

Heritagization of Weddings: A Case Study of the Sinhala-Buddhist Community in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Heritagization may be defined as the process of making heritage, and events are important performances through which heritage is displayed. This study tests the hypothesis that weddings in Sinhala-Buddhist society in Sri Lanka have undergone heritagization during recent decades, particularly through changing patterns of wedding costumes. It also examines the ideological context that has shaped this phenomenon. Data were collected through a survey questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Respondents WERE Sinhala-Buddhists who had held their weddings between 1980 and 2021, as well as those planning to hold weddings in the current decade. Questionnaire responses were obtained from 500 respondents, representing 100 weddings in each decade, and 50 in-depth interviews were conducted. The data were analyzed using simple statistical techniques and content analysis. The findings show that Western full suits and saris with veils were preferred in the 1980s. After gradual changes, a marked shift occurred between 2010 and 2020, with the dominance of 18th- and 19th-century Kandyan elite dress and Kandyan osari carrying heritage value. This shift may have been driven by the demand to glorify heritage within the highly contested field of ethno-religious identity in post-war Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Event studies; Heritage studies; Heritagization; Social impact of events; Weddings

1.0 Introduction

Events are widely used as performances or public rituals in the making and reinvention of heritage among communities across the world (Testa, 2020; Elias-Varotsis, 2006; Leal, 2016). However, the process of heritagization in the context of events has not yet been adequately addressed in research on Sri Lankan society, although some studies have examined the making of history as heritage and the formation of collective ethnic identity on the island (Dewasiri, 2013; Wickramasinghe, 2013).

There is a profound relationship between heritage and identity (Smith, 2006). Heritage can be considered a pivotal element commonly used to create collective identities among ethnic and religious communities. Events function as occasions to form and display collective identities, shared histories, cultural practices, and ideas, as noted by Jaeger and Mykletun (2013). Some studies have shown how traditions are used at weddings to express historical continuity and formulate collective identities (Roche & Hohmann, 2011). In a broader sense, anything that creates collective memory can be considered heritage.

The present study examines the hypothesis that Sinhala-Buddhist weddings have undergone heritagization during the last decade (2010-2020) and in the present. It does so by investigating changing patterns in the wedding costumes of brides and grooms from 1980 to 2021 and by tracing the ideological setting that triggered this phenomenon within the ethno-religious context of post-war Sri Lanka. No published research has yet examined the heritagization of events or the use of events as performances of ethno-religious identity formation in Sri Lanka. This study therefore makes an initial contribution

toward filling this research gap.

Sri Lanka may be considered an ethno-religious mosaic comprising several groups, including Sinhala-Buddhists, Tamil-Hindus, Sri Lankan Moors, and Christians, along with a number of smaller communities. According to the most recent census, conducted in 2011, the dominant Sinhala-Buddhist community accounts for 70.2% of the population, followed by Tamil-Hindus (12.6%) and Sri Lankan Moors (9.2%) (Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka, 2012). Southern, Western, and Central Sri Lanka are predominantly Sinhala-Buddhist, while the Northern and Eastern districts are dominated by Tamil-Hindus. The open economy was introduced in Sri Lanka in 1977, and its socio-economic impact began to emerge in the 1980s; therefore, the 1980s are used as the first decade in the present study.

Since 1980, Sinhala-Buddhist brides and grooms have used several types of wedding costumes. Bridal costumes include the sari with veil, Kandyan osari, normal osari, gown, and normal sari, with varying degrees of popularity across decades. The sari has Indian origins, while the veil was added as a result of Western influence. The Kandyan osari is generally perceived as a costume originating in the Kandyan period (late 16th to early 19th century AD), although there is no clear evidence of its use during the early Kandyan period. However, it was worn by Kandyan elite women in the 19th century. Groom's costumes used during this period include the Western full suit, the Kandyan male elite dress known as *Mul Anduma* or *Nilame Anduma*, and the national dress consisting of a sarong and shirt, often with a shawl. The elite male costume changed over time and took its modern form in the late 18th and first half of the 19th century (Codrington, 1910). It consists of twelve items, including trousers (in the later Kandyan period), a cloth known as *tuppotti* wrapped over them, a short-sleeved jacket, a four-cornered hat, and jewelry. The method of wearing the costume developed gradually (Ranathunga, 2013).

2.0 Literature Review

Heritage and heritagization are complex concepts interrelated with various social, cultural, and economic factors. Heritage is often used as an ideology for formulating the collective identity of a community. Research literature has attempted to analyze these concepts from broader perspectives. The heritagization process takes objects, events, sites, performances, and personalities from the past and converts them into experiences in the present and even the future (Milošević, 2017). Cultural heritage can be viewed as a complex idea that evolves over time and helps formulate collective memory; it also nurtures a common understanding of the past and social cohesion within society (Catrina & Isnart, 2014). Heritage is not merely a physical entity. It is a social and cultural process that shapes ways of realizing and engaging with the present (Smith, 2006).

The process of heritage making, invention, and reinvention can be interpreted as heritagization. This complex phenomenon is shaped by internal and external variables within a particular society. It is used to reintroduce the past in ways that support present political systems by recycling old ideas, transforming them into relevant narratives, and formulating solidarity among community members (Nilsson, 2018). Ashley and Terry (2018) explain that heritagization depends on who conducts the valuation, for what reasons, and for whom the heritage is consumed. They further describe it as a mode of cultural production used by communities to create a sense of their world, locate their position within it, and project their voices in the public sphere.

Sjöholm (2016) proposes four ways in which heritagization operates in relation to state authority:

reaffirmation of already designated heritage, designation of new objects as heritage, reinterpretation of already designated heritage, and dismissal of previously designated heritage. This framework can also be adapted to wider social contexts. In this process, values are granted to specific resources on the basis of social or scientific criteria, converting them into heritage entities. These values vary from one country to another, from one socio-religious context to another, and from one subgroup to another (Catrina & Isnart, 2014). Heritagization marks objects or practices from the past as important and may be related, to varying degrees, to nostalgia.

The significance of heritagization in the formulation of collective identity, along with its expected outcomes for groups and individuals, has been discussed widely in research literature. Members of a group may acquire a sense of belonging, collective connection, well-being, happiness, and enhanced confidence by contributing to group cohesiveness. This solidarity nurtures smooth group functioning and strengthens community pride (Ashley, 2014).

Events are widely used to make and display community identities that distinguish one group from another. Heritage is fundamentally intangible, vital, and alive, and events of meaning creation and remembering are staged at particular places to convert them into places of heritage (Smith, 2006). Several chapters in *Heritage and Festivals in Europe: Performing Identities* discuss this issue mainly in the European context (Kockel et al., 2020). Events that seek to become heritage are structured forms of collective action and performance that have undergone the process of heritage making (Testa, 2020). Festivals and events allow communities to define and redefine their cultural identities through the experiences and practices they display, inspire, and assist in introducing (Elias-Varotsis, 2006). Leal (2016) concludes that heritage making is also group making and points to a strong relationship between social cohesion and collective identity. The development of an extended self, social self, or social identity is a fundamental human motivation, while a shared sense of oneness or we-ness is created through real or imagined shared attributes and experiences of community members in contrast to others (Jaeger & Mykletun, 2013).

It is conventionally accepted that there is a strong correlation between the consumption of cultural, heritage, or ethnic costumes and the display of collective identity. Ethnic costumes have been defined as ensembles and modifications of the body that capture the past of group members and display the items of tradition that signify cultural heritage (Eicher & Sumberg, 1995, as cited in Chattaraman & Lennon, 2008). Chattaraman and Lennon (2008) point out that the strength of ethnic identification is a significant factor in the consumption of cultural apparel and the attribution of emotions and meanings to such consumption. Clothing may be viewed as a coded sensory system of non-verbal communication in space and time, and ethnic dress is linked to the protection of identity through meaningful heritage (Eicher, 2010). There is an intimate connection between people and their traditional dress, which lies at the core of ethnic identity (Disele, Tyler, & Power, 2011). More importantly, Thowfeek (2019) discusses how Sri Lankan Muslims have differentiated themselves through conservative clothing in order to represent a reformed identity in response to challenges, threats, and tensions.

3.0 Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-method research design combining quantitative and qualitative methods. It is widely accepted that these two methods complement each other (Bryman & Bell, 2003). The quantitative method is considered scientific in nature (Daniel, 2016), and quantifiable data are perceived to provide greater precision (Crowther, Bostock, & Perry, 2015). In contrast, qualitative

methods help construct social realities. A multi-method approach was therefore considered appropriate because it draws on the strengths of both methods (Neuman, 2014).

Quantitative data required to track changing patterns of wedding costumes were obtained through a simple survey questionnaire. The respondents were Sinhala-Buddhists who had conducted their wedding ceremonies between 1980 and 2021 and those expecting to stage their weddings during the current decade. Questionnaire responses were collected from 500 respondents, representing 100 weddings for each decade and covering districts where the community is dominant. The accidental sampling method was used for data collection. This technique is frequently applied in quantitative studies and is characterized by affordability, ease, and ready availability of subjects (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). It was selected for this study because it was suitable for obtaining data from a large sample of 500 respondents. Qualitative data used to understand the ideological setting behind the selection of specific wedding costumes were obtained from 50 in-depth semi-structured interviews.

Quantitative data were analyzed using simple statistical methods, as statistical techniques are essential for the proper analysis of quantitative data. Content analysis was applied to qualitative data within an anthropological approach. This method was selected because of its strength in analyzing social phenomena.

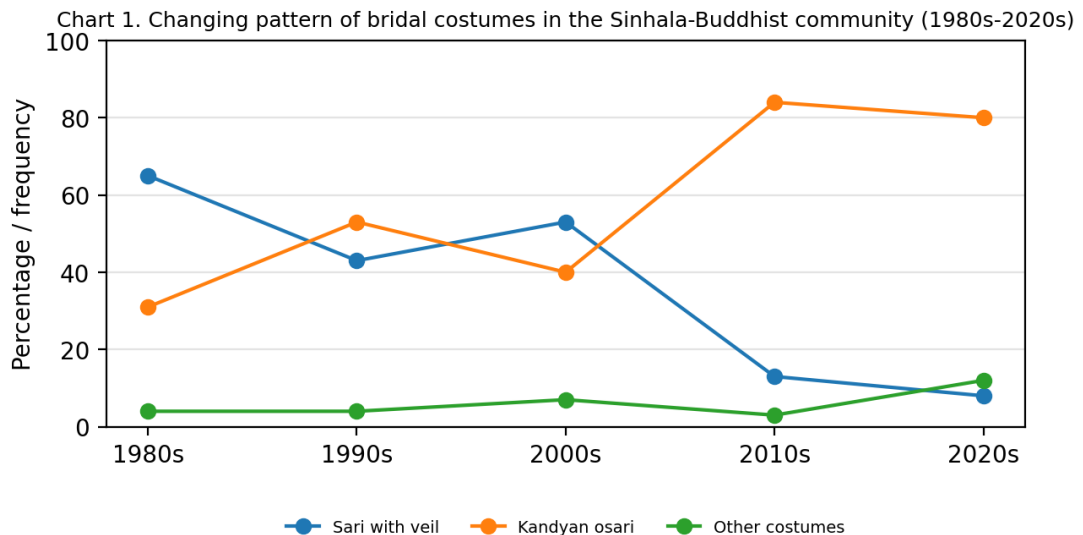
4.0 Findings

Data on wedding costumes among Sinhala-Buddhist weddings covered five decades, from the 1980s to the 2020s, including both recent weddings and intended weddings in the current decade. Bridal costumes were classified into three categories: Kandyan osari, sari with veil, and other costumes. Groom's costumes were also classified into three categories: Western full suit, Kandyan male elite dress (Mul Anduma), and other costumes. Table 1 presents the frequency of bridal wedding costumes in the Sinhala-Buddhist community from the 1980s to the 2020s.

Table 1. Frequency of bridal wedding costumes in the Sinhala-Buddhist community from the 1980s to the 2020s

Decade	Sari with veil	Kandyan osari	Other costumes	Total
1980s	65	31	04	100
1990s	43	53	04	100
2000s	53	40	07	100
2010s	13	84	03	100
2020s	08	80	12	100

Table 1 shows that the dominant bridal costume from 1980 to 2009 was the sari with veil, although its use gradually declined throughout the period under study. In the 1980s, 65% of Sinhala-Buddhist brides wore this costume; however, its popularity fell to 8% in the 2020s. In contrast, the Kandyan osari gained increasing popularity, especially after 2009. Its use reached 84% in the 2010s and 80% in the 2020s. Interest in other wedding costumes, including gowns, normal osari, and normal saris, shows only slight growth in the present decade. The latter two costumes are not generally considered special wedding costumes and may be selected for financial reasons, although their use remains low.



The chart indicates a major change in the bridal costume pattern of Sinhala-Buddhist society after 2009. The use of Kandyan osari widened substantially, while the popularity of the sari with veil declined sharply.

Table 2 presents the frequency of groom's wedding costumes in the Sinhala-Buddhist community from the 1980s to the 2020s.

Table 2. Frequency of groom's wedding costumes in the Sinhala-Buddhist community from the 1980s to the 2020s

Decade	Western full suit	Kandyan male elite dress	Other costumes	Total
1980s	89	08	03	100
1990s	85	08	07	100
2000s	73	20	07	100
2010s	44	47	09	100
2020s	33	54	13	100

The Western full suit was the most widely used groom's dress in the 1980s, with a high frequency of 89%. Its popularity declined in later decades and reached 33% in the 2020s. In contrast, the Kandyan male elite costume (Mul Anduma) was much less popular in the 1980s and 1990s, with a frequency of 8% in both decades. Its use increased after 2000 and reached 54% in the current decade. The 'other costumes' category mainly includes the national dress, consisting of a sarong and shirt often worn with a shawl, and military ceremonial costumes worn by military personnel. The use of other costumes, especially the national dress, shows slight growth in the 2020s.

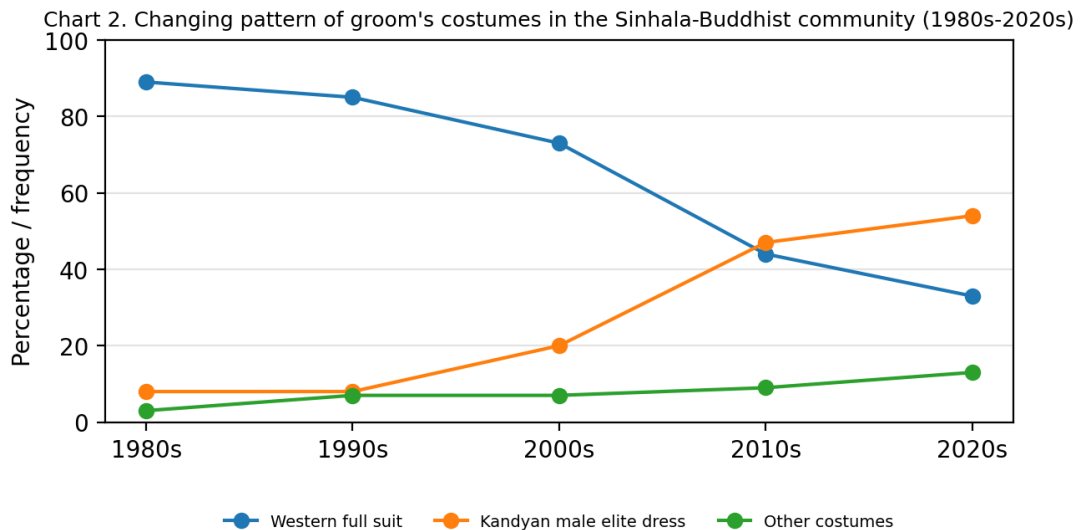


Chart 2 shows the changing pattern of groom's costumes in the Sinhala-Buddhist community from the 1980s to the 2020s. Two contrasting trends can be identified: a gradual decline in the use of Western full suits and an increasing preference for the Kandyan male elite dress, especially after 2000. The most important development is the establishment of the latter as the dominant groom's costume at Sinhala-Buddhist weddings in the 2010s.

Qualitative data were collected from 50 respondents through semi-structured interviews in order to understand the concepts and motivations behind the selection of wedding costumes. The majority of interviewees who had worn, or were willing to wear, Kandyan osari and Kandyan male elite dress stated that tradition and the perception of heritage were key motivations for selecting these costumes. Other major reasons included beauty, elegance, and the preferences or influence of close family members and peers, particularly the influence of brides in the case of grooms.

It was noted that brides often strongly influenced the selection of the groom's dress in order to ensure a perfect match between the two wedding costumes. Brides and close female relatives showed greater concern for the selection of heritage costumes, such as Kandyan osari and Kandyan male elite dress, than their male counterparts. According to several female interviewees, a specific additional reason for preferring Kandyan osari was the perception that the wedding provided a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to wear it with unique accessories, including seven necklaces and special forehead jewelry known as thella. In contrast to the practice of dressing best men and page boys in similar Kandyan elite male costumes, the full Kandyan osari with jewelry is not worn by bridesmaids, flower girls, or brides on any other occasion in their lives. It is noteworthy that the groom's Mul Anduma is always associated with the bride's Kandyan osari, although the latter may also be worn with a Western full suit or national dress.

Some female and male interviewees perceived Kandyan wedding dress as related to Buddhist identity. A few female respondents stated that, as Buddhist women, Kandyan osari should be worn for the Poruwa ceremony, the traditional ritual element and central focus of Sinhala-Buddhist weddings, which is conducted on an auspicious platform.

The qualitative data also reveal the religionization of the Kandyan male elite dress as a wedding costume. Pirith, or chanting of selected parts of Buddhist doctrine, is conducted and sacred threads are tied with blessings around the right arms of the groom, best men, and page boys by Buddhist monks a few weeks before the costume is worn. They are also required to refrain from consuming meat and fish from the day of pirith chanting until the removal of the dress at the end of the wedding. This practice did not exist in the past, when the costume was worn by Kandyan elites as a marker of high social status. The new practice adds a religious value of sacredness to the costume. One extreme case was revealed by an interviewee who delayed starting sexual companionship with the bride because he was wearing this sacred costume.

5.0 Conclusion

The heritagization of Sinhala-Buddhist weddings can be recognized through changing patterns in bridal and groom's costumes, particularly the emergence of Kandyan osari and Kandyan male elite dress (Mul Anduma/Nilame Anduma) as dominant costumes after 2009. The majority of interviewees who preferred these costumes stated that their main motivation was associated with the heritage or traditional value of the costumes.

Both costumes carry historical value, as indicated by the term Kandyan, which refers to the last independent kingdom of Sri Lanka before the beginning of British colonial administration in 1815. The groom's dress is widely referred to in the native language as Mul Anduma or Udarata Mulanduma, which may be translated as 'dress of the root' or 'Kandyan dress of the root.' Some leading wedding shows in the country now have official Mul Anduma partners, reflecting the emergence of wedding costume businesses that specialize exclusively in Kandyan male elite dress.

Milošević (2017) defines heritagization as a process through which objects, events, sites, performances, and personalities derived from the past are converted into experiences in and for the present and future. The reinvention of new heritage value for already perceived heritage is one category of heritagization (Sjöholm, 2016). The Kandyan elite male dress already carried historical heritage value, and a new religious value has now been added to it in the secular context of weddings. This may have been influenced by Buddhist religious processions in which lay custodians of shrines, mainly from Kandyan elite family backgrounds, wear this costume.

It is important to understand the ideological setting that has shaped this phenomenon within the social, cultural, and political context of modern Sri Lanka. The year 2009 marked a turning point in modern Sri Lanka, when the long civil war between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ended with the military victory of state forces. The highly contested nature of ethno-religious identity in post-war Sri Lanka has been discussed by several researchers (Dewasiri, 2013; Wickramasinghe, 2013; Zuhair, 2016; Thowfeek, 2019). It is commonly accepted that all major ethnic groups in the country, including Sinhala-Buddhists, Tamils, and Muslims, experience partly real and partly imagined or politically constructed challenges, threats, and tensions in relation to other ethnic groups.

The historical consciousness of Sinhala-Buddhist society acquired new significance after the war and created a demand to redefine history in support of its claims (Dewasiri, 2013). This phenomenon may have functioned, at least partly, as a driving force behind the special attention paid to historic costumes rooted in the Kandyan era. Wickramasinghe (2013) explains the hegemonic heritage discourse

of the Sinhala-Buddhist community, which seeks to consolidate the idea of a glorious national heritage through various performances. Weddings are well-qualified events for this purpose because of their strong emphasis on tradition. Several aspects of weddings beyond costumes may also be used in this process, although those aspects are beyond the scope of this article. Recently, Sri Lankan Muslims have differentiated themselves from other ethnic groups through the selection of conservative clothing to represent a reformed ethnic identity (Thowfeek, 2019). In this context, the heritagization of wedding costumes and their increased use may have been driven by the demand to glorify heritage in the highly contested field of ethno-religious identity in post-war Sri Lanka.

This article contributes to the understanding of event-based heritagization and the use of wedding costumes as agents of that process in Sri Lanka and beyond. The study can be recognized as an initial attempt to view event-related heritage as a process in the Sri Lankan context from the perspective of heritage studies.

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