

Are We Carrying the Colonial Burden Called “Saree” into the 21st Century?

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Abstract

Sri Lanka enjoys over half a century of independence. Together with India, Sri Lanka has the longest history of decolonization, which is well documented also by Fashion Historians: Today the National Costume which evolved in the process is very much a ceremonial dress, which males appropriate when embarking on a political career. As formal and office they wear the pant and shirt, embellished with ties and blazers in keeping with the prestige of the event. It seems that the “Saree” which has a history of about of about only one hundred years in the Indian Subcontinent, on the other hand, enjoys a privilege of being able to project a National Identity. In the recent past there has been a conscious effort to impose the Saree as a dress code, because it symbolizes the female “modesty”. After a short linguistic research, on the translation of the word “modesty” into Sinhala, I question if such a category existed in the pre-colonial Sinhala literature, specially when referring to the woman’s dress. Using visual evidences from the Colonial Period and methodologies from Fashion History, I then trace the evolution of the “Saree” which is a mixture of western and Indian elements. Finally I question the legitimacy for males to impose the Saree on women, when they themselves move more than ever to represent the West in costume.

Keywords: Fashion History, Post – colonial Identity, Culture

Introduction

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 the appointment with, because her *hāttaya* 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 words used by the Security Guards in that case were “*Harihati āndla emmane wenawa*”, which can be translated as “you will have to come properly dressed”, “in a fitting manner” or “modestly dressed”. This “modesty” the school principals feel, can be demonstrated by only wearing a saree, when mothers enter the school premises. The more practical “skirt and blouse” or “*Shalwar Kameez*”, which are usually permitted in Buddhist temples, Churches and Hindu Kovils are not permitted within the school premises. The reasons are not verbalized. In the case of the *Srī Daladā Māligawa* wearing even a saree does not seem to satisfy the whims of the Security Guards implementing these unwritten rules, if the blouse does not have sleeves. These current developments incite me to question through this paper, why the saree enjoys a higher respect in the eyes of moralists? Using visual and textual evidence also to question, which kind of female/females’ costumes could ever reflect the “Sinhala Buddhist culture” that rejects all Western influence?

The visual and textual evidence presented here, may help the reader to understand, how the “Saree” in the 21st century enjoys a higher respect over other imported hybrid modes of dress such as “Skirt and Blouse” or “*Shalwar Kameez*”.

My research interest is 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 identity, class and religious affiliation, occupation, regional origin, as well as moral values, gender ideals and gender roles have been constructed and expressed through clothing, concentrating on the period of late 19th century France, England and USA. Additionally, Udaya Kumar’s essay *Self, Body and Inner Sense* (1997), approaching the topic from a caste based differentiation and Himani Bannerji’s *Textile Prison* (1999), observing the clothing of “Gentlewomen” (Bhadra mahila) in Colonial Bengal based on the discourse of “shame” (*lajja*) have provided multiple view points to contextualize the information I cite here, in a wider, Asian panorama.

Female costume in poetry of the Sandeshayas

Martin Wickramasinghe in his observations “Dress and Ornament in Ancient Ceylon” first published in Sinhala in 1935, brings many examples from the literature of the “Kotte Period” in the 16th and 18th 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 1956 too has come to similar conclusions in his study *Society in Mediaeval Ceylon*. The poets of the 16th to 18th centuries writing *Sandēsha Kāvya* did not fail to write poetry and prose that was overloaded with the erotic sentiment *Srngāra Rasa*. They used many metaphors like “Swan breasts” (*Pīnapayodhara*) when they described the beauty of the female breasts. Another most striking example is from the *Yashōdarāvata*, which was written in late 18th century: Prince Siddhartha on leaving the palace on the Great Renunciation (*Mahābhinishkramanaya*) falters to leave the palace, as he sees the “golden breasts” of his wife Yashōdarā feeding the new born son.

Here Yashōdarā's breasts are referred as *Rankumbu* - "Golden Pots" (Gamlath 1995:16).

Siri Tilakasiri in his analysis of the *Sandēsha* Poems (*Sandēsha Kāvya*) shows that "women of the cities" (*Puraganan*), "women of the villages" (*Gamiliyan*), "women tending cattle" (*Gopaluliyān*), 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" bird observes some *Gopaluliyān* wearing a lower garment above the knee and in Ūruwela, he observes women crossing a stream holding hands with their male partners. Flying over the river, the messenger bird (or the author) is very much fascinated by the visible female breasts. If the women were "modestly dressed" in verses 89 and 133 of the *Thisara Sandēshaya*, their breasts would not be visible through the very fine cloth to covering 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 "Ekāmsaka", covering only one shoulder, as a mark of respect to a person encountered. He also brings in evidence, that *Uturusaluwa* at times, 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 the artist from Prag visiting Ceylon early last century. Tavik Simon's paintings show that *Uturusaluwa* is worn loosely or does not cover the breasts (see images 1-4). I recently discovered this pre colonial practice in a temple mural in the Sailabimbārāmaya in Dodanduwa (see images 5 and 6). The man on seeing the monks approaching with their begging bowls, takes off his upper garment, the *Uturusaluwa*, and worships

the monks. When worshipping the monks, the woman does not cover her breasts. Tilakasiri also notes that a *Thanapataya* (cloth tied around the breast) was worn by women in the cities. In the *Girāsandēshaya* (V 24) this garment is referred to as "*Piyayurupata*" (Rathnapala 2005: 61). The bird *Salalihiniya* notices even a clasp at the back of this upper garment of a woman in Jayawardanepura. In general, affluent women in the cities of Jaffna and Jayawardanepura seem to wear "Cloth from Benares" (*Kasīsalu*) or silk (*Patasalu*) bought at market places (ibid. 281).

The poets never miss the chance to describe women trained to sing and dance performing in temples of gods, in royal palaces or in specially constructed dance halls to amuse the city dwellers during festivals. Even the movements of the shaking breasts are described then. The 18th century ivory combs on display at the National Museum and the wood carvings of the dancing hall of the *Embakke Devālaya* in Pilimatalawa dated to mid 18th century, may give visual evidence to these earlier literary texts (see images 7 and 8). The *perahera* scenes in the temples of the Southern province show women dancing with no upper garment. I cite the well known example from the Mulgirigala Rajamahāvihāraya (see image 9).

That these women felt ashamed (*lajja*) or were anxious about the public opinion of their modesty (*bhaya*), when performing for the gods as *Devadāsīs*, 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 were not bothered 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. Erudite Sri Lankan society readily accepts descriptions of places and events recorded in the *Sandēsha* Literature as historical evidence. If so, why should they not take the comments made on the costumes of women as historical facts, which point to a society more tolerant pertaining to what women should wear in public space before the advent of colonial rulers to Sri Lanka? 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 15th century.

A curious but very important quotation may point to some deviations. In an excerpt from a 15th century Sinhala poem, an 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 “*Kāvyaśekhara*” (1449) is regarded as a juvenile work of the most erudite monk Ven. Thotagamuwe Sri Rahula. Ven. Rahula was residing in the west coast in the 15th century during the reign of King Parakambahu 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 moralizing verses seem to have had an impact on the prudish mind. In later colonial times these verses from the “*Kāvyaśekhara*” were sung at wedding ceremonies. Martin Wickramasinghe in his famous novel “*Gamperaliya*” (1944) parodies the wedding scene of the end of the 19th century mimicking the West and at the same time inventing new wedding traditions.¹

“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 veranda 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*

gī" sung by the girls and "halla/ 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 chief protagonist Nanda in *Gamperaliya* gets married twice, Wickramasinghe does not go into such vivid descriptions of these two weddings. Laisa's social standing is much lower than that of Nanda. One can read many other wedding scenes in Wickramasingha's oeuvre, how the less affluent class celebrate weddings spending much money in a very humoristic way. The above cited wedding of Laisa stands out as a parody of a wedding ceremony which followed colonial bridal fashions. It also demonstrates how certain families were anxious to follow customs created by the Sinhala Buddhist society, such as singing "*Jaya magul gī*" and reciting

excerpts from the "*Kāvyashekaraya*". This most popular novel relating the story of the village in a turmoil under British influence was published in 1945. Wickramasinghe in his introduction informs that he has located this novel in around 1904 (Wickramasinghe 1944: 3). With the affluent middle class moving from Galle and Matara to Colombo, it seems, certain new traditions were invented like the celebration of Wesakh with Wesakh greeting cards, illuminations with "buckets" and "pandals" and singing of "Wesak- carols". Not only Martin Wickramasingha, but W. A. De Silva includes many burlesque scenes to demonstrate how of the Western educated Sinhala Buddhist was eager to invent "own traditions" in the new cities. On closer observation, one may notice that they are nothing but variations of customs of the British with a Sinhala twist.

The two words "*lajja*" and "*bhaya*" as values to be cherished by Sinhala women makes its appearance in Piyadasa Sirisena's first novel "*Dingiri Mānika*" (1918). Piyadasa Sirisena, the "Father of the Sinhala novel", makes the following statement thorough his protagonist "*Dingiri Mānika*"; "*Lajja* and *bhaya*" are "Great Aryan ornament" (*Maha Aryābharanaya*) for "moral" (*Silachara*) women. "To wear a cloth extending from the navel (*Nābhiya*) to ankle (*Bola*), to wear a jacket (*Hāttaya*) that will cover the upper body completely, and to cover the entire body most safely (*surakshita lesa*) would be most befitting. To *Dingiri Mānika*, who was fashioned as the role model of the female readers, the "*osariya*" is most suitable for the "women of noble birth" (*Kula striya*) and not the "transparent gown and short jacket" ("*bāru dālak vāni araksha rahita sāyat hāttayath*") and wearing a short jacket (*kota hāttaya*) exposing two thirds of their body" (Translation by author) (Sirisena 1918: 60).

The novel was a big success and later made into an even more popular film. In the popular novels, plays and poems and newspaper articles

written by these men, the 6-7 meter long “*Osariya*” they profess would be most befitting dress for the Sinhala women in order to demonstrate “*lajja*” and “*bhaya*” in society. The new women, who is advised to turn away from Western practices is branded as the “*Arya Sinhala Women*”. As Neloufer de Mel points: “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). The fashion of wearing the Saree was first introduced about 100 years ago to the upcoming urban society eager to be dressed in a manner that opposed the colonial dress of *Sāya* and *Hāttaya*.

Is the word “Modesty” a white man’s burden?

De Mel through her readings of Anagarika Dharmapala’s pamphlet “*Gihī 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”. De Mel continues: “as Gombrich and Obeyesekere note, what Dharmapala was formulating here were new values and modalities and behaviour for an emerging Sinhala elite which drew on western bourgeoisie notions of property” (De Mel 2001:105-106).

By the time of its 18th edition in 1958, about 50,000 copies of *Gihī 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. Today the word “modesty in dress” seems to be the moralist’s buzz word. The view that Nanda Pethiyagoda and many others uphold, that women’s attire “down the

ages was anything but immodest”, needs to be revisited. Informing travellers to Sri Lanka in 2012, Nanda Pethiyagoda writes:

“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 (sic!) indicated when the fill was of net or fine silk” (Pethiyagoda 2012 II-III).

The writer seems to be eager to proclaim the sari and *osariya* as the “modest” dress for women.

Visual and literary evidences show that the statement “Women covered themselves from head to toe in a saree, the mode typical and unique to Ceylon /Sri Lanka” is a kind of projection of those writers, who are eager to uphold the Sri Lankan woman branded as the “*Arya Sinhala Women*”, as the most modest women of the world. Being covered from “head to toe” the Sri Lankan women is supposed to display her modesty. This notion based on the prudery of the Christian missionaries, which was later appropriated by Anagarika Dharmapala for his moralizing pamphlets and popularized by Piyadasa Sirisena in his moralizing novels. We may note that most of the vanguards of the Buddhist revival movement late 19th century were products of missionary schools run by the British and Americans.

In her article how gendered forms of morality and constraint 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 on to 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).

Obeyskere’s division of the compound “*lajja-bhaya*” is interesting: He allocates “*lajja*” to females and “*bhaya*” to males. To me, this somewhat gendered division 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 13th century *Saddharmālamkāraya*, referring to an uneasy state of mind, like “shame”.

Today many researchers translate the English word “modesty” with the Sanskrit/ Pali words “*lajja*” and “*bhaya*”. Equating the Sanskrit/ Pali words “*lajja*” and “*bhaya*” to “modesty” seem to be an innovation of Rev. B. Clough, who for the first time was able to publish comprehensive English-Sinhala and Sinhala- English dictionaries in the years 1830 and 1887 respectively. In the “second new enlarged edition” of the Sinhala-English Dictionary by Clough in 1887, one finds the Sinhala word “*lajja*” translated as “shame, punctuation modesty and bashfulness” (Clough 1887: 556), in the 1892 edition as “shame, shamefaced, shamefaced-ness, modesty, bashfulness” (Clough 1892 : 556). The Methodist Priest Charles Carter, known to be one of the earliest translators of the bible into Sinhala, who heavily depended on Clough’s lexicographic work, translates ‘*lajja karanavā*’ as “to put into shame” and the word “*lajjāva*” as “shame, modesty, bashfulness” (Cater 1923: 549). Cater

Sinhala-English Dictionary was first published in 1923. He associates the word “modesty” very closely with “*lajja*”. In the English-Sinhala dictionary printed in 1881 Cater equates “modest” with “*nisi lajja bhaya attāvū, vilibhiya attāvū, lajja kola āthi, lajji, vinīta, sādusīla, yatahat, nirahamkāra*”, the scale begins with “having appropriate “*lajja bhaya*” ending with meanings such as “servile” and “humble” (Cater 1881:301) . From about the 1880s the meaning of the English adjective “modest” seems to be located in the realm of “having shame” and the noun “modesty” given the meaning “*nisi lajjāva, hiriōtap, vinaya, vinītava*”.

Gunapala Malalasekara, who in 1958 published the more authoritative dictionary, the *Ingrisi-Sinhala Shabda Kōshaya* equates “modest” as a noun with “*nirahamkāra, vilibhiya āthi, aprgalbha, vinīta, pramānavat*” (Malalasekara 1958: 587). The 4th edition of this most popular dictionary which was revised by a panel of scholars in 2000, “modest” means “*tanpath, nirahamkāra, vinīta, vilibhiya āthi, madhyastha, hikmuni, nihatumāni*” (Malalasekara 2007: 644). The values for the word “modest” varies and not any more located prominently in the realm of “shame”. Translating the list given by the editors of the Malalasekara *Ingrisi-Sinhala Shabda Kōshaya* in the 2000 edition, one sees that the scale what “modest” could mean ranges from “controlled, not-proud, following a moral conduct, having a sense of shame, moderate, controlled by a set of rules, not-proud”. To me, only “*Vilibhiya āthi*” points to a connotation of respectability as accepted by the community who regard themselves as “cultivated or civilized”, as ‘*vill*’ is a derivative of ‘*val*’ which has the original connotation of “wild” (De Zoysa 1967: 2397).

The compound *lajja-bhaya* goes back to the pali-compound “*hiri-otap*”: according to the Sinhala English Dictionary (1967) by AP de Zoysa, it means “fear of dishonour” (De Zoysa 1967: 2848). When

consulting the original usage of “*hiri-otap*”, in the Pali-English Dictionary of the Pali Text Society, one discovers that it has another connotation: “fear of sin”, or “shame of fear and sin”, as it appears in the *Tripitakaya* pertaining to the behaviour of Buddhist monks (Rhys Davis 1959: 732). The original meaning of “*hiri-otap*” is linked to the practice of evil and harmful deeds. It is how a monk observes his own conscience to avoid all kinds of evil. As such, “*hiri-otap*” primarily governs the mind from harmful deeds, pointing to a self-controlling mechanism. A monk may not engage in evil and harmful deeds not because society may perceive as “*a-lajjā*”. As seen in the *Anguttara Nikāya*, the two words appear in a list of powers: *Saddhā* (faith), *sati* (mindfulness), *hiri* and *ottappa* etc (Naynatiloka 1952: 83). As such, *hiri* and *ottappa*, that guard the behaviour of a Buddhist monk, have no moral connotation such as “modesty” in a Theravada Buddhist context. The *Sigālōvāda Sutta* and the *Vyaggapajja Sutta*, discourses that set certain rules to the laymen, do not mention any rules how “modestly” women should be dressed. As such, according to the preaching of the Buddha, “*hiri-otap*” are rules to be observed by the ordained *Bhikshu*.

The *Sanhinda Ingrīsi-Sinhala Mahā Shabda Kōshaya* (2009), by Sucharita Gamlath equates “modest” as an adjective with following categories: 1. “*hirotap sahita, vilibhiya āthi, lajjashīli*. 2. *Nirahaṅkāra, tanpat, vinīta, hikmunu, hadiccha, nihatamani, madhyasha, sādhusīli, apragalbha*. 3. *pramānavat, sāmānya, anādhika*”. The first category seems to be derived from the Clough-Cater concept of “modesty”, the second category located in the realm of humbleness, good upbringing and moderate, the third denoting moderation. “Modesty” as a noun is described as one of five categories: 1. “*vinīta bhāvaya, vinītakama, maryadava*”, 2. “*hirotap, hiriya, vilibhiya*”, 3. “*Krāmanvitatava*”, 4. “*pārishuddhiya*” 5. “*sādhusīlaya*” (Gamlath 2009: 1301).

In the prose of Sinhala Literature one may very seldomly discover the compound *lajja-bhaya* used to control the behaviour of women. I cite a few isolated examples here: In the 13th century *Saddharma Ratnāvaliya* one reads of the merchant Soreyya: When he was transformed into a woman, because he wished to be the wife of a good looking Arhat monk, he fled from the vehicle in the state of *lajja* (“*Ū lajjā va vahānāyēn bāsa palā giyoya*”) (Gnanawimala 1961: 340). Patāchārā in her distraught state of mind ran naked, without the “*hiri otap* garments” (“*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*. Here the compound *lajja bhaya* does denote a state of “shame” (ibid. 730). But one may notice that all the instances cited from the the 13th century *Saddharma Ratnāvaliya* denote an “extra-ordinary state”: A sex change, distraught state of mind and intoxication due to excessive consumption of alcohol.

However, an exception from the same literary source is unavoidable: The lady Rōhinī, in the *Rōhinī bisovun gē vastuva* does not leave her inner chamber to greet a visiting monk because she was in a state of “*lajja*” (*Lajjāven no-āvōya*). The reason for not greeting the monk is mentioned. Her upper body was covered with a skin disease (*lajja vana tarān kusta rogayek siyal sirura vasā ātīviya*) (ibid. 873). She however obeys the request of the monk and comes out. The author of the *Saddharma Ratnāvaliya* does not narrate, what she was wearing when she came out. But the original Pali source, the 5th century *Dhammapadattakatha* narrates, that she takes off the silk upper garment that covered her infected body and appeared in front of the monk (*patta kanchuka patimunchivā āgatam*). This clearly shows that the old custom as reflected in the 5th century text was to take off the upper garment when showing respect to a person of higher status.

Queen Rohini is not ashamed to appear in front of the Buddhist monk with out covering her diseased upper body.

Ariyapala too sites the original Pali source (Ariyapala 1956: 320). Citing the *Dampiyā Atuvā Gatapadaya*, which is the commentary to the Pali work, Ariyapala notes that Rōhini, 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. The visual information seen in the paintings of Simon in the 1920s and Buddhist murals of the 19th century corroborate this evidence². The argument that women belonging to a lower caste had to take off the upper garment when entering a Buddhist temple or the house of a Sinhala chieftain of higher social rank, cannot be applied here because Rōhini was lady of high standing.

None other than Martin Wickramasinghe points to the prudery of the monk, who translating the *Dampiyā Atuvā Gatapadaya* into the *Saddharma Ratnāvaliya*, 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 idea of the “modest” woman as imagined by the moralists of today does not seem have its roots in neither the Pali-Theravada tradition, nor in the Sinhala literature but an invention of early 20th century. The exposure of the female body was not seen as sinful to evoke “*lajjā*” in the mind of the woman.

The Pan-Indian style of representing the female in art

A certain uniformity in costume with regard to the upper body of females can be noticed all over the Indian subcontinent, which I call the “Pan Indian Style”. The early Buddhist sculptures and carvings

seen in regions that were influenced by artists commissioned by Maurya Rulers, examples cited by art historians as “Mathura” Art of the *Kuśāṇa* Rulers, the gate ways in *Sāñchi* commissioned by the *Sunga* Dynasty, and sculptures in *Nāgarjunakoṇḍa* of the *Iksvakū* Dynasty all reveal that the upper part of the female body was not covered (see images 10 and 11). Dehijia has pinpointed that the sensuous figure of *Sirima devatāva* was commissioned for the railing of the Bharut Stupa by a Buddhist nun. The *Chanda Yakshi* was donated by a Buddhist Monk called Buddhakhita 100 BC (Dehijia 1999: 5) (see images 12 and 13). The stupas of Sangol, Bhārūt, Sāñchi and Nāgarjunakoṇḍa display the highest mastery of classical Indian art. Undoubtedly they attracted many pilgrims since the first century before Christ. The nudity of the females (*Yakshīs*) placed around the stupa it seems, was not a source of distraction for visitors over centuries. Even a Buddhist nun and a monk donated female figures revealing their beauty to embellish the stupa.

This “Pan Indian Style” seems to have engulfed Sri Lanka in the 5-6th century leaving examples from the Sigiriya Frescoes for the modern art historians to make assumptions. The images of the Goddess Tāra from 7th to 10th centuries provide evidence seen in Buddhist Art of Sri Lanka (see images 14 and 15). Pallava and Chōla Art of South India too show Goddesses of Indian origin clothed in a *Dhōti* kind of lower garment and only jewellery embellishing the necks, breasts and arms (see image 16). The Sri Lankan Tāras are unique: They being Ascetics (*Tapasvins*), are not adorned in Jewellery and do not wear any upper garment. This “Pan Indian Style” can be traced in the earliest murals of the mid 18th century Kandyan Period, were Ascetics such as Mandri Devi from the *Vessantara Jātakaya* and the mother of the Asetic *Sāma* in the *Sāma Jātakaya* do not wear any upper garment (see image 17). In the murals of the Western and Southern Maritime regions, the fashion of wearing cloth and shawl over the shoulders seems to

emerge around mid 19th century, then following the European Victorian fashion by switching to an ankle length gown and long sleeved blouse, displaying “modesty” as the westernized Sinhala society dictated. I cite two examples from the same scene of Māra’s daughters attempting to seduce the Buddha from *Ranvella Navamuni Vihārāya* from mid 19th century close to Kathaluwa (Galle) and from the *Rankoth Vehera*, in Panadura painted about fifty years later (see images 18 and 19).

An unbroken tradition of women being able to display their beauty is recorded in the literature and arts right up to mid 19th century. As notions of “modesty” seem to seep into the Europeanized strata of the Sinhala elite, Women of higher strata begin to mimic the colonial masters, firstly by wearing ankle length gowns with long sleeved jackets, then draping a six meter cloth in order cover this, that was worn in India called “saree”³.

The women seen at the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy by the artist from Prague may have captured less Europeanized women wearing two unstitched cloths. If one may dismiss them as “rodiya women”, a common notion, that all women without upper garments captured by the colonial lens were “rodiyas”, then the paintings may have been done at the Temple of the Tooth on an open day for rodiyas⁴.

The hybridity of what is called “Saree”

The “Kandyan Saree” today is a hybrid costume. To what extent this way of draping the *osariya* with an upper garment called “*hāttaya*” can display the “true Sinhala identity” may have to be reconsidered. The stitched upper garment “*hāttaya*” may have been invented in South India as the word has its origin in the Dravidian languages as “*sāttaya*”. The “leg-o-mutton sleeve” which was in vogue in the West towards the end of the 19th century has been indigenized as “*boricci*

atha” of the Kandyan woman. This upper garment is never seen in the murals of the Kandyan school of art of the 18th and 19th centuries but in photographs of upper class ladies posing for the cameramen of the colonial masters.

The *osariya* since the early 20th century has been changing more to satisfy the requirements as dictated by the fashion industry of the West: How could the *osariya* ever exist without accessories such as a hand bag, an umbrella, handkerchiefs and shoes with heels? The *osariya* clad “Arya Sinhala women” is only able to keep up to the hallmark of “Sinhala-ness”, due to the *osariya* being draped over her skirt in a most complicated and innovative way. If one may unwrap the *osariya*, “Arya Sinhala Woman” immediately becomes a “western woman” in a skirt – a “*Sāya*” – and the very much Anglo-Indian blouse called “*hāttaya*” of with or without “leg-o-mutton sleeves”. Is the “*saree*” or “*osariya*” then only six meters of cloth wrapped around the body to cover up the “European-ness” worn closest to the skin?

Males too about one hundred years ago wore a tweed cloth over the trouser to cover the “European-ness” underneath the “Redda” becoming the “*Redda asse Mahattaya*” (the gentleman underneath the cloth). As such, is the saree clad lady a “*Redda asse Nona*”?

The length of the borrowed “leg-o-mutton sleeves” imported from Europe may vary, ending up in the forearm, which is then called “*boricci atha*” today (see image 20). This mode of dressing, is not older than a century. When creating the most suitable costume for freshly invented the “Arya Sinhala Woman”, she was advised to turn away from the western dress. In an effort to indigenize the costume of the upper class women, one seems to have “invented a tradition” of the “*ohoriya*” or Kandyan Sari, as the most befitting for the women of

the nation state being fashioned in the early years of the 20th century. However Anagarika Dharmapala's mother Mrs. Mallika Hewavitharana (nee Dharmagunawardhana) had been instructed to wear a sari on a pilgrimage to India in the late 19th century.

Judging by the different sources, it seems that the fashion to wear the "Kandyan Sari", as we see it today, was imposed on women from the non-Kandyan, low country, upcoming maritime and urban families takes shape about the turn of the century, coming into full bloom in the 1920s. Anagarika Dharmapala's mother, the daughter of 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.

Today the *osariya* too has undergone changes, evolving into a "Made Up Saree", which is an assemblage of stitched fabrics and frills. Former presidents and first ladies seem to adopt the *osariya* when they are in power and reject it when the lime light on them fades. Seldom does a bride today wear the unstitched *osariya*. The "Made Up Saree" is seems is more practical and smarter than the original *osariya* from the times of Anagarika Dharmapala. Flight attendant's *osariya* serving in the National Carrier Sri Lankan Air Lines even has pockets today. The reader of this article, as such, is free to question, if this hybrid costumes "*sāriya*" or "*osariya*" - which is not even as old as the Colombo Harbor - can claim to represent a "true Sinhala Buddhist Identity". Insisting on *saree* as a dress code that reflects a national identity seems to be the projection of males, who never seem to realize, that they must also decolonize themselves by shedding their shirts, pants, ties, shoes and jacket to display a national identity.

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. Even today one may notice that wives of Brahmins in Kerala do not wear any stitched upper garment underneath the saree covering the upper or lower body. Sinhala literature of the pre-colonial era very seldom describes a stitched upper garment. In the rare cases it was called "Kañchukaya", which means "covering" in Pali.

Concluding comments

Based on the evidence in the dictionaries compiled by the western educationists, "modesty in dress" to me, is a burden the Buddhists inherited from protestant missionaries. Pre-colonial Sinhala literature describe the female body with all its beauty. Pre-colonial Buddhist Art stands evidence for a more open minded representation of the female figure that was inherited from India before colonization.

By providing linguistic evidence, this article has demonstrated that the notions of "modesty" as preached by Christian missionaries were happily taken over by the vanguards of the Nationalist Movement early in the 20th century. The saree was chosen to display the "modesty" of the *Ārya Sinhala Kula Kantāva* in the upcoming urban spaces, where Buddhism had to face critique from Christian Missionaries, as women traditionally did not cover their breasts with a stitched upper garment. The visual information from mid 18th century murals demonstrate that in the Kandyan region only privileged women were allowed to wear an upper garment or jacket, called "*Moja Hātaya*" (see images 21 and 22). The privilege of wearing the "Moja Jacket" seem to have been enjoyed by both males and females (see images 23 and 24). The frill around the neck, for both males and females called *Manthaya* too is a ruff inherited from the West. When inventing a suitable costume for Buddhist girls, the

ruff was attached to the jacket of the “*lamā saree*” or “children’s saree”.

Falling in line with the Judo-Islamic tradition, which imposed face veils, veils and long gowns on females entering religious space, Sri Lankan Buddhists too adopted the veil and white gowns, handkerchiefs, fans, white gloves, bouquets, hand bags and shoes when brides were given in marriage. In the 1920s the white gown was replaced by a white saree. In some isolated cases the white veil and bouquet of white flowers still remains. Even if the bride chose the Kandyan *Osariya*, accessories of Western origin such as hand bag, heeled shoes, and flower bouquets are preserved.

At the conclusion, this article touched briefly on the hybrid nature of the saree. Those who argue that the saree is the only costume women should wear to display their cultural identity, will have to point out, which cultural identity such a hybrid saree is to represent.

Traditional Buddhism, we can clearly see, did not preach “modesty in dress” by covering the female body. If we are to regard Nanda Pethiyagoda’s claim that “women covered themselves from head to toe in a saree” more seriously, then at the conclusion of this article, I would question more provocatively: Has the saree now become the “Sinhala-Buddhist” equivalent to the “*Abaya*”, “*Hijab*”, and “*Niqab*” in a weird attempt to cover all Sri Lankan women “from head to foot” in a saree?

End notes

1. 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 19th century Bengal.
2. For details please refer my article “Covering the Female Body: Transition seen in Buddhist murals from 18th to 20th century” published in the website of the National Heritage Trust. The text was read at the monthly lecture no. 38 on the 29th March 2012 at the HNB Auditorium Colombo 10, Sri Lanka and published in. “Thuppahi’sBlog”. Thuppahi.wordpress.com/2013/08/22/covering-the-female-body-transition-seen-in-buddhist-murals-from-the-18th-to-20th-centuries/ Accessed: 24th November 2013 at 1.30 hrs.
3. “Is modesty in dress also a white man’s burden?” as first presented at the International Conference of Asian Studies. 26/27th July 2012 in Negambo, Sri Lanka.
4. In an academic paper titled “Gendering the Colonized and Dressing the De-Colonized Female Body” to be published in Nevedini, Journal of Gender Studies, I discuss the authenticity of the photographs in circulation as marketed as “Rodiya Women”.

Image No 1



Three Women at the Temple of Kandy, Ceylon.- Tavik Frantisek Šimon

Image No 2



Buddhist-Temple in Kandy - Tavik Frantisek Šimon

Image No 3



Stairways of Kandy Temple, Ceylon - Tavik Frantisek Šimon

Image No 4



The Buddhist Temple - Tavik Frantisek Šimon

Image No 5



Pindapatha Scene from Sailabimbaramaya, Dodanduwa.

Image No 6



Detail from the Pindapatha Scene (Sailabimbaramaya, Dodanduwa). See how the upper garments are draped to pay respect to the monks.

Image No 7



Ivory comb from the National Museum, Colombo

Image No 8



Carving from the Embakke Devalaya, Pfilimatalāwa.

Image No 9



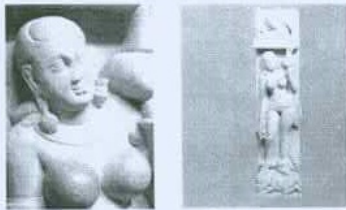
Dancer from the Telipatta Jatakaya in Mulgirigala Rajamahāvihāraya.

Image No 10



Yakshi found in Didarganj – 3rd century BC in Patna Museum.

Image No 11



Yakshi with drinking vessel found at the Buddhist site Bhūteshvara in Mathura Museum

Image No 12



Sirima devatava on the railing of the Bharut Stupa Indian Museum Calcutta.

Image No 13



Chanda Yakshi on the railing of the Bharut Stupa in Indian Museum Calcutta.

Image No 14



The standing image of the Goddess Tara from 9th-10th century found between Trinco and Batticaloa now in the British Museum.

Image No 15



Samādi Goddess found in Tālanpīya near Kurunāgala from 7th-8th century in the National Museum, Colombo.

Image No 16



Pārvatī as consort of Siva from the Ālahana Piriveṇa, Polonnaruwa from the 11th century in the National Museum, Colombo.

Image No 17



Mandrī Dēvi from the *Vessantara Jātākaya* from the from the *Mādawala Tampiṭa Vihāraya*.

Image No 18



Māra's daughters from *Ruvella Navamuṇi Vihāraya* close to Kathaluwa.

Image No 19



Detail of Māra's daughters from *Rankoth Vehera*, Panadura.

Image No 20



Leg-o-mutton sleeves. Infanta Eulalia in the 1890s

Image No 21



Uraga Jatakaya from the Madawala Viharaya. Note all women do not wear an upper garment in private space.

Image No 22



Mother of King Vessantara, Madawala Viharaya. Note the "Moja jacket" worn by the queen.

Image No 23



Dunuvila Nilame from Madawala Viharaya Wearing "Moja Jacker"

Image No 24



The "Moja Jacket" is worn by both male and female devotees in the Murals of the Lewella Gangāramaya

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