

A Culture-Oriented Approach to Drama Therapy in Sri Lanka: Integrating Spiritual Concepts and Traditional Performance

Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This chapter explores the unique convergence of drama therapy with the rich tapestry of cultural and spiritual practices deeply embedded within Sri Lankan society. Drawing upon the profound influence of Buddhist philosophy, and interwoven with indigenous folk beliefs, Sri Lankan drama therapy emphasizes a holistic approach to healing, prioritizing the restoration of balance and harmony across body, mind, and spirit. This emphasis aligns with the core Buddhist principle that thoughts are the precursors to emotions, highlighting the importance of cultivating mindful awareness and emotional equanimity.

The study delves into the profound influence of ritualistic theatre on contemporary drama therapy approaches. An in-depth analysis of key rituals, including *Kohomba Kankariya*, *Gam Maduwa*, *Bali*, *Thovil*, and *Daha Ata Sanniya*, reveals how these performances, steeped in symbolism, storytelling, and community engagement, offer valuable insights into culturally appropriate therapeutic interventions. These rituals, often characterized by music, dance, and symbolic representations, demonstrate how spiritual concepts, such as the interplay of benevolent and malevolent forces, are intricately woven into the fabric of healing within Sri Lankan society.

Furthermore, the chapter introduces the 8 Part Story Method (8PSM), an innovative drama therapy approach developed in Sri Lanka. Grounded in Buddhist principles, notably the Four Noble Truths, the 8PSM aims at empowering clients to reframe their experiences, cultivate emotional resilience, and navigate challenges. By encouraging self-reflection, mindfulness, and a focus on understanding the root causes of suffering, the 8PSM aligns with the Buddhist emphasis on cultivating awareness of one's thoughts and emotions. A case study illustrates the transformative potential of this approach, demonstrating how it facilitated significant personal growth and emotional regulation in a young Buddhist boy.

This study contributes significantly to the growing body of knowledge on culturally sensitive and spiritually informed therapeutic interventions. By demonstrating the successful integration of Buddhist philosophy and traditional healing practices within a

contemporary therapeutic framework, this study offers valuable insights for developing more holistic and effective approaches to mental health care, not only in Sri Lanka but also in diverse contexts worldwide.

Introduction

In Sri Lanka, drama therapy intersects with a rich tapestry of spiritual teachings rooted in Buddhism, Zen, and Taoism, alongside various folk religious symbols and concepts (Ranasinha, 2019)¹. These cultural aspects aim to facilitate healing by restoring balance and harmony across body, mind, and spirit, aligning with the Buddhist notion that thought underpins emotions. Gautama Buddha asserted that "purging of desires, lust, ideas, beliefs, views, and concepts from the heart and mind" leads to liberation (Ranasinha, 2013, p.6)². This foundational belief reinforces the essence of drama therapy in Sri Lanka, as it engages individuals in transformative practices that promote psychological and physiological well-being.

In a society where treatment approaches often rely on deeply rooted folk wisdom and sound theories of mind, the principles of *karma*, *vasana*, *rebirth*, *moksha*, and *nirvana* become critical healing resources (Ranasinha, 2013)³. These spiritual frameworks provide individuals with avenues to build resilience and reframe their understanding of suffering. Consequently, it becomes essential for dramatherapists to comprehend how Sri Lankans perceive and express their mental states, grounding therapeutic interventions in culturally relevant narratives.

Ritualistic Theatre and Buddhism: Interwoven Threads of Cultural and Spiritual Heritage

Ritualistic theatre in Sri Lanka represents a profound interplay between spirituality, culture, and community, with roots extending back to pre-Buddhist times (Ranasinha, 2019)⁴. It is a vibrant manifestation of folk beliefs, embodying a vast pantheon of gods and demons. These performances are not merely entertainment but serve dual purposes: addressing communal welfare during collective ceremonies and alleviating individual suffering (Sarachchandra, 1966)⁵. Through music, dance, and storytelling, ritualistic theatre bridges the tangible and intangible realms, fostering resilience and healing within the community.

***Kohomba Kankariya* and *Gam Maduwa*: Healing and Community Bonding**

Prominent communal theatrical forms such as *Kohomba Kankariya* and *Gam Maduwa* exemplify the integration of ritualistic theatre with community well-being. *Kohomba Kankariya*, a healing ceremony led by *yakdessas* (exorcists), is deeply intertwined with

Sri Lankan mythology, particularly the tale of Vijaya and Kuveni (ibid)⁶. The ritual reenacts the healing of Panduvasdeva, a descendant of Vijaya, from afflictions caused by Kuveni's curse. This layered symbolism underscores the role of theatre as a medium for addressing both physical and spiritual ailments.

Gam Maduwa, another communal ritual, invokes the blessings of goddess Pattini, a figure revered for her protective and nurturing qualities. As the Sinhala variant of Kannaki from the Tamil epic *Silappadikaram*, Pattini symbolizes the cultural synthesis of Tamil and Sinhalese traditions (Ranasinha, 2013, p.43)⁷. Performed post-harvest, *Gam Maduwa* celebrates agricultural prosperity and communal unity. Offerings of paddy to deities and the use of music and dance create a shared space for expressing gratitude, seeking divine favor, and strengthening communal ties.

Bali and Thovil: Navigating Benevolent and Malevolent Forces

The *Bali* and *Thovil* rituals further illustrate the duality of ritualistic theatre, engaging with both benevolent and malevolent spiritual influences. Bali ceremonies involve offerings to deities and demons through symbolic representations, such as clay images or floral arrangements, fostering a tangible connection between the divine and the community (Kalinga Dona, 2024, p.12)⁸. This practice underscores the importance of balance and harmony in the spiritual and material realms.

Thovil rituals, in contrast, focus on exorcism and confronting malevolent spirits. These exhilarating performances often induce trance states, allowing participants to interact with supernatural forces (Ranasinha, 2013, p.31)⁹. The communal nature of Thovil transforms individual suffering into a shared narrative, promoting collective healing. The interplay between spiritual engagement and theatrical performance exemplifies the transformative potential of ritualistic theatre in addressing both personal and communal challenges.

Daha Ata Sanniya: A Buddhist Integration

The *Daha Ata Sanniya*¹⁰ ritual is an elaborate performance consists of eighteen mask dances representing demons believed to cause various illnesses. The ritual's origin story, rooted in Buddhist folklore, recounts how the Buddha tamed these demons, transforming them into symbolic representations of human afflictions (Ranasinha, 2013, pp.43-44)¹¹.

Each demon in the *Daha Ata Sanniya* corresponds to specific physical or mental ailments. For instance, *Kana Sanniya* (blindness) symbolizes excessive attachment to visual pleasures, reflecting the Buddhist concept of *Rupa Thanha* (craving for forms). Similarly, *Bihiri Sanniya* (hearing-related ailments) and *Golu Sanniya* (speech-related ailments) address desires associated with sensory perceptions. By externalizing these

afflictions through theatrical performance, the ritual provides psychological relief and spiritual insight, aligning with Buddhist teachings on overcoming desire and achieving mental equanimity (Ranasinha, 2019, p.3)¹².

Tamil Cultural Influences in Ritualistic Theatre

The influence of Tamil culture adds a multicultural dimension to Sri Lankan ritualistic theatre. The Hindu rituals call forth a myriad of gods, demigods, and evil spirits into the healing arena. Many a god and devil, those which bring sickness and sorrow upon the people, enter into the *kattadis* (exorcist), in an ecstatic dance. Thiruchandran (2012)¹³ reveals how women enter into a state of trance, to let the respective gods enter into them:

I saw that the possessed women had completely abandoned themselves, their bodies twisting and turning, heads nodding up and down, eyes either closed or widely open, arms stretched out and wagging in the air. They speak in high tones, sometimes shrieking as though to emphasize some special message, unintelligible to the listener. The woman's self and soul are both submerged in the process. When watching women in trance, one is struck by the importance of sound: tinkling bells, drumming and accompanying music, chanting and singing.

As Ranasinha (2013, p.28) has mentioned¹⁴:

The ethnic Sinhala Buddhist and Tamil Hindu communities in Sri Lanka have their occultism and animistic practices. Gods, demigods, angels, spirits, and demons reign over their minds. It was during *yaksha* (devil) and *naga* (cobra) tribal times that most rites originated. Early Indian migrants brought Hinduism and related spiritual practices to the island. The plethora of Hindu and Buddhist spiritual practices has made a tremendous impact on Christians and Muslims, too.

Buddhism has invariably held hands with Hinduism to enshrine common spiritual concepts such as *karma* (good and bad deeds), *vasana* (past life experiences, mental imprints, propensities and habits), *samsara* (existence conditioned through mental imprints), rebirth and life after death. These concepts aim towards altering man's thoughts to liberate him of all mundane entrapments.

Creative Aspects of Ritualistic Theatres

Ritualistic theatres in Sri Lanka are distinguished by their highly creative and dramatic forms, which transform ceremonies into immersive healing experiences. These

performances are meticulously crafted to engage all the senses, creating a powerful medium for spiritual and emotional catharsis (Sarachchandra, 1966)¹⁵.

Theatrical Elements: Music, Dance, and Storytelling

Music and dance play a central role in ritualistic theatre, setting the emotional tone and facilitating spiritual engagement (Kalinga Dona, 2024)¹⁶. Drumming, particularly on instruments like the *geta bera* (barrel drum from the upcountry) and *yak bera* (low country drum), establishes rhythmic patterns that resonate with the audience's heartbeat, inducing trance-like states. Traditional melodies and chants often invoke divine blessings, creating an auditory atmosphere that blurs the boundary between the sacred and the mundane.

Dance, characterized by intricate footwork and symbolic gestures, serves as a visual narrative tool. Performers embody deities, demons, and mythical figures, using movement to convey complex stories and emotions. For instance, the graceful yet powerful dances of *Kohomba Kankariya* illustrate the interplay between human vulnerability and divine intervention (Ranasinha, 2019, p.2)¹⁷.

Storytelling is another integral aspect of these performances, weaving together mythological, historical, and cultural narratives. The tales often center on themes of suffering, redemption, and the restoration of harmony, providing a framework for participants to interpret their experiences and find meaning in their struggles.

Symbolism and Visual Spectacle

Ritualistic theatre is rich in symbolism, using masks, costumes, and props to represent abstract concepts and spiritual entities (Jinadasa, 2016, p.688)¹⁸. Masks, often intricately carved and painted, depict various deities and demons, each associated with specific qualities or ailments. The exaggerated features of these masks amplify their symbolic significance, making them powerful tools for emotional expression.

Costumes and props further enhance the dramatic impact of the performances. Brightly colored fabrics, elaborate headdresses, and symbolic objects like swords, lamps, and offerings create a visual spectacle that captivates the audience (Kalinga Dona, 2024)¹⁹. These elements not only heighten the theatricality of the rituals but also serve as conduits for spiritual energy, facilitating the participants' connection to the divine.

Ritual Structure and Dramatic Progression

The structure of these ceremonies mirrors that of a theatrical performance, with distinct phases that build tension and culminate in resolution. The rituals often begin with an invocation, where drumming and chanting invite divine presence. This is followed by the

main performance, which dramatizes the conflict—be it a struggle with malevolent spirits, a plea for divine intervention, or an exploration of human suffering. The climax typically involves a symbolic act of healing or purification, such as the exorcism of a demon or the offering of a sacred object. Finally, the ritual concludes with a closing ceremony, marking the restoration of balance and harmony (Ranasinha, 2013, p.34)²⁰.

The dramatic progression of these rituals engages participants on a deep emotional level, creating a sense of catharsis and renewal. The combination of music, dance, storytelling, and visual elements ensures that the experience resonates with both the conscious and subconscious mind, making it a powerful tool for healing and transformation (Sarachchandra, 1966)²¹.

Community-Centered Therapeutic Practices

Ritualistic theatre fosters collective healing through shared narratives and experiences, creating a supportive environment that reflects the interconnectedness of community life (Jinadasa, 2016, p.688)²². Grounded in familiar cultural symbols and narratives, these rituals allow individuals to reframe personal pain within broader cultural myths, fostering a sense of continuity and belonging. Moreover, the collective sharing of experiences encourages solidarity and validates individual struggles, creating a shared narrative of endurance and recovery (Ranasinha, 2013)²³.

Rituals are regular affirmations of shared values, fostering resilience against future adversities. Adaptable to address diverse issues, from individual distress to societal conflicts, ritualistic theatre, when integrated with contemporary therapeutic techniques, demonstrates the power of culturally grounded, community-centered approaches to healing, offering pathways to both individual and collective transformation (Ranasinha, 2019, p.4)²⁴.

Modern Dramatherapy and Ritualistic Theatre

Modern dramatherapy draws substantial inspiration from Sri Lanka's rich tradition of ritualistic theatre. These performances, with their emphasis on symbolism, storytelling, and collective participation, offer a robust framework for therapeutic practices. Key features include the externalization of internal conflicts and their transformation into shared narratives, reflecting dramatherapy's core principles of fostering personal and communal healing (Ranasinha, 2013, pp.27-53)²⁵.

Ritualistic theatre utilizes powerful tools such as masks, as seen in the *Daha Ata Sanniya*, to explore identity and psychological distress (ibid, p.44)²⁶. By embodying diverse personas, individuals can safely confront deep-seated fears and emotions in a symbolic environment. Trance states, as in *Thovil* rituals, offer insights into subconscious thoughts and emotions, facilitating deeper self-awareness.

The communal essence of rituals like *Gam Maduwa* fosters a profound sense of belonging and mutual support (Sarachchandra, 1966)²⁷. Collective engagement transforms individual struggles into shared experiences, promoting resilience and solidarity, particularly in addressing trauma. The ritual's integration of music, dance, and storytelling creates an immersive environment for psychological relief and spiritual rejuvenation.

Incorporating these traditional elements into modern dramatherapy allows practitioners to design culturally sensitive interventions that resonate deeply with diverse populations (Ranasinha, 2024)²⁸. This synthesis of ancient rituals with contemporary therapeutic techniques creates a bridge between traditional wisdom and modern psychological practices. By drawing on the collective and symbolic strengths of Sri Lankan ritualistic theatre, dramatherapy not only honors cultural heritage but also broadens its scope to meet the evolving needs of global therapeutic contexts (Ranasinha, 2021)²⁹.

The Influence of Buddhism on Developing the 8 Part Story Method (8PSM)

The 8 Part Story Method (8PSM), an adaptation of the Six Part Story Method by Mooli Lahad³⁰, represents a significant evolution in drama therapy within the Sri Lankan cultural context. Originating in 2018³¹, the 8PSM transcends the diagnostic focus of its predecessor, integrating Buddhist teachings on coping with suffering to empower clients to reframe their experiences and cultivate emotional resilience.

The 8PSM, rooted in Buddhism, centers on the Four Noble Truths. *Dukkha*, the first truth, recognizes the inherent suffering in life, stemming from impermanence and unfulfilled desires. *Samudaya*, the second, identifies craving (*tanha*) as the origin of suffering, binding us to the cycle of samsara. *Nirodha*, the third, asserts that suffering can be ceased through liberation from this cycle. *Magga*, the fourth, outlines the Eightfold Path, a guide for achieving this liberation. The 8PSM emphasizes self-reflection, encouraging clients to introspect and understand the root causes of their suffering, aligning with the Buddhist principles.

The structure of 8PSM

The 8PSM is arranged into eight slots:

1. **Self:** The protagonist's identity and inner state.
2. **Setting:** The environment where the conflict arises.
3. **Need/Goal:** The protagonist's primary desire.
4. **Actions Taken:** Efforts to achieve the goal.
5. **Obstacles:** Challenges and consequences of these actions.
6. **Support Systems:** Resources and relationships available to the protagonist.

7. **Cost Analysis:** A rational evaluation of the protagonist's choices.
8. **Wisest Choice:** Lessons learned and actionable insights.

This structure supports identifying harmful behaviors and their consequences, ultimately recognizing the importance of mindfulness and wise decision-making. This aligns with Buddhist teachings, emphasizing self-awareness and the cessation of suffering.

Case Study: Applying 8PSM to a Sinhala Buddhist Boy

In 2021, a fourteen-year-old Buddhist boy sought therapy at the Research Institute for Dramatherapy in Sri Lanka. He exhibited aggressive behavior, resentment, and frustration, which had worsened during the COVID-19 lockdown. His relationship with his parents was strained, and he had attempted to physically attack his mother. Confined to a dark room, he described feeling isolated, unloved, and unable to control his emotions.

To address these challenges, in the *first phase* of 8PSM, the therapist encouraged the boy to create a narrative that reflected his internal struggles. The boy created a story titled "Sonny the Young Deer," which served as a powerful metaphor for his own experiences.

Sonny the Young Deer:

Once, in a faraway land, lived a father deer, a mother deer, and their dear Sonny. One day, birds brought a message about a dangerous disease spreading from trees. The deer family had to stay safe. Their movement was restricted. 'No friends, no play,' said the father. Sonny wanted to meet his friends and play. He had a mynah friend who took his message to his friends, telling them to come and play. 'Don't call them. They will bring the germ, and we will die,' said the mother. 'No, no, that can't be. My friends are not bad,' screamed Sonny.

One day, he felt very angry. He started making a huge noise and went on kicking everything around him. Dust covered the place. The parents tied his legs with a rope to control him. After some time, a message arrived that humans had wiped out the germ. Sonny was released but didn't want to speak with anyone. 'I don't want anyone,' he said. He had no interest in anything. He didn't eat well, felt lonely, and cried all the time.

Metaphorical Reflection

The boy, connecting with Sonny's struggles, externalized his own emotions, exploring anger, frustration, and loneliness. This fostered mindfulness, enabling him to become more aware of his thoughts and emotions. Recognizing the impact of his actions, mirroring Sonny's, he began to understand the consequences of his aggressive

behavior. This understanding resonated with the Buddhist concept of *karma*, highlighting the interconnectedness of actions and consequences. Consequently, the *second phase* of 8PSM began, encouraging the boy to revisit each slot in the 8PSM, to initiate action for transformation.

Initiating Action

The boy revisited each slot, reflecting on his own life and identifying steps for personal growth:

1. **Self:** He envisioned himself as a friendly, happy person.
2. **Setting:** He sought a well-lit, welcoming environment.
3. **Need/Goal:** He prioritized rebuilding relationships with his parents and friends.
4. **Actions Taken:** He acknowledged past behaviors, such as anger and isolation, that hindered his goals.
5. **Obstacles:** He identified the consequences of his actions, including strained relationships and loneliness.
6. **Support Systems:** He recognized the value of his parents and friends as sources of support.
7. **Cost Analysis:** He evaluated the losses caused by his behavior and the potential benefits of change.
8. **Wisest Choice:** He resolved to practice mindfulness, kindness, and positive communication.

The boy's reflections underscored his transformation. He articulated self-directed insights, such as "I shouldn't hurt myself," and "My anger is not helpful," demonstrating his commitment to change. Over twelve sessions spanning three months, he consistently revisited every Slot in 8PSM, reinforcing his progress.

Self-Examination and Realization

As therapy sessions progressed, the boy increasingly assumed control over his narrative, engaging in self-examination to explore the underlying causes of his anger. This resonated with the Buddhist emphasis on self-awareness and understanding the roots of suffering. Echoing the Dhammapada, "*We are what we think; all that we are arises with our thoughts,*" he recognized the power of his thoughts on his emotions and behavior. Observing his thought patterns, he identified negative loops contributing to his anger and isolation. This process of self-observation, akin to the Buddhist practice of mindfulness, enabled him to gain greater control over his thoughts and emotions. Gradually, he reframed his narrative, shifting his focus from anger and resentment towards self-compassion and empathy.

Transformation and Hope

The boy's journey exemplifies how the 8PSM, by integrating Buddhist principles, facilitates personal growth and transformation. By encouraging self-reflection, cultivating mindfulness, and fostering a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of thoughts, emotions, and actions, the 8PSM empowers clients to navigate challenges and cultivate emotional resilience. This transformative journey encapsulated the essence of Buddhist practice: *pursuing the cessation of suffering through mindful awareness, compassionate action, and wise choices.*

Therapeutic Outcomes

The 8PSM facilitated significant client transformation. Improved relationships, emotional regulation, and self-awareness were evident. Reintegration with his social world symbolized healing. Key elements of this transformation included:

- *Hope for a Better Life:* Fostering motivation for change.
- *Willingness to Change:* Openness to challenging thought patterns and behaviors.
- *Commitment to Cognitive Restructuring:* Facilitated systematic examination of emotions and actions.
- *Transformational Agency:* Actively redefined his narrative, embodying the Buddhist ideal of self-liberation.

The 8PSM exemplifies the intersection of Buddhist philosophy and dramatherapy, offering a culturally sensitive framework for therapy. The integration of Buddhist teachings enhances the model's capacity to foster self-awareness, emotional regulation, and personal growth. By encouraging clients to reflect on actions, evaluate consequences, and envision self-realization, the 8PSM aligns with the Buddhist ethos of ending suffering through conscious effort.

Conclusion

This exploration of Sri Lankan ritualistic theatre and its influence on modern dramatherapy reveals a rich tapestry of cultural and spiritual practices interwoven with therapeutic approaches. From the ancient wisdom of Buddhist philosophy to the dynamic expressions of ritualistic theatre, Sri Lanka provides a unique context for understanding the interconnectedness of mind, body, and spirit within the healing process. The 8PSM, with its foundation in Buddhist principles and its adaptation of narrative therapy, exemplifies how culturally grounded approaches can empower individuals to navigate challenges, cultivate self-awareness, and foster lasting personal transformation. This synthesis of ancient wisdom and modern therapeutic techniques offers a valuable model for culturally sensitive and spiritually informed interventions, not only in Sri Lanka but also in diverse contexts worldwide.

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