

# The Traditional Mask Industry in Sri Lanka

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## INTRODUCTION

In a world increasingly shaped by globalization, cultural exchange, and technological innovation, traditional industries stand as enduring reflections of a society's values, artistic expressions, and cultural resilience. Among these, the Sri Lankan mask industry emerges as a uniquely vibrant tradition, rooted in centuries-old rituals, storytelling, and craftsmanship. Masks have long served as powerful cultural artifacts—used in healing ceremonies such as Sanni Yakuma and dramatic folk performances like Kolam—embodying both spiritual symbolism and social commentary.

At the heart of this tradition lies the Southern coastal town of Ambalangoda, which remains the most prominent and enduring center of mask-making in Sri Lanka. Known for its multi-generational lineages of artisans and its role in preserving kolam dance-drama, Ambalangoda serves not only as a production hub but as a living archive of Sri Lankan ritual arts. While other regions have practiced mask-making, it is in Ambalangoda that the craft has achieved its fullest cultural, technical, and symbolic maturity. Greater emphasis on such geographical specificity enhances both the authenticity and scholarly grounding of any study on Sri Lankan masks.

In recent decades, the traditional mask industry has undergone considerable transformation, particularly due to the growth of tourism. Masks today function not only as ritual objects but also as cultural ambassadors—attracting visitors through museum exhibitions, performances, and souvenir markets. This dual role has led artisans to adapt designs and techniques to appeal to global audiences, raising important questions about cultural preservation, authenticity, and economic sustainability. Yet, the deeper implications of tourism on meaning-making, craftsmanship, and heritage transmission remain underexamined in much of the current literature.

Moreover, the gendered structure of mask production has often been overlooked. As an art form historically dominated by men, mask-making reflects broader gender roles in traditional Sri Lankan artisanal communities. The underrepresentation of women in carving, design, and leadership roles in the craft highlights unequal access to cultural capital and underscores the need for a gender-sensitive approach to understanding knowledge transfer and labor dynamics in the industry.

Beyond Sri Lanka's borders, mask traditions flourish in regions such as South India and Southeast Asia, where masks similarly function within ritual, theatrical, and healing contexts. A comparative perspective could further enrich this study by exploring shared cultural histories, material techniques, religious symbolism, and colonial legacies. Such a framework allows for a critical understanding of regional convergences and divergences, highlighting what makes Sri Lanka's mask-making unique, and how it is shaped by broader South and Southeast Asian cultural currents.

This article, therefore, aims to offer a more layered and interdisciplinary understanding of the Sri Lankan mask industry by integrating technological, cultural, gendered, and geopolitical lenses. It examines how tradition is transformed through tourism, how local hubs like Ambalangoda preserve artisanal heritage, how masks act as cultural mediators in global contexts, and how Sri Lanka's experience compares with related traditions across Asia. Through historical analysis, fieldwork, and cross-cultural reflection, the study contributes to broader debates on cultural sustainability, authenticity, and the future of intangible heritage in the modern world.

## Research Question:

How has traditional mask-making technology in Sri Lanka changed and evolved over time?

## Objective

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the technological evolution of mask production within the broader context of Sri Lanka's rich cultural heritage associated with traditional mask-making.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Historical Background of the Emergence of Sri Lankan Mask Art

In examining the origins of mask art in Sri Lanka, both experimental scholarship and folkloric interpretations offer valuable insights. Folklore narratives and socio-economic conditions underlying the birth of mask-making traditions are especially significant. According to folkloric accounts, the origins of mask art are closely tied to the emergence of kolam drama. One popular narrative explains that this tradition began with the sorrow of Queen Menikpala, the consort of King Mahāsammata, who experienced a strong desire to witness humorous and entertaining dances during her pregnancy. Unable to satisfy this craving, King Mahāsammata appealed to Śakra Devendra, who in turn instructed Visvakarma Divyaputra to resolve the issue. As a result of Visvakarma's intervention, not only was the Queen's desire fulfilled, but the arts of kolam performance and mask-making were also born (Wijesooriya, 2014, p. 12). This mythological explanation forms the popular understanding of the origin of mask art in Sri Lanka.

Geographically, the mask-making and kolam performance traditions are primarily concentrated along the southern and southwestern coastal regions, including areas such as Bentara, Mirissa, Pitigala, and Matara. However, Ambalangoda has historically gained the most recognition as a center for mask craftsmanship (Wijesooriya, 2014, p. 12). Historically, Ambalangoda was part of the lowland regions under the control of the Kotte Kingdom, the last Sinhalese kingdom to rule over the lowlands. There is minimal historical evidence to suggest that these areas fell under the authority of the Kandyan or Sitawaka kingdoms. Following the Kotte period, the region came under the influence of Don Juan Dharmapala, a pro-Portuguese ruler (Senevirathne & Kariyakarawana, 2018, p. 15).

The Ambalangoda region underwent further transformation during colonial rule. While Portuguese and Dutch influences were present, the most profound changes occurred under British administration. The British significantly expanded the cultivation of cinnamon and coconut—crops initially promoted by previous colonial powers—thus integrating the region into a broader capitalist economy. These socio-economic reforms introduced by the British led to the emergence of a local petty bourgeoisie, especially among the Karāva and Durāva castes, who gradually transitioned from traditional caste-based roles to positions of economic and cultural influence. The arts of masquerade and kolam drama became powerful media for expressing the social values and beliefs of this emerging class (Amarasinghe & Kariyakarawana, 2018).

### Traditional Techniques of Sri Lankan Mask Art

The art of mask-making in Sri Lanka is an integral part of the country's cultural heritage, with techniques handed down through generations of master craftsmen. Traditionally, Sri Lankan masks were crafted from locally available materials such as softwoods (e.g., Kaduru), clay, and natural fibers, using basic hand tools and centuries-old carving methods (De Silva, 2004). Each mask is carefully designed to portray specific characters from mythology, folklore, or religious rituals, often imbued with symbolic meanings that vary across regional traditions (Jayasuriya & Gamage, 2019).

In recent decades, however, mask-making practices have undergone considerable transformation due to a range of socio-economic, cultural, and technological influences. One of the most significant developments has been the adoption of modern tools and machinery, which has allowed artisans to increase the precision and complexity of their work (Perera & Gunaratne, 2020). Additionally, access to imported raw materials and synthetic pigments has broadened the creative possibilities for mask painting, enabling more vivid coloration

and diverse textural effects (Thrabbada & Jarur, 2018). These changes reflect a broader trend in which traditional craftsmanship adapts to new contexts while striving to maintain its cultural integrity.

The growth of tourism in Sri Lanka has played a significant role in shaping the evolution of traditional mask-making techniques. The increasing demand for authentic cultural artifacts and souvenirs has led to innovation and diversification within the mask-making industry, with artisans adapting their traditional skills to cater to the preferences of international visitors (Usavaisabataya & Ribisabatayala, 2021). Moreover, exposure to global art trends and cultural exchanges has influenced the design elements incorporated into contemporary Sri Lankan masks, thereby blurring the boundaries between tradition and modernity (Gunasekera & Bandara, 2019).

Despite these developments, the traditional mask-making industry in Sri Lanka faces several challenges. These include a declining population of skilled artisans, competition from mass-produced imitations, and concerns related to environmental sustainability (Ranaweera & Peiris, 2020). In response, efforts have been undertaken by government institutions, non-profit organizations, and local communities to protect this intangible cultural heritage while promoting sustainable livelihoods for artisans (Gunathilaka & Senanayake, 2017).

## METHODOLOGY

### Study Area

The study focuses on the major center of the mask industry located in the Patabendimulla Grama Seva Division of the Ambalangoda Divisional Secretariat, Galle District, in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka. This region, currently led by the Ariyapala Wijesuriya lineage, holds a distinguished place in Sri Lanka's mask-making heritage.

Although mask-making is practiced in other villages such as Bentara, Mirissa, and Pokunuwita outside Ambalangoda, this particular area was selected for several compelling reasons. Notably, the mask-making tradition in Ambalangoda has a longer and richer history compared to other regions. Two prominent artisan lineages have played a pivotal role in the development of the Ambalangoda mask tradition: the lineage of Juanwadu Ariyapala Gurunanse of Hirewatte and the lineage of Gunadasa Gurunanse of Tukkawadu, both of Ambalangoda. Based on its historical depth and its continued contribution to the craft, Ambalangoda was chosen as the focus area for this study.

### Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through both primary and secondary sources. Secondary data were obtained primarily from academic books and scholarly articles related to the Sri Lankan mask industry, providing insight into its historical development. Primary data were gathered through interviews conducted with individuals directly involved in the mask-making tradition, particularly within the selected study area.

### Data Analysis

This research adopts a qualitative methodology. The primary method used for analyzing the data was thematic content analysis, a widely recognized approach in qualitative research. Using this method, key themes were identified within the collected data and were analyzed theoretically to uncover underlying patterns, interpretations, and cultural significance.

### Local Art of Mask Making

Masks have been used in various cultures around the world since prehistoric times, continuing into the present day. A mask is essentially an artificial face worn over a person's natural face, often used to conceal identity or transform appearance temporarily. Anthropologists acknowledge that masks were commonly used by tribal communities across different continents for a range of purposes, including:

- ❖ Magical practices, rituals, and ceremonies associated with religious or cultural beliefs

- ❖ Intimidation in battle, through the use of fierce or frightening masks
- ❖ Cultural and theatrical performances, to create visual appeal and communicate narrative roles

Although no extensive written documentation from early Sri Lankan history explicitly discusses the use of masks, evidence from classical Sinhala literature offers insight into their presence. For example, the Sinhala classic *Saddharma Ratanāvaliya* includes the phrase:

- ❖ “They are coming to the stage to perform in the guise of sweet maidens.”
- ❖ Similarly, *Lovāda Saṅgarāva*, another Sinhala poem, contains the line:
- ❖ “They are going to perform in the guise of fun with masks.”

In *Guttala Kāvya*, a well-known literary work, it is stated: “They are going to play in the guise of fun wearing masks.”

Scholars agree that such references support the view that masks were in use during ancient and medieval times in Sri Lanka. Each mask traditionally served a specific purpose—be it ritualistic, theatrical, or spiritual.

Historically, foreign visitors have shown great interest in Sri Lankan masks, often collecting them as museum artifacts. However, they did not initially recognize the intricate artistic skills involved or consider these masks as fine art. In contrast, contemporary art connoisseurs now appreciate their aesthetic and cultural value, acknowledging them as remarkable examples of traditional craftsmanship.

In addition to literary references, there exist handwritten manuscripts, sketches, and templates preserved by generations of mask-makers. These artifacts, often passed down within families, are found in both local and international museum collections. Mask-making has traditionally flourished in the lowland regions of Sri Lanka, particularly in the Southern Province.

### Arts, Tradition, and Family Schools

Many pioneers in the field were also leaders of kolam dance troupes. Notable figures include:

- ❖ T.W. Pelis Gurunanse of Ambalangoda and his son T.W. Gunadasa Gurunanse
- ❖ J.W. Ariyapala Gurunanse of Hirewatte
- ❖ T.W. Oinis Gurunanse (father of Pelis Gurunanse)
- ❖ S.H. Andiris Gurunanse

These individuals were highly skilled in both ritual performance and woodworking. They traditionally carved kolam masks from the wood of the “Din” tree (a softwood species that grows near rivers). Later, Kaduru wood became the preferred material due to its durability and availability. Among the finest artisans were:

- ❖ Bentara Sinda Gurunanse
- ❖ Juanwadu Ondiris de Silva Waduarachchi, grandfather of Ariyapala Gurunanse
- ❖ Thido Gurunanse
- ❖ Nanda Gurunanse
- ❖ Pokunuwita Andy Singho
- ❖ Leon Fernando
- ❖ O.N. Pediris and O.N. Sadiris
- ❖ Meegoda Sada Gurunanse
- ❖ Hokandara Gurunanse from Olaboduwa in Raigama Korale
- ❖ Thomas Adeline and K. Pasdun Korala

Historical records also indicate notable kolam mask makers and performers from the Mirissa region, including:

- ❖ Ginthota Juan Gurunanse
- ❖ Kodagoda Punchi Yakdessa
- ❖ Weligama Sitthare
- ❖ Garaduwe Sedonis Gurunanse
- ❖ Weligama Gomis Gurunanse
- ❖ Udupila Edwin Gurunanse

These artisans were engaged in the full creative cycle: carving, painting, decorating, wearing, and performing with masks—primarily for kolam (comedic and dramatic folk dance) traditions. Today, some of their descendants continue this heritage by producing masks for commercial and cultural purposes, ensuring that this unique tradition remains alive.

### **Different Types of Masks**

In traditional Sri Lankan mask-making, various rituals were observed from the very beginning of the process—starting with the selection of suitable trees for wood, continuing through the carving and coloring stages, and culminating in the wearing of the mask during performances or rituals. Although carving and painting generally followed established patterns, sizes, standard measurements, shapes, and proportions, it was customary to draw inspiration from poetic verses associated with Kolam literature. These verses often influenced the artistic expression and symbolic meaning of the masks.

In many cases, artisans created masks by replicating original or ancestral masks that had been preserved within their family tradition. Despite these standard practices, individual mask types could still be distinguished based on subtle differences in measurement and proportion. Masks that focused on detailed and accurate facial features were commonly referred to as “carved faces.”

### **Carved Human Faces**

A widespread practice involved carving masks to closely resemble human facial proportions, typically measuring about 8 to 9 inches in height. However, in certain ritual contexts—particularly those related to healing or blessing—smaller masks were also used. Some of these are referred to as “fruit-shaped faces.”

Originally, small holes were carved below the eye level of the dancer to allow better vision during performances. A separate section was crafted for the nose, enabling the performer to breathe comfortably while wearing the mask. This design consideration also helped to prevent practical challenges, such as voice distortion or breathing difficulties during long performances.

Certain traditional masks, such as the Lenchina Kolam and Mudali Kolam, as well as those used in healing rituals, did not include openings for the mouth. In contrast, some masks were innovatively crafted with movable parts, particularly the mouth, by assembling separate carved pieces. This feature allowed for mouth movement and clearer articulation during dramatic dialogues and performances.

Such dynamic masks often depicted recognizable social roles or characters, including:

- ❖ Police Kolam – imitating colonial police officers
- ❖ Marakkala Kolam – imitating Muslim traders
- ❖ Royal and noble figures – kings, ministers, and chieftains
- ❖ Vedda characters – representing Sri Lanka’s indigenous community

Beyond the masks themselves, Sri Lankan mask traditions also incorporated related ornaments and decorative elements, enhancing the aesthetic appeal and symbolic value of each performance. These accessories were not merely embellishments but were integrated into the performativity and cultural context of the mask's use.

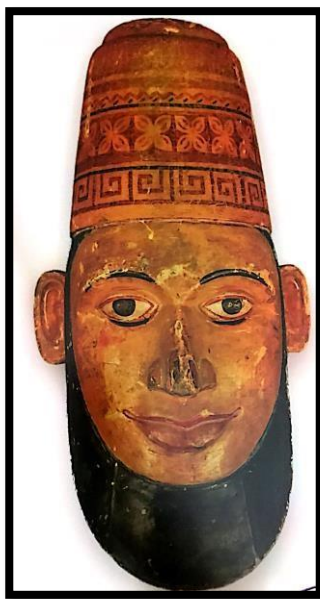




Lenchina Kolama



Arachchi Kolama



Marakkala Kolam



### Masks with Ear Ornaments

In addition to the ornamental designs and symbolic features carved into traditional Sri Lankan masks, many masks also include earlobes and ear ornaments attached to either side. These attachments, often stylized and exaggerated, serve not only as decorative elements but also as symbolic indicators of character identity and status. Some masks feature complex extensions or side attachments to represent ears, jewelry, or other anatomical or ritualistic features.

A basic example of such a design can be seen in the Gara Susthāna Yaksha mask. This mask includes side extensions, although it is typically shorter in width but taller in height compared to other ear-ornamented masks. While such styles are not commonly used in contemporary performances, a few skilled performers and traditional artisans still preserve this heritage through occasional rituals and reenactments. Masks with Protruding Earlobes on Both Sides

Many traditional masks are distinguished by symmetrical earlobes extending equally on both sides, often in a bold and exaggerated manner. Prominent examples of this type include:

- ❖ Nāgarāksha (Serpent Demon Mask)
- ❖ Gururāksha (Guardian Demon Mask)

Some of these masks feature openings for the mouth, allowing performers to speak or sing during performances. This enhances both visibility and breathability, contributing to the functionality of the mask during extended rituals or dances.

Due to the practical difficulty of obtaining large enough pieces of kaduru wood (the preferred material), artisans often create separately carved earlobes that are then attached to the main structure. These earlobes are usually prominent and easily identifiable, contributing significantly to the visual impact of the mask.

The largest and most elaborate masks with earlobes are typically used in:

- ❖ Sanni Yakuma (Demon Dance to Cure Diseases)
- ❖ Royal character masks, including the King, Queen, and Surambāvallī (Sky Goddess/Akasha Yakshi) masks

Among these, the King's mask is especially important in the tradition of masks with ear ornaments. Artisans of the Ariyapala lineage of Ambalangoda are known for adding elevated attachments to the top of the king's mask. These additions accommodate a crown, and the surrounding carvings are intricately designed to remain visible and balanced. The crown's detailed elements are often detachable and prominently displayed.

Performers must insert their entire face into the mask, while also balancing its considerable weight on their shoulders. These masks are therefore carefully designed to rest comfortably and remain stable during vigorous dance movements.

The Queen's mask, while similar in overall design, is slightly smaller than the King's mask. Nonetheless, it includes all the characteristic decorative motifs appropriate to royalty, including delicately carved features and traditional embellishments.

Generally, Gurukula artisans (members of traditional craft schools or lineages) maintain consistency in facial features, patterns, and symbolic motifs across royal masks. However, minor variations in size, expression, or decorative detailing have been observed over time, reflecting both regional styles and evolving artistic interpretations.



Queen's mask

Queen's mask

**Masks without Earlobes and Earrings** Certain masks in the Sri Lankan mask tradition are created without extended earlobes, earrings, or side decorations. Examples include masks representing the Kāva Rākshā (female demon or demon princess), the Scarecrow, the Giri Devi, and the Nāga Kanyā (serpent maiden or cow-

maiden). Traditionally, artisans selected kaduru wood of appropriate length and width to accommodate the specific design elements and detailed carvings required for these figures.

These masks were often larger than the human face, sometimes two or three times its size, but lacked attached ear components or prominent side features. In some cases, decorative parts were only affixed to the top or sides, rather than being sculpted as integral elements. Today, many of these elaborately designed masks survive only in photographs, sketches, or museum collections, as they are no longer in common use.

### Other Types of Masks

Various specialized masks were used by traditional dance troupes performing Yakka (spirit or demon) dances and Pāli (line or circular) dances. In particular, Matara-based dance groups and Gurukula schools employed Pandampāliya (torch dance) and Sālupālai masks for ceremonial and healing rituals. These masks were crafted with distinctive features: Teeth were attached directly without a separate artificial chin. The forehead, cheeks, eyes, eyebrows, and nose were all carved from wood. In some cases, other natural materials were used to form the upper and lower teeth, as well as the cheeks. Beards were affixed to give a more lifelike and dramatic appearance. Importantly, these masks exposed the dancer's real eyes and lower face, allowing for greater expressiveness during performances. They were commonly used in Shānti Karma (rituals for blessings and healing) and by exorcists in traditional healing ceremonies. Functional Mask Innovations. In the Kandipālai dances (ritual dances involving water pitchers), some exorcists from the Matara Gurukula lineage used specially designed masks. In this method, facial components such as eyebrows, cheeks, eyes, and nose were carved separately. Additionally, sets of teeth, lips, and beards were made from natural materials and assembled to form movable facial features. These masks often included: Openings to reveal the performer's eyebrows. A mechanism to simulate the up-and-down movement of the iris or eyebrows. Strings attached to the upper and lower lips and chin, enabling dynamic movements of the mouth during performance. This ingenuity allowed for expressive storytelling, especially during healing and exorcist rituals.

### Application of Natural Materials and Makeup in Rituals

In some Yakka Thovil (spirit invocation) ceremonies, black soap was applied to the face of the Yakadura (ritual specialist or exorcist) to resemble a demon. In dances such as Veddi Sanniya (ritual to heal hunting-related illness) and Māra Sanniya (ritual to prevent premature death), teeth made of natural materials and noses carved from kaduru wood were commonly used.

Additionally, in the lowland regions, wooden components called ketakeli were used to make upper and lower sets of teeth and lips. In the Sabaragamuwa Province, such features were referred to as Kumāra Thalla (prince's lips).

In performances such as Maru Sanniya, red was traditionally applied to the performer's lips to represent vitality or divine power. Originally, this was done using red pigment made from natural substances mixed with coconut oil. In modern practice, however, Bali powder or other synthetic paints are used as a substitute.



Maru



## Mask-Making Techniques

Traditional Sri Lankan craftsmen have primarily used a special type of wood known as kaduru for making masks. Several varieties of kaduru trees are found in Sri Lanka, including Gon Kaduru, Mudu Kaduru, Divi Kaduru, and Goda Kaduru.

The trees referred to as Gon Kaduru and Mudu Kaduru are sometimes collectively known as Velkaduru (field kaduru) because they grow abundantly in wet zone regions. Goda Kaduru is found in both the wet and dry zones, while Divi Kaduru is primarily valued for its medicinal properties and is widely used in the preparation of indigenous Ayurvedic medicines.

<b>For Cutting and Carving Wood:</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Adze</li> <li>2. Hand Adze</li> <li>3. Large Knife</li> <li>4. Cross-cut Saw</li> <li>5. Cross Saw</li> <li>6. Hand Saw</li> <li>7. Hacksaw</li> <li>8. Mallet</li> <li>9. 1½, 1, ¾, and ½ inch Flat Chisels</li> <li>10. 1½, 1, ¾ inch Bent Chisels</li> <li>11. 1½ and 1 inch Gouge Chisels</li> <li>12. Flat Knife</li> <li>13. Gimlet (Hand Drill)</li> <li>14. Rasp/File</li> </ol>
<b>For Measuring:</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Carpenter's Foot Ruler</li> <li>2. Pair of Dividers/Compasses</li> <li>3. Chalk Line</li> <li>4. Angle Level (Bevel Gauge/Protractor Level)</li> </ol>
<b>For Smoothing Masks:</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Shark's Rough Skin</li> <li>2. Madurumaalu Fish Scale (or another abrasive fish skin)</li> <li>3. Leaves of the Kotu Dimbula Tree (used for polishing/smoothing)</li> </ol>
<b>For Coloring and Decoration:</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Natural (Eco-Friendly) Pigments and Special Minerals (e.g., powdered gems)</li> <li>2. Brushes/Paint Brushes</li> <li>3. Dorana Oil (used as a binder or base)</li> <li>4. Resin</li> </ol>

Since ancient times, mask-makers have predominantly used Velkaduru and Goda Kaduru due to their excellent physical properties. Once dried, the wood becomes light, durable, and resistant to breakage, making it ideal for detailed carving. It also has the special quality of forming tight bonds when joined, which enhances the structural integrity of the finished mask.

These properties are particularly noted in the kalapa (the heartwood) of the tree. While other woods such as Rukattana and Erabadu were occasionally used, they lacked the unique durability and workability of kaduru wood, and thus their use has declined over time.

## Carving Masks

The process of carving begins with the selection and cutting of the kaduru tree. Some artisans traditionally prefer to cut the tree during the waning phase of the moon, believing that wood harvested during this period is more suitable for long-term use. In earlier times, it was customary to clear the area around the selected tree and hold ritual ceremonies before felling it—practices that have become rare today.

Large masks are carved from the broader sections of the trunk, while smaller masks are crafted from leftover pieces. The trunk is cut to specific heights and widths depending on the intended size of the mask. While axes were traditionally used to split the trunk, band saws ("bandi saw") are now commonly used in the initial cutting process.

After the wood is brought home, the actual carving begins. Some artisans still observe traditional practices such as choosing an auspicious time or invoking blessings before beginning the work. This reflects the deep cultural and spiritual significance of the craft.

**Tools and Equipment Used in Traditional Mask-Making** The traditional tools employed in the carving process include: Hand axes and hatchets – for rough shaping of the wood Chisels and gouges – for detailed carving and refining facial features Wooden mallets – used to assist chiselling Knives and rasps – for smoothing and fine detailing Polishing stones or sandpaper – to finish the surface Paintbrushes made from animal hair or plant fiber – for painting the final mask Each tool is selected and used with care, often passed down through generations of artisans who regard their craft as both an art and a spiritual duty.



## Further Mask-Making Techniques

The characters described in Kolam poems and other ritual performances are often considered during the mask-making process. Although the exact dimensions (length, width, and depth) are not provided in these texts, the general appearance and symbolic traits of the characters are interpreted and artistically expressed through the mask. Craftsmen draw inspiration from poetry, oral tradition, ritual specialists (charmers), personal experience, and their own artistic intuition to create masks that embody these attributes.

## Initial Carving Process

To begin shaping the mask, the artisan levels one side of a block of kaduru wood using tools such as a wide hoe, manna pihiya (a traditional small axe), or a hand axe. The block is firmly positioned on the ground, often rolled into place to ensure stability.

For smaller masks, such as keta masks, a mat made of natural fibers or a sacking bag is spread on the floor, and a small bench or flat log is used so that the craftsman can sit comfortably with knees spread apart. The wooden block is then held firmly under the artisan's feet, allowing better control for carving.

Using a chisel and mallet, the general shape of the face is carved—a process known locally as *gaasma* (meaning “to apply pressure or weight”). The outline of facial features—forehead, eyes, nose, teeth, mouth, and chin—is then marked using charcoal or pencil.

Once outlined, the artisan carves out these features with chisels of various shapes and sizes, gradually bringing the face to life. At a later stage, pressure is again applied to hollow the back of the mask.

### Drying and Detailing

After carving, the mask is dried in soft shade or placed in a smokehouse (*dum massa*) for several days to remove moisture. Once sufficiently dried, finer features are sculpted and smoothed. Holes are made for the eyes, nose, and mouth using either a *thorapana* (traditional boring tool) or, in modern practice, an electric drill.

The inside and outside of the mask are further smoothed with a marten knife or other sharpening tools. This stage begins the detailing process, where unique features—eyelids, cheekbones, wrinkles, fangs, or symbolic markings—are defined.

### Larger Mask Production

When crafting larger masks, the process becomes more technical. A sketch is first drawn, followed by measurements using a carpenter’s ruler, black thread, leveling tools, and a compass to ensure perfect bilateral symmetry. Due to the size and weight, the mask is not pressed underfoot. Instead, the piece is rotated and repositioned frequently during carving.

Mask-making at this level demands high precision and refined skill. The craftsman must be both a sculptor and painter, using finely sharpened tools with meticulous attention to detail. The differences in artistic skill and aesthetic style can be observed in the final masks, making it possible to identify specific regional styles or family lineages.

**Tools and Modern Adaptations** Traditional tools once included: Sharp axes for felling trees (now often replaced by chainsaws) Crosscut or band saws (replaced by mechanical saws for precision cutting) chisels and mallets of varying sizes *Thorapana* (now largely replaced by electric drills)

For tool sharpening, earlier craftsmen used sandstones, whetstones, and files. Today, mechanical grinders and specialized sharpening blades are more common.

**Smoothing and Finishing** Once shaped and dried, the mask is smoothed using traditional and modern materials. In earlier times: Skins of shark, eel, and catfish Rough plants like *motadaliya*, *kotadibula*, *del*, and *savarin* These were used to smooth the surface. Today, artisans primarily use sandpaper, emery paper, and other synthetic abrasives.



After the front of the mask is smoothed, it is adjusted to fit the performer's face. The area around the forehead is trimmed to remove any obstructions. The mask is placed directly on the face of the performer, and areas that do not align properly are trimmed using a small knife to ensure comfort and correct fit.

**Coloring the Mask** Once the surface of the mask is smooth and even, the coloring and painting process begins. Traditionally, white clay extracted from streambeds and spider webs was used for final smoothing. After this preparation, coloring materials were sourced from natural elements such as plants, minerals, gravel, medicinal herbs, soap, coal, and special resins. These natural pigments were then applied according to the character represented in the mask.

It was customary to apply a protective coating made from a mixture of “dorana” oil and rice wood extract to preserve the painted surface—this coating was known as “walichchi.” While these traditional methods were practiced for centuries, over time, store-bought color powders began to replace natural pigments, with village shops supplying the materials needed for mask coloring.

This transition was influenced by temple painters, whose use of more vibrant and synthetic paints encouraged mask artisans to adopt modern techniques. Traditionally, paintbrushes were made using the natural hair of monkeys, squirrels, and cats. However, the availability of industrial solvents and synthetic brushes has simplified the process in modern times. Today, lacquer and paint thinner are commonly used in the painting of masks.

According to Mr. Gunathilaka, colors used in Sri Lankan masks are not arbitrary—they signify character traits such as gender, age, social status, and even spiritual nature. The color scheme typically follows this logic:

- ❖ Royal figures: Light red, orange, white, yellow
- ❖ Officials/officers: Light red, yellow-green, grey
- ❖ Supernatural beings (e.g., demons or spirits): Red, black, brown
- ❖ Mythical or folkloric characters: Red, white, reddish-brown

This system of color coding enhances the symbolic and narrative clarity of traditional performances.

### **Wearing Masks**

Once the mask is carved, painted, and fully dried, it must be carefully adjusted to be worn securely and comfortably by the performer. For ordinary masks, a system of three threads is commonly used, while larger demon masks (yaksha masks) typically require five threads for support.

The design includes a carved area near the lower palate of the mask to anchor it against the dancer's chin, ensuring stability during movement. In traditional practice, holes are made on either side of the mask and sometimes at the top of the head to pass the threads through. When the height and weight of a mask increases, additional threads are added to distribute the load evenly. A typical five-thread setup includes:

- ❖ Two threads on either side of the mask
- ❖ Two threads beneath the chin
- ❖ One thread above the head

In earlier times, cords were made by grinding and twisting the bark of trees such as beli and other jungle varieties. Today, cotton strings have replaced these natural materials due to ease of availability.

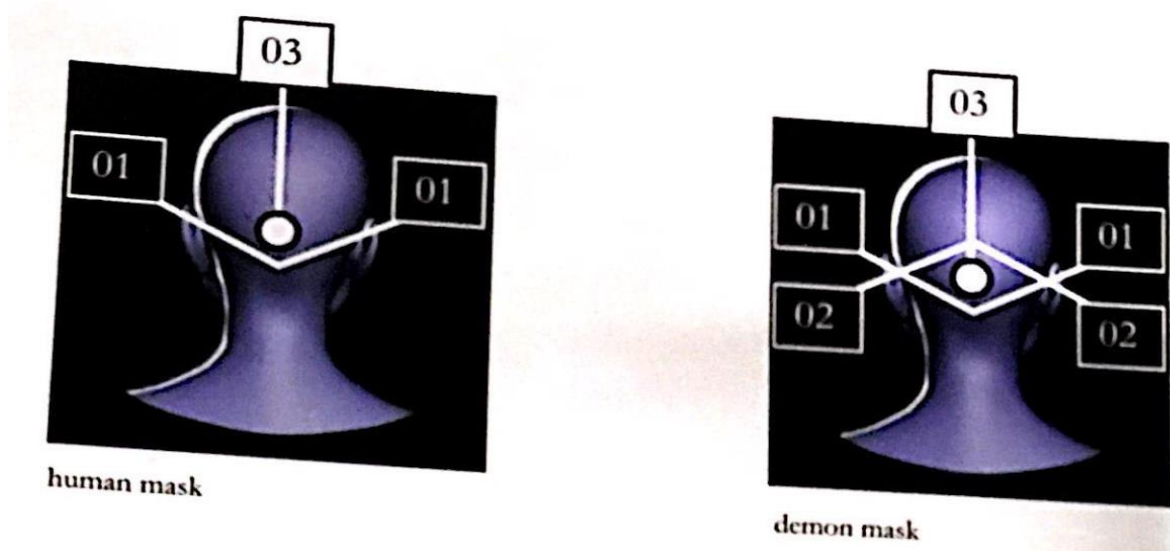
Before wearing a mask, especially during dance performances, the dancer ties a handkerchief around the head to hold the hair in place and to avoid direct contact between the scalp and the wood. Traditionally, the knot was tied close to the hair bun, but in contemporary practice, a ball of cloth or paper is sometimes used as a substitute.

When human masks are worn, a simple handkerchief is usually sufficient. However, when wearing demon masks, the dancer's face is first covered with pieces of cloth to prevent skin irritation caused by rubbing



against the interior wood. Some performers use a large, black cloth, folded into a triangle and tied tightly to cover the chin, cheeks, and forehead. This provides cushioning and comfort during extended performances.

The diagram (Figure 10) below illustrates: The three-thread technique for human masks The five-thread technique for demon masks The method of tying the handkerchief knot behind the head



- ❖ A string used to tie the headscarf at the back of the head, extending from the forehead.
- ❖ A string extending from above the ear to the headscarf knot and downward (around the knotted hair ball).
- ❖ A string extending above the headscarf knot (hair ball) and below the ear.
- ❖ Sometimes, the mask is worn without any strings.

For large masks, such as the traditional king and queen masks, the dancer supports the mask on their shoulders. Additionally, a wooden headpiece or shoulder rest called “uramala” is used by the ana drummers of the kolam mask dance groups to stabilize the dancers' heads with the mask.

While comfort is important, it is essential that the wearer can clearly see forward. Traditional mask makers have long understood this requirement. Historically, novices were initiated into mask wearing before performing on stage. During this initiation, the three gods were blessed, the deities were invited to bestow their blessings, and, accompanied by auspicious drumbeats, the teacher placed the mask on the novice dancer’s face. It was the teacher’s responsibility to instruct the novice on how to adjust the mask to synchronize with the rhythm and movements of the dance.

Some teachers used this occasion to demonstrate the novice’s ability to perform to the drumbeat, wearing the mask suited to the character they were learning to portray. This demonstration took place before the kolam troupe’s formal stage performance and was typically conducted only in front of troupe members at the teaching venue.

There is little information about this practice among lowland artists who performed Shanthi Karma (rituals for disease prevention). In those rituals, prominent exponents blessed newcomers at the consultation point when they first performed wearing masks. It was common to use “Katakel” masks—masks with movable parts assembled for action—during these occasions.

The above information illustrates that local mask artists have long applied their creative skills to craft masks, contributing significantly to the country’s cultural pride by producing a wide variety of masks in diverse styles.

The different methods and designs historically and currently used to create masks for dance and performance, along with the technical patterns involved in mask-making technology,

- ❖ Technical Patterns Used in the Creation of Wooden Masks

## ❖ Evolution and Development of Mask Making Techniques

This section identifies significant technological advances in the production of traditional masks in Sri Lanka and traces their evolution over time. The evolution of traditional techniques Evolution of Techniques Introduction of Power Tools alongside modern advances can be summarized as follows:

### **Traditional Techniques**

#### **01. Hand Carving**

Historically, Sri Lankan masks were hand-carved by skilled artisans using basic hand tools such as hoes and knives. These traditional techniques emphasized craftsmanship and artistic expression, with each mask individually crafted.

With the advent of power tools such as electric drills, rotary tools, and pneumatic chisels, mask makers in Sri Lanka began incorporating mechanical carving techniques. Power tools enabled artisans to achieve greater precision and efficiency, speeding up production while maintaining quality standards.

#### **02. Use of Colours**

In the past, coloring materials were obtained from natural plants, gravel, soap, coal, medicinal plants, and special resins, and masks were painted accordingly.

#### **Use of Modern Materials and Pigments**

Today, the availability of imported materials and pigments has broadened the options available to mask makers. Artisans have begun experimenting with new materials such as acrylic paints, synthetic resins, and fiberglass, offering improved durability and color vibrancy compared to traditional materials.

#### **03. Incorporating 3D Printing**

More recently, 3D printing technology has revolutionized mask manufacturing in Sri Lanka. This technology allows rapid prototyping and customization of mask designs, enabling artisans to create complex, detailed masks with greater ease and efficiency.

### **Impact of Technological Advancements**

#### **01. Increased Efficiency and Productivity**

The introduction of power tools and modern materials has significantly increased the efficiency and productivity of mask manufacturing in Sri Lanka. Artisans can now produce masks faster while maintaining high craftsmanship and quality.

#### **02. Expanded Design Capabilities**

Technological advancements have expanded design possibilities, allowing mask makers to create more complex and innovative designs. 3D printing, in particular, offers limitless opportunities for experimentation and creativity, enabling artisans to push the boundaries of traditional techniques.

#### **03. Preservation of Traditional Crafts**

Despite adopting modern technologies, many Sri Lankan artisans remain committed to preserving traditional crafts and cultural heritage. Modern tools and materials provide new avenues for innovation, yet artisans draw inspiration from traditional techniques and designs, ensuring the continuity of Sri Lanka's mask-making tradition.

## 04. Integrating Sustainable Practices

Increasing attention is being paid to integrating sustainable practices into mask production. Artisans are exploring eco-friendly materials and production methods to minimize environmental impact while preserving cultural heritage.

The evolution of mask making in Sri Lanka reflects a dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation. While modern technologies have transformed the industry, traditional craftsmanship remains at the heart of Sri Lanka's mask-making heritage. By embracing technological advances while preserving cultural authenticity, Sri Lankan artisans strive to produce masks of exceptional quality and beauty for generations to come.

## CONCLUSION

The evolution of mask making in Sri Lanka has undergone significant transformation, with traditional techniques adapting to modern technological advances. From meticulously hand-carved wooden masks to the integration of power tools, modern materials, and 3D printing, Sri Lankan artisans have embraced innovation while maintaining the essence of their cultural heritage.

The introduction of power tools has increased efficiency and productivity, allowing artisans to create masks with greater precision and speed. The availability of modern materials and pigments has expanded design possibilities, enabling artisans to experiment with new textures, colors, and finishes. Furthermore, 3D printing technology has revolutionized mask production, offering unparalleled opportunities for customization and intricate detailing.

Despite these advances, the preservation of traditional craftsmanship remains a fundamental principle of the mask-making tradition in Sri Lanka. Artisans continue to draw inspiration from centuries-old techniques and designs, ensuring that each mask embodies the cultural significance and artistic excellence of Sri Lankan heritage.

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