



SRI LANKA NATIONAL INVENTORY

of

INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE ELEMENTS

NIICH-SL/ Index no 2017-02 RūkadaNātya
Traditional String Puppet Drama of Sri Lanka

Prepared by

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NIICH-SL/ Index no 2017-02 RūkadaNātya

1. Name and Identification of the element:

RūkadaNātya- traditional string puppet drama of Sri Lanka.

The element is identified as representing an important element of the corpus of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Sri Lanka as it manifests the following four domains of ICH as specified in the 2003 UNESCO Convention.

- Oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle
- Performing arts
- Social practices, rituals and festive events
- Traditional craftsmanship

1.1 Name of the element in the language and script of the community or group concerned

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1.2 Short, maximally informative title (including indication of domain(s))

RūkadaNātya is a type of drama performed using string puppets, traditionally meant for providing innocuous entertainment and conveying moral lessons to village communities.

1.3 Communities Concerned

RūkadaNātya is performed by familial groups who belong to, or are connected with, the lineage known as *Gamwari*, living around the southern coastal towns of Ambalangoda, Balapitiya, and Mirissa, and believed to be the descendants of migrants from the south-western coastal areas of India where similar forms of entertainment still prevail.

Additionally, there are other groups who are connected to those of the *Gamwari* lineage through marital relationships and have internally migrated to other parts of the island.

Furthermore, there are groups of puppeteers who have learnt the art from the *Gamwari* masters but not related to them.

As a result, the communities, groups or individuals who are concerned with the element, irrespective of where they reside, can be identified as those who are either the decedents of original families of *Gamwari* lineage, those who are related to such families, or unrelated but connected through master-pupil relationships.

1.4 Physical Locations of the Elements;

RūkadaNātya of the *Gamwari* lineage of southern Sri Lanka is the only form of traditional string puppet drama in the country with many characteristics specific to that tradition with its own cultural identity. The element is concentrated around the southern coastal townships of Ambalangoda, Balapitiya, and Mirissa in the Galle and Matara Districts of the Southern Province where the families of the *Gamwari* lineage have been traditionally living. Additionally, due to internal migration of people to other parts of the country for various socio-economic reasons, several other puppetry groups who are either related to the *Gamwari* lineage, or have learnt the art from *Gamwarimasters* are distributed in the districts of Colombo, Kalutara, and Gampaha in the Western Province.

1.5. Short Description.

RūkadaNātya is a type of drama performed using string puppets, traditionally meant for providing innocuous entertainment and conveying moral lessons to village communities. Themes are chosen from folktales, Buddhist stories, ancient literature, historical narratives, and the trivia with humorous anecdotes from contemporary life or from *nādagam*, an extinct form of 'folk opera'. Puppeteers prepare their own handwritten scripts with dialogs and songs, and recite them, while manipulating the puppets.

Puppeteers make their own wooden puppets with movable joints that represent either 'static roles' with fewer movable joints and of near life-size, or 'active roles' with many

movable joints and of 3.5' to 4.5' height. Puppets are dressed with colourful costumes that identify the characters they portray. Puppeteers manipulate them using strings tied to single short bars or two crossed-bars held by hand, while standing on an elevated horizontal platform and leaned onto a horizontal bar that is fixed across the stage about the shoulder-height of the puppeteers. A small band of musicians provides accompaniment using a harmonium, a violin, and a drum.

Performances are held as community events at public spaces suitable for community gathering, mostly during festive times in the months of May and June, while special shows are held at schools and higher educational institutes. Makeshift stages, made of wooden frames and covered with black curtains on all sides to camouflage the strings to create an illusion of reality. Performances are held in evenings in a well-covered space under dim light to enhance the illusion.

2. Characteristics of the Element

2.1 Associated tangible elements

Wooden masks, musical instruments, thread, fabric, short wooden bars, paper-mache, wooden makeshift stages, and wooden frames

2.2 Associated intangible elements

Folk tales, folk songs, music accompaniment

2.3 Language(s), register(s), speech level(s) involved

Sinhala language; dialogs and songs recited and sang at a higher pitch

2.4 Perceived origin

Believed to have been introduced from the South-Western coastal areas of India that belong to the State of Kerala, though there are no documented evidence.

3. Persons and Institutions Involved with the Element

3.1 Practitioners(s)/performer(s): name(s), gender, and/ or professional category, etc.

(A) Name & Gender:

(B) Professional Category:

(C) Address:

(D) Telephone:

| | | |
|---|---|----------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | A | Gamwarige Premin, (Male) |
| | B | Director, Suranga Puppetry |
| | C | 21, Pokuna Rd., Wathugedara. |
| | D | Mobile: +94-779189985; Fixed Line: +94-91-225-7931 |
| 2 | A | Nalin Gamwari, (Male) |
| | B | President, Sri Aruna Puppetry Society |
| | C | Bogahawatta, Ambalangoda. |
| | D | Mobile: +94-77-940-1894 |
| 3 | A | Gamwarige Nimal, (Male) |
| | B | Director, Nipuna Rukada Kala Kavaya |
| | C | No. 15, Bogahawatta, Ambalangoda. |
| | D | Mobile: +94-77-603-6105 |
| 4 | A | Wipula Gamwari, (Male) |
| | B | Director, Sri Aruna Rukada Sangamaya |
| | C | Bogahawatta, Ambalangoda. |
| | D | Mobile: +94-77-999-4534 |
| 5 | A | Sunil D. Jayarathna, (Male) |
| | B | Director, Thisara Kala Kavaya |

| | | |
|----|---|-----------------------------------------------------|
| | C | Hunupola, Attanagalla. |
| | D | Mobile:+94-77-889-0649 |
| 6 | A | W. Hema de Silva, (Female) |
| | B | Puppetry Practitioner |
| | C | No. 115, Kanda Kurundu Watta, Dediawala, Waskaduwa. |
| | D | Mobile:+94-77-783-2301 |
| 7 | A | Ganwarige Indika Gamini, (Male) |
| | B | Puppetry Practitioner |
| | C | Wathugedara, Ambalangoda. |
| | D | Mobile:+94-77-620-8447 |
| 8 | A | Y. Wijesiri De Silva, (Male) |
| | B | Puppetry Practitioner |
| | C | 87G, Wathugedara, Wiharagoda. |
| | D | Mobile: +94-77-999-4266 |
| 10 | A | L. P. Violet, (Female) |
| | B | Puppetry Practitioner |
| | C | Pokuna Road, Wathugedara. |
| | D | Mobile: +94-77-387-1348 |
| 11 | A | L.P. Charlotte, (Female) |
| | B | Puppetry Practitioner |
| | C | 'Sanjeewa', Kandegoda, Ambalangoda. |
| | D | Mobile: +94-77-150-5134 |
| 12 | A | D.W. Chatrapani de Silva, (Male) |
| | B | Puppetry Practitioner |
| | C | 'Udeni', Sirisumana Mawatha, Dickwella. |
| | D | |

| | | |
|----|---|----------------------------------------|
| 13 | A | T.G. Amaradasa, (Male) |
| | B | Puppetry Practitioner |
| | C | Athuraliya. |
| | D | Mobile: +94-76-871-1201 |
| 14 | A | S.A. Nandadasa, (Male) |
| | B | Puppetry Practitioner |
| | C | Kirinda, Puhulwella. |
| | D | Mobile: +94-71-108-3716 |
| 15 | A | Gamwarige Wijesiri, (Male) |
| | B | Puppetry Practitioner |
| | C | Ambalangoda. |
| | D | Mobile: +94-77-950-6390 |
| 16 | A | Kosala Priyam Kumara, (Male) |
| | B | Director, 'Pruthuvi Art Institute |
| | C | No. 43, Kumarathunga Mawatha, Gampaha. |
| | D | Mobile:+94-72-505-5772 |
| 17 | A | A.L. Lal Priyantha, (Male) |
| | B | Puppetry Practitioner |
| | C | No. 345/1, Maligathenna, Weyangoda. |
| | D | Mobile: +94-71-013-2779 |
| 18 | A | W.A. Gunadasa, (Male) |
| | B | Puppetry Practitioner |
| | C | Kannimahara, Wathurugama |
| | D | |
| 19 | A | W. Dhammika de Silva, (Female) |
| | B | Puppetry Practitioner |

| | | |
|----|---|-----------------------------------------------------|
| | C | No. 7, Kanda Kurundu Watta, Dediya Wala, Waskaduwa. |
| | D | Mobile: +94-77-574-5616 |
| 20 | A | Gamwarige Supum Chaturanga Gamini, (Male) |
| | B | Puppetry Practitioner |
| | C | No. 24, Pokuna Road, Wathugedara, Ambalangoda |
| | D | Mobile: +94-71-552-5038 |

3.2 Other participants (e.g., holders/custodians)

The Master Puppeteers who are often the heads of their families are assisted by grown-up male and female members of the family, and any other members of the extended families or relatives in numerous ways in the making of puppets and doing performances. Family groups, headed by the Master Puppeteer as such will do all aspects of puppet drama that involves scriptwriting, puppet-making, performing, and musical accompaniment. Light and sound will be provided by someone with resources who may be outside of the family. There are no custodians.

3.3 Customary practices governing access to the element or to aspects of it

There had been customary practices some decades ago, preventing those outside of the Gamwari lineage being admitted to as apprentices to learn the art. Also, female members had been prohibited from entering the puppetry stage or manipulating puppets, although they contributed to the making of the puppets in numerous ways. However, due to socio-economic changes took place during the past 30-40 years, those customary restrictions have now changed. As a result, a Gamwari master would accept to train any young person who is interested in learning and who shows dedication to learn. Similarly, female members take part in performances of puppetry plays.

3.4 Modes of Transmission

Transmission of knowledge and skills of the element is made through generational replacement. Young members of puppeteer families and those of extended families learn about performing of puppet dramas, including puppet-making, through the imitation of elders. Transmission is further enabled by allowing apprentices outside of *Gamwari* affiliations to learn under master puppeteers. All members of the family or the group contribute to transmission through script-memorization.

Children learn about the element at school as a part of art or history curriculum. Although its aim is not to produce puppeteers, it will eventually contribute to the creation of a future generation knowledgeable and appreciative of the element as a part of their heritage and cultural identity, respect cultural diversity, and thereby support transmission.

National Museum in Colombo, and Martin Wickramasinghe Folk Museum at Koggala contribute to the transmission of the element through dissemination of knowledge on puppetry among researchers and students as a part of the community. Declaration of 20th March as the National Puppetry Day by the Ministry of Culture helps increase awareness of the element among the public that indirectly contributes to its transmission.

The Traditional Puppet Art Museum at Dehiwala, transmit the knowledge through displaying puppet material; facilitates research; and conducts training sessions, seminars, and lectures. Such institutionalized training is a positive step towards transmission since there are no traditional restrictions against it.

3.5. Concerned organizations (NGOs and others)

There are no NGOs that has concerns in the element.

4. State of the element: viability

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4. State of the element: viability

4.1. Threats to the enactment

Due to the popularity of television and various other forms of mass entertainment, attracting the public for puppet performances has become a serious challenge. The 'folk' or the 'rustic' nature the language used in the dialogues and songs in puppet plays seems not too appealing to the present-day youth. Changes in the themes and in the language to suit the present-day audiences without compromising the characteristic identity if the element may be necessary to assure its future viability.

4.2. Threats to the transmission

There are no threats to transmission of the element today as the customary restrictions of teaching the art only to children of their own families or those of close relatives have now been lifted by the master puppeteers who now admits any person outside of their family circles to learn the art.

So, the master puppeteers transmit in totality their knowledge and skills to the next generation to ensure the viability of the element with all of its associated cultural attributes and values. Younger generation's enthusiasm to learn, including the memorizing of hand-written and unwritten scripts is a positive sign of success in assuring the viability of the element.

4.3. Availability of associated tangible elements and resources

All associated tangible elements such as puppets, costumes, and other paraphernalia are made by the puppeteers themselves with the help of family members, and resources to produce them are easily available.

4.5. Safeguarding measures in place

The traditional practice of holding puppet-drama performances during the months of May and June at temple premises, which have been the traditional community centres in Sri

Lankan culture, is a major catalyst for the element's viability. Showing of puppet-dramas on university campuses and schools contributes to the element's viability through raising awareness of and promoting the element among undergraduates and school children, while supporting the livelihoods of the puppeteers.

Documenting, researching, and publishing on various aspects of the element by scholars contribute to the safeguarding of the element. It also contributes to the viability by inflicting a sense of self-pride and boosting the morale among the practitioners, a necessary pre-requisite for ensuring viability.

Privately owned Martin Wickremasinghe Folk Museum at Koggala supports the element's viability through collection, preservation, display, and protection of puppetry artefacts, and increasing awareness among the visitors, of which the majority consists of school children.

Training programmes conducted by the privately owned Puppet Museum at Dehiwala, and television programs on puppet dramas contribute to the viability of the element through increasing awareness of the element and its associated intangible cultural heritage aspects among the general public.

5. Data gathering and inventorying

5.1 Consent from and involvement of the community/group in data gathering and inventorying;

Yes

5.2. Restrictions, if any, on use of inventoried data;

5.3. Resource persons(s): name and status or affiliation;

5.4. Data and place of data gathering; Southern and western province Sri Lanka

5.5. Date of entering data into an inventory; 20 February 2013

5.6. The inventory entry compiled by Udaya Cabral, Suleka pathmini Wimalasiri and Vijani Rodrigo

6. Reference to literature, discography, audiovisual materials, archives.

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Schubert, Rose. 1986. *Rukada - Puppenspiel in Sri Lanka - Das Ähälepola Nadagama, das Spiel vom Sturz des letzten Königs von Kandy 1816.* (= Katalog zur Ausstellung im Puppentheatermuseum). München

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