

Puppets in Sri Lanka: The Rūkada Nātya

Sri Lankan puppetry originates from the southern Indian coast approximately 300 years ago. Similarities between Sri Lankan and south Indian cultures helped to develop the art of Rūkada Nātya puppetry.

Traditional puppet making and performances in Sri Lanka bring a unique display of Gamwari, where families contribute to the process of lineal passing of the knowledge revolving around puppets. From grandparents to grandchildren, families practice and develop storylines that are personal to their experiences in their communities and country. Up to 10 people usually perform together; five are the puppet manipulators, while the remaining members of the family set the stage, play drums and seraphina (a traditional instrument), and sing.

The purpose of Rūkada Nātya is to bring together communities, teach moral lessons, enjoy humbling humour, and reflect on the past influences of domestic society.

Sri Lankan Women and Puppets

Women play a significant role in the creation of the Rūkada Nāṭya practice. The major element of clothing is influenced by the role of women creating, teaching and preparing puppets; they also are key to the society of Sri Lanka far beyond the puppet practices. During curtain ceremonies the Rata Yakuma doll is used to review female affiliations, especially child bearing. During these events, the Rata Yakuma doll is used symbolically to represent pregnancy and birth. Sri Lankan women's role in puppetry is emphasised through their labour work; they are referenced as 'puppets on a string', meaning that they are constantly tied to the harvesting and development of the country's work. Not only as mothers, but also as workers, women influence Sri Lanka and its culture to a great extent.



Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

A Sri Lankan dancing girl puppet from the mid-twentieth century.

Costumes

The clothing worn by puppets are all handmade by the creators, and each puppet can be transformed into new characters because of their clothing. Similar to many other cultures around the world, the costumes used reflect the status of the character. Human hair, natural paints and Kaduru (a soft and light wood for puppet carving) are the basis for the puppet figure, but not the character.

Did You Know?

The average Sri Lankan puppet is as tall as the average 10yr old child, but weighs less than the average newborn baby.

Costumes

A character is determined by what materials, colours and accessories the puppet has. For example, the royal characters are identifiable by their orange, black and blue clothing (usually velvet), as well as their jewellery consisting of multicoloured sequins, beads and pearls. Costumes for the dancers reflect the status and importance of local kolam and sannu dances, such as the kagull topiya, a wooden dancing headdress used in the yakuma ceremony. The costumes duplicate the aesthetics used by people to bring life to the puppets. Colours are also important in costume making, as the colour determines the role of the character. For example, different genders are represented through different colours: for female characters pink is regularly used, and for men bright colours (specifically orange and red) are used.

A Sri Lankan clown puppet from the twentieth century.



Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Did You Know?

Sri Lankan puppets were shown at the World Columbian Exposition in 1895 by the Smithsonian Institution, US national museum. They are also officially listed as UNESCO intangible heritage objects.

Activity:

Discuss with your class how clothing or costumes can reflect status and cultural importance.

Think about different colours or objects that can define a person's cultural background.

Are there different items that are specific to different groups of people, or that are used across multiple cultures?

Are there similarities in the Sri Lankan puppets aesthetic and their culture compared to life in Canada or your local area?

The Story of the Performance

The story lines of Rūkada Nātya have evolved through connections to Buddhism, and the folktales that derive from the native Kandy Sri Lankan peoples. Many of the stories presented are the stories of the Jātaka (historic Indian literature about Gautama Buddha's births in animal and human form). Literature and historical events also play a role in the storylines presented during the puppet plays.

The history of the Kandy peoples (Sri Lanka natives) is exhibited through the use of historical events. Historical plays, such as those about the Kandy rulers, were very popular. Characters such as King Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe have become greatly integrated into the Rūkada Nātya practice.

Nādagam (a historic and traditional Sri Lankan form of folk opera) is one of the most practiced genres of puppetry. The creators make their own personalized stories from the history of their peoples.

Did You Know?

The word "marionette" originates from the French word mariole, meaning "figurine of the Virgin Mary." It was first coined in 1972 in the US by Jim Henson. "ette" was added to the end of the word as a diminutive; it means "little". Before this, only the word "puppet" was used to reference glove and rod puppets, which are both popular in Sri Lanka.

Activity:

Discuss with your class the similarities and/or differences between Rūkada Nātya and Indigenous cultural performances in your local area, like dances or oral history. Think about cultural universalism. Do all cultures across the globe give similar importance to certain practices, and how are these practices accomplished?

Konangi or Bahubhutaya

The bahubhutaya are clown dancers, who traditionally appear first to set a cheerful mood for the performance. In some cases, because each performance is unique to the storytellers, the bahubhutaya perform at the end of the play.

These characters are very popular in the nadagama tradition. The clown dancers are usually accompanied by a feather duster prop to clean the stage before and after the performance occurs as a gesture of polishing the environment for culture expression.

Dancing Girl

The dancing girl is supposedly the most intriguing and beautiful section of a play.

Her beauty comes from her skillful movements and her detailed and extravagant costumes. The dancing girl is able to move in swift and dancing motions due to the fact that up to 19 strings could be used to move her. She is usually introduced after the bahubhutaya or to conclude the performance. The dancing girl is usually dressed a pink-prominent coloured costume and is one of the characters that comes from the nadagama tradition.

Vidane or Village Official

This character presents different sections of the storyline and objects used during the play. The connection to cultural life is extremely relevant with this character, as the costume reflects the traditional style of authority figures in Sri Lanka. In some cases, the most comical scene of a play includes the Village Official conversing with a drunkard. The Vidane is one of the only stock characters that does not dance, because of the character's role in humour.

Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe (King) and his Chiefsman:

Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe was an Indian king from the 18th Century. The characterisations of the king and his chiefsman were highly strategic in duplicating the royal essence of the monarch. This was achieved through the high attention to detail and aesthetics of the costumes, to emphasize the status and importance of historical hierarchy. Like other prominent male characters, the king was dressed in brightly coloured costumes and had elaborate accessories. Within a play setting, the king and his chiefsman would appear in the middle of the play.

Sellapillai or Boy Player

The boy player is another character that originates from the nadagama tradition and is a dancing character. Like other male figures used in Sri Lankan puppetry, the Sellapillai is a dancing character. The boy player is usually a high moving and counterpart to the dancing girl. Unlike the more prominent male characters such as the Village Official or Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe, the boy player does not directly satirize human types in the context of tradition. Instead he is meant to increase a joyous mood among the audience.

Sources:

Film http://www.unesco.org/archives/multimedia/?pg=33&s=films_details&id=4778

Welcome to Museum of Traditional Puppet Art, Sri Lanka, www.puppet.lk/web/index.php?option=com_content&view=featured&Itemid=435&lang=en.

This Museum Is Attempting to Save Sri Lanka's Traditional Puppetry, roar.media/english/life/in-the-know/this-museum-is-attempting-to-save-srilankas-traditional-puppetry/.

Puppet Master, www.sundaytimes.lk/111113/FunDay/fut_01.html. Folk Music Conservation Library, Sri Lanka.

"Rukada Natya: Traditional String Puppet Drama in Sri Lanka." UNESCO Multimedia Archives, Folk Music Conservation Library, Sri Lanka, Producer., 1 Jan. 1970, www.unesco.org/archives/multimedia/?pg=33&s=films_details&id=4778. "King Sri

Wickrama Rajasinghe - Kandy, Sri Lanka." KandyCity.lk, 20 Aug. 2017, kandycity.lk/history-of-kandy/kandyan-kings/king-sri-wickrama-rajasinghe/.

"Marionette (n.)." Index, www.etymonline.com/word/marionette#etymonline_v_9619. Pooranee.

"Puppetry in Sri Lanka." ..., www.cultural.gov.lk/web/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=63:puppetry-in-sri-lanka&catid=35:right&Itemid=72&lang=en. "Rukada, the Marionette Theatre |." Asian

Traditional Theatre & Dance, 23 Feb. 2018, disco.teak.fi/asia/rukada-the-marionette-theatre/. "Rūkada Nātya, Traditional String

Puppet Drama in Sri Lanka." UNESCO, ich.unesco.org/en/RL/rukada-natya-traditional-string-puppet-drama-in-sri-lanka-01370?RL=01370.

Samarasinghe, Vidyamali. "Puppets on a String: Women's Wage Work and Empowerment among Female Tea Plantation Workers of Sri Lanka." *The Journal of Developing Areas*, vol. 27, no. 3, Apr. 1993, pp. 329-340. "Sri Lanka."

World Encyclopedia of Puppetry Arts, 28 Apr. 2016, wepa.unima.org/en/sri-lanka/. *The World Through My Camera Lense*. "Puppet Art in Sri Lanka." *The World Through My Camera Lense*, 22 Nov. 2015,

theworldthroughmycameralense.wordpress.com/2015/11/22/puppet-art-in-sri-lanka-3/. Tilakasiri, J. *Puppetry in Sri Lanka*. Dept. of Cultural Affairs, 1976.

Unesco, and Accu. Asia-Pacific Database on Intangible Cultural Heritage(ICH) | Performing Arts | Policies & Actions, www.accu.or.jp/ich/en/policies/C_LKA.html. "

Wooden Puppets." Asia InCH – Encyclopedia of Intangible Cultural Heritage, asiainch.org/craft/wooden-puppets/.