

Dress for Dance; Costumes during Kotte Period

(1) Fashion Design & Product Development, Department of Textile & Clothing Technology,
Faculty of Engineering, University of Moratuwa, Moratuwa, Sri Lanka.
(email : virajinik@yahoo.com)

Abstract: Dress has always been a distinctive mark of a historical period. The aim of this article is to present a comprehensive study of dance costumes in use during the Kotte period. Two ivory caskets at present in the Munich Treasury reveal an interesting representation of period dance costume. This attire was inspired by South Indian culture. A profusion of jewelry and an abundance of drapery signified that these dresses were definitely utilized by the court performers of the period.

Keywords: Dance costume, Cultural aspects, Ivory caskets, Kotte period, South Indian inspiration

Introduction

The dress in historical times reveals curious, tantalizing cultural phenomena which signify their complex origins. Two Ivory caskets of the Kotte period at present in the Residenz Munich, Schatzkammer, Germany(Amin & Melanie 1999) (casket no 1- Inventory no 1241, 18x 30x 16cm and casket no 2, Inventory No 1242, 15x 25x14cm) provides an interesting representation of period attire inspired both by Portuguese and South Indian culture. These two caskets are said to have been produced under the patronage of King Buwanekabahu VIIⁱ (1521-1551AD) the eldest son of Vijayabahu VI (1513- 1521 AD) who sent a delegation to Lisbon carrying an image of prince Dharmapala(1551-1597 AD) with the intention of having it crowned to ensure the succession of Dharmapala to the Kotte throne.



Front side

Rear side

Fig. 1: casket no 1 (Schroeder 1990, 468)

Front slanting lid panel on the left - two Sinhalese dancers with a baby and a leaf

Middle and right panel - two dancers

Rear side in the middle - dancers and musicians

Rear side sloping lid surfaces on the - bearded sword dancers right and the middle panel



Front side



Rear side

Fig. 2: casket no2 (Schroeder 1990, 469)

Front slanting lid panel on the middle - two Sinhalese dancers

Rear side sloping lid surfaces on the middle panel - two dancers

There are eleven female dancers shown with seven types of costumes. The scenes depicted in both caskets show that it happened inside the king's court. Therefore it is possible to think that these dancers were the dancers who were attached to the dance platoon in the court. Most probably they would have been court dancers. These collections of dresses include exclusive patterned lower garments and highly developed and well structured head dresses. The unique forms and the shapes of the dresses portray a range of forms and styles. The study of dance costumes can be discussed under four heads. Which are,

1. Interesting picto-graphic representation
2. Some cultural aspects in the Kotte period.
3. Exclusive lower costume styles.
4. South Indian Influences

Discussion

Importance of Kotte period

Kotte was one of the kingdoms to which the lowlands were divided and lasted for 197 years (1400–1597 AD). It received many foreign influences from South India, Portugal, and Chinaⁱⁱ. Parakramabahu VI ruled 55 years (1411 - 1466 AD) and the country was prosperous and united signifying the last glorious period of Sinhalese history with notable achievements in peace such as trade, commerce, art, architecture, and literature. The Portuguese arrived in Kotte in the 16th century and became an influential factor in its political history. The 197 year reign of the 8 kings of Kotte ended with Dharmapala, grandson of Bhuvanekabahu VI, who survived for 46 years as a puppet king in the hands of the Portuguese.

Costumes and their cultural impact:

The costumes of the Kotte period were well developed artistically. Some of them stand out as period costumes found in history. Their external appearance is an indication of their cultural origin. De

Silva (1981, 93) has noted that 'Although South Indian influence was very prominent in the Polonnaruwa period onwards it was deeper rooted in every aspect of the Kotte kingdom than ever before. The upper crust of the Sinhalese society was fast becoming Hindu in outlook'. Similarly Schroeder (1990, 146) has stated that the 'Kotte caskets do not represent an indigenous tradition and were certainly influenced by South Indian works.' These two statements go to show that in the Kotte period South Indian influence was strong in the upper strata of society. It is important to note how South Indian influence penetrated into this period.

The former kingdom of Gampola was the source of Kotte culture. Bhuvanekabahu V (1371 -1408 AD) king of Gampola ruled Kotte as well in the early part of his reign. The Gampola period shows superiority in both art and architecture during the 70 years of its existence under four kings. South Indian influence comes to a zenith during this period. The best examples of South Indian inspired temples were Gadaladeniyaⁱⁱⁱ and Lankathilaka. Gadaladeniya was built by South Indian chief architect Ganeshwaracharya under the patronage of king Bhuvanekabahu IV (1341-1351 AD) and Lankathilaka was built by the architect Sthapathi Rayar on the directions of the chief minister Senadhilankara^{iv}. Senadhilankara was descended from the South Indian Mehenawara^v clan and, the sculptors who were employed at Gadaladeniya and Lankathilaka were brought from India (Mudiyanse n.d 81). The South Indian Vijayanagar Empire was at the peak of its development during the Gampola period. Dance and music developed in Hindu temples of the time and are depicted as graceful rhythmic figures in architectural friezes. This style was merged with Sinhala tradition (Ragavan 1967, 25). Gadaladeniya and Niyamgampaya dancing friezes are similar examples. The *Devadasi* dancing style had emerged during the Vijayanagar period as a ritual function in honor of the Hindu gods. Similar to this function a '*Digge Dance*^{vi}' began at some of the Gampola temples (Mudiyanse n.d 81) with distinct elements. Coomaraswamy (1956, 26) said that these Digge dancers were supposed to be of Tamil origin. Practitioners of the art would have migrated from the Gampola kingdom for the service of the court of Kotte. Craftsmen of the Gampola period would definitely have brought their artistic tradition to the

Kotte period because, the kingdom had been shifted already to Kotte while Gampola still existed as a regional kingdom. Therefore we can assume that the Gampola period was the origin of the artistic tradition of Kotte (De Silva 1998, 38).

Significance of the dance costumes:

A costume worn in dance has in it the quality of Rhythm. Even each type of attire has its own rhythm. However these rhythmic characteristics arise from the culture from which they originate. That rhythm is not a haphazard incident but evolved from the body movements. These are described in Shilpasastras (Shilpa texts). Every costume comes alive when it is worn on the human body. Skillfully choreographed movements of the human body can be enhanced by the delicate wraps and draperies of transparent textiles. However textiles that are two dimensional when worn on the bodies as costumes become three dimensional.

Rhythm is the essence of dance costumes and is also enhanced by accessories. Form, style, texture, proportion, shape, gravity, length, have been utilized successfully in these attires to emphasize rhythmic movements. Rhythm has also been facilitated by the sound of the accessories attached to the dance attire. Anklets and armllets are important accessories in this sense. Extended frills, long chords, layers of pleats, wads of pleats, detailed fringes, and decorated hem lines are also incorporated in the attire. Therefore the style of the dance costumes is not to be thought of as something independent of movement. Movement and garments are conceived as a single whole.

Interesting picto-graphic representation:

People of groups and organizations of a particular period share a common culture. The dress of these groups is indicative of the common culture. However these period dresses tend to conform to established rules and traditions linked to formal standards and a hierarchical structure. (Performance dresses could be regarded as a special case of organizational culture. These attires reveal objects of clothing as public and personal. It is very clear that these dance costumes signify a desired public image along with an understanding of appearance.)

The Kotte period, dance costumes have been identified as a well-known form of period attire. There were two categories of female dancers which can be identified by the descriptions of the Sandesha poetry. There were dancers who performed at the king's court and dancers who performed at Hindu shrines. The *Gira* (Parrot), *Hamsa* (Swan), *Kouvl* (Cuckoo), *Paravi* (Pigeon), and *Selalihini* Sandesha poems of the Kotte period have fascinating descriptions of the dresses and adornments of both categories. Among these the *Kokila* (Kovul) and *Hamsa* Sandeshas give an interesting account of dance performers at court and the *Paravi* and *Selalihini* Sandesha give an idea about the dresses and adornments of temple dancers. These poems have interesting glimpses of jewelry and the dresses worn. The frills, folds, materials used in dance costumes can be identified in these poems.

Evidence of some cultural aspects in the Kotte period:

The dance costumes represented in the ivory caskets of the time also shed some light on dance forms in Kotte. As shown above the literature of the time shows that dance was a strong cultural phenomenon. It has been a part of cultural ceremonies in two different contexts, secular and religious. Secular dance can be identified as the dance for aristocratic circles, and dance for the public. Religious dance was in honor of the gods. The former dance forms were meant for the amusement of royalty and the court. Every king had a dance company. Dancers performed with a considerable professional skill in front of appreciative audiences at the king's court. Dr P.H.D.H. De Siva has commented^{vii} on the presentation of dancers in the ivory caskets. He assumes that the six figures of dancers with impressive head dresses represented a ritual which was held at the court after the birth of the infant Prince Dharmapala. The figure carrying the infant Prince is identified as the queen mother, the royal consort of Bhuwanekabahu VII, with leaves of Neam (Kohomba) in the pose of *avadanava* or wishing the child long life. Other dancers are performing ceremonial dances before the infant Prince. However these are unsubstantiated assumptions. But they cannot be completely disregarded since it is a dancer who carries the infant. There is no valid evidence to establish that the female

figure carrying the infant is the consort of King Buwanekabahu VII. It is also possible that what the casket shows is a kind of ritualistic performance inside the court. As for religious dance, temple dancers have always been honored and rewarded by royalty in appreciation of their skill^{viii} in dancing in honor of a god as it was considered as an act of worship and several religious dance performances were held at many Hindu temples in the Kotte kingdom. Dancing in public was always connected with processions and carnivals which were held in the capital of the kingdom. All this goes to show that the art of dance had been very popular in the king's court of the Kotte period.

A range of exclusive lower costume styles:

The dress of the period can be distinguished between the upper garment and the lower garment. The word *style* means "a distinctive characteristic or way of expression". Style in clothing describes the lines that distinguish one form or shape from another (Kaiser 1998, 4). Accordingly style must have certain features. Thus in this period breast cups were used as an upper garment of all these dresses and skirts for the lower garments. There are two ivory caskets in which eleven female dancers are represented. Casket no 1 shows five lower garment styles and casket no 2 shows two types of lower garments and altogether seven distinctive styles each with unique features. The lower garments in both caskets can be classified as follows:

Style no 1 Layered garment Style no 2 Scalloped patterned, Style no3 Drapery wraps

Style no 4 Folded tights like garment, Style no 5 Folded Wrap, Style no 6 folded drapery , Style no7 Folded layered garment.



Fig. 3 Style no 1



Fig. 4 style no 2



Fig. 5 Style no 3



Fig. 6 Style no 4



Fig. 7 Style no 5



Fig 8. Style no 6

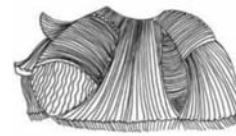


Fig. 9 Style no 7

Upper garments: Breast ornaments

The ivory carvings show four types of impressive breast cups identifying different styles. Flowery design cups flatter the breast and emphasize the feminine beauty of the nautch girls. Under the breast cups there are beaded pattern linings visible. This can be identified as the *Sthana Bhushanamau* in *Natya Sastra*. (Nirmala 1995)

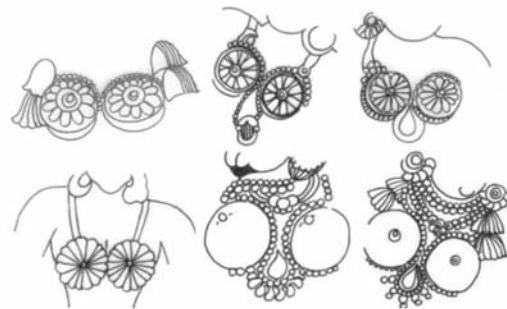


Fig. 10 Breast bands

Elsewhere the dancers expose their breasts which are encircled with pearl necklaces. Besides these the exclusive lower garments, folds and head dresses can be considered as significant fashion devices in dance costumes.

Fashion devices: Head dresses

A crown or high *makuta* was a common head ornament of the kings and the gods from the earliest times. A god is considered a replication of the king, because the kings' image was very familiar and the most influential live visual of that period. The artist portrayed an elaborate head ornament for the dancers in the ivory casket emphasizing the significance of court performers in comparison with the dancers that can be found for instance on the stone door jamb at Benthara Galapatha (fig.11) temple and the Ambulugala temple(fig. 12) which also belong to the Kotte period.



Fig. 11
Benthara Galapatha temple



Fig. 12
Ambulugala temple



Fig. 13
Ivory casket figure

Kotte is the only period in which impressive and imaginative head dresses are found. The shape of the head gear was in keeping with the dance costumes. Dancing damsels adorn their tresses in various ways to complement their beauty. The dancers enhance their images with beautiful head dresses and hair styles. The head gear was shaped in such a way as to be in rhythmic balance with the proportions of the face and the beauty of the countenance. There are six types of head dresses and, three types of women's hair styles, depicted in the two caskets. The secular poetry of the Salalihini (Wijesooriya 2004) gives an interesting glimpse of the aesthetics of head dresses. Verse 73 describes the dancers of Sri Jayewardenepura Kotte decking their heads with flowers. Furthermore it described flowers as being braided into the hair. Compared to the Galapatha and Ambulugala head ornaments the ivory carver exhibited clever forms and a range of structures. These structures function also as space fillers.

There are six types of head dresses and three types of hair styles depicted in both caskets.

Type 1- A crown of madalam flowers with hanging decorated strings

Type 2- A crown of madalam flowers with looping pearl strings

Type 3- A crown of layered flower buds

Type 4 A crown of conical structure with strings to control it

Type 5 - A crown of conical structure without strings to control it

Type 6 - A three layered crown.

Their forms suggest many ideas. These forms blended with the attire. The Aesthetics of these head dresses can be discussed under four heads, dimension, design, structure, and shape.



Fig. 14 Type 1



Fig. 15 Type 2



Fig. 16 Type 3



Fig. 17 Type 4



Fig. 18 Type 5



Fig. 19 Type 6

Dance costumes and South Indian influences:

Kotte was the period when the South Indian element was manifested in every aspect of the society. From the king to the royal court officials such as chaplains, court recorders, chief Brahmins, Prime Minister, were mostly Tamil in origin. Therefore one can assume that Kotte was greatly influenced by Tamil culture. Anthropologist Bruce Kapferer (1983,19) has said "that people do not proselytize their culture, but they do proselytize ideology". There were some elements inspired by South Indian culture which can be identified in the lower garments. The impressive use of surface texture is very remarkable in skirt no 2 (fig. 9). The skirt in figure 21 below is represented in a wooden figure (fig. 21) from the Hoisala period (12th cen). The Kotte period skirt was better developed stage of the style and shows more refined craftsmanship of skirt.



Fig. 20 Kotte dress



Fig. 21 South Indian dress, Hoisala (Huntington 1985, 325)



Fig. 22 Kotte headdress

Fig. 23. Virisidai

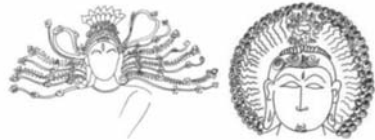


Fig. 24 Virisidai
(Sthapathi 2002, 132)

Fig. 25 Jatamandalam
(Sthapathi 2002, 130)



Fig. 26 South Indian headdress
(Michel 1995, 61)

The circular arrangement of a head dress is very similar to the head dress depicted in fig 25 known as Dakshinamurthi (Tamil God). Strings of pearls and ornamental ribbons also are shown here at the corner of the ears. This circular head gear is called *Jatamandalam* (Sthapathi 2002, 130). The swaying tresses shown here are more similar to those shown in figures 23, 24 *Virisidai* (Sthapathi 2002, 138) styles which are normally shown in the Nataraja dancing form. There are some textured ornamental garlands suspended from both shoulders. A bunch of pearl strands freely sway suggesting rhythmic movement. Figure 16 from Virabhadra temple in South India also shows some similarities in arranging the semi circular head gear.



Fig. 27 Kotte headdress



Fig. 28 South Indian headdress
(Postel 1989, 67)

Figure 28 from South India shows similarities in the arrangement where the crown is adorned with

flowers. This is called *Dancing Devi* (Postel 1989, 67). When analyzing all these representations it is very clear that the artist employed in the Kotte period was able assimilate elements from abroad.

Methodology

The qualitative method was adopted for the research. Sequence of observational studies with temple paintings, wood carvings, sculptures and ivory carvings at the Munich Treasury in Germany along with the continuous literature review with the use of documented manuscripts, records, published research and inscriptions were used to gather and sort data. Validation was confirmed with cross checking with literary sources and random interviews. Gadermar's interpretation theory applied for synthesis of data.

Results

The literary evidence shows that dress arrangements of court dancers and temple dancers are very similar. The costumes, the alluring jewelry and other accessories, the pleasing movements of the dancers and the stages of the dances performed also show similarities. The dance costumes are very important because the carver of the casket has attempted to show that the dress has been prepared for this performance. Furthermore, the magnificent creative head dress of the dancer is not described in the five Sandesa poems of the Kotte period. Perhaps the representation of a multitude of flowers in the head dress is intended to suggest their perfume. The artist (ivory carver) no doubt took the familiar dancers of his day for his creations. However dancers could have been the people who performed both in the court as well as in the shrines. These dancers may have worn a special head dress for performance at the king's court. This head dress may have been very similar to that of South Indian temple dancers. It was most likely that the dance scenes shown in the ivory carvings were performances at the king's court and not at the shrine. The results show that the Sri Lankan dance dress was made up of a rich set of possible combinations (South Indian and Sri Lankan) which entails authentic individuation of an outfit.

End notes

- i Jaffer Amin, & Schwabe Anne Melanie, *A group of 16th century ivory caskets from Ceylon*, Applo, March 1999, p 7

The two caskets in the Residenz in Munich are carved with images which allow us to date them more accurately. The first which depicts scenes relating to the embassy to Lisbon must have been made after the envoy from Kotte returned home in 1543, while the second illustrates political events of 1547 – 48 and is likely to have been made soon after. The earlier of the two caskets in Munich is carved on the front with scenes of the coronation of the effigy of Dharmapala and has rich gold mounts inset with cabochon rubies and sapphires. The front right and left panels depict respectively, the crowning by Dom Joao iii of the effigy of Dharmapala and the swearing of an oath of loyalty to the Portuguese crown by the young prince.

- ii Paranavithana .S, 1960, UCHC, vol 1, Gampola and Raigama, p 652,

The Chinese emperor treated the captives with consideration, set Alagakkonara and his family free, and ordered those from Ceylon to select 'the most worthy member of the tribe' to be placed on the throne. The choice fell on a personage whose name appears as Yeh-pa-nai-na- in the Chinese account. Accordingly he was sent back to Ceylon, bearing the seals of office and proclaimed king under Chinese suzerainty. The Chinese chronicle Woo-hee-peen has recorded that the king of Ceylon, obviously Parakramabahu VI, personally visited the Chinese Court, bearing tribute, in 1416, and 1421. In 1433 Parakramabahu Raja sent envoys to China bearing tribute. In 1436 the Sinhalese envoys who had been to China were sent back on board the tribute – junks from Java, an Imperial mandate having been issued to that effect. In 1445, the Sinhalese envoys to China went in company with those from Malacca. The last reference to Ceylon in

Chinese chronicles for this period for 1459, king of Ceylon sent envoys with tribute. Ibid, p 665

- iii De Silva, K.M, 1981, *The History of Sri Lanka*, Madras, p 94
- iv Mudiyanse, Nadasena, *The Art and architecture of Gampola period*, Colombo, p 25
Gadaladeniya inscription noted, Ganeshwaracharya, who as the name itself suggests was a south Indian.
- v Kulasoorya S, Anada, 1976, *JRAS of Great Britain Ireland*, No 2, p 141 .
Senadhilankara is a title and not a personal name. In the Saddharma ratnakaraya cited before, he is described further as Senevirat Mantriyana, that is a minister who is also commander of the armed forces. Ibid p 142
- vi Deraniyagala, P.E.P, *Spolia Zelanica*, 27, Part iii, p 305,
Digge dance was performed by the Alaththi Amma women as feudal service either before the King or at the temple where they danced at the preaching hall known as Dig – Ge. Digge or the Pillared porch was a main feature of the religious buildings in the Gampola period.
- vii .De Silva, P.H.D.H., 1975, *A catalogue of Antiquities and other cultural objects from Sri Lanka abroad*, National museum of Sri Lanka, p 72
- viii Ariyawathi, Ajantha, Narthana Vikashaya, *Maharagama*, p74
During the period of king Parakramabahu VI gifted many land grants to the Alaththi Ammas dancers who performed Digge dance at the god shrine. there were 24 female members in the group. Manikka Mahage of Sabaragamuwa, manikka Mahage of Egoda Kuttama, Hunuwila manikka mahage, Kandeniya Mahage are still performing the rituals dance to the god Saman at the Saman Devale Rathnapura.

References

- Bruce, Kapferer, 1983, *Exorcism & the Aesthetics of healing in Sri Lanka*, Bloomington, p19
- Coomaraswamy, A. 1956. *Medieval Sinhalese Art*. 2nd ed. New York: Pantheon books
- Ferguson, Donald. 1907. The discovery of Ceylon by the Portuguese in 1905: *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society Ceylon Branch*, vol xix, no.59: 284-400.
- Huntington, Susan.L. 1985. *The art of ancient India*. New York: Weather hill.
- Jaffer, Amin . & Schwabe, and Anne. Melanie. 1999. *A group of 16th century ivory caskets from Ceylon*: *Applo Art the international magazine of the oriental art*, 1-14.
- Jayasuriya M.H.F. 2001. *Vijayantatantra*. Colombo: Godage Book Emporium.
- Jayasuriya, Edmund. 2005. *Hamsa sandeshaya*. trans. Colombo: Central Cultural Fund Publication.
- Keiser, B. Susan. 1998. *The social psychology of clothing*. New York: Fairchild publication.
- Kulasuriya, S. Anada. 1976. Regional independence and elite change in the politics of 14th century Sri Lanka: *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain Ireland*, no.2:136-154.
- Kumari, Nirmala. Y. 1995. *Social life as reflected in sculptures and paintings of the late Vijayanagar period*. Madras: T.R publications Pvt Ltd.
- Michell, George. 1995. *The new cambridge history of India: architecture & art of South India*, Cambridge : Cambridge University press.

- Mudiyanse, Nadasena, n.d, *The art and architecture of Gampola period*. Colombo: M.D Gunasena.
- Pathmanathan, S. 1986/87. Buddhism and Hinduism in Sri Lanka AD 1300- 1600: Kalyani, University of Kelaniya, vol V/VI, 78-112 .
- Pieris, P.E.1992. 2nd edition, Ceylon the Portuguese era, Vol 1, Dehiwala: Thisara Publishers.
- Postel, Michel. 1989. *Ear ornaments of ancient India*. Bombay: Vakil & sons Ltd.
- Ragawan, M.D. 1958. *Spolia zelanica: Traditions and chronicles of the dance in Ceylon*. Vol 28, 205-216.
- Raghavan, M. D. 1967. *Sinhala natum*. Colombo: M.D Gunasena & co ltd.
- Schroeder, U, Von. 1990. *Buddhist Sculptures of Sri Lanka*. Hong Kong: Visual Dharma Publications.
- Senevirathna, John. M. 1915. The Mekhaladhama: *Ceylon Antiquary and Literary Register*, Vol 1, p II: 129-132.
- Silva, K.H. De and Abhayasinghe Wijayasriwardhane. 1953. *Sinhala sandesha vicharaya*. Colombo: Malcom book shop.
- Silva, K.M. De. 1981. *A history of Sri Lanka*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Silva, Nimal. De. 1998. *Art and crafts of Kotte*, Battaramulla: Cultural Department.
- Silva, P.H.D.H. De. 1975. *A catalogue of antiquities and other cultural objects from Sri Lanka abroad*. Colombo: National museum of Sri Lanka.
- Stahapathi, Ganapathi.V. 2002. *Indian sculpture and iconography forms and measurements*, Ahmendabad: Sri Aurovindo Society.
- Stella, Kranrisch. 1960, *Indian sculpture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania press.
- Wijesooriya, S.2004. *Sinhahala sandesha kavya*, Kotte: Shabageethwa Sanwardana parshadaya