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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  
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Nuwan Chamika.

## Angampora and Dance: Some Historical and Kinesthetic Connections

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**Abstract:** One can see different types of connections between the Sri Lankan martial art form angampora and dance. This essay examines the historical and kinesthetic connection between angampora and dance, primarily focusing on the Kandyan dance form of Sri Lanka. Historical sources, interviews, and my experience as a dancer and a martial arts practitioner aided me in this study. What we call angampora and Kandyan dance today has a historical connection to the pre-colonial Kandyan kingdom of Sri Lanka. This essay mainly focuses on the kinesthetic connections between the two forms. I elaborate on kinesthetic learning in both angampora and Kandyan dance and assert that both forms try to develop mastery through a pedagogical method I articulate as kinesthetic habituation that encompasses habits and practice. This process includes a vital component called haramba, which is a set of physical exercises done repetitively.

**Keywords:** Angampora, dance, Kandyan dance, kinesthetic learning, kinesthetic habituation, haramba, repetitive movements, Sri Lanka.

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### 1. Introduction

At the age of 12, I was learning both Kandyan dance and karate, Budokan style. After learning mindful movement practices like *Tai Chi* in my late thirties, I began to reflect on the history of my bodily training and was critical about the repetitiveness, rigidity and rigorous training in dance and martial art. I felt that it imprisoned me in certain movements and limited my bodily expressions as a performer. However, studying the kinesthetic connection between angampora and Kandyan dance provided me with a different perspective about bodily art and training. As in

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most other Asian bodily practices, angampora and Kandyan dance develop a particular type of bodily discipline that I articulate in this essay as kinesthetic habituation. A close examination of kinesthetic habituation in these two movement practices will provide valuable insights for training in performing arts.

Although their purposes are different, both angampora and Kandyan dance can be characterized as performances. According to Richard Schechner, one of the pioneers of performance theory, “any behavior, event, action, or thing can be studied ‘as’ performance” (Schechner 2013: 41). Since angampora and Kandyan dance are movement practices, they can be easily categorized as performances. Describing the emergence of “the concept of performance” in the 1960s, theatre scholar Marvin Carlson asserts that:

If theatre is to be considered as a particular kind of human activity found in many cultures, it needs to be considered in a very wide variety of manifestations, and in relation to other related cultural activities, such as rituals, festivals, civic demonstrations, dances, puppet shows, circuses, and storytelling (Carlson 2014: 79).

Both angampora and Kandyan dance are physical activities, and they contain ritualistic components as well. Therefore, in the performance studies framework, both of these movement practices can be identified as performances.

## **2. Kandyan dance**

The Kandyan kingdom was the last native Sinhalese kingdom in Sri Lanka before the British established colonial order, which lasted for 132 years from 1815 onwards. Therefore, if someone is searching for pre-colonial cultural practices, Kandy is a site that contains rich evidence. The dance form that is primarily practiced in the central highlands of Sri Lanka is called Kandyan dance. It should be noted that the Kandyan dance itself has evolved into its current form through various historical political manoeuvres, during the British colonial period (Mantillake 2018) and after the independence during the nation-building process (Reed 2010). The current outlook of both angampora and Kandyan dance came to the popular consciousness of Sri Lankans between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. However, as evidence suggests, there was a historical connection between these two bodily practices since the pre-colonial era.

Today, when we hear the term “Kandyan dance,” it reminds us of a particular dance repertoire, a set of costumes, and instruments. Kandyan dance includes *ves* dance<sup>1</sup>, *panṭeru* dance<sup>2</sup>, *udekki* dance<sup>3</sup>, *nayyadi* dance<sup>4</sup>, and certain female dance repertoires. The term Kandyan dance is further associated with the costumes of the dances mentioned above and musical instruments such as *geta beraya*<sup>5</sup>, *panṭeruva*<sup>6</sup>, *udekkiya*<sup>7</sup>, and *talampota*<sup>8</sup>. Although the repertoire of Kandyan dance was solidified in the twentieth century, before the British colonial era,<sup>9</sup> the dances mentioned above were practiced in rituals, processions, and in the royal court of the Kandyan kingdom.

### 3. Historical connections

It is difficult to find the exact origins of both angampora and Kandyan dance. However, we can try to map the historical connections between these two performance practices through existing historical evidence. We began to see more evidence of these, particularly after the 14th century in Sri Lankan history. Images of angampora practitioners and dancers are depicted in the wood carvings of the *Embekke* Devalaya near Kandy, which was built in the 14th century. Angampora has been used in various battles and wars in Sri Lanka, particularly against European invaders (Weerasooria 2004: 28) between the 16th and 19th centuries. The Kings in the Kandyan kingdom had a special relationship with angampora. According to historian P.E.P. Deraniyagala, angampora was a vital practice of the Kandyan kingdom, particularly among elites and the King’s court (1959). Since this was a combative practice used in battles and wars, angampora was kept under the control and close association of the Kandyan kings and aristocrats. It was practiced by Kandyan kings, aristocrats, and community leaders who were loyal to the kingdom.

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<sup>1</sup> A sacred dance with a glamorous costume.

<sup>2</sup> Dance with a tambourine.

<sup>3</sup> Dance with hourglass shaped drum.

<sup>4</sup> A dance with a similar costume as in *ves* dance, without some major ornaments such as the glittering headdress and puffed frills.

<sup>5</sup> A drum that keeps horizontally and play with both hands.

<sup>6</sup> Tambourine.

<sup>7</sup> Hourglass shaped drum.

<sup>8</sup> Small metal instrument played like a small cymbal.

<sup>9</sup> British colonial rule in Sri Lanka can be marked between 1815-1948



In the Kandyan kingdom, attached to the King's court, there were two major types of performance spaces – *ilangama* and *maduwa*. According to the chronicle *rajāvaliya*, *ilangama* was where various physical activities like swordsmanship were taught (Sorata 2009: 163). As anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere asserts, *ilangamas* are “training schools for soldiers in the martial arts, especially fencing”; however, as he speculates, they might also include “dancing associated with paeans of victory” (Obeyesekere 2017: 377). Historical evidence suggests that various types of performances took place in *ilangamas* and the *maduwa*. There were two *ilangamas* and one *maduwa* in the last Kandyan kingdom as *natum ilangama* (performance space for dance), *māhala ilangama* (performance space for acrobats, games), and *kavikāra maduwa* (performance space for singing and poetry) (Davy 1821: 139). As evidence suggests, there were blood sports at the court of King Raja Sinha II (1581) (Deraniyagala 1959: 2–3). While there were these three spaces, the Kings appointed elite officers called *mohandiram nilames* as leaders and individuals responsible for those spaces and performances in the King's court. For example, there were officers responsible for fencers (angampora fighters), dance, acrobatics, poetry singing, musicians, drummers (Davy 1821: 155–56). Therefore, *ilangamas* and *maduwa* were spaces where all kinds of performances took place in the Kandyan kingdom. In those spaces, some played war drums, some fighters performed, some danced, and some sang eulogies and war poetry. Since both of these practices were performed and exhibited under the auspicious of Kandyan kings and elite officers, there is a strong possibility that knowledge about these performances were transferred to other officers and performers.

The term *ilangam* has a connection to hereditary dance families and to the space where dance training happened.<sup>10</sup> Tittapajjala Sumanaweera is a hereditary Kandyan dance practitioner and ritualist who is 69 years old and lives near Kandy. His father is a famous ritual dancer, Tittapajjala Surambā. Their traditional dance school, which opened in Tittapajjala village in 1931, is arguably the first ever academy of art established during the colonial government in Sri Lanka. When they first opened, their academy was named “*ilangam haramba sālāwa*” (movement training hall) (Sumanaweera 2021). According to Sumanaweera, the word “*ilangam*” was a part of his grandfather's surname. His grandfather's name was “*Ilangam Karunādhīpati Brāhmaṇa Ganita Gedara Siuranga Ganitasāra*” (Sumanaweera 2021). In the Kandyan kingdom, citizens' names

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<sup>10</sup> A type of dance exercises called “*ilangam haramba*” are used in Ruhunu dance tradition that is popular in western and southern coastal areas.

were directly connected to their service to the King and the kingdom.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, based on Sumanaweera's family history, we can speculate that both angampora and Kandyan dance were performed in one space called the *ilangama*.

#### 4. Kinesthetic connection

One of the primary connections between angampora and dance is kinesthetics. Movement is absolutely primary for both angampora and dance. In her book *The Primacy of Movement*, meditating on various movements in nature and the body, American philosopher Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (2011) asserts that movement is primarily crucial on two levels. On one level, it allows us to be kinetically aware of ourselves in everyday happenings. On the other level, it exemplifies for ourselves or makes us self-evident about kinesthetic consciousness or kinesthesia. Based on the experiences described by dancers such as Merce Cunningham and Doris Humphrey, Sheets-Johnstone emphasizes the need to pay attention to movers' kinesthesia, that is, the "first-person experiences of movement" (2015: xvi). Both angampora practitioners and Kandyan dancers are movers. Therefore, in this section, I attempt to draw the kinesthetic connection between angampora and dance paying attention to the bodily awareness and training in these movement practices.

In terms of movement quality, angampora and dance come closer in the spectrum of different movement practices. One of the qualities of movements is that it flows forth with a certain intensity, spatial and temporal contours, and that movement creates a qualitative space-time-force dynamic (Sheets Johnstone 2015: xxiii). Different movement practices have different qualitative space-time-force dynamics. It is a spectrum of possible qualitative movement dynamics. In this spectrum, you can find various physical movements such as sports, martial arts, gymnastics, military drills, rice pounding, sexual acts, and dance. Even within the category of martial arts, different practices like Karate, Aikido, Capoeira, and angampora carry different space-time-force qualities. Therefore, if we compare angampora to the larger spectrum of movement practices, one could argue that angampora is closer to dance. However, considering the quality of movement and the use of music, we could argue that the Brazilian martial art Capoeira is closer to dance than angampora. Both angampora and Kandyan dance have their own qualitative space-time-force dynamics because the purpose of these two practices is primarily

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<sup>11</sup> This system was called *najakāriya* (duty to the King).

different. While one has been developed as a combative practice, the other has been developed mainly as a ritual dance. However, when it comes to the training of these two movement practices, we notice a common kinesthetic connection.

## 5. Kinesthesia and movement training

Although we all talk about the human body, physicality, consciousness, and movement through terms such as kinetic, kinesiology, kinesthetic and kinesthesia, different disciplines approach human movements in a variety of ways. Kinesiology is a [scientific] study of human body movement. The Oxford Dictionary of Dance defines kinesiology as “the study of human movement, from the point of view of both mechanical action and anatomical structure” (Craine and Mackrell 2002: 271). While this mechanical and anatomical definition of human movement has been used in western dance, medicine, and physiology, several scholars expanded the understanding of human movements. Dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster asserts that pervasive mistrust of the body in academia has “resulted in a paucity of activities that promotes awareness of the body’s position and motion, or the degree of tension in its muscles” (Foster 2011: 19). Dance scholar Deidre Sklar further claims that kinesthesia has been omitted from the western sensorium (Sklar 2008: 87). Scholars have begun to hasten towards non-western perceptions of the human body and movements to understand their complex connections.

Foster defines kinesthesia as “a designated way of experiencing physicality and movement that, in turn, summons other bodies into a specific way of feeling towards it” (Foster 2011: 15). Drawing from various non-western movement practices, Sklar argues that kinetic vitality is connected with cultural patterns, and those cultural patterns are embodied in movement practices as movement knowledge (Sklar 2008). She describes how “body consciousness” in American and western Europe refers to an “image” of the body often enhanced by cosmetics, fashions, and body-shaping classes (88). She contrasts this type of visual body consciousness with somatic awareness in Buddhist mindfulness practices, and Asian “in-body” disciplines, based on the writings of Gil Fronsdal and Phillip Zarrilli respectively (Sklar 2008: 105). Sri Lanka is a country with a strong Buddhist influence and a country with various in-body movement practices. Here, I compare the selected aspects of kinesthesia in angampora and Kandyan dance. While doing so, I



also demonstrate that the kinesthesia of bodily training of these movement practices is engraved into the teaching and learning culture.

## 6. Developing kinesthetic habituation

In the training process, primarily the amateur, angampora and Kandyan dance contain rigorous bodily training. Why is rigorous bodily training included in both these movement practices? Here, I pay attention to the overall training process, particularly their rigorous kinesthetic learning process that emphasizes kinesthetic habits.

The training process in both angampora and Kandyan dance can be theorized as developing kinesthetic habituation. Merleau-Ponty describes dance as a “motor habit” (Merleau-Ponty 1990:126–30). Sheets-Johnstone, not entirely agreeing with Merleau-Ponty, argues that there is a kinesthetic element in dance movement and habits. Therefore, she articulates the process of dance and movement as “kinesthetic memory” (Sheets, Johnstone 2003: 90). From my analysis of both angampora and Kandyan dance, I identify the importance of both the habitual and kinesthetic aspects of movement training. Therefore, I articulate it as kinesthetic habituation. Kinesthetic habituation includes the first-person experience of the body, awareness of the qualitative dynamics of movements, physicality, and cultural memory and knowledge related to the body and movements. Both angampora and Kandyan dance masters achieve their mastery in their bodily training through kinesthetic habituation. In the training process, the amateur needs to go through a rigorous training process that also includes learning other systems of knowledge related to the movement practices. For example, while angampora practitioners learn massage and traditional medicine (Liyanage, Honcharova 2020: 10), Kandyan dancers learn astrology, drumming, and ritual recitations. Therefore, kinesthetic habituation includes a holistic, continuous learning process.

When it comes to training both angampora and Kandyan dance, a concept called *purudda*, a kinesthetic habituation among Sinhalese people, becomes highly important. *Purudda* in Sinhalese holds two primary meanings. It denotes both “habit” and “training.” As we can see, habituation and training are connected in angampora and Kandyan dance. Therefore, in both practices, “to train” or “to practice” means “to habituate” or “to make it a habit.” Practitioners habituate certain movements and knowledge. Therefore, in order to master angampora and Kandyan

dance, both practitioners go through a “kinesthetic habituation” called *purudda*. Japanese avant-garde theatre practitioner and theorist Tadashi Suzuki further emphasizes a similar aspect of bodily training for actors when he describes “creating physical continuity” in his acting method (Suzuki 2015:53–54). When he distinguishes amateur vs professional, artisan vs artist, he describes an amateur as a “momentary flower” and a professional who has gone through continuous training as a “flower that never withers” (54). According to Suzuki, practitioners need to lead “a life committed to developing certain qualities” (54) to achieve professional mastery in theatre. This requires long training and maintaining a lifelong physical continuity.

*Purudda*, in both senses, habit and practice, is a vital part of the learning process in traditional physical skills in Sri Lanka. *Purudda* has been highlighted in Kandyan dance training. According to Waidyawathie Rajapaksa, a scholar of traditional dance, and the daughter of the famous dance family of Amunugama,<sup>12</sup> there are four *puruddas* in dance training. These are four practices embodied by dancers in a pedagogical method called the *gurukula* (teacher-centred lineage) tradition. She asserts that they are *pera purudda* (practice and habits that come from earlier life), *deka purudda* (practice by seeing), *aba purudda* (practice by listening), and *kara purudda* (practice by doing) (Aluthge, Rajapaksa 2021:11). A similar teacher-centred pedagogical method, *guru-shishya* (teacher-disciple) has been used in angampora (Liyanage and Honcharova 2020: 6).

The *Gurukula* and *guru-shishya* pedagogical methods are connected. According to angampora practitioners, *purudda* is highly important for their training (L<sup>13</sup> 2021).<sup>14</sup> Hence, kinesthetic habituation is vital for both movement practices.

One of the questions we can ask from both angampora and Kandyan dance practitioners is, what do you practice? Or what *purudda* do you maintain? What kinesthetic habits do you maintain? Kinesthetic habituation directly connects with the psychophysical stamina of the practitioner developed through repetitive movement exercises. One of the ways angampora and dance practitioners attain mastery is through the repetition of movement sequences or a set of exercises called *haramba*. In various physical activities like dance and martial arts, *haramba* means repetitive physical exercises. Continuously practicing these exercises helps practitioners to develop their stamina, memory, and mastery. When talking about physical exercises, Polish

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<sup>12</sup> Amunugama dance family shows their connection to pre-colonial Kandyan kingdom.

<sup>13</sup> “L” is a symbolic letter assigned by the author to identify one of the senior students of Angampora master Karunāpāla. “L” does not want to identify himself.

<sup>14</sup> L 2021, Telephone Interview on Haramba: 29 September

theatre director and theorist Jerzy Grotowski elaborates on a somewhat similar idea on kinesthetic learning and repetition. According to Grotowski:

The body itself functions like a brain; it can record and later recall movement patterns and emotion in a seemingly instinctive way when stimuli are given. Learning kinesthetically incorporates both the physical precision and the emotional quality of the action... The student also learns through observing and following the teacher, repeating the voice or movement sequence many times. Repetition is another basic principle of kinesthetic learning through which the body will internalize the physical experience. Repetition may lead to a mechanical quality, but a student is instructed to find the life of the action in each repetition (Wolford, Schechner 2001: 323–24).

This shows the vitality of embodied memory in theatre, dance, and other physical expressions. It also reinforces the psychophysical training in physical expressions. Therefore, haramba in both angampora and Kandyan dance help to internalize the physical experience. According to Sumanaweera, “doing haramba repetitively is a difficult task; therefore, it develops practitioner’s stamina” and recalling his memory as an amateur, he claims, “we did one haramba for a long time. It needs to be a habit (*purudda*) because you cannot get tired when dancing a whole night ritual” (2021). Physical stamina develops through habituation of haramba. Practicing haramba, develops both angampora and dance practitioners’ memory, stamina and helps to achieve mastery.

In angampora, we can find ath haramba (hand exercises) and polu haramba (stick exercises), while in Kandyan dance, we find pa haramba (leg exercises)<sup>15</sup> and goda haramba (exercise with both legs and hands).<sup>16</sup> The repetitive aspect of kinesthetic learning is highly prominent in haramba in both angampora and Kandyan dance. According to Sumanaweera, training haramba is absolutely important for dance training, and different *gurukulas* had different harambas; this also carried the identity of each *gurukula* (Sumanaweera 2021). Veteran angampora teacher Karunāpāla who has his training center in the vicinity of the capital city of Colombo, is believed to be one of the experienced masters in the field. Mr. L,<sup>17</sup> one of Karunāpāla’s senior students who does not wish to disclose his identity, vigorously stressed the vitality of haramba in angampora. According to him, “haramba is angampora, and angampora is haramba”. This

<sup>15</sup> Traditionally these exercises were done using a horizontal bar on which dancers keep their hands and practice leg movements. In some dance schools they used to have a trench where dancers keep their legs and practice the exercises.

<sup>16</sup> These are not the only *harambas* found in both angampora and Kandyan dance. I mention these to highlight some.

<sup>17</sup> L 2021, Telephone Interview on Haramba: 29 September.

statement proves the kinesthetic habituation in bodily training. Observations of the participants in AHEAD Actors Lab also verify that the kinesthetic habituation occurs in angampora training. Marlon Ariysinghe, one of the actors who learned angampora, emphasizes the difficulty of controlling the body, concentration, discipline, and mathematical way of doing the footwork, and felt that “angampora demanded that awareness and that precision (like in dancing)” and he felt it as a combative choreography (quoted in Liyanage, Honcharova 2020: 17). As performance researchers Liyanage and Honcharova observed, in angampora, ath haramba affects the practitioners’ facial expressions as it connects with their inner energy and intention (ibid: 11–12). This portrays that both in angampora and Kandyan dance, haramba are not just physical drills but contribute to the kinesthetic expression expected in performance practice.

In conclusion, today, performing artists and researchers can learn important lessons from the kinesthetic learning methods used in angampora and Kandyan dance. As in most other Asian bodily practices, angampora and Kandyan dance training involve a pedagogical method, a discipline that can be defined as kinesthetic habituation, involving rigorous bodily training. On one level, this can be seen as limiting the freedom of the performer. However, a close examination of kinesthetic habituation in angampora and Kandyan dance will provide valuable insights for performing artists and researchers. Kinesthetic habituation is being developed through rigid movement sequences, repetitive movement exercises, rigorous training, and habits. We can try to understand this through classical binary craft vs art. Some of the general assumptions are that art is more important than craft; art is the final destination, and craft is the means to get there; art is hierarchically superior to craft. However, kinesthetic learning in angampora and Kandyan dance challenges these assumptions in the craft vs art binary. In these two performance practices, craft and art function as a continuum. Therefore, both in angampora and Kandyan dance, the craft is the art, and the art is the craft.

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This special edition is dedicated to the actor training project titled “Lamp in a Windless Place: Developing an Actor Training Methodology through Sri Lankan Combative Art Angampora”

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