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ABSTRACT

Costume design as an expression of cultural heritage in the Ramleela Festival in twenty-first century Trinidad

Satrohan Rajkumar

This project examines costume design as an expression of cultural heritage with a focus on the East Indian religious festival Ramleela in twenty-first century Trinidad. The aim is to highlight some forms of costume design portrayed in Ramleela, document the creative process of costume making for the Ramleela characters and examine the relationship between costume design and cultural heritage in the Ramleela festival. This research is qualitative, and involved conducting interviews with members of three groups which facilitate the celebration of the Ramleela festival annually in central Trinidad and ethnography through participant observation. Books and journal articles were also used. The conceptual framework focuses on cultural heritage and the literature review highlights themes relating to costume design and Ramleela.

Key words: Costume Design, Ramleela, Cultural heritage, Trinidad, Religious festivals, Hindu, Ramayana.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This thesis argues that costume design is an expression of cultural heritage that continues to be visible in East Indian religious festivals in twenty-first century Trinidad through the lens of the festival of Ramleela. This play of Lord Rama is an annual ten-day Hindu festival that is observed in September or October and is usually celebrated before the festival Diwali. This festival theatrically reenacts and narrates the epic battle between the Hindu deity Shri Rama and the demon King Ravana. Traditionally, the reenactments for the Ramleela take place in open air spaces such as fields and recreational grounds in rural Hindu communities in Trinidad (Riggio 110). Ramleela was established from virtuous stories rooted from the Ramayana, a religious scripture of the Hindu faith. Every year, the celebrated characters from the Ramleela are religiously manifested through creative costume designs and reenact the auspicious events that express the religious customs and beliefs observed by Hindus of the East Indian Diaspora (Riggio 113).

In Trinidad, Ramleela is a major East Indian religious festival that showcases a variation of costume designs that portray a rich blend of the creative arts that highlight the cultural heritage of the Hindu population. The purpose of this study is to explore the use of costume design as an expression of cultural heritage in contemporary Trinidad through three groups, the Pierre Road Ramleela Committee in Felicity, the Three Roads Seva and Cultural Group of Freeport both of which are Ramleela groups as well as one religious non-government organization, the Hindu Prachaar Kendra Located in Raghunanan Road, Enterprise, Cunupia. Cultural heritage can express the way people live and develop over time in a society. It can help individuals learn about previous generations and their histories as well as provide a sense of identity and belonging. Cultural heritage can include places, objects, practices, customs, values and artistic expressions (Alzahrani

9). The cultural heritage of a people can be classified as either tangible or intangible cultural heritage. Tangible cultural heritage refers to the physical things that one can see and touch such as buildings, artefacts and archaeological remains whereas intangible cultural heritage, refers to attributes of culture that cannot be seen or touched such as social practices, oral traditions, rituals, the performing arts, traditional craftsmanship and festive events (Alzahrani 10). In 2005, The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared the festival of Ramleela as an example of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humankind because it is an artform that showcases the oral tradition, expressive culture as well as the traditional craftsmanship practiced by Hindus (Ramtahal 41-45)

The cultural heritage of a people can be identified by the visual composition of a costume design. Traditionally, costume design can be described as a practice that exhibits artistic skills and cultural aesthetics of a people. The core practice of costume design involves the creation of symbolic outfits that help to establish a specific mood and style for performers. This can integrate forms of ethnic jewelry, ornaments, body art, traditional attire, and craft (Kwakye 13). Costumes are regarded as an essential and creative medium in the field of the performing arts and are commonly worn by performers to impersonate fictional, mythological and historical characters. The wearing of costumes can physically and psychologically transform an actor/actress for a theatrical performance. Therefore, it plays a fundamental role in the visual narrative for theatrical folk performances in religious and cultural festivals (Kwakye 9).

Rationale

This research on costume design and Ramleela was conducted because this festival portrays a wide variety of costume designs in what is one of the oldest forms of religious folk theatre practiced by Hindus worldwide. As a practicing Hindu and Visual Artist residing in central Trinidad, costume design portrayed in the Ramleela festival has always been an intriguing artform to the researcher. The elements and principles of design visible on Ramleela costumes are essential to the researcher's practice because of its unique aesthetic details as well as the traditional craftsmanship utilized for costume designing. This topic was chosen because I believe that there is a need to inspire the younger Hindu generation, as well as individuals with an interest in costume design and East Indian religious festivals to appreciate and safeguard the material culture, oral tradition and the unique traditional craftsmanship skills that continue to be practiced and passed down throughout generations through the festival of Ramleela.

Significance

This research is essential as it seeks to enhance the knowledge of costume design and cultural heritage specific to East Indian religious festivals observed in Trinidad. Traditional East Indian cultural practices such as religious and spiritual practices and forms of artistic expressions were highlighted in this study to sensitize the East Indian population and the wider community about this aspect of cultural heritage. This topic would provide information for designers, researchers and individuals with an interest in costume design and its relation to the expression of cultural heritage in East Indian religious festivals. It would be useful to persons in areas such as Visual Arts, Caribbean Heritage, Festivals, Caribbean History and Indian History.

Objectives

This research seeks to:

1. Identify costumes and aspects of costume design of Ramleela characters.
2. Explain some forms of costume making for the Ramleela festival in Trinidad.
3. Examine the relationship between costume design and cultural heritage of the Hindu community through the Ramleela festival in Trinidad.

Parameters

Trinidad and Tobago have many festivals including many East Indian religious festivals namely Diwali, Phagwa, Eid ul Fitr, Hosay and Ramleela. The scope for this research focused on Ramleela but brief reference is made to other festivals. The East Indian population living in central Trinidad was targeted as the majority of Hindu communities are located in this part of the country. Specifically, the areas of Felicity, Freeport and Cunupia were selected because the festival of Ramleela is an annual celebration and a center of attraction in these communities. The study was limited to three groups namely the Pierre Road Ramleela Committee, the Three Roads Seva and Cultural Group and the Hindu Prachaar Kendra because they have consistently been part of putting on this festival in the country for many years.

Methodology

Qualitative research was utilized for this project. Qualitative research is used to understand the beliefs, interactions, behaviors and experiences of human beings. It involves collecting, interpreting and analyzing various forms of data such as interviews, images, videos, audios and texts (Jackson 23). This approach was ideal because it allowed the opportunity to obtain information via different modes of collecting data. Primary and secondary sources also were reviewed to gain insight on the value of costume design and how it has been used as a medium for expressing the cultural heritage of the East Indian Diaspora in Trinidad.

An ethnographic approach was predominantly utilized for gathering primary information. Ethnography is a form of qualitative research which involves describing and interpreting cultural activities by engaging oneself in a particular community or organization. It gives researchers the opportunity to directly experience the unique culture and practices of a particular group (Jackson 24). This method was selected because this study involved visiting Hindu communities in central Trinidad to research costume design of the Ramleela festival.

Participant observation was conducted at costume a workshop at the residence of Vikash Khan, costume designer from the Pierre Road Ramleela Committee located in Pierre Road Felicity and at the Three Road Mandir which was hosted by Mrs. Goomatie Bickram, costume designer from the Three Road Seva and Cultural Group from Freeport. These sites were also visited in January and March 2023 for costume workshops on two of the main Ramleela characters Lakshman and Sita. Digital documentation of material culture belonging to the East Indian Diaspora was done at site visits in an effort to contribute to preserving the art of costume making practiced by East Indian communities and to bring awareness of the importance of existing art and craft that can be utilized for costume designing in twenty-first century Trinidad. Examples of these

include photographing and recording information about draping the North Indian sari style, making of the crown, the traditional materials utilized for Ramleela costumes and the craftsmanship. The workshops conducted were two hours long and involved the researcher observing, writing notes and photographing the costume design process.

Interviews were conducted with costume designers from the Ramleela groups to obtain firsthand knowledge of this particular type of costume design as well. Interviews can be considered an effective method for obtaining data from interviewees for research as well as it can also restrict the availability of achieving in-depth information mainly if the interview questions were structured to focus strongly on a specific topic (Ryan 310). Three interviews were conducted in January 2023 at locations in the community of the interviewees, the Pierre Road Community Centre, the Three Roads Mandir and at the Hindu Prachaar Kendra.

The interviewees, one male and two females are practicing Hindus of East Indian ethnicity, between the ages of eighteen to sixty. They were selected because of their experience in the festival. Vikash Khan, a 21-year-old male, is a costume designer and performer with eight years' experience at the Pierre Road Ramleela Committee. Goomatie Bickram, a 39-year-old female, is a performer and costume designer with sixteen years' experience as a costume workshop tutor with the Three Road Seva and Cultural Group. Geeta Ramsingh, a female between 50 and 60 years, is the Festival Director and President of the Hindu Prachaar Kendra with years of experience as a religious guru (teacher) in the Hindu faith. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Peer reviewed journals and books were secondary sources utilized for gathering scholarly information as well.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature on costume design, cultural heritage and the Ramleela festival in Trinidad were reviewed to discuss the importance of this festival and its costume design to the cultural heritage of the East Indian community.

Costume Design

Costume design plays an essential role in theatrical performances in cultural and religious festivals as it can assist with the expression of the interpretative meaning of the physical appearance of a character or performer (Akas 28). Nicholas Chielotam Akas in “Costume and Make up, as a Tool for Cultural Interpretation” analysed the role of costume design in theatrical performances in cultural and religious festivals. He elaborated that costume design can be considered as a practice that creates symbolic outfits that exhibit a particular tone and style to characterize an individual or a group to a specific period (25). According to Akas, a costume design can also influence and modify the psychological nature of its wearer for a performance (24). The use of costumes in cultural festivals provides communities with a sense of cultural identity and belonging that can make locals conscious and appreciative of one’s traditional attire as a cultural communicative tool (22). While Akas offered a comprehensive review on costume and cultural interpretation with reference to African costume designs from the Egba festival in Nigeria, however, the use of traditional materials was vaguely discussed.

Kwakye-Opong argued that the cultural manifestation of a costume can be seen through the social life of people and serves as an authentic medium for expressing cultural values in a society (12). She investigated the use of stage costumes as a form of cultural expression in theatrical performances. She also conveyed that costume plays an integral role in theatre

production because it can display the physical details, the social status, and the geographical location of a character (18). Therefore, the costume reflects the everyday life of the people because of its association with festivities, traditional, cultural, and religious practices (9). She stated that stage costumes can visually portray the cultural inferences of a person without the use of verbal communication (18). With reference to the Yoruba religion practiced in Ghana and Nigeria, she acknowledged that costumes can be used to represent the different deities through various colors and symbolic materials (13). Even though the notion of costume as a portrayal of the Yoruba deities was identified, the details of the costume making process were not present in her discussion.

Sara Jablon in “Historical accuracy in costume design: Experiences and perceptions of Broadway costume designers” stated that costume design can be considered an art form which involves creating and developing an attire that best defines a character that supports the concept, theme, and ambiance of a theatrical production (8). Jablon examined characteristics that Broadway designers regard as important for historical accuracy in costume design. She explored the different strategies designers consider for the creative process of integrating history into theatrical costume design (5). According to her, a costume can enable a performer to become transformed as well as to communicate with cultural information in the collective memory of an audience (45). As for the different costumes that are used in theatrical designs, she highlighted that costumes are generally labeled in four categories: symbolic, contemporary, national, and traditional (14). Jablon sequentially reviewed the historical evolution of costume design beginning from Neoclassicism to Romanticism and into Realism (19). While the historical and theatrical aspects of costumes were outlined, insight to costume making was not discussed.

Through the involvement of presentation, viewing and response, the costume evokes a sense of psychographic responses in the wearer (DeCoursey 136). In “Dressing and Being:

Appraising Costume and Identity in English Second-Language Drama” C.A DeCoursey analyzed the use of costume from a theatrical perspective. She outlined that a costume possesses the ability to portray a symbolic meaning in many social cultures (132). She elaborated that costumes can assist actors with the oral and social performance of a character, as it enhances one’s awareness while communicating to an audience (136). These writings contributed significantly to understanding the role of costumes from a cultural context but did not provide details on the design aspect for traditional costumes utilized in religious festivals.

Ramleela Festival

Derek Walcott in “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory” acknowledged the Ramleela festival in Felicite Trinidad as a philosophical example of cultural identity to express how cultural practices such as oral traditions, rituals and language have shaped the lives, values, and beliefs of the East Indian Diaspora. He noted that although the Ramleela play can be viewed as an outdoor theatre production, it is also religiously observed as an expression of faith. Walcott also explored the influence of different cultural practices exercised within the Caribbean Islands and how it has contributed to the shaping of cultural identity among Diasporic communities in the Caribbean.

The Ramleela festival is religious and distinctively ritualistic, as well as it can provide a sense of Indo-Trinidadian identity (Sisto 123). Edith Sisto in “Myth and Ritual in Hosay, Ramleela and Carnival as expression of a vibrant Caribbean Culture” explored the myth as a living existence and the ritual as a rebirth of the historical events and achievements of civilizations in festivals celebrated in Trinidad. She examined the various forms of rituals and rites practiced in festivals from Shi’i Islam, Hinduism, and the Black Religion (Shango). She investigated the theatrical performances accompanied by the religious rituals traditionally observed in the Ramleela festival

and highlighted the various religious characters portrayed in the Ramleela festival with the association of the religious scripture used by the Hindu communities. Though the various characters portrayed in Ramleela were mentioned, the connection between costume design and cultural heritage was absent.

Primnath Goptar in *The Ramleela of Sangre Grande: From a Rural Town in Northeast Trinidad: Celebrating 25 Years of the Sangre Grande Ramleela Committee 1990-2015*, analysed how the Ramleela festival in Sangre Grande was safeguarded in the past as well as how it is presented in the modern-day society. Goptar documented his research with supporting images throughout the book. According to Goptar, in the earlier times, the costumes for the Ramleela were mainly fabricated from local natural materials found in the surrounding environment as compared to present day costume fabrication (14). He also provided a historical review of the changes made to the traditional costumes and props for the Ramleela festival. Although Ramleela groups from other locations in Trinidad were highlighted, the research was mainly specific to the town of Sangre Grande.

In *The Ramayana Tradition and Socio- Religious change in Trinidad, 1917-1990*, Sherry-Ann Singh examined the idea and practice of Hinduism within the East Indian Diaspora in Trinidad and uses the Ramayana to interpret major misconceptions about Hinduism in Trinidad. She noted that the Ramayana was established as the main Hindu religious scripture during the time of Indian indentureship and has since evolved through the oral traditions. Singh outlined that while the characters and narrative of the Ramayana have not changed the mutual relationship between the Ramayana tradition and the people have caused changes in interpretation (20). While Singh made references to the different characters portrayed in the Ramleela, there was no evidence of costume design in the text.

Milla Cozart Riggio in “Performing in the lap at the feet of God: Ramleela in Trinidad, 2006-2008” investigated the Dow Village Ramleela and Cultural Organization, the First Felicity Ramleela and Cultural Group, the Sangre Grande Ramleela Committee, and the Hindu Prachaar Kendra Baal Ramdilla for her case studies in Trinidad. She provided a detailed historical background of the Ramleela festival and its practice from the time of indentureship in Trinidad (111-118). Riggio presented information on the various Ramleela characters as well as the theatrical aspect and performance layout for each of the mentioned sites in her research. While she provided a comprehensive history of the practice of the Ramleela festival in Trinidad, there was some information on the props and layout of the Ramleela ground but no details on the costume design aspect for the festival.

Kumaree Ramtahal and Marilyn Kumar in “Documenting and Archiving the Ramleela legacy in Trinidad: Practice and Prospects” investigated the Ramleela festival as an element of Caribbean cultural heritage and the scope to which this form of cultural expression is acknowledged and documented in Trinidad. They also provided a comprehensive study of the history and observance of the Ramleela festival in Trinidad. Though some photographs of Ramleela costumes were presented, the interpretation and design process of the costumes were not documented. This research sought to address this and provide some discussion on costume design in Ramleela. Overall, these literatures provided comprehensive information on the Ramleela festival in Trinidad both from a social and cultural perspective but did not identify costume design as an expression of cultural heritage.

Chapter Outline

This study consists of four chapters. Chapter one presents the introduction, rationale, significance, methodology, objectives, purpose, and literature review. Chapter two provides a brief history of the festival of Ramleela in Trinidad. The third explains various forms of costume design and visual elements, the design process involved in creating costumes for the main characters of Ramleela and the fourth chapter provides an evaluation of the findings.

Summary

This chapter introduced a conceptual framework relating to cultural heritage and a literature review on costume design and the festival of Ramleela. The following chapter explains a brief history of the Ramleela festival in Trinidad.

CHAPTER TWO

A Brief History of The Festival of Ramleela in Trinidad

This chapter presents a brief history of the festival of Ramleela in Trinidad with within a context of East Indian religious festivals celebrated in Trinidad. From the time East Indian indentured labourers were first introduced to Trinidad in 1845, religious festivals observed by these immigrants gradually began to emerge in different communities throughout the island) as they brought this aspect of their cultural heritage with them to the region (Parmasad 68). The majority of indentured labourers who settled in Trinidad came from regions in Northern India such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Uttarakhand (Mahabir 1). At that time, the two East Indian religions that were dominant in Trinidad were Hinduism and Islam. The Hindus primarily focused on the various philosophies associated with the Hindu deity, Sri Vishnu and his various avatars which include Shri Rama, while the Muslims adhered to the teachings of the Prophet Muhammed (Riggio 107). Subsequently, some of the main religious festivals celebrated by the East Indian Diaspora emerged such as Ramleela, Diwali, Phagwa, Eid-ul- Fitr and Hosay in Trinidad.

Diwali

Diwali, the festival of lights, is one of the most celebrated Hindu festivals in Trinidad. It is observed annually by Hindus worldwide on the darkest night in the month of Kartik which falls between October and November in the Hindu calendar (Mahabir 209). On this auspicious night, Hindus traditionally perform Lakshmi puja (spiritual offerings) in honour of the Goddess Lakshmi who is regarded as the Goddess of wealth and consort of Sri Vishnu. Diwali also commemorates the return of Lord Rama, his wife Sita, and his brother Lakshmana to the kingdom of Ayodhya after fourteen years in exile (Gooptar 3). To celebrate this occasion, small earthen lamps, also

known as deeyas, are lit and placed in decorative patterns on the ground and on intricate bamboo design structures to signify the victory of good over evil and light over darkness (Gooptar 13).

Phagwa

Phagwa or Holi is the Hindu festival of colours which is associated with the coming of spring. It also commemorates the start of the Hindu New Year (Singh 12). Although there are several origins of this festival in India, in Trinidad it customarily honors the legend of Prahlada and Holika. This story is about a young Hindu demon prince called Prahlada who was sentenced to death by fire because he was a devotee of Sri Vishnu and refused to worship his father, Demon King Hiranyakashipu (Sethi 1).

Holika, the king's sister, was given the mission of burning Prahlada, but he survived, and Holika perished in the fire during the ritual. The witnesses of this miracle gathered the ashes of Holika and scattered it on each other. To commemorate this auspicious event, Hindus would playfully apply coloured powder and coloured water called abeer on each other to symbolise the victory of good over evil. From a costume perspective, people participating in this festival become a canvas of hues from the application and interaction of the different colours (Mahabir 254).

Eid-ul-Fitr

Eid-ul-Fitr is an Islamic festival that marks the breaking of the fast at the end of the holy month of Ramadan and is observed by the Muslim communities in Trinidad. Fasting is one of the five pillars of Islam and is an essential part of the Muslim faith which is performed with the intention of learning self-discipline. During the month of Ramadan, Muslims exercise daylight fasting from sunrise to sunset and usually abstain from all forms of foods and liquids (Aloian 12).

Muslims also faithfully read the Quran during this period as it is believed that the Prophet Muhammad received the teaching of the Quran from Allah in the month of Ramadan. The sighting of the moon is another key aspect of this festival which signifies the end of the holy month, as it marks the end of the fasting period and the beginning of the Eid-ul-Fitr celebrations.

Hosay

Hosay is a ten-day festival that commemorates the death of Prophet Muhammad's grandsons, Hassan and Hussein. It is celebrated during the month of Muharram in accordance with the Islamic lunar calendar and is mainly observed by the Shia Muslim community in Trinidad. During the first six days of the festival, Muslims engage in prayers, fasting and constructing ornate tadjahs or tombs as a symbolic remembrance of this martyrdom (Korom 137). On the final day of the Hosay festival, decorative tadjahs followed by ornately costumed moon dancers portraying the crescent moons head a street procession before the tadjah are immersed in the sea by sunset. In Trinidad, the festival of Hosay was identified as a prevalent street festival of the plantation Indians and is mainly celebrated in communities such as St. James and Cedros (Paramasad 68).

The festival of Ramleela

The festival of Ramleela, which is the focus of this study, was observed by Hindu indentured labourers as a form of folk theatre for portraying the traditional religious and cultural practices that they brought from India. These include Hindu religious rituals, folk music, languages craftsmanship and oral traditions. Since the majority of labourers were not literate to document the knowledge associated with these practices in written word, it was orally transmitted from one generation to another (Sisto 117). This method became a medium for teaching the younger

generations about the Hindu religion along with keeping this cultural expression alive among the Hindu population.

The celebration of Ramleela is a ten-day Hindu festival that originated in the northern states of India. The word “Ramleela” can be translated to ‘The play of Ram’. It portrays the legendary battle between the Hindu deity, Shri Rama, and the Demon King, Ravana, over a ten-day period. This festival presents theatrical re-enactments of the Ramayana which celebrate and narrates the life story of Shri Rama, an avatar of Sri Vishnu. The Ramayana is a sacred Hindu scripture which was written by the great Hindu scholar Valmiki (Singh 105). This sacred scripture is highly regarded by Hindus because it imparts life lessons with guidance for coping with the social and personal struggles in life as well as it teaches the value of respect for oneself and society.

Ramleela customarily takes place before Diwali, the festival of lights, and is usually held during the Nav Raatri or nine nights period during the months of September-October. On the tenth night the Ramleela culminates with the burning of the effigy of the Demon King Ravana, symbolizing the battle of good over evil (Gooptar 128). Annually, the festival of Ramleela is religiously observed in rural Hindu communities in the North-East, Central and South Trinidad in locations such as Sangre Grande, Felicity, Freeport, Dow Village and Cedar Hill.

Traditionally, it takes place in an open outdoor space such as a recreational ground which is regarded as the Ramleela stage (Gooptar 122). The Ramleela stage is usually divided into two sections which accommodate the Kingdom of Shri Rama and the Kingdom of King Ravana. The Kingdom of Shri Rama is a platform that is traditionally situated in the northern side of the stage to represent Ayodhya which is located in North India whereas the Kingdom of Ravana is situated on the southern side of the stage to represent Lanka also known as Sri Lanka, which is located close to the South of India (Riggio 115). Within this open-air theatre space, there are no particular

seating arrangements, thus allowing the audience to encircle the site where the re-enactment is being performed (Gooptar 123).

On each of the nine nights, the festival features an episode from the Ramayana which is artistically portrayed by performers in creatively designed costumes (Walcott 5). During the various episodes, performers integrate facial expressions and choreographed body gestures into portrayals to represent different characters from the Ramayana. In these portrayals, traditional East Indian folk songs such as the biraha and instrumental percussion music such as tassa are usually performed to enhance the theatrical episodes of the sacred Ramayana.

Some of the main characters portrayed in the Ramleela are Dashrath, the King of Ayodhya, and his four sons, Shri Rama, Lakshman, Bharath, and Shatrughan. Other main characters are Sita, the wife of Shri Rama and his faithful devotee Hanuman, the chief of the monkey army as well as the enemy of Shri Rama, Ravana the demon King of Lanka (Gooptar 82-86). The main plot in the re-enactment of Ramleela revolves around the characters Shri Rama, the prince of Ayodhya and his consort Sita. It highlights Sri Rama's journey in search of "Sita" who was kidnapped by the demon King Ravana and held captive in the kingdom of Lanka. The story climaxes in an intense battle between Shri Rama and Ravana and portrays the destruction of Ravana by burning the effigy of Ravana on the last night. Shri Rama then reclaims Sita and becomes the new King of Ayodhya (Gooptar 51).

Summary

This chapter has briefly outlined various East Indian religious festivals practiced in Trinidad. The festival of Ramleela in Trinidad has kept alive the memory of India together through religious and cultural practices of the Hindu people. The next chapter presents the findings of this research.

CHAPTER THREE

Costume Design and the Ramleela Festival

The chapter explains various forms of costume design, visual element and the design process involved in creating costumes for main characters such as Sita and Lakshman from the perspective of three groups which celebrate Ramleela in Trinidad. Information gathered through participant observation at two Ramleela sites is also presented.

Visual Elements of Costume Design Portrayed in Ramleela

Costume designer and performer, Vikash Khan, from the Pierre Road Ramleela Committee states that the Ramleela festival is associated with the Hindu religious scripture known as “The Ramayana” and that the characters mentioned in this scripture influence the design of the costumes (Khan). Performer and costume designer, Goomatie Bickram, from the Three Roads Seva and Cultural Group, echoed similar sentiments. According to her, Ramleela is connected to the Ramayana, and Hindu deities related with this sacred Hindu book have influenced the way a costume is designed (Bickram). The President of the Hindu Prachaar Kendra, Geeta Ramsingh, also indicates that the Ramleela festival is associated with the Ramcharitmanas, or the Ramayana as called by Caribbean people, and was brought to Trinidad by the ancestors of the East Indian indentured labourers (Ramsingh).

In relation to costume design, Khan explains that some of the main forms of costume design used in the portrayal of the Ramleela characters include the use of traditional East Indian clothing, crowns and battlefield weapons such as bows and arrows (see fig. 1). The weapons showcased in the Ramleela play an integral role because they portray the concentration and discipline of the characters in the battlefield and reflect the time of the event. He notes that the specific colours emphasized on the designs also represent the spiritual energies that are associated with the characters. For example, performers portray Shri Ram and his brother Lakshman traditionally dressed in a yellow-coloured costume to symbolize purity according to Hinduism (see fig. 2).

Bickram adds that the jewelry, crowns, East Indian ethnic wear, weapons, makeup, and body painting are all part of the costume designs portrayed in the Ramleela festival (see fig. 3). According to Bickram, costumes which exhibit brilliant colours such as red, orange, and yellow are associated with the kingdom of Ram whereas dark colours such as purple, black, and navy blue are associated with the kingdom of Rawan (see fig. 4). In Ramleela, the bright warm colours are mainly associated with the notion of positivity or goodness whereas the dark colours are associated with negativity or darkness. Bickram notes that the Vaishnava tilak, which is a U-shaped sacred symbol that is associated with Lord Vishnu, is worn on the foreheads of the performers belonging to the Ram kingdom (see fig. 5) (Bickram). The Vaishnava tilak or sacred mark on the forehead expresses the religious background of the followers of Lord Vishnu in Hinduism.

Similarly, Ramsingh asserts the forms of costume designs portrayed in Ramleela include folk costume designs and royal costume designs, which are used according to the character being portrayed. The Ramayana provides guidance as to how the various characters in the Ramleela

should be portrayed and listed the various traditional East Indian clothing that are integrated into costume designs. Ramsingh explains:

“Now specific colours in the Ramleela indicate which army or which king or ruler is being supported. So, Shri Rama's army and his following are usually dressed in reds and yellows and traditional bright beautiful royal-looking colours like blues and pinks, some greens, orange and so on. Those on the side of the tyrant king and ruler, Ravana, who represents the kingdom of Lanka, traditionally wear black and darker colours so you might see some dark shades of blue, dark burgundy, dark greens” (Ramsingh).

She added that the intricate costume ornaments such as the belts, armbands and chest pieces worn by the different armies also vary in colour and design (Ramsingh).

Ramleela Costume Designing and Cultural Heritage

According to Khan, some of the main craftsmanship utilized for costume designing, particularly on embellished pieces are sewing, papier mâché, wire bending, textile manipulation and decorative rhinestone application (see fig. 6 and fig. 7). Some traditional organic materials such as bamboo and Rudraksha seeds are used (see fig. 8). The Rudraksha is a seed from a sacred tree that is grown in India and is mostly used for religious offerings and for practicing meditation in Hinduism. Bickram also notes that fabric art, sewing, papier mâché, wire and bamboo bending are some of the skills used in the costume designing process. Some traditional natural materials used by her group members are cotton, bamboo and coconut palm leaves which are incorporated with the use of traditional East Indian clothing in the designing process because they represent East Indian ancestry and culture (Bickram). At the Hindu Prachaar Kendra, pattern drafting, bead art, sewing, wire and bamboo bending are some of the main craftsmanship practiced by the

designers in Cunupia as well. Some of the traditional materials utilized for their costumes are embellished textiles, cotton, and printed fabrics (see fig. 9) (Ramsingh).

Part of the design process integrates different draping styles of traditional East Indian clothing worn by male and female performers. The different draping styles practiced for clothing such as the sari and dhoti can vary based on the location it originated from in India. These include the North Indian and the South Indian draping style for the dhoti and the sari. Oral tradition has played an integral part of this process because most of the draping skills utilized for creating costumes were orally passed down from the older generations of the Pierre Road community.

This was exemplified at a costume design workshop for the character Sita at the Three Roads Seva and Cultural Group. On March 30, 2023, Goomatie Bickram, a costume designer and performer conducted a costume workshop at the Three Roads Mandir in Freeport. At this workshop, that this researcher it was observed that she introduced sari draping for the character Sita. In Hinduism, Sita is regarded as a Goddess and a representation of divine beauty as well as the ideal daughter, wife, and mother (Bickram).

The sari is an Indian garment worn by females and is usually a long un-stitched decorated fabric which is approximately seven yards. For this session, the participants, mostly females ranging between the ages of eleven to seventeen were asked to bring along a sari to practice the draping technique. At the start of the workshop, Bickram explained that the way a sari is draped indicates the location or state in India it originated and that the character Sita belonged to Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh which is in Northern India.

She demonstrated the draping style, which began with knotting and wrapping the sari to create a skirt around the waist, followed by the formation of overlapping pleats that were tucked in the front of the waist. Secondly, the remainder loose end of the sari was folded to create a fan

or accordion fold and was placed over the left shoulder covering the front of the chest. Lastly, the accordion folded piece over the chest area was then spaced out to create an opened fan displaying the intricate pattern of the sari on the front (see fig. 10). The colours of the saris utilized for this workshop were mainly bright warm colours such as blended shades of pink and yellow. Most of the participants at the workshop were able to successfully drape the North Indian sari style after the third attempt. Creating the accordion fold to place over the shoulder was also challenging for some of the participants at the beginning. During the session, the participants were constantly reminded that this part of the costume was integral because it characterizes the physical appearance as well as the cultural uniqueness of the character Sita. It was observed that this workshop demonstrated how senior group members continue oral tradition through workshops that teach various draping styles for East Indian clothing as well as body and face painting skills utilized for costume making (see fig. 11). Both male and female senior members contribute towards preserving these skills by having active group participation with the youth in the community.

On January 24, 2023, Vikash Khan, a Ramleela performer and costume designer conducted a costume design workshop for the crown worn by the character Lakshman in the Ramleela play, which this researcher attended. Lakshman is a prince and the younger brother of Shri Rama. Khan organized this workshop to specifically explain and demonstrate the traditional fabrication of the crown that he was taught in the past by the senior members of the Pierre Road community.

During the session, he listed and displayed some of the main materials such as cardboard, textured glitter paper, and gold decorative edging which are used in the creative process (see fig. 12). He then proceeded to the construction process and showcased a template that was used for creating the crown (see fig. 13). The template was shaped from a thin, flexible cardboard and was used as the base for applying the textured glitter paper and the decorative edging (see fig. 14). At

this workshop, Mr. Khan presented the construction process for the crown in a sequential manner, while the participants followed his instructions to create their crown. Participants developed the crown from the cardboard templates and used textured glitter paper and decorative edging to create elaborate designs to represent the royal status of the character Lakshman.

in her community, workshops are held once in the beginning half of the year and for an entire two weeks before the Ramleela celebration at the end of the year. Over the years, four of the senior members including Bickram from the Three Roads Seva and Cultural Group have contributed to these workshops by teaching the youth how to practice different draping styles for East Indian clothing, practicing face-painting from local natural pigments such as turmeric and charcoal as well as designing costumes from natural material such as dry leaves and plant fibers found in the community (Bickram).

These workshops are reminiscent of what Khan recalls in the past where the older generation in his community would usually organize groups at their residence to demonstrate and guide the younger generation in these skills as they prepare and organize in the days leading towards the Ramleela celebration. In Freeport, oral tradition has helped preserve the skills they practice for costume designing because it was passed down from the older generations in their village (Khan). However, it is noted that skills practiced in costume designing are not entirely influenced by oral tradition because the description and the characteristics of the characters are depicted in the sacred texts.

The art of costume designing in the Ramleela festival has helped to preserve cultural identity and cultural heritage of the East Indian community in the Pierre Road vicinity because it produces and showcases the religious and ethnic background of the Hindu community each year

(Khan). Costume designs in the Ramleela festival have helped preserve cultural identity because they artistically portray the socio-cultural background and the faith of the Hindu people (Bickram).

Summary

This chapter has discussed the importance of oral tradition and the preservation of East Indian cultural heritage through workshops on costume design in communities across Trinidad that celebrate the Ramleela festival.



Fig. 1: Ramleela characters-from left, Shri Rama, Hanuman, and Lakshman dressed in traditional East Indian clothing with crowns and battlefield weapons

Source: Vikash Khan (2022)



Fig. 2: Characters Ram and Lakshman dressed in yellow costume

Source: Vikash Khan (2022)



Fig. 3: Goomatie Bickram applying make-up and body paint as part of costume design for a character from the Rawan kingdom

Source: Goomatie Bickram (2022)



Fig. 4: Ravana character portrayed in black and gold costume design

Source: Goomatie Bickram (2022)



Fig. 5: Vaishnava tilak displayed on the foreheads of the characters from right- Shri Rama, Sita, and Lakshman

Source: Goomatie Bickram (2022)



Fig. 6: Decorative rhinestone application on the chest piece of the costume for the character Lakshman

Source: Satrohan Rajkumar (2023)



Fig. 7: Decorative coloured rhinestone design on the crown worn by the character Lakshman

Source: Satrohan Rajkumar (2023)



Fig. 8: Rudraksha seeds worn around the neck, wrist, and arms of the performers

Source: Satrohan Rajkumar
(2023)



Fig. 9: Printed sari

Source: Satrohan Rajkumar
(2023)



Fig. 10: North Indian style of sari draping.

Source: Satrohan Rajkumar (2023)



Fig. 11: Various styles of traditional East Indian clothing integrated into creative costume designs worn by the different characters from the Ramleela

Source: Goomatie Bickram (2022)



Fig. 12: Decorative gold edgings and glitter foam sheet for crown design

Source: Satrohan Rajkumar (2023)

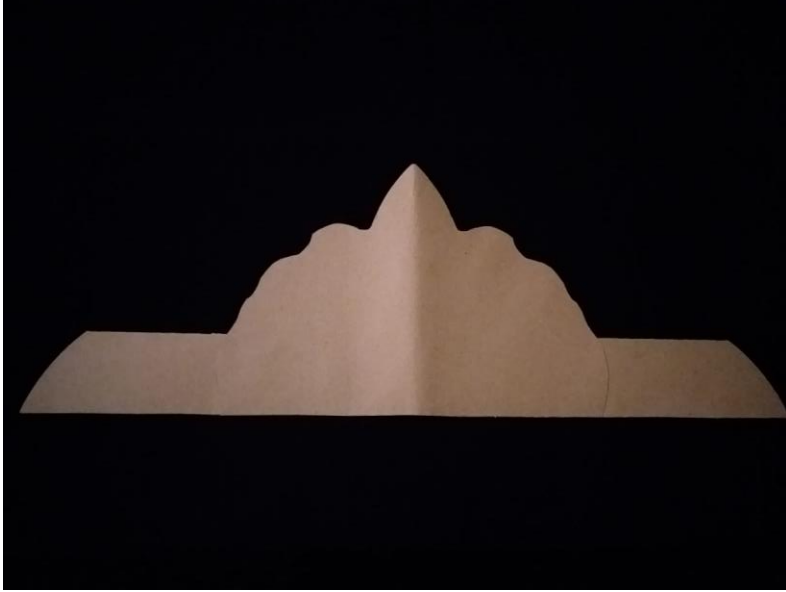


Fig. 13: Template design
of crown for the character
Lakshman

Source: Satrohan Rajkumar
(2023)



Fig. 14: Developing
template of crown with
decorative gold edging

Source: Satrohan Rajkumar
(2023)

CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS OF THE FINDINGS

This chapter analyses the findings from interviews and site visits to discuss the extent to which costume design depicted in the Ramleela festival reflects and expresses the cultural heritage of the Hindu community in Trinidad.

The life events of Shri Rama, an incarnation of Shri Vishnu, is compiled in the most sacred Hindu text, the Ramayana, which is written by sage Valmiki (Sisto 114). The interviewees acknowledge that the Ramleela festival is associated with the sacred Hindu scripture, the Ramayana, which has an influence on the costume design of the characters portrayed in the play. From the information gathered, it implies that the Ramayana provides a visual narrative of the various characters portrayed in Ramleela and can also be an important resource for designers to utilize when fabricating the costumes.

In addition, they were able to distinguish the various forms of costume design portrayed in Ramleela as well as the different visual elements and their symbolic representations. According to Bickram, the various costumes portrayed in the Ramleela festival are creatively designed to visually represent and enhance the divine or demonic appearance of the Ramleela characters from the kingdom of Shri Rama or Ravana in the play. This indicates that the use of selective colours, makeup, jewelry, embellishments, and ethnic wear within a costume design can reveal the status of a character as to whether they belong to the royal clan in the kingdom of Sri Rama or Rawan. The artistic designs of body and face painting and the creative use of face mask are also integrated within a character costume.

Ethnic symbols represent the unique religious and socio-cultural background of an individual (Akas 22). From a visual arts perspective, the symbolism as well as the techniques and

media utilised in the creative process of body art in the form of sacred markings, such as the Vaishnava tilak as seen in fig. 5 on the forehead of the actors belonging to the Ram kingdom, can express the cultural heritage of a people. According to Bickram, the meaning of that symbol represents the Ramleela characters belonging to a particular sect in Hinduism called the Vaishnavas or followers of the avatars of Shri Vishnu from the northern part of India.

By tradition, the costuming displayed in the Ramleela is influenced by traditional East Indian clothing which belongs to the material culture of the Hindu people. These include traditional East Indian clothing that is usually draped, such as the sari which is worn by the female performers and the dhoti which is commonly worn by the male performers.

At the costume workshop for the character Sita, Mrs. Bickram carefully demonstrated the sari draping technique to all the participants in the session. In the field of art and design, this technique showcased the skills of fabric manipulation, which involves folding, knotting, pleating, and contouring the fabric onto the human body to outline and create a suitable garment shape for the female figure or body. From observation, it is noted that these distinctive textile manipulation skills are essential and that they are also the foundation to draping saris. Special attention was given to the pattern on the borders of the fabric during the pleating of the sari to ensure easy mobility for the wearer and for an overall aesthetic finish.

According to Mr. Khan and Mrs. Bickram, most costume designs are traditionally constructed by members of the Ramleela group and that the use of organic materials such as coconut leaves, sacred plants, and bamboo, along with embellishments, various fabrics and other materials are utilized in the creative process. They voiced that the craftsmanship skills involved in the creative process were mainly developed and passed down from the older generations of their community. These skills have now become a traditional activity which is practiced by members of

the Pierre Road Ramleela Committee and the Three Roads Seva and Cultural Group in preparation for their annual Ramleela celebrations.

Craftsmanship and artistic skills are practiced and expressed by ethnic communities as a form of cultural heritage (Kurin 12). During the workshop for designing the crown for the character Lakshman, Mr. Khan utilised a template created from cardboard along with various decorative edgings. The light weight and flexibility of the materials used made the design process innovative and interesting for the participants as they were able to create and design the crowns to any dimension that fit their heads. In the responses obtained from the interviews and by observing the workshops, it is evident that oral tradition is regarded as an essential medium for the skills practiced in costume designing because through this form of communication, the East Indian communities were able to carry on traditional craftsmanship as well as the religious and cultural practices from one generation to the next. Overall, oral tradition is an essential tool in costume designing for the Ramleela. Costume design is indeed an expression of cultural heritage in the Ramleela festival in Trinidad.

CONCLUSION

The Ramleela festival in Trinidad is one of the oldest forms of a folk theatre as well as a traditional religious festival that annually brings together the people of the Hindu communities. It is also a cultural stage for safeguarding the rich East-Indian heritage such as the religious practices, oral traditions, expressive cultures, and the traditional craftsmanship practiced by the East-Indian Diaspora in Trinidad. Over the years, this cultural event has expanded into a tourist attraction and continues to artistically develop in many Hindu rural and urban communities across Trinidad.

Costume design in the Ramleela festival expresses the cultural heritage of the Hindu religion as well as the cultural practices that were brought and introduced by the East Indian indentured labourers in Trinidad. Most of these practices were transferred orally from one generation to the next and has helped to preserve the unique material culture and craftsmanship of the Hindu communities in central Trinidad. Costume design as an expression of cultural heritage is indeed visible medium in the Ramleela festival in Trinidad and kept alive by the Pierre Road Ramleela Committee, the Three Roads Seva and Cultural Group and the Hindu Prachaar Kendra.

APPENDIX A

Interview Questions:

- 1) Which East Indian religious festivals do you participate in and in what capacity?
- 2) Which religion or community group are you associated with?
- 3) What religious text or scripture is connected to the festival, and does it impact costume design?
- 4) Which people or religious characters in the text or scripture influence costume designing and why?
- 5) What are some forms of costume design portrayed in the festival that you participate in?
- 6) Which types of traditional East Indian clothing are usually integrated in costume designs and why?
- 7) What do the specific colours emphasized in the costume designs represent?
- 8) What are the specific religious symbols or textile motifs displayed on the costumes and what do they represent?
- 9) What types of craftsmanship are utilized in the process of costume designing?
- 10) How important is oral tradition to the skills practiced in costume designing in this festival?
- 11) What are some traditional materials utilized when designing costumes and why are they used?
- 12) Are there any workshops for costume designing in your religious organization or community group? Please explain.
- 13) In what ways do traditional clothing and craftsmanship express cultural heritage?
- 14) Do you think costume designing has helped to preserve cultural heritage in East Indian communities? Why or why not?