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# Gendering the Colonized and Dressing the De-Colonized Female Body

*Asoka de Zoysa*

The following statement referring to a senior academic of Sri Lanka evoked a general outrage among female academics:

“Prof. Nalin De Silva, Dean, Science Faculty of University of Kelaniya expressed his grave displeasure for the way the Kelaniya University students and lectures (sic) dress. He says the way they dress is not different from the way prostitutes dress. Prof. Nalin said the true Sinhalese Buddhist daughters should always dress according to our Sinhalese Buddhist culture and not appear to be prostitutes. He expressed these views addressing the monthly meeting of the ‘Veemansaka Parshadaya’ on University of Kelaniya. He said he is so ashamed that even the professors and senior lecturers who should set example to the students by their proper dress are now wearing clothes like western prostitutes. Prof. Nalin De Silva said it is his dream to see the day that all female students wear the ‘Lama Sariya’ to university. That is the only dress fit for a true Sinhalese Buddhist female he said. Even Susanthika Jayasinghe once wore Lama Sariya at an international level sports event. So why should not our university female students wear Lama Sariya to the university? He asked”<sup>1</sup>.

Concurrently a female Vice Chancellor of a Colombo-based university, supported by a few senior academics, wished to impose a dress code for females at universities with the conviction that the saree is the only fitting dress for women<sup>2</sup>.

At the moment the issue to impose the saree as a dress code for women seems to have died down in the universities. Nevertheless, recently a colleague and professor at the University of Kelaniya complained that she was not allowed to enter the Ministry of Education to meet the official she had an appointment with, because her *hattaya* or saree blouse did not have sleeves. Many leading national schools have imposed the rule that mothers entering school premises must be dressed “modestly”. In Sinhala the word that is used by the security guards seems to be “*Harihathi andala*”, which can be translated as “properly dressed”. According to the school principals, such modesty can only be demonstrated by wearing a saree. But even wearing a saree does not seem to satisfy the whims of the security guards implementing unwritten rules. These current developments have provoked me to question through this paper, which kind of females costumes could ever reflect the “Sinhala Buddhist culture” that rejects all western influence?

Many Sri Lankans still seem to believe that the saree was worn by all females in ancient times. Buddhist temple murals by about 1920 too show women from the time of the Buddha from Sri Lankan history dressed in saree. The colored lithographs of Maligawage Sarlis which adorned the walls of Buddhist homes in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century too showed the same saree, while two decades earlier, Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906) depicted Indian goddesses and female characters from the Sanskrit epics such as *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana* dressed in saree. The generation that strongly advocates the saree perhaps draws from their childhood memories of Sarlis’ lithographs and images of Indian goddesses (see images 1-4).

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1 The source cited is “Jathika chinthana”. This quote appears in many internet sites; <http://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/ruhunuvoice/conversations/topics/1554> and [transcurrents.com/tc/2011/01/post\\_605.htm](http://transcurrents.com/tc/2011/01/post_605.htm). Accessed on 1.11.2013

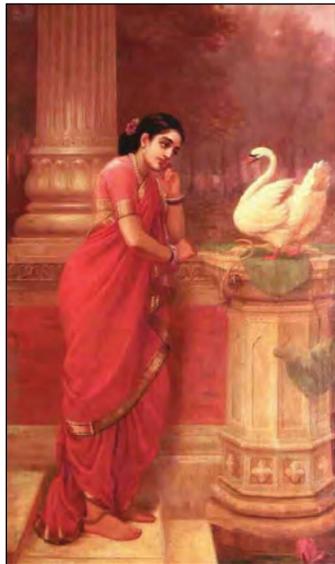
2 I have opted for this spelling “saree” for this loanword from the Indian subcontinent.



1. A coloured lithograph -M. Sarlis



2. From a temple in Padukka



3. Damayanti from Mahabharata



4. Image of Lakshmi by Raja - Ravi Varma (1848-1900)

Statements such as the following essentializing the importance of the saree are very common today: “The traditional clothing of Sri Lanka is very interesting. Women close to the age of marriage and who are already married normally wear a saree, also known as Kandyan Saree, as traditional clothing.” Here the “Kandyan Saree” is seen as the “traditional clothing of Sri Lanka”<sup>3</sup>

Nanda Pethiyagoda writes in 2012:

“Women’s attire down the ages was anything but immodest. Women covered themselves from head to toe in a saree, the mode typical and unique to Ceylon /Sri lanka (...). Young girls in Kandyan provinces - the hill country – wore a modification of the Kandyan, the nod to being young and not too bustful (sic) being that the *osariya* was twisted and taken around the waist. But modesty had to be retained. Hence the blouse a young girl wore, had a long frill around it which covered completely developing breasts, titillatingly indicated when the frill was of net or fine silk” (Pethiyagoda 2012 II-III).

The writer seems to be eager to proclaim that the saree and the *osariya* are the most ‘modest’ forms of dress for women. Similar statements have driven me to find the answer to the question as to why the saree enjoys greater respect over other imported hybrid modes of dress such as the

3 Source: [http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What is the traditional clothing in sri lanka](http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What_is_the_traditional_clothing_in_sri_lanka)

“skirt and blouse” or the *shalwar kameez*, which are permitted in Buddhist temples, churches and Hindu kovils. Therefore, in this article, I seek to answer the question: has the saree now become the Sinhala-Buddhist equivalent to the abaya, the hijab, and the niqab, making the female body a showcase to display ‘modesty’?

My research interest stems from the point of view of a fashion historian. For this paper I base my observations on Diana Crane’s seminal study *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing* (2000), in which she demonstrates how, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century France, England and the United States, identity, class and religious affiliation, occupation, regional origin, moral values, gender ideals and gender roles have been constructed and expressed through clothing. In addition, Udaya Kumar’s essay “Self, body and inner sense” (1997) which approaches the topic from a caste-based differentiation and Himani Bannerji’s *Textile Prison* (1999) that examines the clothing of “gentlewomen” (*bhadra mahila*) in colonial Bengal based on the discourse of “shame” (*lajja*) have provided multiple viewpoints to contextualize the information I discuss here, in a wider, South Asian context.

Due to the corpus of critical writing by Malathi de Alwis (1995 and 1997), Neloufer de Mel (2001) and Nira Wickramasinghe (2003), we in Sri Lanka, to some extent, are able to make some assumptions on how the female costume was transformed in colonial times. K. D. G. Wimalaratne and Dian Gomes’ coffee-table book *Costumes of Sri Lanka* (2001) presents visual information on costumes in transition for the first time. The research base provided by Kumari Jayawardene (1989) and Janaki Jayawardene (2000) presents multiple perspectives to observe the ever-changing attitudes towards women’s clothes. Only a few researchers have attempted to synthesize this knowledge generated over the past ten years. The evolution of the female costume in Sri Lanka has been read mainly as a product of colonial intervention and the subsequent efforts in building a “national identity”.

Very seldom has the archive of visual material available in colonial photographs, postcards and murals in Buddhist temples during the final decades of colonization and the early decades of de-colonization been examined through a gender lens. If gender aspects of the visual representation of the female are to be researched in depth, the regional differences and ethnic, caste and class identity of a fast-changing society at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as reflected in costume too will have to be taken into consideration. Juxtaposing the evidence from multiple sites that give textual and visual evidence how the female costume may have evolved from pre-colonial to colonial and postcolonial times, I question in this paper the hegemony of the saree that seems to be the only costume that, according to this evidence, could reflect ‘Sinhala Buddhist culture’. Leading from this, I also seek to find out in this paper whether the opinion that women should cover the entire body when entering sacred spaces is inherited or constructed.

The paintings by Tavik František Šimon (1877-1947) of women in the Dalada Maligawa in 1920s were uploaded in a commercial website recently. They evoked comments in social media networks such as “ElaKiri” that the women painted were Rodiya women, which appears to point to a general practice that all women who did not wear a stitched upper garment to cover their breasts to be branded as “Rodiyas”<sup>4</sup>.

One notices that Šimon’s paintings of Ceylon available for research are mostly of women

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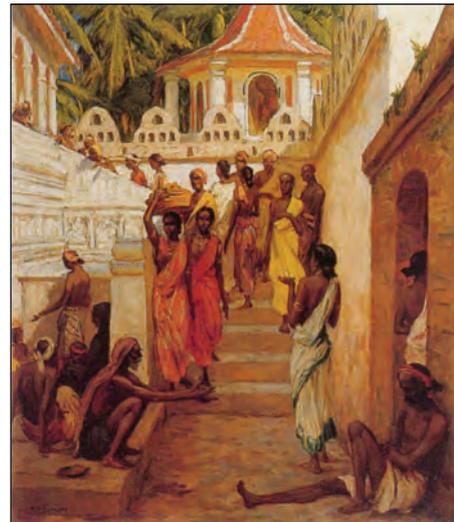
4 I am very thankful to Ms. Rapti de Zoysa Siriwardane for introducing me to this site. [A selection of paintings can be viewed in](#) “Catalogue Raisonné of the graphic art of the Czech artist Tavik František Šimon (1877-1942)” in [www.tfsimon.com/Graphic-List.html](http://www.tfsimon.com/Graphic-List.html) and “Graphics of Tavik Frantisek Šimon (1877-1942)” <http://www.google.de/imgres?biw=1525&bih=666&tbm=isch&tbnid=Y-97->. I am also thankful to curators of private collections of photographs and other commercial websites.

entering, sitting around or leaving the Holy Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, the highest place of Buddhist worship in the hill region (see images 5-8 ). Šimon's open air scenes painted in cities like Tangier for example do not show women in public spaces . The Japanese women in his paintings from Kyoto do not appear to be gendered through their costume at all (see images 9 and 10). As such, the Japanese female figures do not fit into the clichéd poses known in Orientalist art or the indolent *Gauguinesque* woman of the South Sea Islands painted by artists who copied Gauguin, but are of a more quasi documentary form. The two paintings of European women are painted very much in the style of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, differentiating them in dress and nudity according to the situation (see image 11). The ambience of the Temple of the Tooth in Šimon's paintings corresponds to a large extent with photographs of that time. The activities taking place in this holiest of temples, documented by Šimon in the "Kandyan Series", match the type of colonial photography which later in the analysis of photography I shall name "wayside photography".

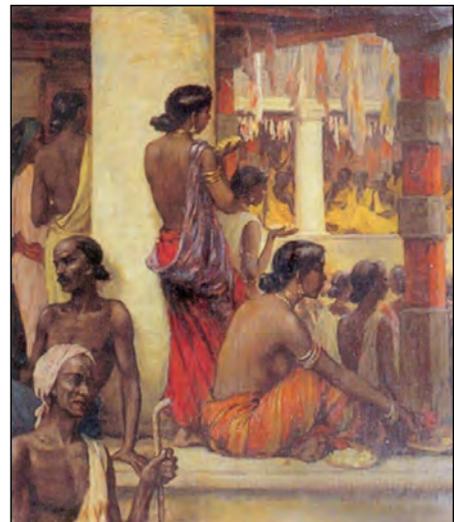
This evidence may guarantee a certain amount of 'authenticity' for Šimon's representation of the 'exotic' world. But the final verdict as to what extent Šimon's "Kandyan Series" have traces of 'Orientalist art would be left to the readers of this article, which, as far as I know, presents Šimon' corpus of paintings for academic discussion in Sri Lanka for the first time<sup>5</sup>.

Finally one may also notice that Šimon's portraits of European women show much detail in dress, which match the female upper class costume seen in the photography of the 1920s (see images 12 and 13).

Assuming that photographs may leave less space for the male imagination than paintings, one may pursue the research intention in the following manner: In order to ascertain the relative 'authenticity' of the costume of Kandyan women of the 1920s, we should then have to read some of the earliest photographs of Sri Lankans captured by photographers. Most of the photographs of this vast colonial archive were produced mainly for commercial purposes: These subjects ended up becoming images on picture postcards sent back to Europe or America by tourists visiting unknown and strange destination

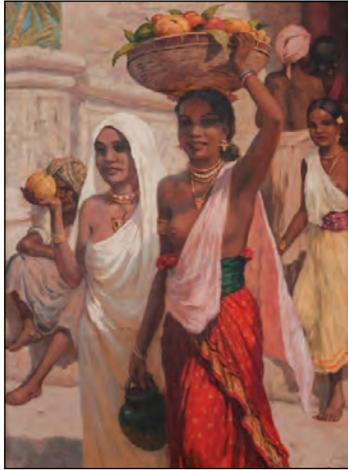


5. Three Women at the Temple of Candy, Ceylon - Tavik František Šimon (1877-1947)



6. Buddhist-Temple in Candy - Tavik František Šimon (1877-1947)

5 Šimon seem to have painted and sketched the "Kandyan Series" series in the latter half of the 1920s. Emerging out of the genre *Orientalist Art* which had its heyday from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the female non-European body, highly exoticized and eroticized, was portrayed in seductive poses in Turkish baths (*Hamams*), the Turkish Sultan's *Seraglio*, slave markets and harems (*Serais*). Paulette Dellios in her article "Reframing the gaze: European *Orientalist Art* in the eyes of Turkish Women Artists, gives an overview to the movement with a substantial overview. From the many articles quoted by Dellios, I wish to cite the following: "The juncture between sexual imagery and imperial lust is thoroughly investigated by Nochlin (2002), who argues that *Orientalist art* cannot be disassociated from the ideologies of Western imperialism." (Dellios 2010 : 621)



7. Stairway of Kandy temple - Šimon (1877-1947)



8. At the Temple of Candy, Ceylon. Oil on canvas - Šimon (1877-1947)



9. Kyoto in Winter - Tavik František Šimon (1877-1947)



10. Two Japanese Women - Tavik František Šimon (1877-1947)



11. Girls on the Dalmatian coast - Tavik František Šimon (1877-1947)



12. Girl by the birch tree - Tavik František Šimon (1877-1947)



13. Vilma Reading on the Sofa - Tavik František Šimon (1877-1947)

called “Ceylon”. To what extent photographers intended to be ethnographically correct when it came to depicting the ‘natives’ on post cards is debatable<sup>6</sup>.

As Max Quanchi in his article “Visual histories; contrasting postcard views of early 20th century colonies of French, British and Australian colonies” (2008) points out, over 50% of his sample of picture postcards from four colonies in Oceania (Fiji, New Caledonia, Papua and New Guinea) demonstrate an ethnographic interest as against about 30 % post cards that document scenic beauty<sup>7</sup>.

The scope of this paper does not permit me to first carry out a classification of all the photographs from colonized Ceylon, but based on Quanchi’s categorization, I wish to propose the basic framework which I shall introduce later. To my knowledge there has been no academic analysis of the corpus of photographs from colonized Ceylon up to date. The intentions of the colonial photographers have been identified by Quanchi as forms of propaganda to demonstrate power over the colonized country. In the Ceylon Collections such as “Lankapura” and “Ancient Ceylon” on the internet and other private collections seen by me, I notice that many photographs are devoted to documenting the colonization project such as buildings of roads, bridges, tunnels, railway lines, harbours, deforestation of land for plantations, activities in graphite mines, the processing of agricultural products such as coffee, the bungalows of the British and their past times. One may notice that the ‘native labourers’ have been instructed to pose in these photographs and to some extent have been dressed in their ‘uniforms’ for the camera. The situation most often is authentic, but the arrangement of the subjects of the photographs by shifting their activity into the open air with adequate lighting is obvious. Another genre of photographs documenting the heritage of colonized Ceylon demonstrate landscapes of lush tropical vegetation, temple ruins, pageants and festivals. However, the photographs by the sadly little-known Ethel Mairet (1872-1952) and her then husband Ananda Coomaraswamy such as “Craftsmen at work” (plate V) and “Manufacture of iron and steel” (plate LIII) published in the monumental study *Medieval Sinhalese Art* (1908) demonstrate a significant effort to be as close as possible to the original setting, because the focus here was more to document the artisans, their tools and artifacts the Coomaraswamys discovered in their voyages through villages around Kandy at the turn of the century. The photograph titled “Mat Weavers” (*Kinnarayo*) Plate IV of the Coomaraswamy collection (Coomaraswamy 1907: 615) seems to have been borrowed from the Skeen Collection (see image 14.)<sup>8</sup>

6 I borrow the word “Colonial Archive” from Anjali Arondekar’s anthropological research on law, literature and pornography from 1843 to 1920, which proposes a different reading practice of the Colonial Archive and its sexual implications.

7 Quanchi locates his study of post cards in the context of other research by John Mackenzie (1984), who suggested in a study of imperial propaganda in 1984 that images were a form of propaganda, a ‘conscious manipulation on the part of those who controlled the powerful religious, commercial, military and official agencies’. He also mentions Nicholas Thomas, who warned in 1993 that colonialism was imagined and energized through various mechanisms, and that colonialism should not only be seen through ideologies of racism and oppression. Quanchi also mentions of “James Ryan (who) later noted that the influence of photography had been overlooked in Orientalist Discourse, but that “photography – with its detail, ubiquity and currency across a range of institutional sites – played a significant role within the construction of the imaginative geography of empire” (Quanchi 2008: 4). Quanchi categorizes the post cards in four categories: 1. Actual people, 2. Places and objects, 3. Mythical/stereotype images which have been edited, cropped, staged or posed; 4. News photography recording unusual or newsworthy, current events.

8 Architect Ismeth Raheem at the 53rd Lecture “Ananda & Ethel Coomaraswamy and the making of ‘Medieval Sinhalese Art’ (1908)” delivered on Thursday 25 July 2013 pointed out that there is a large archive of photographs taken by Ethel Mairet-Coomaraswamy in foreign archives.



14. Mat Weavers (Kinnarayo)



15. Road scene near Kandy

In the quest of ‘authenticity’, when analyzing photographs of the colonial archive, we also need to distinguish between “studio settings” and “wayside settings” (see images 15 and 16). While this article may not permit a detailed analysis and categorization of the corpus of photographs available on print and electronic media, a short clarification on this dichotomy is necessary here: The “studio settings” capture those photographed at close quarters, with the ‘model’ often instructed to hold an alluring pose and gaze into the camera. The persons photographed in “wayside settings” are often captured at a distance and the ambience has an equal status as the photographed ‘natives’, quite similar to earlier drawings of exotic street scenes (see image 17).



16. Sinhala Women

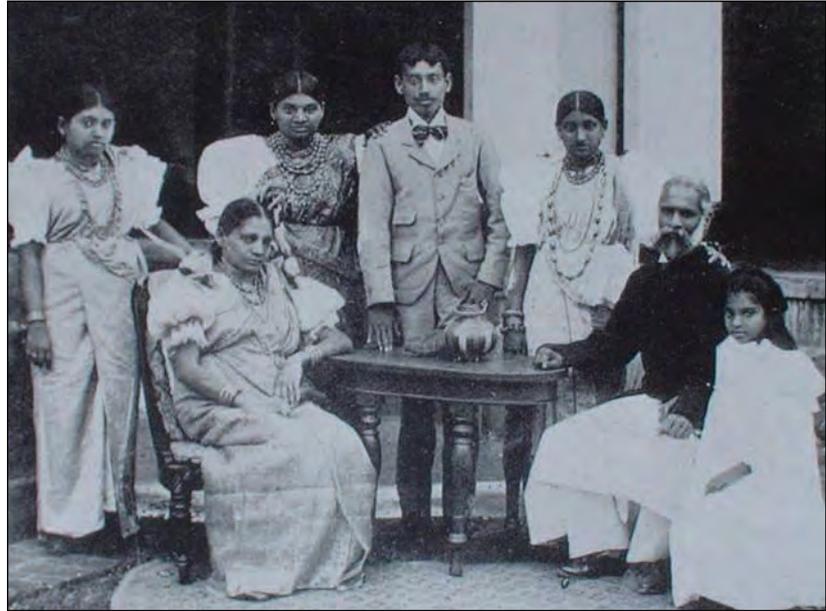


17. Street scene drawing

It may be tedious to run all the available photographic material documenting ethnicity, caste, profession and location through this very basic dichotomy and other overlapping categories. But it seems that in the “studio settings” the native Other is sometimes dressed up and arranged in a studio and made to look ‘natural’. In the very first photograph that I present here, one may notice the artificially falling branch of the coconut tree on the right side of the photo and the beautifully arranged coconuts that seem to have dropped at the feet of this arranged group of women (see image 16). In the next photograph two women may have been captured on the wayside, or made to pose in a natural setting (see image 18). The costume of the “wayside settings” to me, often seems to



18. Two women on the wayside



19. Family in Hybrid costume

represent greater ‘authenticity’, more specifically a closeness to a kind of ‘real’ situation, although in the early years of photography, the human subjects have been often composed into a photogenic group and instructed not to move and to stand still while the shutter of the Daguerreotype camera moved. An initial skepticism over the ‘authenticity’ of the costumes in “studio settings” arises due to the overt nudity in some photographs, while in some others the intended ‘modesty’ of women photographed, which I shall discuss later in this article.

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the westernized upper classes of Sri Lanka too began to have their family photographs taken. Most of them were reproduced in A. Wright’s *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon* (1907). Members of the family who were considered worthy of being photographed were dressed up in a manner that would demonstrate their social class. Automobiles, carpets and other valuables too were displayed in the photograph (see image 19) The poses of this class of elite Sri Lankans, who demonstrated traits of Europeanization in dress, mimicked the British family photograph of that time. The next group photograph shows a more complex setting from the working class plantation sector: The only adult male is seated in the middle wearing both upper and lower garments. He has taken off his coat, revealing the white under shirt or the *banian* (See image 20). He may be the father of the family posing in front of a “lattice house”, the kind living space that was built for plantation workers. His wife too wears an upper garment, a white jacket. The daughter closest to him wears an oversized long white frock. The two boys of school-going age wear a lower garment whereas the two youngest boys are nude. The girl far right is carrying a child. She too is wearing the same ill fitting upper garment. We shall notice these types of upper garment and the loose long white frock worn by girls in our observations.

In these years, some Sri Lankan entrepreneurs too had their businesses photographed. In these photographs the Sri Lankans pose with their own staff and labourers as portrayed in the image of women pounding coffee in the open air (see image 21). When comparing this sample with other photographs of the coffee plantation community of the hill country, we can assume that women of South Indian origin working in the coffee plantations do not wear a stitched upper garment. This can be very clearly seen in the next image, which is a “studio setting”, in which the woman is overloaded with jewelry for the photograph (see image 22).



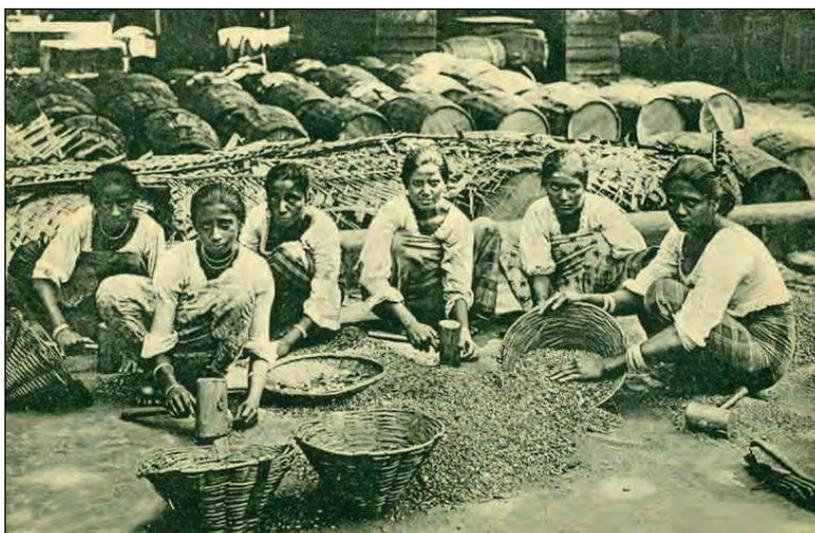
20. A native Family



21. Pounding coffee



22. Woman without an unstitched upper garment



23. Plumbego curing

As such, we may also have to observe as to what extent women who have recently joined the labour force to work for colonial or local masters were dressed up to look ‘modest’ in the southern and western areas when they were photographed while sorting graphite (plumbago), or peeling cinnamon, or on the other hand gendered to appear ‘exotic’ and ‘sensuous’ when they were photographed in the studio or at close distance (see images 23 and 24 ). In most of the “wayside” photographs available today, small boys are often seen nude or scantily dressed (see image 25). Seldom are little girls seen nude, but, as already noted, they are seen very often wearing the oversized white frock reaching well below the knee (see image 26 and 27).

Observing images of women made to pose for postcards and comparing them with photographs that show the costume of female stereotypes such as “Nonchi” and “Lenchina” from the southern *Kolam* Ritual, I notice that female characters generally wear a white jacket, with or without sleeves, a round or V-shaped neck, and a front opening or no front opening (see images 28). Here I do not rely solely on the colonial archive, but have used evidence from the Sri Lankan costume history as reflected in the figures of the *Kolam* ritual (see images 29 and 30) (Dissanayaka 1993).



24. Sinhala Woman



25. Native group



26. road-side-scene-natives



27. Wayside scene, hand coloured



28. Sinhalese Peasants



29. Costume of Nonchi



30. Nonchi from the Chitrasena Troup

These jackets are referred to as “*hättaya*” in Sinhalese since about the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Tamil term “*sattai*” used in many regions of south India seems to be older than the Sinhala term. “*Hättaya*” or “*sattai*” is, to my knowledge, not recorded in any Sinhala literature prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is therefore possible that this stitched upper garment was introduced from South India. Examples of jackets without sleeves, although rare, can also be seen in this Colonial Archive (see images 16

and 28). These jackets are, in general, loose, as if stitched on mass scale to fit any woman. They do not have buttons. Perhaps they were closed with safety pins commonly called *hätta katu* which can be translated as “jacket pins”. The white upper garment of the girl posing for the photograph is loose-fitting and is not closed in a symmetrical manner (see image 31). The ill-fitting white jacket for women and the oversized long frock for girls may point to some type of white garment stitched mass scale for women and girls in the Western and Southern regions.

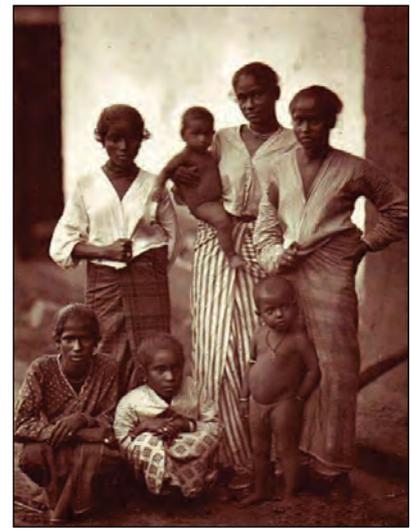
The women in the next image from another set of photographs wear similar upper garments but edged with lace (see image 32) The next photograph showing five women evokes further questions: Why do the two women on the sides hold their upper garment with the right hand (see image 33)? To me the woman in the middle carrying the baby seems to be most confident to face the camera and the girl crouching in the middle, the most uncomfortable. The looseness of the upper garment which seems to make the wearer appear somewhat uncomfortable, without the means to totally cover the chest due to the difficulty of fastening the jacket may be the reason for this discomfort. The skimpy white jacket worn by the female character Nonchi, the coquette wife of the drummer, is often pulled down by her in a similar manner. To accentuate her old age, costume tradition of the *Kolam* ritual insists on hanging two fruits visibly below the lower edge of her jacket<sup>9</sup>. Exactly when this ill-fitting white jacket was introduced to the Southern coastal province still remains unanswered.



31. Woman in white jacket



32. Three Sinhalese Woman - Skeen-1880



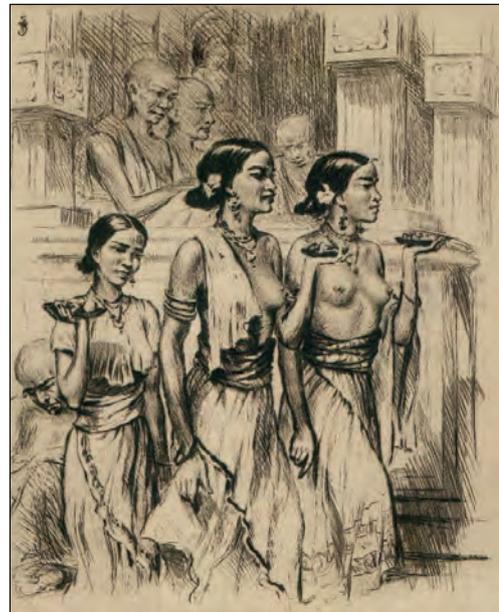
33. Women-children-1870

9 I am very thankful to the late maestro of the Kolam Ritual, Mr. Bandu Wijesooriya of Patabademulla, Ambangoda, who introduced me to the many unknown facets of the Kolam Masks and costume during my initial research in the years 1997-1999. I was fortunate to view many live performances of the *Bandu Wijesooriya Kalayathanaya* in that period, and such concerns like two *Vatakolu* fruits being used to denote a senior citizen's breasts were nagging questions from my early years as a researcher on costume. A video documentation of the entire Kolam Ritual, as performed in the Ambalangoda Tradition, is currently available. At the second edition of the Colombo Dance Platform 2012, the gender aspects of female stereotypes were demonstrated in the piece “The performing costume” which used material from the Kolam Ritual. See video clip by Sanjaya Senanayaka, titled “Colombo Dance Platform 2012 - The Performing Costume”, where the author and Nilan Maligaspe staged changing attitudes to female costume on stage. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3Z60rdUSU0>. Accessed on 4.3. 2012 at 12 noon. Also in “Sapta Naari”, directed by the author and choreographed by Nilan Maligaspe for the Arpeggio Creative Dance Academy, premiered on 28<sup>th</sup> may 2013 and later on 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2013 at Punchi Theatre in Sri Lanka, the entire panorama of female representation in traditional theatre from Sokari to Puppet Theatre was staged. See selections in: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4U-U8QMA9qU> accessed on 1<sup>st</sup> December 2013.

In Šimon's paintings and sketches only young girls wear a kind of improvised jacket when entering the Temple of the Tooth (see images 34 and 35). These loose jackets worn by women of lower social classes, at that time visible in public spaces, may have provoked Anagarika Dharmapala to prescribe a suitable attire for Buddhist women in the much cited article "What Sinhala Buddhist Women should know",<sup>10</sup> in which he exhorts women to refrain from exposing their midriff, abdomen, or breasts. According to Dharmapala, twelve or fourteen *riyan* long cloth is suitable for 'Arya women'. This paragraph opens with a citation from the *Sigalowada Sutra*, a well known discourse in the Pali canon, where the Buddha advises the husband to provide the wife with beautiful clothes. When reading the Sinhala newspaper in 1923 one would get the impression that the directives about covering "midriff, abdomen and breast" too are sacred words of the Buddha as Dharmapala places it just beneath the quote from the *Sigalowada Sutra*. However, Dharmapala's line of argumentation is haphazard. After describing the costume of Japanese women in two lines, he then digresses to talk about the use of furniture of other Asian countries and finally turns to a female costume, the "single cloth" (*Ekasataka*), which he names "types of Ohori" (*Ohori varga*), worn by all women of 'higher' birth (*kula srin*) in Bengal, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Kashmir and Gujarat. It is interesting that he does not use the word "saree" but the Sri Lankan variation *Ohoriya*.



34. On the steps of a Buddhist Temple 510



35. Two Women and young girl entering the Temple of the Tooth

"We can see that all upcountry women wear the Ohariya. In the low country wearing the Ohoriya has been forbidden in Dutch times. Since about 400 years the Sinhala women of the low country have got accustomed to bad habits of the Portuguese and the Dutch. The *Arya* tradition of 2000 years has deteriorated in the last 400 years in the low country. The Ohoriya is common to all up country women. Low country women should also get accustomed to this. (Dharmapala 1923: 85)" (translation by author).

We should now ask the question as to what extent did the Dutch intervene to prevent 'low country' women from being modest in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century? Dharmapala's allegations go back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, even encompassing the Portuguese era, where almost no visual evidence is available today of a *saree* or an *ohoriya*. In an earlier article he admonishes affluent women to donate the "twelve *riyan* long *Ohoriya*" to poor Sinhala women (Dharmapala 1923: 82). Maybe

10 The article written in Sinhala in the newspaper "Sinhala Baudhdhaya" (1923) titled "What Sinhala Buddhist Women should know", was republished in *Dharmapala Lipi*.

in the 1920 when he was lobbying for the *Ohoriya* women from poorer classes did not wear the *Ohoriya*, but a skirt and a blouse.

This brings up the task of clarifying the etymology of the words “*ohoriya*”/ “*osariya*” and “*hätte*”/ “*sätte*” commonly used even today to denote the most venerated costume of Sinhala identity. These words seem to be loanwords from south India. One may fall back on the popular and well known hypothesis that the fashion of wearing an “*ohoriya*” and “*sättaya*” arrived from South India with the Malabar princesses who were married to the last Sinhala princes of Kandy. It is generally believed that the fashions of the Malabar princesses were adopted by Sinhala women of the upper class by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with the end of the Sinhala lineage of kinship, and the advent of kings from South India ruling Kandy. The royal fashions may have been the privilege of *Radala* women of higher birth of the king’s court. Nevertheless, it must be recalled here that the majority of the women living in the hilly region did not wear, or were not permitted to wear, a stitched upper garment. The evidence will be discussed later in this paper.

At this point in the research, we may have to differentiate between life styles of “up country” (*uda-rata*) and “low country” (*pahata-rata*) Sinhalese. The dichotomy appears in Dharmapala’s instruction. This division of Sinhala people projected back to 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries has a political connotation. “Up country” or “*udarata*” with a loose political identity called “*Sinhale*” is upheld as having protected the true ‘Sinhala’ identity because the area was ruled by Sri Lankan kings till 1815, whereas the “low country” or “*pahata-rata*” was ruled by the Portuguese, Dutch and British since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It is strange that Anagarika Dharmapala’s “*ohoriya*” or “*osariya*” which, according to him, is worn by all Kandyan women, or “up country women” was not worn by the women in and around the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy when Šimon visited the temple in the 1920s, which was when Dharmapala was busy lobbying for the “up country” saree. The majority of Šimon’s women at the Temple of the Tooth do not even wear any kind of jacket. We could take the easier reading of Šimon’s paintings and say they were all *Rodiya* women. Then do the paintings and sketches by Šimon show an open day for *Rodiyas* in the *Dalada Maligawa*, because most women at the *Dalada Maligawa* do not wear an upper garment when Šimon happened to be there? A more nuanced reading will show that some older women carry a cloth in the hand or have wrapped another cloth around the waist. Have they taken off the cloth that may have covered the upper part of their body as a mark of respect to the Temple of the Tooth? In earlier times it was expected that men of lower castes or classes removed the shawl or towel off the shoulder as a mark of respect when they met persons of higher castes or classes in public spaces. Some women in Šimon’s “Kandyan Series” do wear an unstitched cloth diagonally across the chest. The young girls seem to wear an earlier form of upper garment, stitched or unstitched, which seem to be held together between the breasts (see images 34 and 35).

When unearthing more postcards from the Colonial Archive, I came across these images that carry the title “*Rodiya*”. The girl posing in front of the jar is at ease as she smiles into the camera lens. (see image 36). In the next photograph I present, two girls are standing looking away from the camera. Their upper garment is still visible around their waist, leads to an embarrassing question: Have they been ‘undressed’ to be made a *Rodiya* in this studio setting? (see image 37). We do notice a difference in the manner the two studio photographs have been composed and how the ‘*Rodiya* models’ have been captured for the post cards. But when we observe the elderly women in the next ‘*Rodiya*’ group photograph wearing a piece of cloth covering their breasts, our notions of the ‘semi-nude *Rodiya*’ will have to be reconsidered ( see image 38). It seems that all three older women have not been allowed to appear in the same manner without an upper garment by the photographer’s team, whereas the younger girls have obediently let their upper garments be



36. Rodiya Girl, Ceylon



37. Two Rodiya women



38. Rodiya women

pulled down. The ‘model’ from the previous picture is posing here once again. Are these women really *Rodiya*? Or has the process of gendering them made them appear *Rodiyas*?<sup>11</sup>

The next photograph showing a *Rodiya* woman wearing the upper garment may provide evidence that the women of the *Rodiya* caste did cover their breasts with another piece of cloth (see image 39)<sup>12</sup>. Reading this photograph more closely, one may question if the girl had been more dressed up because the upper garment has been well tucked in, not worn loosely as in the case of the elder women in the group photograph.

The reader may discover more and more ‘*Rodiya*’ photographs in commercial websites and in recent publications such as the Palinda Stephen de Silva collection. The ‘*Rodiya* models’ photographed seem to reveal similar tastes in beauty, stereotyping the *Rodiya* women to be sensual exotic creatures. On the other hand, the caste denotation of *Rodiya* seems to become a brand name under which the colonial industry may have marketed photographs of Sri Lankan women as an erotic commodity (see images 40 and 41). The colonial photography published in *19<sup>th</sup> Century Photographs of Ceylon* of Palinda Stephen de Silva collection shows the title “*Rodiya* Girls” denoting all the women without an upper garment photographed by W L H Skeen from 1860 to 1903 in Ceylon. These photographs are certainly studio settings. Other studio settings of “*Rodiya* women” reveal no upper garment at all, while not all women without upper garments bear the title “*Rodiya*”<sup>13</sup>. One may wonder if some male hand had removed the upper garment of these women to make their breasts more accessible to the Colonial Gaze<sup>14</sup>.

11 Richard Boyle reviewing *Images of British Ceylon: 19th Century Photography of Sri Lanka* by Ismeth Raheem and Percy Colin Thome for the Sunday Times on 30<sup>th</sup> April 2000 comments: “Looking through the photographs after reading these words, I could not help but seek examples to illustrate this intriguing school of thought. So it is that I suppose the photographer(s) of Charles Scowen & Co. who took the pictures titled ‘Study of a Girl with a Vase’ and ‘Nude Study’ (both 1880s) could not have foreseen that, a century later, they would come to epitomize the exploitation of the indigenous female in Ceylon - especially Rodi women - in order to provide Victorian men with pictures of exotic, bare-breasted natives. (Boyle 2000 in <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/000430/plus7.html> . Accessed on 24.11. 2012 at 12.44 hrs.

12 Title: Rhodiya woman, Ceylon. Publisher: “SKEEN-PHOTO” Printed Black, White and Red postcard with UNION POSTALE UNIVERSELLE/CEYLON (CEYLAN.) POSTCARD divided back in red Code: PC-CEYLON-0097.

13 I refer to the collection published as “*Images of Ceylon. 1850-1920. Nineteenth century photography of Ceylon. The Palinda Stephen de Silva Collection*”

14 For further information on the Colonial Gaze, please refer the following sites: “The colonial gaze by Urbanora in Catalogues and databases, Non-fiction, Online videos, Resources Tags: Silent films 2 Comments”. In <http://thebioscope.net/2010/11/11/the-colonial-gaze/>



39. Rodiya Woman



40. Rodiya or Veddha



41. A Rodiya Women

As Paul S. Levine (2008 and 2002) points out, the nineteenth century Victorian attitudes towards the unclothed body have been ambivalent. He argues that the “vexed attitudes” towards nudity and nakedness cannot be understood without what he calls the “experience of the empire”. The colonizers categorized the “natives” whom the empire colonized from their outward appearance, i.e. physique, manners and dress, assigning those who were seen “clothed” as belonging to the upper strata of society. Although nudity in the statues of the Greeks and Romans was deeply appreciated and copied in later centuries even in “civilized” Europe, the “partially clothed” non-Europeans had been regarded as “uncivilized”. Such derogatory statements can be read in the writings on the colonized Africa, India and Sri Lanka too. On the other hand, the fascination for the “Noble Savage” seen in the literature of post 18th-century “sentimentalism” Romanticism elevated the “colonized” to a higher level, because of their closeness to nature, or “God’s Creation”, like Adam and Eve. In this context, clothing was seen as a marker of the corrupting influences of civilization. In the Indian context, “Paria women” dressed only in a loin cloth were not seen as “immoral” or “uncivilized” (De Zoysa p. 116 1996). The two photographs of “Rodiya Women” posing in Ceylonese studios with pots and baskets that I present here have been gendered to satisfy the Colonial Gaze, just as the colonized women of Africa too have been instructed to pose and stand still as the camera clicked (see images 42-43).

In another “arranged photograph”, we have Veddahs posing in a garden. In this image, the three women do not seem to wear any upper garments. The young woman in the middle of the photo seems to be covering her breasts, wearing the lower garment high enough to cover her breasts. If the men with bows and arrows did not flank the women, and we had just the three women photographed, and there was no title, then would the three women still be identified as “Rodiya”? Is the woman in the photograph of a “studio setting” holding a beautiful pot then a “Rodiya” or “Veddah”? The Colonial



42. Racist Ragazza



43. Racist Ragazza

Archive brings its own problems: It seems that women were gendered in many ways, made to pose with an upper garment and without. In some cases the label “Rodiya” may have been used to

demonstrate that the postcard was documenting a pseudo authentic class/caste identity and to gloss over the pornographic intentions.

Martin Wickramasinghe in his observations in *Dress and Ornament in Ancient Ceylon* first published in Sinhala in 1935, presents many examples from the literature of the Kotte Period from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries to demonstrate that women of Sri Lanka did not cover the upper part of the body before the advent of the Europeans. Drawing information from independent literary sources, historian M B Ariyapala in 1968 too has come to a similar conclusion in his study *Society in Medieval Ceylon*. The poetry and the prose from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century was overloaded with the erotic sentiment *Srngara Rasa*, using many metaphors like swan breasts (*pinapayodhara*) to describe the beauty of the female breasts. The most striking example is from the *Yashodarawata*, written in late 18<sup>th</sup> century, which describes Prince Siddhartha leaving the palace on the Great Renunciation (*Mahabhinishkramanaya*) faltering as he sees the “golden breasts” of his wife Yashodara feeding the new born son. Here Yashodara’s breasts are referred as *Rankumbu* or “golden pots” (Gamlath 1995:16).

Siri Tilakasiri in his analysis of the *Sandesha* poems (*Sandesha kavya*) written from about the 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century shows that “women of the cities” (*Puraganan*), “women of the villages” (*Gamiliyan*), and “women tending cattle” (*Gopaluliyian*), all wear very fine cloth below the waists. The more affluent the women, the more transparent seems to be the fine and soft cloth. In Moratuwa the “*Tisara*” observes some *Gopaluliyian* wearing a lower garment above the knee and in Uruwela he observes women crossing a stream holding hands with their male partners, where he is enraptured by the female breasts. If the women were “modestly dressed” in verses 89 and 133 of the *Thisara Sandeshaya*, their breasts would not be visible through the very fine cloth that covers their upper body (Tilakasiri 2008: 283). Tilakasiri also mentions that both men and women wear an *Uturusaluwa*, a cloth that is draped over their shoulders. On greeting somebody of higher social standing, the *Uturusaluwa*, is made “*ekamsaka*”, covering only one shoulder, as a mark of respect to a person encountered. He also brings in evidence that at times the *Uturusaluwa* could also be wrapped around the waist (ibid. 284). This manner of showing respect can clearly be seen in the images of the women entering the Temple of the Holy Tooth by Šimon early last century. I recently discovered this practice in a temple mural in the Sailabimbaramaya in Dodanduwa (see images 44 and 45). The man on seeing the monks approaching with their begging bowls, shifts his upper garment, the *Uturusaluwa*, in order to worship the monks. The woman does not cover her breast. Tilakasiri also notes that a *Thanapataya* (cloth tied around the breast) was worn by women in the cities. In the *Gira Sandeshaya* (V 24) this garment is referred to as “*Piyayurupata*” (Rathnapala



44. Pindapatha from Sailabimbaramaya, Dodanduwa - early 19<sup>th</sup> Century



45. Pindapatha detail from Sailabimba - early 19<sup>th</sup> Century

2005: 61). The bird *Salalihiniya* notices even a clasp at the back of this upper garment of a woman in Jayawardanapura. In general, affluent women in the cities of Jaffna and Jayawardanapura seem to wear “cloth from Benares” (*Kasisalu*) or silk (*Patasalu*) bought at market places (ibid. 281).

The poets never miss the chance to describe women trained to sing and dance in temples of gods, in royal palaces or in specially constructed dance halls. Even the movements of the shaking breasts are described then. The *perahera* scenes in the temples of the Southern province show women dancing with no upper garment. That these women felt ashamed (*lajja*) or were anxious about the public opinion of their modesty (*bhaya*), when performing for the gods as *devadasis*, or when playing in the parks or in water, has yet to be discovered in the Sinhala poetry of pre-colonial times. The *Girava* bird mentions that women did not bother to fasten their lower garment which had got loose, when they were running in an excited mood (Rathnapala 2005 :124). Puritans may argue that these late medieval descriptions of women were just repetitions of “topoi from classical Indian literature”. Descriptions of women’s costume, as Tilakasiri demonstrates, are nuanced, based on their social class and functions in each society. If society readily accepts descriptions of places and events in the *Sandesha* epics, why should they exclude the comments on the costumes of women then? Such statements that the *Thisara* bird when flying over Payagala saw women who were slightly intoxicated resting under coconut trees, cannot be just a fantasy of the poet-monk living in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

A curious but very important excerpt may point to some deviations. A 15<sup>th</sup> century Sinhala poet and erudite monk writes:

“Do not omit to tell your husband, and throw your cloth over your shoulder when you set foot outside your dwelling place: and go without hurried movements”

“Do not sit down in any place in company with another man (except he be old, or a doctor or a monk) and chatter of things connected to love”

“Do not uncover your navel but let your garment hang down to the ankle. Do not bare the curve of your breasts, and refrain from laughing to show off your teeth” (ASL 1970: 280)

This is the advice given to a daughter at her wedding by her father, as he gives his young and beautiful daughter in marriage to an old Brahmin. As would be expected, this young woman is not faithful to her old husband in the course of the story. This poem *Kavyashekaraya* (1449) is regarded a juvenile work of the most erudite monk Ven. Thotagamuwe Sri Rahula who lived in the west coast in the 15<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of King Parakamabahu VI. This monk has also left us with some of the most descriptive poetry like the *Selalihini Sandesaya*, which I have quoted above.

Although Ven. Rahula composed many other poems in which he praises the beauty of contemporary women, these verses seem to have had an impact on the moralists in later colonial times and sung at wedding ceremonies. Martin Wickramasinghe in his famous novel *Gamperaliya* (1944) parodies a wedding scene of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that mimicked the the West and at the same time invented new ‘local’ traditions:

“Laisa’s bridal costume was a shabby white satin gown, yellowed gloves and a fan. She walked with some difficulty because the shoes she wore were too small for her, and she had only succeeded in thrusting her feet into them with a great deal of determination and effort [...]. In keeping with the English dress worn by the bride, the bridegroom wore a tweed cloth, a black coat, and a battered hat. After the Registrar had recorded the marriage and written out the marriage certificate, both parties set out for the home of the bride groom. They alighted from their carriage to the sound

of fire-crackers lit in welcome. The bridegroom and bride who had reached the verandah entered with slow and measured steps as four little girls sang the customary blessing in clear sweet voices. As the song ended the bride groom and bride neared a door of the room assigned to them, and an elderly man began to invoke blessings and prosperity on the couple. This man, celebrated as a pundit throughout the village, chanted the auspicious words in an erudite style and wound up by uttering the word of blessing 'pura' with a flourish" (De Silva and Wickramasinghe 2009: 198). In the Sinhala original one reads of "*jaya magul gi*" sung by the girls and "*hallal sahalla*" recited by the village pundit (Wickramasinghe 1944: 106).

In the course of other ceremonies pundit continues his function as the master of ceremonies:

"A man and wife, he said, were like two people who bear a heavy load together, if either does not shoulder the weight, the consequences are disastrous to both. He also quoted from Sri Rahula's Kavyasekara and adjured the bride to obey those injunctions to the letter. As the pundit recited the verse prohibiting the wife from conversing with other males save aged men, Baladasa shot a covert glance at the bride. He wondered, whether the precept 'if you do smile, do not display your teeth' would not give Laisa secret amusement. The smile that came to the corner of her lips often parted and widened them involuntarily, displaying teeth like white pearls: and Baladasa knew - as the learned gentleman did not - that the greatest efforts on her part would not help Laisa to avoid what naturally came to her" (De Silva and Wickramasinghe 2009: 198)

Although the female protagonist Nanda in *Gamperaliya* marries twice, Wickramasinghe does not go into such vivid descriptions of these two weddings. The above cited wedding of Laisa stands out as a parody of a wedding ceremony which followed colonial bridal fashions, but was anxious to follow customs created by the Sinhala Buddhist society, such as reciting *Jaya magul gi* and excerpts from *Kavyashekaraya*. Although this extremely popular novel relating the story of the village in turmoil under British influence was published in 1945, Wickramasinghe in his introduction informs the reader that he has located this novel in about 1904 (Wickramasinghe 1944: 3).

The two words *lajja* and *bhaya* as values to be cherished by Sinhala women makes its appearance in Piyadasa Sirisena's first novel *Dingiri Mänika* (1918). Piyadasa Sirisena, often hailed as the "Father of the Sinhala novel", makes the following statement through his protagonist Dingiri Mänika: "*Lajja* and *bhaya* are the Great Aryan ornaments (*Maha Aryabharanaya*) of "moral" (*Silachara*) women. To wear a cloth extending from the navel (*nabhiya*) to ankle (*bola*), to wear a jacket (*sättaya*) that will cover the upper body completely, and to cover the entire body most safely (*surakshita lesa*) would be most befitting. To Dingiri Mänika, who was created as a role model for female readers, the *osariya* is most suitable for "women of noble birth" (*kula striya*) and not the "transparent gown and short jacket" "*baru dalak väni araksha rahita sayat hättayath*" and wearing a short jacket (*kota hättaya*) "exposing two thirds of their body" (Sirisena 1918: 60, translated by the author).

The novel was a bestseller which was later made into an even more popular film. In the popular novels, plays and poems and newspaper articles written by such men, the 6-7 meter long *Osariya* they feel would be the most befitting dress for the Sinhala women with "*lajja*" and "*bhaya*", whom they also call "*Arya Sinhala Women*". As Neloufer de Mel points out, "Western attire provided the respectability and status that indigenous dress could not: the nationalists' insistence of the sari - the *osariya*, Kandyan, or Indian - for their Arya Sinhala women was then an instrument of resistance to colonial impositions on dress and habit. The sari became a signifier both of a subversion and conservatism" (De Mel 2001: 84).

Neloufer De Mel through her readings of Anagarika Dharmapala's pamphlet "*Gihi Vinaya*" (1898) comments: "[... ] Dharmapala has no less than 30 rules on how women should wear saris and dress modestly, keep their households, personal belongings and bodies clean" etc. De Mel continues: "as Gombrich and Obeyesekere note, what Dharmapala was formulating here were new values and modalities and behavior for an emerging Sinhala elite which drew on western bourgeoisie notions of property" (De Mel 2001:105-106). By the time of its 18<sup>th</sup> edition in 1958, about 50,000 copies of *Gihi Vinaya* were sold. Even today, some aspects of "codes of respectability" dictated to Buddhist women seem to have been appropriated from the formative years of building a national identity based on Protestant Christian moral values. The word "modesty in dress" seems to be the moralist's buzz word. The view that Nanda Pethiyagoda and many others today uphold, that women's attire "down the ages was anything but immodest", seems to me a projection of missionary prudery appropriated by Anagarika Dharmapala in his moralizing pamphlets and later by Piyadasa Sirisena in his moralizing novels.

In her article on how gendered forms of morality and constraints were imposed on Sinhala society, Malathi de Alwis uses comments made by Gananath Obeyesekere in 1984: "Gananath Obeyesekere in his pioneering formulation of the Sinhala practice of *lajja-bhaya*, glossed as shame and fear, notes that the Sinhala females as well as males are socialized into practices in very early childhood. He goes onto observe however, that "in spite of the cultural view that females should be especially *lajja-bhaya*, it is the male child who becomes sensitive to the second part of the verbal set, *bhaya*, or 'fear of ridicule', "as it is men who "have public roles and hence must be more sensitive to the reactions of others" (De Alwis 1997: 105). Obeyesekere's division of the compound "*lajja-bhaya*" to females and "*bhaya*" to males, to me does not seem to be based on lexicographic evidence. As we shall see in the concluding passage of this observation of the compound "*lajja-bhaya*", only the word "*lajja*" emerges in the 13<sup>th</sup> century *Saddharmaalamkaraya*, referring to an uneasy state of mind, like "shame".

In the prose of Sinhala literature one will very seldom discover the compound *lajja-bhaya* used to control the behaviour of women. I cite a few isolated examples here: In the 13<sup>th</sup> century *Saddharma Ratnavaliya* one reads of the merchant Soreyya who, when he was transformed into a woman, because he wished to be the wife of a good looking Arhat monk, fled from the vehicle in the state of *lajja* ("*U lajjava vahanayen basa pala giyoya*") (Gnanawimala 1961: 340). Patachara in her distraught state of mind ran naked, without the "*hiri otap* garments"<sup>4</sup> (*hiri optap salu noladin*) and later on meeting the Buddha regains her "*hiri-otap*" (ibid. 637). The women of Vishaka's retinue, who accompanied her when she went to visit the Buddha intoxicated after drinking toddy, behaved as if possessed by a demon without *lajja bhaya*, do denote a state of "shame" (ibid. 730). All instances denote an extraordinary state: A sex change, distraught state of mind and intoxication due to excessive consumption of alcohol. An exception however is unavoidable: The Queen Rohini, in the *Rohini bisovun ge vastuva* does not leave her inner chamber to greet a visiting monk because she was in a state of "*lajja*" (*Lajjaven no-avoya*). The reason for not greeting the monk is that her upper body was covered with a skin disease (*lajja vana taram kustha rogayek siyal sirura vasa ativiya*) (ibid. 873). She however obeys the request of the monk and comes out. The author of the *Saddharma Ratnavaliya* does not state what she was wearing when she came out. But the original Pali source, the 5<sup>th</sup> century *Dhammapadattakatha* narrates that she puts on the silk upper garment that covers her infected body to appear in front of the monk (*patta kanchuka patimunchitva agatam*). Ariyapala too cites the original Pali source (Ariyapala 1956: 320). The *Dampiya Atuwa Gatapadaya*, which is the commentary to the Pali work, says that Rohini, out of respect for the monk, removed the jacket she had worn to conceal her skin disease (ibid.). When showing respect, we see in the Pali-Buddhist literature, even women were expected not to wear an upper garment.

None other than Martin Wickramasinghe points out the prudery of the monk, who, translating the *Dampiya Atuwa Gatapadaya* into the *Saddharma Ratnavaliya*, left out the passage of the pious lady appearing in front of the monk without an upper garment (Wickramasinghe 1935: 40). Judging by the cited examples, the “modest” women as imagined by the moralists of today do not seem to have their roots in the either in the Pali-Theravada tradition, or in Sinhala literature. The exposure of the female body was neither seen as sinful nor evokes *lajja* for the woman. Based on the evidence in the dictionaries compiled by missionaries, ‘modesty in dress’ to me is a burden from Protestant missionaries, happily taken over by the vanguards of the Nationalist Movement. As in the Judeo-Islamic tradition, it is only the ‘modesty’ of the female that the Buddhists today are concerned with. Visual evidence from Buddhist temples of the pre-colonial and colonial era too, as we shall see, indicates that males and females did not cover their upper body when paying their respects to the clergy.

Costumes have been a key factor in identifying ethnicities and nationalities in most travelogues. Robert Knox’s observations in the Kandyan Region, published in 1681, reveal that costumes and caste are linked. In his description of how the people of the island were dressed in 17<sup>th</sup> century, he first gives the persons observed a caste identity based on their occupation and function within the feudal Kandyan society. Knox first differentiates between *Hondrews*, referring to the members of the *Goyigama* caste, (the majority belonging to the rice cultivator caste) who were held in high esteem and “other castes”. Then he differentiates between two types of costume, rather disjointedly. Referring to women of the *Goyigama* caste, he comments that their costume comprised of: “[...] one end of which the cloth the women fling over their shoulder, and with the other end, carelessly cover their breasts, whereas other sort of women (sic) must go naked from the waist upwards, and their cloaths not hang down much below their knees: Except it be for cold: for then either women or men may throw and their cloaths over their backs. But then they do excuse it to the *Hondurews*” (Knox 1681 Vol II: 201). Knox’ statement that “the other sort of women must go naked, from waist upwards [...]” may be valid for the Up Country provinces in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In a later passage he describes these “other sorts” as “Goldsmiths, Blacksmiths, Carpenters and Painters etc.” (ibid 202-210). Judging by Knox’s descriptions of the occupations of the many non-*Goyigama* castes, one may assume that the majority of Up Country women belong to the category of “other sort of women”.

The cloth “carelessly covering the breasts” can be observed in the in Šimon’s Kandyan Series as well. Joseph Eudelin de Joinville writing to Asiatic Researchers in 1801 comments: “Those of inferior ranks to the first class of courtiers only wear the lower parts of dress. It is strictly forbidden for them to cover the upper parts of the body” and claims that “women of the lower orders wear a petticoat of white cloth, which passing between their legs, is thrown over the right shoulder and is fastened to the ligature about the waist. It has a pretty effect” (De Joinville 1801: 429). This may refer to a *Dhoti* type of draping seen in the photographs documenting women sorting and pounding coffee. In the travelogues of the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century, there seem to be no evidence of a stitched upper garment used to cover the breasts for all females of the island.

This information of an unstitched cloth covering the upper body of women of higher social standing / caste is confirmed by John Davy in 1821. “The material of the women’s dress is very similar; they leave the head uncovered, and wear a long cloth, of a single breath, called *hala*, wrapped round their loins, and thrown over their left shoulder. On occasions of ceremony, when full dressed, the men cover the body with a short jacket; and those who have the privilege, lay aside the handkerchief for a cap and decorate themselves with gold chains and girdles. The women when full dressed, use a jacket, with a kind of ruff, hanging from the neck over the shoulders (Davy 182:

114). Davy also does not fail to mention of the practice of showing respect when entering a temple in a footnote: “[...] they invariably bare their shoulders, when they enter a temple: conceiving that the offender, who should do otherwise, would, in another life, draw on himself the punishment of boils and cutaneous diseases” (ibid.).

Coppelstone in 1892 notes an event in a Buddhist temple which he found disturbing: “In a recent instance a poor woman had her jacket torn off from her shoulders by a lay authority during the very reading of a *bana*, not because she was intruding, but because being of a low caste, she presumed to wear any such covering in the presence of high caste people” (Coppelstone 1892: 258-259). This may also be a reason why the women entering the Temple of the Tooth took off their upper garments.

Taking the paintings of Šimon as a starting point, we can see that women of ‘lower social status’ may have not worn an upper garment. Some may have worn a single cloth wrapped around the waist and body. Dharmapala’s statement in the article “What Sinhala Buddhist Women should know” cited above, which claims that all Sri Lankan women wore the *Ohariya* before the advent of the Portuguese and the Dutch, needs to be revisited with more historical facts. Those who continue to make anachronistic statements about how females should be dressed when entering spaces sacred to the Buddhists and who set up security systems that do not even permit a woman dressed in a sari to enter highest sites of veneration because a jacket does not have sleeves, need to consult the wealth of visual information in the murals behind the doors of Buddhist temples.

Since Auguste Racinet’s monumental work “*Le Costume Historique*” published in 1880, costume historians follow the practice of using visual evidence as seen in Egyptian pyramids, Assyrian, Persian, Greek, Roman and Indian temples, mediaeval European, Arabic, Turkish and Mogul miniatures, illustrations in travel journals and reports, Easel Paintings since the early Renaissance, photography and movies to construct the costume history of each country. The set of coloured drawings by François Baltasar Solvyns (1760-1824), “The Costume of Hindostan” (1799), may be the first time costumes were seen as a reflection of class, caste and social identity. This was demonstrated through very detailed illustrations, published in colour<sup>15</sup>.

A set of ten drawings by J. L. Kalenberg Van Dort titled “*Lankave Svadeshikayange Andum*” 1861 in the National Museum Library seem to be one of the earliest attempts to document costume. In 1876 Auguste Racinet too published two full folios of “Sinhalese” in *The Complete Costume History* but he is unable to make any fine differentiations based on ethnicity, religion or caste (Racinet 1880: 148,149).

Other than the 5<sup>th</sup> century Sigiriya frescos, there is almost no material to study the evolution of the female costume from the Anuradhapura to post-Polonnaruwa mural paintings, apart from Malathi de Alwis’ 1996 article that discusses notions of female sexuality within the framework of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism with visual evidence from these frescos. Although the Sri Lankan student of costume history has many Buddhist mural paintings for research, there has been very

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15 “The Flemish artist François Balthazar Solvyns once wrote that he drew only what he personally saw, never reproducing others’ prints, and that this first hand observation was fundamental to his endeavours. Solvyns’s quest for varied subject matter brought him to Calcutta in 1791, where for nearly 13 years he focused on documenting the dress, manner and physique, according to caste, of Bengali commoners [...] However, Solvyns’ work took a slightly different turn from the touristic mode of the Daniells. His ambitious anthology, *A Collection of Two Hundred and Fifty Coloured Etchings: Descriptive of the Manners, Customs and Dresses of the Hindoos* was the result of five years of a detailed, anthropological study of the Hindu caste order in Calcutta. <http://www.timeoutdelhi.net/around-town/features/character-portrayal>. Accessed on 1st December 2013 at 11hrs.

little attempt to view the female costume as a cultural product that reflects changing notions, attitudes and values<sup>16</sup>.

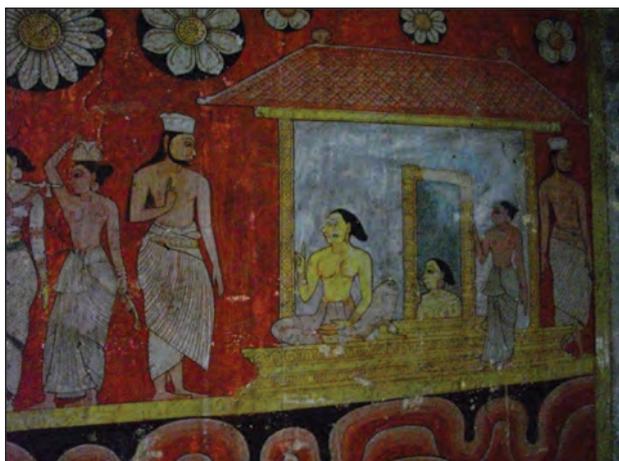
The costumes of the “apsaras”, “devatas” and “vidhyadharas” seen in the Tivanka Image House (12<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> century) in Polonnaruwa show very little evolution. The panels of the northern wall and the vestibule showing ‘Birth Stories of the Buddha’ (*Jatakas*) as seen in the line drawings by P. G Perera do not reveal any female upper garment (Bandaranayake 1986; 82-83). The ivory caskets of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Kotte Period may point to some changes of a female upper garment worn by the royalty. *Das Singhalesisches Elfenbein-Kaestchen* (the Sinhalese Ivory Casket) in the *Schatzkammer der Residenz* also called the “Coronation Casket” that can be seen in the Royal Treasury in Munich dated 1540-42, does differentiate Europeans and Sri Lankans through costume, but due to the heavy stylization, one cannot draw conclusions on the female dancing figures on the lid of the casket (Novos Mondos 2007: 150). The many ivory caskets presented at the Lanka Decorative Arts 4<sup>th</sup> Conference which was held from 26-28 November, 2013 show a variety of themes, motives and even styles seen on these caskets now in Lisbon, Amsterdam, Oxford, Munich and Peradeniya and some private collections. Until such time, the provenance and the artistic tradition of the caskets and also where the ivory engravers actually worked are established, one cannot use the visual material as evidence in this research. Here we may discover some of the earliest evidence for the stitched upper garments and the style of wearing a shawl covering the back and shoulders, which is also seen in the female dancing figures of the ivory combs of the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Bandaranayake comments on the styles of this 16-17<sup>th</sup> century fragments of paintings leading to the analysis of the ivory carvings: “More detailed analysis and argument than have so far been offered is necessary to substantiate these views, but the general drift of their proposals (referring to Maranzi and Deraniyagala) concerning the stylistic developments of the pre-1750 period is significant (Bandaranayake 1986:111). Temples built after the Revival Movement by the Kandyan king Kirthi Sri Rajasimha (1747- 1782) reveal a rich collection of visual evidence to reconstruct the evolution of the female costume.

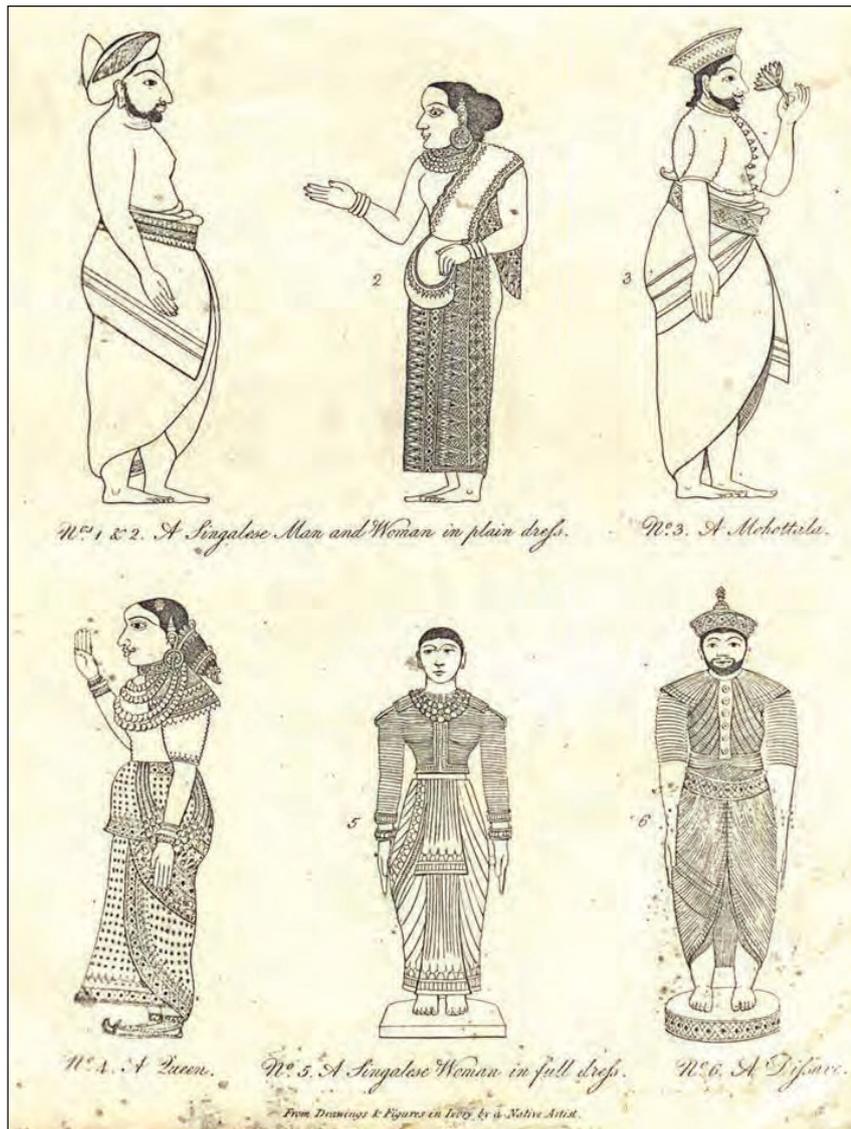
When one observes the temple murals of Mādawala Viharaya in the Kandyan region from about 1755, one notices that females of “higher social status” did not wear an upper garment when in private spaces (see image 46) It is only in public spaces that they are seen wearing an upper garment. In a scene from the *Uraga Jatakaya*, the servant does not wear an upper garment at all, both in private and public spaces (see image 47). In this same temple, one observes that both men and women did wear the same upper garment - a “*sāttaya*” with the frill called “*manthaya*” (see images 48 and 49), which can also be noticed in other temples of the Kandy region such as Suriyagoda, Gangaramaya, Degaldoruwa and Dambulla from the Kandyan Region” (see image 50). This “*manthaya*” of soft white cloth was detachable and can be seen as an accessory to the male upper garment, according to evidence in the Kandy museum.

These images match Davy’s description cited above: “The material of the women’s dress is similar to that of the man, to which he refers as “a long cloth of two breaths” [...] “they leave the head uncovered, and wear a long cloth of a single breath called the *hala* wrapped round their loins

16 Art historians such as D. B. Dhanapala (1957), Nandadeva Wijesekara (1959 and 1962) Siri Gunasingha (1980), Senake Bandaranayake (1986), Marie Gatellier (1991), Gamini Jayasinghe (2003, 2006, 2011) as well as Archeological Survey Series by Chutiwongs, Prematilleke and Silva (1990) have contributed to the understanding of temple murals of Sri Lanka. L. T. P. Manjusri (1977) in his “Design Elements from Sri Lankan Temple Paintings” has done some ground work into viewing costumes and accessories of males and females in mural paintings. The analysis of murals in the Southern Region by Ven. Unuwaturabubule Mahinda (2007) discusses costume as a cultural product of the colonial period, for the first time.

46. Uraga Jatakaya, Madawela Viharaya - mid 18<sup>th</sup> Century47. Uraga Jatakaya Madawela Viharaya - mid 18<sup>th</sup> Century48. Mother of King Vessantara, Madawela Viharaya - mid 18<sup>th</sup> Century49. Patron of Medewela Viharaya - mid 18<sup>th</sup> Century50. From Gangaramaya, Kandy - mid 18<sup>th</sup> Century

and thrown over the left shoulder. [...] The women when fully dressed wear a jacket with a kind of ruff hanging from the neck over the shoulder” (Davy 1821 p. 114). What Davy meant by “fully dressed” may be interpreted as wearing an upper and a lower garment. The jacket with the ruff may have been reserved for women of higher class. Davy presents sketches of male and female upper class dresses in Kandy in adjacent page (see image 51). Jackets seem to be worn here according to the rank as dictated by the Kandyan court. Even as late as 1821 no *ohoriya* or *sari* is mentioned in any text from the Kandyan Region.



51. Davies Sketches

*Hala*, the name used by Davy, denotes the *selaya* or *helaya*, a white muslin-like soft cloth worn by men and women to cover the lower part of the body. It is also often mentioned in Sinhala folk poetry. We may also note that, both men and women of higher *radala* status did wear the same upper and lower costume. It was the men who had loose hair, whereas the women tied their hair in a loose knot or a *kondaya*. Also wearing a hat was a privilege of the males, whereas women may have covered their heads depending on climatic conditions.

The setting of about a half a century later seen in the murals of the early British colonial period from about mid 19<sup>th</sup> century from the low country or *pahata-rata* is interesting. The murals of the maritime regions of Kathaluwa, Mulkirigala, Kotte and Kelaniya show that the women covered their head and shoulders with an uncut piece of cloth while the men wore an upper garment with a collar and sleeves. Only in a few isolated scenes in the Purvaramaya in Kathaluwa and Ranvälla Temple in Ginivälla close to Galle from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century show women wearing the white jacket with long sleeves called the *Kabaakuruttuwa*<sup>17</sup>.

17 For details please refer my article "Covering the Female Body: Transition seen in Buddhist murals from 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century" published in the website of the National Heritage Trust. The text was read at the monthly lecture no. 38 on the 29<sup>th</sup> March 2012 at the HNB Auditorium Colombo 10, Sri Lanka and published in. "Thuppahi's Blog". [Thuppahi.wordpress.com/2013/08/22/covering-the-female-body-transition-seen-in-buddhist-murals-from-the-18th-to-20th-centuries/](http://Thuppahi.wordpress.com/2013/08/22/covering-the-female-body-transition-seen-in-buddhist-murals-from-the-18th-to-20th-centuries/) Accessed: 24<sup>th</sup> November 2013 at 1.30 hrs.

Nira Wickramasinghe in her study “Dressing the Colonized Body” comments:

“The Movements, which invented a national dress for men, looked back to the past to suggest a suitable dress for the women. Little was known about the clothes worn in pre-colonial times. It is generally known that in medieval times women’s dress was a cloth wrapped around the hip leaving the body bare from waist upwards. By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries an upper garment was worn, when going out” (Wickramasinghe 2003: 15).

Šimon provides visual evidence to demonstrate that the ‘older fashion’ Wickramasinghe refers to was maintained as late as even the 1920s in the Up Country.

Wickramasinghe continues:

“The costume of the Sinhalese women before the arrival of the Portuguese was abandoned in the low country as a result of the widespread adoption of Christianity and the free social intercourse that existed between the Portuguese and the Sinhalese of the upper classes. The great majority of women on the coastal belt took to the Portuguese long sleeve jacket rounded at the back and in front with a V neck line. This style of the jacket was called the *kabakurutuwa* and was worn by women of the *Karava* caste (an intermediary caste traditionally associated with fishing). Areas where there was most contact between natives and newcomers from Europe were in the harbors and military centers” (ibid. 15).

She however does not elaborate what the “costume of the Sinhalese women before the arrival of the Portuguese” could be. From the visual evidence provided earlier, we may assume that women did not wear any upper garment in order to appear “modest” for the prudish male gaze. They had a choice of draping a second piece of cloth to cover the back and shoulders.

We may now ask, what is the status of the white upper garment or jacket in the context of southern coastal costume of the mid 19th century? In Kathaluwa and Ranvālla, two temples close to the Galle harbour, where trade activity at the time was centered, they denote a lower social status.

In the Kathaluwa Temple we see three narratives where the woman is wearing a white Jacket. The first is in the scene where a woman is seated talking to her husband in a bed room (see image 52). Later when she is serving the *dana* to Buddhist monks she is dressed only in a lower garment and shawl (see images 53 and 54). The second figure from another narrative in Kathaluwa wearing the white upper garment is a woman who seems to be measuring the height of the wife of the merchant *Mahadhana Sitano*, or the Merchant of Great Wealth (see image 55). None of the females of higher birth are wearing European clothing or the white upper garment in the narrative



52. Scene leading to the Dana. Kathaluwa - early 19<sup>th</sup> Century



53. Serving Dana, Kathaluwa - early 19<sup>th</sup> Century

of *Mahadhana Sitano* who lives in utmost luxury and comfort (Bandaranayake 1986: 213). The third figure is Patacara known from the narrative of the 14th century “*Saddharma Ratnavaliya*” (Bandaranayake 1986: 208 and 209). In the first scene, she is seen on the left hand side residing with her rich parents in the palace, very much dressed in the standard cloth and shawl (see image 56). The male servant she falls in love with is seen far left, dressed only in a loin cloth. When Patacara elopes with her lover, she wears the white jacket and a simple white cloth (see image 57). The narrator describes how she appeared at the rendezvous: “On the second day the daughter of the merchant, just as she had unclean ambitions, dressed in unclean cloths found somewhere, loosening her hair, having smeared dust on her body, left the night carrying a goblet, giving the impression that she was a servant girl going to fetch water”. (Gnanawimala 1961: 633, translated by the author). The artist at Kathaluwa denotes her appropriated lower status by dressing her in the cloth and white jacket. Her loose hair and the pot used to carry water denote her assumed lower status to be unnoticed in the elopement. The servant boy, her lover, wears a more vibrant lower garment, a shawl and a comb on the head.



54. Serving dana, detail.  
Kathaluwa - early 19<sup>th</sup> Century



55. Detail, Mahadhana Sitano, Kathaluwa  
- early 19<sup>th</sup> Century



56. Patacara Narrative, Kathaluwa - early 19<sup>th</sup>  
Century

When Patacara finally enters the forest with her husband, she covers her head with the shawl, which she retains in the next four scenes. Many tragedies befall her: She loses her husband who is bitten by a snake. The two children born in the jungle are lost when trying to cross the river. In these scenes of elopement she retains her white jacket (see image 58 and 59). Finally when, she returns home to her parents she is informed that the members of her family have died when the palace collapsed due to heavy rain. Patacara’s distraught state of mind is shown by the loose hair and her nudity. The palace which fell down during the torrential rain too is shown next to the burning pyre (See image 60).

The way Patacara gradually comes to her senses when she meets the Buddha is seen in the scene at the right of the pavilion, where the Buddha is preaching (see image 61). We first see her standing with loose hair totally naked. When she becomes aware of her nudity, she sits down hugging her knees. A man hands her the lower garment, which she puts on as she gets up. Then her hair is tied in a knot, an iconographic marker that she has regained her sense of perception. It is once again remarkable that when listening to the Buddha she does not wear an upper garment (see image 62). Nevertheless, she is dressed in the white jacket when she leaves the Buddha’s pavilion having attained the first stage of sainthood after her decision to be ordained as a nun. She carries the begging bowl and robes on her head, wearing this white upper garment (see image 63). Strangely, she wears the white jacket after the encounter with the Buddha, and she did not cover her breasts when she was listening to the sermon.



57. Patacara elopes with the servant - early 19<sup>th</sup> Century



58. Patacara's encounters in the jungle - early 19<sup>th</sup> Century



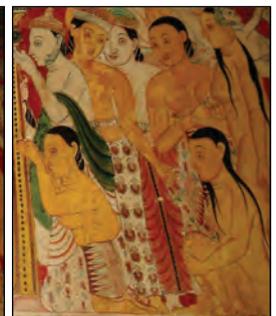
59. Patacara loses her two children - early 19<sup>th</sup> Century



60. Patacara is informed about the death of her parents - early 19<sup>th</sup> Century



61. Patacara meets the Buddha - early 19<sup>th</sup> Century



62. Patacara receives a lower garment - early 19<sup>th</sup> Century

Summing up, Patacara, when she leaves the palace of her parents with the manservant of the family, changes her dress to a white upper garment and cloth. Only a lower garment is given to her when she comes to her senses on visiting the Buddha. When she leaves the space where the Buddha was preaching, she is seen once more in the same white jacket, carrying her alms bowl on her head, thereby re-claiming her former 'lower' social status. This would lead to a further hypothesis, that wearing the white jacket in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century in the maritime region did have a class identity in a diametrically opposite manner: The women wearing the white jacket denote a 'servant' status and draping a shawl shows the status quo of women of higher birth making the shawl-dressed-female the 'mistresses'.

The only figure wearing this upper garment in the Ginivälla Temple in the vicinity of Kathaluwa, is a servant carrying messages from the *Ummaga jatakaya*. In this image, she carries a secret letter to Udumbara Devi with the caption: "*Udumbara rahaspata yäwu bava*". This white garment is not a fantasy of the artist, but is recorded in the earliest photographs. (see images 64 and 65).

Photographs of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century show that women in public spaces wear a white jacket. Areas where there was most contact between the natives and the newcomers from Europe were the harbours and military centres (Wickramasinghe 15: 2003). The photographs of the cleaning yards of plumbago graphite, cinnamon and coconut show that the long sleeved white jacket has become almost a uniform for women working for the entrepreneurs of the southern coast (see image 66). It is known that cinnamon peeling was done exclusively by members of the *Salagama* caste: As such, the assumption that the white jacket was "only worn by women of the *Karava* caste" cannot be applied to all women of the "Low Country". Also "Wayside Photographs" show women selling vegetables and fruit wearing the same ill-fitting white jackets. In them, the sleeves are short and the neck line is seldom V shaped.



63. Patacara leaves the Buddha and later as an ordained Bhukkuni - early 19<sup>th</sup> Century



64. Undumbara Devi's narration. Ginivalla temple - early 19<sup>th</sup> Century



65. Detail from the Udumbara Devi's narration - early 19<sup>th</sup> Century

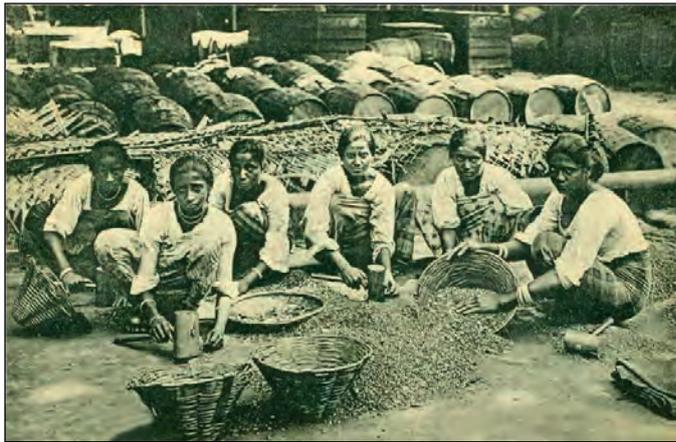
“The great majority of the women in the coastal belt took to Portuguese long sleeved jacket rounded at the back and in front with a V neck line. This style of jacket was called *kabakurutththuwa* and was only worn by women in the Karava caste (an intermediary caste traditionally associated with fishing)” (ibid.). In the wake of the photographic evidence, Nira Wickramasinghe’s argument may have to be revisited, because, according to her, all women wearing a “V shaped” white jacket belong to the *Karava* caste. If we link the evidence from the two temples in Kathaluwa and Ginivalla, then the women of the upper classes did not wear an upper garment, but wore a shawl over the head and shoulders. They seem to have not followed the fashion of covering their breasts preached by the missionaries. This leads again to the assumption that women in Ceylon in the pre-colonial period did not wear stitched upper garments. At Kathaluwa both Patacara and the “mother” in the narration painted below, seem to take off the stitched upper garment, as a mark of respect, when worshipping clergy.

From the evidence I gathered from these temple murals, I built a working hypothesis, that these female figures, Patacara and the “mother”, are shown in a manner demonstrating respect to the Buddhist monks. This may have been the individual choice of the artists working in both temples. The white jacket with long sleeves, at this time of colonization, may have been a marker of the new fashion for females, denoting foreign and ‘alien’ influence. It may have been regarded as unfit or disrespectful to be seen in the spaces of Buddhist rituals. Today in a similar line of argument which refuses ‘western influence’, mothers are forbidden to wear skirts or pants when entering government schools, even if the skirt or pants may be worn ankle length<sup>18</sup>; instead, they must wear a saree.

In contrast, in the hill country, the stitched upper garment seems to have been a sign of distinction, showing the *Radala* status of higher birth. Once again, we must keep in mind that the Kandyan murals of the 18<sup>th</sup> century can be read as representing the ‘up country’ fashions and southern maritime temple murals of the 19<sup>th</sup> century can be read as representative of ‘low country’ fashions. The ‘up country’ female costume is represented by a stitched jacket *sattaya* with a European ruff, or the *manthaya* for upper class *radala* women. This may be a product of the Portuguese imported to the hill capital by Sinhala *Radala* who were educated by missionaries. Dayananda Goonawardana states that the Kandyan Costume was very much influenced by Portuguese-Dutch fashions<sup>19</sup>. The *Moja* jacket worn by King Kirti Sri Rajasinha has a frill was

18 See paper “Is modesty in dress also a white man’s burden?” presented at the International Conference of Asian Studies. 26/27<sup>th</sup> July 2012 in Negambo, Sri Lanka. Publication in process.

19 In his foot notes to the script of the play “*Madhura Javanika*”, Dayananda Goonawardana makes the above statement based on information supplied in “*Vihara Vitti*” by Gunnapana Vajira. Gunasena 1962



66. Plumbego yard

67. Kirthi Sri Rajasimha,  
Dambulla RMV68. Kandyan  
mathayaRMV

known as the *Juan hättaya* (see image 67) . This can be observed in the many statues and portraits of the king, including the very well known statue in the Dambulla cave known as “Vihara no. 3” from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century (Bandaranayake 1986: 159)

The fashion for the new Senkadagala Kingdom may have been created by princesses such as Dona Catherina (1581- 1613) who had been baptised by Catholic missionaries and instructed by a local lady Catherine de Abrew in Mannar. The first king of Kandy, Vimaladharmasuriya I, (former Don Juan Konappu Bandara) who was her uncle, forces Dona Catherina to marry him and she is given the name Kusumasana Devi when they became the first rulers of Kandy after 1594. Paul E. Pieris in *Ceylon: The Portuguese Era* (1913) comments: “As the consequence of his early training Wimala Dharma was largely Portuguese in his sympathies and his queen was especially so. She and her children wore Portuguese costume to receive honoured guests. European meals were served at their tables which were set with Spanish chairs. Portuguese names were fashionable among courtiers, and in moments of excitement Portuguese came more familiarly to the mouth of the king than his mother tongue” (Pieris 1913 Vol 1 : 365). Pieris further comments “a baju or jacket made in the Portuguese fashion was also adopted by the time of king Rajasinha II” (Pieris 1913 Vol II p. 107). Wimalaratne and Gomes (2001) provide further evidence that the jacket worn by later Kandyan Kings got the name *Juan hättaya* because it was introduced by Don Juan Konappu Bandara, who was to become the first king of Kandy. Correspondence with foreign diplomats shows that the *lingua franca* of the first Kandyan rulers was Portuguese.

It seems that the fashion of wearing a jacket with a ruff made of soft muslin was followed by both males and females. Many paintings of the Baroque era show the ruff of soft white fabric which was a mark of prestige in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century. In the family portrait of Sir Thomas Luca and Lady Spencer by the English painter Cornelius Johnson (1593-1661), one can clearly see that all members of the family wear the ruff. This may show the original European version of the Sinhala *mantaya*. Similar ruffs can be seen in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Flemish paintings too (see image 68).

As mentioned earlier, the white jacket can be traced back to earliest 18<sup>th</sup> century temples in the Kandyan Region, or up country. Let us now pick up another strand from the Jaffna district, which may throw some light on how in later colonial times, fashions may have changed. The traces are seen from about the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, which gives a clue to the hypothesis that the white jacket may have been introduced first to the women coming in contact with the British. Later, perhaps, it was worn by women of other castes too. I quote Malathi de Alwis, who cites Harriet Winslow, the wife of one of the first missionaries representing the American Board of Foreign Missions writing in 1824:

Soon after we came to Ooduvil, two little girls were often seen about the house [...] If we spoke to them, they appeared alarmed and ran away. After a while, [...] they ventured to stop and listen to us, then listen to sit on the door steps a few minutes, afterwards to receive a little fruit when offered; and at length, by the promise of a jacket, when they should be able to make one, they were induced to take a needle and learn to sew (De Alwis 1997: 119).

Harriet Winslow's statement shows that the women were not forced to cover their bodies, but it was considered "decent" and "proper" to cover the upper part of the body when entering space dominated by the colonial masters, such as the church, factory or when they were employed as domestic servants by Christians. Most missionaries, military officers and travellers since Robert Knox in the 17<sup>th</sup> century comment that the majority of women did not wear an upper garment. The change in dress into the loose white jacket seems to have been imposed first on the 'lower castes' about early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

When creating the most suitable costume for the 'Arya Sinhala' women who were advised to turn away from the western dress, Anagarika Dharmapala seems to have invented a tradition of the *Oloriya* or Kandyan Sari as the most befitting for the women of the nation state now being fashioned. His mother Mallika Hewavitharana (nee Dharmagunawardhana) had been instructed to wear a sari on a pilgrimage to India in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Judging by the different sources, it seems that the fashion to wear the Kandyan saree, imposed on women of non-Kandyan, low country, upcoming maritime and urban families takes shape at the turn of the century, coming into full bloom in the 1920s. The invention of this tradition does not seem to lose its charm<sup>20</sup>. Anagarika Dharmapala's mother, the daughter of Lansige Andiris Perera Dharmagunawardhana, a wealthy businessman from Colombo, may have worn a long skirt and blouse, which her son felt was not befitting to be worn on a trip to India (see image 69).

The stitched upper garment with puffed sleeves mimics the European leg o' mutton sleeves (see image 70) popular at the turn of the century or a long sleeved white blouse was retained as an upper garment. Today in the shortened variation they are called *boricchi atha*.

We have traced two strands of covering the upper body with a stitched jacket. Wearing a white upper garment with an embellishment of a ruff, it seems, was a fashion among the elite class of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century in Baroque Europe. This embellishment may have been adopted by the upper classes during the times of the Sitawaka and Kotte kingdoms and later supplanted in Kandy by its new Sinhala rulers. The ruff was not worn as a mark of 'modesty', as Pethiyagoda et al seem to claim. It was not used to cover the breasts as imagined by contemporary writers. Ironically, the detachable ruff was worn by men as well as women both in Europe and Kandy, who could afford fine cloth such as muslin to display higher social class. The ruff is visible in murals from the times of King Kirthi Sri Rajasinha (1747-82) and his numerous statues and portraits. The evidence from Davy, a century later, shows that it was not worn by the lesser officers at court but only the king and a few chief ministers wore it. The ruff of light and soft fabric is even today called *manthaya*, a word even used today to denote the detachable accessory to the stitched upper garment *sättaya*. The etymology of the word *manthaya*, may point to a word of European origin *Mantau*, or "covering". Even today in French it means "coat". We may also note that in contemporary Iran

20 Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence O Ranger in *The invention of tradition* (1983) have pointed out the connection between "traditions" which "appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented" and modern endeavours of building of a nation state. Cecily Morrison in her article "Invented Tradition and Imagined Communities" (2003) has showed how tradition was invented taking the example of the Scottish Dance, which was a product of Scottish nationalism. See also Himani Bannerji (1999) writing observing the clothing of Gentlewomen (*bhadramahila*) of mid 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal



69. Lady Mallika  
Dharmagunawardhana



70. Infanta Eulalia in 1890s



71. Women in market

the word *Mantau* is used to denote the long or short coat and head scarf. On the other hand, the etymology of the *sättaya* (origin of the word for the jacket or the “saree blouse”) points to a south Indian origin. As such, the upper garment worn since the mid 1950s by younger girls popularly known as the *lama sariya* is also a most hybrid costume. The *manthaya* did not have the function to cover the female breasts.

With the evidence I have presented, there is a case to argue that in the first phase of colonization viz. during Portuguese times, this ruff called *manthaya* was introduced to the upper classes to denote a class distinction. Although we have very little visual evidence from the Portuguese period, we may assume that the Portuguese may have introduced the jacket to females whom they instructed to follow western religious practices and life styles. The ivory caskets show a female upper garment worn by members of the royal family, whereas the dancing female figures follow the Indian fashion of wearing a shawl. The fashion of the jacket may have been adopted by the low country royalty of Seetawaka and Kotte who were baptized by the Portuguese in the coastal region. It seems that the upper garment with the European ruff was reserved for the higher class *Radala* in the up country, whereas other less privileged men and women by custom were not permitted to wear any type of stitched upper garment. The style of not covering the upper part of the body can be observed in the hill region till about the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Šimon’s paintings show that this custom prevailed in Kandy even in the twenties. With the advent of the saree about a century and a half later, the European blouse with the leg o’ mutton sleeves, called puffed sleeves or *boricchi atha* seem to have come into vogue. This can be seen in the photographs showing Kandyan families in many collection cited here.

The upper class women at this point seem to have been dressing eclectically, mixing western blouses with innovative modes of draping the saree around it. The final product can be also seen in an advertisement by cloth importers D. D Pedris and Son in 1915 branded *Lakagana Osariya*, or the “Osariya for the Sri Lankan woman” (Wimalaratne and Gomes 2001: 85)

The second strand would be the loose white jacket that was imposed by the British on the low country coastal region in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century on non-*Goyigama* or *Govigama* women they had employed or Christianized. Almost all photographs document the same white jacket worn by women towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The fashion may have been taken over by women of the *Karawa* caste and followed by women of other castes and classes who joined the labor force under the British. This is evident in the photographs of women who appeared in public spaces as vendors carrying baskets on their heads or in the market (see image 71). Only such women were available to be “captured” by the colonial lens in the wayside, unlike the females of the upper

strata. It seems that they had not been gendered by the western photographers on the “wayside”. The colored *Cambay* cloth that was imported from India first and later from Malacca was worn as a lower garment with the white jacket, a feature that can be observed in many photographs. The practice of wearing a white jacket seems to be followed even up to today. The older generation still prefers to wear a white jacket and refuses to match the upper and lower garment in design or colour.

In Martin Wickramasinghe’s novels and autobiography one reads how the urbanized Sinhala women shift to wearing the “Indian Saree” in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. So according to the fashion designer Kirthi Sri Karunaratne, the *sari* is a fairly new form of dress in the Sinhalese community; a little more than a 100 years old. According to the book *Costumes of Sri Lanka* by K.D.G Wimalaratne and Dian Gomes, the Indian sari was introduced in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to Sri Lanka by the women of Moratuwa and hence was known of as the *Moratuwa sari*. (Wimalaratne and Gomes 2001:85) All written and visual sources cited in this article point to one fact: that the saree as ‘formal dress’ was an invention of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Any sundry family photograph from low country would show that the older generation of women – grandmothers and grand aunts - at this time still wore the *redda* (cloth as a lower garment) and *hättaya* (as an upper garment), or the *saya* (skirt) as a lower garment. The “Funeral Photograph” of Buddhist and Catholic relations of the Perumadura de Silva Family taken in 1904 in Mutwal, which was the social hub of the upcoming Colombo at the time, show the eclectic fashions before the advent of the saree (Jayawardena 2012) . Even after the younger generation draped the body in a *saree*, the *saya* (*skirt*) was retained as an undergarment.

Most males of this generation are seen in the ‘formal dress’ of western suit and waistcoat, even if they vehemently opposed western dress for women. Playwright John de Silva is the best example. On the other hand, it seems the older generation of males at this time was uncomfortable to wear the western trousers, which they covered with an imported tweed cloth worn over the pants making them the *redda yata mahattaya*, the “western gentleman under the cloth”. Similarly young women of this time living in the burgeoning urban cities like Panadura, Moratuwa, Negombo, Chilaw , Horana or Colombo did not give up wearing the skirt, but draped the newly adopted saree over the skirt. Was this a subversive act to maintain the original dress of skirt and blouse? The two women on the left hand side of the photograph from India perhaps demonstrates the eclectic character of the saree.

As such, the Sri Lankan women of today have a variety of upper and lower garments to choose from our own costume history without having to fall into a moral trap of being forced to wear the ‘Kandyan saree’ which was the privilege for a very few women from the hill country. To what extent this style of draping the *osariya* with the *hättaya* with leg-o-mutton sleeves can display the “true Sinhala identity” is questionable. My observation today that the *osariya* too has undergone changes, mutating into a “made up saree”, an assemblage of fabrics and frills.

Most costume historians of India are of the opinion that women of upper castes did not wear a stitched upper garment, as cutting of a fabric according to Brahmanical custom makes it ‘unfit’ for wearing. Photographs taken in Jaffna and Trincomalee show that all men and women do not seem to wear a stitched upper garment when attending Hindu rituals. Answering the question, what did the Sri Lankan woman wear as an upper garment before the colonial intervention, I would conclude that from the many variations that may have been possible, we have evidence for two: One documented in photographs shows that an unstitched cloth was worn hugging the hips and thighs or draped around the hip and one end pulled up between the legs in the style of a dhoti and the free end tucked in at the back at the waist. The other loose end of the fabric was worn diagonally

across the chest, then thrown over the shoulder and wound around the waist. This requires more than 10 or 11 meters of cloth, which only women of higher strata could afford. Wearing a cloth wrapped around the waist covering only the lower part of the body too may have existed. This required less fabric and could have been the garment worn in private spaces. A second cloth may have been used to cover the upper part of the body as seen in the murals of the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century (see images 72 and 73). As a result much of the body may have been exposed in pre-colonial times. It is most unlikely that female costumes had the function of displaying ‘modesty’, which is an invention of the missionaries.

To conclude, the scope of research on gender aspects of female costume in Sri Lanka is vast. I have limited myself to available material from the colonial archive of photographs and murals from a sample of temples which were connected to each other historically. This choice was made because they are repositories of the oldest visual material in the Kandyan and maritime regions. New images keep appearing in internet sites such as “Old Ceylon” and “lankapura.com”. These virtual sites have become a perennial source of inspiration to me, and keep me questioning the arguments I have presented at national and international fora in the past two years. This is my first publication on female costumes. As such, it should be viewed as a work in progress. The conclusions presented here are naturally open to discussion. The very heterogeneous evidence from visual and textual sources I have presented here are, at times, contradictory, and prevent the articulation of a monolithic statement on female costume that represents a collective identity for an entire nation, just as one costume cannot, at any time, represent an entire nation. What is commonly labeled “*ape sanskrutiya*” or Sri Lankan culture is a rich fabric constantly evolving in time, changing its texture by the interweaving of many cultures in the past, continuously producing new designs of cultural interweavings even in the present. Drawing conclusions on costume, which is a very sensitive visual marker of culture, at the end of this essay, is purely to satisfy the wishes of fastidious editors.

The images presented here demonstrate that the Sri Lankan women of today have a variety of upper and lower garments to choose from our own costume history without having to fall into a moral trap of being forced to wear the saree, which was an innovation in the early years of the last century. In the Indian subcontinent the saree appears in about 1880. Many Sri Lankans believe that the *osariya* or the Kandyan saree truly represents the identity of the island. This research has shown that the Kandyan saree was a privilege of a very few women from the Hill Country. The majority of the women were not allowed to wear any upper garment when Kandy was ruled by Sri



72. Soreyya Sitano from Kathaluwa - early 18<sup>th</sup> Century



73. Royal Couple, Mulgirigala - early 18<sup>th</sup> Century

Lankan kings. Murals show that the privileged few wore the *selaya* and *hättaya* with the *manthaya* frill appropriated from the west.

The Kandyan saree today is a hybrid costume. To what extent this style of draping the *osariya* along with the European leg o' mutton sleeved *hättaya* can display a 'true Sinhala identity' may have to be reexamined, especially when taking the European concept of accessories such as the handbag, the umbrella and shoes into consideration. The *osariya* clad 'Arya Sinhala' woman is assumed to be only able to maintain the hallmark of Sinhala-ness due to the *osariya* being draped over her skirt in a most complicated and innovative way. If one is to unwrap the *osariya*, she immediately becomes a "western woman" in a skirt – a *saya* -- and an European blouse called the *hättaya*. The length of the borrowed leg-o-mutton sleeves may vary, ending at the forearm, which is then called *boricci atha* today. This mode of dressing, as has been demonstrated in this article, is no older than a century. Today the *osariya* too has undergone changes, evolving into a "made up saree", an assemblage of stitched and unstitched pieces of fabric and frills. The reader of this article is thus free to question, if this hybrid costume *saree* or *osariya* -- which is not even as old as the Colombo Harbor -- can claim to represent a true Sinhala Buddhist identity, even if such a category can exist in the female wardrobe.

This research study shows that the saree too is an eclectic dress made up of Indian and Western elements, which is most evident in the up country saree, the *osariya*. To the question, what did the Sri Lankan woman wear as an upper garment before colonial intervention, I would conclude that we have evidence of two: One documented in photographs shows that an unstitched cloth was worn hugging hips and thighs or draped round the hip and one end pulled up between the legs in the style of the *dhoti* and the free end tucked in at the back in the waist line. The other loose end of the fabric was worn diagonally across the chest, then thrown over the shoulder and wound around the waist. Wearing a cloth wrapped around the waist covering only the lower part of the body too may have existed. This required less fabric and could have been the garment worn in private space. A second cloth may have been used to cover the upper part of the body as seen in the murals of the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century. This shawl called "*uturusaluwa*" was used to cover the shoulders and head at times. On seeing an image of a woman without an upper garment "*Lascorins - Sinhalese soldiers of Ceylon ~ 1785*" by a Dutch artist, which appeared in the Facebook site "Ancient Ceylon", a young male subscriber commented "Looks like this is kinda insult to our nation, please remove this. They were not half naked back in the days<sup>21</sup>".



74. East meets West

I finally cite a caricature from the periodical "East and West" from 1915 by Gaganendranath Tagore which shows "The Indian Lady dancing with an European gentlemen<sup>22</sup>". Her 'Indian-ness' is demonstrated by what Sri Lankans would call the "Indian Saree", which she drapes over her head in a stylish manner. The shoes and the chignon style of hair knot demonstrate her eclectic approach of making a choice of costume of Asian and non-Asian elements. Does the saree make her 'modest' when dancing the Tango?(see image 74)

21 Have not edited this comment that appeared in October 2013. Such comments are very common today, which show confused notions dress in regard to representing an entire "Nation" and maybe also "Race" which is often used to denote "Ethnicity".

22 See: Gaganendranath Tagore's Realm of the Absurd by Mulk Raj Anand: <http://www.chitralekha.org/articles/gaganendranath-tagore/gaganendranath-tagore%E2%80%99s-realm-absurd>. Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> December 2013

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