

Cultural Significance of Specific Costumes in Sinhalese Folk Theatre

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Abstract

Each country has its own cultural significance which is reflected even in a play that is performed. If the play is a translation, the spectators go through the cultural, religious and political experience pertaining to that particular country as depicted in the context of the play. Theater costumes assume much significance here as they are specially used to surface the cultural significance in theatre. Also costumes provide the space for the actors to switch roles during a performance.

This research focused on how to signify the cultural significance of the Sinhalese folk theatre, namely, *Sokari*, *Kolam* and *Nadagam*. *Sokari* is performed in the upcountry and has not been performed in the down south and the coastal area of the land. This is the oldest folk play the Sinhalese have. This is a theatrically rich play which has been performed after the harvesting period. *Sokari* is performed with specific costumes and this research attempted to analyze how these costumes represent the ancient period of the country and the cultural influence of neighboring India.

Kolam is performed in the down south of the country and has not been performed in the other parts of the land. This performance always depicts the contemporary time of Sri Lanka. In this research I attempted to analyze how the costumes symbolize politicians, policemen and *Mudliars* of the country.

Nadagam is performed in the coastal area of the country. This was influenced by Tamil *Therukkuttu*. With respect to *Nadagam*, I attempted to analyze how the costumes represent contemporary Sinhalese and Tamil culture. The source for primary data were the actual performances of particular plays. The secondary sources included the literature relevant to these areas.

Keywords - Folk theatre, cultural significance, *Sokari*, *Kolam*, *Nadagam*,

Introduction

Sinhalese folk theatre consists of *Sokari*, *Kolam*, and *Nādagam*. These performances are of very primitive type and are associated with harvesting ceremonies and devotional beliefs about the goddess *Pattini*. These folk theatre are performed in villages and the coastal areas. *Sokari Natya* is performed in *Uda Rata*, (up-country) *Vanniya*, *Sathara Koralya*, *Sath Koralya*, *Harispatthuwa*, *Udu dumbara* and *Paatha Dumbara*, though it is not performed in the down south and costal areas of the land. *Sokari* is an enactment of the story of *Sokari*. This is highly dramatized due to usages of *Abhirupanaya* or mime. The main characters do not wear any mask and all of them are male actors due to religious purposes. Folk society believes that woman is prohibited to attend any ceremonies of Gods.

Kolam is performed in the down south in the country such as *Bentara*, *Alutgama*, *Ambalangoda*, *Mirissa Udupila*, *Mātara* and *Thangalla*. The meaning of the word *Kolam* is mockery. The word *Kolam* was borrowed from Tamil, Kannada and Malayalam. Its meaning has changed when it used in Sri Lanka. *Kolam* characters wear suitable masks to represent their characters with facial expressions. These masks made with *Kaduru* wood by Ariyapala Gurunnanse in Ambalangoda.

The development of Sinhalese folk theatre is a continuous process. Nonetheless, there existed special elements and attributes to each individual form. The masks of *Kolam* are quite disturbing to performances. Actors can't utter their dialogue loudly as the face is covered by these masks. Also the masks are quite heavy for the actors as they come to stage and dance.

The word *Nādagam* had been borrowed from Tamil word *Nātakam*, and it has been popular in western coastal belt, Chillaw, Jafna, and Tangalla and this is not performed in the middle part of the country. It is also rare to see this in South. There was a special performance called *Terukkuttu* in Jaffna. It was a kind of street theatre. According to scholars, Sri Lankan *Nādagama* had been influenced by the South Indian *Terukkuttu*¹. Sri Lanka and India are neighboring countries with cross-cultural communication, which had greatly influenced Sri Lankan society. However, *Nādagam* was highly dramatized and it is

¹ *Purāna Sinhala Nādagam Pitapat*, (Vol. I), Sunil Ariyaratna, p. 05

considered as a form of dramatic entertainment. The *Nādagam* actors never wear masks. Carnātaka music and *Nātyadharmi style* were used for these performances.

Method

This research was based on the analysis of actual performances of *Sokari*, *Kolam* and *Nadagam*, which were performed in 2013, 2014 and 2015 in Sri Lanka. The data collection areas of this research were, Ambalangoda, Kandy and Chillow respectively for *Kolam*, *Sokari* and *Nadagam*. It is a new experience, that the researcher was a participant as well as a spectator too. Many of the artists and critics have viewed the folk theatre of Sri Lanka as a heritage. I also wanted to find out why any other culture is not represented by actors' costumes. Entire discussion of this paper has been written in the view of author according to the live performances. Due to prohibition of taking photographs during performances, the researcher had to find images through websites to discuss costumes and cultural significance in Sinhalese folk theatre.

Discussion

Culture is learned and transmitted. It is to be shared with different kinds of interpretations and perceptions. Culture would change from time to time. It is expressed as behavior of the people of the society. It affects our identity.

Culture is shared through communication. It can be defined as an intercultural communication. In that communication process, many differences in cultural values and norms can be observed, and most of the time there are dissimilarities between interpretations and expressions in that intercultural communication.

Theatre is one of the best intercultural communication methods. If the play is a translation, obviously that is based on that particular culture of that country. If it is an original creation, script writer brings that particular culture which he belongs to. Apart from that there are folk theatres in every society. These folk theatre has no particular author, or director.

Those are created by the peasants. When they create those folk theatres, they bring their cultural norms and values from the script and the performances.

Performances included acting, makeup, costumes, stage, lighting, and stage backdrops. Costumes and make-up are important elements of this cultural significance. Not only theatre, but in everyday lives of the people, it can be observed that the people wear their costumes according to the cultural situations such as ceremonial functions and professional lives. This is adopted in theatre as similar to actual lives of the people. Culture changed every moment. So, the costumes and make-up also changed accordingly.

If the costumes belong to culture and interests of people's behavior, it is creativity work in the theatrical process. Make-up and costume artists depicted those costumes to express their thoughts and behavior. It provided space to recognize cultural significances.

Sinhalese culture has been mixed together with the neighboring country, India, since very ancient times. Due to cross cultural communication, many cultural elements like, folk religion, dresses, food, language, music, dance, and musical instruments have influenced Sinhalese culture. The Cholas ruled *Ceylon* in 2nd Century BC. This is the main reason of this cultural influence. At that time, many Sinhalese Kings married Indian princesses thus enhancing this cultural communication.

Sinhalese folk theatre is performed even today in the villages of the country. These folk theatres are associated with the ritualistic practices in Buddhism and Hinduism. Most of the people are Buddhists, but, in day to day life, they need some support from the Gods and demons. Therefore, peasants perform folk plays to get spiritual support to get success or prosperity to their lives. For this reason, peasants act as Gods, Goddesses and Demons. They use costumes and make-up for this purpose.

The Sinhala peasants found proper dresses and make-up from Kerala, India. They started to give offers for some gods like, *Sakandha*, *Vishnu*, *Ganeshas*, *Lakshmi* who belong to Hindu culture. Sinhala people adapted the goddess *Patthini*, *god Skandha* and *Saman* to suit Buddhism. Therefore, those Gods' costumes were influenced by Indian painting and were used in folk theatre too.

As a belief, naturally peasants do not act as gods or goddesses and they used gods' statues for the purpose. An important fact is Sri Lankan's belief that Goddess *Patthini* belongs only to Sri Lanka. But folk people have no any idea to decorate the goddess *Patthini*

as a typical Sri Lankan goddess. Therefore at the introductory song of each folk theatre, Pothe-guru or narrator, sings a song or verse and bow to the exact god and goddess according to the beliefs of particular performing area.

The way the Goddess wears sari, necklaces, Earrings, head-dresses represents the typical Indian culture. According to the *Pattini* story, Goddess *Pattini* belongs to South India and after the tragedy of her husband she came to Sri Lanka and settled to see the Lord Buddha in next 2500 years. According to this legend Sinhalese and Tamils worship goddess *Pattini* and that belief is represented in the folk play *Sokari*.

According to the story of *Sokari*, there is a servant called *Andi Gura* or *Guru hami* in Andrapradesh India. He belongs to *Andis* who is born for the art and culture. In this kingdom there is a beautiful lady called *Sokari*. *Andi Guru* used to give his service to her palace. After some time, a love affair emerged between *Andi Guru* and *Sokari*. When this news was revealed to the king, he asked her daughter to leave the country with *Guru Hami* or stop the love affair. She chose to marry *Guru Hami* and left the country.

Sokari received a servant called *Paraya* and few utensils as her dowry from her father. *Guru Hami* decided to come to Ceylon. They started their journey in an auspicious hour, crossed the seven seas and landed on Ceylon beach. After that they searched a place to settle. They didn't know Sinhalese language. Therefore, they had to face a lot of problems in communication. They started to build a house with mud and coconut leaves. *Sokari* mixed mud with cow dung and made the floor with the rhythm of Kandyan *Getaberaya*. After some time *Guru Hami* went to the village doctor, *Wedarala* to get rice. On his way a dog bites his leg and *Guru Hami* acts his pain. Chorus sings songs depicting this event and *Guru Ham's* pain. Knowing that there is no *Guru Hami* in his home the servant *Paraya* tried to make love with *Sokari*. She refused his ideas and commanded to bring the village doctor to give medicine for her husband.

The village doctor is also not coming without *Sokari's* invitation. Finally she had to go to the village doctor and invited her home. He started to give medical treatments to *Guru Hami* spending the whole day at *Sokari's* house. The village doctor sees *Guru Hami* in a severe pain and tried to make love with *Sokari*. She also agreed with his idea and they eloped at the dawn.

At the next day morning *Guru Hami* wakes-up and searches *Sokari*, realizing there is no *Sokari* at home. He started to pray to the Goddess *Pattini* and God *Skandha* to get *Sokari* back. *Sokari* is pregnant, and she has no kids from *Guru Hami*. Finally they returned back to *Guru Hami's* home and revealed the truth. The pregnancy is a symbol of wealth and prosperity. Every one of the play dances together and get gifts from the audience and the play ends with this event.

Sokari is the oldest Folk play in Sinhala Culture. It is performed after harvesting time, between May and June of each year to get prosperity from the next season. *Sokari* is performed on threshing floor during the harvesting season. Therefore, it is connected with the cult of Goddess *Patthini* and god *Katharagama*. While the harvesting is going on in the night *Sokari* is performed.

This story belongs to Indian culture. But, the performances are totally related to Sri Lanka. *Sokari* wears sari in Kandyan style. The pallu or border comes to the front and there are pleats around the waist. This is totally different from Indian style of wearing sari. Long necklaces, headdress and earrings particularly belong to the Kandyan dress. It signifies Sinhalese marriage system and beliefs. Also these ornaments are worn by Bharatanatyam dancers who belong to Kerala, Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh.

Sinhalese thoroughly believe that Kandyan is our traditional dress and especially the up-country woman wears this. It is a significant aspect of respectable Kandyan Mudalyar's wives. They never wear any other dresses rather than the Kandyan. In contemporary time Kandyan style of sari is worn by women, ladies, and grandmothers in all over the land except in Jafna. But, In India, this style of dress is wearing by rural area's women in Kolkata.

Guruhami and *Sotthana* wear a village type of dress. Sometimes *Guru Hami* wears colorful or black overcoat. This is influenced by the Portuguese, British and Dutch people who ruled Ceylon: Portuguese (1597-1658), Dutch (1640-1796) and British (1780-1815). Sinhalese are typical Sri Lankans who were blended with the multi culture of Chola, Portuguese, Dutch and British. Since Sri Lanka is a small Island with important harbors, many foreigners are eager to come to Sri Lanka, stay and spread their cultural and religious norms and values.

Sinhalese have their own cultural norms related to the tradition of harvesting, religious beliefs, marriages, funerals, and family life. The lives of folks of Ceylon also have

modernized and some norms and values have been eroded from society. Dresses of their daily life are adapted according to changing times and culture of the country.

The other folk theatre is *Kolam*, which is performed in Southern part of the country and it never spread in to the upcountry or other parts of the land. This is famous in Benthara, Ambalangoda, Mirissa, Udupila, Matara, Hambanthota. *Kolam* exists today and the performances depict current events of the village or famous stories of politicians. This is the only play where actors wear masks to depict the character. Those masks are made by Ariyapala Gurunnanse in Ambalangoda.

Kolam is performed in the night and it starts around 7pm and ends in the next dawn. These performances consist of two parts such as primary and posterior session. At the primary session Gods and Demons come to the stage, sing songs and dance. After that stock characters come and narrate their duties and life events by songs or dialogues. At the posterior session there are few stories, like *Maname kathawa*, *Sandakinduru kathawa* and *Gama kathawa*. *Kolam* is performed in humor and sarcasm. The dramatists used vulgar and colloquial words to entertain the audience.

The costumes of stock characters such as *Andabera kolama*, *Heva Kolama*, *Polis Kolama*, *Arachchi kolama*, *Mudali kolama*, *Jasaya and Lenchina*, *Pendi Vidane's* depict various cultures. *Andabera Kolama* comes to the stage to give the message to the folk, that *Kolam* is performed tonight and he invites everyone to come and see the performances. *Andabera* means the sound which comes from playing Dawula or drum. He gives few beats to the drum to get attention from people. After that he starts to give the message loudly, verbally.

Naturally this character wears white Dhoti and red colour headdress. He is an old man, mis-behaves on stage apart from doing his duties. Meanwhile, his wife *Nonchi Akka* is also coming to the stage saying that I couldn't see my husband. Her husband or *Andabera Kolama* falls down on the side of the stage due to having too much of alcohol.

Costumes of *Andabera kolama* and *Nonchi Akka* depict a combination of Kerala and Sinhala culture. Dhoti belongs to Kerala and his necklace which is made by clothe is related to Kandyan dance. *Nonchi Akka's* dress, blouse and cloth which is around her waist depicts the culture of the southern part of the country. This character is mixed with different cultures. First thing, *Kolam* has never been performed in upcountry, but, they have taken the costume

from Kandiyan dance. Therefore, the cultural significance of this character belongs to Kerala, Kandy and Southern part of Sri Lanka.

Polis Kolama comes to the stage to see whether enough security is there for the chief guest. The chief guest is sometimes a minister or other respectable person. Every stock character criticizes current political situation, parliament and ministers with sarcastic dialogues. Even the chief guest never gets angry at the performances because this is the only time that peasants can express their honest idea about the political situation.

Polis Kolama represents the current situation of the police: corruptions, illegal cases, promotions with no qualifications. The folk artist looked at this character sarcastically.

There are few police men who come to the stage, wearing old khaki coat and a short. It is falling from side to side. Short has been tightened with a string. It is always coming down and police Kolama tries to keep it fixed on his waist. The inspector orders his employees

At t e n tion plea....s.....

But, no one gives attention and other police men do their own work, looking at beautiful women who sat in the audience, eating bananas and walking in mockery. Inspector shows several times that he knows English well. But, he uses wrong English.

Sabe Vidhane : Do you know any dance?

Spector : Yes, Yes. Baila, Karapincha... (curry leaves)

Sabe Vidhane : No No. Not Karapincha.... It is Kaporincha.

Like this, all the duties of Police have been abused and their costumes signify the culture of corrupted police men. Khaki coat, shorts and trousers signify the western culture. Due to Dutch and English rule in the country, these costumes have been influenced by them.

The next, *Mudali Kolama* comes to the stage to see whether everything is done before reaching the chief guest. The character of Mudali is related to up country of the land. He is not representing the down south, but in the performances of Kolam he is a compulsory character.

Folk artist wanted to criticize his character, behavior, culture and his class. He wears black overcoat and sarong. This overcoat signifies the western culture. The concept of *Mudaliar* dominated the village people, taking their property, misbehaving with women.

Nadagama is a form of folk theatre, which is rich in dramatic elements and it began at the beginning of 19th century. *Nadagama* is still performed sometimes in Roman Catholic villages during the Christmas season.

Nadagama is a kind of folk opera and this is different from other forms of the folk plays in Sri Lanka. It began at the beginning of 19th Century. *Nadagam* stories enacted with Karnatak music, dance and songs. It is influenced by *Therukkutthu* in Tamilnadu. This *Nadagam* is performed continuously in seven nights. It starts around 7pm and concludes by the next dawn. The folk people go to see the performances carrying pillows and carpet. They sit on the floor and the performances are going on the stage which is made by sand in the open space.

There are stock characters such as *Bahubhutha Kolama or Konangi, Handaduthayan* or drummers. They have particular manner and steps to enter the stage. *Potheguru* or narrator and the chorus sing an introductory song for each character. After that the stock character comes in specific dance movement and sings a song for the audience.

The costumes of *Bahubhutha Kolama* is similar to *Vidushaka* in Sanskrit theatre. He wears pleated skirt and long sleeve blouse. It is made of dotted cloth. The colour combination is red and yellow. Costumes of this character signify Indian culture.

Handaduthayan or drummers enter the stage after the *Bahubhutha Kolama*. They come to give the message that *Nadamam* is performed tonight. They narrate the stories going to be performed that night. The costumes of these characters are a white long Kurtha and a Dhoti. There are two combs on the sides of their head as a headdress. Neck is decorated with a long necklace. They have put a huge dot on their forehead. Their costume signify Indian priest.

During the performances of *Nadagam* stories, characters such as *Balasantha, Selesthina, Bromport* wear costumes according to Christian culture.

Conclusion

The folk theatre cannot be the exclusive claim of any specific land. Folk theatre is imbued with different cultural values and norms, representing enormous geographical significance. No one can say that this is their heritage. My research focused on this and my conclusion is that the folk theatre is a multicultural event and this idea is reinforced by the costumes of characters in Sinhalese folk theatre.

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