

# Fashion as a Resistance Method for the Afro-Sri Lanka Community

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**Abstract** – This research investigates Afro Sri Lankan fashion as a dynamic medium of resistance and cultural identity. Through an ethnographic approach, the study delves into the Afro Sri Lankan community's unique fashion practices, focusing on six participants residing in Sirambiadiya, Puttalam. Drawing from primary data collected through in-depth interviews and participant observations, the research contextualizes Afro Sri Lankan fashion within its historical roots in slavery and colonialism, examining how the community has preserved its cultural traditions and adapted them to contemporary contexts. Secondary data from literature on Afro Sri Lankan history, cultural diversity, and cross-cultural perspectives on fashion persistence further inform the analysis.

The findings reveal that Afro Sri Lankan fashion, deeply intertwined with African, Portuguese, and Sri Lankan influences, serves as a vital expression of cultural identity. The community employs vibrant colors, intricate fabrics, and stylistic adaptations that reflect their diasporic heritage and social resilience. Traditional attires like sarongs and blouses, as well as performance outfits for Manja dances, are central to their sartorial expressions. Fashion acts as a tool for preserving cultural practices, transmitting ancestral knowledge, and resisting cultural assimilation. The community's engagement with African-inspired designs, such as large hoop earrings and head wraps, reflects an ongoing diasporic connection while emphasizing their distinctiveness within the Sri Lankan cultural fabric.

The research identifies key determinants influencing Afro Sri Lankan fashion, including cultural values, group discussions, economic challenges, and diasporic connections. Vibrant color palettes and cotton fabrics are predominant preferences, often constrained by limited purchasing power and access to high-quality materials. Creative interpretations of attire demonstrate the community's adaptability and resourcefulness, ensuring that cultural heritage remains relevant in modern contexts. Challenges such as limited resource availability, cultural suppression, and economic hardships highlight the vulnerabilities faced by the community, further underscoring the significance of their fashion practices as acts of resistance and identity assertion.

*The study sheds light on the critical role of oral traditions and cultural inheritance in sustaining Afro Sri Lankan identity through fashion. Generational storytelling and community-driven initiatives, such as proposed cultural preservation projects, are pivotal in combating cultural erosion. The Afro Sri Lankan community's fashion practices not only reflect their resilience but also serve as a counter-narrative to historical marginalization, providing a platform for self-expression and cultural reclamation.*

*The research contributes to the broader understanding of fashion as a sociocultural tool for marginalized communities to assert their identity and resist cultural erasure. By documenting Afro Sri Lankan fashion practices, this study emphasizes the need for preserving cultural diversity within Sri Lanka while offering insights for designers, policymakers, and cultural practitioners. Future research could extend to other Afro diasporic communities, exploring shared narratives of resistance and identity through fashion.*

**Keywords:** Afro Sri Lankan, fashion, resistance, identity, ethnography



Figure 1 : The community dispersed throughout the island (Karunaratne, 2020) , Right : Ancient Slave Island (Fernando, 2012 )



Figure 2 : Manja Performance (Kaffirs of Sri Lanka , 2023 )



Figure 3 : Color preferences of the traditional attire. Right - Female attire, Left - Male attire



Figure 4 :Casual wear of 6th, 5th and 4th generations and Manja attire (Perera, 2023 )

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