

# Evolution of Female Costume in Sinhala Tradition

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## Abstract

*According to the Oxford English dictionary the meaning of costume denotes 'the distinctive style of coiffure, jewellery, and apparel of a period, country, class or a group'. Costumes are considered as things that are laid on the human body for beauty, aesthetics and function. Body shape or figure is believed to be the cumulative result of a woman's skeletal structure and distribution of muscle on the body. The female figure in many cultures has been worshipped as the symbol of fertility and prosperity. The female form is considered as more attractive than its male counterpart. In general female figures are narrower at the waist than at the bust and hip area, and accentuated with long hair that falls along the back.*

*This study intends to identify deeper meanings in costumes that were practiced in local traditions, by mapping out the visible connections between costumes/dress and the social, material, and philosophical aspects of female dress. The research problem is the examination of the principles that have evolved in the history of Sinhalese female costume. In the world of costume design today, it is important to always look back to tradition, for creative inspiration in design. This has been the main objective of the research paper. A wide range of costumes, from the royalty to the commoners can be identified in the Sinhalese culture. This wide range of costumes has evolved to make the female figure a focal point for design and creativity. The traditions of costumes have been subjected to external changes from outside influences. The concepts behind dress design that have evolved from local traditions need to be brought in to focus. For instance, the ancient temple paintings of Sri Lanka depict the life style of a bygone era and in these paintings we come across stories illustrated with people at different events in their various costume and ornament. As such, it is possible to derive the social significance, philosophy of life, customs and beliefs, and design aesthetics of the era from these paintings. Much of the information has been collected by visiting ancient temples in Kandyan region and Southern coastal areas. Line drawings were then prepared from the scanned photographs. The dresses of the royals, variations of the costumes of the commoner, Kandyan villagers costume, costume according to Robert Knox, the occupations related to costumes, costumes of the dancers, costume and its western and Indian influences are some of the sections that will be discussed in this study.*

*Key words - female, costume, tradition, Sri Lanka, design, evolution*

## **Evidence from Literary and Epigraphic Sources**

Direct and indirect literary sources include the chronicles (Mahavamsa & Chulavamsa) and the written dissertations, books and silpa texts. The Mahavamsa, (Geiger W, 1953) the ancient chronicle of the Sinhalese (5<sup>th</sup>

century A.D) and the Chulavamsa (Geiger W, 1953) give some idea of the dress and ornaments worn by the Sinhalese in ancient and medieval times. The Mahavamsa states that the Yakkhini woman Kuveni was first seen by the Aryan prince Vijaya from Bengal, seated under a tree spinning cotton. This event is believed to have taken

place sometime during 5<sup>th</sup> - 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. This indicates that some knowledge and skills in cloth making had existed in the island as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. From this it is only natural to suppose that the ancients, whether Aryans or the aboriginals, clad themselves in some form of garment. The costumes/dress were subjected to change according to the Sinhalese caste system. As for womens' attire Martin Wickramasinghe (1935) basing his contentions on the Pali work Dhammapadatthakatha (5<sup>th</sup> century A.C) has shown that ancient Sinhalese women did not cover the upper part of their bodies.

Garments for the upper body became popular amongst the Sinhalese nobility by the 17<sup>th</sup> century as noted by Robert Knox, in his monumental work, Historical Relation of Ceylon (1681) says of the attire worn by Kandyan ladies: Govi women were distinguished by the wearing of their cloth, which they wore to their heels with one end of the garment flung over the shoulders carelessly covering the upper part of the body.

As for the low caste women, he says that they would go naked from the waist upwards and their clothes did not hang down much below their knees. Knox also states that when going outdoors Kandyan women wore a short frock with sleeves, made of fine white calico wrought with blue and red thread with designs of flowers and branches, to cover their bodies. Wickramasinghe states that middle class women only wore a cloth around their hips when at home, and also used another cloth to cover their shoulders whenever they went outdoors. As for the upper classes, the Sigiri frescos (5<sup>th</sup> century AC), depict the aristocratic women as being bare breasted, though heavily bejeweled, while their lower class female attendants are depicted with a breast band. As noted

by Wickramasinghe, women of the Chandala/ rodhi caste covered their upper bodies even if those of the noble birth did not do so. It appears that in ancient times exposing a woman's breasts was considered, a mark of respect and high birth and that covering them was a sign of inferiority and low birth, in later times however, the very opposite was true. As noted by Coomaraswamy (1956), in Mediaeval Sinhalese art the dress of women of high caste consisted of 'hettaya'(jacket) with 'mante' (mantle) like that of a man, and a cloth (helaya) around the loins arranged in various ways. Alternatively the end of the cloth (ohoriya) was thrown over the shoulders similar to that of Tamil fashion. He states that 'ohoriya' is a fashion of Tamil origin.

The intention of this study is to identify the characteristics of female costumes belonging to three time periods of history, namely; Anuradhapura & Polonnaruwa, Mediaeval /Kandyan period and Southern Colonial times. An effort is made in this study to understand the evolution of womens' costumes in a way that can be traced from the above mentioned time periods of history.

### **Eastern and Western Approach to Female Costumes**

In the development of the great civilizations of the world, people understood the techniques of dignifying the human form with cloth, arranging it in many methods, in different lengths for different uses and functions. Generally the wrapping style of cloth as costume was considered more dignified than the cut and sewn dresses. Womens' costumes are subjected to local culture, religion and climate. Looking into the developments of western costume one can identify the cut and sewn dresses to be of European origin, whereas particularly in the hot, humid climates the human form was

left exposed with a minimum of clothing to suit the climatic conditions. Traditionally in Indian costumes, the upper body was covered with jewellery and lower body was covered with the lower garment. Many of the draping styles have evolved from the Indian traditions, most significantly the costume identified as the 'sari' for women. The costume when worn, of which falls around the ankle, and elevates the female form in a dignified manner. In eastern culture, the dress represents much more than fashion or aesthetics; it signifies beliefs that become part and parcel of life.

### Female Costume in Sri Lankan Tradition

Evidence on early period developments of female costumes can be gathered from literary and epigraphic sources. Similar to the Indian tradition, early period (Anuradhapura & Polonnaruwa) female costumes had a garment for the lower part of the body, with jewellery adorning the upper part of the body. This had been the practice till colonial influences came into existence. Female costumes varied with regard to occupations, rituals, events of life, social classes etc. A gradual evolution can be traced from the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa periods to the Kandyan and Colonial times in history.

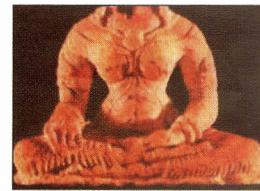
### Expression of Female Costume in Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa Sculpture

The earliest sculpture from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D, a wooden sculpture believed to represent a 'yakkini' figure indicates a hip ornament as shown in the figure below.

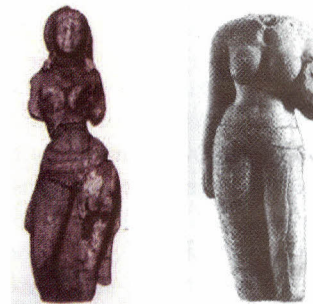
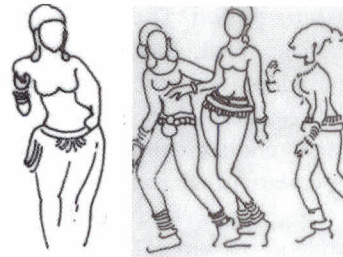


Yakkinifigure  
2nd -3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D  
Source –Schroeder 1990

The sophisticated classical lines of the sculpture as illustrated below depict the simplicity and graceful draping of early period costumes. The ancient sculpture indicates the accentuation of the chest and hip area of the female form.



Female sculpture from Abayagiriya,  
Anuradhapura



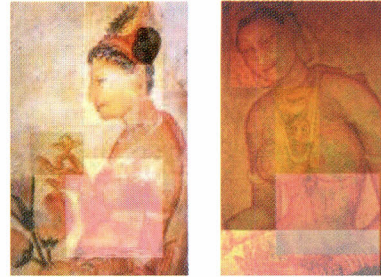
Sculpture from Jethavana archaeology  
museum, Anuradhapura  
Source –Schroeder 1990



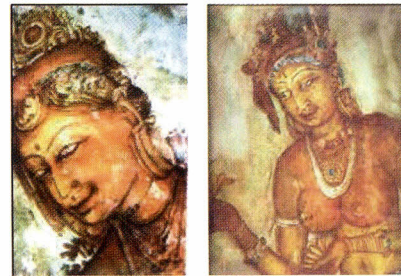
Nikawakanda  
Source - Schroeder 1990

The Sigiriya damsels, representatives of the 5<sup>th</sup> century aristocratic women are shown to be adorned with elaborate head dresses, large ear rings, arm bracelets and a plethora of necklaces and bangles. Some of these ornaments are uniquely found only in the Sigiriya paintings and sculpture. The perfect form of the female figure is depicted with high breasts and narrow hips. The dignified formation of the female form, denoted with classical lines, was continued in the Sinhalese tradition from the early Anuradhapura period. The upper areas of the female form, that include the neck, shoulders and the breast are adorned with ornaments, including; a tightly fitted choker ornament to the hanging pendants that rest on the mid plane of the chest, accompanied by the fitted armbands on either side of the arms. Various expressive details from elaborate Sinhalese literature work (such as writings on the mirror wall) can be taken as examples on the beauty of the Sigiriya royal women in dress and ornament. For instance, the breast is compared to a couple of swans, and the stately arms to the well formed trunk of an elephant. A number of necklaces adorn the neck area at different levels, this is a common occurrence in female ornament: Primarily the shoulders, upper arms and chest were adorned with

necklaces and armlets. This is very well expressed, in the Sigiriya jewellery.



Sigiriya paintings & sculpture  
Source - Chutiwongs 1990

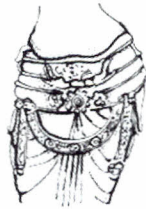


Sigiriya paintings & sculpture  
Source - Chutiwongs 1990

Sculptural examples taken from local traditions indicate different forms and expressions of the female figure. A particularly spectacular example of female sculpture in the Sinhalese tradition is the seated figure of the goddess 'Tara' (7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century Anuradhapura). This sculpture indicates the supremacy that is achieved by classical expressions in Sinhalese ornament and detail. The tall gem studded headgear identified as the 'Jatamukuta' emphasises the head, as the only decorative ornament adorning the female figure.



Sculpture of Tara. Late Anuradhapura period, 7<sup>th</sup> -8<sup>th</sup> century. Source National museum Colombo



Hip ornament detail from Polonnaruwa sculpture



Gaja Lakshmi at Vahalkada pillar. Archaeology museum Ampara. Source Schroeder 1990

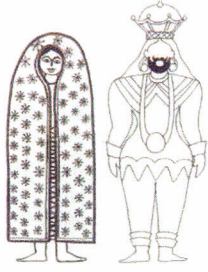


Kubera figure from Anuradhapura Source - Schroeder 1990

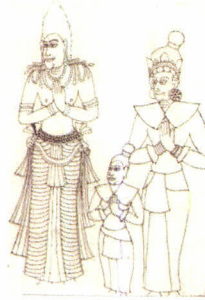
As attested by literary evidence, from ancient times to around the 16<sup>th</sup> century till the arrival of the Portuguese, the lower garment of men and women folk of all classes were worn similar to the modern day 'dhoti' of North India. This was worn from the waist down to below the knees. However unlike the Indian 'dhoti', the ancient Sinhalese garments appear to have been worn as neatly arranged horizontal folds. This was especially apparent among the upper classes. Another important ornament worn by upper class women was the 'minimevla' or 'manimekala' which is a gem studded girdle that was worn at the hip level. This is indicated in sculptures that date back as far as the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa period. These ornaments were considered as a mark of wealth and status of the wearer. Further references to these ornaments are made in the 15<sup>th</sup> century in literary sources such as the 'Hansa Sandeshaya'.

### Womens Dress of the Kandyan Period

It is observed that the Aryan influences that was the spring of art and civilization in the early periods in Sri Lanka, were evidently overtaken by the South Indian traditions during the Kandyan period. The Madurai influence on the arts and crafts of Kandy, particularly during mediaeval times was clearly evident. The matrimonial alliances made with South Indian royalty particularly, brought with it a great influence to the costume and jewellery of the Kandyan period. Another example of the royal queen's dress, the 'mottakkiliya' which is used to cover the body from head to toe, is evidently of South Indian origin. However this practice was not continued into the latter periods of the era.

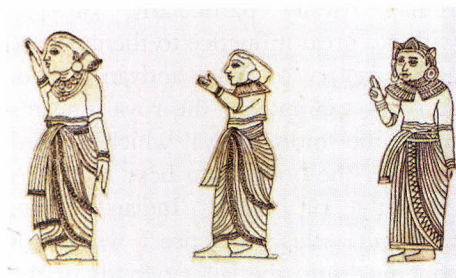
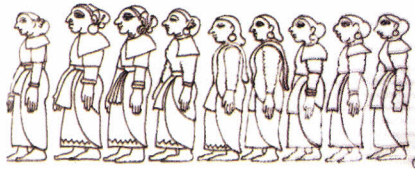


The Kandyan King and the queen: Painting of a wooden panel, source - Kandy museum



Royal family:  
Sources - Dambulla temple paintings

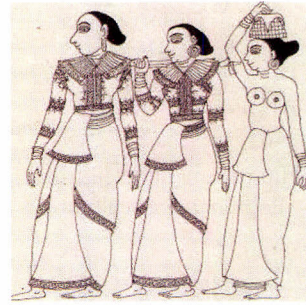
The way in which the lower garment is draped differs according to various styles. In the Kandyan draping styles the folds are taken in front, and tucked at the hip level.



Variations of Kandyan womens' costumes  
Source Gangaramaya temple paintings,  
Kandy

In colder climates higher up in the hill country, people were in the habit of wearing a mantle/ 'mante'(Large collar), as indicated by the Kandyan temple paintings and sculpture. This was evidently an influence from the Portuguese costume.

According to Wickramasinghe, during the Kandyan times (16<sup>th</sup> -18<sup>th</sup> centuries) it was the practice amongst respectable women to cover their upper bodies, while women of the low castes and the 'Rodi' were prohibited from doing so. Furthermore, upper caste women wore their lower garment to the ankles.



Noble women and female servant of the Kandyan period. Source-Madawala temple paintings

Robert Knox (1681), as quoted from Medieval Sinhalese Art, ( page 35) gives a description of the dress and ornament of Kandyan ladies, which is as follows: on their arms silver bracelets, and their fingers and toes full of silver rings, about their necks, necklaces of beads or silver, curiously wrought and engraven, gilded with gold, hanging down so low as their breasts. In their ears hang ornaments made of silver set with stones, neatly engraven and gilded. Their ears they bore when they are young, and roll up coconut leaves and put into holes to stretch them out, by which means they grow so wide that they stand like round circles on each side of their faces, which they account a great ornament, but in my judgement a great deformity, they being well featured women.



Kandyan lady according to Robert Knox

The above mentioned description indicates the details of jewellery worn by the Kandyan ladies and their extreme fondness for jewellery in costume during the Kandyan period.

### European Influences

In response to the cold climates of the European region, rather than the folded costumes prevalent in Asia, Europeans gave emphasis to cut and fitted dresses on the human form, which also comprised of hats, gloves, stocking and shoes. One can observe that quite differently to the Eastern concept of dress and ornament, where emphasis was given to the fulfilment of spiritual factors, in the Western traditions costume was considered as a changing style that moved with time, material and the attitudes of the people.

The history of Colonial occupation that originated in the Southern Coastal regions of the island with the arrival of the Portuguese in A.D 1506, opened up Western cultural and religious influences in the coastal region of Sri Lanka. According to Coomaraswamy the Portuguese and Dutch influence in the low country (16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries), on art, costumes and manners was marked with extremes. It shows that the influence of the Portuguese was not limited to the aristocracy, but its impact was rapid and widespread throughout society.



Queen and the noble women  
Source - Suriyagoda 18th century

The temple paintings of Suriyagoda indicate the costume of the queen and noble women. The long sleeved jacket, tight fitting upper garment and hair styles show European influences. Certain features like 'mante'(collar) in the ladies' costumes can be identified as a prominent feature in Western style.

### Low Country Traditions of Female Costumes

The costume and ornament of Western origin bear evidence to the changing patterns that occurred in Sinhalese traditions. Furthermore the merging of Western and Eastern concepts resulted in hybrid formations. There is a clear revolution that took place from Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa to the Kandyan era and then to the Southern Colonial times. These traditions are subjected to an indigenous process, marked with material, life style, and technological skill. Lace and such upper garments as 'arichchi' and 'borichchi', comprising of puff- sleeved bodices or blouses, mainly worn in low country areas, were very popular among the Sinhalese women. In certain instances the skirt or 'saya' of the Portuguese replaced the 'redda' or the lower garment and the 'jacket' took place of the 'hattaya'. Techniques such as 'beeralu' became an artistic craft of cloth making, in the low country, which was introduced by the Portuguese.



Drawing of J.L.K Van Dort 1861  
Source – National Archives, Colombo



Women attending the daily chores. Source-  
Kotte raja maha vihara



Source – Karagampitiya temple paintings

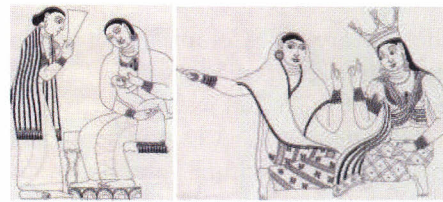
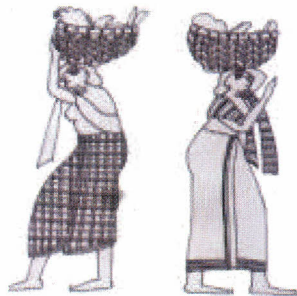
Another important feature is the ornamental shawl or ‘satakaya’ (Wickramasinghe 1935) that is worn on the upper body. In certain instances it is carelessly thrown over at the shoulders, neatly worn crisscrossed at the chest or partly covering the head.

### Variation of Lower Garment Details

The daily life events depicted in temple paintings indicate the various occupations women engaged in, including house hold chores etc. In most instances various draping patterns are shown as they were understood by the artists of these paintings. As indicated in the diagrams, there are vegetable sellers, and women attending to their daily chores, wearing the simple ‘redda’ as the lower garment. In the low country traditions ‘redda’ is simply tucked in at the loins of the female figure.



Source - Kataluva temple paintings



Source - Telwatte temple paintings

### Womens Costumes in Dance, Rituals and Pageantry

Sinhalese dance traditions have a conspicuous place in Sri Lankan cultural heritage, which has formed through the life pattern, beliefs and customs of the Sinhalese. The dance costumes and



accessories is an important aspect of the overall expression of the dance. In the past, it seems that women had taken an active role in these traditional dances. As such alongside with the different dance postures, a picturesque variety of costumes have developed for women. Traditional dance belong to a number of categories that can be identified as classical dances, folk dances, dance plays, ritual dances, royal court dances and dances for amusement, recreation and processions. The distinctive attributes of these dances can be marked in the development of the Sri Lankan dance tradition from ancient times by tracing the sources of stone friezes, sculpture, wood carvings, temple paintings, literary sources, figures carved in low relief in ivory combs, metallic images and so forth.

### Temple Dances

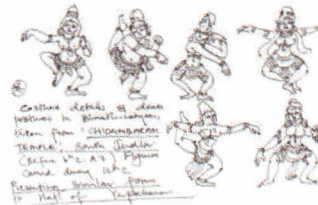
Temple or 'devala' dance have evolved with the influence of 'Indian temple dances' and is a ritual of 'performing before the gods'. In the Sri Lankan context, the 'devala dancers' were identified as 'nalaganan', with the earliest archaeological inscriptions depicting the influence of 'Bharatha natya' in the temple dance forms. Among the many stone sculptures, the frieze of a female dancer and a drummer from the Polonnaruwa Vishnu Devalaya is illustrated in the figure given below. The dance costume is designed in such a way that it allows for the vigorous movements of the dancer and vibrates with the swinging and swaying actions of dance. Dance costumes would comprise of turbans, body ornaments and flowing robes that would hug the contours of the body.



Stone friezes from Polonnaruwa.  
Source – National museum Colombo



Dancer Drummer of Vishnu Devalaya  
Frieze of Polonnaruwa - (National Museum)



Musicians and dancers from the stone  
friezes of Yapahuva

The wood carvings of 'Gadaladeniya' and 'Embekke' show a remarkable wealth and precision in the costume details. They are well proportioned figures with expressive faces, appropriate jewellery, attractive drapery with graceful frills and folds at the centre and on the sides allowing for the free movement of the dancers. The costume with its intricate details is a pleasing ensemble; from the elaborate hairdo to the disposition of the frills and folds. The significant feature in the 'nalaganan' is the shawl the dancer sports over her shoulders, the ends of which spread like a fan on either side. It is believed that the shawl has a particular reference to the goddess 'pattini', who in the legendary stories has her birth in the 'shawl'. Thus the shawl has a ritual sacredness in the cult

of the goddess 'Pattini'.



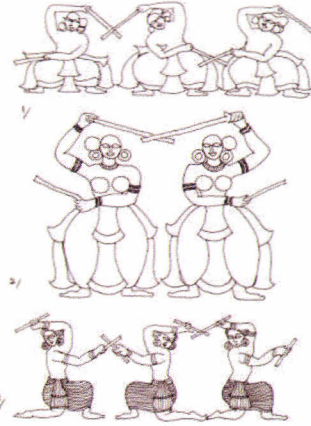
Female dancers costume from Ambakke & Panavitiya



Female dancers costume from Ambakke & Panavitiya

## Folk Dances

Many folk dances have evolved for the amusement and recreation of village folk. These dances are oriented purely towards amusement purposes, and sometimes towards magical or ritualistic aspects of village life. Along with historical developments, the most popular folk dances are, the 'kalagedi', 'leekeli' and 'raban dance'. They are followed by the 'goyam kapima' and 'kulu natuma' dances that were latter developments. A significant factor of their costume is the distinctive, spectacular appeal created by village life.



1/2 - examples from Polonnaruwa  
3 - from Ambekke

## Kalagedi Dance

This is a popular dance play for maidens throughout all provinces in the country. This charming dance is performed by group of young girls carrying pots. The pot is used as an important element in the dance; it is passed around from hand to hand, and very dexterously projected up and down. The distinctive charm of the play is highlighted by the simple village costume of the cloth and jacket.



### Folk Dances from the 'Kotte Period'

Carvings from the Ivory casket made by King Bhuvanekabahu as a present to the Portuguese King, Don Juan III, (1521-1551) depict female dancers in folk dance postures. The use of natural leaves and flowers with the fitted bodice and lower garment are characteristic features of the Kotte period dances. Elaborate head gear is a marked feature of all folk dances. There is no jacket covering the upper part of the body however in some instances there is a tight bodice worn at the breast. In some dances the end of the lower garment is taken by hand in the dance movements.



Folk dance costumes from Kotte period  
Source – Schroeder 1990

### Dance Troop from Mulkirigala

The dancers and musicians from Mulkirigala indicate Western influences in their costume and ornament. The female musicians wear lower garments as the 'redda' leaving the upper part of the body bare. The shawl is used to partly cover the head in a careless manner. The hair is set as tight bun carefully placed with hair pins. As such it can be concluded that the dancers costume is of Western style.



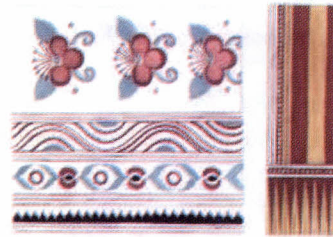
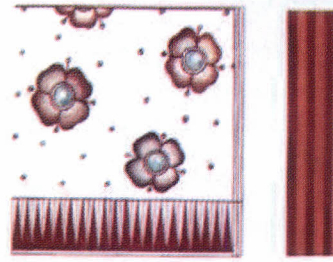
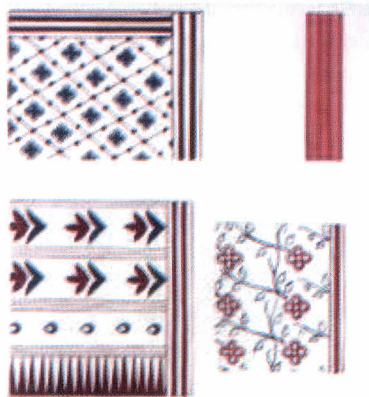
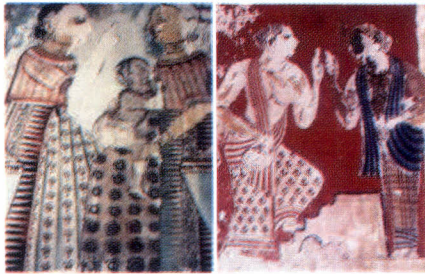
A group of musicians from Karagampitiya  
(19<sup>th</sup> century)

A group of female musicians from Karagampitiya are represented wearing a Western style 'saya' and 'jacket' and partly covering the head with a shawl.



## Art & Design of Female Costume

The art and design of female costumes consists of the way in which the costume is composed, its colour composition and detailing. The examples can be derived from Sigiriya, Kandyan temple paintings and the low country temple paintings. The costumes of the Sigiriya damsels indicate the elaborate headgear, jewellery and the lower garment. The headgear consists of a cloth pedestal on which the head gear rests; natural flowers and leaves, gems, and other structural elements such as coils are incorporated into the headgear. The colourful striped clothes were worn as lower garments. The thin borders with white cloth and delicate embroidery indicate the practices during the Kandyan era. The Kandyan female costume consisted of mantle, jacket and the lower garment. Female costume of the low country consisted of the jacket and cloth, with elaborate textile designs on the lower garment. The subtle colour range of the low country textiles is a marked feature in low country costume design.



Textile patterns of the fabrics from Southern temple paintings source -Telwatte temple paintings

## Conclusion

Costume had become an inseparable part of the human existence, fulfilling a higher purpose that man found necessary. The trends and styles were evidently set in vogue by the upper classes and the royalty which then trickled down to other social strata. The practices appear to have been in vogue at certain times which would have been influenced by the prevailing aristocratic styles. There exists a variety of female costumes from different social backgrounds, ranging from the royalty to the commoner. The female body, because of its characteristic form became the vessel from which a variety of costumes spanning into different eras of history came to be. A wide range of costumes have evolved through various geographical, political, social, religious, economical, and cultural motivating factors. Local costumes were influenced by other cultures and sartorial practices were carefully absorbed in to local customs and norms. As a result, these processes have created a unique identity to local trends of the female costumes. In certain instances what was accepted from other cultures remained part and parcel of the local practice while the rest were rejected.

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