

## **Kumari Living Goddess' Dress and Ornaments**

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Clothes are for our protection, safety, shows social status, identification and modesty. We wear clothes not only to cover and protect our body, but to make us look more elegant as well. Clothes can make us feel more attractive, build our self-confidence to express our personality and also help us identify with other people. People wear clothes for many different reasons, it could be psychological and social reasons also. Clothes exposes the personality of a person to some extent, often tells a lot about a person as well. Clothing may also function as adornment and an expression of personal taste or style. Every country has its own traditional dresses, specific to the country's culture and climate. Traditional dress is the ensemble of garments, jewelries, and accessories rooted in the past which reflects their traditions. The clothes that I have chosen to do research is a traditional dress and ornaments of "Living Goddess" Kumari from Kathmandu, Nepal.

There are several stories on how Kumari traditions have started. It is said that in around 15th Century, goddess Taleju used to visit the king, Jay Prakash Malla, and played dice for hours. One day, the king had strong amorous desire toward the goddess Taleju. No sooner had he moved a step towards her, the goddess Taleju disappeared. And soon, the king heard the voice of Taleju "from now on you will never see me in my original state again because you have committed a big crime in trying to seduce me. You will soon be punished to death. However, if you want to atone for your crime, have a temple built for me wherein I will reside in the form of a virgin girl from a low caste family" (Bhattarai and Shrestha 2010). It is also believed that Kumari festival was established by Jaiprakash Malla when the goddess Taleju came in his dream and said, "You will lose the state shortly and another dynasty will take over. If you want to prolong your rule, build a house for me and start a tradition of festival" (Bhattarai and Shrestha 2010). Then the King constructed a Kumari house next to his palace and established the virgin goddess in it. Actually, Kumari is a young girl who is chosen from Shakya or

Bajracharya caste of the Newari Buddhist community and she is revered and worshiped as goddess. Newars are inhabitants of Kathmandu Valley and surroundings, who are regarded as an example of a community with identity and very rich in cultures. Indra jatra is one of the biggest festival in which Kumari is carried in chariot around the town (Ecotourism 2018).

I have chosen to talk about this dress because I have learned Kumari dance. I perform traditional dances of God Manjushree and Goddess Bajrayogini as well. Even though Goddess Kumari does not perform any dances by herself, dancers perform her dances to show symbolical meaning of Kumari. In reality, it is believed that Kumari has the power to undermine the authority of king's who rules the valley and also a Kumari is believed to be the incarnation of Goddess Taleju. When her first menstruation begins, it is believed that the goddess vacates her body (Tree 2015). I possess a dress that is similar to that of Kumari's original dress. This dress is called "Vastra" in Sanskrit. Its three pieces' dress consist of a red Jama (long skirt), red Bhoto (blouse) and Mekhala (a piece of red cloth tie in front of waist). Ornaments like necklaces, ear, fingers ring and crown is worn along with this dress. Forehead is painted with red color with yellow border. Third eye, made up of thin silver sheet, is pasted on the forehead. Eyeliner is drawn extended up to temple. Red lipstick is applied on the lips. Fingers and feet are colored red and in palm red filled circle is drawn (Tyata 2017).

Up until 100 years back, all the raw material required for traditional dresses were available locally, cottons were picked by hand to make yarn and fabrics were hand loomed at home. Every household used to hand loom. Since this is traditional dress, ready-to-wear dress is not available in the market. And, only local tailors know how to get it right, it is tailor made in Kathmandu. To match with this dress red Mukut (crown) is worn. Unlike other crown, this crown is made up of fabric. It has got only the front side which is completely covered with precious stones. Precious stones are arranged in rows which is hold by metallic and cotton threads. At the bottom corner of this crown laces are attached which is tied around the head to make crown stay on head. From the top corner cotton or woolen tassel are dangled. Ornaments are worn, not only around neck

but also around wrists and ankles, and silver rings are worn in the fingers. Different kind of necklaces, one with silver coins, other serpent necklace and one with charm. The serpent necklace represents Vasuki Naga, serpent with gemstone on head, protector of enlightened beings (Bhattarai and Shrestha 2010). The necklace with big pendant, crescent shaped, with embossed floral pattern and coral stone also worn by Kumari. The necklace with amulet is called Tayo. Tayo is one of the oldest ornament and exclusively worn by the women of the Newar society, local people of Kathmandu, as well as deities including Kumari. Traditionally Tayo made up of gold, gilded copper or brass according to wealth people have. Tayo is lozenge-shaped pendant connected to the necklace which is hollow inside and has paper with mantra and Chanting written for good fortune. This ornament is used in festivals and auspicious rituals including marriage ceremony by the local women (Ashrestha 2018). Silver anklets, like bangles, hollow inside with embossed designs and pattern is also worn along with this dress. Family name of ethnic Kathmandu residents, Newars, indicate their profession. Occupations were inherited from parents. Goldsmiths and tailors in Newar community were mainly from priest family. The silver and gold jewelries worn along with dress were made by Shakya and Bajracharya (Family Name). If the amulet called Tayo is made up to copper or brass, then it is made by brass smith and it is gilded with gold by goldsmiths. The amulet contains the mantras, prayers, written on a piece of local parchment paper. These mantras are writing by priests and special prayer is carried out. These amulets are believed to have special power that protect the wearer and brings the good luck (Ashrestha 2018). The serpent necklace, bracelets and anklets are complicatedly carved.

Up until 100 years back occupations were inherited from parents. Back then nobody had to worry about job, as it's inherited from parents and they learn skills from childhood while playing with their parents in the workshops. Nowadays due to western influence and education, everyone goes to university and looks for office jobs. Everyone looks for white collar job and rather prefer to go abroad as salary in Nepal is very low. Nepal is slowly losing its heritage and cultures due to influence of modern western

influence. Back in the days, artists and craftsman used to dedicate their life for the sake of traditions, culture and religion, nowadays it has become all about money. Globalization is one of the reason to blame, all the products are imported and readily available (Proud, et al. 2019). Thus, instead of using cotton hand loomed textile, readymade polyester fabrics are used and whatever is easily available with low price is used which making our culture lose its strong essence and meaning. Complicatedly handcrafted ornaments and artifacts are being replaced with cheap plastic materials. In those days to carry out any traditional religious festival, every family had their participation directly or indirectly, from farmers to carpenter, blacksmith to priest. As we hear the stories from elders, we can feel that everybody used to feel proud and pleased on their contribution as they used to feel that they have done something for God. Every item used in religious rituals were considered to be holy, people had in fact dedicated their life for those cultures. But today, we are generation of using use-and-throw products, people do not understand the value of it as well, as its readily available and no effort has been made to produce it. All materials are used in this particular dress is either imported from China or India. I can say that due to globalization business relations have been made stronger across the borders since raw materials are imported and exported. As the raw materials are imported and not handmade locally, the essence of local culture is losing its meaning. I can say that, unlike western clothes, at tailor level, no labors have been abused to make this dress. However, cheap labor might have been used in India or China while making textile. Very thick textile is used to make this dress. It is made up of poly cotton and metallic thread, which makes it very heavy.

From this research, my relation with this dress has become stronger. Even though, I have learned Kumari dance but never performed on stage, except Manjushree and Bajrayogini, made me realize that I should continue to learn Kumari dance in order to introduce more about Goddess Kumari, who plays very important role in life of Kathmandu residents. Kumari's dress represents the strong culture of Newari people of Kathmandu Valley which makes me feel proud as I am also a newari girl from Kathmandu, and I am able to present part of my culture through this dress. In fact, I am

personally involved to promote my culture by performing Manjushree and Bajrayogini dances to attract international tourism to Nepal. I have also performed in many stages including Jackson Heights, New York to promote my culture and keep it alive. I have attached some pictures of my performances in Jackson Height, Time square, and on stage including Queens College to promote my country, Nepal's culture. I will also add a picture of real Kumari from Kathmandu, Nepal.

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