

# MASKS OF CEYLON

SIRI GUNASINGHE





Arts of Ceylon—5

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*By*

SIRI GUNASINGHE

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## THE MASKS OF CEYLON

MASK-DANCES and mask-plays have been for centuries one of the most important sources of popular entertainment in Ceylon. *Kolam*, a popular type of folk play is pure mask-drama in which almost every character wears a mask. Masks are also used, although not to the same extent, in a few performances belonging to the class of rituals known as *tovil* or devil dancing. These colourful dances and dramatic performances, restricted mainly to the rural areas of the southern coastal strip of the Island and the immediate hinterland and *sokari*, a dramatic performance confined to the central regions, are no doubt of a purely folk character. Perhaps for this very reason they have not been able to successfully withstand the challenge from more sophisticated modern forms of entertainment. However, inspite of a steady process of urbanisation, the ritual significance of some of these dances has enabled them to survive in the less affected rural areas, and when performed on rare occasions they still enjoy the patronage of enthusiastic audiences. Although the dances and the plays themselves may have lost much of their appeal, the masks worn by the dancers and the actors cannot be said to have suffered the same fate. And in fact, more than the dances themselves, more than their ritual significance or dramatic import, it is the masks that enhance the entertainment value of these performances. From ritual to drama the transition is not

always very clear and it is often of little consequence whether a performance is of a ritual or dramatic character so long as the masks and the dances can hold our interest. This is especially so when it is not the ritual aspect that is emphasized but the purely choreographic, as it is in the case of many of the popular ritual ceremonies of Ceylon. Almost without exception the ritual performances that are prevalent in Ceylon have in them many elements which would be more in place in a dramatic performance. A large number of the characters that appear in some of the rituals as well as the dialogues they engage themselves in are unmistakably of a theatrical nature. The dance sequences which form part of the ritual and the masks worn by the dancers seldom make us think of their ritualistic import.

The masks themselves have become a source of aesthetic pleasure and we do not resent their being exhibited in museums. Nevertheless in their natural context, they were not pure *objets d'art*. They had a very important role to play as the most effective means of impersonating the extraordinary characters that feature in these performances, both ritual and dramatic. These characters are often super-natural beings with rather grotesque and fearful mien or rural folk whose appearance and mannerisms are exaggerated to the point of becoming almost ridiculous. It is obvious that such characters could not be depicted with the aid of simple theatrical make-up alone. With masks however there are limitless possibilities. Unlike the human face a mask is neutral and immobile and for that very reason capable of registering any emotion or feeling required



in the context. Besides all manner of motifs that are foreign to the human face can be incorporated in a mask thereby widening the field of possibility far beyond anything that the human face is capable of. These advantages that the masks enjoy in comparison with the human face, with or without make-up, have tended to emphasize this purely functional aspect of the masks and reduce their value as works of art in their own right.

It is seldom that the carvers of these masks are credited with any ideas of beauty as an end in itself. Any occurrence of even formal beauty is generally taken as accidental rather than intentional. Such a view seems to be untenable in the face of the immense labour expended by the mask-maker not only in carving the basic features but in bringing out the minutest details with fine line work and appropriate colours. It is not merely the excellence of the traditional formula, it is the creative imagination of the carver as well that make some of these masks valuable works of art. If the carvers depended entirely on the tradition and did no more than mechanically imitate a prototype we would expect all masks to be equally good or equally bad. This however is not the case. Some of the Sinhalese masks, especially those of the *rassa* group, the ones depicting old age among those used in the *kolam* and the well known *sanni* masks are of an exceptionally high artistic quality.

It may perhaps be difficult to ascertain if the craftsman-artist did always look upon his creation as a veritable work of art. But the aesthetic satisfaction

one derives from these masks may perhaps be proof that, though the carvers were only the inheritors of an extremely simple folk tradition, they were not altogether devoid of a sense of beauty. That they were making an attempt at expressing a variety of thoughts and feelings, which we do not perhaps need to share, cannot be doubted. Nor can it be said that these folk artists were oblivious to the essentially theatrical quality of the ritual and the masquerades in which the masked dances occur, and that the masks are not meant to enhance this theatrical quality. The sense of proportion that is exhibited by the best masks, their simple but very effective colour scheme, and the many distortions and exaggerations that have been worked into them do certainly produce an effect which, in the best sense of the term, is dramatic.

Simple though these masks are in the ideas embodied, the complicated forms and highly exaggerated distortions they employ to bring out the supernatural and the ludicrous raise them to a point of perfection that makes the best of them significant enough for comparison with some of the best creations of mask-makers elsewhere in the world. Such beautiful pieces are to be found among the earliest examples carved at a time when the formula was still fresh. Much of the later examples remain rather mechanical imitations of the traditionally accepted models. The need to conform to tradition is so very pronounced in all forms of folk art that no deviation however small from the basic formula would be acceptable. This adherence to tradition results in the later work becoming mere



faithful copies of the time-honoured original models, generally accepted as the standard. This does not however happen in the hands of the imaginative craftsman. He does not merely imitate. He only avails himself of a tradition of familiar motifs and patterns. Whatever little variations that may be observed are limited to surface details while the basic concepts remain unchanged. These basic concepts or the repertoire of time hallowed motifs and familiar ways of composing and organizing them have resulted in rigid conventions as regards form and colour as well as the characters represented. No overall modification of these conventional motifs and their combination could have been effected without breaking away from the tradition. The result would then be a glaring misrepresentation of the basic mythology and content of both folk religion and folk drama. The mythology concerned is very simple. It abounds in all forms of very hazily conceived supernatural beings as well as humans whose lineaments could be defined only with the greatest difficulty. Consequently the distinction between two different characters is seldom easily recognised. This vagueness is due in the main to the fact that the masks are intended to symbolize certain basic feelings and ideas rather than represent definite characters. Fear and a sense of awe are two of the commonest motivations and one can easily observe that most of the ritual masks of the *tovil* are so conceived as to recreate these same feelings in the beholder. As for the dramatic masks of the *kolam* and *sokari*, the most characteristic elements is a certain ribald humour resulting from an over-

simplified attitude of tolerance towards the common foibles underlying many a comedy of error. It is not the individual that forms the subject of a *kolam* mask but the type: the haughty official, the naive villager, the crafty trader &c. The masks therefore depend on conventionalized and universally accepted motifs rather than on features and traits reminiscent of known individuals though of course there are occasional attempts at caricaturing well known persons. It is therefore not surprising that masks which represent different characters often appear very similar. In most cases the apparent uniformity is merely the result of an attempt at approximation to the traditionally accepted prototype.

We do not know much of the history of the masks in Ceylon. It would be idle to attempt in an essay such as this to establish when and how the first mask came to be carved in Ceylon. It could be stated, however, that the history of the Sinhalese masks is bound up with that of the popular folk ritual, *tovil* and that of the folk dramas *kolam* and *sokari* mentioned earlier. We do not know for certain how long these performances may have been popular in Ceylon. There need be no doubt however that in their present form these ceremonies and dramatic performances may have been known for many centuries.

The extant masks, the oldest of which may not be more than two hundred years old, are to be found mainly in the coastal regions of Ceylon. The perishable



nature of the light woods *kaduru* (*Strychnos-nuxvomica*) and *ruk-attana* (*Alstonia scholaris*) of which the masks are carved probably account for the loss of the older masks.

Ceylon masks as we know them today fall within three clearly distinguishable groups : the naturalistic dramatic masks, human and animal, used in the *kolam* and *sokari* ; the demon masks used in the *tovil* ritual and the *kolam* ; the group of eighteen masks used in the *sanni* sequence of the *tovil* ceremony.

### **Kolam**

The masks used in the popular *kolam* are the most varied in character as well as the most numerous. Any one complete *kolam* play has in it a very large number of dramatis personae : kings, queens, ministers, a host of officials, soldiers, men and women from all walks of life and animals, each one a masked character. In addition there is also a large number of characters impersonating a class of supernatural beings. These beings, usually referred to as *rassayas* have to be distinguished from the more ferocious *yakas* of the *tovil* ritual. A few masks representing animals and birds—lions, tigers, bulls &c.—that appear in these *kolam* plays form a third group.

Not very much is known precisely with regard to the origin of the *kolam*. One could however be certain that for two hundred years or more *kolam* performances have been a very popular form of entertainment in the maritime areas of Southern Ceylon. Although the

*kolam* is no longer the popular form of entertainment that it was, it has not altogether disappeared from the coastal regions of Ceylon. There is evidence of its popularity, though diminished, at the turn of the century and, still today, when a *kolama* is performed on occasion, it does not fail to evoke hilarious laughter, even among the sophisticated urban audiences.

In the *kolama*, in all probability, is preserved a very old tradition of narrative drama of a purely folk style, with the narrator describing the physical appearance and exploits of each character. In fact the narrator who is also the leader of the troupe recounts the whole drama as it is being enacted by the masked dancers. Verses sung by the narrator serve the purpose of an introduction to the characters at the same time preparing the audience to receive and understand each of them as they come on the stage. The spectators are spared the pain of trying to interpret the characters for themselves. They are thereby given the freedom and the leisure to enjoy the spectacle. This technique seems to be of great advantage especially when no particularly dramatic situation is enacted. It is no doubt a most elementary kind of dramatisation in which the emphasis is very much on the spectacular rather than the dramatic.

A *kolama* is presented in two parts : a prelude and the main piece. The prelude is, as it should be, a device for setting the stage for the dramatized presentation of any one of the well known stories such as Maname,



Sandakinduru, Gothaimbara &c., which are normally the popular pieces in the repertoire of any *kolam* troupe.

According to legend the first *kolama* was performed in the presence of King Mahasammata and his queen and, as it is performed at present, the *kolama* preserves this tradition. The prelude which seems to have no connection with the actual drama is in effect a re-enacting of the old legend. The characters that appear in the prelude—policeman, *vidane*, soldiers, drummer and his wife, washerman and his wife and *mudali*—are all the king's officers who are making preparations for the arrival of the king and the queen. All the characters have appropriate dances and stylized walks. These characters of the prelude, as they are presented, are not connected in any way with the main story or among themselves episodically except by a seemingly related series of events and their task of preparing for the arrival of royalty. While making these preparations they also enact certain episodes, common occurrences in their daily routine, little comedies of error, which produce endless guffaws in the audience. The presentation of these characters seems to be motivated by the sole need to burlesque these common foibles and evoke innocent laughter. Once the king and queen take their seats the supernatural *rassa* characters come dancing on to the arena. These *rassa* dances, the most spectacular sequences in the performance, probably hark back to the original *kolam* dances seen by the legendary king and his queen. The prelude comes to an end with the *rassa* dances and the *kolama* proper begins.

*Vidane*, *Panikkale* and *Nonci* are some of the characters that have been favourite subjects of the mask-maker as is evident from the variety of mask-types for these subjects which are all equally provocative. In spite of their exhilaratingly humorous appearance these masks stand out on account of the realistic effect of old age that has been very cleverly brought out. These masks as well as the ones representing nondescript old men and women are probably some of the best creations of the Sinhalese wood carver. One feels that old age was one motif of which the formal elements and the characteristic features were best mastered by him.

In this extremely elementary kind of dramatic presentation, it is the masks that naturally hold our interest. As we have stated earlier there is a large number of masks used in any single performance of *kolama*. But as is to be expected they are all not of equal merit. The most outstanding masks are those which represent old men and women and the ones depicting rustic characters. These characters all belong to the prelude. Viewed independently of the performance itself, all these masks seem very neutral and lacking in any kind of expression that may provoke laughter. But once worn by the actor every tilt, every change of angle, every movement of the head is capable of a large variety of expressions. Although the majority of the masks seem commonplace when not in play, there are a few which are very effective caricatures such as the drummer and his wife, the soldier, the *vidane* or the



Moorman. One observes also the ease with which the carver has reduced the salient features of the aged face to a simple formula consisting of a few lines to represent the wrinkles on the forehead, the cheeks and at the corners of the mouth. The most striking feature, however, in these masks is the extremely effective disposition of the very few teeth left—sometimes just one simple white protrusion—and the gaping empty spaces in between creating a laughter-provoking black and white pattern. The eyes and the mouth seem sufficiently supple as to take their natural shapes unlike in the more stylized masks and the sagging skin over the prominent cheekbones above sunken cheeks is often shown with significant mastery of technique. Grey hair and beard made with the white strands of hemp or animal fur on a rugged brown background heightens the over-all effect completing a perfect image of old age.

Where exalted personages such as divinities, royalty and officials were concerned the masks appear to be of a heavily stylized character quite expressive of a sense of nobility. Youth too has been expressed through a perfection of form and a certain smoothness which seem to stamp the masks with an unnaturalness. They are all painted in a very light yellow or pink and have perfectly arched eyebrows, wide open almond eyes looking vacantly ahead, straight noses, softly curved

mouths and pearl white teeth evenly disposed. There is not a wrinkle or a single blemish in these masks. For this reason they appear to lack all character and seem unrelated to any man or woman ever known.

It does not however follow that these masks are altogether neutral in effect and lacking in expression. The king and queen are of course onlookers in the *kolam* performance and the only part they have to play is to be present on the stage as spectators. The king's mask however is the biggest—sometimes four or five feet high. It is certainly one of the most impressive masks with its highly elaborate crown. A mask that often becomes full of expression and provokes a good deal of mirth is the *mudali kolama*\* which lends itself to extremely expressive tilts bringing out all that is haughty in the high government official caricatured. In spite of its formal abstraction, the mask of the washerman—*pedi*—with its wide open mouth wearing an eternal but meaningless grin is so conceived as to illustrate very effectively the supposed naïveté of the character which is that of a perfect simpleton. The washerman's is certainly one of those vacant looking masks which become very expressive in the right context. The *heva kolama*—soldier—is a very popular item with the Sinhalese mask-maker and one of his most picturesque creations. There is a large variety of soldier-masks with very slight variations. The basic formula—face covered with bleeding sword-cuts with large black leeches sticking to them, wounded

\* *kolama* also means the mask.



mouth with the teeth laid bare and nose in tatters—remain the same in all these variations. The soldier is usually painted a light red but yellow as well as blue soldier-masks are not uncommon. Among the other human masks used in the *kolama* significant ones are the *marakkala kolama* (the Moorman) distinguished by his *féz* and beard, the *demala kolama* (the Tamil) with his particular head gear, protruding teeth and black face and the rather realistic Negro.

Perhaps some of the most picturesque masks are those belonging to the *rassa* group of the prelude. These masks have been very imaginatively conceived with their formal motifs cleverly combined to form a picture of immense power, evoking a sense of awe and a fear of the unknown. According to the legendary origins of the *kolama* referred to earlier these masks representing mythical beings are the first creations of the mask-maker and displayed in a masquerade in the presence of the legendary king Maha Sammata and his chief queen. These *rassayas* are different from the fierce devils that are invoked during the *tovil* ceremony though they all have the same basic characteristics such as large cylindrical protrusions with large black discs at the tips for eyes, broad mouths that cut the entire face in two from ear to ear and filled with large white teeth set off occasionally by two huge fangs at the corners, the red rolling tongue appearing to smack the red lips and the expansive nose that takes almost all the space on the face and seems to blow fury from the dilated cavernous nostrils.

The *rassayas* are, unlike the *yakas* of the *tovil* ceremony, benevolent semi-divine beings. However, the masks in both these cases are so similar that the benevolent nature of the *rassayas* is often lost sight of. This similarity is, perhaps, the result of a need to evoke fear and awe in the spectator. In spite of this similarity in the basic features one finds no difficulty in distinguishing the different *rassayas* since each one of them possesses certain individual attributes. Demons and other supernatural beings, important elements of the mythology of the Sinhalese, are created basically in the image of man himself, for they would not be otherwise intelligible. But man's face is necessarily inadequate to express the supernatural quality of these beings though they may be the creation of the unsophisticated imagination of naive myth-makers. The imposition of such severe distortions and exaggerations as noted earlier on the human face appears to be a very effective means of expressing these oversimplified folk visualizations of supernatural power. Even these exaggerations and distortions by themselves were probably found inadequate and they had to be supplemented with elements borrowed from the animal and vegetable worlds : such for instance are the cobras usually shown coiled into intriguing and fanciful patterns that form the ears and crowns of many of the masks belonging to the *rassa* group ; cobras that issue from the mouth nostrils and ears and shown with their expanded hoods are invariably the distinguishing mark of the *nagarassaya*,



*ratnakutaya* and the mythical bird *gurula*, who is also a *rassaya* in its own right. The popular lotus is generally used as the ear or ear ornament and the lotus petal which is a very common decorative motif is mostly used to fill the space below the eyebrow. Best known among the *rassa* masks are *nagarassa*, *ratnakuta*, *gurulu rassa*, *puṇaka*, *marurassa* and the rare but beautiful *kavarassa*.

These *rassa* masks are generally very large, about two feet high, and very heavy. To complete a single dance sequence with any one of these masks must necessarily be a very strenuous performance, though it is an extremely rewarding experience for the audience.

### **Sanni**

Not many masks are used in the devil dancing ceremonies known as *tovil* although these ceremonies are very complex and involve the invocation and the propitiation of many supernatural characters. There is however one long sequence of dancing known as the *sanniya* in which appear a group of eighteen masked dancers. These eighteen masks, very clever in conception and generally very cleverly executed, are some of the most artistic creations of the Sinhalese wood-carver although they are not so spectacular as the *rassa* masks of the *kolama*. Compared to the usual run of demon masks the very much smaller

*sanni* masks are at the same time more readily recognized although we have no satisfactory explanation of the meaning of these eighteen masked characters. The *sanniyas* are generally supposed to be the devils who inflict various ailments. According to the popular mythology of the Sinhalese diseases are caused by devils. When a devil takes possession of a man, the man falls ill. The only cure is a propitiation ceremony—*tovil*—in which the devil is invoked and gratified with various types of offerings of food &c., and is prevailed upon to leave the person of the helpless invalid. The devils if satisfied will immediately leave the invalid restoring him to his original state. There are a great many such devils of whom the eighteen *sanni yakas* are a homogenous group. According to popular belief these eighteen *sannis* are said to be different apparitions of one main *sanni yaka* called *kola sanniya* who is easily recognized by the cobra hoods and the green face. Sometimes the eighteen *sanni yakas* are taken as the attendants of the *kola sanniya*. Whatever be the exact character of the eighteen *sanniyas* they are generally believed to be authors of eighteen ailments. The masks themselves do not seem to support this general belief since they do not have any of the attributes of the devil. The *sanni* masks are unmistakably human in appearance except of course the *kola sanniya*. One could suggest that the demon who is responsible for the eighteen *sanni* ailments is



the *mahakola sanniya* while the eighteen masks are only the representations of those afflicted by the eighteen *sanni* ailments. The power to inflict these diseases is the main attribute of the *mahakola sanniya* and this is best expressed in the *mahakola sanni* mask which is one of the most interesting creations of the Sinhalese mask-maker.

These *sanni* masks, covering no more than the space between the middle of the forehead and just below the lowerlip, are extremely effective in presentation. This is especially the case with those masks which clearly depict the various symptoms of the ailments represented: *kora sanniya*—lameness—with the whole face contorted out of shape and the wide mouth twisted up, *kana sanniya*—blindness—with its vacant eyes and expressionless face, *golu sanniya*—dumbness—with its mouth appearing to make the greatest effort to speak but to no avail, *maru sanniya*—death—and the most curious of them all, *biri sanniya*—deafness—with half the face covered by a cobra, the symbol of deafness according to the folk mythology, are some of the best masks in this group.

These masks although apparently very simple and involve no *tour de force* as do the *rassa* masks, when worn in the *sanni* sequence, become extremely expressive and help in a large measure to enhance the dramatic effect of the *sanni yakuma*, which is one of the most spectacular and dramatic episodes of the *tovil* ritual.

The last masked dance to appear at the end of the normal *tovil* ceremony, or *kolama* performance is that of the *gara yaka*. This character, probably belonging to a lower rank of devils, is supposed to perform the ceremony of purification. It is generally believed that the performance of a *tovil* ceremony must necessarily produce some ill effects due to errors of commission and omission. In such a case some ritual of expiation has to be performed. The final dance of the *gara yaka* is intended for this purpose. Whatever be the function of the *gara yaka* the *gara mask* has become not only the most widely known but also the most popular of all the Sinhalese masks. It is perhaps due to the fact that the *gara yaka* sequence while being the grand finale, is at the same time one of the most dramatic episodes in a *tovil* ceremony. The *gara* mask is also one of the few rare masks with movable jaw permitting the dancer to sing and speak, thus adding to the dramatic quality of the performance. It is also quite unlike other masks in the matter of proportion as it spreads far and wide on either side with its two large lotus-ears in addition to the normal elements of the demon masks such as the protruding eyes, large mouth, tusks, cobras &c. It is often painted green (green and blue being the usual colours for those of inferior rank) and the two long curved white tusks that extend from the two corners of the mouth are very effectively set off against this background of green. The green also helps



to heighten the fearsome effect of the protruding black and white eyes. This mask has therefore all the attributes of the normal *rassa* mask although it is much smaller in size.

The masks of Ceylon seem to fall between the highly abstract masks such as those of Africa and the very naturalistic, sophisticated creations of the Japanese mask maker. In this respect they belong with the dramatic masks of Indonesia, with which, perhaps, they have some affinity. Consequently the task of the Ceylon mask maker, as that of his Indonesian counterpart, was perhaps made more difficult by the need for a subtler approach to the delineation of features and the juxtaposition of the various components. In addition he also had his limitations in the use of colours since his palette consisted of no more than four or five basic colours—red, blue, yellow, green and black. However, we must give the village craftsman the credit for creating, in spite of these difficulties, some of the most colourful masks known to folk art anywhere in the world.





## PLATES

1. PANIKKALE (*Drummer*)
2. NONCHI (*Drummer's Wife*)
3. PEDI (*Washerman*)
4. HENCHA (*Washerman's Assistant*)
5. MUDALI (*High Government Official*)
6. LIYANARALA (*Clerk*)
7. ARACHCHI (*Village Headman*)
8. HEVAYA (*Soldier*)
9. RAJA (*King*)
10. BISAVA (*Queen*)
11. KALUVA (*Peasant named thus*)
12. GAMAYA (*Peasant*)
13. KAPIRI GĀNI (*Negro Woman*)
14. HETTIYA (*Money Lender*)
15. POLISKARAYA (*Policeman*)
16. NAGARASSA
17. GURULURASSA
18. MARURASSA
19. KAVARASSA
20. PALI MASK
21. KOLASANNIYA
22. MAHAKOLASANNIYA
23. SANNI MASK
24.     "     "
25.     "     "
26.     "     "
27.     "     "
28.     "     "
29.     "     "
30. MARUSANNIYA
31. GARAYAKA







PANIKKALE (*Drummer*)





**NONCHI** (*Drummer's Wife*)







PEDI (*Washerman*)







**HENCHA** (*Washerman's Assistant*)



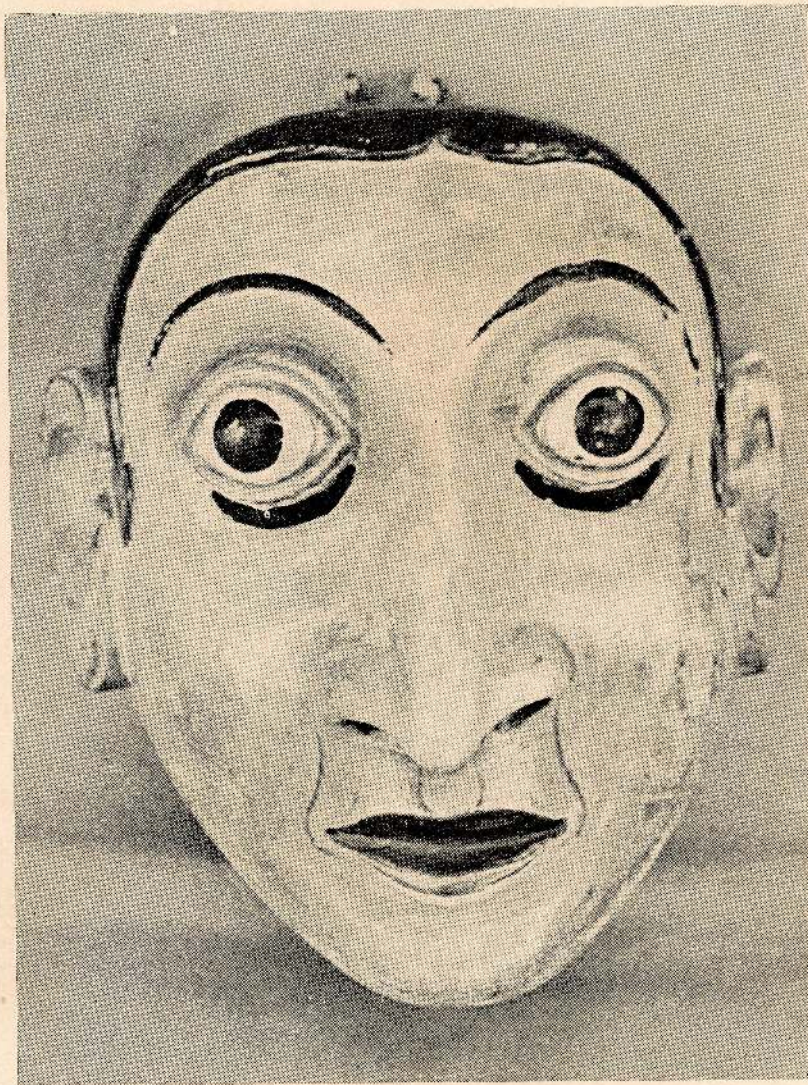




**MUDALI** (*High Government Official*)







LIYANARALA (*Clerk*)







**ARACHCHI** (*Village Headman*)







**HEVAYA (Soldier)**







RAJA (King)







BISAVA (*Queen*)







**KALUVA** (*Peasant named thus*)







**GAMAYA** (*Peasant*)







KAPIRI GĀNI (*Negro Woman*)







**HETTIYA** (*Money Lender*)







**POLISKARAYA** (*Policeman*)



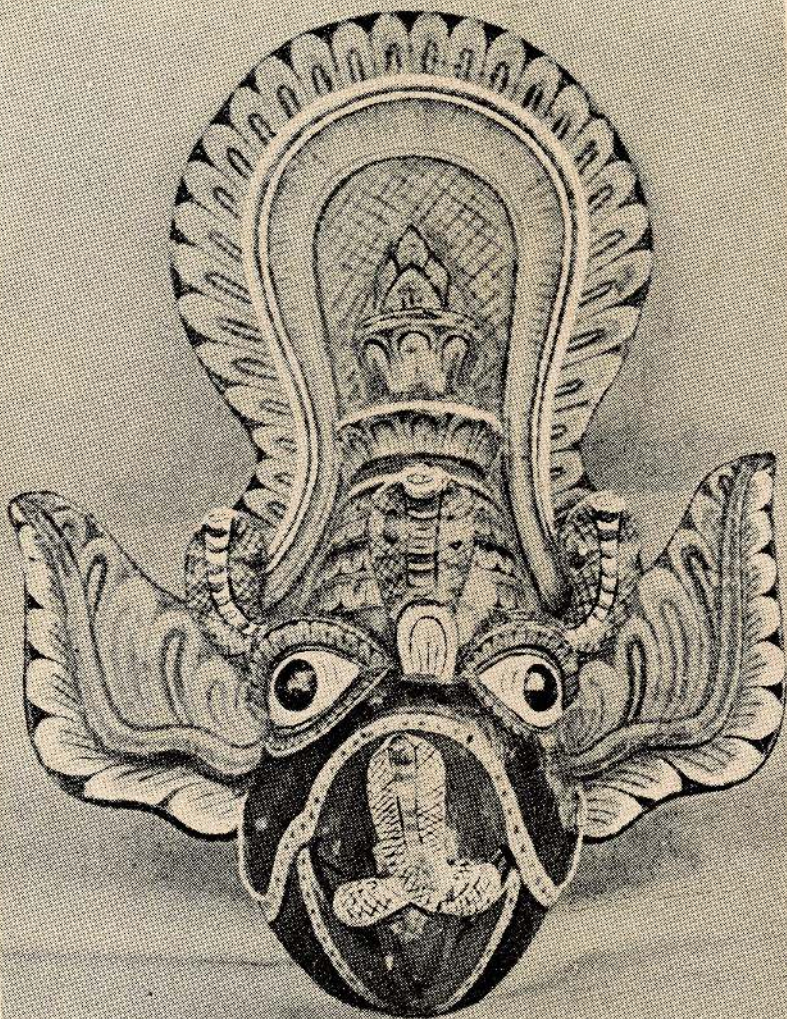




**NAGARASSA**







GURULURASSA







**MARURASSA**







**KAVARASSA**





PALI MASK













**MAHAKOLASANNIYA**







**SANNI MASK**







**SANNI MASK**







SANNI MASK







**SANNI MASK**







**SANNI MASK**







**SANNI MASK**

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**SANNI MASK**







MARUSANNIYA







## GARAYAKA











