

SESSION 9 (Papers)

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Stigmatizing the Drummer in Traditional Performances of Sri Lanka:

A Study Based on Kooththu and Kōlam

The character of the messenger-drummer is typical to both Tamil Kooththu performance tradition in the North and Sinhala Kōlam performance tradition in the South. It comes as a parai in Kooththu and ana anabera kārayā in Kōlam. This presentation examines how drummer characters are portrayed in Kooththu tradition and Kōlam tradition. As performance practitioners of South Asia, we analyze interviews, video recordings of performances, manuscripts of Kōlam that contain poetry and dialogues between characters, and our personal experiences and reflections as performers. We mainly analyze the character of parai drummer in Kooththu and the character of anabera kārayā in anabera Kōlama. The study reveals that the drummer is stigmatized and depicted as a drunken, filthy, irresponsible person in both traditions. It also stigmatizes the drummer caste (parai/berava/nakathi) in both Kooththu and Kōlam. In both cases, the performances comically and cynically portray the drummers and drummer castes in Sri Lanka. However, some practitioners believe this problematic portrayal of drummers should be changed. The Third Eye Collective of Batticaloa, Sri Lanka, tries to reformulate parai drummer character found in Kooththu tradition and change the portrayal to give him dignity. This kind of a reformulating attempt in regard to traditional performance is lacking in Sinhala Kōlam theatre.

Bios

Sudesh Mantillake is an artist-scholar, who teaches in the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Peradeniya in Sri Lanka. He received his BA degree from the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka, his MSc from the University of Lugano, Switzerland, and his PhD from the University of Maryland in the USA.

Karthiha Parthiban, an Indian classical dance lecturer, choreographer, and artistic director based in Toronto, Canada, is a graduate of the prestigious Kalakshetra institution in Chennai, India. With exceptional choreographic skills and a deep musical sense, she has carved a unique identity in Bharatanatyam. Currently pursuing her PhD at Tamil University, India, Karthiha has presented notable research papers on topics such as dance traditions, cultural sensitivity, and more. With 15 years of teaching, choreography, and production experience, she explores culturally sensitive dance therapy for South Asians.