

The Psychological Background of Colour Symbolism in Sri Lankan Traditional Masks

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Authors:

R.A.N.N.I De Alwis

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Abstract:

The Low Country dance tradition of Sri Lanka, centred in the Southern and parts of the Western Province, features three stylistic schools: Matara, Benthara, and Raigama. Central to these traditions are ritual healing ceremonies (shantikarma) and popular folk dramas (Kolam), where masks play a vital role. These masks serve as powerful storytelling tools, generating humour and portraying a wide range of characters, thereby evoking strong emotional responses in audiences. Despite the cultural significance of Sri Lankan traditional masks, there is limited scholarly focus on how their colour symbolism influences psychological engagement and ritual effectiveness. This gap hinders a deeper understanding of how traditional performances impact mental states, emotions, and social cognition. The colours on these masks are not arbitrary; they psychologically stimulate the audience and convey messages about a character's masculinity, social status, and moral orientation. This study adopts a qualitative methodology, incorporating interviews,

observations, and literature reviews. Mask performers involved in shantikarma and Kolam drama were observed over one month, with in-depth interviews conducted over four months. Drawing from psychological theories of colour perception and cultural semiotics, the research highlights how colour choices in mask design are intentionally crafted to influence both performers and spectators. The study reveals that these colours enhance narrative impact and serve therapeutic purposes within ritual contexts. Thus, Sri Lankan masks, a profound element of the nation's cultural heritage, demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of colour's psychological effects, enriching both performance art and communal healing practices.

Keywords:

Sri Lanka, semiotics, masks, colour, culture, psychology

Editorial Note:

This compelling study bridges psychology and cultural anthropology by examining how color symbolism in Sri Lankan ritual masks influences both performers and audiences. De Alwis employs rigorous ethnographic methodology, combining field observations with performer interviews to decode the psychological impact of red (aggression/energy), yellow (divinity/healing), blue (wisdom/protection), and other hues in shantikarma healing rituals and Kolam folk theater. The research reveals how these ancient practices demonstrate sophisticated understanding of color psychology, suggesting potential applications in modern art therapy while preserving invaluable cultural heritage.

Contact Details:

Editor-in-Chief:

Name: Amritanath Bhattacharya

Address: Barabagan Eker Pally, Near Hanuman Mandir, SIURI, WEST BENGAL, 731101

Phone: +917003701370

Email: editor@poorvam.com

Publisher:

Name: Nupur Bhattacharya

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Address: BARABAGAN, KALIPUR, VIVEKANANDA PALLY, Near Tetultala, Karidhya, SIURI, WEST BENGAL, 731103

Phone: +917003701370

Email: connect@dhvanibooks.com

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R.A.N.N.I De Alwis

Senior Lecturer,

University of Visual and Performing Arts, Sri Lanka

nilakshide1@gmail.com

Introduction

Sri Lanka's Southern and Western regions host vibrant ritualistic traditions known as *ranga shaileen*, including the prominent healing rituals of Matara, Bentara, and Raigama (Kotegoda, *Pahatharata Shanthikarma* 25-30). These are divided into *Deva thovil* (divine), *Yak thovil* (spirit), and *Graha thovil* (planetary) forms, all relying on elaborate masks and performative elements. The *Kolam* folk theatre tradition, often performed alongside these rituals, provides valuable insights into the symbolic use of colour within ritual contexts. This paper explores the psychological and cultural symbolism embedded in ritual mask colours. Although numerous *shantikarma* are practised across the island, this study focuses on masks with significant psycho-cultural and semiotic relevance. Two theoretical lenses guide the analysis: colour psychology and semiotics. In colour psychology, hues elicit emotional and cognitive responses—red may signify aggression or vitality, while blue suggests calm or wisdom—responses shaped by both biology and culture. Semiotics offers a framework to interpret masks as cultural texts, where each colour and design acts as a signifier within Sri Lankan cosmology and ritual practice. Through visual analysis, symbolic interpretation, ethnographic accounts, and historical texts (Kotegoda, *Pahatharata Shanthikarma* 6-25), this study examines how colour in *thovil* masks communicates complex layers of meaning within ritual performance.

Red: Often used in *Yak thovil* masks representing demonic or aggressive spirits, red is associated with energy, anger, and danger. It serves both to portray the volatile nature of the spirits and to provoke an emotional response from the audience, including fear and awe.

Black: Symbolising death, mystery, or the unknown, black is frequently seen in *Graha thovil* masks that address planetary afflictions. Psychologically, black can create a sense of foreboding and gravity, appropriate for rituals aimed at appeasing cosmic forces.

Yellow and Gold: These colours, frequently used in *Deva thovil* masks, signify divinity, prosperity, and light. Their brightness evokes feelings of hope, sanctity, and healing.

Blue and Green: Blue often represents healing, calmness, and protection, while green is linked to fertility and growth. Their usage in masks can suggest the benevolence of certain spirits or deities.

Viewed through colour psychology, Sri Lankan ritual masks serve as tools for emotional regulation and transformation, not mere aesthetic objects. Their colours evoke responses from awe to catharsis. Semiotic analysis reveals masks as cultural texts; colours symbolise identity, power, and cosmological beliefs, such as red demon masks signifying disorder and the need for ritual control. This qualitative study combined ethnographic fieldwork, performance observation, interviews with mask artisans and performers, and a literature review. Masks were photographed and categorised by colour, character, and role, linking visual symbolism with psychological and narrative functions in *Deva thovil*, *Yak thovil*, *Graha thovil*, and *Kolam* traditions.

Methodology/Creative process

This research employed a qualitative approach, integrating ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, interviews, and literature review. Over one month, *Shantikarma* rituals and *Kolam* dramas in Sri Lanka's Southern Province were observed. Ten experienced mask performers and artisans were interviewed over four months, focusing on their interpretations of mask colours, emotional experiences, and audience reactions. A review of anthropological literature provided cultural and psychological context. The creative process included photographing masks, analysing dominant colour themes, character types, and their psychological and narrative functions.

Symbolic Colour Coding in Sri Lankan Masks

Colour in Sri Lanka's traditional masks is deliberate, drawing from a symbolic palette that speaks to emotional resonance and social coding.

Colour Perception and Its Psychological and Cultural Implications

When considering colour, it becomes evident that colours have a significant impact on human emotions and can stimulate specific emotional responses. Colours act as psychological stimuli that influence emotional and cognitive states.

Psychological Effects of Colour

- Red increases heart rate and stimulation. It symbolises power, energy, anger, and vitality. (Birren 61-63)
- Blue has a calming effect on the mind. (Birren 75-77)
- Yellow elevates an individual's mood and promotes optimism. (Birren- 69-71)
- Green represents fertility and nature, signifying balance and growth. (Birren – 83-85)
- Black evokes fear or seriousness and can create a sense of mystery or gravity. (Birren -93-95)

Cognitive Perception of Colour

Colour plays a crucial role in perception, memory, and symbolic interpretation. In ritual contexts like *shantikarma*, masks are used as therapeutic tools to enhance mental well-being. Practitioners select mask colours deliberately to support the healing process (Bentharage, 08 January 2025). Beyond aesthetics, colour functions within a cultural semiotic system. In low-country ritual masks, colours act as signifiers of culturally embedded meanings, not mere decoration. These meanings have evolved historically and are conveyed through performance traditions and artistic conventions handed down over generations (Bentharage, 08 January 2025). Thus, colour bridges cognitive perception and cultural symbolism in these healing rituals.

Psychological and Semiotic Perspectives on the Use of Masks

Viewed through psychological and semiotic lenses, mask usage in Sri Lankan rituals reveals the interplay between cultural symbolism and universal psychological responses. The colour red, symbolising danger, power, tension, and vitality, heightens the dramatic impact of healing ceremonies (*shantikarma*). Performers internalise these meanings; wearing a red demon mask often induces an aggressive demeanour and heightened emotional state, enhancing character portrayal and audience response. In *Shantikarma*, colour strategically manipulates spiritual energy and psychological states. Audiences rapidly interpret colour cues, facilitating immediate recognition of a character's role or morality. This dynamic enriches both narrative comprehension and emotional engagement.

Red colour Mask

The use of red in Sri Lankan *kolam* folk theatre is associated with demon characters and is also found in the demon exorcism ritual known as *Sanni Yakuma*. In these contexts, red symbolizes power, energy, anger, blood, and life force.(Olaboduwa 11 January 2025)

The Naga Raksha (Cobra Demon) Masks (Bentharage 15 and 28)



Figure 1 – Naga Raksha (Bentharage, *Art of Mask Making* 30) Figure 2- Naga Raksha (Bentharage, *Art of Mask Making* 15)

This mask is featured in the southern Sri Lankan *kolam* folk theatre, particularly in the traditions of Ambalangoda, Olaboduwa, and Mirissa. It portrays a powerful demon character, and red is predominantly used in its design. The performance style emphasizes strength and dynamic energy, visually communicated through the red colour scheme. (Piris)

The Reeri Yaka (Blood Demon) Masks



Figure 3 – *Riri Yaka* (Bentharaage, *Reeri Yak Sankalpaya* 1)



Figure 4 – *Riri Yaka* (Kottegoda, *Sampradaika Narthanaadum* 104)

The *Reeri Yaka* mask and its accompanying costume predominantly use red. The demon character represents illnesses related to blood. Through performance, it is implied that the afflicted person suffers from a blood-related disease, and the demon symbolises the cause. The ritual uses psychological intervention by creating awareness of the illness's source, while also symbolically neutralising the demon's influence. Here, the red colour enhances psychological

focus and intensifies emotional expression. It plays a central role in amplifying emotional arousal and cognitive attention, aiding both healing and dramatic effectiveness

Yellow-colour Masks

In healing rituals (*shantikarma*), the colour yellow is used to symbolise royal characters, divinity, prosperity, protection, power, and sanctity. It represents spiritual wisdom and divine protection. Artists believe that this colour evokes auspiciousness and blessings.

Deva Sanniya Masks

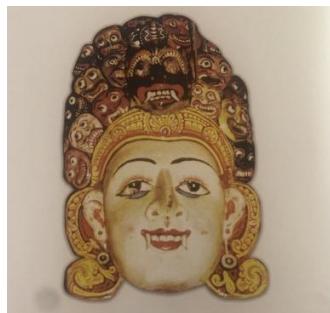


Figure 5 – *Deva Sanniya* (Benthalage, *Art of Mask Making* 176)



Figure 6 – *Deva Sanniya*(Benthalage, *Art of Mask Making* 174)



Figure 7 - *Riri Yaka* (Bentharage, *Art of Mask Making* 177)

In the widely practised *Sanni Yakuma* healing ritual in the Southern and Western provinces of Sri Lanka, there are sixteen primary demon ailments (*sanni*) and sixteen *pali* demons. Each is represented by a specific mask character. At the conclusion of the ritual, the *Deva Sanniya* appears. (Vidanagamage) Through a final dance, this divine figure bestows blessings, marking the completion of the healing ritual.

Salu Paliya Mask



Figure 8 – *Salu Paliya* (Bentharage, *Art of Mask Making* 186)

Within the same ritual tradition, the *Salu Paliya* is a comedic and symbolic character, marked by the colour yellow. (Sadun) During the performance, he sings of the birth of the goddess Pattini and uses a white cloth (*saluwa*) as part of the healing narrative. (Sampath) The character uses humorous language to make the audience laugh, thereby contributing to the psychological well-being of both the patient and the audience.

Green-colour Masks

The colour green symbolises fertility, nature, healing, and rejuvenation. It is often used for characters who are compassionate or neutral in their moral alignment.

King and Queen Masks



Figure 9 – Maha Sammatha King (Bentharage, *Art of Mask Making* 30)



Figure 10- Maha Sammatha Queen (Bentharage, *Art of Mask Making* 15)

Before the commencement of performances in the *kolam maduwa* (kolam stage), the King and Queen enter the scene. Subsequently, various characters perform their acts before them. The purpose of these performances is to ease the Queen's emotional burden, which is believed to

stem from her unfulfilled maternal desire—known as *doladuka*—the longing to see, feed, and care for a child after giving birth. (Olaboduwa)

Blue-coloured Masks

According to traditional healing performers, blue symbolises calmness, wisdom, and mystical power. It is associated with characters that embody serenity and insight.

Gara yaka Mask



Figure 11- *Gara yaka* (Kottegoda, *Pahatharata Shanthikarma* 22)



Figure 12 – *Gara yaka* (Vigesuriya 41)

Gara Yaka, a divine protector, features in the now rare *Garamaduwa* ritual of Sri Lanka's Southern Province. Traditionally performed to safeguard fishing communities, the ritual concludes with the appearance of the Gara Yaka mask, which offers blessings and invokes

protection. (Jayantha) It is believed to purify the eyes and speech of both the patient and spectators. The ritual fosters communal well-being, aiming to enhance fishing yields and remove misfortunes, symbolising collective hopes for prosperity and abundance.

Kalu Yaka Mask



Figure 13 – Kalu yaka (Kottegoda, *Sampradaika Narthanaadum* 104)



Figure 14 – Kalu yaka (Kottegoda, *Sampradaika Narthanaadum* 104)



Figure 15– Wadi Sanniya (Kottegoda, *Sampradaika Narthanaadum* 136)

In the *Sanni Yakuma* ritual, *Kalu Yaka* symbolises a demon believed to cause illness in women who consume impure or forbidden foods. Sinhalese tradition holds that oily foods require an offering or discarding portion to appease spirits; neglecting this invites illness. (Migama) The ritual features *Kalu Yaka* dramatically confronting the patient, then symbolically removing the illness before departing. This performance fosters psychological healing, reinforcing the belief that the illness has been expelled. (Dayas) It exemplifies the ritual's therapeutic, symbolic purpose.

Mahasohon Yaka Mask



Figure 16 – Maha sohon Yaka (Bentharage, *Art of Mask Making* 71)



Figure 17 – Maha sohon Yaka (Kottekada, *Sampradaika Narthanaadum* 85)

The *Mahasohon Samayama* is a unique healing ritual from Sri Lanka's Southern Province, rooted in legends from King Dutugemunu's era. *Mahasohon Yaka*, a feared demon, is believed to haunt graveyards and cause illness or death. (Chathuranga)

Consuming wild boar meat is thought to invite his influence. When symptoms suggest his presence, ritual specialists (*adura*) conduct an exorcism. During the ritual, *Mahasohon Yaka* is invoked and then expelled, symbolising the patient's recovery. The ritual reinforces communal belief in symbolic healing, with the demon's feared status so pervasive that his name is often avoided in conversation. (Thilakarathna)

Discussion

The interplay of colour and psychology in mask performances functions as a non-verbal language. A red mask signals danger or aggression, heightening audience alertness, while gold or yellow evokes reverence. Performers also report psychological shifts; one Kolam artist (Piris) felt "energised and confrontational" in a red demon mask, another experienced peace in a yellow divine mask. (Chaturanga) Thus, colour influences both audience perception and performer mindset, enhancing embodied storytelling. In Shantikarma, precise colour use is considered essential for ritual success.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that colour symbolism in traditional Sri Lankan ritual masks plays a dual role: as a psychological stimulant and a cultural signifier. Colours such as red, black, yellow, green, and blue are meticulously selected to convey emotional and narrative cues rooted

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in cultural semiotics and psychological theory. These hues are far from arbitrary; they elicit specific emotional responses, guide audience perception, and enable performers to inhabit their roles with greater authenticity and emotional depth. In healing rituals like *shantikarma*, colour serves as a therapeutic medium, helping participants and spectators process emotional tension, interpret symbolic illness, and achieve psychological relief.

Furthermore, the masks' symbolic palettes embody a rich cultural worldview where spirituality, emotion, and performance converge. The interplay between colour psychology and traditional beliefs enhances the masks' role as instruments of communal healing and narrative expression. This research highlights the traditional Sri Lankan performance art's value beyond cultural preservation, suggesting its potential applications in modern art therapy and cross-cultural psychological practices.

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