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**Alan Bullion**

**“Exegetical somersaults.  
Theories on the Kolam Dances of Sri Lanka”**

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## **Exegetical somersaults. Theories on the Kolam Dances of Sri Lanka**

In this paper I give a short outline of the performance and perception of one of the most famous mask performances of Sri Lanka, the Kolam Dances, I will analyse their components, strategy and structure and link them to overarching notions of Sinhalese culture.

In the southwest coast area of Sri Lanka exists a number of mask performances, rituals that aim at dispelling the malign influences of disease bringing demons or at honouring the Gods and deities. Another type of such mask performances is the Kolam Dances and it is on this art that I shall concentrate here. This form of mask theatre existed all along the southwest coast of Sri Lanka during the last 200 years and still today few families adhere to their tradition.

In former times the performances - in this description of the Kolam Dances I follow the tradition of Bandu Wijesooriya of Ambalangoda - lasted for 3 or 5 consecutive nights at auspicious dates like New Year. A complete set of Kolam sequences consists of a prologue, dance and dialogue scenes and the performance of a Jatakaya, one of the stories of the rebirth of the Buddha.

The whole story revolves around the preparations for the visit of the royal couple and the ministers, their arrival and the duties of officials connected therewith and, in a second part the display of stories from the Sinhalese past and present.

A stage is prepared and embellished. After introductory stanzas are sung and homage is paid to the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha and the Gods, the occasion of the first Kolam performance is related in verses. The wife of King Maha Sammata was pregnant and she had the strong desire to watch a mask dance. This was, however, unknown at that time and no one knew how to perform this. To put an end to the suffering, God Sakra helped to provide masks and texts for a Kolam Dance. The next morning these things were found in the royal garden, the king ordered some of his followers to study the texts and a mask dance was performed. In due time the queen recovered. After this introduction, the acting and dancing sequences begin.

The first one to come is the drummer, he has taken a good quantity of palm wine and proves to be unable to fulfil his duty, e.g. to announce the visit of the royal couple and the court. Being annoyed by his wife who complains openly about his bad habits, his drinking and gambling, he beats her up.

Then the village chief and his secretary come to the place. They too, have to announce the visit of the royal couple but as the secretary is drunk, it takes some time to deliver the message. The secretary does his best to ridicule his boastful master.

Next, the King's guard, the soldiers arrive. In order to prepare the King's arrival they have to clean the roads and provide provisions for the court. They turn out to be stupid and avaricious characters, they throw all the rubbish on the roads and sweep the jungle instead. They harass the local people and demand meat and liquor.

Then, the washer's preparations are due. An old and lazy washer and his nephew, enter. It is their duty to clean the white cloth, which is used as a carpet and canopy for the royal couple. Both are stupid and mess up everything. Eventually they call the young and pretty wife of the old washer for assistance. After her arrival the district chief passes by, notices the young and pretty women and starts a love affair with her. The old man complains his fate, points at the secret love affairs his wife enjoys while she relates his bad habits, his desire for liquor and his laziness. At the end the attendant of the district chiefs punishes the old man because of his complaints.

All these persons should have prepared the visit of the royal couple, yet what they have done instead is to display the miserable life of the poor people and the incompetence of officials. Finally, King and Queen arrive; they walk to their seats in dignity and enjoy the dances of the lions and the raksha, the guardians of the cosmos.

Here the topic which is referred to in the introductory stanzas at the beginning is taken up again. The queen who comes to the stage is pregnant. By watching the pleasant and artistic dances her pregnancy cravings disappear and she leaves the place with her husband, the King Maha Sammata.

These scenes are a fixed series of episodes. At every Kolam performance this set has to be staged and no change or substitution is allowed. The selection of the scenes which follow the departure of the king and the queen are left to the choice of the Kolam master and his troupe.

After the departure of the royal couple, a pregnant woman enters the stage and complains about her pregnancy pains. She relates how all the men in the audience are responsible for her situation. All men had promised her clothes and jewellery, thus indicating the wish to marry her. She had loved them all. But none of them kept his promise. She was misled by these promises and finally faced this trouble.

The episode from village life introduces into the everyday problems of village people. The story explains how a young and pretty woman was given into marriage to an old and ugly washer because her parents wanted to get rid of her. Eventually the woman gets fed up with her stupid husband and falls in love with the village headman who chases the husband away.

But there are not only the local and traditional authorities that are criticised but also the colonial characters, the Portuguese, the Dutch, Africans and British.

The Paring, the Portuguese for instance, is depicted as a man who has no idea of a decent life; he is shown to be addicted to brandy, meat and sex. The British is displayed as an arrogant person whose absolute economic and political power is as fragile as the earthen pot, which serves as his helmet or cap.

Invariably, all colonial representatives are displayed as greedy, sex-driven and profit-seeking individuals who put their desires above the needs of the people and show, at the same time, the fragility of colonial rule, based on individual desire.

Similar stories may be performed according to the wish of the Kolam master and his troupe. After a Jatakaya, five out of the 550 stories of the rebirth of the historical Buddha belong to the Kolam corpus, is performed, the Gara Yakka comes to the stage and dances. The performance of this benevolent demon wards off any influences resulting from evil mouth and evil eye.

Anthropological research on this mask performance has provided plentiful material for misunderstandings. First of all, all local Kolam traditions, and there were many in former years, irrespective of their age and structure were mostly treated as if they were copies of "the original version" and though many different local traditions existed, scholars were often on the search of "The Original Text", e.g. the ancient blueprint.

Few Kolam traditions were actually described, but without connection to their regional settings and particularities. The approaches to the Kolam Dances display over time the marks of the development of history of anthropological thought. This is a topic far too detailed to be covered in a few minutes, I give only a few examples with regard to the perception of the Kolam Dances by different authors.

We have explanations which state that the Kolam Dances consist of unconnected sequences (Raghavan 1967:86; Sarachchandra 1966:77; Lucas 1958:9; Pertold 1973:68, 72 f.) Wijesekara 1989:256), there are explanations, which state that the Kolam Dances consist of (partly) connected sequences (Pertold 1973:94; Goonatilleke 1978:47), the characters of which would display "an underlying unity of action and theme" (Goonatilleke 1978:53).

Some authors say that the Kolam Dances have no ritualistic significance (Sarachchandra 191966:79) or argue that the Kolam Dances are basically of "ritualistic and ceremonial nature" (Goonatilleke 1978:55, 47) whereas again others argue that the Kolam Dances were once a fertility or a pregnancy rite, whatever this means (Pertold 1973:93 f; Raghavan 1967:78) and again others maintain that the Kolam Dances were meant for the amusement and entertainment (Gunasinghe 1962:8; Lucas 1958:7; Pertold 1973:68; Raghavan 1967:79) of the simple village folk without any logical development in the performance (Pertold 1973:67).

Eventually Nandadeva Wijesekara solves the problem quite elegantly and puts it all into a nutshell. He concludes that the Kolam Dances are of a ritualistic nature, helping the people to believe the supernatural (Wijesekara 1989:260), being at the same time an ancient fertility rite, entertainment and amusement for the simple village folk (Wijesekara 1989:256 ff.).

Vis-à-vis these contradicting interpretations I ask, like the authors I quoted: What is the meaning of all these episodes displaying drunken and boastful persons, what is the common link between corrupt officials, a pregnant woman, raksha, the perfect king and greedy colonial authorities - if there is any.

Let us examine the reasoning of the Kolam. The constituent levels of the drama are unfolded simultaneously.

The information aspect says:

Officials are arrogant and boastful; they neglect their duty and look only after their own well being. Men maltreat women. The higher classes exploit the lower classes. Their desires contribute to individual and common misery.

Then, there is an aesthetic aspect in the performance.

The Kolam Dances display a highly elaborated aesthetic beauty with artistically carved masks, the elaborated costumes, the sophisticated dialogues and the artistic dancing episodes. The iconography of masks and costumes highlight and mirror aspects of the life, experience or attitude of the respective characters.

Yet, art and aesthetics in Sinhalese culture are part and parcel of an overarching cultural notion. Pieces of art display in their perfection the balanced and pure mind of the artist. The sculptures of the Buddha, for instance, underlie precise rules of proportion and iconography (Coomaraswamy 1979:148 ff, 154 ff; Ruelius: 61 ff, 172 ff.).

Similarly, the masks were carved according to strict rules of proportion. Their perfection depends on the adherence to these rules, which were part of the respective family traditions and secrets concerning the correct proportions. The success of the craftsman also depends on his personal balance. A perfect piece of work reflects the purity and the balance of the artist's mind. With an unbalanced mind one cannot produce a piece of artistic and aesthetic perfection.

There is, for instance, the mask of the King Maha Sammata, the founder of the lineage of the historic Buddha. The carving reflects a complete balance; it displays a beauty, which almost mirrors enlightenment. The set of measurements according to which such a king mask is to be carved, have been taken from overarching concepts of Buddhist art and rules of proportion (cf. Coomaraswamy 148 ff, 154 ff.) Similarly the costume, which is a part of the King's attire, is composed according to traditional rules to the detail. Also the music, the tunes of the *horanāva* (local oboe) and the rhythms of the drum match with the meaning of each Kolam episode. Generally speaking, they underline the structure and express the contents of the particular Kolam episode. Likewise the dances mirror the meaning and message of each Kolam piece.

Beauty plays a central role in the construction of a Kolam performance and Buddhism recognises a form of deliverance through the appreciation of beauty. In the pure contemplation of great beauty there is no sense of self, and to be completely free of self is a moment of enlightenment (Humphreys 1978: 41).

The humoristic aspect

The exposure of the repressive character of both officials and social structures follow a social convention. Institutions and office holders are never attacked directly but always indirectly, when their actions and their behaviour are exposed. Exposure and indirect attack employ joyfully the subtleties of puns, allusions, hints and exaggerations. This technique of an indirect attack is an integral part of the Kolam-type of humour and critique; it is woven into an ever-repeating process of inversion (cf. also Birnbaum 1982:101 f.).

This technique attacks and protects both the speaker and its victim. The whole social order is temporarily turned upside down, humour helps to unfold an “alter world”, in which, metaphorically speaking, the oppressed and poor ones gain an upper hand until the next morning dawns and the whole misery starts anew.

This type of humour uses inversion as its method and it is in itself a special expression of overarching and culturally well-founded strategies of describing or avoiding conflicts in Sinhalese society.

Sinhalese society places a high value upon disturbances and conflicts to be avoided, minimised or contained. Aggressiveness, conflicts and violence indicate attachment to worldly matters, which should be overcome.

In the Kolam Dances a society in conflict, contradiction and disequilibrium is shown. According to the notions of Sinhalese society, Man should lead a balanced life in order to be able to understand the essentials of human nature and to follow eventually the path to salvation. This notion maintains that the more Man is attached to worldly matters the more this understanding is barred. In the Kolam Dances and its dialogues, numerous episodes of various forms of attachment, such as that to liquor, to illegitimate and/or uncontrolled sex, to abuse of power and exploitation of man by man are displayed.

How then is this disequilibrium to be overcome? The construction of an “alter world” is obviously not the solution. The Kolam Dances give an indirect yet clear answer.

Some Kolam episodes indicate the way people should behave in order to overcome attachment. There is reference to the King Maha Sammata, the King who was elected by all, a hint to a political model that is based on quasi-republican notions rather than on absolute monarchy, a model that outlines the golden age of peace and harmony.

There is reference to the teachings of the Buddha in the performances of the Jataka. Long back, the masters of the Kolam troupe went on stage after the performance and explained the doctrine.

Here the argument of social healing comes into my view. The Buddha said he was the greatest physician; the Dhamma was the medicine and the Sangha the nurse that administers the medicine (Birnbaum 1982:37). According to the medical theory of Buddhism, those people who do not understand the essentials of life are mentally and spiritually unbalanced, this means, attachment is an expression of disease. The more Man learns to understand the cause of his actions, through appropriate measures like, for instance, meditation and detachment, the more Man becomes independent from attachment, more balanced and healthier in spiritual and physical terms (Birnbaum 1982:31 f.). And those who lead a pure life will not be troubled by disease (John Blofeld in: Birnbaum 1982:8; Birnbaum 1982:30 f.): In this perspective the performance of a Kolam Dance or rather, the series of dances and episodes are meant to balance the mind of the audience.

I resume: The Kolam Dances as a whole complex mirror Sinhalese society in its structures and contradictions. They emphasise that attachment, injustice and repression lead to disequilibrium and they indicate how this can be overcome.

In his teachings the Buddha provided the apparatus to describe human nature: He taught that attachment is the beginning of everything and the cause of suffering and finally he enlightened his disciples how to overcome this suffering by explaining the Four Noble Truths (1) and the Noble Eightfold Path (2).

I find the same argumentative structure in the Kolam Dances. Each episode describes reality and suffering of human beings. This refers to the first noble truth: "There can be no existence without suffering".

This motif is also made clear in the story of the origin of the Kolam Dances: The Queen suffered to watch a mask dance. Her suffering was the beginning of becoming.

As a second step, the Kolam displays the various causes of this suffering: attachment to sex, liquor, benefits, privileges, power: This answers to the question of the second Noble Truth: What is the cause of suffering? The cause of suffering is egoistic desire. Except a few characters, the Kolam stages persons who are caught in the web of their misery, with hardly a way out.

The answer of how to put an end to this suffering provides the third Noble Truth: The elimination of Desire brings the cessation of Suffering. This is displayed in the performance of a Jatakaya, in one of the episodes of the Buddha's rebirth.

In former times, the Kolam master went on the stage after the performance and explained the doctrine: "The way to the elimination of Desire is the Noble Eightfold Path".

The Kolam Dances do not advise the people to give in to oppression, they do not advise the people to surrender to the mighty ones who hold the power, they rather argue that following the middle path of the Buddha will lead them to salvation.

The Kolam Dances are an integrated form of regional art that has moulded various local artistic traditions into a complex and multifaceted web of performance. This form of art follows two demands. It voices the critique of the oppressed ones and it offers a long term, action oriented solution for structural contradictions in a society as far as individuals are concerned. The Kolam Dances, which had been said to be anything between a fertility rite and unrelated series of funny items for the entertainment of the simple village folk turn eventually out to be a danced exegesis of the Four Noble Truths.

Somewhere in his "Feast of the Sorcerer" Bruce Kapferer said that the Suniyama, a sorcery ritual is a "ritual of power"; paraphrasing this I would argue that the Kolam is a ritual of "devolution of power". If this is correct then the rituals of the low country outline on a meta level the story of emergence, rise, manipulation and devolution of power. This is, however, another story, which would lead us into another realm.

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## Notes

1

The Buddha in his First Sermon set the basic insights of Buddhism forth. He taught the Middle Way between the extremes, the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path.

The 4 noble truths are:

- (1) Dukka There can be no existence without suffering.
- (2) Samudaya The cause of suffering is egoistic desire.
- (3) Nirodha The elimination of desire brings the cessation of suffering.
- (4) Magga The way to the elimination of desire is the Eightfold Noble Path.

The Noble eightfold path constitutes the Buddhist scheme for moral and spiritual self-development leading to enlightenment. The 8 constituent parts are:

Right View,  
Right Mental Attitude,  
Right Speech,  
Right Action,  
Right Pursuits including means of livelihood,  
Right Effort,  
Right Mindfulness,  
Right Contemplation.



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