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Bathed in Blood

Ritual Performance as Political Critique

In May 2009, when the war between the government of Sri Lanka and Tamil insurgents came to an end, Sri Lanka's citizens were hopeful that the country had entered a new era of peace. Instead, along with the ongoing neglect and marginalization of the island's ethnic and religious minorities, there has been a dramatic increase in violence against Muslims and Christians, much of it led by ultra-nationalist Sinhala Buddhist monks. In response to this violence, Venuri Perera, a well-known dancer, choreographer, and performance artist, created a ritual performance titled *Kesel Maduwa*. In this article, I examine *Kesel Maduwa* as a model for utilizing dance and traditional ritual to contribute to processes of conflict transformation, ethnic reconciliation, and women's empowerment. I situate the performance in relation to Sri Lanka's history of dance and, through thick description and interpretation, demonstrate the power of the creative reshaping of ritual to address contemporary political and social issues. I also analyze the radical gender politics embodied in *Kesel Maduwa* as a contribution to women's political activism and a challenge to stereotypic views of Sinhala Buddhist womanhood.

Keywords: dance—gender—nationalism—peacebuilding—performance—ritual—violence

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In April 2012, a mosque in the Sri Lankan market town of Dambulla was firebombed and attacked by a mob of more than two thousand people, led by Buddhist monks of the nearby monastery. The rationale given by the monks for the attack was eerily similar to that provided by the Hindu fundamentalists who notoriously destroyed the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, India in December 1992: the mosque had been built on sacred ground. Though many other Buddhist monk–led attacks against Muslims have occurred in Sri Lanka since the end of the war between the Sinhala government and the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) in May 2009, it was the Dambulla incident that brought the issue of Buddhist-Muslim conflict to national and international attention, making the names of extremist groups such as the BBS (*Bodu Bala Sēna*, "Army of Buddhist Power" or "Buddhist Power Force") and *Sinhala Rāvaya* ("Sinhala Roar") familiar throughout the country.[1] In January 2014, another Buddhist monk–led group attacked two Christian churches in the southern coastal town of Hikkaduwa, destroying church property and setting fire to bibles and other religious paraphernalia.

These two attacks are among hundreds of incidents of anti-Muslim and anti-Christian violence perpetrated by ultra-nationalist Buddhists in recent years. Tacitly enabled by the state, the attacks are yet another example of the crises experienced by Sri Lanka's ethnic and religious minorities in the postwar era. For even as Sinhala government officials publicly profess support for the idea of a multi-ethnic state, this violence continues along with the neglect of the displaced and traumatized Tamil communities of the north and east.[2]

A few weeks after the Hikkaduwa attack, Venuri Perera, a well-known Sinhala dancer, choreographer, and performance artist, staged a ritual performance, *Kesel Maduwa*, in which she named Dambulla and Hikkaduwa as two of the many sites of violence on the island. Created by Venuri in response to the rising violence instigated by Buddhist monks, *Kesel Maduwa* reformulated and reinterpreted elements of traditional Sinhala Buddhist healing rituals. The result was a groundbreaking performance that challenged both Sinhala Buddhist extremist nationalism and conventional ideas of Sinhala Buddhist womanhood.

In this article, I examine *Kesel Maduwa* as a model for utilizing dance and the reformulation of traditional ritual as sociopolitical critique. While Sri Lanka has a long history of political and socially engaged theater, some of which draws from elements of traditional rituals that satirize authority figures and comment on

sociopolitical issues, dance has rarely been employed for this purpose. I situate *Kesel Maduwa* in relation to Sri Lanka's history of dance and, through thick description and interpretation, demonstrate the power of the creative reshaping of ritual to address contemporary political and social issues. I also analyze the radical gender politics embodied in the performance as a contribution to women's political activism and a challenge to stereotypic views of Sinhala Buddhist womanhood.

Art, performance, and peacebuilding

With the end of the war, and particularly after the 2015 election of Maithripala Sirisena to the presidency, Sri Lankan artists (including many returning from abroad) found more space to engage in new and experimental creative work. Boundaries were blurred between theater, dance, ritual, visual arts, verbal arts, and performance art, with collaborations across genres becoming more common. Artists came together to form collectives, and in Colombo and elsewhere, there were efforts to build communities of artists and performers from varied ethnic and religious backgrounds.[3] In early 2019, the Colombo arts scene was lively and flourishing; every week there was at least one major arts-related event.[4] Especially in regard to political and social critique, the Siresena regime (January 2015 to November 2019) allowed artists more freedom than both the wartime governments of 1983–2009 and the previous post-war regime (2009–2015).

Theater and dance are increasingly being employed throughout the world for peacebuilding and conflict transformation.[5] In Sri Lanka, scholars have an important role to play in amplifying the voices and practices of performing artists of all ethnic communities who are creating works that critique the status quo and force viewers and audiences to confront and reflect on the causes and consequences of violence. Critical scholarly analyses can provide important reflections on these performances, their impact, and how they might serve as models for others within Sri Lanka and elsewhere.[6] While scholarship on Sri Lankan theater has examined its role as political critique (for example, Obeyesekere 1999; Dharmasiri 2014) and in ethnic reconciliation (for example, Premaratna 2018, 107–52),[7] there is very little scholarship on the role of dance along the same lines. While this is due, in part, to the history of Sri Lankan dance as ethno-nationalist practice, over the past ten years dancers and other movement-based artists have created critical works that engage with ethnic, religious, and gender violence. Ethnographic research on and critical analysis of these works can provide much-needed reflection on their significance in contemporary Sri Lanka.[8]

Dance as ethno-nationalist practice

In comparison to theater, film, and the visual arts, which have long been used as modes of political critique, dance in Sri Lanka has largely focused on the preservation of "tradition" and "cultural heritage." Stage dance developed as part of the Sinhala and Tamil nationalist movements of the 1930s to 1950s, and the binary categories of ethnic nationalism, which have served to separate and polarize Sinhala and Tamil

communities, are reproduced in dance.[9] Kandyan and low-country dances, which are derived from ritual practices of these predominantly Sinhala-speaking regions, are identified as Sinhala, while Bharata Naṭyam, which developed from the ritual practices of female temple dancers in Tamil Nadu and was imported to Jaffna in the 1930s, is identified as Tamil. The state is the major patron of dance in Sri Lanka; Kandyan dance, low-country dance, and Bharata Naṭyam are taught in government schools and aesthetic institutions, with the assumption that Sinhala students will study Kandyan and low-country dance and Tamil students, Bharata Naṭyam.[10] There is no major dance tradition identified with Sri Lanka's Muslim or Christian communities.

Within the state system, the central goal of dance education has been, and remains, the preservation of these traditional forms. Consequently, dance in Sri Lanka has rarely been performed as sociopolitical critique.[11] This is somewhat ironic, given that the roots of the Sinhala-identified dances are in village ritual practices that in fact provided just such a critique. However, in the 1940s and 1950s, when the dance was extracted from ritual and put on stage, these elements of ritual performance were excluded.

Venuri Perera and contemporary dance

Kesel Maduwa is part of the nascent contemporary dance scene in Sri Lanka in which choreographers are experimenting with new forms and new content, breaking with the conventions of the three major classicized Sri Lankan dance traditions of Kandyan dance, low-country dance, and Bharata Naṭyam. These choreographers are experimenting with a range of movement vocabularies, media, music, costumes, and staging, and using dance as a means of exploring sociopolitical issues of the past and present.[12] Asian countries such as India and Cambodia have a much longer history of contemporary dance, but as scholarship on these demonstrates (see, e.g., Katrak 2011; Burridge and Frumberg 2010), contemporary dance does not necessarily involve a rejection or exclusion of traditional/classical dance or its elements. Instead, tradition may be "expanded" or "extended" in contemporary Asian dance works. In India, for example, dancers have developed their contemporary work after years of formal training in classical Indian dance or another classical style and "incorporate that knowledge into their innovations" (Katrak 2011, 7). Venuri's own career follows this trajectory, from a solid foundation in a classical form (Kandyan dance) to experimentation and exploration in contemporary dance drawing from her deep knowledge of the Kandyan tradition.[13]

Venuri Perera has been at the forefront in developing contemporary dance in Sri Lanka. As the most experienced solo contemporary dance artist in the country, she has created a body of work that has experimented with a wide range of themes, movement vocabulary, costumes, visual media, and music. Venuri's work has focused on the ethnic conflict (*Thalattu*/Lullaby, 2013), issues of patriotism and tradition (*Traitriot*, 2015), and global inequality and neocolonialism (*Passport Blessing Ceremony*, 2016; *Entry-No Entry*, 2016). Gender, class, and body are at the center of much of her most recent work.[14] In 2016, she curated the Colombo Dance Platform focused on gender, titled *Shakti: A Space for the Single Body*, which was open to women, and "people who identified as women."[15] The male gaze was a focus in a 2018 performance

installation at the Sapumal Art Gallery (*See You, See Me*); at Colomboscope 2019, in *I dance for _______* she recreated a dance bar scene at the Grand Oriental Hotel to examine issues of voyeurism, capitalism, class, and women's agency.

Venuri sees the body as "political provocateur" (Hisano 2017), and she uses her body "to provoke" and make people question what has been normalized, things to which they may have become numb or desensitized. Within the Sri Lankan context of government censorship of theater and film scripts (all of which must be approved by the government Censor Board), dance and movement have the possibility to "say things . . . without having to use words." The body can communicate in situations where words and text are being censored, and it can provoke in direct and indirect ways.[16]

The milieu in which Venuri was raised has played an integral part in her creative and choreographic choices over the years. As she stated in a 2016 interview, "I grew up in an environment where I was surrounded by activists, human rights lawyers, and journalists. To make political work seemed not only natural but necessary for me, especially when I returned to Sri Lanka (after my studies) to the post-conflict Rajapakse regime. I believe that as artists, we have a responsibility to raise a voice, especially in contexts such as ours. In Sri Lanka, visual artists, theater makers, filmmakers were doing so in various capacities, but not dance makers. I wanted this to change" (Siddiqui 2016). Venuri's identity as a middle-class, English-speaking, Sinhala Buddhist is one reason she feels an obligation to "raise a voice." As part of a "privileged minority" she feels her identity comes with "certain sense of responsibility which . . . drives the work I make" (Hisano 2017). Venuri's way of looking at the world, her core beliefs, her willingness to critique the status quo, and her penchant for "going against the grain" is rooted in her early family life.[17] However, despite being a dancer and choreographer with an international reputation, she notes that dedicating oneself to a career in dance is still seen as a dubious choice for a "respectable" middle-class Sinhala woman.[18]

Ritual is a relatively recent focus of Venuri's work, with *Kesel Maduwa* her first ritual performance. Though Venuri was trained primarily in Kandyan dance at the Colombo-based Chitrasena Dance Academy, she also received low-country dance training there, and it is from this training, as well as extensive research on low-country rituals, that she created *Kesel Maduwa*, which draws from low-country healing rituals, such as *yak tovil* and *Rata Yakuma*. *Yak tovil* is commonly viewed as an "exorcism" ritual, while the *Rata Yakuma* is a ritual for barren or pregnant women.

In ritual, which is increasingly a focus of her work, Venuri has found a medium that gives her a great deal of freedom.[19] Healing rituals of rural Sinhala Buddhist communities are all-night events that include a wide range of performance arts, including drumming, chanting, comic dialogues, dance, and drama, and an array of visual elements in the construction of the ritual hall, costumes, and masks. Ritual priests who perform the drama and dance embody important principles of indigenous healing and Sinhala Buddhism. In *Kesel Maduwa*, Venuri draws from these varied arts and reconfigures them to challenge audiences to directly confront the most visceral consequences of physical violence: damaged and bloodied bodies.

Since originally performing *Kesel Maduwa* in 2014 in Colombo and in Cologne, Germany, Venuri has performed it twice, changing the dialogues and editing

some scenes to recontextualize the piece in relation to the time and place of its performance. In December 2018, she performed the ritual at the South Asian Human Rights Festival in Colombo, as a commentary on the October 2018 constitutional crisis in Sri Lanka. In early April 2019, she performed it at the University of Peradeniya, near Kandy, to comment on the large-scale Buddhist violence against Muslims that had taken place in the Kandy District in March 2018.

Kesel Maduwa

Kesel Maduwa was first performed as the opening act for Colomboscope 2014, a multidisciplinary, multi-sited arts festival staged over a five-day period (January 30 to February 3). The festival featured a range of music, dance, and drama performances and talks focused on the theme "Making History." The participants included several of Sri Lanka's best-known performing artists, writers, and activists.[20] Colomboscope 2014 was a well-funded cosmopolitan event, as evidenced by both the large numbers of corporate and government sponsors and the stellar line-up of multi-ethnic and multinational participants. The thirty-two-page program booklet itself was a work of considerable aesthetic sophistication.

Venuri was commissioned by the Goethe Institut in Colombo to produce the performance for Colomboscope, a testament to the stature she holds in the Sri Lankan arts world. As the opening act, *Kesel Maduwa* was an "invitation only" event. Most other performances in Colomboscope were ticketed events of Rs. 500 or Rs. 1000 each. The primary audience for the festival appears to have been the largely English-educated arts, literary, and intellectual community of Colombo. Many in this audience might have seen a similar ritual performance in a village setting, but even for those who hadn't, the dance and movement vocabulary, singing, chanting, drumming, and satiric dialogues would likely be familiar from dance classes, stage performances, or TV, film, and digital media.

Though I did not attend the Colomboscope performance, I saw Venuri perform *Kesel Maduwa* a few months later at the Germany Sport University Cologne, as part of an international symposium on "Dance Aesthetics and Identity Politics of Bodies."[21] For that occasion, she modified and abbreviated some parts of the performance, but almost all of the dance elements were included. The audience in Cologne was composed of the symposium participants: students, lecturers, and visiting speakers.[22]

In the following section, I describe *Kesel Maduwa* primarily as it was performed in Colombo, as this is where it was staged in its complete form.[23] However, my description and interpretation are deeply informed by my experience as an audience member and ethnographer in Cologne, as well as by my background as an anthropologist of Sri Lankan ritual and dance. As *Kesel Maduwa* was performed entirely in Sinhala, I also draw extensively from a handout provided to audience members in Cologne that includes, as it notes, "approximate" English-language translations of the songs, chants, and dialogues. Though the performance employed a script, the performers also engaged in improvisation on occasion.[24]

In a 2017 interview, Venuri described the genesis of the piece: "Kesel Maduwa was triggered by the Buddhist monks led violent attacks and hate speeches against the

Muslim minority community that started taking place in 2014. . . . Being a Buddhist and also Sinhalese, I was so ashamed and angry [about] these incidents. . . . I used this opportunity [the commission of the piece] to create this work. In this piece, I look at religious and racial extremism as fringe insanity creeping into the core of society that needs to be exorcised with this 'ritual'" (Hisano 2017). She also developed the piece to comment on the political situation of the time.[25]

The roots of *Kesel Maduwa*, and its framing as a ritual performance, was described in the Colomboscope program, setting up expectations for viewers: "The ancient healing rituals of Sri Lanka are complex communal ceremonies that combine dance, drama, dialogue, exorcism, humor, and satire. Drawing on these elements, this ritual performance is infected with the uncertain energies of a society in transition." The program's introduction also noted that the audience would have the opportunity to watch "historic re-interpretations" of dance and music "unfold under the majestic Nuga tree of the Sri Lanka Foundation," a clear reference to *Kesel Maduwa*.

The title, *Kesel Maduwa*, requires a brief explanation. In the handout's translation of the comic dialogue, it is rendered as "Banana Ceremony." While this is literally accurate (*kesel* are bananas, and *maḍuva* can mean ceremony, though it also refers to the ritual hall or structure), this translation does not adequately convey the cultural significance of the Sinhala terms. Bananas are potent symbols of fertility and abundance, and they are widely used in traditional Sinhala rituals, with large combs of them typically decorating the ritual structure. And though *maḍuva* usually refers to the ritual hall—the meeting place of the three worlds of gods, humans, and demons—the term is also used to refer to a ceremony that takes place there, as in the ritual for the goddess Pattini known as *gam maḍuva* ("village ceremony"). For Sinhalas, the term *maḍuva* in this context would connote these elaborate, all-night village rituals. For this reason, I use the term *Kesel Maduwa* untranslated in this text.

Kesel Maduwa, Sri Lanka Foundation, Colombo, January 30, 2014

Kesel Maduwa was performed outdoors, in the evening, under a large banyan (*nuga*) tree at the Sri Lanka Foundation in the heart of Colombo. It was scheduled for 8:00 pm, the approximate time that the major events of all-night Sinhala rituals begin in rural villages. In addition to Venuri, the ritual included two other performers: Kumari Kumaragamage as the narrative performer and singer, and Iroshan Anuradha as the drummer and *gurunnanse* or "respected teacher" in the comic dialogue. The duration of the performance was forty minutes, and it was structured in three parts, each marked by a costume change by Venuri. Between parts 1 and 2, a comic dialogue served as an interlude.

Prelude: Preparing the *maḍuva*

The performance begins with Venuri, draped in a shiny bright orange and black plastic costume, defining the boundaries of the ritual space by laying out a few dozen bananas, end-to-end, in a rectangular shape on the stage (figures 1 and 2).[26]

Figure 1. Venuri places bananas to mark the boundary of the *maḍuva*, Cologne. All photos by and coutesy of the author.

Figure 2. Audience members observe as Venuri places bananas.

Figure 3. Venuri with drummer, Mahesh Umagiliya, in the background.

The stage is small and intimate: a black square elevated about three feet off the ground. The backdrop is orange and black, and a banana tree and a comb of green bananas are behind the stage, on the left. A woven basket and a palm-frond decoration are near the front of the stage. Three torchlights placed near the left side of the stage provide illumination, supplementing the standard stage lighting.

Several of these elements—the bananas, the palm-frond décor, the woven basket, and the torch-lights—are typical of village rituals. What is not typical is a woman assuming the role of a ritualist, since cultural ideas about women's impurity prohibit Sinhala women from performing these kinds of ceremonies. Also atypical is the costume, a very striking bright orange construction composed of several plastic panels. Though it roughly resembles the shape of a traditional ritual costume worn by men, its material and design mark it as contemporary. The orange color references the saffron robes of Buddhist monks. The black spots that adorn the costume have a dual meaning: the spots of a leopard (*diviyā*), an animal resonant with ritual significance for Sinhala villagers, and camouflage, to signify the militarization of the monks.[27]

The audience, a mix of women and men, middle-aged and young, Sri Lankans and foreigners, is seated around the sides and front of the stage. Some are seated on the ground close to the stage, while most are in chairs. Kumari, the singer and narrative performer, is a middle-aged woman, dressed in a red cotton tunic and striped wrap. She is seated on a low stool, next to the left side of the stage, as seen from the audience.

Part 1-A: Dance

The performance opens with Venuri standing with a banana in each hand, held close to her

Figure 4. Venuri in *mänḍiya* position.

Figure 5. Venuri aiming at the audience.

torso (figure 3). Her long dark hair is unbound and uncovered, swept back from her face. Her feet are bare.

Venuri's gaze is directed straight ahead. She slowly lifts her right foot off the stage, and carefully places it back; then does the same with the left. She repeats this sequence two more times. This minimalist motion draws attention to the construction of the plastic costume, which gleams and moves easily with her movements, revealing her legs, clad in brown tights, underneath.

After about a minute, abruptly, and with a loud slap of the feet, Venuri jumps into a wide-stanced position, the *mäṇḍiya*, which is the foundation of all Sinhala ritual dances. Her center of gravity has shifted lower and her arms are outstretched wide, holding the two bananas upright (figure 4). Her gaze has intensified: it is now a glare, with which she surveys the audience, moving her head slowly from right to left, taking in all of the spectators. Her arms then shift into the position of a person—an Army soldier, a guerrilla fighter, a security officer—holding a rifle aimed at the audience, which she swings around in a semicircle. In this movement, her features take on a menacing look.

Returning to the *mäṇḍiya* position, she begins to loudly and rhythmically slap her heels against the stage, first the right, then the left. She begins slowly and then accelerates this stamping until her feet are vibrating against the floor. The style of her dance is *tāṇḍava*: forceful and assertive.

She then leaps again into the gun-holding position. She points one of the bananas at audience members, creating a feeling of entrapment. The audience is literally "under the gun" (figure 5). She moves in response to sounds in the audience. She is wary. Her senses are alerted to the presence of another, as might be the case in jungle warfare. Throughout, she trains her intense gaze on the audience. She then briefly returns to an upright posture, with a composed face, but soon begins stamping her right foot loudly, with her right arm raised up.

Part 1-A: Singing

Kumari stands from her seat, and moves closer to the side of the stage, her eyes fixed on Venuri. She begins singing in a forceful and lively manner, moving her body and gesturing with her arms to accentuate the words and rhythm of the song, as Venuri stamps and circles in time. Though women never sing in traditional low-country healing rituals such as *yak tovil*, Kumari brilliantly captures the rhythms, tone, and nasality characteristic of the singing of male ritual priests. At some moments, Venuri mimes or acts out parts of the narrative. In this section her dancing augments the meanings conveyed in song. Kumari sings in Sinhala with a lively tone and manner:[28]

> Hurry up and come boys
> Hurry, hurry, and come here // [repeated twice]
> Come dancing; come singing
> It is a real boon to us
> Come barking
> It is a real joy to us
> Come running
> The job isn't hard to do
> There are many gifts for you
> Say *sādu*, *sādu*! (veneration cry like Great One! Great One!)[29]

This verse appears to be sung from the perspective of Buddhist monks or politicians who are recruiting "boys," which in Sri Lanka means young men, to do a "job"—attack Muslims and Christians—for which they will receive "gifts" as payment.

Luke Heslop (2014, 61) reports that during the Dambulla attack Buddhist protesters chanted "*sādu-sādu-sādu*" as they threw rocks at the mosque.[30]

> Search in Europe
> Search in any rope
> Search in human abodes
> Search in the demons' abodes[31]
> In that abode or this abode
> Search in monasteries[32]
> Find those cattle thieves
> They stole the sacred cows![33]
> Say *sādu*, *sādu*!
> And make joyful noise
> ...
> Chase out the cattle thieves
> Chase out the drug/heroin thieves[34]
> ...
> Hurry up and come boys
> Hurry, hurry, and come here
> The demon! (*yakā* [she shouts, not sings])
> What happened? [she says this in English]
> Drop it and see!

The singing section comes to a close and Kumari retakes her seat.

Part 1-B: Dancing and singing

Venuri's mood now changes to quiet and somewhat tentative. Her gaze has softened. She wipes her nose. She appears to be vulnerable, a dramatic shift from her forceful, assertive demeanor. Standing still, she starts to slowly, gracefully, peel the banana she holds in her right hand. She then takes a bite and chews slowly, while looking out placidly at the audience. She takes four bites, about half the banana, and then sets it down. Kumari, still seated, starts to sing again as Venuri exits the stage. Kumari's tone is calm. The next song is just a few verses, utilizing a familiar ritual formula in which places associated with specific gods (for example, Kataragama) and the site of the ritual, which is Colombo, are named:

> In this highly prosperous Sri Lanka
> In this Kadira's city in the Ruhunu region [Kataragama]
> In the Pihiti region of Colombo city
> Those living in prosperity and splendor
> ...
> Long may they live (*āyubōvēvā*)

Iroshan Anuradha, the drummer, comes and stands near the stage, on the opposite side from Kumari. His costume is a pared down version of the attire worn by traditional low-country ritual drummers. For example, he wears the standard red cummerbund but is not adorned with the usual decorated cloth neckpiece, or the

white turban of low-country drummers. He is playing a *yak beraya*, the ritual drum of the low country. He plays softly as Kumari sings.

Interlude: Comic dialogue

Having completed the song, Kumari shifts into speaking, greeting the drummer as Gurunnanse, or "respected teacher." Though *gurunnanse* is a respectful term, it is used somewhat ironically in the dialogue. In *Kesel Maduwa*, as in many village healing rituals, the character of the Gurunnanse is often depicted as quite clueless.[35] Kumari uses an intonation and rhythm in her speech that is exactly like that used by male ritual performers, rising and falling in predictable ways. Again, as women are excluded from this role in traditional rituals, it is striking to hear a woman voicing the traditional speech qualities of the dialogue so perfectly.

Comic dialogues between two or three male ritualists are essential parts of major Sinhala village healing rituals. In Sinhala culture, laughter is believed to purify the blood and enable healing; thus, making people laugh is considered an integral part of the ritual process. Dialogues typically combine well-worn jokes and puns with improvisations that reflect the local context and current political and social climate. But these dialogues aren't just for fun: they often lampoon, ridicule, or criticize those in power, particularly the corruption, hypocrisy, and immorality of local and national politicians and Buddhist monks (Kapferer 1991, 50–51, 317–19). Authority figures, including the deities, demons, kings, and even the Buddha, can be the targets of ridicule (Obeyesekere 1999, 24–25). Much of the fun of these dialogues derives from linguistic misunderstandings (ibid, 25).[36] Kumari and the drummer engage in a comic dialogue that elicits much laughter from the audience at various points, making their performance, in ritual terms, a success.

Given the length of the dialogue, I am compelled to cut much of the text here. In the following paragraphs I include those excerpts from it that most clearly address political issues. Ellipses indicate where sections of the dialogue have been excised due to space constraints.

Throughout the dialogue the drummer's gaze is primarily directed toward Kumari, though on occasion he looks at the audience. The drummer also responds to Kumari by saying "*ov*" (yes) or "*hondayi*" (good) or "*ē vagēma*" (it's like that). Indeed, there is much more response from him than is conveyed in the translated text from the program.

During the dialogue, Kumari and the drummer accentuate aspects of their speech with hand and arm gestures and facial expressions. Kumari or the drummer will also occasionally mime segments of the dialogue, such as when the drummer indicates the person is tall (with his hand raised above his head) or *maha* (fat) or when Kumari mimes the twirling of a mustache. These gestures add considerably to the comic effect of the dialogue. Kumari begins the dialogue by exclaiming, *Āyubōvēvā! Āyubōvēvā, Gurunnanse*![37] The drummer responds:

Drummer: Why are all these bananas all over the place?
Kumari: Respected teacher, we are all gathered here

A few hours after the sun has gone down
At this auspicious time
With all these fortunate people
For a Banana Ceremony
Respected teacher, before it becomes a banana flower (*kehel malak*)[38]
We are getting ready for a Banana Ceremony

Drummer: What's the hurry for a Banana Ceremony?
Kumari: This is for all the 84,000 ailments and the sub-ailments
To be vanquished
And the patients

Drummer: Who is the patient?
Kumari: They are all sick (indicating the audience)[39]

Drummer: But it does not show in their faces
Kumari: They all look as if nothing is happening, isn't it?
Yet they have rubbed it all over themselves
They are bathed in it
They have eaten it[40]
Broken and carrying the burden
They have had it
Finished
But it's unfair to say it is these people here only [the audience, ordinary people]
It is the other people too
The great people, big man[41]

Drummer: Is it the tall fellow?
Kumari: Yes he acted innocent then but he has changed now
Curling up his moustache now[42]
Don't talk about him now
Very dangerous
We can choose a new great person
...
The great man you know?
Jaha! Jaha! Is like the cry to drive cattle
They are driven, alright
...
You know how the ailments come, don't you?
Yes with the air, bile, and phlegm
Wind . . . many winds [alluding to the four humors of the indigenous medical system, *āyurveda*]
Pricking you like nails
Have you unloaded
I unloaded everything at home and came
Not lies and eating and bathing, etc. [playing with the sounds of the words; puns, common in comic dialogues]

> These are big things like
> Religious strife, racial strife, caste strife, and family strife...[43]

Near the end of this section, Venuri enters the stage with a rooster in one hand and a knife in the other. She circles once, places the rooster on the floor, then exits.

Part 2-A: Dance

Venuri returns to the stage now dressed in a red and white outfit similar to that of a *yak ädurā* (ritual priest) of the low-country region. She wears loosely draped white pants, and a white top adorned with a red plastic decorative ornament on her chest. Around her waist is a fringed red plastic cloth that hangs slightly below her waist. On her head she wears a red and white cloth that covers her hair.

She walks to center stage and assumes the *mänḍiya* pose with her hands in two *mudrā*s (hand gestures) commonly used in low-country ritual performance (figure 6 and figure 7). The drummer plays a rapid beat, to which Venuri vibrates her right arm. It appears as an arm that is about to strike her. As the drumming stops, she smacks her hand onto her face. Then, using her left arm, she slowly pulls off the right hand from her face as she gazes at it. It is as if the arm and hand belong to someone else: an external force or person who is hitting her. Again, as the drum is beaten rapidly, her left arm appears to be striking and slapping her face, as she leans back, recoiling from the blows (figure 8).

Venuri then mimes the movements of possession, her face in a grotesque grimace with mouth wide open, tongue out, her fingers curled under like claws. She has an animal presence, her face like a lion or a wild dog. Suddenly she droops, as if drained of energy, and falls limply onto the stage. The drumming stops. A recording of a distorted hate speech of the monk Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara, head of the ultra-nationalist BBS (*Bodu Bala Sēna*), plays while Venuri lies on her side.

As the speech becomes louder, Venuri begins to move and jerk as with tremors, still lying on the stage. A few times her body almost touches the rooster. After one sudden movement from Venuri, it flies up and off the stage. Venuri is now writhing, in stiff and jerky movements, as if in pain, as if possessed. Her hair is now loose, the head cloth gone, and she is moving like the possessed women move at the shrine of Kataragama: not completely out of control, but rhythmically, and sometimes gesturing with both hands, as if worshipping.

Dropping on all fours, she again assumes a grotesque, animal-like face, with mouth open and eyes bulging, glaring at the audience. Her tongue hangs out, and her eyes roll back: her face appears as a demon mask worn by ritual priests when they are possessed. She appears to be going through various stages of possession.[44] She lies immobile on the stage as the recorded speech stops.[45]

Part 2-B: Dialogue and chant

Kumari gets up and walks to the edge of the stage, calling to the drummer, “Gurunnanse.” As Venuri lies sprawled on the stage, with legs and arms outstretched, Kumari and the drummer engage in a dialogue about Venuri’s apparent state of

Figure 6. Venuri as *yak ädurā.*

Figure 7. Venuri as *yak ädurā.*

Figure 8. Venuri, receiving a blow.

Figure 9. Venuri, possessed.

Figure 10. Venuri, possessed.

Figure 11. Venuri, possessed.

possession. This kind of exchange is common in healing rituals, when performers, and even audience members, debate whether someone is genuinely possessed and, if so, by which demon or god. Kumari begins by saying, "respected teacher, was that the demon"?

Drummer: Can't say if the demon came or went[46]
Kumari: Was it a demon or a lion?[47]
The chicken also flew away
Drummer: The chicken flew away, no? Must look for it later quietly

Kumari begins to chant, as the drummer keeps rhythm. Venuri is stirring. She eventually gets up and walks off the stage while Kumari chants the following, asking the gods to assist in exorcising demonic forces:

Invoking the gods and seeking their assistance
After viewing the ten atrocities[48]
To the Suniyam god[49]
Son to the great king of
Panduwasnuwara
To the goddess Pattini[50]
An invitation to descend onto the stage
Praising the higher beings with supernatural powers who travel the skies
And beckoning the powerful demons who have overcome the patient
To kindly leave and go

The drummer plays the drum rapidly. During this section, Kumari is seated. They then resume the dialogue:

Drummer: How was the hammering?[51]
Kumari: I hammered and hammered
Why hammer?
Drummer: It's kind of nice
When one gets the chance you hammer
Kumari: Is it cool?
Drummer: It's kind of cool, no?
Kumari: Is it fun?
Drummer: It's kind of fun, no?
Kumari: The hitting goes on

Upon the conclusion of the dialogue, in one of the most pointedly political sections of the performance, Kumari names several towns where either Buddhist monks instigated violence or where Mahinda Rajapaksa or his two brothers, Basil and Gotabaya, were involved in corruption and financial scandals.

I have inserted the political significance of the various towns in brackets. In the original handout, the significance of these places was noted in brief, but here I provide a level of detail that would have been known to most Sri Lankans in the audience.

Kumari: Can you hammer like in
Dambulla [where in April
2012, a mob of two thousand
Sinhalas led by Buddhist
monks attacked and dam,
aged a Muslim mosque],
Hikkaduwa [where on January 12, 2014
a mob led by Buddhist monks attacked two Christian churches],
Maradana [an area for a development project
overseen by Gotabaya Rajapaksa],
Marandagahamula [a rice marketing development
project initiated by Basil Rajapaksa],
Norrecholei [a coal power plant that was
built by the Chinese beginning in 2011 under M. Rajapaksa;
the plant is notorious for its environmental and health hazards]
Hambantota [the locale from which M. Rajapaksa is alleged to have
stolen millions of rupees from a tsunami fund]
Mattala [the town in the Hambantota district that is the site of a
Chinese-funded airport, Mattala Rajapakse Airport, called in a 2017
New York Times article "the world's emptiest airport"]
Many types of strokes
Can you do all that hammering?
Drummer: Oh I am incapable of that kind of hammering,
such massive strokes and hits
Kumari: So shall we hammer the drums?
Drummer: Let's hammer them...

The drummer then beats the drum rapidly, in a concluding phrase.

Figure 12. Venuri carrying a bucket into the *maḍuva*.

Figure 13. Venuri circumambulating the *maḍuva.*

Figure 14. Venuri washing herself with blood.

Part 3: Dancing and singing

Venuri returns to the stage, carrying a square woven basket. She is now dressed all in white, with a long-sleeved formfitting top and blousy, loosely draped pants (figure 12). She walks onto the stage, assuming the movements of a confident and sexual woman. She smiles saucily as she looks into the audience. In my field notes from Cologne I noted: "Her facial expression is kind of strange . . . like possessed, but not quite possessed and powerful and sexy and devious looking all at once." There is silence. Kumari, seated, starts to sing as Venuri walks about on the stage:

> Oh sister, where are you going?
> Swaying your hips like that
> Why are you jerking your body that way
> Going to the shops?
> Contesting an election this time?
> Very bad you are!
> Never came once towards the temple
> The bananas too have all dried up...

These verses include typical words and calls (e.g., "oh sister, where are you going?") that are often directed at women as they are walking on the road. The verses are also a clear admonishment of a woman who does not adhere to the modest and chaste ideals of Sinhala Buddhist womanhood.

Venuri sets the basket down in the center of the stage. She begins to walk to the rhythm of the drum, in the low-country style of the *gaman mātra*, a stylized walk that ritualists use to circumambulate the *maḍuva* (figure 13). The hip swinging is actually typical of low-country male ritual dancers, who sometimes imitate women or feminine movements and styles. Unlike male ritualists, though, Venuri's manner

and facial expressions indicate sexual confidence and even seductiveness.

Venuri kneels down over the basket and takes out a metal water pot. Immersing both hands in the pot, she pulls out handfuls of dark red "blood" which she then rubs on her arms and torso. The blood stands out sharply against the white of her costume. She appears to relish this "blood bath" (figure 14). As she washes and rubs her body with the blood, the drummer accompanies her, keeping time with her movements. These movements recall the earlier verse in the comic dialogue where Kumari has said of the audience (and by implication, the wider society):

> They all look as if nothing is
> happening, isn't it?
> Yet they have rubbed it all
> over themselves
> They are bathed in it
> They have eaten it

Venuri starts to drink the blood. It is a shocking scene. It is visceral and seems quite real. It is both repugnant and grotesque. She washes her mouth and teeth with blood (figure 15), then spreads the blood over and into her loose hair. She raises the pot with both hands over her head and pours blood onto it, which trickles down her face. She is clearly savoring the feeling (figure 16). She rocks her body and hips from side to side as she pours the blood slowly and rhythmically onto her face, head, and neck. She slowly rotates her head as she pours so that all of it is covered. Her face is completely drenched in the dark-colored blood and her hair becomes matted with the sticky substance (figure 17).

Figure 15. Venuri cleaning her teeth with blood.

Figure 16. Venuri begins pouring blood on herself.

Figure 17. Venuri pours blood on herself.

Venuri places the pot down and leans over it to wring the blood out of her hair, as the drum beats along to accentuate her movements. With her hair twisted into a long rope, she leans over and slowly pulls a knife out of the basket. She begins cutting her hair with a sawing motion that indicates its thickness. Eventually, after nearly a minute, she has severed a clump of her darkened blood-congealed hair. Holding the mass of hair in her left hand, she pulls a mirror out of the basket with her right hand, and gazes admiringly into it. As during the previous "blood-bathing" and hair-cutting scenes, she rocks her body and hips in a sensual manner, again accompanied by the drum. She is smiling, revealing gruesome, bloodstained teeth.

She stands up, still holding the mirror in one hand and the clump of hair in the other, and again walks around the stage in the jaunty *gaman mātra* of ritualists. As she walks, she makes odd, high-pitched sounds, a kind of deranged laughter. At times she screams or screeches. These are all signs of possession. After a short time, she appears to be losing energy as she walks, moving into a state of exhaustion. She starts slowly twirling around, then begins to rotate faster. Then she stops. Standing still, she gazes at her cut hair, looking disconcerted, disoriented. She is breathing heavily. The drumming has stopped. In seeming disgust, she throws the hair onto the stage.

The cutting of a woman's hair has multiple meanings, including asceticism and sexual abstinence, as exemplified by the shaved heads of Buddhist nuns. But it is also a sign of modernity. Short hair is identified as modern and Westernized because it defies conventional standards of beauty in which long hair is highly valued. In traditional village rituals, the earth goddess, Shriya Kantava (*Śriya Kāntāva*), is typically honored on an altar that consists of an overturned basket, on which is placed a comb and a mirror, symbols of feminine beauty. Here, these symbols are literally "overturned," with the basket upright and a knife replacing the comb.

Venuri now seems more composed, and definitely more somber. She looks out into the audience, then glances down to look at herself in the mirror as if to ask: "What have I done?" The mirror may be her conscience or the conscience of society asking: "What have we wrought?" She brings the mirror close to her face, as she touches her bloodied cheek, as if to say: "What has caused this?" She seems surprised, incredulous, seemingly asking: "Why all this blood? What happened? It is everywhere: on my face, hair, earlobes, cheeks, and neck. This bloodied body."

On the altar for Shriya Kantava, the mirror normally reflects beauty, but here it reflects the opposite: horror. Watching this poignant scene, the spectator could note that the mirror Venuri holds is two-sided, so that the audience is also reflected in it. Society is culpable but also appears as the victim. In Sinhala ritual dramas ritualists often use a mirror (or a banana-stem carved in the shape of one) to reveal something true—or even visionary—that is unseen by the audience.

Kumari, seated, starts to sing the final song, as Venuri turns her body and the mirror slowly, gracefully, somberly, from one side to the other:

> Therefore by the righteous and good people
> Not being about might of the body
> Being about the might of the mind
> Developing good qualities
> Trusting

Healing the sicknesses
Using the sword of the path of knowledge
Wage war against all the defilements...

The drummer then has the last word, a standard exhortation said at the conclusion of a ritual:

So let all the millions of ailments and sub-ailments
be resolved in the patient
And may their life be long!

After declaring this, he drums a concluding phrase, and he and Kumari retreat, walking away from the stage. Venuri, however, remains on the stage, in silence: looking into the mirror and caressing her hair. Though it seems the performance has ended, she lingers, absorbed in herself. A young man walks up and takes some bananas off the left side of the stage and starts handing them out to audience members; a young woman soon follows, taking bananas off the right side and similarly distributing them. Venuri continues to gaze into the mirror, then exits the stage.

In Cologne, at the ritual's conclusion, Venuri also left the "stage" (in Cologne the performance took place on a demarcated area on the ground, not on an elevated stage). When she returned, the audience responded to her, and to her fellow performer, Mahesh Umagiliya (the drummer and dialogue partner), with enthusiastic applause and a standing ovation. The German audience members I spoke to in Cologne found the piece riveting, intense, and powerful, even as they puzzled over parts of it, especially the provocative, blood-drenched final scene. Throughout the performance I noted how intensely audience members were engaged with it.

Alas, the reception by the Colombo audience is not included in the online video; when the video ends, Venuri is still on stage. However, one newspaper review of the Colombo performance echoed what I heard from audience members, noting that the performance "went far beyond what was expected of it . . . leaving many enthralled and several questions unanswered" (Borhamund and Samaraweera 2014).

Reflections and analysis

The Cosmos of Kesel Maduwa

Kesel Maduwa was effective as both aesthetic and political performance largely through its juxtapositions of the familiar and the unfamiliar. These juxtapositions made the piece compelling: viewers had to be alert to how various elements intertwined and reinforced or contradicted each other. The dramatic contrasts in mood, costume, and modes of movement, along with dance, song, chant, and speech made the piece intriguing, but also challenging, for audience members. *Kesel Maduwa* was thus, above all, provocative: stimulating new ways of thinking about the relation of tradition, ritual, art, dance, and politics.

Ritual creates a world, and *Kesel Maduwa* constructed a world that both drew from and refigured that of traditional Sinhala ritual. As a healing ritual, the piece articulated and displayed the symptoms of society's illness (violence, corruption),

named its causes ("caste, religious, ethnic, and family strife" as well as the objectification and demeaning of women), showed its effects through tortured possession of the body (symbolizing the people, the body politic), and concluded in an unsettling and ambiguous way: through an exorcism that claimed to expel the demonic forces of violence through words, even as the body of the ritualist was left bloodied and exposed.

Kesel Maduwa upends, and even inverts, many conventions of traditional Sinhala ritual. In the following section I describe some of the ways in which the piece refigures both the Sinhala Buddhist cosmos and the structural and ideological elements of traditional ritual.

The Sinhala Buddhist cosmos is composed of three worlds: one visible, two invisible. The visible world is the ordinary, everyday world of humans and animals; the invisible worlds are those of deities and demons. The gods and goddesses who inhabit the *dēva lōka* are virtuous protectors of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, since they follow the Buddhist precepts. In addition, they are benevolent, rational, orderly, and attractive. Like all virtuous beings, they strive to attain *nirvāṇa*. The *yakṣa lōka*, or the world of *yakku* (demons), is the lowest of the three worlds. Here reside hundreds of demons that afflict humans with illness and various kinds of suffering. Demons are the opposite of deities: they are irrational, disorderly, ugly, impure, cruel, and sometimes powerful. However, even they can be redeemed by following the Buddhist path, which results in being reborn in a higher state to eventually achieve *nirvāṇa*.

In rituals, the offerings made to deities and demons reflect their purity or impurity. Pure offerings for the gods are flowers and uncooked fruits or vegetables; impure offerings for *yakku* are fried and burnt foods, intoxicants, and the blood of animals. A rooster is a blood offering: though it is not actually killed in a ritual (since Sinhala Buddhists should not kill), its neck is nicked with a knife and its blood is offered to the demons.

In *Kesel Maduwa*, the *yakku*, or demons, afflicting humans are those who perpetuate violence and corruption: government officials and Buddhist monks. While in traditional rituals the *yakku* are from the demon realm, the demons in *Kesel Maduwa* are humans. In ordinary Sinhala discourse, it is quite common to call humans who defy the norms of Sinhala Buddhist culture *yakku*. Politicians, insurgents, or anyone who embodies unruly, disruptive, and negative elements can be deemed a *yakā*.

Traditional exorcism ceremonies are extraordinarily complex events, but all follow a standard three-part sequence. The first section describes and manifests the disorderly nature of the demons; in the second section the ritual priest confronts the demons with the greater power of the gods and the Buddhist teachings; and in the third section, the ritualist confines and subordinates the demons by showing them to be absurd, foolish, and ultimately powerless figures (Kapferer 1991). In the traditional *yak tovil*, the ritual reaches a resolution, healing the patient of ill effects. *Kesel Maduwa* also unfolds in three parts, but unlike the traditional *yak tovil*, it does not conclude with a resolution.

In part 1 of *Kesel Maduwa*, the dancer appears as a kind of *yakā*: violent, menacing, and threatening to the audience. The leopard spots on her costume link her to the jungle, the wild, which is considered by Sinhalas as an abode of the demonic and is

to be feared. The orange color of the costume and the camouflage pattern allude to the militancy of saffron-robed Buddhist monks. The gun-wielding *yakā* of part 1 symbolizes the pervasiveness of ultranationalist violence in society.

In part 2, we see the demonic made visible in a different guise: one that is similar to the traditional *tovil.* In the village *tovil*, ritualists wear elaborate masks, make-up, and costuming to embody particular demons, such as the Demon of Death (*Maru Sanniya*), the Demon of Blood (*Rīri Yakā*), or the Great Cemetery Demon (*Mahasōnā*). Around midnight—the time demons are most active—they appear in the ritual hall. Dancing vigorously, they aim to frighten the spectators.

Venuri, as the *yak ädurā* (ritual priest) also takes on the guise of a demon, though using facial expressions and body movements rather than a mask to convey this. Her bulging eyes, tongue hanging out, and other animalistic expressions along with her strange and contorted movements clearly indicate the presence of the demonic. The rooster on the stage also signals this presence. In traditional rituals a rooster is an offering made to demons as a substitute for human flesh.

At the end of part 2, Venuri lays prone and still on the stage. This is similar to the moment in a traditional *tovil* when an exorcist offers his own body to the demons as a sacrifice. During this section the priest's body is body wrapped from head to foot in cloth, like a corpse, in order to entice the demons to come. However, at the last minute, he tricks them into accepting the rooster instead. In *Kesel Maduwa*, Venuri similarly lies like a corpse, offering her body to the demons. However, in her case, the rooster has flown, implying that she, in fact, will be sacrificed to the demonic forces of violence.

In part 3, Venuri appears as a possessed woman: it is not clear if she is a ritualist or a patient; perhaps she is both. In *yak tovil*s, it is not only the ritualist but also the patient who can become possessed, entering into a trance state. The patient may dance, speak unfamiliar words, run or walk in an unusual manner, and laugh strangely. Venuri manifests all of these behaviors.

In the second segment of part 3, Venuri begins the gory process of bathing in blood, inverting the symbolism of a cleansing and purifying ritual that is a well-known segment of the *Raṭa Yakuma*, a village ritual performed for pregnant or barren women. Several elements of the blood-bathing scene were clearly inspired by a segment of the *Raṭa Yakuma* known as *The Twelvefold Ritual*. In this segment, a male priest is dressed in women's attire, using coconut shells under his jacket to appear as breasts, with long flowing hair made of coconut leaves. *The Twelvefold Ritual* includes the miming of how seven barren queens groom themselves (Sarachchandra 1966, 145) and rid themselves of impurities by bathing in a lotus pond. The priest mimics a woman pouring potfuls of water over her head, washing her face, scrubbing her body, cleaning her teeth with her fingers, and combing and styling her hair (Sarachchandra 1966, 39).[52] After this segment ends, the ritual priest gazes into a "mirror" (traditionally, a banana stem cut in the shape of a mirror) and says to the chief priest that he can see many things: women with children who are happy and smiling, and those who are sad, who have no children (Sarachchandra 1966, 40). However, in Venuri's reformulation, purifying water and rituals of beautification are replaced with impure and polluting blood and rites of the grotesque. The mirror seems to reveal puzzlement and confusion, rather

than clarity and truth. The inversion of all these elements is shocking, a world turned inside out.

In the final segment of part 3, we experience a juxtaposition of contradictory elements: a contrast between words and the body. On the one hand, the words in the verses seem to provide a resolution similar to that of a traditional *yak tovil* by quelling the demonic, stating that sickness can be healed by the "righteous and good people" who can use the "path of knowledge" to defeat "all defilements." But the body of the ritual priestess in the final segment of *Kesel Maduwa* contradicts the uplifting words of healing sung and spoken by the singer and drummer. The ritual does not end in a settled resolution: the ritual priestess is left alone, drenched in blood: she hardly seems whole. The demonic has overtaken the patient and lingered, leaving the patient stained with the blood of violence. Society seems overwhelmed, unable to purify itself of the stench and substance of its own barbarism. The Buddhist ethical teachings have been defiled by secular power, politics, and militarism, with the final result of horror and despair. The words of healing solace are exposed as insufficient to counter the deeper strains of violence that are expressed through the body of the performer.

By ending on such a note of "dis-ease," Venuri employs an aesthetic technique that keeps the audience puzzled and pondering the relevant sociopolitical issues.[53] In Cologne, after *Kesel Maduwa* ended, my conversations with audience members revealed that it was indeed the lingering image of the blood-drenched woman that was the starting point for conversations about the meanings of the performance.

The gender politics of Kesel Maduwa

Through her performance, Venuri reformulates ritual elements to deconstruct the conventional hierarchical order of gender. In the two major classical dances of Sri Lanka—Kandyan dance and Bharata Naṭyam—women are expected to embody the ideal of the respectable Sinhala or Tamil woman: modest, reserved, and virtuous. Women who perform on stage are constantly scrutinized for their adherence to these ideals, and dance training emphasizes grace, beauty, and femininity for women, even as the dancers are engaged in practices that require considerable strength, agility, and athletic prowess. In the classical dances, women's bodies are viewed as symbols of the nation.[54]

While ideas of respectability shape women's dance performances on stage, it is ideas about their inherent impurity that have deemed them unfit as performers in major Sinhala village healing rituals, which remain an all-male domain. Women's bodies are viewed as impure and shameful; even today a Sinhala woman should not enter a deity shrine (*dēvālaya*) if she is menstruating.[55] In the field of Kandyan dance, it is taboo for women to even touch the sacred *ves* costume worn by men, much less wear it.[56] Women's touch is defiling.

Kesel Maduwa is a challenge to both Sinhala nationalist ideals of demure womanhood, and to cultural ideas of women's impurity. Strong, powerful, and confident, the ritualist in *Kesel Maduwa* is not dependent on men in any capacity. She not only dances alone but flaunts her sexuality in the face of societal criticism. Her role as a *yak ädurā* is a rejection of ideas of women's impurity, and an assertion that women's bodies are not merely vehicles of their supposed virtue. She is a woman

of power: the sacred power to heal afflictions, and sexual power, with desires and appetites of her own.[57]

Kumari's performance as the singer and narrative performer is equally powerful. She is the one who articulates the illness, the cause of illness, and effects a cure through her words. She interrogates and examines: "What happened?" She engages the audience, and she takes the lead in diagnosing the possession of the *ädurā*. In the comic dialogues, she is the composed and intelligent "straight man" in contrast to the foolish and clueless *gurunnanse*.

Kumari's performance as critic of the state and Buddhist monks also challenges the male dominance of political discourse and critique in Sri Lanka. Despite having elected two women heads of state (Sirimavo Bandaranaike, in 1960 and 1970, and her daughter, Chandrika Kumaratunga, in 1994 and 1999), the political sphere of Sri Lanka is overwhelmingly male dominated. Women only hold 5.3 percent (twelve) seats in the current parliament, and no women currently (at September 2020) holds a major political office. However, there is a strong culture of women's political activism in Sri Lanka: many human rights organizations critical of the state and nationalist extremists are led by or include women in positions of prominence. Within this context, *Kesel Maduwa* can be seen as a contribution to women's political activism and peacebuilding.

Kesel Maduwa also contributes to expanding roles for women within the larger field of political and activist performance that has long been dominated by men. As Kanchuka Dharmasiri notes regarding the Sinhala and Tamil theater in general, while there have been well-known and highly regarded women actors, the role of director and playwright has been largely male dominated (2014, 226). She notes that the dearth of female directors and playwrights can be attributed to expectations that women should prioritize family obligations over career (Dharmasiri 2014, 226). With a few exceptions, such as the late director and actor Somalatha Subasinghe, the major theater directors and organizers associated with peacebuilding and engaged theater initiatives have been men.[58]

Conclusion

In the current context of Sri Lanka, it takes considerable courage and commitment to be an activist artist working for peace, conflict transformation, and ethnic reconciliation. Due to the nearly thirty years of ethnic conflict that has led to increasing ethnic polarization along with the "intense militarization" of society, peace activism is regarded as "ambiguous and unpatriotic within the mainstream conflict narratives" (Premaratna 2018, 142). For example, even in the post-war era, members of the renowned multi-ethnic Jana Karaliya theater troupe, which has been performing in Sinhala and Tamil regions for over fifteen years, are often reported to police as "suspicious" and initially viewed with hostility by local officials and community members (Premaratna 2018, 141).[59]

Yet, theater and dance professionals engaged in political and socially engaged theater persist, resilient in the face of such hostility and difficult conditions. Performers and teachers with years of experience, such as M. Kalidas, a highly regarded up-country Tamil actor, director of children's theater, and long-time

member of Jana Karaliya, have faith in theater—and other arts—as "the key instrument through which dialogue can be reintroduced into communities that no longer talk to each other" (Premaratna 2018, 130).

Madhawa Palihapitiya, who was a conflict resolution worker in the Eastern Province during the war, affirms that much of the work already accomplished by performance professionals in Sri Lanka has been a success: "I have seen how theatre artists in Sri Lanka have been able uniquely to create spaces in which communities can reflect, mourn, empathize with the other, acknowledge injuries done, and feel respected and empowered" (2011, 95).

Scholars of performance have a critical role to play in the peacebuilding process. Though the arts are increasingly being recognized as having an important role to play in peacebuilding and conflict transformation, there has been limited research on the topic, particularly in-depth empirical analyses at the local level (Premaratna 2018, 7).[60] Exploring art's role in peacebuilding "is a search for the transformative power of what reaches us amidst the emotional and political turmoil of conflict" (Premaratna 2018, 233). When "calculated rational arguments" and "well-formed policy frameworks" have failed, the arts can provide an alternative (Premaratna 2018, 233).

Through *Kesel Maduwa* and her other politically engaged performance work, Venuri Perera is part of a growing number of Sri Lankan artists who are expanding the role of the arts in peacebuilding. In Palihapitiya's assessment of performance activism in Sri Lanka, he asserts that the artists who are working for peace "deserve the best thinking and support of all of us who are committed to creative approaches to transforming seemingly intractable conflicts" (2011, 95). In a world that appears to be fragmenting at a frightening pace, critical analyses of art and peacebuilding have a crucial role to perform in reflection, healing, and conflict transformation.

Author

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Notes

1. For a comprehensive description and analysis of the Dambulla attack, see Heslop (2014).

2. See, fot example, Fernando (2013) for details of government efforts to Sinhalize the Tamil regions of the north and east. For analysis of the prospects for peace in post-war Sri Lanka see Amarasingam and Bass (2016).

3. In Batticaloa, for example, the project "Building Critical Democratic Communities" is exploring how traditional ritual and performing arts might be used to challenge exclusionary discourses

of community and identity. Sponsored by the British Academy, the project is a collaboration between Goldsmiths College, the University of London, the Eastern University of Sri Lanka, and the Law and Society Trust. The project was initiated in 2018 and is ongoing; however, due to disruptions caused by Covid-19, a number of community events originally scheduled for 2020 and 2021 have had to be cancelled or postponed (Kiran Grewal, personal communication, April 21, 2021).

4. Interview with Venuri Perera, March 7, 2019, Battaramulla.

5. The two edited volumes of Cohen, Varea, and Walker (2011b and 2011c) provide a comprehensive analysis and set of case studies of theater performances employed in the "creative transformation of conflict," a phrase that they prefer over "conflict resolution" (2011a, 9). While the editors exclude performances that consist primarily of dance (2011a, 9), the analyses and methodological frameworks employed in these volumes offer much to scholars exploring the role of dance in peacebuilding. See also the edited volume of Jackson and Shapiro (2008) on dance, human rights, and social justice.

6. Researching and analyzing the effects of political performances is a complex and difficult task, given that these effects may be quite subtle and may or may not translate directly to social or political action. As Indian theater scholar Ashis Sengupta notes, "Political or socially engaged theater may or may not bring about any immediate or visible change to the existing political or social order, but it can still influence people's attitude and change their ways of thinking by dealing with serious issues and in a language that is more direct and persuasive than merely seductive and metaphorical" (Sengupta 2014, 15). Even when the audience is composed of those who are already committed to the political project of a performance, the performance may provide an occasion for their commitment to be validated and for these audience members to recommit to a cause. As well, "Those who are either not politically aware or do not already share those beliefs can be persuaded all the more by the play's performative power. This is more applicable to those sections of the audience in a postcolonial, developing society, whose everyday lives are enmeshed in conflicts but who have little idea of how to react to them" (Sengupta 2014, 15). While I have not as yet conducted in-depth research on the impact of *Kesel Maduwa* (and such impact may be measured in both the short and long term), I wish to stress that I consider such research an extremely valuable, if often neglected, aspect of dance and performance analyses.

7. In Sri Lanka there have been a number of theater professionals and organizations involved in peacebuilding work (see, e.g., Dewi 2010; Palihapitiya 2011; Premaratna 2018; Thompson 2007). Theater groups engaged in peacebuilding include Inter-Act Art, Floating Space Theatre, Act4, Abhina, and Stages Theatre. These groups work primarily in Sinhala and English (Premaratna 2018, 119). The Centre for the Performing Arts, affiliated with the Catholic church, has centers throughout the island and produces plays in both Sinhala and Tamil (Premaratna 2018, 119; see also Thompson 2007).

8. Performers often differentiate between work that is product- or process-oriented. While my focus here is on a work of art, it is important to note that in Sri Lanka performers are also increasingly engaging in process-oriented and collaborative work across ethnic lines. While the famed theater group Jana Karaliya has since the early 2000s engaged in collaborations with Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim communities to model a peaceful multi-ethnic society (Premaratna 2018, 136), they were for a long time one of the few organizations with such a goal. In the post-

war period, more organizations have become engaged in such work, bringing together artists from different ethnic communities to create together, with the idea of building relationships and community. In 2017 and 2018, for example, the Goethe Institut organized week-long Choreography Camps in Kalpitiya, led by Venuri Perera, that brought together Sinhala-speaking dancers from the south and Tamil-speaking dancers from Jaffna and Batticaloa. See Satkunaratnam (2013) for an analysis of how Bharata Natyam was employed during the war years to try and build relationships between Tamil and Sinhala dancers and communities.

9. My use of Tamil here is shorthand for the Sri Lankan Tamil community. Up-country Tamils, the descendants of Indian laborers brought by the British to work on tea plantations in the central mountainous ("Up-country") region of the island, have a quite distinct history and a different relation to dance (see Bass 2013).

10. Some Sinhala girls and young women, especially those from the urban educated middle and upper classes, study and perform Bharata Natyam, in part because it is viewed as more feminine and sophisticated than Kandyan dance. Bharata Natyam can also be viewed as "Indian" rather than "Tamil" so that performing it is not necessarily seen as a betrayal of one's ethnic (Sinhala) identity. Intriguingly, James Thompson notes that one activity of the Centre for Performing Arts is "teaching Tamil young people dances usually associated with the Sinhala community and vice versa" (2007, 301). However, he does not specify which Sinhala and Tamil dances, and whether they are the classical forms (for example, Kandyan and Bharata Natyam) or so-called "folk" dances. For more on Bharata Naṭyam in Sri Lanka see Satkunaratnam (2013), O'Shea (2016), and Reed (2010).

11. By contrast, for decades, Sinhala and Tamil theater productions have focused on such issues. Exceptions to this lack of political engagement include early productions of the 1950s and 1960s, such as Premakumara Epitawala's *Titta Batta* [Bitter Rice] and Vasantha Kumar's *Kumburu Panatha* [Paddy Lands Bill]—two major dance dramas that addressed issues of socioeconomic class and state policy. In a discussion of the genre of dance drama (often termed "ballet") in Sri Lanka, drama scholar Tissa Kariyavasam notes that: "Both Premakumar Epitawela and Vasantha Kumar . . . made attempts to dramatize contemporary social problems in dance. They both criticized the agricultural reforms in the country. When the government increased the price of rice, Premakumar did Titta Batha (Bitter Rice). When the government was to impose the Paddy Lands Act both did ballets to praise the Act" (Robinson 1988, 90).

12. The Goethe Institut in Sri Lanka has been critical in the development of contemporary dance, providing opportunities for dancers and choreographers to learn and experiment with new techniques through workshops and performances by and with prominent international dancemakers. In 2010, the Goethe Institut established the biennial Colombo Dance Platform as a means to promote contemporary dance.

13. Other contemporary dancers and choreographers, such as Mahesh Umagiliya and Sudesh Mantillake, also draw from their deep knowledge and training in the Kandyan dance tradition to produce innovative and critical dance pieces.

14. Interview with Venuri Perera, March 6, 2019, Colombo.

15. Interview with Venuri Perera, March 6, 2019, Colombo.

16. Interview with Venuri Perera, March 7, 2019, Battaramulla.

17. Interview with Venuri Perera, March 6, 2019, Colombo.

18. Interview with Venuri Perera, March 6, 2019, Colombo.

19. Interview with Venuri Perera, March 6, 2019, Colombo.

20. Participants included Shyam Selvadurai, author of *Funny Boy* and other novels; Bradman Weerakoon, a Sri Lankan civil servant and advisor to nine presidents; and Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu, director of the Center for Policy Alternatives.

21. The Cologne performance took place in the early evening of May 17, 2014.

22. In Cologne, Venuri performed outdoors on the grounds of a space near one of the university's academic buildings. Mahesh Umagiliya, a well-known Sri Lankan dancer and choreographer, performed as the drummer (on African drums loaned by the university) and engaged in comic dialogues with Venuri.

23. My description of the Colombo performance is based, in part, on the video recording, *Colomboscope Keselmaduwa 2014*, available on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=90Cu6HC1B6Y.

24. The script was created collaboratively by Kumari Kumaragamage and Venuri Perera.

25. Interview with Venuri Perera, March 7, 2019, Battaramulla.

26. The preparation of the *maḍuva* is not included in the YouTube video.

27. Venuri Perera, personal communication, January 22, 2020.

28. The English translations of the Sinhala songs and dialogues are from the handout that was given to audience members in Cologne. For the sake of clarity and consistency, I have made a few minor changes in spelling and grammar.

29. This phrase in parentheses is in the original handout.

30. The term *sādu* has a cluster of meanings: "The predominant reference is to offering respect to a superior, especially a spiritual superior. In this mode it is whispered or muttered as the conclusion of a ritual recitation or chant, and it can be seen as a verbalization of the physical act of worship by bringing one's palms together. However, in recent times militant Buddhism has incorporated this expression of religious emotion for purposes of proclaiming superiority over ethnic and religious minorities and seeking religious legitimation for majoritarian domination. A cry that literally means 'may there be peace/good' has been made into a battle cry of mob transgression into minority territory" (H. L. Seneviratne, personal communication, August 10, 2019).

31. In the handout provided to the audience in Cologne, the word *yakā* is translated throughout as "devil." However, *yakā* is more accurately translated as "demon," since "devil" has a Christian connotation. I have thus changed the word to "demon" here and in the remainder of the article. Anthropologist Alex Argenti-Pillen (2003) even eschews the term demon, instead translating *yakā* as "spirit of the wild."

32. The reference is to Buddhist monasteries.

33. Muslims are the butchers of Sri Lanka. In recent years cattle slaughter and anti-beef campaigns have been waged by extremist Buddhist monks as a cover for attacking Muslim businesses. See the contribution in this special issue of Mari Miyamoto, Jan Magnusson, and Frank Korom for similar campaigns in Bhutan, as well as Mara Malagodi for Nepal. On the taboo on beef in South Asia generally, see Korom (2000).

34. This section appears to describe an attack on Muslims, who are the "cattle thieves." Right-wing Buddhist monks also characterize them as being drug/heroin dealers. Moreover, Buddhist extremist groups, such as the aforementioned BBS, have accused Muslim women of using their veils to conceal drugs they are purportedly trafficking.

35. See Reed (2010, 68) for discussion of a comic episode in a traditional healing ritual in which a clueless "guru" is featured.

36. For examples of comic dialogues in traditional Sinhala village rituals, see Kapferer (1991) and Obeyesekere (1999, 25–30). Satirical comic dialogues were also employed in the modern theatrical genre of Street Theatre that emerged in Sri Lanka in the 1970s. Obeyesekere notes that the appeal of Street Theatre to villagers may have been due to the fact that these were familiar from folk rituals. Thus, "Street Theatre might thus be seen as a direct take-off or extensions of the comic interludes of folk ritual and their transformation into the modern political context" (Obeysekere 1999, 54).

37. The term is here used as a greeting meaning "may you live long."

38. *Kehel malak* (banana flower) is often used as a derogatory term for a nuisance.

39. She says this in English and gestures to the audience, which elicits the first laughter of the performance.

40. Here she seems to allude to what is to come: the rubbing, bathing, and eating of blood by Venuri in the performance's final segment, which are symptoms of the sickness. This suggests the audience members are sick: but in what way? Have they caused it, or did others?

41. She is referring to politicians and the president, Mahinda Rajapaksa.

42. This is a clear reference to Mahinda Rajapaksa, who has a large, thick moustache.

43. During the actual performance in Colombo, the order was changed to the following: "*kula vāda, āgam vāda, jāti vāda, pavul vāda*" (caste strife, religious strife, racial strife, family strife). Note that the word translated as "racial" (*jāti*) can also be translated as "ethnic." In any case, she is here referring to anti-Muslim and anti-Christian violence (religious strife) and anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim strife (racial/ethnic strife) perpetuated by Sinhala Buddhist extremists.

44. In Cologne, Venuri also walked and gestured as if possessed during this segment of the performance (figures 9, 10, 11).

45. This scene is similar to that of an exorcism ritual when the priest lies on the ground like a corpse, offering his body to a demon.

46. This is an important line, as it suggests that in this sequence the ritual dancer may either have become possessed by a demon, or that the demon has been exorcised.

47. The lion, or *sinha*, is emblematic of the Sinhala people, "the people of the lion." It could also refer to Mahinda Rajapaksa or other Sinhala Buddhist nationalists, or more abstractly to Sinhala Buddhist nationalism as an ideology.

48. This is a reference to the recent ethno-religious violence that has occurred on the island since the end of the protracted civil war.

49. Suniyam is a major god in the Sinhala Buddhist pantheon, especially in the south.

50. Pattini is the only major goddess in the Sinhala Buddhist pantheon. She is rarely worshipped in contemporary times, so her inclusion here is significant as a representation of the divine feminine. Another goddess, Shriya Kantava, the earth goddess, is alluded to in a following scene.

51. Here the drummer is playing on the word *gahanava*, which can refer to beating a drum but also to attacking others, verbally or physically.

52. Sarachchandra (1966, 145–50) includes photos of these actions that are strikingly similar to those of Venuri in *Kesel Maduwa*.

53. Indian drama scholar Ashis Sengupta notes that, "All social and political theatre more or less engages with an unjust society or political system for change, an exercise that is incomplete unless aesthetically engaging, too. Even the note of dis-ease a play or performance may deliberately end on to keep the audience thinking about issues has to be worked out aesthetically" (Sengupta 2014, 16).

54. For more on women and Kandyan dance see Reed (2010, 198–217). The stereotypes hold true for women in other genres and media as well. As Kanchuka Dharmasiri remarks in her discussion of contemporary drama: "stereotypes of the ideal Sinhala Buddhist or Tamil woman are not notions of a bygone era; they are constantly and consistently produced through media imagery and nationalist rhetoric" (Dharmasiri 2014, 223).

55. Women can, however, enter a Buddhist temple (*vihāraya*) at any time.

56. However, a few Sinhala women have defied this prohibition on wearing the *ves* costume. In the 2000s, Miranda Hemalatha, a well-known Sinhala dancer from Colombo, initiated several of her women students in a *ves* ceremony, after which they routinely performed wearing the full *ves* costume (Reed 2010, 215–17).

57. The sexual symbolism of *Kesel Maduwa* is a subject ripe for analysis, but beyond the scope of this article. Many traditional Sinhala folk rituals are rich in complex sexual symbolism. See, for example, Gananath Obeyesekere's psychoanalytic interpretations of the Sinhala folk ritual of *gam maḍuva* (1984).

58. Somalatha Subasinghe was highly regarded for her work in children's theater in particular. She also trained others in this work, such as Muniyandi Kalidas, a highly regarded Tamil actor and theater educator (interview with M. Kalidas, April 5, 2012, Wellawatte). For more on Somalatha Subasinghe's organization, see Dewi (2010, 60, 63). Somalatha passed away in 2015; her work is now being carried on by her daughter, Kaushalya Fernando.

59. In 2011, Palihapitiya noted that in comparison to the 1980s and early to mid-1990s, the space for theater and peacebuilding had actually decreased since the late 1990s, and that due to the intensification of militarism on the island "productions depicting national fervor and ancient victories of Sinhala kings" dominated the theater scene (2011, 95).

60. Premaratna's (2018) comprehensive study and analysis of theater for peace in South Asia provides an excellent conceptual framework, grounded in empirical research, for further studies of art, performance, and peacebuilding.

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