

The Role of Traditional Communication in Sri Lankan Folk Theatre: A Cultural Perspective.

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ABSTRACT

In pre-mass-media Sri Lanka, traditional performance served as a vital communal technology rather than mere recreational spectacle. This study investigates the mechanisms of indigenous communication in Sri Lanka across three theatrical lineages: *Kolam*, *Sokari*, and *Nadagam*. Employing primary field observations alongside secondary scholarly literature, the research examines how these traditions organized communal life, mediated societal tensions, and preserved intangible cultural heritage. Findings reveal that each genre engaged audiences through distinct communicative registers tailored to non-literate rural contexts. In southwestern coastal villages, '*Kolam*' utilized the visual semiotics of carved '*kaduru*' wood masks and satirical caricature to establish a sanctioned space for anti-feudal dissent, subverting oppressive colonial and local hierarchies through communal laughter. In the central highlands, '*Sokari*' functioned as a participatory, post-harvest agrarian forum; staged on the threshing floor '*kamatha*', it integrated fertility rituals, rustic verse, and domestic farce to process communal anxieties and reinforce agricultural solidarity. Meanwhile, '*Nadagam*' marked a structural evolution into secular, operatic theatre. Guided by the central narrator '*Pothe Gura*', it combined stylized movement, rhythmic drumming, and sung verse to translate complex historical and moral narratives into accessible public discourse, ultimately providing the structural foundation for modern postcolonial drama. Rather than operating as passive relics, these multi-sensory, dialogic media actively dissolved the boundary between performer and spectator to maintain social equilibrium. Preserving these theatrical forms as living practices remains crucial for decolonized cultural education and safeguarding the participatory communicative frameworks central to Sri Lanka's cultural consciousness.

Keywords: Kolam, Nadagam, Sokari, Sri Lankan folk theatre, Traditional communication.

INTRODUCTION

In Sri Lanka, traditional communication serves as a foundational pillar of cultural transmission, articulated most dynamically within the country's diverse folk-art forms. Through folk drama, music, dance, puppetry, and oral storytelling, communities have systematically transmitted social values, religious beliefs, historical chronicles, and a shared cultural identity.

This study examines the mechanics of that traditional communication through three distinct theatrical lineages such as *Kolam*, *Sokari*, and *Nadagam*. While these forms have often been documented simply as folk drama or ritual dance, treating them merely as entertainment overlooks their deliberate function as communal technologies. Each traditional performance form developed its own distinct way of communicating with its audience. *Kolam* used biting masquerade to safely mock authority and expose social hypocrisy. *Sokari* relied on harvest rituals to bring agrarian communities together. Its threshing-floor '*kamatha*' performances addressed shared domestic anxieties and fertility rites. *Nadagam* adopted an operatic style to stage complex historical chronicles. It translated these grand narratives into accessible public verse and song. By analyzing how *Kolam*, *Sokari*, and *Nadagam* communicate across social, ritual, and musical registers, this research explores how folk theatre actively organized community life rather than passively reflecting it. Understanding these forms as living channels of communication, rather than static relics of the past, demonstrates why keeping them active in performance is essential for meaningful cultural education and the preservation of Sri Lanka's intangible

heritage. As an essential medium for Sri Lanka's intangible cultural heritage, folk theatre offers critical insight into the mechanics of indigenous communication and its enduring contemporary relevance. By analyzing how these performance traditions historically mediated community life, this study underscores the necessity of sustaining them as living practice, informing both cultural education frameworks and grassroots heritage conservation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In traditional Sri Lankan society, folk theatre functioned far beyond mere entertainment; it served as a primary medium for indigenous communication, social organization, and cultural preservation. Scholarly literature consistently identifies three dominant theatrical lineages; *Kolam*, *Sokari*, and *Nadagam* as the primary media through which rural communities transmitted oral histories, religious beliefs, and social critiques.

While *Kolam* and *Sokari* are rooted in masked rituals and harvest cycles, *Nadagam* represents an evolution toward structured, secular operatic storytelling. Originating along coastal hubs and heavily influenced by South Indian *Terukkuttu* and Catholic passion plays, *Nadagam* translated complex historical and moral chronicles into accessible public verse. At the core of its communicative framework was the *Pothe Gura* (the narrator/director). The *Pothe Gura* acted as an indispensable cultural mediator, translating the unfolding drama to the audience, voicing characters' internal motives through song, and maintaining the emotional investment of the village. This transition into a fully sung, structured format eventually laid the foundation for modern postcolonial Sri Lankan drama, most notably inspiring Ediriweera Sarachchandra's seminal 1956 play, *Maname*.

While past documentation has predominantly focused on these folk dramas as ritual dances, treating them merely as performative art overlooks their deliberate function as communal technologies. Recognizing this gap in the literature, this study examines the operational mechanisms of traditional communication within Sri Lankan folk theatre, focusing on *Kolam*, *Sokari*, and *Nadagam*. Far from serving as simple recreational pastimes or quaint relics of rural leisure, these performance traditions functioned as indispensable tools for social cohesion and information transfer.

METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

In addition to primary fieldwork, the study draws on a broad range of secondary literature to ground and contextualize the findings. This material includes books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and relevant digital publications focused on Sinhala folk theatre. Bringing live field observations together with established scholarly discourse creates a clearer, more nuanced picture of how traditional communication functions within these performance arts and how its cultural role continues to evolve.

DISCUSSION

Long before television, radio, or print media shaped public discourse in Sri Lanka, it was folk theatre that commanded the collective attention of the village. Traditions like *Kolam*, *Sokari*, and *Nadagam* were never just artistic spectacles or rigid ritual duties; they were open-air arenas where community life was actively negotiated. On the threshing floor or in a cleared village square, an audience did not sit in passive silence. Instead, these gatherings became lively public forums where villagers laughed at masked caricatures of local elites, processed domestic conflicts, debated communal ethics, and passed their oral histories down to the next generation.

Along Sri Lanka's southwestern coast, particularly in craft hubs like Ambalangoda and Mirissa, *Kolam* operated not merely as festive entertainment, but as an indispensable channel of comedic resistance and communal communication. In an era when direct confrontation with colonial authorities or feudal elites carried severe consequences, the *Kolam* arena provided an institutionalized, sanctioned space where communities could voice dissent, puncture social pretensions, and negotiate village tensions without fear of retribution.

The tradition's communicative power begins with the visual semiotics of its *kaduru* wood masks '*ves-muhun*'. *Kolam* relies heavily on visual communication through intricately carved *kaduru* wood masks. Scholars highlight *Kolam*'s role as a mechanism for social commentary and satirical resistance. The masks establish an immediate visual shorthand, allowing the audience to instantly recognize the social rank and moral flaws of a character.

Through comedic exaggeration and inversion of hierarchies, *Kolam* provided a sanctioned public sphere where commoners could safely mock colonial administrators, village headmen, and the local elite without fear of retribution. Long before a performer delivers a single line of dialogue, these carved caricatures

establish an instant shorthand with the audience. Through exaggerated grimaces, sharp pigments, and grotesque facial asymmetries, the crowd reads a figure's social rank, moral integrity, and flaws at a glance; whether spotting a parasitic headman, a rigid foreign occupier, or a malevolent *yakka*.

Within this performance space, the existing social hierarchy is systematically inverted;

- The Mudaliyar, the native elite administrative officer serving the colonial apparatus, is lampooned through ostentatious robes and a sneering mask. His facade of imperial dignity collapses the moment his stylized choreography devolves into drunken, clumsy stumbling.
- The *Arachchi* and *Kankanama*, the intermediate village headmen and overseers infamous for intimidating peasant cultivators, are exposed as petty tyrants who instantly turn groveling and submissive the second a superior appears.
- The episode of the washerman *Jasaya* and his young wife *Lenchina* functions both as an intimate channel of folk communication and as a subversive space where rigid social structures are systematically overturned. The banter between the narrator (*Kariyakarawana Rala* or drummer), *Jasaya*, and *Lenchina* bridges performers and spectators, turning the performance arena into a participatory dialogue rather than a passive viewing experience.
- *Nonchi Akka*, the elderly, sharp-tongued village matriarch, serves as the community's unfiltered voice. Through acerbic wit, double entendres, and comic monologues, she articulates the private grievances, suspicions, and taboo truths that villagers could never safely utter in everyday civic life.

By transferring the stage to commoners and marginalized performers, *Kolam* turned structural oppression into shared public laughter. In the context of traditional communication, it functioned as an organic, bottom-up medium that allowed rural communities to critique institutional abuses, build collective solidarity, and preserve a shared moral equilibrium. In pre-mass-media rural Sri Lanka, *Kolam* provided an open-air community platform where common social issues, gossip, marital strains, and community morality were staged and processed collectively. The performance uses familiar rural signifiers such as rhythmic drumming 'yak beraya', poetic verses 'kavi' expressive caricatured masks, and colloquial village dialect to convey immediate, unfiltered meaning without requiring formal literacy.

In Sri Lanka's central and upcountry highlands, *Sokari* functions as a primary media of agrarian communication, deeply integrated into the seasonal rhythms of village life. Staged overnight on the threshing floor 'kamatha' during the post-harvest season, the performance converts agricultural downtime into an active, participatory public forum. Through semi-improvised metered verse, conversational vernacular, and comic friction most notably between the indigenous physician 'Veda Rala', the servant 'Paraya', and village authorities 'Sokari' operates as a grassroots, dialogic medium. Framed within communal ritual and rural humor, it provides farming communities with an institutionalized space to negotiate taboos, debate domestic infidelities, and lampoon social superiors under the protective cover of performance.

The plot follows *Guru Hamy*, an Indian artisan-merchant who crosses over to Sri Lanka with his young, beautiful wife, *Sokari*, and their servant, *Paraya*. Plagued by famine and childlessness, the couple embarks on a pilgrimage to seek the blessings of *Pattini*, the goddess of fertility. Their plans fall apart along the way when *Guru Hamy* is bitten by a dog. The local native physician called to treat him, *Veda Rala*, takes advantage of the patient's helpless state, seduces *Sokari*, and runs away with her. Instead of turning into a story of revenge or bloodshed, the crisis is resolved through faith. Once *Guru Hamy* recovers, he turns to the gods praying earnestly to Kataragama and *Pattini* for help. Moved by his devotion, the deities intervene, *Sokari* is brought back, *Guru Hamy* forgives her, and the family is reunited. Their prayers are answered with the birth of a child, bringing harmony back to their world. At its heart, the folk play *Sokari* transforms an old migration myth into a story rooted firmly in Sri Lankan rural life. Through this blend of domestic turmoil, rustic humor, and ritual devotion, the performance reflects the

essential desires of traditional agrarian life, where true wealth and peace meant having abundant harvests in the fields and children in the home.

Beyond its surface narrative, the performance functions as an agrarian fertility ritual directly intertwined with the annual agricultural cycle. Staged in the open threshing floor '*kamatha*' during the Sinhala New Year '*Aluth Avurudda*' following the Maha harvest, the ritual sanctifies this circular performance arena '*rangabhumiya*'. At the very center of the threshing floor stands a mortar '*Vangediya*' and pestle '*molgaha*', wrapped in thorny branches. Together, these symbolic objects carrying unmistakable sexual and reproductive imagery echo the ancient fertility cults that underpinned life, procreation, and agricultural bounty in traditional Sri Lankan village society.

While earlier forms like *Kolam* and *Sokari* were tethered to healing rituals and harvest rites, *Nadagam* represented Sri Lanka's first true leap into full-scale operatic storytelling. Blending traditions from South Indian *Terukkuttu* with coastal Catholic performance styles around Jaffna and Chilaw in the late 1700s, *Nadagam* became a primary channel of rural mass communication designed to translate sprawling epic stories into a language ordinary villagers could instantly grasp. As Sri Lankan performance evolved, *Nadagam* emerged as the island's first fully structured operatic theatre, marking a pivotal shift from ritualistic folk enactments like *Sokari* and *Kolam* toward a secular, narrative-driven medium. Taking root in the late 18th century along coastal hubs such as Chilaw and Jaffna, the form absorbed vital aesthetic currents from South Indian *Terukkuttu* and Roman Catholic passion plays, quickly establishing itself as a vital organ of rural folk communication. To reach agrarian and largely non-literate audiences, *Nadagam* developed a multi-layered vocabulary of oral recitations, driving drum patterns, stylized movement, and symbolic gestures. At the center of this communicative apparatus stood the *Pothe Gura*; the script-holding narrator and stage director. Far more than a passive storyteller, the *Pothe Gura* functioned as an indispensable cultural mediator. He introduced scenes, voiced the internal moral struggles of characters through sung verse, and directly bridged the world of the drama with the collective consciousness of the gathered spectators. Because literacy was scarce, the medium communicated through rhythm, voice, and symbolic movement. The heartbeat of this entire exchange was the *Pothe Gura*. Clutching the handwritten script, this narrator stepped between the actors and the audience, explaining the plot, singing the characters' hidden motives, and keeping the crowd emotionally invested throughout the night.

Crucially, *Nadagam* was never a static relic frozen in a colonial past; it became the vital aesthetic blueprint for modern Sri Lankan theatre. In 1956, pioneer playwright Ediriweera Sarachchandra revolutionized the nation's cultural landscape with his landmark play *Maname*, directly drawing upon *Nadagam*'s core conventions: the commanding presence of the *Pothe Gura* (narrator), the driving pulse of the *maddala* drum, and its distinctive operatic vocal stylings. By reinterpreting these traditional forms, Sarachchandra demonstrated that Sri Lanka did not need to abandon its indigenous roots to create modern art. Instead, he showed that the country's living folk traditions could provide the very groundwork for an authentic, decolonized national identity.

KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

Scholarly research reveals that traditional Sri Lankan folk theatre; including forms like *Kolam*, *Sokari*, and *Nadagam* functioned not merely as rural entertainment, but as a traditional communication system vital to community survival. Before modern media, these highly interactive and participatory performances served as an educational cornerstone, utilizing rich non-verbal symbolism, rhythmic drumming, and intricate masks to transmit cultural values, moral boundaries, and historical memory across generations. *Kolam* relies on elaborate, meticulously carved wooden masks whose colors, physical distortions, and scale instantly communicate a character's social class, personality, or supernatural status. *Sokari*, performed historically on open circular threshing floors, uses broad mime, exaggerated body language, and spatial relationships to depict themes of rural life, fertility, and domestic tension. Finally, *Nadagam* shifts the focus to the actor's body through highly stylized, rhythmic gaits and heavy costumes, using the physical movement and visual weight to immediately signify a character's authority, archetype, and mood. Additionally, the theatre provided a safe, sanctioned space for social critique, employing clever satire and humor to subvert rigid caste hierarchies and mock authority figures without inviting retribution. Ultimately, by blending spiritual instruction with communal catharsis, Sri Lankan folk theatre acted as the vibrant, beating heart of rural communication, binding society together through shared, living narratives.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the operational mechanisms of traditional communication within Sri Lankan folk theatre, focusing on *Kolam*, *Sokari*, and *Nadagam*. Far from serving merely as recreational pastimes or quaint relics of rural leisure, these performance traditions functioned as an indispensable communal technology. Long before modern mass media arrived, folk theatre provided a primary, open-air public sphere where village communities systematically informed their members, mediated socio-cultural tensions, and fostered enduring collective solidarity. Collectively, *Kolam*, *Sokari*, and *Nadagam* demonstrate that pre-modern communication in Sri Lanka was multi-sensory, dialogic, and intrinsically participatory:

- *Kolam*'s visual and satirical mediation relied on the semiotics of kaduru wood masks, which turned the performance clearing into a sanctioned space for political subversion, holding feudal authorities, colonial administrators, and moral hypocrisies accountable through licensed laughter.
- *Sokari*'s ecological and ritual unity was anchored on the threshing floor '*kamatha*', where the performance synchronized with agrarian labor, using seasonal fertility rituals and comedic domestic drama to reaffirm communal interdependence, divine grace, and mutual forgiveness over retributive conflict. Functioning as a participatory, post-harvest forum staged on the same threshing floor, it merged fertility rites with domestic farce to help farming communities collectively process shared anxieties, negotiate social taboos, and reinforce communal interdependence.
- *Nadagam*'s narrative and epistemic transmission marked a structural leap toward secular operatic theatre, utilizing stylized movement, rhythmic drumming, and the central narrator (Potha Gura) to translate complex moral and historical epics into accessible public discourse. Crucially, it provided the structural foundation and aesthetic blueprint for modern, postcolonial Sri Lankan dramas such as Ediriweera Sarachchandra's *Maname* (1956) and *Sinhabahu* (1961).

The central argument of this research is that, prior to the advent of mass media, Sri Lankan folk theatre was never a passive form of rural entertainment, but rather an active and indispensable communal technology. By functioning as multi-sensory, dialogic media, these performance traditions dissolved the boundaries between performer and spectator, providing a vital public sphere for indigenous communication and the maintenance of social equilibrium.

As Sri Lanka navigates digital modernization, rapid globalization, and shifts in rural social structures, these performance traditions face severe marginalization. However, sustaining *Kolam*, *Sokari*, and *Nadagam* as active, living traditions ensures that the island's intangible cultural heritage functions as an evolving educational framework rather than a passive historical archive. Ultimately, this study concludes that active preservation is not merely an act of heritage conservation, but a necessary strategy for developing a decolonized cultural education system that honors and sustains the authentic, grassroots consciousness of Sri Lanka.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest in relation to this research.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data supporting the findings of this study, including field notes and recorded observations, are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Due to the sensitive and community-specific nature of some material, they are not publicly archived.

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