

Porapol Keliya and The Preservation of Cultural Memory in Sri Lanka: From Ritual to Recreation

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ABSTRACT

The cultural significance and symbolic meanings of *Porapol Keliya*, a traditional game played during Sri Lanka's Sinhala and Tamil New Years, are examined in this qualitative study. The game, which involves players representing opposing teams hitting coconuts, is not only a straightforward pastime but also a ritualistic expression of strength, community identity, and social interaction. Although *Porapol Keliya* continues to play an important role in regional festivities, its deeper cultural significance has not received enough attention from academics. The study uses symbolic interactionism as a theoretical framework to bridge this gap, focusing on how performative and symbolic actions help people and groups create meaning. For the study, fifteen (15) informants were selected from the Maligatanne, Gampaha District. The primary technique for gathering data was informal interviews. A review of relevant literature and archival materials, such as newspaper articles and cultural documents, case studies, semi-structured interviews conducted according to a prearranged interview schedule, and direct observation during the 2024 New Year festival were also used to collect data. The study uses thematic analysis to find recurring themes, embodied symbolic representation of strength, social identity and intergenerational transmission, communal unity and cultural continuity. According to the results, *Porapol Keliya* is a flourishing community where cultural values like fortitude, dignity, and friendship are respected and transmitted from one generation to the next. Members of the community develop a sense of identity and belonging through the game, which serves as both a ritual and a cultural archive. The study highlights the value of traditional leisure pursuits in comprehending the sociocultural fabric of Sri Lankan life and aids in the preservation of intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: *Porapol Keliya, Sinhala and Tamil New Year, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Symbolic Interactionism.*

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INTRODUCTION

Traditional leisure activities not only offer entertainment but also serve as powerful markers of a society's cultural values, interpersonal relationships, and historical continuity. Such traditions are deeply embedded in Sri Lanka's Sinhala and Tamil New Year celebrations, where games and rituals collectively represent a time of cultural expression, spiritual renewal, and social unity. Among these customs, *Porapol Keliya* stands out for its profound symbolic meaning and enduring relevance in rural areas. It is a traditional game in which opposing teams strike coconuts. Although *Porapol Keliya* has long been a part of Sri Lankan culture, not much scholarly study has been done on it beyond its popularity as a lighthearted game. However, further study is required to completely comprehend its underlying meanings, which include strength, fortitude, teamwork, and the transformation of a sacred object (the coconut) into a recreational medium. The game reflects a dynamic fusion of ritual and competition, involving players and the wider community in a shared cultural performance. The game functions as a living tradition that consistently enacts and reinforces identities, values, and social roles, based on observations and oral histories.

The purpose of this study is to examine *Porapol Keliya* as a symbolic act of cultural storytelling as well as a kind of recreation. The study looks at how players and viewers create, convey, and understand meaning through the game, all while adhering to the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism. Through fieldwork, tradition-bearer interviews, and ritual element analysis, the study seeks to illustrate how *Porapol Keliya* contributes to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage in the face of modern social

change. The study closes a major gap in the literature by offering an interpretive understanding of a custom that continues to influence communal identity and social cohesiveness in Sri Lanka. Additionally, it contributes to broader discussions regarding the native games' cultural significance and their role in conserving cultural heritage, particularly as it relates to community-led traditions that are safeguarded by UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

➤ *Cultural Significance of Traditional Games in Sri Lanka*

Historically, a society's values, beliefs, and social structures have been reflected in its recreational activities. Traditional games are deeply ingrained in Sri Lankan culture, especially during the Sinhala and Tamil New Year festivities. These games represent customs, interpersonal connections, and generational cultural transmission; they are more than just recreational activities (Silva, 2016). *Porapol Keliya* stands out among the many other New Year's games not only because it is a competitive sport but also because of its profound symbolic meaning. This traditional game hasn't gotten much scholarly attention, though, despite its rich cultural heritage.

Played mostly in rural villages, *Porapol Keliya* hasn't changed much over the years. Its longevity demonstrates how highly this activity is valued in social and ritual contexts. Few studies have looked at the symbolic meanings and interactive roles connected to particular games, despite the fact that earlier research has examined traditional Sri Lankan games as part of folklore (Senanayake, 2003) or cultural heritage (Abeysekera, 2020). By examining *Porapol Keliya*'s deeper cultural and symbolic aspects through the prism of symbolic interactionism, this study aims to close that gap. It seeks to comprehend how, during the New Year's celebrations, the game symbolizes social roles, cultural values, and collective identity.

For most of the Sri Lankans, the mid-April Sinhala and Tamil New Year signifies a time of spiritual and seasonal rejuvenation. Ritual activities during this time include cooking traditional foods, cleaning the house, lighting the earth, and playing games that promote harmony and happiness (Jayawardena, 2007). Games like *Porapol Keliya* are played not only for amusement but also as symbolic acts that strengthen ties within the community during this ritualistic and communal festival. The entire village frequently participates in these events, where both players and spectators add to a common cultural experience.

The use of the coconut, which in South Asian cultures stands for strength, purity, and spiritual energy, is essential to *Porapol Keliya* (Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988). Coconuts are broken as offerings to gods during religious ceremonies, signifying the self or ego being broken. This symbolism is translated into a competitive form within *Porapol Keliya*, where each strike can be interpreted as a metaphor for reaffirming team identity, overcoming obstacles, or asserting strength. A potent illustration of how cultural interaction can give commonplace activities deeper meanings is the conversion of a religious artifact into a recreational tool (Turner, 1982).

The theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, which stresses the creation of meaning through social interactions, serves as the foundation for this study. Symbolic interactionism, which was first developed by George Herbert Mead and then developed by Herbert Blumer, postulates that people behave in certain ways according to the meanings they attach to objects. These meanings are shaped by social interactions and are subject to interpretation (Blumer, 1969). The study aims to comprehend how players and community members perceive *Porapol Keliya* as a significant cultural performance by applying this theory to the game. For example, the audience's applause, the teams' interactions, and the game's conclusion are all viewed through a common prism of custom and cultural meaning.

Anthropologists and sociologists have long examined games as cultural performances. According to Turner (1982), rituals and group gatherings act as "social dramas" where cultural values are performed and reaffirmed. In a similar vein, Geertz (1973) characterized the Balinese cockfight as a "deep play" that reflects societal structures and is loaded with symbolic meaning. *Porapol Keliya* can be seen as a ritualistic performance in Sri Lanka that dramatizes social roles, hierarchies, and the virtues of bravery, unity, and endurance. It is more than just a contest.

➤ *Methodology and Contribution to Intangible Cultural Heritage*

The game drew a lot of community participation, according to field observations made during the 2024 Sinhala and Tamil New Years. The field of play evolved into a cultural stage where customs were enacted and commemorated. The data used in this study was obtained through informal consultations with a retired drama teacher who is knowledgeable about ritual performance in Sri Lanka, observations, and conversations with five elderly men (over 60) from one extended rural family who have upheld the tradition. These keepers of tradition provided insightful information about the game's history, significance, and social roles. Archival newspaper articles and reviews of earlier scholarly studies on traditional games were examples of supplementary data.

Prior research on traditional games in Sri Lanka has mostly concentrated on documentation rather than interpretation. Senanayake (2003), for instance, listed ancient games and festivals, and Abeysekera

(2020) talked about them in relation to heritage preservation. But there was no theoretical examination of how games like *Porapol Keliya* function as symbolic performances in these works. This study fills that gap by taking a qualitative, interpretive approach. It investigates how players and spectators experience the game as a lived, symbolic event and how meaning is constantly negotiated during that process.

The sequence of turns, the coconut, the team rivalry, and even the ceremonial silence or chants prior to each strike were all seen to have symbolic significance. Interviewees revealed that winning the game was interpreted as a sign of future success for the winning team or family. "We don't play just to win; we play because it keeps the village alive with our ancestors' spirit," said one elder. According to these interpretations, *Porapol Keliya* is more than just a sport; it is a cultural narrative performed via play and ritual.

This study advances our knowledge of how traditional games can serve as archives of intangible cultural heritage in addition to providing symbolic and cultural insights. The importance of community-led activities, such as games and oral traditions, in maintaining cultural identity is emphasized in the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003). Documenting and evaluating these practices is crucial for cultural sustainability and education as Sri Lanka rapidly modernizes (UNESCO, 2003).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study used a qualitative research methodology to examine the cultural significance and symbolic meanings of *Porapol Keliya*, a traditional Sri Lankan New Year game. Qualitative approaches were selected due to their capacity to record in-depth, descriptive, and context-specific insights into human experiences, traditions, and meanings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Because the study focused on interpretation, cultural values, and symbolic meanings, the methodology was influenced by interpretivist philosophy and the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism.

Mead (1934) and Blumer (1969) developed symbolic interactionism, which holds that social interaction helps people create meanings that impact behavior and social norms. This framework is especially useful for analyzing how players of *Porapol Keliya* give the game symbolic meanings and how the ritual performance promotes community involvement, social identity, and cultural continuity.

➤ *Research Setting and Participant*

Fieldwork was conducted during the Sinhala and Tamil New Year celebrations in a rural Sri Lankan village in April 2024. Because it actively preserves *Porapol Keliya* traditions and involves elderly players who have been playing and preserving the game for many years, this location was selected.

The study focuses on how performative and symbolic actions assist individuals and groups in creating meaning, using symbolic interactionism as its theoretical framework. Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants with extensive knowledge of the game and a wealth of information. Fifteen (15) informants were chosen for the study from the Gampaha District's Maligatanne neighborhood. There were all over 60 and were selected from a single extended family in the village. Not only were they players when they were younger, but they are also traditional keepers who teach the next generation to continue the tradition. Important insights into the game's social and symbolic goals were provided by this familial and generational continuity (Patton, 2015).

Informal interviews were the main method used to collect data. Data was also gathered through case studies, semi-structured interviews carried out in accordance with a predetermined interview schedule, direct observation during the 2024 New Year festival, and a review of pertinent literature and archival materials, including newspaper articles and cultural documents.

➤ *Techniques for Gathering Data*

A variety of qualitative data collection techniques were used, such as semi-structured interviews, participant observation, archival review, and casual discussions.

➤ *Observation of the Participant*

The researcher went to a *Porapol Keliya* event and made firsthand observations during the 2024 Sinhala and Tamil New Year celebrations. In order to document audience interactions, gestures, symbolic acts, and ritual elements, thorough field notes were taken. During significant symbolic moments, special attention was given to player behavior, team dynamics, game structure, and community reactions (Spradley, 1980).

➤ *Informal Conversations*

A thorough discussion with a retired educator who had taught drama and ritual performance yielded more information about the game's performative components. "Like a stage drama, this game has roles, scripts, and emotions," he said. The statement "Every strike is like a line of dialogue" emphasizes *Porapol Keliya's* status as a cultural performance.

➤ *Document Review*

A variety of secondary sources were analyzed, such as historical newspaper articles, earlier scholarly research on Sri Lankan traditional games, and cultural heritage reports, in order to contextualize and triangulate findings. By relating historical accounts to modern practices, these sources enhanced the analysis (Bowen, 2009).

➤ *Analysis of Data*

The data was examined using thematic analysis, a method for identifying, analyzing, and summarizing patterns in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Understanding the data, developing preliminary codes, identifying themes, assessing themes, defining and labeling themes, and writing the report were the six steps in the process. The themes that emerged from the field data were deductively interpreted using symbolic interactionism. More general themes such as “embodied symbolism,” “collective identity,” and “ritualized competition” were used to group codes such as “communal cheering,” “ritual of breaking coconuts,” and “team rivalry.” These themes aligned with the study’s objectives and guided the conversation about symbolic and social meanings.

➤ *Reliability and Introspection*

Reliability and Introspection The study used triangulation across data sources, including observations, interviews, and secondary documents, to guarantee credibility and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To verify interpretations, findings were summarized with participants as part of an informal member checking process. To recognize positionality and personal biases, especially as someone from the same cultural background, the researcher kept a reflective journal. This understanding highlighted the value of expressing participants’ interpretations rather than imposing meanings from outside sources and preserved the authenticity of their voices.

➤ *Ethical Considerations*

Every participant was made aware of the purpose of the study and that participation was entirely voluntary. Prior to conducting interviews, verbally informed consent was acquired. Participants had the option to leave the study at any moment, and anonymity and confidentiality were upheld. Sensitivity and respect were maintained throughout the study because it involved elderly participants and cultural customs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Three main themes emerged from the examination of observational data, interviews, casual discussions, and archival sources: embodied symbolic representation of strength, social identity and intergenerational transmission and communal unity and cultural continuity. Below, each theme is examined through the prism of symbolic interactionism and supported by participant quotes.

➤ *Embodied symbolic representation of strength*

Porapol Keliya is full of ceremonial elements and symbolic gestures that go beyond the actual breaking of coconuts. The game is more than just a recreational activity; it is a performative tradition with meanings that players construct and interpret through shared action. According to Symbolic Interactionism, symbols change because of social interaction and meaning acquisition (Blumer, 1969). Participants perceived breaking the coconut as a sign of power, good fortune, and rivalry.

“Your family will be fortunate that year when you break the porapol [coconut] first,” “It appears that we are battling not just for pleasure but also for blessings”. stated a 72-year-old.

This comment demonstrates how the act is both playful and related to social and spiritual expectations. The coconut itself comes to symbolize power, wealth, and male vigor, especially during the New Year when communities ceremoniously purify the past and invoke blessings for the future (Jayasiriya, 2014). The game’s depiction of masculine skill and restrained aggression could also be interpreted as symbolic combat, with opposing teams hurling coconuts at one another. Another participant, who is 68 years old, stated,

“It looks like a fight, but it's not violence.”

It is about continuing with courage, commensurate with the difference our fathers displayed.

Turner’s (1987) concept of “social drama,” in which games and ceremonies symbolically practice social roles, power structures, and moral values, is appropriate for this type of ritualized performance. Goffman’s (1959) idea of social performance in which individuals enact collectively shared scripts to preserve communal identity is also reflected in the repetitive, stylized nature of the activity, which is played in the same way year after year.

➤ *Social Identity and Intergenerational Transmission*

The game’s function in creating and passing down social identities specifically, male identity and family heritage is the subject of the second theme. According to symbolic interactionism, role-playing and social interaction help to form and reinforce identities (Mead, 1934). Younger men and boys can learn about their cultural roles through *Porapol Keliya*, especially about teamwork, honor, and strength.

"When I was young, my father told me: 'Break that coconut and show them you are a man, Here, that's how we grew up.'" reflected a 70-year-old participant.

This quotation highlights how the game plays a part in social belonging and masculine initiation. Successfully completing the game signified the passage from boyhood to adulthood in addition to demonstrating physical prowess. The game becomes a rite of passage, and the elder's memory reflects a shared meaning that is transmitted. *Porapol Keliya's* intergenerational component is essential. Another participant, who was 66 years old, said:

"We teach the young boys, but we are too old to play now. They discover who they and we are in this way".

The game contributes to the preservation of cultural identity and collective memory through this transmission. This is consistent with the concept of habitus proposed by Bourdieu (1977), according to which customs and values are ingrained through generations of repeated behavior. The game's ritualistic structure offers a solid framework for teaching and practicing social roles. The game's symbolic significance as a status symbol for family and community was enhanced by the tight-knit village setting. A family's strength and reputation were strengthened by winning or doing well in *Porapol Keliya*. As a result, the game turns into a public platform for acting out social hierarchy and familial pride.

➤ *Communal Unity and Cultural Continuity*

The game's function in promoting social cohesiveness and cultural continuity is made clear by the concluding theme. According to symbolic interactionist theory, people can locate themselves within a larger social and cultural structure by using shared rituals and symbols to facilitate collective meaning-making (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959). A few players highlighted the game's ability to unite people in the New Year.

"People from different parts of the village come to watch,"

Stated a 74-year-old elder. They cheer even if they don't play. We are connected by it. This observation demonstrates how *Porapol Keliya* acts as a social integrator, erasing age and familial boundaries and reaffirming a common identity through group celebration. The audience actively participates in the game, which serves as a symbolic performance of unity.

"We can forget our problems during this time," said a different participant.

We are reminded that we are a single village by this game. This is consistent with Durkheim's (1912) theory that rituals strengthen social cohesion by restating shared ideals. *Porapol Keliya* promotes polite rivalry despite competition, where symbolic conflict fortifies rather than weakens ties within the community. The game's structure makes sure that no lasting animosity develops, so it's a safe and acceptable way to show competitiveness. *Porapol Keliya* has long played a useful role in seasonal celebrations, according to archival documents and newspaper articles examined. It is frequently mentioned as a crucial component of New Year observances in the Southern and Sabaragamuwa provinces of Sri Lanka (Silva, 2017). These records highlighted its enduring appeal and communal significance. In addition, the custom of playing the game again and again despite modernization shows a symbolic defiance of cultural deterioration. For many rural communities, *Porapol Keliya* continues to be a cultural pillar despite the challenges posed by urbanization, globalization, and digital entertainment.

"This is not just a game," said a second study participant, who was 68 years old. It resembles a little drama about our identity. Our values are conveyed through the roles, costumes, and regulations".

His comment supports the theoretical understanding of the game as a social script or performance in which players affirm and recreate their cultural heritage in addition to participating. According to the study's findings, *Porapol Keliya* has significant cultural and symbolic significance in Sri Lankan traditional society. The game's main object, the coconut, represents the common beliefs that have been passed down through the ages and is more than just a plaything. It is a potent symbol of moral fortitude, good fortune, and inner strength. Kinship ties and village-based affiliations are reinforced by the game's structure, which reflects deeply ingrained social roles and communal identities through the formation of teams and the performance of roles. Participants get a sense of honor and community belonging from these ritualistic elements.

Additionally, the game's participatory nature, particularly through audience participation illustrates its role as a cultural performance that upholds shared ideals like unity, justice, and respect. *Porapol Keliya* is demonstrated to be a rich medium for expressing, negotiating, and conserving collective identity and cultural heritage through interactive symbolism and performance, in accordance with the theoretical framework of Symbolic Interactionism. With the help of these themes, the game becomes a communal

mirror that reflects and upholds traditional Sri Lankan identity, a living cultural text, and a kind of symbolic storytelling.

CONCLUSION

This study used a qualitative approach informed by symbolic interactionism to investigate the cultural significance and symbolic meanings of *Porapol Keliya*, a traditional New Year's game in Sri Lanka. The goal of the study was to comprehend how, within its particular social and cultural context, this indigenous recreational activity reflects the identities, roles, and values of its participants. The study has shed light on *Porapol Keliya* as a complex tradition that goes beyond simple play by using observations, interviews with five senior community members, and an analysis of pertinent literature and archival materials. One of the main findings is that *Porapol Keliya* is a symbolic performance that functions as a cultural text rather than just a game. Every action, including selecting the coconut, throwing technique, and crowd cheer, carries layers of meaning developed via shared understanding and practice. According to Blumer's (1969) claim that meaning is created and altered by social engagement, these meanings are not static but are instead constantly negotiated and reaffirmed through repeated social interaction. Smashing coconuts represents concepts like strength, luck, masculine honor, and spiritual purification. These ideas are especially relevant during the New Year, a time of cultural transition. *Porapol Keliya* serves as a conduit for the dissemination of intergenerational values and social identity, according to the second key findings.

Younger community members learn their expected social roles through participation and observation in the game, which serves as an informal but effective teaching tool. The elders who were interviewed highlighted their function as cultural guardians as well as former participants, preserving the custom through storytelling, demonstrations, and advice. *Porapol Keliya* acts as a living bridge between generations and strengthens community and familial ties in this way. This bolsters Mead's (1934) idea that people form their social roles and self-concept via meaningful engagement with others in their community.

The study's third finding is that *Porapol Keliya* promotes resilience and community cohesion. By uniting people of all ages, families, and social groups in the village around a common goal, the game serves as a kind of symbolic bonding. *Porapol Keliya* continues to be a communal ritual that upholds unity, collaboration, and respect for one another in an era where contemporary leisure options frequently encourage individualism and digital isolation. The results are in line with Turner's (1987) observations about how performance can reflect and influence collective values as well as Durkheim's (1912) theory that ritual practices strengthen social cohesiveness.

Furthermore, the study found that this traditional game is still popular in some rural areas despite social, economic, and technological changes. This is primarily because of the locals' dedication to their communities and sense of cultural pride. The participants' ongoing participation shows that older generations must actively participate, tell stories, and make a conscious effort to preserve such customs. *Porapol Keliya* thus provides a localized sense of identity and belonging while embodying a kind of cultural resistance to modernity and globalization. The game's complex meanings have been successfully unraveled through the theoretical application of symbolic interactionism. This method made it easier to investigate how people understand and give meaning to symbols (like the coconut), how social roles are performed and observed, and how daily interactions shape cultural identity. According to the research, symbolic interaction encompasses more than just language and gestures; it also includes play, ritual, and bodily performance, particularly in culturally significant contexts like the Sinhala and Tamil New Years.

To sum up, *Porapol Keliya* is much more than just a game for celebration. It is a storehouse of collective knowledge, a symbolic ritual, and a social institution. Communities actively shape their cultural future while also celebrating their past by continuing to participate in such traditional practices. This study encourages more research into comparable practices throughout the island and helps preserve a significant part of Sri Lanka's intangible cultural heritage by identifying and recording these meanings.

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