

SUBJECT OF CLOTH: ITS MANIPULATIONS AND RAMIFICATIONS

Dr.G.M.Ranathunga

Senior Lecturer, Department of Textile and Clothing Technology, University of
Moratuwa

gayathrir@uom.lk

ABSTRACT Fashion' has been playing a pivotal role in human society from time immemorial. Fashion designing, the essential component that plays a vital role in the industry, deserves a careful and comprehensive study. Creating new fashions is the key to product development in the industry.

The objective of the research is incubating new fashion concepts from identified fashion characteristics of the Kandyan era in to the future.

The selected study setting of the research is the Kandyan era (16th Century – 1815) of Sri Lanka. The Kandyan era emerged as a new fashion movement with unique characteristics. The most significant draping concepts and methods in fashion were gradually developed during this era. The study is based on exquisite draperies of dresses of royalty, elites and peasantry of the Kandyan period.

There are plenty of visual records to study the background of this study setting, such as sketches and descriptions made by observer – participants of the period, historical murals, carvings and sculptures of the period. The study began with observational study. Reliability of the data which was incorporated in the research is of much concern. Therefore, pictorial data were cross checked with different literary sources. Finally the reinforced concepts were compared with formally established philosophies in order to forward timely necessary concepts.

The research extols three draping concepts and methods as emphasizing body silhouette by wrapping, folding and knotting fabrics over the body. Also it enabled to demonstrate dynamic movement of the dress by attaching many suspended folds around the body. The last one veiled the body by coiling large pieces of fabrics. Therefore the Sri Lankan dress characteristic is more than a covering; it imparts an anthropomorphic value to the object. The dress is unpredictable until it is arranged. It is dynamic, thus it evokes timeless fashion concepts.

Key words: Drapes, knots, pleats. Folds, gathers

1. INTRODUCTION

'The body... cannot escape being a vehicle of history, a metaphor and metonym of being-in-time'. Comaroff and Romanoff's (1992, 79) Indeed, when time elapses past fashions circulate to the present in leaps and bounds. Throughout the history of Sri Lanka, its sartorial history consisted of multifaceted clothing styles.

As well as, overall dress habits speak of the delicate Asiatic taste in clothing of the natives at that time. Early Sri Lankan dress practice bears its individual characteristics. The common sartorial sense is, arranging a complete outfit by making knots, frills, pleats and folds of a long fabric. By arranging wads of pleats in certain places emphasizing the body contours. Bare upper body is common in men's' clothing. Usually, women wore cloths draped covering their bodies, while men did so cloths and shawls.

The main characteristics are,

- Using wads of fabrics to arrange a dress.
- The dress is arranged with pleats, knots, drapes, folds and gathers without sewing or without using pins.
- Emphasizing body contours - Arranging different proportions of fabrics in different ways, using many drapes to emphasizing the body shape.

These characteristics make clear margins between early East and West. In fact, East and West mark clear demarcations in their culture, religion and social, and as a result of this difference, the identity of Asian people differs from that of West. The greatest exponent of the traditional philosophy of art, Ananda Coomaraswamy (1913.194) in his careful observation of textiles, embroidery and costumes of India and Ceylon observes the difference between East and West as follows:

‘Before the arrival of the Portuguese, people were not much used to readymade garments. Weaving is at once the oldest and the most important of the industrial arts. The robes are usually woven in the shape and size required for the use, and only rarely and locally cut into fitting garments, so that tailoring is a comparatively unimportant craft’

The philosophy in the clothing of Asia is well described by Ananda Coomaraswamy. Those are well proven through visual and written examples particular to the era. Studying the above elements provides a good impression of ancient draperies and sartorial taste of the period. These well established and well practiced methods of dresses introduce new trends to the world fashion industry.

2. METHODOLOGY

The selected study setting of the research is the Kandyan era of Sri Lanka. The Kandyankingdom, the last kingdom of the administration of Sri Lanka, lasted from the 16th Century until 1815. In the Kandyan era a new fashion movement emerged with unique characteristics. The most significant draping concepts and methods in fashion were gradually developed during this era. The study is based on exquisite draperies of dresses of royalty, elites and peasants of the Kandyan period. Dress items and patterns, silhouette, dress materials and methodology of wearing are identified in the research.

Historical details about the Kandyan dress are well documented visually more than in earlier administrative eras. As well as, there are plenty of visual records to study the background of this study setting such as sketches and descriptions made by observer – participants of the period, historical murals, carvings and sculptures of the period. Original written sources and true pictorial evidences were used for the research. Besides, the Kandyan tradition has a living culture as well. Therefore, when the characteristics of Sri Lankan attire are examined the Kandyan period is remarkably noteworthy with very significant signs and ample visual evidences. The study began with observational study of temple paintings, sculptures, sketches of the period. Reliability of the data which was incorporated

in the research is of much concern. Therefore, pictorial data were cross checked with different literary sources such as temple murals, particular literature and interviews. Finally the reinforced concepts were compared with formally established philosophies in order to forward timely necessary concepts.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Three drapery concepts were identified in the research. The first one emphasizes the extravagant body silhouette by wrapping wads of fabrics at the waist of the elite male. The said manipulation method is well described in the *dresstuppottiya*. The Kandyan elites' extensive, luxurious costume signifies their dignity, power and high social standard. A British writer of the early nineteenth century, Davy (1921, 114) also explains that even the quantity of cloths wrapped round their waist is of extraordinary size, which is considered as an emblem of dignity.

The draping method was associated with such construction methods as folding, pleating, gathering and knotting. This draping method of the dress is unique to Asia. Coomaraswamy (1913) states that in Asia a dress is arranged by a large piece of cloth by knotting, pleating or folding over the body rather than tucking pins or sewing. A *tuppottiya* is a white cloth, eight or nine cubits long, made in two pieces neatly joined up in the middle: single widths are called *paday*, and measure six or seven cubits in length, and four to six spans in breadth (Coomaraswamy 1959, 233p). The dress is started by wrapping a series of *kavani* (waist cloths) which are draped on the hip. The first is draped as a *basque* consisting of semicircular folds over each hip. The top edge of the cloth is gathered in a tight wad of pleats at the diaphragm and anchored firmly to the waist. Folding plays a great part in arranging the dress. It is a descriptive activity, intended to smoothly and continually run with no evidence of ambiguity or interruption (Bradley Quinn, 2003). An extravagant body silhouette was formed by many knots; twisting wads of fabrics at the middle and going round the waist. The twisted knot is placed at the abdomen forming a bulky, firm knot. Finally, three knots appear at the diaphragm and those are known as *mohottigata* (Knots of *mohotti*) (Jayarathna, 2008).



A

b

c

d

e

f

Figure 1-The process of making the knot

Two dress styles of kings who wore dresses of multifaceted knots, pleats and gathers are described below. The lower garment of the male consisted of many folds, frills and pleats. Those frills, pleats and folds may have been added separately to the main garment. Every piece of cloth would have been wrapped round the hip and tucked at the front abdomen. This arrangement was wonderfully able to emphasize the body postures. Folds of different proportions were rendered at the front. Three layers of folds were arranged. The short one had neat pleats. The middle one was arranged as a circular shaped fold. The longest one hung to the ankle level. The lower garments of male figures can be categorized into two styles as shown in figure 2 and 3.



Figure 2- style 1



Figure 3 – style 2

Wood Carving of early Kandyan era

Temple painting

In one fashion the lower garment displayed a loose frill at the front that falls in a circular shape (Figure 2). In another fashion the King wore a long lower garment and upon it a grid like array of ornaments flowed downwards keeping the whole arrangement neatly together (Figure 3). This dress style was similar to that of gods' and deities' dress arrangements of the period. The King and the celestial beings might have been represented in the same dress patterns.

Folding was also a main construction technique in the elite female dress. The Queen's dress mainly consisted of a long lower cloth which comes down to the ankles. All queens wore several cloths as a girdle below the waist, wound very tightly to the hip emphasizing the sinuous rills of the female body. Narrow strips, wide long pieces, suspending folds were attached to the dress. Again, many folds are beautifully arranged in different proportions as short, long and deep folds at the front and those might be detachable items. Besides, around the waist many patterned folds hung. Their utility and meaning were magnificent. There is a stress on the decorative value of the suspended items, arabesque (allover spread) or complex linear rhythms to the main body cloth. The most exotic concept of these items was emphasizing the dynamic movement of the dress. Folds were suspended vertically and buttressing over the waist, some loosely draping many fabrics in wide folds. When females were engaged in slow, rush or rapid whirling dancing activities these suspended items became lustrous and anthropomorphic.



Figure 4 - Varied folds of the lower garment Figure 5- A Queen (Wood Carving ,Aludeniya
- (ivory figures of museum of Kandy) Temple)

Although simplistic in form, the fold has many parts, one being a series of overlapping folds in its body cloth. Overlapped folds generate many visual effects. It is transacted both materially and visually and premised on repetition and plurality (Bradley Quinn, 2003). In the dress of the King, folds of different proportions were rendered at the front. There were three layers of fold that were arranged. The short one had neat pleats. The middle one was arranged as a circular shaped fold. The longest one hung to the ankle level. These three different proportionate folds overlapped one another and each was given a characteristic value by adding unique decorations to each as shown in the figure 2.

A pleat is also a fold but demonstrates parallel lines in a folded form. Pleating creates a textural surface first of all and gives multiple ideas to the dress. Pleating technique became a cynosure in their sartorial etiquettes. At a glance it gave a rosette of lines. Pleats became active when the wearer was engaged in mobile poses. As a result, the line gave delicate flowing, curving, undulating, rippling and dynamic movement to the dress. The lower garment of the royal male, female and elite consisted of many pleats. They wore a long lower garment and upon it a grid like array of pleats flowed downwards. It was also intended to increase the apparent height of the surface, with the pleated texture. The rhythmic, complicated line pulsating with body movement is the ultimate delicacy of the draping method.

Redda is a simply wrapped cloth which goes around the waist with incorporated pleats. One end of the cloth is gathered as a wad of pleats then made tight at the one side of the waist and the other end goes around the body and tucked in at the other side of the hip. Then the other end is pulled out and arranged as a pleated fall which is called *neriya* among the inhabitants. The pleated circular part is useful for easy moving of the legs and also it serves as a decorative item of the

redda. According to the continuing tradition of wearing *redda* (body cloth) it can be assumed that the early practice would have been similar to current practice.

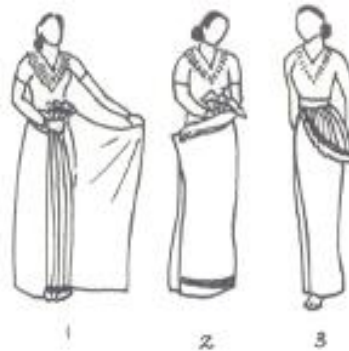


Figure-6

The methodology of wearing redda

Ohoriya was another dress code arranged by combining many fabric manipulation methods. Ananda Coomaraswamy (1959:34) suggests that *ohoriya* is derived from the long lower garment. *Ohoriya* is arranged from one end of the lower garment and that part is thrown over one shoulder.



Figure 7-The methodology of wearing *ohoriya* (Ambrose, Kay. 1980. *Classical Dances and Costumes of India*. New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation. p.92)

Since the 18th century *Ohoriya* has continued as the basic garment among elite females. It is the national costume of Sinhalese women.

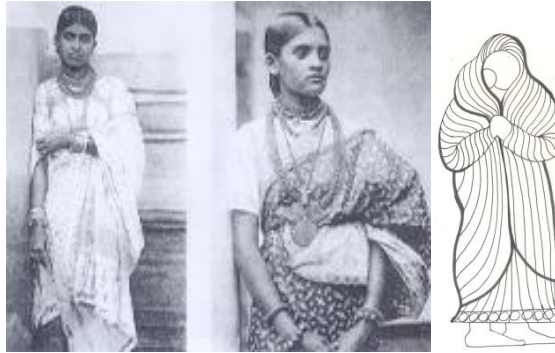


Figure 8- Ladies of Kandy Figure 9-Mottappiliya,

(Coomaraswamy, A. 1959. Murals of Degaldoruwa Medieval Sinhalese Art.

National Museum Colombo. II plate)

Twisted, rotated and twirled surfaces were presented in *Ohoriya*, Sari or *mottappiliya* dress, coiling around the body. This technique gave freedom to clothing from the limitation of the fabric's vertical and horizontal axes, enabling it to spiral around the body.

Abdominal bands were indicated in every male's dress where the coiling and rotating is significant in this manipulation method. Those were arranged into different patterns as shown in figure 10.

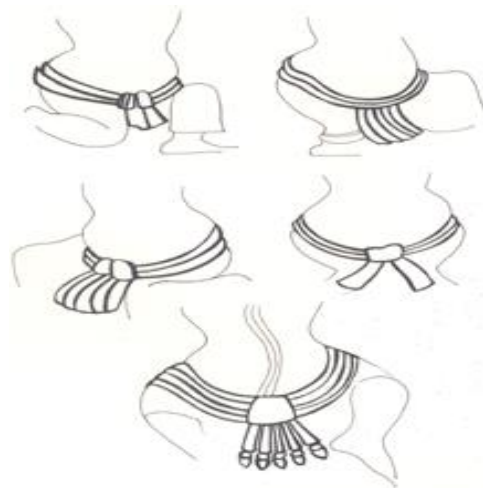


Figure 10- Abdominal Band of elites in Aludeniya door-frame.

Turban is a roll of cloth on the head which gives the effect of the head gear stuck on to a turban (Figure 13). They had tried different styled turbans. Turbans would have been arranged from a folded cloth. It was wrapped tightly around the head and tucked with hanging parts as shown in figure 11. Occasionally these external parts were neatly hidden at the headgear.



Figure 11- Different Headgears of Aludeniya door-frame

Siruvaal is a short breech that has volumes of fabric at the top. The way of dressing the *Siruvaa* would be similar to wearing trousers. When it is tightened at the legs by breeches, the upper part would have been wrapped around the waist and tucked to the central abdomen. Then the volumes of fabric are tightened by a belt. (Figure 12)

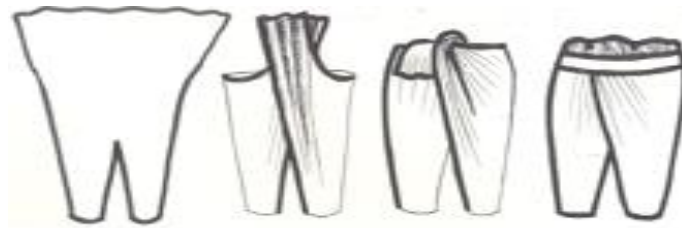


Figure 12–The way of dressing Siruvaal



Figure 13-Temple painting of Degaldoruwa *Figure 14 – A man with Dhoti – Temple painting of Madawala*

Dhoti and turban remained as the standard costume of common males of Sri Lanka. *Dhoti* is arranged from a long piece of cloth, worn wrapped and tucked around the waist of the wearer. Often the ends of the lower garment were passed between the legs and tucked in behind. In Sri Lankan practice *dhoti* would have been worn in order of the occasion, and at work. *Dhoti* is worn to knee level, up to elbow level and sometimes shorter than knee level. Rather than letting the pleated fall hang down, most probably it is again tucked at the central abdomen as a circular form.

4. CONCLUSION

The research highlights three draping concepts and five methods. The first one was emphasizing body silhouette by wrapping, folding, pleating, twisting or coiling and knotting by fabric manipulation methods over the body. The second one was these fabric manipulation methods enabled to demonstrate dynamic movement of the dress by attaching many suspended folds around the body. The last concept was veiling the body by coiling large pieces of fabric. The dress acquired ideal valuations from its various uses of wraps, folds, pleats, knots and coils by such fabric manipulation methods. Hence, Sri Lankan dress characteristics are more than covering; it imparts an anthropomorphic value to the object. It has power to give life to a piece of fabric. The dress is unpredictable until it is arranged. It is an imaginative dress. It is dynamic, thus evoking timeless fashion concepts.

5. REFERENCES

COOMARASWAMY, A (1913). *Art and Crafts of India and Ceylon*. New Delhi: Today and Tomorrow's printers and publishers.

COOMARASWAMY, A. (1959) *Medieval Sinhalese Art*. Published by the National Museum. Sri Lanka.

DAVY, J (1821). *An Account of the Interior of Ceylon and of Its Inhabitants*, London: Longman.

QUINN, B (2003). *The Fashion of Architecture*, United Kingdom: Berg Publications.

CAMAROFF J.I AND CAMAROFF J. (1992). *Bodily Reform as Historical Practice*. Ed. Comaroff, J.I. and Comaroff, J. *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination*. Boulder.