

The influence of South Indian Folk Tradition *Kuttu* on *Nâdagama* Tradition of Sri Lanka

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Abstract

There are many thesis about the origin of *Nâdagama* tradition of Sri Lanka, which was popular from North to South of the Western coast of Sri Lanka. Even though the most popular theory regarding the origin of *Nâdagama* tradition in Sri Lanka is that it came during 18th century AD with the catholic missionaries from South India, some scholars as Dela Bandara argues that it has an important link to and direct influence of *Terukuttu* and *Vithi Nâdaka* of *Kuttu* tradition of South India. Thus, according to social and historical facts, he argues that Sinhala *Nâdagama* tradition goes back to 13th century AD. The central argument of this study builds up to contradict the theory of origin of *Nâdagama* as a tradition introduced by Catholic missionaries and as an offspring of *Terukuttu* and *Vithi Nâdaka* and to establish the thesis that its origin goes back to *Kuttu* tradition of South India, which has been recorded as the most ancient dramatic tradition mentioned in South Indian History.

Key words: Nadagama Tradition, Kuttu Tradition, Terukuttu and Vithi Nadaka, Dramatic Tradition

The Nadagama Tradition of Sri Lanka

The *Nadagama*, which belongs to the folk tradition in Sri Lanka, was popular in the north western coast of Sri Lanka from *Halawatha (chilaw)* down to south coast till *Tangalla* in Southern province. This tradition consisted of theatrical elements, which were not found in the other folk drama tradition of Sri Lanka.

Usually the *Nadagama* performance was serialized and it was commonly performed throughout the night time. It was a type of drama, which had a story set with songs and South Indian *Karnatic* music. The performance starting around nine and lasting till morning (and continuing nightly for a week in the old days) is commenced with the presentation of stock characters -*Bahubutaya*, *kolama*, or *konangi* (jester), *Sellamlama* (literary playful person) and others. As with the earlier indigenous theatres, the stock characters had their

identifying styles of dance and song. Two members of this prologue, called the *Deshanvadi*, briefly narrated the story to be enacted. Then, after certain other preliminaries, such as the arrival of the king, the drama would begin.

Furthermore, the *Nadagama* gave a central role to music. It was, in fact, a completely sung drama, the traditional to a fully operatic form to develop within the traditional framework. While all other theatres used prose dialogue in varying degrees, in this tradition it was reduced to an utterance between songs, intoned in a particular fashion. The *Nadamama* music thus brought a fresh dimension into Sinhala folk theatre.

The objective of this study is to establish the origin of *Nadagama* tradition goes back to *kuttu* tradition of south India but it has not introduced by Catholic missionaries who visited to the Sri Lanka in the 16th, 17th and 18th century. Before any elaborations of analysis regarding the above statement, it would be appropriate at this juncture to glimpse at most important research done regarding the origin of Sinhala nadagam tradition so far.

There are four scholars, Ediriweera Sarachchandra, Bishop Edmand Peiris, M. H. Goonathileka and Dela Bandara whose attention has recently been focused on this particular issue. The most popular theory of the origin of the *Nadagama* is that the *Nadagama* originated as a result of the influence of Tamil *Nattukuttu*, which was based on Catholic religious themes. This argument first made by Bishop Edmand Peiries as follows:

“As far as I know, the earliest Sinhala *Nadagama* is the *Raja Tun Kattuwa*; its theme is the worship of the new born Christ by the three kings of Magi, as narrated in the gospel according to St. Mathew Chapter II. It is modeled on The Tamil *Nadagam Muvirasakkal Nadagama*, generally attributed to Lorenz Pulavar, born at Pasikulam in Mantotte, and brought up in the Catholic religion, which his family professed from the time of its introduction. He lived in middle of the last (18th) century, and through he did not write any large poems yet his abilities are manifested from the many excellent hymns which he composed in honor of our savior and Blessed Virgin” (Edmand , 1978).

The pioneer scholar of Sinhala Drama and Theatre, Ediriweera Sarachchandra in his work *The folk Drama of Ceylon*, he has developed Peiris's opinion further and theorized. Sarachchandra describes the origin of the *Nadagama* as follows:

“Although the Sinhala *Nadagama* is ultimately the descendant of this type of south Indian folk drama, it has not come to us directly from any of these sources. The immediate ancestor of our *Nadagama* is that from of the *Terukkuttu* which has formed in the Tamil language in certain parts of Jaffna by Roman Catholics, and which, underwent certain modifications in their hands,

although the structure of this play was the same as the Tamil *Kuttus*.” (Sarachchandra, 1966).

The latest study of *Nadagama* tradition entitled *Nadagama; The first Sri Lankan theatre* was written by M. H. Goonathileka; there, he has also accepted the theory that origin of the Sinhala *Nadagama* occurred as a result of the early Catholic missionary activity.

“On this data one cannot easily dismiss the theory, which I will be expounding in this chapter and those that follow, namely that the origins of the *Nadagama* theatre in Sri Lanka is meaningfully related to the activities of the Christian missionaries who visited the Island in the in the 16th, 17th 18th centuries” (Goonathileka, 1984).

Goonathileka’s opinion of the origin of the Sinhala *Nadagama* is based on Peiris’s and Sarachchandra’s theories and he further develops the idea of Catholic influence. He accepted that the Sinhala *Nadagama* has the influence of Tamil *Nattukkuttu*.

“The Sinhala *Nadagama* appears to have been fed by two main sources. Generally speaking, we are aware of one but ignore the other. The source that most of us are familiar with is the Tamil folk theatre known by its generic term *Nattukkuttu*.... The lesser known source is the Christian liturgical theatre introduced into the island by Christian missionaries who come here either direct from Portugal or from the coastal belt of South India in the 16th century” (Goonathilake, 1984).

The three scholars Peiris, Sarachchandra and Goonathileka theorize the origin of the Sinhala *Nadagama* tradition as an introduction of Catholic missionaries, who visited Sri Lanka during and after 18th century. Dela Bandara’s opinion regarding the origin of the *Nadagama* is argumentative. He rejects the theory made by Peiris, Sarachchandra and Goonathileka and opines that the Sinhala *Nadagama* tradition was not introduced by Catholic missionaries from the Portuguese period onwards and was not originated through the Catholic folk drama tradition, *Nattukkuttu* of Northern Sri Lanka (Dela, 1990-1994). He further enhances his argument comparing and contrasting the structural differences between Sinhala *Nadagama* and Tamil Catholic *Nattukkuttu* as follows:

“These three modern scholars, Peiris, Sarachchandra, Goonathileka propose that the Sinhala *Nadagama* developed through the Tamil Catholic *Nattukuthu* tradition of Northern Sri Lanka. This is again questionable because there was a relevant difference in the retinue of stock character *Sellam Lama*, which shows that the *Nadagama* had an earlier direct influence from the *Terukkuttu* of South India. Without the stock character *Sellam Lama* the *Nadagam* is certainly

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incomplete, while the *Nattukuttu* does not know this character that perhaps would be out of place in it. Nevertheless, the *Sellam Lama* corresponds to the stock character *Sellam Pillei* of the *Vithi Nataka* and *Terukkuttu* of South India, which establishes the direct link of *Nadagama* with these traditions. It is clear that this is due to influence of South Indian folk drama traditions” (Dela, 1990-1994).

The Kuttu Tradition Of South India

It is now essential to examine the uses and implications of a word, which is central to the dramatic art tradition of south India; the term *Kuttu*. The word *Kuttu* itself has greater importance at number of different levels. First of all, it is unique to Tamil. It has occupied an important place in the descriptive and theoretical vocabulary connected with the Tamil performing arts for at least two millennia. This is attested by the *Tolkappiam*'s use of the references in the *Sangam* anthologies to *Kuttu* and *Kuttar* (performers of *Kuttu*). Along with its historical significance, this term has several ritual implications, one aspect of which is aptly indicated by the fact that one of the titles for *Nataraja*, the dancing *Siva* of *Chidambaram*, who is probably the most important manifestation of this deity in South India, is *Kuttunayanar* (Lord of *kuttu*) (Frasca, 1984). The origin of the word *Kuttu* is confused and controversial while looking at the Tamil Lexicon and some other important lexicographers, who have incorrectly traced this term to the Sanskrit word *Kurda* (jumping or playing). The Dravidian Etymological Dictionary has shown that it is distinctly of Dravidian origin (Burrow and Emeneau, 1966). It has first finds appreciable mention in Tamil literature in the *Sangam* anthologies, where it is used in reference to some of the rituals of performing arts, which characterized the *Sangam* Culture.

Nonetheless, *Tolkappiyam*, the earliest and most important analytical text, shows that the word *Kuttu* has been terminologically significant from the earliest stratum of Tamil literature. It is moreover, most probably the earliest word in Tamil used to refer specifically to dramatic genres.

“*Kuttu* in this early literature is always used in the nominal forms; *kuttanor kuttar*, performers of *kuttu*, attesting that certain groups have been actively connected with such ritual forms of enactment from a very early period” (Zvelebil, 1974).

Kuttu is accordingly a much denser term and a concept and this undoubtedly is the main reason it has such an important classificatory function vis-à-vis rituals of enactment in Tamilnadu. This etymology then fits well with both the lexical and contextual characteristics of the important possession rituals. For the sake of clarity therefore it is now essential to draw these arguments

together. *Kuttu*, rather than meaning just “dance” or “drama” has a direct reference to “rituals of enactment” by deities or sacred entities immanent in the Sangam age religious Milieu. These possessions were brought about through the use of numerous types of music and rhythm and actually manifested themselves in the form of histrionic song and dance, through which the presence of the relevant deity was believed to be perceived and confirmed.

Accordingly, *Kuttu* also had a very essential aesthetic level, on which it was appreciated and understood even though it was only within these particular ritual contexts. It was actually these aesthetic impacts, which gives its great power of communication and confirmation. Both of these levels exemplify the concept of *Kuttu* with its “enactive” or dramatic elements of the aesthetic rituals, which has been characterized in *Sangam* age as religious; it was a theater form centered on procession but manifested through music, dance and poetry.

The Terkkuttu Tradition Of South India

Various kinds of *Kuttu* were in constant practice among Tamils. Hence, in order to observe Professor Dela Bandara's argument that Sinhala *Nadagama* has some direct influence from *Terukkuttu* of South India, the uses and implications of a word *Terukkuttu* will here be examined. The *Terukkuttu*, which belongs to the *Kuttu* tradition, is a form of ritual folk theater that is unique to the Tamil in the context of village cults outside the preview of most of the major temples in this region. The term *Terukkuttu* is actually made up of two words; *Teru* meaning: street and *Kuttu* meaning: performance. The term *Terukkuttu* is sometimes used also by villagers in the North of Tamilnadu, which is the homeland of the tradition. More frequently, however, they will refer to dramatic shows in this style as *Kuttu* without any prefixes (Frasca, 1984).

The *Terukkuttu* that still exist in Tamilnadu is aesthetically extremely sophisticated and is of great socio-religious importance in that it plays a central role in the large village ritual focusing on the Tamil *Mahabharata*. The vast majority of these performances are put on in connection with ritual celebrations relating to Tamil village deities or to important family and personal observances such as numerous rites of passage, which marks the lines of Tamil Hindus. The performances put their importance solely on aesthetic and entertainment value. Some very recent studies dealing with other Tamil performing art traditions have labeled the *Terukkuttu* as an “entertainment” from devoid of any ritual significance or applications. The *Terukkuttu*, in fact, function on two levels, first of being as an important ritual role and second where esthetic consideration predominant. Its ritual significance or relevance is of primary importance in Tamilnadu villages,

while its value as entertainment is subordinate. Therefore, it is unusual to find village celebrations, where *Terukkuttu* presentations are noticeably sub-standard; poor performances may indicate that a village is unable to afford a more professional group or is bound traditionally to support a sub standard group.

The essential point here is that the “event” of the performance taking a central importance: *Terukkuttu* presentation must accompany certain rituals notwithstanding the talents of the performance. This is not to belittle the value of this form as a source of entertainment; however, since its ritual importance is manifested through the dramatic presentation, ideally an important aspect of the *Terukkuttu* as a “ritual event” is the aesthetic value and technical competence of the performance.

It is essential at this point to discuss an important aspect of *Terukkuttu* that is reflected in many of the traditional performing arts throughout not only south India but the Indian sub-continent in general: the fact that it has performance and non performance modes. The performance mode, which is referred as *kuttu* in Tamil is used in the sense of a particular episode actually being presented in performance while the non-performance textual or conceptual mode of the episode is called the *Katai* or story. Terms of reference similar to these are also used in most of the other genres of traditional theater characteristics of South India. Used in connection with one of the important oral narrative traditions in *Tamilnadu* called the *Vil Pattu* (bow songs); these categories which are called *Patu* (song) and *Katai* (story), are dichotomous and refer to the “sang and “unsang” version of the text. The *Terukkuttu*’s use of the term *Kuttu* however, takes this schema one step further in that not only is the *Katai* dance and stylized make-up but also, subsuming *Kuttu* with the category of *Pattu* and is a performance mode with a much wider spectrum of reference. In a classificatory arrangement based on this schema of performance versus non-performance, therefore, the *Pattu* mode of the *Vil Pattu* occupies a medial position between *Katai* and *Kuttu*, while documentary evidence is insufficient to make a conclusive judgment. It can be said that this all encompassing position of *kuttu* as the historical origin or at least conceptual development of the performance modes centered on *Pattu*, to which *Kuttu* had centered.

The Natakam (Nadagam) Tradition of South India

The only other term, which found appreciable to use during the *Sangam* period of South India with reference to dramatic performances was *Natakam* (*Nadagam*), a word clearly derived from Sanskrit *Nataka*. Its usage is posterior to the usage of *Kuttu* in *Tamilnadu* and has a marginal and rather artificial connection with the performance genres of this period (Hanne, 1999). As

will be shown shortly, even the use of *Natakam* contemporarily reflects this same incompatibility.

The pioneer researcher of *Terukkuttu* Dr. Richard Armand Frasca says that the *Natakam* is a secondary development from the *Terukkuttu*.

“It should be noted before going on that the use of *Natakam* (A Sanskrit derivative meaning “drama”) could be misleading, when used in connection with some of the *Kuttu* titles cited above, e.g. *Kankaiyamman Nataka*. This term, which has been used from a very period in Tamilnadu in connection with more classical dramatic representation put on in major temple complexes has no real intrinsic application to *Kuttu*. The earlier discussion of the etymology of the word, *Kuttu*, makes this clear; however, in the context of this century *Natakam* did find use to describe what was essentially a secondary development from the *Terukkuttu* and the first truly modern theater From of Tamilnadu” (Frasca, 1984).

Furthermore he says:

I believe, Tamil cinema. Although most of the professional *Terukkuttu* groups I have met several *Terukkuttu* groups *Icai Natakam* in their repertoires, They make the following clear distinction between these and *Kuttu*: There are *Natakam* and not *Kuttu*; they are modern and not *Aitikam* (derived from the oral tradition); there are entertainment and not ritual” (Frasca, 1984).

According to this opinion, usage of *Natakam* is posterior to the usage of *Kuttu* in the dramatic art tradition of Tamilnadu. Much of the difficulty in understanding the definition or, at least, cultural perception of *Kuttu* stems from the influence of the English language in present-day scholarly circles in Madras city. It should be acknowledged that English has had a predominating influence for at least one and a half centuries in the processes of education in Tamilnadu and this has left its mark, consciously as well as unconsciously on both written and spoken Tamil. The result is that many of the categorization, which is native to English but Foreign to Tamilnadu, is being imposed onto the cultural through the scholarship done by researcher, who has had an English-medium or at least, English-Style education. One of this categorization is the attempt to classify *Kuttu* as either drama or dance overlooking the fact that Indian “dance” or “Drama” has distinctive elements of both.

Up to this point the arguments above have dealt specifically with a semantic problem that has been carried over from the English language into the local milieu. This background is essential not for English semantic purposes but to receive a proper understanding of the full connotation of *Kuttu* in Tamil culture. A glance at the derivation of the term will give us more insight into the important role of *Kuttu* in this culture and will automatically resolve this

extraneous but distracting issue of whether it is dance or drama. To get some idea of the derivation of *Kuttu*, it is essential to look at some of the elements which characterized the performing arts during the earliest phase of developed Tamil culture: The *Sangam* age. The *Sangam* culture, the first of all presents us with a ritual environment, in which various performing arts had a very important place. This kind of misleading confusion on the term of dance and drama also could be seen in the history of dramatic tradition of Sri Lanka. According to English translation, Sri Lankan folk performance also translated as a folk dance. But we can identify this by close examination of the various elements of the Sri Lankan folk performances, because they are not just only dance but a performance with a storyline. A.J Gunawardhena states that the ritual theatres of Sri Lanka are among the oldest extant performances with an unbroken history. Legend traces their beginnings to pre-Buddhist times. However remote their origins, it is quite clear that the ritual theatres, like all living art forms, have been changing over the years, discarding some elements and absorbing others. As practiced today, ritual theatres are generally nightlong performances addressed to the numerous deities and demons of the folk religion. Furthermore, he states that the major characteristics of this ritual theatres are the propitiatory, exorcist intended paramountacy of dance and that it is highly episodic, segmented structure, the elastic form and lack in textual base and that this will probably raise the question whether the ritual theatre are theatres at all. The ritual theatres are also theatre if they produce a play, besides the entire range of expressive modes-gesture, mime, song, chant, dace, etc.

Conclusion

Sri Lankan dramatic traditions have a long history and it was not solely introduced by Catholic missionaries, who visited Sri Lanka during and after 18th century (Compared with Dela Bandara: *Sinhala natya ha sanskrutika pasubima*). Catholic missionaries used the *Nadagama* tradition, which is already existed in Sri Lanka to enact their religious story to spread their religion.

Close examinations of various elements of performance, which comprises a *Kuttu* Tradition, gives a new perspective to view the village-level performing arts of Sri Lanka. The performing techniques of the *Kuttu* tradition also show an existence of a relationship between folk dramatic traditions of Sri Lanka especially with that of *Nadagama* Tradition. In its presentational aspects, the *Nadagama* tradition was not foreign to the indigenous tradition, its main innovation in this regard, was the use of a raised, covered stage - a temporary structure of piled earth, semi-circular in shape, sheltered by a thatch of coconut palm leaves. There was no front curtain, no sets, and of course no playhouse. The female characters are enacted by male. The musicians occupied a part of the stage, so did the narrator or presenter, and perhaps one or two singers to serve as a chorus.

The other folk traditions of Sri Lanka such as *Kolam*, *Sokari*, *Nadagama* performances could not be placed only for the purposes of entertainment as these folk performances are enacted partially with ritual or sacred festivities connected with the village society of Sri Lanka. These performances protected the fertility as symbolizes by the animal and its agricultural economy. *Kuttu* tradition commonly performed throughout the night. The female characters are enacted by male. The *kuttu* is an aesthetic ritual enactment performed almost entirely in the context of village cults outside of the purview of most of the major temples in the Tamil region. The audience sat in a semi-circle around the stage in the open air.

In the folk dramatic tradition (Indian and Sri Lankan) the narrator (*Sutradhara*) and *Konangi* (*Vidushaka*) become important and excellent devices for translating any story into a coherent dramatic production. The narrator or *Vidushaka* is the person who explains the story or relates the story with help of the actors. Though the narrator delegated some of his functions to actor and musician, he retained his important position as a presenter of the show through the performance. Another prelude acted by the stock character known as *Bahuboothaya*, *Kolama* or *Konangi* (*Vidushaka*). *Vidushaka* is a *Kattuiyankaran* in *Kuttu* plays. *Kattiyankaran* has more important role in *Kuttu* play. As in the other folk plays he is not only a jester and his act s as a narrator of the play. He introduced the characters, cracks jokes at their expense and also acts as a stage-manager and property man.

Frasca(1984) has been noted, importance of the character of *Kattiyankaran* in the *Kuttu* Tradition as follows:

“The *Kattiyankaran* the omnipresent court-jester, who is a major figure in any *Terukkuttu* performance, is also a major manifestation of this reversal. Besides playing an important role as a narrator, he is the main source of one of the prime elements of this theater form its powerful humor” (Frasca, 1984).

These two characters are equally important in folk drama tradition in India and Sri Lanka. Professor Sarachchandra assumed that the traditional folk arts such as the *Nadagama* performed only during festival season or after the cessation of annual work (Sarachchandra, 1966). During these months people had plenty of time to devote to their traditional amusements like *Nadagama*, *Kolam* or *Sokari*. A *Nadagama* was performed for at least a fortnight. The Traditional folk plays were performed free of charge and were sponsored by the elite of society.

As discussed above, the vast majority of *Kuttu* performances are enacted as part of ritual or sacred festivities connected with the numerous rites of passage that mark the lives of Tamil Hindus. The central role this theater form plays

not only in this festival but in most of the other ritual context in which it is performed: to provide the genesis of communities. This is clearly confirmed by the fact that the *Kuttu* is at centre of the most important experiences of community in the *Para tam*: the large - scale enactments. These enactments are, in fact, nothing more than *Kuttu* itself drawing on the same performances, narratives and make up but magnified and amplified to ritually subsume the entire village into epic space and time.

Finally *Kuttu*, as a term of reference, has a very early Dravidian origin, which is central to the tradition of music, dance and drama in *Tamilnadu*, from both lexical and conceptual perspectives. This culminated in the important conclusion that the original *Sangam* age connotation of *Kuttu* was theatre of procession, which involved essentially aesthetic ritual enactment manifesting themselves histrionically, poetically and musically.

According to these facts it could be said that there is an important link and direct influence of *Kuttu* tradition of South India on Sinhala *Nadagama* tradition of Sri Lanka given historical, social religious, cultural and aesthetic factors.

Professor Sarachchandra has agreed there is a link between *Nadagama* and the *Terukkuttu* tradition in South India.

“The Sinhala *Nadagama* appears to have been patterned, originally on a variety of South Indian folk play known as *Terukkuttu* in the *Tamilnadu* and as *vithi Nataka* in *Andra*” (Sarachchandra, 1966).

Professor Dela Bandara also has agreed with this point as: “The important link and direct influence of the *Terukkutu* and *Vithi Nataka* of South India on the *Nadagama* has been shown through historical, social, religious, cultural and artistic factors” (Dela, 1990-1994).

Professor Dela Bandara describes in his paper “The origin of the *Nadagama* Tradition in Sri Lanka” that the history of *Nadagama* Tradition goes back to the 13th century.

“We have direct evidence regarding the arrival of a *Nadagama* artist from *Madras*, South India, with a royal retinue in the 13th century...According to *Vanni Puwata* during the time of *Buvanekabahu* the first (1272-1284) these princes landed Sri Lanka with their retinue and there was a *Nadagama* performer among them” (Dela, 1990-1994).

He states further, “This is clear evidence regarding the arrived of the *Nadagama* tradition and the settlement of various South Indian artisans at the western maritime provinces of Sri Lanka. According to this we can safely assume that the history of the *Nadagama* Tradition goes back to the 13th century and there

is no doubt that the authors of “*Saddharmarathnavaliya*” and “*Saddarmalankaraya*” have mentioned the name *Komali* as a character of the *Nadagama* Traditions” (Dela, 1990-1994).

The result of this study shows that the *Terukkuttu* and *vithi Natakam* performances belong to the *kuttu* Tradition. *Kuttu* is the most ancient dramatic tradition, which was mentioned in the South Indian history. In fact *Nadagama* is not a drama, but it is dramatic tradition, which was popular among the Sri Lankan village society for a long time. Sri Lankan village community performed their rituals and folk drama through this tradition. Moreover, this did not originate through the Catholic folk drama tradition *Nattukuthu* of Northern Sri Lanka during and after 18th century. The result of this study shows that the Sri Lankan dramatic tradition *Nadagama* has long history, which has direct influence and important link of *Kuttu*. The *Terukkuttu* and the *Vithi Nataka* also belong to this tradition, which has a long history in South India. The important link and direct influence of *Kuttu* tradition in South India on the Sri Lanka folk tradition *Nadagama* has been shown through historical, social, religious, cultural and artistic factors. Thus, it is possible to accept the influence of the South Indian folk tradition *Kuttu* on the *Nadagama* tradition in Sri Lanka. It could therefore be concluded that the *Nadagama* tradition in Sri Lanka has long historical link with *kuttu* tradition in South India contradicting the fact that *Nadagama* Tradition was introduced by Catholic missionaries, who visited the Island in the 16th to 18th centuries.

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