

Ceylon Traditional Masks

Traditions, Techniques, Materials, and Cultural Significance

Introduction

Ceylon (Sri Lankan) traditional masks, known as "Vesmuhanu" in the local language, represent an integral component of Sri Lanka's rich cultural heritage. Dating back to the 15th century, these masks have played significant roles in various aspects of Sri Lankan society, from religious ceremonies and healing rituals to theatrical performances and decorative art. This report explores the traditions, techniques, materials, and cultural significance of these distinctive masks, which continue to be an important symbol of Sri Lankan cultural identity.

Historical Background

The history of mask-making in Sri Lanka is believed to have originated from the South Indian state of Kerala, where palm leaves were the primary material used. When this tradition was adopted in Sri Lanka, particularly in the southern coastal regions like Ambalangoda, local artisans adapted it using indigenous materials and techniques.

The birth of Ceylon Traditional Masks dates as far back as the 15th century, with strong connections to various spiritual practices including devil-worship. These masks evolved to represent various characters from mythology, folklore, and everyday life, each with specific symbolic meanings and purposes.

The island was historically inhabited by several clans, including the Yakkas ('demon-worshippers') and Nagas ('snake-worshippers'), whose beliefs and practices have significantly influenced the symbolism and design of traditional masks. The influence of both indigenous traditions and those from neighboring regions has shaped Sri Lanka's distinctive mask heritage.

Types of Traditional Masks

Ceylon traditional masks can be categorized into three main types, each serving different cultural and ritualistic purposes:

1. Raksha Masks (Demon Masks)

Raksha masks represent demons and are apotropaic, meaning they are intended to ward off evil. The word "Raksha" itself means "demon" in Sinhalese. These masks are painted in vibrant colors with distinctive features including bulging eyes and protruding tongues, depicting various types of demons.

The main varieties of Raksha masks include:

- Naga Raksha (Cobra Mask) - depicting a cobra that captures enemies
- Gurulu Raksha - representing a hawk or eagle that rescues captives
- Maru Raksha - symbolizing the demon of death
- Rathnakuta Raksha - characterized by a large snake hood
- Gara Raksha - used in perahera rituals to cure sickness

The Naga Raksha mask consists of "a ferocious face with bulging, popping & staring eyes, a carnivorous tongue lolling out of a wide mouth armed to the hilt with set of fanged teeth, all topped by a set of cobra hoods."

2. Sanni Masks (Devil Masks)

Sanni masks are primarily used in healing ceremonies and worn by an edura (a Sri Lankan exorcist). According to tradition, there are eighteen different Sanni masks, each specializing in curing specific illnesses.

The name "Sanni Yakuma" derives from the Sinhala word "sanniya" meaning disease or ailment, and "yakuma" meaning demon ritual. This is considered one of the best-known exorcism rituals in Sri Lanka, blending traditional beliefs about spirits with Buddhist elements.

Each of the eighteen Sanni masks represents a specific disease or ailment, forming part of an ancient classification system that medical researchers note is "still relevant today." The exorcism ritual ends with the appearance of the chief demon mask called Maha Kola ("the terrific or all-encompassing one"), which usually incorporates miniature representations of the other 18 demons.

3. Kolam Masks (Folktale Masks)

Kolam masks are used in folk plays and dramas, representing characters from traditional stories. The term "kolam" comes from Tamil, meaning "costume" or "guise." These masks are primarily performed in southern, rural parts of Sri Lanka.

Kolam masks are considered "the finest examples of wood-carving still being executed for the theatre in the modern world." They are used in theatrical performances and usually honor royalty. The performances were traditionally conducted mainly for royal audiences, with the masks carved by specialized carpenters retained by the king.

Kolam performances typically tell "mocking stories of traditional Sri Lankan colonial life" and depict humorous characters from folktales and stories. These masks represent popular folk characters like Nonchi Akka, Mudali, Panikkala, Lenchina, Hewa, and Jasaya.

Materials and Production Techniques

Materials

Traditionally, the wood of the 'Din' tree, which grew on riverbanks, was used for carving masks. However, since this wood wasn't durable, artisans switched to Velkaduru (*Strychnos nux-vomica*) or Rukattana wood.

The Kaduru tree, which grows mostly in marshy lands and near paddy fields, provides wood that is light, soft, and easy to carve. It was favored because it was convenient for carving and comfortable to wear while dancing. Interestingly, this wood was not used for household purposes, not even as firewood, due to beliefs that pots and pans made from it might crack.

For painting the masks, traditional artisans used natural organic and mineral-based pigments:

- White color came from clay
- Green from leaves
- Blue from fruits
- Yellow from yellow pepper
- Black from charred cotton
- Red from red bricks or clay

The brushes used for painting were made from the roots of the screw pine tree (*Vatakeyya*) and animal fur. Additional materials like animal fur, tree fiber, animal teeth and bones, and cock's fur were used for detailing various mask types.

Production Process

The mask-making process involves several intricate steps:

1. **Tree Selection and Preparation:** Before cutting down a Kaduru tree, traditional craftsmen would look for an auspicious time and perform rituals, offering flowers and lamps to the deity believed to inhabit the tree, asking it to move to another tree.
2. **Initial Preparation:** After selecting the tree, the bark is stripped, and the trunk is divided into workable pieces of appropriate sizes depending on the mask to be carved.

3. **Drying and Smoking:** The wood is initially dried in a gentle breeze. The partially completed mask is then placed above a hearth and smoked for about a week. This process removes humidity from the wood and eliminates insects, ensuring better preservation. Due to this treatment, traditional masks can last for centuries.
4. **Carving:** Following traditional verses known as "carving verses" (embunkavi), artisans carve the features of the mask using various measuring tools, including measurement by eyesight, fingers, or specific length measurements.
5. **Refining:** After smoking, the mask's features are further enhanced using chisels of various sizes. The process may involve placing the mask near the fireplace twice before it is completely finished.
6. **Smoothing:** The mask is smoothed using materials like the skin of sea fish (Maduva and Talapath), Del Savaran, or tender leaves of breadfruit trees. Modern mask makers may use sandpaper.
7. **Painting:** Colors prepared from natural materials are mixed with Dorana Oil and applied to the masks. The traditional painting process was time-consuming, as each color application required 3-4 days to dry before another could be applied, resulting in a minimum of three weeks to complete a mask using traditional methods.
8. **Sealing:** A sealant comprising beeswax is applied to protect the colors before final touch-ups.
9. **Final Details:** Facial hair might be mimicked using elephant hairs, and monkey skin is sometimes used to give an authentic velvety skin-like texture.

Cultural and Religious Significance

Ceylon Traditional Masks hold profound cultural and spiritual significance in Sri Lankan society. They are believed to offer protection against the evil eye and are often used as tokens of good fortune in homes and businesses, thought to attract goodwill while warding off bad fortune.

Ceremonial and Healing Practices

The Sanni Yakuma exorcism ritual is particularly significant, consisting of 18 masked dances, each representing a specific illness. During this ritual, the yakadura (lead performer) determines if a patient is affected by a demon and schedules the ritual for an auspicious time, typically from dusk to dawn.

The ritual has two main stages: the Ata Paliya and Daha Ata Sanniya. Dancers wear colorful masks and attire, performing complex dance steps accompanied by rhythmical drum beats. During the ceremony, comic and sometimes obscene dialogues take place between the drummer and the demon, deliberately humiliating the demon.

The exorcism ritual follows a three-step process: first, a specialist lures the demon with offerings; upon arrival, the "doctor" makes the demon promise to leave the patient's body; finally, the demon is politely sent away after performing a last dance.

In the ritual, the yakendura calls forth the specific sannu yaka responsible for the sickness, and a dancer wearing the corresponding mask comes forward. The patient presents an offering to the masked dancer, symbolically appeasing the demon causing their affliction. The exorcist then commands the demon to leave the sick person's body, after which the dancer performs an elaborate dance.

Disease Classification Through Masks

The ancient Sri Lankans had a sophisticated system of classifying diseases through the different Sannu masks:

- Watha Sannu: Represented abdominal conditions like flatulence and gout
- Pith Sannu: Depicted bilious diseases with masks painted yellow or orange to symbolize jaundice
- Amukku Sannu: Associated with vomiting and stomach diseases like diarrhea, represented by a green mask with an expression of disgust
- Ginijala Sannu: Connected to high fever and chills, conditions present in diseases like malaria

Beyond healing, these masks also serve as educational tools, transmitting cultural knowledge and values to younger generations. Through storytelling, dance, and performance, the rich narratives associated with the masks are passed down, ensuring the preservation of cultural heritage.

Contemporary Relevance

While the production of handcrafted masks using traditional methods and the performance of devil dances for healing have diminished in recent years, the making of masks and the enactment of devil dances as cultural performances for outside audiences remain popular, particularly in the southern coastal region.

Today, many Ceylon Traditional Masks are appreciated for their artistic merit beyond their traditional purposes. They are valued for their:

- Rich historical and cultural heritage
- Unique handcrafted artistry
- Stunning visual appeal with bold colors and intricate details

The mask-making tradition continues to thrive as both a cultural practice and an industry, fascinating locals and tourists alike. The masks commonly adorn the walls of local houses and serve as popular souvenirs for visitors.

Centers of Mask-Making

Ambalangoda, along with Mirissa and Pokunuwita in the southwestern coastal areas, has become renowned for mask carving and dancing. Ambalangoda in particular is considered the heart of the mask-making industry in Sri Lanka.

The Mask Museum in Ambalangoda, a privately owned museum run by a well-known local family, is located along the Colombo-Galle main coastal road. The complex includes a mask museum, a mask-making workshop, and a mask showroom, offering educational exhibits related to traditional Sri Lankan mask making.

Conclusion

Ceylon Traditional Masks represent a rich cultural tradition that has evolved over centuries to become a distinctive element of Sri Lankan heritage. From their origins in religious and healing rituals to their contemporary appreciation as art forms, these masks embody the island's complex history and cultural identity. The careful craftsmanship, symbolic designs, and vibrant colors of these masks continue to captivate both locals and international audiences, ensuring the preservation of this unique artistic tradition despite changing social practices.

The mask-making tradition of Sri Lanka, while facing challenges in the modern era, remains an important cultural practice that connects contemporary Sri Lankans to their ancestors' beliefs, artistic expressions, and healing traditions. As both functional objects in traditional ceremonies and decorative art pieces, Ceylon Traditional Masks serve as tangible links to Sri Lanka's cultural past while continuing to evolve in the present day.