in the procession
- Creative dance sequence based on the *gajaga wannama*, a dance enactment of elephants.
- *naga gurulu* Mask dance, a mythical *gurula* (bird) and *gaga* (seven-headed snake) performance from Kolama Drama of the low-country tradition.
- *chamara dance*, an imitation of the traditional fanning practice used for cooling the king, was accompanied by flute and drum music performers.
- *thelme* dance from *gammadu* rituals of the low-country dance tradition, which has rotating, front handspring and cartwheeling acrobatics, followed.
- The *kshudra mathra* dance, a traditional dance sequence of the Low-country dance tradition was performed by male performers from the Sri Darshna Kalayathanaya in Kamburugomuwa.
- A tusker joined in the procession.

- Wes dancing and drum performing sequence from the *kohomba kankari* ritual of the Kandyan dance tradition was next. It was performed by a male group from the Pahansilu Kalayathanaya, Mathara.
- A group of males in traditional dressing walked in two lines, carrying traditional flags of Sri Lankan provinces (*kodi*), ornamental umbrellas (*chathra*), and ornamental sunshades (*sesath*).



Figure 9 : Members of the Indigenous community enact the shooting of arrows. Photo by K.D Dewapriya.

- The *vedda* indigenous community walks in two lines, each holding a long-handled small axe on their shoulders. An elder, armed with a bow and arrows, enacts an attempt to shoot the Basnayaka Nilame before offering an apology. This performance depicts the legend of their ancestors resisting the god Katharagama's courtship of their tribal girl Valli, and their eventual acceptance of him.
- A drumming procession followed by the current Basnayaka Nilame of the shrine in Katharagama and other important members joined in the procession.
- The decorated tusker, carrying the relic of the god Katharagama, symbolizes the god himself in the parade. The tusker walks along a white carpet strewn with flower petals, while devotees chant "haro hara," the traditional praise for the god. The procession concludes.

Shared Performance Space, Interculturalism, and Inventions

The God Kataragama is commonly believed as the god of love, the god of war, or the god who fulfils the wishes of devotees whether they are Sinhala, Sri Lankan Tamil, Indian Tamil, Muslim, or Indigenous Vedda by ethnicity or Buddhists, Hindu, Catholic, Islam or of indigenous beliefs.¹⁵ In addition, other deities such as Pattini, Devol, Vishnu, Dadimunda, and Ganesha are venerated through dance performances and other rituals in the Katharagama Parade. Such collective beliefs create a shared performance space where all relevant ethnic communities and devotees would be able to participate and perform. This space can be considered as per Mary Louise Pratt's views on the "arts of the contact zone" (2012). Pratt's concept suggests that a place where two cultures meet and inform each other is known as the "contact zone". These kinds of interactions allow people to cooperate, bond, and understand each other as a result of the state of affairs administrated by a single set of rules or norms shared by all participants (2012).

The Perahera creates a space to represent multiple identities for a common goal through parades. Rustom Bharucha explains that 'the Republic Day Parade' in India serves the purpose of unifying diverse cultures through a carefully choreographed spectacle (1989). The Katharagama Perahera employs local dance traditions, Kandyan (up-country), Uva-Sabaragamu, and Pahatharata (Low-country), which are the three main dominant performing arts traditions of the Sinhala community alongside Hindu Tamil traditions in Sri Lanka and South India. This *perahera* performance is intercultural in the view of Jackeline Lo and Helen Gilbert, because it is a hybrid consequential from a deliberate encounter between cultures and performing traditions (2002).

Bharucha denotes the term 'intracultural' to differentiate "dynamics between and across specific communities and regions within the boundaries of the nation-state" as opposed to the term 'intercultural' which concerns the relation between national boundaries (2000,06). The culturally intracultural practice interacts with the fragmented regional and local cultural belongings of demographic diversity to share and coexist within the larger framework of the nation-state celebration (2000). On a macro level, variations of performance styles within one nationalistic traditional performance style can be seen as intracultural because of the performance collectiveness created by regional or *gurukul* traditions in this *perahera* performance. For example, within the nation-state of Sri Lanka, Kandyan (Up-country), Uva-

¹⁵ Vedda people also find kinship to the God Katharagama through their relationship with the god's wife Valli who was a girl from their indigenous ethnic group.

Sabaragamu, and Pahatharata (Low-country) dance traditions are geo-culturally based traditions that bring culturally fragmented performances on its intracultural intractions. On a micro level, performances adopted from popular dance sequences selected from *sanniyakuma*, *suniyam yagaya* and *gammadu* ritualistic dances belong to the Low-country dance traditions of Sri Lanka reflecting regional or *gurukul* specific variations such as Matara, Benthara and Raigam styles within the main tradition. Such micro intracultural variations distinguish the professional practitioners or local spectators who live and observe the particular styles closely over time. However, viewers of the live telecast or archived version may have the advantage of orientating with subject-specific commentary whereas onsite paradegoers and others without supplementary or in-depth cultural knowledge receive it as an intracultural identity on experiential perspectives. In addition, such macro and micro-intracultural styles were carefully selected by the *perahera* committee to represent and interact with geo-cultural identities through performances.

Based on Pierre Bourdieu's (1983) concepts of cultural capital and symbolic goods, in many circumstances, practitioners working on identities are more likely to seek to maximise symbolic and cultural capital from within their cultural references. The selection of performance evidence is mostly based on such references. Determining the identity of a particular culture, community, or country ("we"/"others") is influenced by their direct or indirect experiences, mediated information, expectations, and imaginations. This involves understanding how people perceive themselves and others based on personal interactions, media portrayals, preconceived notions, and cultural narratives. Though identities are impermanent, shifting, and dynamic, stereotypical images are generated by and for anticipations or interpretations of 'us' and them' (Dandeniya, 2016). Here, residual art forms or stereotypical performative images such as the *monara* dance, *kavadi*, *wes* dance, *dewol* dance, and masked *kolam* dance are inevitably selected or brought to represent and satisfy ethnic communities in performer spectatorship dynamics.

The performance identity of the 'other' in this procession is less authentic even within the intracultural geopolitical ethnic communities that are engaged and available. The authenticity of representing ethnic embodied practice in performances is questionable because most performances were portrayed by the Sinhala ethnic-dominant art schools. Ironically, it can be assumed that popular dances in Jaffna and Eastern provinces which have Indian cultural roots were created and performed by the majority of Sinhala ethnic students from performing arts

schools. For example, the Bandaragama Rantharu Kalayathanaya performed the *mailattam* which is a South Indian-origin peacock dance popular in Jaffna. The Sanisa Kalayathanaya in Minuvangoda presented the *kudhirattama* Tamil dance which is based on imitating horse riders by using decorated horse structures attached to the dancers' bodies. *Kohomba kala* dance and *kavadi* dance, rooted in Tamil ethnic communities, were also done by Sinhala performers. Representation of non-Sinhala ethnic performance bodies was only authentic in the procession representing the *pada yathara* from Jafna and the procession of *vedda* indigenous community.

The participation somehow reflects the power relationship of communities with the city council or organising committee. In his television commentary, Mudiyanse Dissanayake also confirms that the Perahera committee has the power to decide the order and the selection of the suitable performance group despite having to stay within the traditional structure of the procession (Sirasa TV, 2024). Naturally, many ethnic communities were left out due to their disempowerment. I use the term 'disempowerment' to identify contexts and conditions in which any culture or ethnic group finds itself: 1) marginalised in the presence of other dominant cultures; 2) marginalised within the same cultural space, such as within caste or class structures, and subcultures; 3) unable to share specific culturally symbolic meanings and values made visible through their artistic expressions (Dandeniya, 2016). On this occasion, cultural disempowerment could be present due to a lack of power relationships in the presence of dominant groups.

It should be noted that the transcending of ethnic identity was mostly evident in the performativity of active spectatorship. Despite the diversity based on ethnicity, language, religion, caste, regionality, belief, or economic status, the parade-goers followed the common customs such as cheering by shouting out "haro-hara" to show their devotion to God Katharagama. Compared to other performance practices, the fire-walking performance paralleled the parade from day thirteen of the procession is a shared practice but only among a minority of devotees. According to Soratha (thero), fire walking is the symbol of purity, a strong belief in the god and although this practice is rooted in the Hindu rituals, it can also be found in many non-Aryan cultural practices, and even Muslim communities of Sri Lanka (2009). Fire walkers, who after cleansing themselves in the Manik River¹⁶ in Katharagama, get dressed in white, and walk on a lengthy pit layered with red-hot coals before the *maha*

¹⁶ It is a popular practice among devotees that they dip in the river water before going for the offering at the shrine.

perahera.¹⁷ Though it was a practice of high cast, now it is a practice of all cast and ethnic communities to do so. Similarly, *paravi kavdi* (*para-kavadi*), hanging and swinging from hooks that pierce the body of devotees, is a way of worshipping the god through the display of body-mind practice. *Para-kavadi* is an iconic practice among the Tamil community mostly in the parade of Nallur Temple which is dedicated to Lord Murugan, also another name for God Katharagama. In addition, rolling on the ground of the *dewala* is practised at the Katharagama Parade, but on a smaller scale compared to the Nallur Parade.

Despite certain contradictions, the Katharagama Perahera creates a new tradition as it brings performance elements to represent diversity. The perahera creates a new intracultural identity by assembling and performing in the procession. The performance sequences adapted from traditional dance traditions as well as the new creations reflect the purpose and ideologies set up based on tradition and the intentions of *perahera* committee. According to the commentary of subject expert Dissanayake, new inventions include costume designs, performance practices, dance sequences, movement adaptations, choreographic body space management, musical tunes including drumming beats, accessories, and shifts in gender-based practices. On the contrary, adapting William Peterson's comment which he made on contemporary religious parade performances in the Philippines, such novelty could be seen as a new generational practice from mushrooming dance schools (*kalayathana*), adapting performances from the traditional dance and rituals into “ (...) generic theatrical patterns which, in conjunction with showy costumes and props, could be seen as reducing the tradition sensational in photographs and is pleasurable to witness live or on social media, yet stand outside the framework for the devotional acts(...)” (2020). However, the performances in the Kathragama Perahera are yet to be placed within the religious framework with innovation. Bharucha says invention is an upholding of a different sense of the unknown and creating new artefacts rather than exposure (2003). Thus, when compared to the many other processions in Sri Lanka, the Ruhuhu Katharagama Asala Perahera consists of both, an amalgamation of invention and exposure of setero-typical performance identity. However, as inventions become traditions over time through generalisation and the influences of mediation and cross-cultural experiences of new generations, contemporary acceptance can change in the future.

¹⁷ Sorathe (thero) describes it as a practice of *aththakilamathanu yogaya*, an extreme suffering of the body to achieve enlightenment that was rooted in an early Brahman practice in pre-Buddhist society

Conclusion

The Ruhunu Katharagama Perahera opens a common contact zone for different communities that are diversified under ethnicity, language, caste, regionality, education, socio-economic power dimensions, and beliefs. The parade goers unify diversity based on a common goal as they intend to worship God Katharagama. The Katharagama parade seems to celebrate cultural and religious diversity by highlighting communities and performance traditions as a showcase. Nonetheless, The representation of subcultures and their performative elements is controlled by the selection committee, which holds the power. Consequently, performances of marginalized groups are often represented by "other" cultural groups that, while not authentic, are connected to those in power or have some provision.. Somehow, the procession has created a modern intracultural or transcultural identity unintentionally, which can be considered an invention of traditions.

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