

Eye-features



Various stages of draping



P.V.S. Jayarathna



With Sasheendra Rajapaksa



Rec
Diy
also

'Mul anduma'

Elaborate grandeur

By Poornima Ravishan Wijemanne

Along the walls of the long rectangular room are pictures of newlywed couples; the grooms fitted into puffed sequined, usually red, blouses with their hands resting on a swelling of clothing just above where the navel must be, inclining towards ecstatic brides, giving the impression of contemplating the bliss of a full belly. "Most of these faces should be popular and quite known to you," says P.V.S. Jayarathna, of whose work-room we have entered, pointing at the embarrassed looking smiling men and women in the pictures. Stationed at Hindagala, Kandy, Jayarathna is a maker of the traditional Kandyan dress called the 'mul anduma' and the pictures, his trophies, belong to his customers; couples who had gotten Jayarathna to dress them in the mul anduma for their weddings.

The 'mul anduma' roughly translates into English as 'the first dress', which should probably also be used to mean 'the dress of early (times)'. "This dress originated in 1815 and was worn by the Kandyan aristocracy in the days the Nayakkar dynasty was powerful, though never by the king," said Jayarathna. Judging by Kandyan wall murals, the king had worn the atamulu thoppiya (eight cornered hat) – a kind of hat, brim raised with eight protruding points – with a jacket of long, loose, frilly sleeves, and dhoti, trousers that stuck close to the ankle at the bottom but were slack and

baggy up. Other than being worn by the Diyawadana Nilames (officials of the Dalada Maligawa – palace, for the worship of the Buddha's tooth relic) and by the Basnayake Nilames (officials of the low country) when performing

certain functions of their office, the mul anduma was worn only by the aristocratic families and on important occasions. But with the power they had having completely evaporated, the veneration directed to them obviated, their residual snobbery made meaningless and a couple of generations of the Rathwaththes, Elpolas, Ehelepolas, Allegalas etc. having been living unconcerned of their heritage – the aristocracy has lost its exclusive claims to the mul anduma; it has now become immensely and increasingly popular as a wedding-day fashion across the classes, among low-country surnames and even the new, class-less surnames of Colombo; from the symbol of privilege and silencing authority, it has become something buyable over the a counter.

But still, according to Jayarathna, not every little stall or mere narrow crack in the roadsides that had begun selling the mul anduma, can give you the real thing, and after being given to compare a sample of his product and another from a Colombo shop, we are convinced too. The mul anduma jacket from Colombo has a profusion of cheap sequins that give off a terrible glare in place of the carefully woven labyrinthine patterns – which I shall describe momentarily – of the original. The lions, peacocks and other creatures that appear on the Colombo version are pathetic, paltry instead of the dignified and the fine. The impostor is made of a bright coloured crude material found usually on cheap furniture where Jayarathna’s jacket is made of soft deep coloured velvet. The craft of making the mul anduma and draping it on a person – for the trick is not just in the fine materials, but also in how it is dressed – is an esoteric knowledge, passed on by descent.

“In the beginning, there were mul anduma makers in Bowala, Warakadeniya, Manikjeewara, Kurunegala and Hindagala, but today, only I survive as a direct descendant of the original craftsmen: I learnt it from my father who learnt it from his father, who learnt it from his uncle...” claims Jayarathna. “Now people have started making bogus versions of the thing, allegedly keeping to the real ancient descendant traditions, I have seen some men made to wear saris (women’s clothing) in place of the kavaniya (the cloth draped around the legs in the mul anduma), they’ve dishonoured and abscessed the tradition,” Jayarathna, who had been in the real craft for 35 years and won presidential awards, laments angrily. He tells us that there is a greater demand for the mul anduma now among young men and women, but also many get swindled by the deception of the people pretending to know the real craft, but sell cheap imitations.

Originally, the craft of making and draping the mul anduma had been the possession of Indian Baiis – a race of Muslims who had come from India. After the effacing of the Baiis who were in the trade, Sinhalese men like Jayarathna’s ancestor took over. “I can remember my father having Baiis to work for him when I was a child. The last Baii I remember is Kapuru Baii of Nawalapitiya, after whom that family met extinction,” said Jayarathne. He had taken up his father’s trade after the latter’s death in 1993, till then, Jayarathna had been employed as a government servant and only helped his father, and not depended entirely on the trade.

The making and the draping of the mul anduma is admirably difficult and also an expensive affair; it cannot be just ‘clipped on’ the way it is available in Colombo. There are certain rites performed at different stages of the making and dressing, such as getting the dress and the wearer sanctified by pirith recitations (Buddhist verses in the Tripitaka, the canon of Buddha’s teaching), but alas, they, like the origin of the material used for the dress and method of draping it, are trade secrets – one has to be content with the mystery. It takes three months for Jayarathna and his 25 helpers to complete a dress, and half-an-hour to almost a full hour for even well practiced hands to drape it over a person.

First, one wears the raeli kalisama or the frilled trouser of plain white. Then, the rathu pachchawadama, a bright red coloured cloth and above it the kavaniya, a cotton cloth with a large golden border at the bottom and sometimes thin lined squares over the rest. All this form the lower part of the dress. A cloth called the somana has also been in use in place of the kavaniya, which is still used for the upasampada festivals (the festival marking the end of a monk’s apprenticeship or learning as a samanera or junior priest) of Buddhist monks belonging to the Asgiri and Malwathu

factions, but is now nonexistent as part of the groom's dress. The thing, when properly draped, should look like, in Jayarathna's words, 'a peeled plantain flower', with layer upon layer and the characteristic bulbous swelling around the hip anybody who had seen the mul anduma should notice. About around the hips a broad belt with a large brass coloured buckle with a gurula carved on it hold the drapes together. All the cloths used for the lower part are gathered above the belt to form the mohottala gaetey or the fat knot on which the groom is seen resting his hand in wedding pictures – a mohottala gaetey, when properly done, we are informed by Jayarathne, should show all three colours of the raeli kalisama, rathu pachchawadama and kawaniya – white, red and cream. Into the mohottala gaetey is thrust the short dagger or siriya, the golden thin hilt of it ending with an open mouthed gurula face should be held by the groom while resting his hand on the gaetey.

The upper part of the dress is a velvet jacket called the 'villuda haetey'. It is low-collared, the shoulders swollen outward – a feature of traditional Kandyan clothing famous as the 'borichchi atha' – and ends with rectangular flaps of the same material hanging around from a level near the elbow. A broad intricate pattern runs along the border of the jacket; the border is composed of two thin frames of little identical five-petal sequin centred flowers that run beside a thicker, more complicated, design of florid vines; everywhere appears a miniscule flower, calculatedly put at the centre of every blank space. On either of the front breast flaps is a lion prancing with a bent ended Sinhalese sword in one paw. At the centre of the backside would be woven either a large lion – like the one in the national flag – a swan, a peacock, a gurula (a two headed bird with a eagle-like beak) or the entwined swan couple (hansa poottuwa); though there is a practice of weaving elephants to the back, Jayarathna tells us that this is wrong. The shoulders have large flowers at the front and the rear: it is a lotus circled twice by two different kinds of petal; the outer circle of petals more numerous and less thick than the other. Everywhere else is speckled evenly, symmetrically, with the little five-petal flower found in the border. Though this description may create a chaotic picture of glittering convolutions, the jacket actually looks well ordered and symmetrical and if a hansa pootuwa is used at the rear, it achieves perfect vertical symmetry. All details are hand woven in thick twisted thread of dull gold: sequins are only occasionally used. The jacket comes in cream, dark red and a slightly illuminated but deep blue. Sometimes, Jayarathna explained, grooms request the thread work to be done in silver instead of dull gold – the colour usually used for the Nilames dress in the Kumbal perahera (the perahera preceding the grand Dalada perahera).

Then, there is the hatharamulu thoppiya or the hat with a square top stretched down, or in cases where this is made of metal, up, at the four corners and embellishments on the sides. Above all this, one wears a host of jewellery; pre-eminently, the necklace with the large gurula shape reaching the mohottala gaetey. On the middle finger of the right hand one wears the mudu mal gasa, a semi-spherical golden signet ring with designs in gems. On top of the hat is the mal gasa, a small crown made of a miniature tree with two five branch tiers, all branches ending with a hanging red drop of gem or imitation.

When it is put together on a man, he looks, one cannot help but think, a combination of grandeur and comedy; but, after a while, the eye gets accustomed to the excessively ornate strangeness next to awkwardly smiling brides, then the mul anduma's intended dignity, as a symbol of power and privilege, emerges through.

The Kandyan Costume: A brief history

By Rathindra Kuruwita

The first description of the Kandyan costume of the Chieftains appears in Robert Knox's "An Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon." Knox stated that, during the time of Raja Singha II, "the nobles wear doublets of white or blue Callico, and about their middle cloth, a white one next to their skin, and a blue over the white. And a blue or red sash girt around their loins and a knife with carved handle, wrought or inlaid with silver, sticking in their bosom."

But it is during the times of the Nayakkars that the Mul Enduma began to take the shape of what see today. H.W. Codrington, in his *Kandyan Chiefs and Headman and their dresses* (1910), claims that, during the reign of Kirthi Sri Rajasingha (1747 -82), Kandyan chiefs wore a round white hat, white muslin pleated jacket with short sleeves, buttoned up the front, tuppotti and belt. He also states that the round white hat was introduced at his reign.

"At the same time, disawe costumes show the development of a hat. The hat was square, the crown is high and has four stiff square pieces, the upper edge of each being semi circular. The lower part of the jacket is heavily plaited, as are the nether portions of the sleeves, which reach to the elbows. The jacket is fastened up the front, two necklaces, pleated mante, belt and tuppotti complete the costume," he said.

Although at first, different Chieftains wore different types of costumes, by the 1820s, a degree of standardisation was apparent in the costume. H.W. Codrington notes that it was customary that the chiefs of the first rank were presented with gold and silver belts and embroidered cloth or silk for jackets, as the badge for office on the day of their appointment.

"A supply was sent in 1817 for that. The distribution of the remains in 1824 was interesting. Diyawadane Nilame, Maha Lekham, the Disawe of Nuwarakalawiya and part of Matale, and Maha and Uda Gabada Nilames, and Padikara Lekam were each presented with six cubits of blue Damask silk with Gold flowers, and a belt of broad gold lace with Silver flowers, three and half cubits of length. While the Disawe of Udapatharata, Atapattu, Nanayakkara, the Padikara and Wadanatuwakkukara Lekams and the four Basnayaka Nilames each received a Gold lace belt with same dimensions. So it appears by 1824 all the principal chiefs wore the same thing," Codrington said.

But the best description of a Kandyan Chieftain comes from Jonathan Forbes Eleven years in Ceylon. "The Court dress of a Kandyan Adikar- minister of state and justice consists of a square cap resembling a huge pincushion. Sometimes made of white stiffened muslin, but in a full dress of Scarlet cloth embroidered with gold, and having an elevated peak in the middle, surmounted by a precious stone. The jacket is of tissue, with short plaited sleeves, very full upon the shoulders, and fastened with amethyst buttons; over this is worn a white tippet of plaited muslin, with gold edging. On the lower part of the body, over white trousers, which are tight at the ankle and terminated by a frill, a number of white muslin and gold figured cloths are bound in cumbrous folds around the waist by a broad gold belt; in this is stuck a knife with a richly carved handle. Gold chains are worn around the neck and hanging down upon the chest, bangles on the wrists, and immense rings, which almost conceal their small hands, complete the decoration of a Kandyan Adikar.

Codrington also claimed that "the dress of the other chiefs differed but little from that of the Adikars, except that their caps were white and circular. The peculiar and distinguishing insignia of Adikar are their silver stick, and immense whips eight or ten feet in length, two inches in breadth. (made of the fibres of a plant like strong hemp), and producing a report almost equal to firing a pistol; seven of these emblems of power and punishment"

But strangely, in the last 150-odd-years, the costume has not seen many changes. The major reason for that maybe the

people of the country have been doing their utmost to hold on to their traditions as much as possible. “In the last hundred-odd-years, nothing major has changed. Well, the length of the costume has been reduced and a lot of new people are involved in making the costumes,” Jayaratna said. “Maybe it is because we needed to hold on to our traditions on the face of imperialists,” he added.
