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LAMP IN A WINDLESS PLACE

Developing an Actor Training Methodology
through Sri Lankan Combative Art Angampora

Issue Editors: Saumya Liyanage,
Lyudmyla Honcharova, Marlon Ariyasinghe

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The illustration on the cover pages is inspired by angampora wood carving piece at the *Embekka Devalaya* and designed by Nuwan Chamika.

*'Helé Wadunu Yoda Sakthiya Angampora': Performing Angampora as a Sinhala Buddhist Nationalist Spectacle**

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Abstract: This paper offers a critical perspective on the relationship between the representation of angampora and the contemporary Sinhala Buddhist identity. Angampora, in this context, plays a significant role in a Sinhala Buddhist identity as the form of ancient martial art. This paper attempts to analyze how angampora has become a nationalist 'spectacle' in recent years. By following Guy Debord's concept of spectacle, this paper argues that representations of angampora have created a concrete inversion of nationalistic life for Sinhala Buddhists. By focusing on two angampora presentations in reality TV programs, Sirasa TV's *Sri Lanka's Got Talent 2018* and ITN's *Youth With Talent 2018*, this paper points out the contradiction between the nationalist identity presented in these performances and the western-oriented life of Sinhala Buddhists. The conclusion that will be arisen in this research is that the images presented in these two angampora presentations constitute a nationalist spectacle or a 'false' unity or an 'authentic' Sinhala Buddhist identity to their western-oriented fragmented lives.

Keywords: Angampora, Sinhala Buddhist identity, Guy Debord, spectacle, reality TV, *kalu sudda*.

1. Introduction

Angampora appeared in popular culture in the early 1990s with Jayantha Chandrasiri's popular teledrama, *Dandubasnamanaya*. The story was about the rivalry between two brothers who were

* Transl.: "Angampora, the giant strength that grew in the Sinhala land". A shorter version of this paper was presented in the International Conference on Intangible Cultural Heritage 2020 organized by University of Sri Jayawardenepura, Sri Lanka and to Early Career Academics Group of Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka and the comments I received in these two events helped me to develop this article.

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the only remaining angampora experts of their lineage, and this rivalry ended in the death of both brothers and their students, hence the whole angampora lineage. Setting up this story in the colonial period, Chandrasiri illustrates the 'enigmatic' nature of Sinhala Buddhist traditional martial arts and its end in the hands of the colonial state. This story was masterfully done with scores of Premasiri Kemadasa, popularly known as the maestro of Sri Lankan music. This resulted in a resurgence of angampora. There is a controversy over the authenticity of angampora in the present day among angampora practitioners where they criticize each other for corrupting angampora by mixing it with the Indian martial art, kalarippayattu, or by practicing different martial arts such as Wushu and Karate and packaging it as angampora. Nevertheless, angampora now has a strong place in the Sinhala Buddhist identity as *the* traditional Sinhala Buddhist martial art. In this context, angampora has appeared in television reality shows on few occasions and has received massive plaudits from the judges and the audience.

Before discussing further, unpacking what is meant by the Sinhala Buddhist identity at this point will be beneficial for the reader who is not familiar with Sri Lanka. According to the census report in 2012, 70% of the total population is comprised of Sinhala Buddhists, making them the largest ethnic group outnumbering Tamil and Muslim minorities who are 15% and 9% respectively. However, as argued by Nira Wickramasinghe (2006) and Nirmal Dewasiri (2000) and many others, the British colonial period, particularly the colonial techniques, have played a major role in constructing the present Sinhala Buddhist identity. Especially from the 20th century, the Sinhala Buddhist identity manifested itself as the authentic identity on the island, making other minorities foreign. In other words, under this manifestation, Sinhala Buddhist identity claimed to be native and the protector of the island for the past 2500 years, where other minorities either came as invaders or traders from India and other parts of the world. This idea of Sinhala Buddhist identity, on the other hand, legitimized the state power held by the Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in post-colonial Sri Lanka.

The main focus of this article is to critically evaluate the present Sinhala Buddhist nationalist identity in relation to angampora by analyzing the images presented in two reality television shows: one from the first round of *Sri Lanka's Got Talent* by Sirasa TV (Sirasa TV 2018) and the other from IITN *Youth with Talent* (Wenasa 2019). Generally, Sirasa TV reality shows are more glamorous in their production quality which other television stations try to emulate. The aforementioned reality shows are no exceptions to this: *Sri Lanka's Got Talent* has more glamour through its visual and audio effects and its Judge board compared to *Youth with Talent*. Also, the

performances too had a difference in quality. For *Sri Lanka's Got Talent*, a group from angampora pool of Sri Lanka Air Force participated, and for Youth with Talent, it was an angampora group from Katuwana, a remote area in the South. The Sri Lanka Air Force group was a state-sponsored group, and as a result, their performance was way ahead of the other angampora group. Apart from analyzing the images of these performances, I have also analyzed the reception these performances received from their spectators. Here, I have identified three levels of spectators. The first level is the judges who have the *words* to express their opinion about these performances. The second level is the audience of these live performances who see both the performances and judges' reactions. Third level is the viewers of these videos, which include the performance and the judges' and audiences' reactions. The words and body language of the judges, the body language of the audience and comments posted in these videos by viewers have been used to understand the way these angampora presentations have been received by the spectators as a whole.

From a theoretical perspective, I am using the idea of spectacle in *The Society of the Spectacle* by the French theorist Guy Debord (2015) to critically investigate these images. This research is organized into three parts. In the first part, the main focus is to portray how these performances have been staged. In the second part, the images of the judges will be analyzed. The final section will discuss the present-day nationalist identity by discussing the contradictions presented in the first two sections.

2. *Hele wadunu yoda shakthiya angampora, sir*

Before the performance of Katuwana angampora group on ITN Youth with Talent, a judge questions "I see an eye-pleasing personality in front of us...What are you presenting to the country today?" to which the leader reply, "*hele wadunu yoda shakthiya angampora sir*" (sir its angampora, the giant strength that grew in the Sinhalese land). And the acrobatics begin. In this section, the focus is to highlight a few characteristics in these two performances.

Both these presentations had a preview of the history of angampora and its importance to the present day. In *Sri Lanka's Got Talent*, there was a separate video clip showing the Sri Lanka Air Force group practicing angampora and in *Youth with Talent*, the master of this group was given time to express his thoughts on angampora. Also, traditional instruments such as traditional

drums and conch shells were used during these presentations to give an aura of ‘authenticity’ to their performances. Moreover, on both occasions, angampora has been described as ‘the’ ancient martial art of Sri Lanka which reclaims its value as a protector of the motherland from her enemies.

Further, both male and female performers in these two videos comply with the gender stereotypes where the masculinity of the male performers and the femininity of the female performers are preserved (Figure 1). Male performers’ bodies are covered in fewer clothes, especially exposing their upper bodies. All the male bodies are well built and look strong as a reminder to the audience of a warrior-Sinhala Buddhist identity. As the judge stated, it is an eye-pleasing personality.



Figure 1

Female bodies do not capture the attention of the audience. In a way, they are mostly hidden from the eye of the audience as a result of less screen time attributed to their performances. They appear as the opposite of the male body: most of their bodies are covered; they are physically smaller than their male performers; hence, less intimidating. Interestingly, the number of female performers is significantly lower – in *Sri Lanka’s Got Talent*, its two and *Youth with Talent*, four – in a group of 15-20 performers.

Both performances are energetic, acrobatic and also, dangerous (Figure 2). They lift each other, jump, spin and allow others to hit one another with sticks to display the flexibility, strength and endurance of their bodies. Moreover, they show the full repertoire of their martial arts by

throwing punches and kicks and also defending them, performing stick and sword fights and, tumbling back and forth. As stated earlier, the whole performance is based on the male and his masculinity.



Figure 2

To sum up this discussion, the performance from the beginning to the end glorifies the idea of Sinhala Buddhist identity. Even though one can argue that the identity projected here is ‘Sri Lankan identity’, all the elements which have been displayed to the audience indicate that it is Sinhala Buddhist identity because there is no single element that can be attributed to minority groups in Sri Lanka.

3. Golden buzzer!

The second section of this article analyzes the words, images and comments of the spectators. As described above, there are three layers of spectators here: the judges, the live audience and the viewers of the videos online. When analyzing the language of judges, or the first layer, the judges of both Reality tv programmes were highly impressed by the performance. It was visible in both verbal and body languages. One judge, in a proud manner, appreciated the air force troop who performed at *Sri Lanka's Got Talent* by stating “these (the presenters) are the heroes who protected Lanka from the sky” (Sirasa TV 2018, translation mine). Another judge went even further by pressing the golden buzzer, the highest accolade a contender can get in *Sri Lanka's Got*

Talent, to express his tribute to the performance. The audience of these live performances is also portrayed as a group who appreciated what they witnessed.

Moreover, the YouTube viewers who saw the performance and the reactions of the judges and the audience were also mesmerized. A YouTube viewer had commented: “Wow wow wow! Really seeing this, boils [my] Sinhala blood. Well done! How worthy it would be if all Sinhala boys and girls could learn this martial art. Well done! May the blessing of Buddha be with you!” (Sirasa TV 2018, translation mine). One appraises the performance: “ten headed Ravana, the king who inherited a martial art like this to Lankapura 5000 years ago and for Sinhala *yakka* armies who dance to the *yak* drum. You are the only god I worship” (Sirasa TV 2018, translation mine). Another sees the perils of present Sri Lanka and the lost ancient glory of the past: “Actually [my] mind became really proud about Sri Lanka while watching this. A lot of our people do not understand the value of our history... [we should not] allow angam martial art to be extinct. This is the essence of our country you people!!!” (Sirasa TV 2018, translation mine).



Figure 3

However, when looking at the judges' appearance, it is difficult to omit the western orientations these judges portray (Figure 3). For instance, the bodies of these judges represent Victorian sexualities where masculinity and femininity are visible clearly. At the same time, the styles they have used are closer to the western than to the so-called Sinhala Buddhist nationalist identity. Also, through the way they used Sinhala language, it is evident that these judges do not command a level of Sinhala proficiency as their presenters. For instance, the following statements

from the judges can be highlighted to illustrate this point. One judge used a mixed language consisting of both Sinhala and English words: “*oyagollo* present *karana kota* truly proud to be Sri Lankan *kijala [apita]* message *ekak awa. Ithin* congratulations. *Api* verdict *eka denawada?*” (When you are presenting, [we] received the message of proud to be Sri Lankan. So congratulations! Shall we give the verdict?). Also, another said a comment in Sinhala which had no meaning: “*idiripath karanna obe nimathiya mage ratata*” (present your perplexity to my country). Here, he used the word *nimathiya* (perplexity) which completely distorts the meaning of that sentence. One commented in English with a Sinhala touch: “amazing *aa!* Very refreshing’ (It is amazing. Very refreshing)”. In the popular mindset, using Sinhala in this manner – corrupting it with English words, saying without knowing the meaning of words, and speaking in English to a Sinhala audience (in this case, the presenters) – is considered as anti-nationalist. Differently put, according to the popular understanding of Anagarika Dharmapala, the nationalist who preached during the first part of the 20th century, this kind of behaviour was condemned as the behaviour of *kalu sudda* (dark white man). *Kalu sudda* refers to a man who “abandons his Sinhala heritage to adopt Western attitudes and customs” (Berkwitz 2008: 101).

When we look at these images and words of the judges, we can argue that there are elements that contradict the very image of Sinhala Buddhist nationalist identity projected in these angampora presentations. However, this tension of authenticity of Sinhala Buddhist identity between the performers and judges does not appear in these videos. In other words, this tension created by these judges’ distance from the ‘authentic’ Sinhala Buddhist identity does not exclude the spectators from aligning them with the projection of Sinhala Buddhist identity through angampora. On the contrary, it can be suggested that both the performers and spectators are united.

4. A nationalist spectacle

As we saw, there is a significant gap between the identity presented on stage and the identity of the spectator. Yet, without addressing this gap, both the presenters and the spectators have been able to relate to each other. The final section of this article discusses how to understand this merge between Sinhala Buddhist identity of the presentations and the western orientations of the spectators.

The Sinhala Buddhist identity does not imply a single, static identity. From a historical point of view, it is evident that the Sinhala Buddhist identity has been subjected to a number of changes and is still in the process of changing. Also, due to the complexities of modern society, it is difficult to categorize each individual into a single identity. It is because “[t]he main acquisition of the modern individual was the autonomous, self-constituted subject” (Abrudan 2011:24). As a result, the modern individual identity, as we witnessed in our analysis of the identities of the judges, varies from each other. However, the problem remains how does an autonomous individual acquire an identity which is constantly in the move?

In this context, Guy Debord’s conceptualization of the spectacle, where he discusses the relationship among market economy, technology and everyday experiences (Debord 2015), may shed light on this question. As he begins his book, “[i]n societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*” (Debord 2015: 7). In these spectacles, every aspect of life is reduced to an image where the unity of life can no longer be recovered. Nevertheless, these images or “*Fragmented* views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a *separate pseudo-world* that can only be looked at” (Debord 2015: 7). This creates an autonomous world of images “where even the deceivers are deceived” (Debord 2015: 7). In other words, the world created by these fragmented images or the spectacle gives a false unity to the life. Finally, “the spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, an autonomous movement of the nonliving” (Debord 2015: 7). In this age of technology and capitalist economic production, people lack a number of things and “[e]verything life lacks is to be found within the spectacle, conceived of as an ensemble of independent representations (Jappe 1996: 6).

This theoretical backdrop opens up a way to understand the contradiction between the spectators and the angampora performances. As we witnessed, people can no longer adhere to an ‘authentic’ Sinhala Buddhist identity in their day-to-day practices. Due to the colonial influences and modern technological advances, the Western lifestyle has immensely influenced the present-day Sinhala Buddhists. In other words, it creates a lack in their lives. In this context, these angampora presentations create a spectacle that fulfils the need for a Sinhala Buddhist identity. In other words, the images presented in these two angampora presentations constitute a nationalist spectacle or a ‘false’ unity for the Sinhala Buddhist community that merely aggregates a collection of isolated and contradictory elements. The identity presented in the spectacle is a static, singular identity that allows anyone to be connected with it.

5. Conclusion

As we saw, the images presented in these angampora performances in two reality TV programs cannot be considered only as performances in a competition. Instead, the function of these performances goes beyond its purpose of winning the competition to a terrain where they fulfil the void of identity created due to the daily realities of their lives. Here, these performances function as spectacles where they give a false unity, or an 'authentic' Sinhala Buddhist identity, to their fragmented lives.

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