

MASKS OF SRI LANKA **by Gamini Wijesuriya**

Sri Lanka, an Island close to the Southern tip of India is noted for its Masks. It is not possible to say how far back this mask tradition goes in the country, but it is possible that it is a few centuries old. Masks have been used in the many rituals performed to propitiate the gods or demons or to cure some illnesses said to be caused by demons. Among these rituals, the Sanni Yakuma is quite important and all demons called into this ritual in order to be requested to heal the patients arriving wearing masks. In this there are eighteen masks, each one representing one or more ailments. Today one could count even up to twenty-two such masks coming in the ritual which would prove that many new sicknesses that came to be known later were also represented by new masks. These masks have so many similarities that the best way to identify them is by listening to the description of the Sanni given by the performers. Certain masks have not changed their form although someone who is not quite conversant with them may give them different names. Earlier in these rituals, it could be that there was one slightly big mask having on it a few more masks associated with certain ailments. In the Munich Museum, Germany is a mask of this type. This could be the forerunner to the big MAHAKOLA SANNI mask we know today which carries in addition to the mask for the performer, eighteen other masks and a figure of a demon. The mask in Munich has only nine masks. The Mahakola Sanni mask is too big and it was certainly a very difficult task for a performer to dance with it. It may be that this mask was later used just to decorate the place at the entrance to the area where the ritual was performed. There is evidence for this if one were to examine the Mahakola Sanni mask in the Naparastek Museum in Prague. On the abdomen of the demon, there is the British coat of arms. People considered the showing of the British the coat of arms even at places of worship, quite acceptable and in order at the time, may be because the country was ruled by Britain.

The more important and very widely used masks are from KOLAM which is folk theatre. Kolam should be pretty old, but it is still not possible to say when it really started. There are many Kolam texts available and one of the earliest copies are available in the British Library. This is copied on paper. Kolam has a very clear script and characters are introduced in one particular order. This may however vary in a modern day performance. Every character in Kolam is given a mask and everyone is introduced by the leader before he enters the arena. In a Kolam performance, all performers were males. At the beginning the place is cleaned and the King and Queen arrive to witness the performance. They have very large and beautiful masks to wear and these are also quite heavy. The King and Queen have to sit through the performance, so it is not so difficult for them. However, the King is given a sword into his hand, which he usually uses to keep his big mask in position. The performance really begins after the arrival of the King and the Queen. There are the soldiers, animals, Rakshas (superior to the normal Demons) who are introduced and later there are many stories that are enacted. Kolam scripts also vary from time to time and it appears that more new masks have been introduced. One such mask is that of a Devol Dancer, now in the collection in Leipzig, Germany. It is not possible to find any reference to this mask in any Kolam script.

The masks of the demons of Rakshas are quite interesting. An important feature is that they all have cobras on them. There is the mask of Garuda, the eternal enemy of the Cobra and one could see a cobra inside his beak. The Gara Raksha has three cobras over his head while the number of cobras on the Naga (Naga means Cobra) could be from six to twenty or even more. As the performance begins in the presence of the King and Queen, it was natural that his courtiers and minor officials also had to be there. An examination of the Kolam script would show that some of these officials are treated with a bit of sarcasm. There are the Mudliar (a high official responsible for the administration of a province) the Arachchi, village Headman his assistant and Policeman, Kolam is a very humorous play and there are many episodes played on to provoke laughter among the audience. Among such are the struggle of the old Nonchi who is trying to take home her husband Ana Bera who has had a little too much to drink and the soft corner the Mudaliar and his assistant had towards the beautiful Lencina, the wife of the washerman, JASAYA. Into this episode of Jasaya and Lencina, another woman Prancina is introduced, to prove to Jasaya was also having his mind on another woman.

There is another folk theatre known as Sokari in which also a mask is used, but this is not taken very seriously as this particular one is usually turned out of arecanut leaf or some paper. The masks do not last long like the masks from the rituals or the Kolam, which are made out well-seasoned wood, treated and painted.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to find Kolam or Sokari performances in Sri Lanka today and this is mostly due to changing values and also beliefs. Earlier it was more a community affair where villagers all got together to organize a performance contributing towards it, some with labour and some with money. Performances were usually held after harvesting and one performance could have lasted two to three nights. Today a performance lasts only a few hours and even the people who come to witness there do not have the time to sit through them for nights. Attempts have been made to use the stage for these performances like the Sanni, but the real atmosphere of a ritual seem to fade away from such performances. Masks from the Kolam, however could be used more effectively on stage as most of these masks were even originally used for entertainment.

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