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Author: Dr. Gayathri Madubhani Ranathunga

Department of Textile & Clothing Technology, University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka

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COLOUR AND CULTURAL DRESS: THE CASE OF THE KANDYAN KINGDOM OF SRI LANKA

Dr Gayathri Madubhani Ranathunga

*Senior Lecturer, Fashion Design and Product Development, Department of Textile
and Clothing Technology, Faculty of Engineering, University of Moratuwa, Sri
Lanka.*

gayathrir@uom.lk

ABSTRACT

Sri Lanka, a Island situated at the southern tip of the Indian sub- continent processes a culture and tradition of over 2500 years. Therefore, the perception of colour in dress has been derived through inherited values, norms and customs, Thus, colour, dress and culture have been interwoven into the lives of the people of the Island. Fashion designing, the essential component that plays a vital role in the apparel industry at present, deserves a careful and comprehensive study. Creating new fashions is the key to product development in the industry. A new creation would not simply incubate unless it conforms to some underlying concepts. The objective of this research is to discuss cultural explanations for how people perceived colour and its affective meanings in dress. The selected study setting of the research is the Kandy era of Sri Lanka (16th Century AD to 1815) where traditional perception of colour has changed with the influence of foreign cultures. The Kandy era has continued with as living culture to the present day. The research was carried out by studying folklore, wall paintings, original dresses which depict the dress of the era, sketches of foreign diplomats, relevant to the subject. According to the cultural exploration on colour perception, it was found that people perceived colour in a common way although there were some differences in perception at individual level. As a community people had common perceptions of values and norms of certain colours that were reflected in common ceremonies like temple, funeral and marriage ceremonies. Perception of colour is unique to individual cultures. Keywords: Colour , culture, foreign influences, Dress, The Kandy era.



INTRODUCTION

Colour is the most treasured and significant cultural expression of the historical dress of Sri Lanka. Colour signifies meanings of beliefs, rituals and traditions of the Sri Lankan culture. Therefore, understanding fundamentals of culture is very vital in determining how the cultural perception of the people of Sri Lanka has been formed throughout her history.

‘Culture’ is, in the words of Tylor, anthropologist, (Tylor 1913,1) “culture taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”. Furthermore, he remarks that the condition of culture among the various societies of mankind, in so far as it is capable of being investigated on general principles, is a subject apt for the study of laws of human thought and action. Therefore, culture can be assumed as a continuous chain which is nourished by human thoughts and experiences from time to time. According to Boulton (Puri and Tyler 1998) culture stands upon its values and norms. Boulton refers to values as collective beliefs about what is right, good and desirable that has developed within a particular social group. They are conceived at a relatively abstract level and provide guiding principles for living. Norms refer to expected ways of behaving in specific situations, which reflect the values of the group. According to social psychologist Kaiser (1997) the characteristics of culture are (1) transmitted (2) learned (3) shared and (4) transformed. Boulton (Puri and Tyler 1998, 327) states that the society is the culture. He explains that ‘because people live together in social groups, they tend to share common experiences and come to develop common ways of thinking and acting. The broad set of assumptions or world view of a social group is its culture.

Foreign influences were the main in constructing Sri Lankan tradition and which have affected the society

since time immemorial. Sri Lanka being situated at the Southern tip of the Indian sub-continent, had the possibility of Indian cultural and social elements to flourish. The recorded history of the Island and its people starts with the Aryan colonization marked by the advent of Vijaya and his seven hundred followers from North India by the 6th Cent BC. In the great chronicle of Mahavamsa it is said when Vijaya landed on the Island he heard the music and drum beat of a festival. It can be assumed that the indigenous cultural habits mixed with Aryan culture. The greatest social event in the Islands’ history was the introduction of Buddhism in the 3rd Cent BC. Rev. Mahinda, son of Asoka the Great of India brought Buddhism during the reign of Devanampiyathissa creating the strongest link for Aryan influences on the people. More Aryan ways of life entered when 16 artisan groups of painters, craftsmen and musicians came. Then Indian influenced tradition developed through the early administrative era. The oldest Kingdom of the early administrative era was the Anuradhapura Kingdom during which time period South Indian Pressures such as Lambakarna, Moriya, Pandyas, Pallavas Colas affected the country. During the Polonnaruwa period more South Indian pressures such as Pandya and Colas entered the society. Royalty tolerated Hindu religious rites in the palace. The Dambadeniya, Yapahuwa and Kurunegala eras had more significant South Indian Influences. During the Gampola era seven South Indians rulers and mayors ruled the Kingdom. During the Kotte Kingdom Western influences of the Portuguese first affected the country in 1506. The last Kingdom of the early administrative era of Sri Lanka was the Kandyan Kingdom. Kandyan reign of Sri Lanka which lasted from the 14th Century to 1815 is a well-known historical era showing the strong effects of foreign influences on the society. During this era the Portuguese, the Dutch, the British, the French, Siamese and South Indian influences affected the society. Compared to other ancient administrative eras the whole period of the Kandyan Kingdom faced different cultural forces. At its beginning, South Indian features gradually descended from the Gampola Kingdom. The



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Portuguese colonial occupation exerted an influence of almost of 130 years. Then next, the Dutch lasted for 163 years and the British for 33 years. As a result of colonial inspiration from the 16th century onward the natives soon embraced Western cultural values. As well as, South Indian dominant cultural feature were also quickly and strongly assimilated into the community because of their 76 years of their resident phase. (Tamil Nayakkar) .This situation opened the door to Tamil social and cultural influences. They brought their own cultural habits from the same reign. Traditional perception was subjected to change and modified due to sturdier foreign cultural influences which occurred during the period of the Kingdom. Indian, Siamese, Portuguese, Dutch cultural values were most firmly implanted over a hundred years.

Multicultural values were well evident through literature, dance, drama, music, art and crafts, architecture, sculpture, painting, food, clothing and games of the society. One of the most noticeable features is Colours, arguably the most enduring cultural signifier which is visualized in dress of the Kandyan Kingdom.

METHODOLOGY

The research is a qualitative approach. The study is based on discussing colour perception of the people of the Kandyan Kingdom of Sri Lanka. There are plenty of visual records to study the background of this study setting such as sketches and descriptions made by observer – participants of the period, historical murals, carvings and sculptures of the period. Wall paintings which depict the coloured dress of the era, sketches of foreign diplomats are observed in the research. Historical details about the Kandyan colour perception are well documented visually even more early administrative eras. Original written sources and true pictorial evidences were used for the research. Besides, Kandyan tradition has a living culture as well. Therefore, when colours of the Kandyan era are

examined the Kandyan period is remarkably marked with very significant signs with ample visual and written evidences. Museum collections of dresses, accessories and a variety of domestic items belonging to the era were observed. Reliability of the data which was incorporated in the research is of much concern. Therefore, pictorial data were cross checked with different literary sources such as temple murals and particular literature, enabling to build a strong logical analysis.

Folklore about the Kingdom of Kandy were studied. Historian Nira Wickramasinghe realised the advantages of studying folk culture in building the perception of past societies. She (Wickramasinghe, 2003. P.4) states that ‘in order to reconstruct past systems of meanings, when one can neither participate nor directly observe the lives of the people has preoccupied historians for a number of decades’. She claims that in France historians have attempted to write a history of mentalities by drawing on new types of evidence such as visual imagery and oral traditions and also digging deeper into sources of information authors did not consciously impart. Nira Wickramasinghe cites Amin (Wickramasinghe, 2003. P.4) that ‘peasants do not write, they are written about. The speech of humble folk is not normally recorded for posterity; it is wrenched from them in courtrooms and inquisitorial trials. Historians therefore learnt to comb ‘confessions’ and ‘testimonies’ for their evidence, for this is where peasants cry out, dissimulate or indeed narrate’.

DATA ANALYSIS

The Kandyan culture stands upon mutual interrelations of state and religion. Dewaraja (1988) states that the relationship between the King and the priests had always been one of mutual interdependence. The King defended the faith and the faith legitimized the King. In Kandyan society the King was the head of the civil institution. ‘Sovereignty’ was considered as divine. Foreign influences directly affected royalty dress then trickled



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down to commoners. Cultural beliefs and rituals were signified through their dresses. Colour played a role as a symbol of expression of the status, values and norms of the royal clan. Coomaraswamy (1959) claims that in Sinhalese history when ruler and people met together, they were united by a common religion and a common culture, in sympathy and with mutual respect. Further he (Coomaraswamy , 1959) explains that the Kandyan Sinhalese were an independent and self-contained community, with a culture and art which had for all an equal appeal and a state religion which was also the religion of the people . The background set their perception over colour and dress. Psychologists in general regard all perception as subjective in that an individual tends to interpret information according to his existing beliefs, attitudes and general disposition (Hanna M.A and Jackson K.C. 1987) . Perception refers to the use of assumptions to integrate incoming sensory information into a model of the world based upon which we make decisions and take action (Atkinson and Hilgard's, 2003). Colour is a factor which is related to the visual perception of a person. Colour had been a successful stimulus in influencing foreign attire as well as an inhibitor during the Kandyan reign. During the Kandyan era limited colour was used in dresses. Red, blue, yellow, green and white were mostly used. As a result of the factors of availability, durability and cost, each colour was given characteristic value and symbolic meaning. Tones and hues of colours are rarely evident. Colour of the fabric can be traced out of collections at Museums and some items belonging to Kandyan families. Four borders, braid edging, the innermost border and the centre are always highlighted with symbolic colours.

White

White was the mostly used colour by all social strata of the society. According to the travel journal description of Dutch Admiral Spilbergens who visited The Kingdom of Kandy in 1602 King Vimala Dharma Suriya I (1592-1604) was clad in white cloths at their

historic meeting (Paranavithana, 1997). 'Mandarampurapuwater' reported that King Senarath wore white cloths on the way back to the Kadyan Kingdom after defeating the Portuguese at Randenigala (Lankananda, 1996). Knox in the reign of Rajasimha II (1634-1687) writes that the Nobles wear doublets of white or calico, and about their middle a cloth of white next their skin (Knox 1966). White was an auspicious symbol. Furthermore, he describes that the country caps are all of one colour either white or Blue. Rebeiro who was in Ceylon from 1640-1656 states that high status people wear a white cotton cloth, a kind of fine white shirt of cotton with narrow sleeves trimmed before and behind with stripes of a finger (JRAS vol XI no 39 1889).Heyt in his careful description of a Dutch embassy to Kandy in the reign of Kundasale (1707-1739) shows the chiefs in white tuppotti. In the time of Kirthi Sri Rajasimhe (1747-1782) the paintings in the temple represent the chiefs wearing round white hats, white muslin pleated jackets. Tradition says that the round white hat was introduced in this reign (Codrington, 1910).It is noticed that the majority of the examples represent the chiefs wearing white pleated jackets with loads of white muslin. The state dress is white in cotton shown by the picture of the conference between the Dutch governor and the Kandyan ambassadors in 1772, now at Amsterdam. Kandyan ambassadors wear their state dress, the material is apparently white silk. The collar is white (Codrington, 1910. 19p). Doyly in his diary, under June 16, 1812 records that elites were presented white round hats by the King (Codrington, 1910). Davy who was in the Kandyan province shortly after the accession and who got much of his information from chiefs acquainted with the late King's court, the chiefs wear a square white hat, the jacket is of white silk, the collar is of white colour (Codrington, 1910). Coomaraswamy shows embroidered on white cotton a copy of part of an embroidered jacket said to have been used by a Queen in the eighteenth Century (Coomaraswamy 1956 plate xxx p 333). According to traditional rumours there were many sumptuary laws imposed regarding the usage of white.



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Dolapihilla (2006) describes that no men may wear a full white dress during Sinhala times. Besides, it was the auspicious colour of the monarch. McDowall's welcome was described as at 'all the entrances there were three or four small bronze cannon beside which stood seven or eight soldiers clad in white from head to foot, each carrying a gun covered with puffed white muslin' (Mons Jonville 1948, 14). And also it is said that "offensive weapons were also draped in white as an emblem of peace" (Mons Jonville 1948, 5). White denoted the importance and significance of the occasion to the Sinhalese King and high office. The colour white shows equality, peace and purity. The perception of the white colour has not been changed even today. When Sinhalese Buddhists observe the eight precepts white clothes are worn to denote purity. People who belong to different castes and status wear white which contributes to equality at the temple.

Black

Black was not a colour of interest in Sinhalese dress styles. Black was always used to highlight borders of cloths in a small quantity and full black dresses were hardly seen. This is because according to Sinhalese culture black depicted demons, bad spirits, sin and misery. In the Degaldoruwa temple murals a brahmin named jujaka of 'vessantara jataka' is depicted in black. In Sinhalese folk stories, there are some demon characters like the black prince. Therefore, it was difficult to influence Sinhalese people with black dresses. The influence of black colour occurred with the change of the culture with Christianity. In Christianity priests wore gray robes. Christians participated in funerals in black. Therefore black was an accepted colour at some occasions in Christian culture. Some historical events described how Sinhalese people were gradually influenced by black dresses. By Kirthi Sri Rajasimha's days it became a custom to wear black at a cremation. According to traditional stories Dolapihilla (2006) explains that all commoners, Adigars and the successor of Sri Vijaya's wore black turbans and

somana cloths at the cremation of Sri Vijaya Rajasimhe. Dolapihilla explains that black was the mourning colour of the Sinhalese. Coomaraswamy (1905) also states that a blue cloth called KaluKangan was used for mourning purposes and for awnings during the Kandyan kingdom. The customs of a funeral is explained by Dolapihilla (2006, 11) as, "the box of rice sent by relatives to a bereaved house was covered not with white as usual, but a piece of black cloth, and old men of the early twentieth century found a black piece of cloth to wrap round the head on a sad occasion". Here, Adigars wore black colour without hesitation and it was a revolution in fashion colours of attire. John Davy (1921) explains that at funerals it was a custom to wear a black mask and handkerchief by the person who was to associate with funeral rituals. Therefore it can be suggested that there was a tendency of changing traditional perception of colour through constant foreign influences.

Yellow

Yellow is bound to Buddhist and Hindu religions and have been practised from time immemorial. It is a unique colour of Kandyan culture worn by only Buddhist monks and Hindu brahmins who occupied the reign. Buddha sculptures are painted in yellow colour. It was considered as a sacred colour and unacceptable to be worn by people other than spiritual personalities. Even the King didn't wear a full yellow coloured attire, because it might have been considered a sin. Therefore, yellow has been given a high position and an unreplaceable colour. Ordinary people were difficult to be influenced by dresses of widely spread yellow. Although there were some fashions and accessories of yellow colour, any costumes of which the main colour was yellow were hardly seen. On the other hand Buddhist monks and Brahmins had no substitute colour and they were given a high position when they were in yellow robes. When the Franciscans visited Kandy during the days of Vikramabahu (1542-1551) the sight of Buddhist monks was prominent to them because of the colour of



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their robes. It was expressed as, “royal activities embellished the town with places of Buddhist worship and soon yellow-robed members of the Buddhist clergy were among the most prominent townfolk” (Silva 1967, p.2). The importance that was given to the colour yellow by the society is reflected in the statement of ‘abandoning the yellow robe’ to denote disrobing. There were deviant colours of Buddhist robes but they were hues of yellow. This unique colour remains as a sacred colour to date and is evident in the retraining from using this colour by political parties for their colour codes. Yellow decorations are only used for funerals of Buddhist monks even today.

Red

Red was used as a highlighted element. Ananda Coomaraswamy gives original examples in his scholarly work of the Kandyan era. A devil dancer’s dress which is displayed at the Museum of Colombo consists of blue and white applique on red material. An embroidered napkin belonging to the Temple of the tooth is in red (Coomaraswamy, 1956 plate xxxiii p.334). Woven cloths such as belt belonging to Tibotuvawe High priest of Malwate has black, red, blue, green and yellow colours (Coomaraswamy, 1956 plate xxix p.333). Coomaraswamy gives some exotic examples of embroidery of in multi-colours. A small betal bag of fine red cotton is embroidered with blue and yellow silk (Coomaraswamy, 1956 plate xxx p.333). Objects which are catalogued as miscellaneous objects in the collection of Coomaraswamy consist of a ceremonial procession fan of red velvet with gold and silver thread and applique of green velvet (Coomaraswamy, 1956 plate xli)

Gold

The colour gold was enormously mentioned only in the etiquette of royalty. The early European travellers and ambassadors to the court of the region were impressed by the gold embroidered costumes of the rulers. The Kings of the Kandyan Kingdom were renowned for their conspicuous display of objects made of gold, especially

elaborate jewellery, other items of regalia and gold encrusted garments that were the stuff of legends. Prince Vijayapala (prince of the Matale District), younger brother of King Rajasimha II was completely converted to the western way of life. His passion for such glamorous materials of gold and silver is well described in the records of his Baptism.

‘He was dressed in high black shoes. Lined with white satin, white stockings, and a short cloak lined with white with rich buttons of gold, a round bonnet of black velvet, with buckles of the finest diamonds, and at the base of the aigrette a jewel of great value encircled by a large number of the costliest pearls, with gold lace over a vest of white tissue. Round his neck he wore an eagle set in a scallop shell, adorned and made entirely of rubies (Pieris, 1927, 44-45)’.

Gold coloured dresses are mentioned at the sartorial etiquettes of the Kings during 17th and 18th Centuries. Many foreign travellers especially mentioned that the Kings upper garment was made out of gold cloth. During the 17th and 18th centuries Kings of the Kandyan era had close connections with Siamese royalty where the gold colour was essential and an important signifier of the status of the ruler.

A new cultural impact influenced the dress of Sinhalese kings at this time together with the higher- ordination introduced from Siam. Because of the frequent visits and contacts with Siam, Sri Lankan Kings were gifted many luxurious textiles and other accessories. It was recorded that in 1689 AD Vimala Dharma Suriya II’s envoys visited Siam and with them twenty cloths embroidered with gold, twenty silk cloths, and various other articles were sent to the Sri Lankan King (Pieris 1945). Sri Lankan Kings gradually got accustomed to embroidered cloths with gold threads and dazzling gems in Siamese tradition. According to the description of Sinhalese envoys the Siamese king’s dress is described as follows,

The Siamese king wore on his head a crown of three tiers blazing with gems of all colours. Rings set with large



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and flashing diamonds were worn on his hand. His coat (Kabaya) was of cloth embroidered with gold and was secured with diamond buttons (Pieris 1945,103).

Gold textiles were mentioned in the dress of King Kirthi Sri Rajasimhe. King Kirthi Sri's costume was a blend of Western, South Indian and especially Siamese influences. Gold textiles, gem studded crown, ring sets, cabaya (coat) of gold tissue were also described in king Kirthi Sri's clothing habits. According to Pybus's embassy to Kandy in 1762, he carefully describes the king's costume as follows,

upper garment seemed an open robe of gold tissue, with a close vest underneath, and a broad belt richly embroidered with gold round his waist. He had upon his head a cap of scarlet cloth embroidered with gold, much in form of an Armenian's cap, upon the top of which was a small crown set with precious stones, several rings on his fingers, a short dagger in his left hand, the hilt of which was gold set with precious stones, and on his right side was a large broad sword, not girt upon him but resting against the chair of state, its hilt likewise was of gold set with precious stones. His shoes were made in the manner of the Chinese sandals, of crimson velvet embroidered with gold, and a plate of gold seemed to run round the outside of the soles (Reven-Hart 1956,p.57).

The daughters of Kandyan chiefs who are depicted in original photographs of medieval Sinhalese art (Coomaraswamy, 1956 plate II 324p) wore embroidered jackets and gold woven ohoriya .Kandyan chiefs in jacket with Gold buttons are displayed in the plate III(Coomaraswamy, 1956 plate III 324p). According to examples of jewellery (Coomaraswamy, 1956 plate xlviii,p342) neck chains and pendants are of gold.

One of the most important and long lasting ways of symbolizing the wealth and power of the court has been through sumptuous dress. The history of the high-status textiles, especially those created from silk and gold has been intimately tied to rise of royalty. Gold was the key symbol of prestige and high social status yet lacked

sacred meaning , it could be adapted more readily to changes in Fashion and dress (Maxwell, 2003).Court rituals bristled with symbols of the god king as Coomaraswamy claims (Coomaraswamy, 1956 p.19) that 'The king ruled as an absolute monarch; his ministers could advise but not control his actions ; with him rested all decisions as to peace and war'. Everywhere past and present in Asia and Europe, gold evokes similar responses and signals a clear message: the owner controls great wealth and power, and he or she possesses objects of enormous value((Maxwell, 2003).Silk and gold textiles in the Indic court were not just the preferred fabric for state ceremonials. They provided a means of visualizing the complex status systems that supported court rituals. Then the formal relationship of subjects to the ruler, his recognition and patronage, and the resulting honours and office were reflected in the pomp and ceremony and especially in the garments worn on occasions of state ritual ((Maxwell, 2003)

CONCLUSION

During the Kandyan era limited colours were used in dresses. White, yellow,Red, Gold, black were mostly used. According to the historical exploration on colour perception, it was found that people perceive colour in a common way although there are some differences in perception at individual level. As a community people had common perception of values and norms of certain colours and that was reflected in common ceremonies at temples, funerals and marriage ceremonies. Perception of colour is unique to individual cultures. Ability of influencing these colours depends on this use pattern of perception.

White - purity

Black -miserly

Red -Power

Yellow -Sacred



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Gold - Dignity

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