

# The Healing Masks of Sri Lanka

Posted on

Kalpana Isaac



Gara Yakka, a Tovil mask worn in the concluding purification ceremony.

Historically masks were used in rituals to exorcise villager's fears and illnesses. Even today, patients who require psychiatric therapy more often than not approach the Kattadiyas who dance their illness away; 'for it is commonly believed that illnesses are caused by an evil force entering the body. The masked dancer either appeases the spirit and pleads with it to leave the person's body, or drives it away by force. From this tradition of healing grew the folk dramas in which masks were worn to portray illness and to dramatically symbolize the forces of good against evil. Sri Lankan masks originated, in three types of folk drama: Kolam, Sokari and Tovil.

In all, the characters wore masks to portray larger than life images of human or supernatural emotions. The commonest emotions portrayed were awe and fear.

## **Kolam** – Dance to Appease the Cravings of Pregnancy

For two hundred years or more, Kolam was the popular entertainment in maritime areas of southern Sri Lanka. It is performed in the open, the audience sitting on the ground with a space in the middle for players, all of whom wear masks. It starts around 9.00 p. m. and goes on until the early hours of the morning.

According to legend, the first Kolam was performed for King Mahasmmata and his Queen to appease the Doladuka – her cravings for pregnancy. Today this ritual is performed as a prelude to any Kalama, the drama in which preparations are made to the King and Queen's arrival the prelude evokes laughter and ends with the Rassa dancer's performance. The most picturesque masks are those belonging to the Rassa group. These are imaginatively conceived to form a picture of immense power to evoke a sense of awe and fear of the unknown. The Rassaya were semi-divine beings who could be either kind or cruel and thus had to be appeased. The Rassa masks are very large, generally about two feet high, and heavy. The performer have to show great strength as well as acting abilities. The Kolam, or

Kolamas as they are now called, are usually based on popular folk legends or on the Jataka tales which relate stories of Lord Buddha on his journey toward Nibbana. The tales highlight revealing incidents of each life he lived, thereby teaching the audience how to cope with similar situations in their lives. Another common theme is the Gama Katawa or village tale. The biggest of Sri Lankan masks are those of this group, and the biggest of this lot are those of the King and Queen. The most skillful Kolam are those depicting old age. In them wrinkles on the forehead, the cheeks and corners of the mouth are carefully delineated, while effective use is made of the absence of teeth, sunken cheeks, gray hair and beards to emphasize old age.

Explore Sri Lanka 14 SOKARI-Dance to Grant Barren Women Children The Sokari drama originated in the central regions and is still performed after the Sinhala New Year during Vesak, and during Poson from mid-April to June. There are seven performances on seven consecutive nights and then seven more at regular intervals to complete the season. Sokari is usually performed on the threshing floor or Kamata, after the paddy harvest. The play is called Sokari after its heroine. It is presented in the form of a mime with some players wearing masks. In certain hill country areas this play has been associated with the cult of Goddess Pattini, who is often worshiped by barren women as the Goddess of Rejuvenation. In other areas it is simple entertainment. The play tells the story of Sokari and her husband who come to Ceylon from Kasi to pray for a child. Accompanied by their servant and his wife, they settle in a village called Tambaravita. Various adventures take place, Sokari's husband is bitten by a dog and the attendant physician ends up running off with Sokari. The play ends on a happy note however with Sokari and her husband reconciled.

### **Tovil** – Dance to Appease and Drive Away Evil Spirits

The Tovil ritual incorporates one of the most famous dances. the Daha Ata Sanniya which means Eight n Devil Dances. Though not many masks are used, the ceremony is complex and involves the invocation and propitiation of many supernatural characters.

The Sanni masks are not as spectacular as the Kolam masks but they are more artistic. They are also much smaller than the normal demon masks, covering from the middle of the forehead to just below the lower lip on a human face. Except for the Mahakolasanni mask, the Sanni masks are human in appearance. According to popular Sinhala mythology, diseases are caused by devils. Sanniyas are generally believed to be the devil's responsibility. When a devil takes possession of a person he or she falls ill. The only cure is in a propitiation ceremony, Tovil in which the devil

is invoked, gratified with various offerings of food and prevailed upon to leave the invalid person. The devil, if satisfied, will leave thereby restoring the person to his or her original state of health. There are eighteen Sannis representing different aspirations of one main Sanni Yakka called the Mahakolasanniya, meaning the Great Green Devil. The Mahakolasanni mask depicts this devil carrying a corpse in his mouth, one in each hand and two laid at his feet. Smaller masks depicting his eighteen attendant apparitions are carved panel wise on either-side of him. The eighteen attendant apparitions are each responsible for a particular type or types of ailments, including blindness, lameness, bad dreams, black death, hallucinations and parasitic worms. The Sanni Natuma, as it is generally referred to, is one of the most spectacular and dramatic episodes of the Tovil ritual. The last dancer to appear at the end of the normal Tovil or Kalama is the Gara Yaka, who performs the ceremony of purification to rid any remaining ill effects owing to errors of commission or omission. The Gara Yakka mask is one of the few with a movable jaw. In proportion, it spreads far and wide with too long lotus ears in addition to the normal elements of a demon mask. It is often painted in blue and green.

### **Mask-Making**

The mask-makers today follow the same method of mask making as their forefathers. The masks are made from the soft wood of Rukattana (*alstonia scholaris*), Eramadu (*erithrina India*) or Kaduru (*strychnox nux-vomica*) trees. Once the tree is selected it is cut and hewn into blocks. Next it is sawn into an approximate semblance of a mask. The features are then delineated with a sharp knife or chisel. Holes are made for the eyes and ears. After this stage tradition gives way to commerce. The paints are no longer made from natural materials but instead bought over the counter. But in the old days the carved wood was smoothed with the leaves of the Boodaliya or Korasa (*delima sarmentosa*) and coated with alliyadu a filler made from white clay. After this, dry designs were painted on the mask in the traditional colors red, yellows, white, black, green and blue. Blue was used sparingly and often green was substituted. The paints were made from vegetables or minerals. White was made from makulu a white clay found in fields and streams. Green came from the kikirindiya plant (*eclipta erecta*), or by mixing blue and yellow. Blue was made from the fruit of the bovitiya (*osbeckia aspera*), black from soot of cotton cloth or from charcoal. Red was from the quartz like mineral called Cinnabar, and yellow from the yellow orpiment also a mineral. Monkey skins were used for eyebrows and mustaches. The hair and beard were made from the niyanda (*sansevieria zelanica*). Its leaves were soaked in water, beaten, dried and combed

and the fibers dyed before use.

Even today mask-makers perform the masked dances, passing the art from father to son as only it can be. Masks can be purchased directly from the makers or in the major cities like Colombo, Kandy and Galle. Some of the mask makers sell their products to the government emporium “Laksala” which exhibits and sells them. Some places where the original tradition of mask-making can be seen are Mirissa, Udapilla and Devi Nuwara in the southern Matara Electorate, and Ambalangoda, on the way to Hikkaduwa (southwest coast).

T.W. Harischandra, son of Gunadasa Basunaha whose masks are among the most impressive ones preserved in the Colombo. National Museum, carries on his fathers trade in Ambalangoda. He also dances when the occasion arises and has done so as a representative of Sri Lanka abroad. The masked dance tradition is still strong in Sri Lanka, and through it legends that first inspired the carvers are kept alive.



The King and Queen masks, the largest and heaviest of Kolam masks. Photo: Pushpakumara Mathugama.



*The Gurulu Dance, depicting the mythical bird Gurulu battling the Naga, or cobra.*



*Jasaya, a Kolam mask, shows the wrinkles and white locks of old age. Photo: Pushpakumara Mathugama.*



*The Mahakolasanniya mask portrays the eighteen malefic demons related to illnesses.*



*The art of mask-making in Sri Lanka is still passed on from generation to generation. Photo courtesy: Ceylon Tourist Board.*