



Understanding social constructs of the Kandyan period: An examination of apparel accessories depicted in temple murals belonging to the Kandyan period: A study conducted on selected temples of the Kandyan period

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Abstract

The advent of Sangamiththa, along with the Sri Mahabodhi sapling and a delegation drawn from 18 castes, including those of the painter/artist caste contributed to the propagation of the fresco and mural tradition, which had begun way back in the third century in the island, in numerous ways. This art, which was developed along traditional lines prospered during the Kandyan Period. Despite the permission granted for the adorning of a deep orange colour (Guru in the vernacular) or white, the Vinaya Pitka's section 'Chullavagga Paliya' prohibits the depiction of the human form. Literature: including legends, and chronicles related to King Dutugemunu, Parakramabahu I, and the Visuddhimagga has taken note of the mural and fresco culture of the island. The kingdom underwent a series of chaos from its establishment as a kingdom in the early 17th Century to the coronation of its last king – Keerthi Sri Weera Parakrama Narendrasinghe in the 18th Century. Literature suggests that Keerthi Sri Rajasinghe rises to the throne in 1747 AD and that he seeks the consultation of Ven Welivita Saranankara. The literature also suggests that the king embraced the teachings of Lord Buddha under the tutelage, guidance and influence of the Ven. Welivita Saranankara Sangharaja, and further led an attempt to reform Buddhism in the island, which resulted in a Renaissance of Buddhism. The king also undertook the renovation of Buddhist viharas previously destroyed by invaders, while building several new viharas. During this period, art in temples took a novel form, with specific characteristics, including the use of symbology, developing an independent tradition of art, differentiating itself from the classical tradition. This paper attempts to answer the question, "Was the artist able to demonstrate the class structure that existed in the society of the time?", with the objective of examining and unraveling through the apparel accessories depicted in the temple frescoes/murals, to understand elements of the society during that period. This study employed primary and secondary data to explore the frescoes and murals in temples belonging to the Kandyan period in detail. This study concludes that the artist of the Kandyan period, using symbology and apparel accessories in the Temple art of the period, has managed to portray the Kandyan society of the period and its social constructs successfully. This study reveals that the exemplary artist/painter of the Kandyan period has, in fact, employed apparel accessories of the period, including jewelry, on the characters in frescoes/ murals that form temple art. The schematic use of these characters in the art that the artist has not personally seen, is a testimony to his/her effort.

Key Words: Artists, Attires, Contemporary Society, Kandyan Paintings, Temple

1. Introduction

Those who are interested in history and its nostalgia may show a special interest in exploring the study of paintings and the decoding of paintings. They often pay significant attention to the murals and frescoes of the temples.

Since pre-historic times, rock art and murals had been practiced around the world. Cave paintings in Altamira, Spain provide evidence for prehistoric paintings. We can identify murals and paintings that have been produced throughout human and social evolution, all the way from pre-history to the modern era (Bandaranayake & Jayasinghe, 1986).

The origin and evolution of Sri Lankan art/paintings could be divided into periods. The painting tradition began in the prehistoric era and evolved through the Anuradhapura, Gampola, Kotte, and Kandy eras. The Kandyan era saw the spread of this painting tradition across the island, including many places of historical importance, belonging to this period (Bandaranayake & Jayasinghe, 1986).

The paintings of the Kandyan era have been identified by various names such as 'Kandyan paintings' and 'upcountry paintings'. Researchers should examine the reasons for the variety of descriptions of paintings belonging to the Kandyan era. Scholars, including L.T.P. Manju Sri, S.A. Wickramasinghe, and Nandadewa Wijesekara described those paintings as 'upcountry paintings', 'Kandyan paintings' and 'Nuwara paintings'. However, the rationale for this description had to be elucidated by explanations of scholars, such as M. Somathilaka, who states in one of his books that, "These paintings are introduced as 'upcountry or Kandyan' paintings because these paintings were painted in the temples belonging to the Kandyan era and supported by the Sinhala kings, as well as those paintings specially identified in the boundaries of the Kandyan kingdom" (Somathilaka, 2002).

Further decoding these Kandyan paintings Somathilaka (2002) states that "there prevailed a division that went beyond the geographical or administrative." He presents examples from various other regions which were not under the rule of the Kandyan kingdom at that time, but possess similar characteristics in paintings, such as; the Mulkirigala temple, Old Kelani temple, and Telwaththa temple. Moreover, it is evident that it is impossible to completely refute the cultural and geographical division as 'upcountry' and 'low country'. Also, it can be recognized that this art bears traces of the influence of the British. According to the factors mentioned by Somathilaka in his book "*Purathana Sri Lankawe chithra kalawa*" /"Art in ancient Sri Lanka," it is more reasonable for these paintings to be called 'of the Kandyan tradition' rather than 'upcountry paintings' or 'Kandy paintings'.

Initially, art did not receive the patronage of the kingdom. One reason could be the fact that the state should be economically stable first, to bring in political stability. According to sources, in the mid-18th century, kings: Kirthi Sri Rajasinghe, Rajaadhi Rajasinghe, and Wimaladharmasooriya, paid more attention to the paintings and renovations of the temples. Also, most of the Nayakkar Kings in the Kandyan

kingdom supported art/paintings with religious, cultural, or political aspirations and used the paintings as a medium of propaganda.

Rev. Dewaragampala thero is identified as one of the skilled painters among Buddhist monks in the Kandyan era. Degaldoruwa temple is a special place among the other temples in the Kandyan era, painted by this monk. Traditional painting ancestries were established by that time, and the king acknowledged these traditional artisans by granting distinctions to them on the completion of work in temples built or renovated by the king.

One of the special characteristics of the Kandyan paintings is the limitations on the color order. This exception was helpful to carry out comparisons of the observable differences in artworks of the Kandyan period in 'upcountry' and 'low country' settings.

This research relied heavily on its primary sources of information that include *Chulawamsa*, *Dhaladawamsa*, *Vidura jathaka kawya*, *Mahawamsa*, *Sulu rajaawaliya*, and the *Sannas*.

Kandyan paintings could be easily identified at a glance. Moreover, a detailed examination of these works, including the fine lines, colors, and style, could reveal the characteristics and traits of the painters.

It is important to understand the various development projects carried out by the various entities to identify the paintings. Determining whether the temples had been rebuilt or renovated is a crucial factor that should be given serious attention. The evidence for renovation remains in the layers of paint belonging to different time periods and different rules. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, in his book *Medieval Sinhalese Art* (Coomaraswamy, 1955/1962) notes that Degaldoruwa temple, the Temple of the Tooth and Gangarama temple, Kandy had such paintings, and therefore belonging to different patrons or periods.

The study of the 'Kandyan Art Tradition' gives close attention to the inspection of the human figures in the paintings. Various scholars have diverse opinions about the human figures in the 'Kandyan Art Tradition'. Close examination of the human figures in the 'Kandyan Paintings' revealed that the artists of the period either had not specialized or had specific knowledge of the depiction of the human form. One speculation would be that the artists had not received any special training in the painting of the human form. According to the tradition of teaching art during that era, prominence was given to the painting of the Buddha's figure or figures in the various pantheons of gods, where special attention to measurements had been given (Charlis, 2001).

Although the study of art in the 'Kandyan Period' is generally divided into 'Upcountry' and 'Low country' traditions, in some exceptional instances, south and west areas belonging to 'Low Country' also have had paintings of the Kandyan Tradition. The division of 'Upcountry' and 'Low Country'; paintings are based on subtle differences. According to Somathilaka (2002), "[although], there were no considerable

differences in the style and the skills, there were slight differences in the human figures, attires, background, background decorations, and the utilized colors.”

However, the Kandyan paintings which were spread across the country during the Kandyan era faced the wrath of invaders during the latter part of the Kandyan era. Dutch and British influences made inroads into temple murals, as identified in the southern and western provinces. “As seen in Thotagamuwa and Kelani temple murals, the Kandyan art tradition in the low country was influenced by Portuguese and Dutch painting, and it was no more attractive as Kandyan paintings, but with the differences of and novelty of new painting traditions contributing to effective westernization of the art” (Dhanapala and Dissanayake,1958).

Especially Low Country and coastal artists had been influenced by the Portuguese, Dutch and British characteristics and attitudes. For example, Subadhraramaya, Balapitiya, Galle, and Mulkirigala temple, have several paintings with foreign attire.

Not only the Low Country areas, but also the Kandyan traditional art in the Upcountry had undergone foreign influences. For example, in the ‘Mara parajaya’ painting (depiction) at Degaldoruwa temple, one archfiend carries a gun instead of a sword, which can be speculated as a foreign influence.

“Our gratitude for remaining paintings of Kandyan tradition should go to King Keerthi Sri Rajasinghe (1747-1780). There was not any temple in Senkadagala kingdom, which was repaired or restored by his support” (Dhanapala and Dissanayake,1958).

When considering the Kandyan painting tradition, and the studies and research carried out on those paintings, most researchers have only described those paintings physically, and not critically, descriptively, or comparatively. Mostly, they have;

- Described the temple paintings as they are
- Described the background preparation, color preparation, and the methods employed
- Described the origin, evolution, and history of these paintings

There were, however, several studies on the conservation, protection, and maintenance of those paintings. Thus, it was evident that studies carried out to identify the traditional Kandyan society depicted by the attires in the paintings were minimal.

Accordingly, there was a need and necessity to explore the traditional Kandyan society to understand the sociocultural mindset of that era by studying the Kandyan murals. This is the gap in the body of knowledge this research attempted to understand and fill.

The research objective is to understand whether the Traditional Kandyan society could be interpreted through the study of temple murals belonging to the Kandyan tradition.

2. Materials and Methods

Literature suggested that the Kandyan era experienced a series of social disturbances due to various foreign invasions, foreign influences, and internal power struggles. Upper body (waist up) nudity was a common feature of the time. However, temple murals outside the footprint of the 'Kandyan Kingdom' had paintings of females depicted as having their upper bodies covered. Specifically, this study chose to examine the murals of temples belonging to the Kamfyian period that displayed clear salient characteristics. For this purpose, four locations: Sooriyagoda, Medawala, Thelwatta, and Kelaniya, were chosen. This included locations: the Sooriyagoda and Medawala vihara displaying clear 'Kandyan Era' characteristics, The Telwatte vihara belonging to the Kandyan period, but displaying low country characteristics, and locations belonging to the Kandyan period, but located along the western coastal belt, a few locations in the central hills but also belonging to the 'Kandyan period', and finally, the Kalaniya Viharaya. The research employed a qualitative approach with observational techniques for data collection. Content analysis techniques were used to analyze the data.

3. Results and Discussion

The study enabled the identification of several factors and perspectives of the murals in temples belonging to the Kandyan period. They include caste, labor division, sex/gender, ornaments, jewelry, accessories, emotions, special occasions, and everyday activities.

3.1 Caste Conflicts

Robert Knox, who landed on the island during this period included the 'Kandyan era' in his work 'An historical relation of the island of Ceylon (1861) He explains the caste system that prevailed at the time in detail. He notes that when males came together, they greeted each other 'with clasped hands and a slight bowing of the back'. When a person of a higher caste would greet one belonging to a lower caste, the individual belonging to the lower caste would bow a little more, according to Knox (1861). Furthermore, the person belonging to the higher caste would acknowledge or accept this greeting with one hand. While retaining the bowing protocol, the female members of the castes would clasp their hands and hold them to their foreheads and accordingly bow – bending their backs as the males do, with those of the lower caste bowing further down (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Uruga Jataka, "Women leaving for the field", Madawala Temple (Source: Choti Wong, N., Premathilaka, L., Silva, R., 1990. Ceylon murals, Central Cultural fund)

The artist has portrayed the individuals through their garments in a manner that helps us identify certain characteristics. Among the female cadres of the Kandyan kingdom, those belonging to the higher castes wore garments covering both their upper body, as well as their lower bodies while those of the lower castes were only permitted to cover their lower bodies, revealing their upper bodies (Figure 2). However, in the style of Low Country art within the Kandyan tradition, all female forms were portrayed with 'upper body nudity' but adorned in jewelry and accessories. The more the specific location was displaced from the Kandyan centre, this tradition gradually became diluted. The low country vihara murals portraying women without any prejudices and demonstrating everyone in upper body nudity, thus rejecting divisions along caste lines could be one reason for this dilution. This could be due to a political ideology. At the time, Kandy was at the centre of power. The artist might have attempted to establish how different their ideology was, from the prevailing Upcountry ideology – specifically from the administrative centre of Kandy.

Legends suggest that King Sri Wikrema Rajasinghe fell for 'Ehelepola Kumarihamy'; who was threatened to have her toddler ground in a mortar or have her given away to a servant, upon rejecting the king's advances. Here, the threat of 'being given away to a servant' resonates with the humiliation of having to live in matrimony with a servant who is immediately recognized as of a lower caste. It can therefore be surmised that these traditions were prevalent at the time among the greater populace of the Kandy area (Coomaraswamy, 1955/1962).



Figure 2. Vesantara Jataka, "The parting at the city gate", Telwatta Temple (Source: Chotiwiangs, N., Premathilaka, L., Silva, R., 1990. Ceylon murals, Central

3.2 Labour division

Murals also display everyday activities, and these are splendid sources to understand the various labour divisions among the population of the time. Agriculture had been one of the prominent areas of labour division. Several murals depict the 'Bodhisattva turning paddy fields (Figure 3). The artists have paid attention to depicting the act in great splendor, with facial expressions of happiness. A well-built (endowed) bodhisattva (the father) is adorned with a cloth that reaches the knee. The head covering symbolizes protection for the head, which is also a depiction of a higher position within society that inevitably commands an

honorary title. However, the Bodhisattva is always adorned by the artist in everyday garb. The situations, and the movements of the figures, portray everyday activities. The ancient farmer in Sri Lanka did not culture his body. Instead his nutrition and his commitment to work bequeathed upon him his physique (Coomaraswamy, 1955/1962).



Figure 1. Uraga Jataka, “Bodhisatta ploughing the field”, Medawala temple (Source: Choti Wong, N., Premathilaka, L., Silva, R., 1990. Ceylon murals, Central Cultural fund)

The artist has managed to portray this notion through his art successfully. The murals also depict the son of the bodhisattva lending a helping hand with a sharp instrument in hand, attending to a plant/tree. While there are many interpretations of this setting, it is a known fact that children do not remain still and adventure always allures them. It is quite possible that this could be a portrayal of the hyperactivity of children within an ordinary setting, while adults attend to their activities of the day. The figure upon closer inspection denotes a pounding rather than cutting, despite the obvious sharpness of the instrument. The artists have also attempted to portray the awareness of the adult of the child’s activity, and a certain reprimand or caution being voiced at the child is visible in the art. The artist has portrayed a live event in an extremely skillful fashion. The continuing of ploughing amidst a tail-wagging bull portrays a continuous activity in everyday life, where the adults are concentrating on their activities while keeping an eye on the children. The child adorned in a garb extending to the heel points is not engaged in the field. It had been a tradition for the parents not to engage the children to grace the fields alongside them. However, there is a certain expectation with regard to the transfer of technology between generations portrayed by the children’s attendance in the seasonal activity (Coomaraswamy, 1955/1962).

3.3 Positions in society

The murals also depict individuals of positions in society, in the 18th and 19th centuries. In the illustration of the Jataka stories, the artist has made efforts to portray the king and his ministers and/or his other administrative officials. For this, the artist has incorporated clothing, accessories, and jewelry of the period, in his art. Coomaraswamy in his 'Medieval Sinhalese Art' has used three terms in the subject of headgear; crown, cap, and hat, according to the traditional practice.

During king Keerthi Sri Rajasingha's reign, a new form of a hat was observed in state officers' dress. The hat was known as *sudu wata toppiya* by Codrington (1910). In Madawala temple murals, Molligoda Adigar is depicted with such a hat. Codrington (1910) cites that 'tradition says that this round white hat was introduced in this reign.

There is also the suggestion that the artist infused life into the works by employing this technique (Figure. 4). It has to be noted that Venerable Saranankara Sangharaja's contribution, along with other philanthropists of the period, had contributed to the development of the art of the Kandyan period immensely.

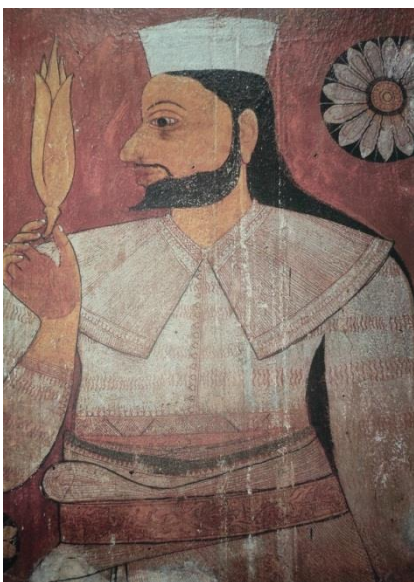


Figure 4. "Patron", Madawala Temple (Source: Chotiwoongs, N., Premathilaka, L., Silva, R., 1990. Ceylon murals, Central Cultural fund)

The artist has portrayed people in a similar form. However, he has employed characteristics such as the beard or the ornaments to configure the relative position of the individuals within the social hierarchy. This is prominent in the portrayal of the Jataka stories and state events.

3.4 Gender and ornaments

In the depiction of male forms of lesser castes; their torsos remain naked, while the male forms of the higher castes are depicted with bare torsos ordained with jewelry, symbolizing their status in society (Figure. 5). However, in some occasions, the male members of lower castes are painted with covered torsos. There is a clear distinction between males and females in the art.

In general, females are portrayed with naked upper bodies. This might be a result of the Indian influence to a great extent. The Indian female of higher caste is known to adorn herself in rich garments and valuable ornaments including jewelry (Figure 6). However, exceptions could be observed in the art of the low country tradition, of the Kandyan period, where the female is painted with upper body nudity, but also adorned with ornaments. The females of

the higher castes are depicted as covering themselves with a flimsy cloth from the head to bottom.



Figure 5. “Suddhodana informed of Maya’s departure”, Sooriyagoda Temple (Source: Choti Wong, N., Premathilaka, L., Silva, R., 1990. Ceylon murals, Central Cultural fund).

According to researchers, this might be due to the pressures exerted by the Kandyan kingdom on the areas in the periphery. However, the Indian influence has not been completely ruled out. Also, the age differences, and gender are clearly depicted in these art (Bandaranayake and Jayasinghe, 1986).

3.5 Motifs in garments

The lower garment style shows positive traces of South Indian influence. The lower garment arrangement is similar to the 17th century Nayak queens’ and noble women’s costumes. Indian style of lower garment is called the *sakaccha*, which reaches down to the ankles. The goddesses and queens wore these lower garments in a similar manner. The front of this garment is arranged decoratively, in the form of a fan, with shaped ends (see Fig 7) (Kumari, 1995).

The artists have illustrated certain garments in their art as motifs. In doing so, the artists have attempted to demonstrate a clear social hierarchy. The



Figure 2. Vessantara Jataka, “The King and queen of Sivi”, Telwatta temple (Source: Choti Wong, N., Premathilaka, L., Silva, R., 1990. Ceylon murals, Central Cultural fund)



Figure 7 & 8. Vesantara Jataka, “The Redemption of the children”, Medawala temple / Devadharmya Jataka, “The King and his three sons”, Kelaniya Temple (Source: Chotiwoongs, N., Premathilaka, L., Silva, R., 1990. Ceylon murals, Central Cultural fund).

In the depiction of the human forms, the lower body is covered in dhoti-like garments; sometimes up to the knee and the other times, all the way down to the ankle (Figure 8). When depicting male forms of higher social standing the motifs are simple and line-based. These motifs are most often vertical in direction. In certain instances, they have taken not only a vertical form but also a geometric form. These motifs of vertical and geometric shapes have also been used in the illustration of female forms. The artists have also employed motifs of petals and circular shapes in the ornamental adornments on female forms (Figure 9).



Figure 9 & 10. Vessantara Jataka, “The parting at the city gate”, Telwatta Temple / Figure 10: Vessantara Jataka, “The king and queen of Sivi”, Telwatta Temple

(Source: Chotiwoongs, N., Premathilaka, L., Silva, R., 1990. Ceylon murals, Central Cultural fund)

3.6 Ornaments, jewelry and accessories

It is a generally accepted norm that females are more prone to ornamental wear. However, the art of the period shows us that both males and females had worn ornaments and jewelry equally. It can be speculated as a visual declaration of character and pride.

These arts reveal that irrespective of age and gender, it is the position in society or the social hierarchy to which one belongs, that determines the number of ornaments on a person. These ornaments are used on the head, forehead, ear, nose, neck, arms, hand, fingers, waist, feet, and legs (Figure 10).

3.7 Emotions.

The power and skill of the artist is prominent in the representation of emotion in his or her art. Emotions such as happiness, bravery, commitment, sadness, and compassion are expressed in the art of the period. One can witness these emotions in the human forms placed both within domestic settings and outside; in the open environment.

3.8 Special occasions and everyday activity

Especially in the recital of the Jataka stories, the same character is present in different contexts, allowing the researcher to study them in their official or unofficial settings. Specifically, in the depiction of the bodhisattva or the Buddha, the artist has employed general attributes of society to differentiate the main character in compositions (Figures 4 and 5).

There are instances where the sponsor of the art or a very important person in society is painted. This could very well be the result of pressure arising from the administration or the political entities of the day.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The artist of the Kandyan period has been successful in portraying civil society and its constructs in the mural art of the temples of the Kandyan period. These arts include practical ornaments, jewelry, garments, and apparel of the time. Several societal constructs are depicted, including political, caste-based, and other positions in the social hierarchy. Economic, religious, and social information have been infused into the temple mural art of the Kandyan period.

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