

# A Dialogue between Cultures

A. J. Gunawardana

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Culture can be defined in so many different ways. Some think of culture in terms of arts, literature, performing arts, fine arts, and so on. Others perceive culture as the total content of a civilization. Whatever our definition, it must be conceded that culture has a primary role to play in our lives.

I must say that I am not very comfortable with the idea of a single, closed, monolithic culture assigned to each ethnic group. Ours is a multi-cultural society — that is the truth, whether or not we like it. And all societies today are becoming multi-cultural in a very genuine sense. No culture can lead an isolated, protected existence. I have used the term "Asterix mentality" to identify the gate-keeping approach to culture. The Asterix cartoons are about a small village in Gaul which is trying to fend off all external influences. Because they have a special concoction which gives them super-human power this is possible. But this is not so in the real world. We don't have a magic potion. We must also remember that culture has a material base.

The truth is that we are living in a world that is dominated by, permeated by mass media. This penetration of mass media is going on all the time. As a result, we begin to feel worried about the possible loss of our cultural identity. This is not

something which is peculiar to Sri Lanka. You find that in even Canada, vis-a-vis the United States. I personally do not think we should worry too much about this danger. As long as a people have a language of their own, their identity is uniquely established. Some people are worried that because English is more widely spoken, because it has more resources at its disposal, it might one day swallow up the Sinhala language. This is being paranoid.

After all we should not forget that even after 400 years of direct colonialism and proselytization this country has remained predominantly Sinhala, and Buddhist.

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## A dynamic society

Another problem we have when we are discussing culture is that we assume that society remains static. But society is a dynamic organism. It is constantly changing. Equally regrettably we tend to look at cultural issues from very parochial standpoints. We sometimes display a gaulish mentality. For thousands of years, we have been influenced by the Greeks, the Romans, the Indians, the

Western Europeans and so on. The only difference is that now this has become universal.

Our feeling of vulnerability is understandable. The Sinhalese, though in the majority domestically, are a minority both regionally and globally.

## Pursuit of excellence

My conviction is that it is only by meeting, confronting, encountering other cultures on equal terms that one's identity will come to be preserved. Whatever is useful, meaningful, functional will remain in one's culture. Culturally, we must be as liberal, and as open minded as possible. But at the same time, all those who are engaged in cultural endeavour should try to give the very best. The objective should be excellence. It is only by achieving excellence that

you can counter what you may think are influences inimical to your cultural identity. Take the cinema, for example. If you merely make bad copies of Indian films, your films have no right to exist. The day the Indian films come to Sri Lanka, those who merely try to copy Indian films will lose their occupation. We cannot counter external cultural influences by producing second rate films. The problem is that professionalism, the pursuit of excellence, is

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something I miss here. I think there should be competition with products from other cultures for meaning and significance.

**Any kind of philosophy, any kind of ideology that contains even the slightest hint or suggestion of dominance, is bound to aggravate conflict, exacerbate tension rather than diminish it.**

Why has the Hollywood film been so successful universally? Because whatever they do, they do well. Ever since cinema became an industry, it has been dominated quantitatively as well as qualitatively by the Americans everywhere in the world. There are a lot of countries protesting against this, but the problem is that they cannot do without the American product to their cinemas, just as we are finding it today. So how does one fight back? One fights back through excellence. But I do not see ourselves doing that. That is our problem.

Take Wesak. You would have seen in the papers some people lamenting the fact that there is music and illuminations and decorations instead of piety and meritorious deeds. But if you read Fa Hsien's travels, in the 4th and 5th centuries A.D. in India and Sri Lanka, you will find that all Buddhist festivals, whether Mahayana or Heenayana, always had decorations, illuminations, and music. Fa Hsien specifically says that skilled musicians played all night. The question to be asked today is not whether musicians should be playing or not — but whether musicians who play are skilled or not. To me that is the criterion.

### Sense of Balance

What I am saying is that we should maintain a sense of balance. We should not look down or condemn what we are

producing here as being second rate. But we must also realise that there are numerous shortcomings in our cultural productions. And these we must

discuss openly and as objectively as possible. I do not think that this is happening in our country. I do not think that we are selfcritical enough, that we are objective enough. I know this personally, because I have been engaged in cultural and art criticism in this country for a long time, and I can proudly claim that I have very few friends!

**To me, Jathika Chintanaya is not the solution. It is part of the problem.**

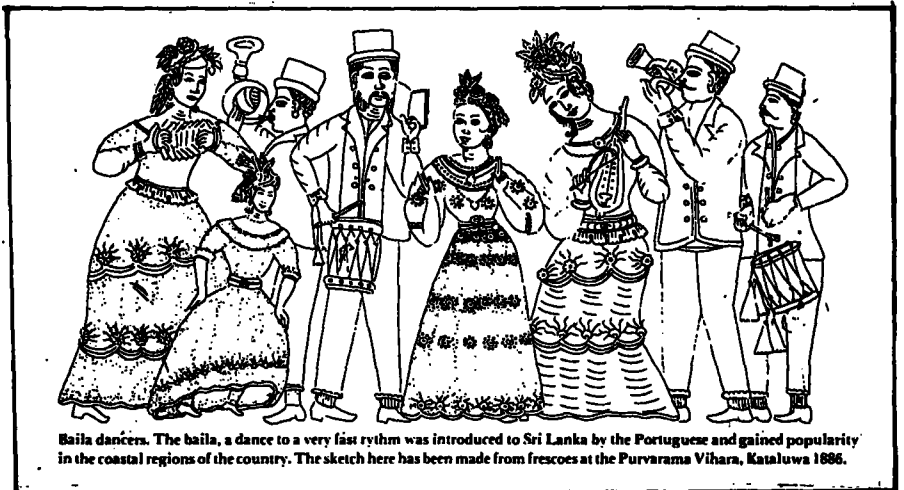
I think the recent fragmentation of the Eastern Europe an model should serve as an eye opener to the political as well as cultural thinkers of this country, or the so-called "progressive" who followed the Eastern European model for a long time, I know of a Sri Lankan writer who once wrote in a book that in East Germany he found young people seated in Cafes

sipping Coffee, and listening very studiously and keenly to Beethoven and Bach, while in West Germany he found uncouth youngsters, high on drugs, dancing to punk rock. People who make such assertions do not realise that rock music is a universal phenomenon, that you find it both in China and in Russia, that you saw it on Russian Television even before Gorbachev's Perestroika and Glasnost. Our condemnation of Baila is something similar. Baila has every right to exist.

### "High Culture" & "Low Culture"

This whole debate about high

culture and low culture has been present even in other countries. Fortunately in many of the so-called developed countries, this debate has now become rational and pragmatic and it is accepted that there are different levels of enjoyment, different levels of entertainment, different levels of sensibility. In no country in the world will you find one level of sensibility.



Baila dancers. The baila, a dance to a very fast rhythm was introduced to Sri Lanka by the Portuguese and gained popularity in the coastal regions of the country. The sketch here has been made from frescoes at the Purvarama Vihara, Kataluwa 1886.

'Baila has every right to exist

Courtesy — Ceylon yesterday — Sri Lanka today by H. A. J. Hulugalla

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## **A dialogue .**

After all, culture fulfils certain needs. These needs define the particular cultural objects that you take over.

### **Jathika Chintanaya**

I have been following the ongoing debate on Jathika Chintanaya in the Sunday Island and what I would like to say is that any kind of philosophy, any kind of ideology that contains even the slightest hint or suggestion of dominance, is bound to aggravate conflict, exacerbate tension rather than diminish it.

My recipe for our current problems is not Jathika Chintanaya. Because, to me Jathika Chintanaya is not the solution. It is part of the problem. My recipe for it is what Mao said "Let a thousand flowers bloom". Let every flower bloom, let every culture bloom. We must encourage dialogue between cultures; creative and affirmative encounters are what we desperately need, not fresh grounds for tension, conflict or paranoia.