

An Assessment on the Philosophical and Psychological Aspects of the Traditional Devil Dance Practices of Sri Lanka

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In a scientifically developed society like today, the traditional devil dance practices are being out rightly rejected as forms of mystic practices. This study aims to prove the psychological and philosophical value manifested in these so called mystic devil dance practices, with special reference to psychoanalysis and the concept of catharsis. The 'Poetics' by Aristotle and secondary sources related to the devil dance practices in Sri Lanka are used in this research. The qualitative data gained through literary analysis are critically and comparatively analysed to reach a conclusion. Traditional Sri Lankan devil dance practices have a deep psychological value, underlying the scientific claim that certain ailments and mental instability are caused by distorted and destructive feelings that are being suppressed in mind. As Sigmund Freud has claimed, the destructive and distorted feelings that are trapped in the unconsciousness create mental and (sometimes) physical disabilities, therefore they should be brought up to the conscious level and should be released. The devil dance practices, going a step further from modern psychological explanations, try to cure mental and physical instabilities created by fear and insecurity (which is symbolically represented through the concept of Yakas) through the invocation of fear itself, using devil figured masks, exaggerated folk poems describing yakas and sound effects of drums. Apart from this psychological value, the philosophical value of the devil dance practices can be seen with its relation to the concept of catharsis presented by Aristotle in 'Poetics'. Catharsis is aimed at purgation of destructive human emotions by evoking fear and pity in people through tragedies, providing an outlet to the free flow of these negative emotions. Therefore, it can be concluded that these two Eastern and Western practices share similarities despite the geographical and cultural differences.

Keywords: Mystic devil dance, catharsis, yakas, Aristotle, Eastern, Western