

## ADAPTATION OF *KINDURA* MYTHICAL CREATURE IN TRADITIONAL ARTS AND CRAFTS OF SRI LANKA: AN ANALYSIS OF GRAPHICAL ADAPTATION AND ITS IMPACT

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### Abstract

The word “myth” comes from the Greek “mythos”, meaning a word or a story. Humankind has made myths from the dawn of history. Many common themes run through world of myths and one such theme connects human beings with other animals. Therefore, from the early ages of storytelling, mythical creatures were prominent feature in each human culture. It is noticed that myths of diverse cultures are often linked by similar themes and concepts, but the difference is made with the process of adaptation which were done by each culture according to their own stories, beliefs and ideas. Many researches and studies have been carried to understand the origin and the background stories of these mythical arts, but yet few have been done to understand the graphical adaptations. This study intends to discuss the development of graphical adaptation of the mythical creatures from its original artefacts which is applied in Sri Lankan traditional art and craft. By understanding these graphical and visual adaptation of the local context, this research further places the initial foundation of updating the local mythical legends and creatures in a more effective manner in both art and design aspect, which has not been continued in recent past.

**Keywords:** *Mythological creatures, Graphical adaptation, Traditional art and craft*

### 1. Introduction

Human imagination had a tendency towards imaginative creatures from the early ages story telling. The stories themselves became myths filled with imaginary creatures as a prominent element of them. These creatures were mostly created by merging imaginary elements with real animals there by forming what is turned as a mythical creature.

Pattanaik (2003) states, “Myth can be defined in two ways. First, it is a sacred idea that is inherited over generations. Second, it is absurd, irrational, and fantastic concepts about the world that appeal to unsophisticated minds. The two meanings are two sides of the same coin.”

People believe in mythology regardless of their authenticity. Mythology evolves through the progression of human imagination and storytelling. Mythical creatures therefore can be identified as a communication which evolved alongside traditional storytelling. Therefore they evolved with the influence of different cultures. The origin of the myths were mostly common to several cultures therefore each culture adopted the mythical creatures into their own. The mythical creatures in arts and crafts of Sri Lanka, has also gone through this process of adaptation. It has become a great example of cultural creativeness producing uniqueness.

The intention of this paper is to examine these unique elements of Sri Lankan mythical creatures in order to study their graphical adaptations. Although there are seven interesting mythical creatures in arts and crafts of Sri Lanka we intend to consider *Kindura* as the focus of the study.

Research methodology will be to analysis written records, historical records, and folklore, research and scholar interviews focusing on the graphical adaptations in arts and crafts of Sri Lanka. Also a study on foreign mythologies and their cultural influence on Sri Lankan art will be done with respect to the scope of this paper.

## **2. Value of mythology and mythical creature in Asian traditions**

The mythical creatures are interpreted as the animals of fantasy. If we take a glance in to the remnants of our ancient world we can find many mythical creatures, most of them created by adjoining two or more animals and creatively developing it in to a motif and a decorative design. It seems that we have inherited these iconographic and symbolic animals from the Hindus as we can see these animals in ancient Indian art. The Indian art history contains a huge number of mythical creatures, some are human bodies conjoined with animal heads and some are hybrid representations of number of animals.

These fantastic mythical creatures were once illustrated by people who have imagined them as they appeared in legends, folk stories and myths. And these stories were made out as explanations for the great powers and supernatural things early people saw and experienced, which they couldn't explain: (e.g.: rain, thunder, flood, storm, etc.) These narratives existed in different cultures before they took part in the traditional literature.

Rosen (2009) states, “The legends, folktales, and spiritual stories of peoples around the world have always been filled with mythical creatures,

from the earliest tales told around the fire to the books and movies that delight and terrify us today, the human imagination has populated the world with a marvellous variety of magical and menacing animals, monsters, spirits, and gods.”

Rosen (2009) furthermore declares that “many of the mythical creatures explored here have supernatural or magical abilities. More powerful than mere humans, but less potent than the supreme deities worshipped in the world’s faiths, these beings often bridge the gap between religion and folk beliefs. Some creatures are generally beneficent; others are mischievous or overtly malicious. All reveal something significant about the hearts and minds of the people who tell stories about them.”

## 2.1. THE FUNCTIONS OF MYTH

A myth focuses on the worldview of a nation. Each culture has its own narratives, symbols and rituals to mould its people, and to build up the way they see the world. So each culture has its own unique identity. But overall, all cultures try to teach people what is good and what is bad with the help of myth.

## 3. Character of mythical creature in traditional arts and crafts of Sri Lanka

There are many mythologies, legends, chronicles and folklores fantasized with mythical beings in Sri Lanka. The main three types are the *yakshas*, *Nagas* and *Devas*. They are believed to be the former inhabitants of Sri Lanka even before the immigration of north Indians prior to historic era.

The historic chronicle, “Sinhabahu” is a great example from Sri Lanka, which describes the origin of the Sinhalese natives through animal hybridization. The story tries to empower the nation’s supremacy and power by submitting that the Sinhalese inherit the blood of a lion, which lately helped to develop a symbol for the Sinhala nation. According to the story, the son of the lion and Princess Suppadevi was born with lion’s paws/ legs with fur, which gave him the name Sinhabahu (*Sinha*-lion, *bahu*- hands). According to the *Mahavamsa*, Sinhabahu killed his own father and was rewarded as a hero. This is a fine example in Sri Lankan history where they used animal hybridization to signify and symbolize great power of an extraordinary chronicle.

Coomaraswamy, A.K. (1956) states, “the motifs in Sinhalese decorative art may be tabulated as followings, using, as far as possible, the names employed by the craftsman themselves:

1. **Divine** - Symbols of the sun (*ira*) and moon (*handa*).

**2. Animal - Mythical:** *Kindura*, *Serapendiya*, *Et-kanda-lihiniya*, *Makara*, *Bherunda-pakshaya*, *Nara-simha*, *Gaja-simha*.

**Partly mythical, with a natural prototype:** *hamsa*, *simha* (incl. *kibihi*"), *naga*.

**Natural** (real animals decoratively treated): fish (*matsya*, etc.); birds, especially parrot (*girava*), cock (*kukula*), peacock (*monara*), *sela-lihiniya*; beasts, especially deer (*mriga*), hare (*hava*), squirrel (*dandu-lena*), bull (*usamba*), elephant (*eta*), horse (*asvaya*); dog and crow; man (*manushya*).

**3. Vegetable - Mythical:** *nari-latha-vela* (semi-human); *kadu-pul*, *parasatu*, *palol*, *damba*, *imbqul*, *kap-ruka*, *mahari*.

**Conventional:** *kathuru mala* (scissors flower), *pica mala* (Jessamine), *sina-mala*, *nelum-mala* (lotus), *pala-peti* (lotus petal), *mala* (flower in general), *sapu-mala* (*sapu* flower), *vetakeyiya* (Pandanus), *mal-gaha* (flower tree), flower in pot, *Liya-vela* (branch or vine), *Liya-pata* (vine-leaf), *bo-kola* (bo-leaf), *bo-pat-kangul*, *suLiya*, *Malaya*; and traditional forms without special Sinhalese names, including pineapple, palmette, honeysuckle, knop and flower, cone, calyx-volute. No forms derived directly from fruits appear to occur.

**4. Inorganic - Geometrical:** dot (*binduwa*), line (*iri*); curve (*vaka*), circle, spiral, triangle, chevron (*diya-rela*), arch (*torana*), cross, *suvastika*; diaper, esp. *dela* (the net), *tundan-veda*, *kalas-dangaya*, *kundi-rakkan*; chequer; plait (*lanu-geta*); borders, *gal-binduwa*, *arimbuva*, *panava*, *havadiya*, and fret. ”

#### 4. Identification of *Kindura* as a significant mythical creature

*Kindura* is a well-known creature in Hindu mythology and Buddhist mythology which is considered as an aerial or atmospheric mythical creature. Hindus had known them as the *Kinnara* and *Kinnaris*. The creatures who resemble the *Kinnaras* in Greek mythology are the harpies. But they were originally the goddesses of the sweeping storm, symbolic of the sudden and total disappearance of men.

##### 4.1. MYTHOLOGIES RELATING TO *KINDURA* MYTHICAL CREATURE

According to the mythologies these species lived in the Himalayas, the Indian forest Broceliande and in Hindu mythology the *Vishnudharmottara* describes these creatures as half-human and half-horse, much similar to centaur in Greek mythologies. But *Kinnara* and *Kinnaris* which was illustrated as a half-human and half-bird types are represented at Barahat (third century B.C.) and at Ajantha (fifth century A.D.)

But in Sri Lanka the Kandyan artist enhanced the *Liya* or „woman-*Kindura*“, like the mermaid is well spoken of than the merman. The form is found not only in purely decorative work, but of necessity also in pictures of

the Chanda *Kinnara Jataka*, as at Kelaniya. The Chanda *Kinnara Jathaka* which was cited by Coomaraswamy (1956),

“The story of the *Jataka* is briefly thus: the Bodhisattva was incarnated as a *Kinnara* and lived with his wife Chanda in the Himalayas. The king of Benares committed his Government to his ministers and went alone to the Himalayas on a hunting expedition. The two *Kinnaras*, whose home was on the Mountains of the Moon, had come down from them and were playing and singing by a stream, Chanda dancing to the sound of her fellow flute. The king heard the sound, and creeping near, was smitten with love for Chanda. I will shoot the husband,’ thought him, and kill him, and I will live here with his wife.’ He shot and slew the *Kinnara*; his mate fled in fear and sorrow to the top of the mountain, and a dialogue ensued between her and the king, and she refused to live with him; his passion died away and he departed indifferent. Chanda embraced her fellow and brought him to the hill-top and cried aloud over him, taunting the gods to bring him to life again. Sakra’s throne grew hot. (Sakra is the Chief of the Gods, and Lord of *Deva-loka*. In stories it is said that his throne grows hot whenever important event take place on earth, requiring immediate attention.) Pondering, he perceived the cause; in the form of a Brahman he approached, and from water pot took water and sprinkled the great being with it.’ The dead *Kinnara* was restored to life, and Sakra departed, warning the *Kinnaras* never again to seek the haunts of men. The master thus identified the birth, at that time Anuruddha was the king, Rahula’s mother was Chanda, and I myself was the *Kinnara*,”

Ghosh, S., (2005) states “We are everlasting lover and beloved. We never separate. We are eternally husband and wife; never do we become mother and father. No offspring is seen in our lap. We are lover and beloved ever-embracing. In between us we do not permit any third creature demanding affection. Our life is a life of perpetual pleasure.”

#### 4.2. IDENTIFYING THE CHARACTERISTICS

*Kindura* is a mythological creature, which has a hybridization of a human upper body and a bird’s lower body. The *Kinduras* can sing, play flute and dance with soft movements of the body. The *Kinduras* are tender hearted creatures as *Jataka* No.540 says a story of *Kinduras* who nurse a baby whose parents have gone to the woods. Referring the mythologies we can identify their habits as bathing in streams, swinging in creepers and sleeping on flower beds. They prepared their dresses with flowers, their feed was of dust specs of flowers and they used flower perfumes as their cosmetics. These kind hearted, harmless creatures which were described in Buddhist mythology is far more different from the half-horse, half-human creatures

mentioned in the Hindu mythology. But the both literature mentioned the fondness of music and dance of them.

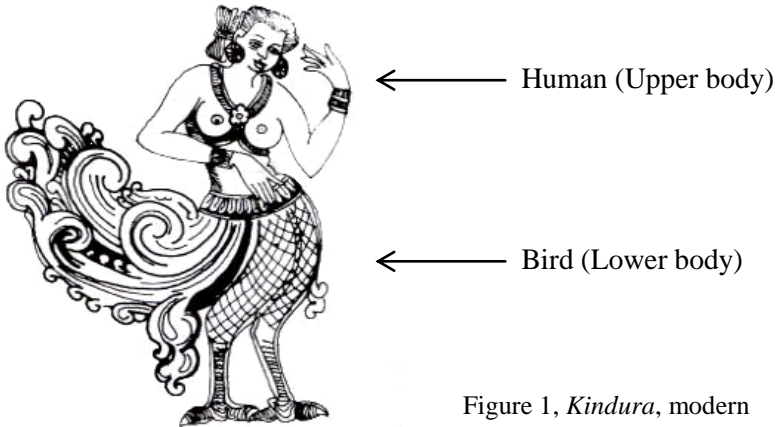


Figure 1, *Kindura*, modern  
Source, De Silva, 2009

### 5. Significance of *Kindura* mythical creature in traditional art and craft

The earliest *Kindura* can be found in a museum near the Isurumuni Vihara. It is carved on a stone panel. Most of the decorative art of *Kindura* can be seen in the temple of tooth relic, Kandy. There are varieties of ways to interpret the *Kindura*, *Kinduras* whose wings were joined to the waist, and the *Kinduras* whose wings are joined to the back of the shoulder. The lower parts of the bodies were covered with feathers. The most beautiful *Kindura* image can be found in the Welihinda Sudarsharamaya paintings. *Kinduras* are holding flowers and *Liyawela* by their hands.

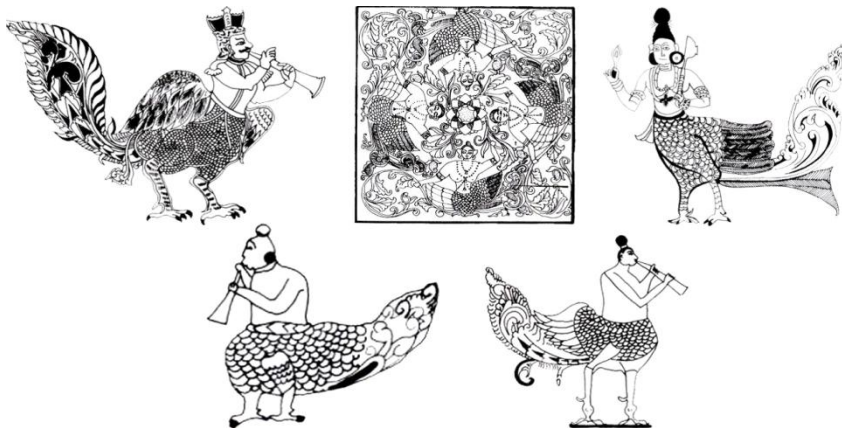


Figure 2, *Kinduras*, Sri Lanka (modern illustration)  
Source, De Silva, 2009

### 5.1. CHARACTER SEMIOTICS

The Sri Lankan artists were inspired from the Buddhist Jataka stories. Mostly the *Liya Kindura* was dressed her hair on top of her head and wearing flowers as a necklace. She has a pretty fair face and inherits a beautiful neck as the Brahma. The *Kindura* which is drawn in the Udunuwara flag was wearing a crown or a head cover. Mostly these creatures are holding a musical instrument and are dressed with different kind of accessories like earrings and bangles.

### 5.2. REPRESENTATION OF NATURAL PROTOTYPE

Since *Kindura* is a hybridization of a human and a bird, natural prototypes of the specific species are assimilated into the graphical adaptation.

Human upper body - *Kinduras* are feminine creatures. To construe these characteristics, expressions were adapted into graphical form as very pleasant, peaceful with a slender smile on their faces and feminine gestures. The carving which can be found in the Embekka *Devale*, is a carving which was done considering the feminine curves of a woman's body. (Figure 3.1)

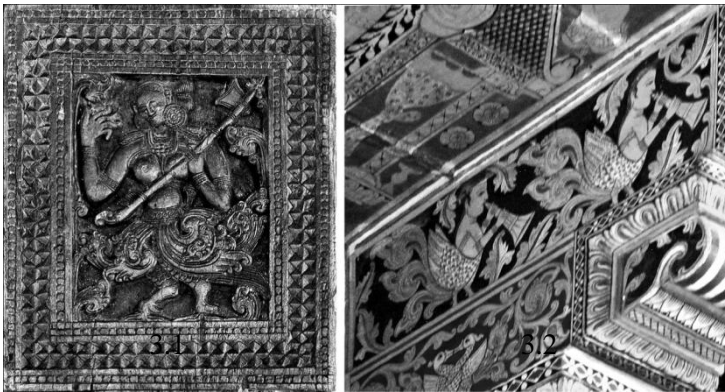


Figure 3, *Liya Kinduri* and *Kinduras*, Sri Lanka

3.1, *Liya Kinduri*, wood carving, Ambekke *Devale*, Kandy,

3.2, *Kinduras* playing music, application of an architectural detailing, Temple of tooth relic, Kandy

Bird's lower body- To illustrate the lower body of the *Kindura*, *Siththara* has used many conventional motif designs to differentiate different body parts of the bird. Different feather styles were used to exemplify feathers and textures of primary feathers, belly, thigh and wings, and sometimes *dela* (net) was used to illustrate the feathers on belly area.

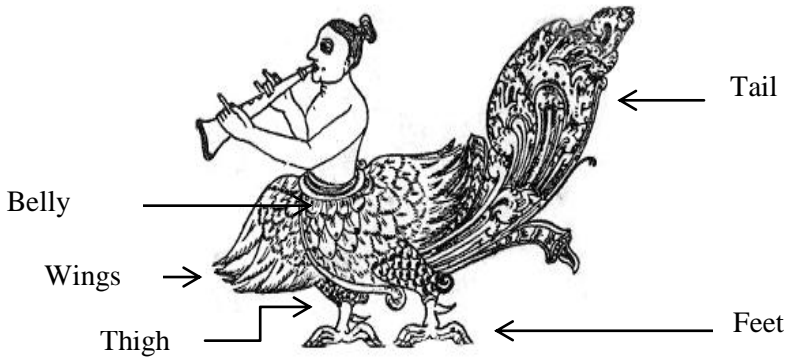


Figure 4, parts of a bird  
Source, Coomaraswamy (1956)



Figure 5, feathers of *Kindura*

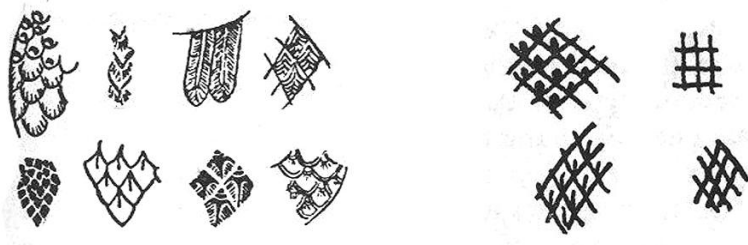


Figure 6, Methods of representing feathers, *dela* (net)  
Source, Coomaraswamy 1956



Figure 7, tails of *Kindura*



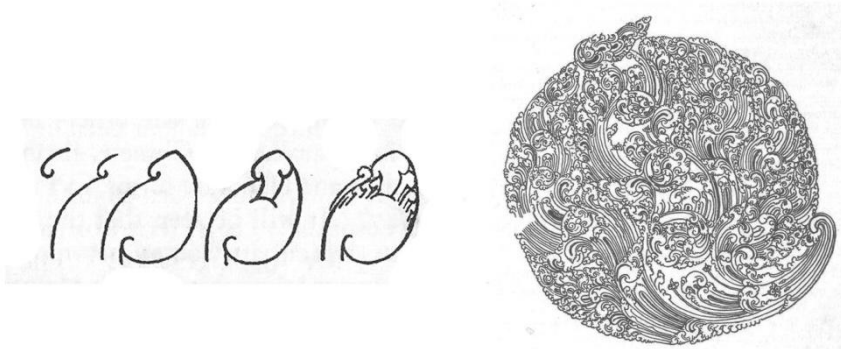


Figure 8, *Liya pata* ornament, showing manner of drawing, *Tiringi Tale*  
Source: Coomaraswamy 1956

### 5.3. PERCEIVED CHARACTERISTICS THROUGH COLOR

Gibson (1950) points out that, “color, size, form, sequence, and still other qualities of perception may unquestionably be affected by the past experience and attitudes of the observer.”

In Sri Lankan culture people use different colors in their cultural occasions and events to resemble or symbolize a message. Examining the thoughts of scholars it can be said that the Sinhala *Siththara* have used specific colors to enhance the relevant characteristics of *Kindura* considering the colors which were used in Sri Lankan tradition. Rev. Unuwathurabubule (2007) states that yellow is a “dispassionate” and “pleasant” color when he was doing the amplification of the coloring techniques and representation of Buddha, *Rahath* and *Deva* images. Furthermore Prof. Sirisena (2007) suggests that the color yellow represents wisdom, power, goodwill and purity. When exemplifying the *Kindura*, in most of the paintings the Sinhala *Siththara* have used the color yellow. Considering the representations of the colors which are mostly used by the Sri Lankan *Siththara*, the colors which were used to illustrate *Kindura* was to convey the qualities of wisdom and goodwill.

### 5.4. INFLUENCES OF CULTURES IN THEIR RESPECTIVE TIME

Natives whom belong to two different cultural groups don't see the world in the same way. Way of seeing things depends on a person's past experiences and his cultural background. So though there were many incidents in Sri Lanka cross-cultural influences effected Sri Lankan art and architecture. Hindu and Tamil influences even alternated Sinhalese social lifestyles. Hinduism was adopted by Sinhalese since the Polonnaruwa period.

According to the thoughts of Wikramasinghe (1947), he has pointed out “though Sri Lankan tradition is not a deep and multifaceted one, it is an entity of a natural, relaxed, simple and subtle tradition. The main evidence to prove the creativity of the Sinhalese artist is the remnants of *Sandakadapahanas* and the *stupas*. This evidence proves the characteristics of simplicity, shallowness and the absence of the hidden significances of the Sri Lankan tradition.”



9.1



9.2

Figure 9, Cultural influence on *Kindura*

Figure 9.1, Earliest *Kindura*: stone carving, Isurumuni Vihara museum Figure 9.2, Udunuwara *Kindura* flag,

Source: Author, Coomaraswamy 1956

Those influences were consciously visible in the graphical evolution of *Kindura* mythical creature. The simple, natural and subtle interpretation of *Kindura* is observable in Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa period (Figure 9.1), while a more elaborated and detailed *Kindura* is exemplified in British colonial period. Even the accessories and adornments are influenced by the cultural background of the respective time. (Figure 9.2)

## 5.5 GRAPHICAL ADAPTATION THROUGH SUPPLEMENTS

### 5.5.1 Adornments

According to the mythologies and *jathaka* stories *Kinduras* are not ordinary animal species. Though they live in forests and live a primitive life, they are embedded with a spiritual value which positions them beyond a human or an animal. To add a value to this significant mythical creature Sinhala *Siththara* had used adornments such as necklaces, earrings, headdresses/crowns, bangles, waist chains/belts and even different attires.

In Uda Nuwara flag (Figure 9.2) the *Kindura* is illustrated in a majestic manner, wearing royal attire and a valued crown. According to the information Rev. Dheerananda (2013), the Uda Nuwara and Yata Nuwara were famous for Jewel makers in the Kandyan era. It was named as the Siruwana banda pradeshaya. The ones whom were mastered of the arts and craft were named as *Ran pattal shilpeen*, *Otunu pattal Shilpeen*, *Kadu pattal shilpeen* and *Sinhaasana pattal shilpeen*. As these communities of craftsman were experts of their talent they were devoted to supply their services for the king. By examining the Uda Nuwara flag it is evident that they have tried to communicate their region's unique talent by interpreting the finer details of the *Kindura*, its formal attire including the crown and the smoothly detailed frame of floral design.

When graphically presenting these adornments *Siththara* has used Inorganic, geometrical and conventional motif designs to demonstrate them.

**Inorganic** - Geometrical: dot (*binduwa*), line (*iri*); curve (*vaka*), circle, spiral, cross, esp. *dela* (the net), borders, *arimbuwa*,

**Conventional** - *Pala-peti* (lotus petals)



Figure 10, Adornments- Royal attire, crown, jewellery

### 5.5.1 Accessories

In most of the paintings, carvings and sculptures these creatures are drawn as fun loving and a species which are fond of music. To augment the entertaining lifestyle of the *Kinduras* they are mostly portrayed with a horn like music instrument. And to enhance their naïve and fondness towards nature in some places *Liya Kinduri* is illustrated with flowers in their hands, and in some they appear to be holding a stick.



Figure 11, *Liya Kindura* and *Liya Kinduri* with accessories: horn, flowers, and sticks

Source: Author, Coomaraswamy (1956)

As mentioned above, *Kindura* is a species with a spiritual value beyond human or animal. However the Sinhala *Siththara* used adornments and accessories of that time period which he could experience commonly in day to day lifestyle. Even the specific graphical detail which elaborates the character of *Kindura* was influenced by the motif design of the relevant time period. Therefore could it be that the graphical adaptation through supplement made a heavy impact on the character semiotics of *Kindura* thus reducing the divine and spiritual value of it.

## 6. Conclusion and further studies

All around the world in different cultures, fantastic mythical creatures appeared in different forms. We have a number of our own mythical creatures in our culture. The research of this paper discusses the scope of imagination of the Sinhalese *Siththara* with respect to different time periods and how they gradually established through diverse cultural influences, and how those cultures identify the mythical/divine *Kindura* using their visual semiotics. And furthermore the paper edify how *Siththara* has transfigure imagination into a grass root level through art and craft, where the common man can experience them rather than appreciating them as superior species.

When considering the foreign mythical creature, their applications in modern society and how they interact with people with different modes, it is evident that the Sri Lankan mythical creatures have become obsolete and are under-utilized compared to the other cultures. The evolution of this visual character has been discontinued since Kandyan period, and they are no longer a part of our society, as per they are merely appreciated as a historical decorative art up till now. Without knowing their origin and how they have graphically adopted into a specific culture or a tradition, it cannot be endure into the new generation as a different graphical character, rather than an application in traditional art and craft.

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