‘Perception of Culture in a way of influencing in Fashion of Dress’

(Analysis of fashion of dresses in Kandyan Kingdom of Sri Lanka)

Authors –

1. **Professor Nimal De Silva**- Senior Professor, Faculty of Architecture, University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka.

2. **Gayathri Madubhani Ranatunga**- Lecturer, Fashion Design and Product Development, Dept. of Textile and Clothing Technology, Faculty of Engineering, University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka.

**Abstract -**

Perception is a scientific process by which people got to know and get ideas about environment. Several modalities of perception are there like Vision, hearing, tactile sensation, taste and vibration sensation. People influence in certain fashion through this process. Important factors involve in perception in a society are culture (norms and values), level of communication, accepted colours. For example same visual stimuli like elephant was percept in Sinhalese culture as a dignity but westerners’ percept it as mere big animal not the dignity. This means same stimuli percept in different cultures in different ways.

**Rationale -**

‘The Kandyan era’ (Kandy was the last Kingdom of ancient Sri Lankan administration which extended from 14th century AD to 1815) of Sri Lanka has been selected as the study setting of the research. The researcher did not attempt to do a contemporary survey as the current influencing process is on going therefore it is impossible to take an overall picture on behavior pattern of influences. The influencing process was over in this setting and there are plenty of resources to study the background as living evidences,
documented information, murals, and inscriptions. Importantly, if the factors affecting influence are different from today, the derived psychological theories are valid for all time.

By studying foreign influences of costumes of a specific period in history of Sri Lanka; An attempt has been taken to investigate how culture communication and accepted colours affect this influencing process.

**Key words**- Perception, Culture, Foreign influences, Fashion

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1. **Perception of Culture**
2. **Communication**
3. **Colour perception**

1. **Perception of Culture**

The culture has the ability of making influences. If contents of culture change; there is a capacity of entering influences into the culture. In Kandyan culture it is obvious that certain political phases, religious subversions, geographical location (land lock), economical changes caused differences in Kandyan culture. Not only, those activities also added new social customs. To understand the effect of foreign influences on Kandyan culture it is necessary to understand the main construction of Kandyan culture. The Kandyan culture stands upon mutual correspondence of state and religion. The Kandyan tradition is always protected by values and norms.
The pattern of culture is similar wherever. ‘Culture’ is, in the words of Tylor, anthropologist, ‘culture …… 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’². Therefore, culture can be assumed as a continuous chain which nourishes by human thoughts and experiences from time to time. Boulton states that the society is the culture. He explains that ‘because people live together in social group, 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. Furthermore, he describes that culture is stand upon its values and norms. He refers values as collective beliefs about what is right, good and desirable that have 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 group³.

The study is mainly talked under four topics as below.

1.1. How State and religion behaved as key tools of accepting or rejecting new cultural habits.
1.2. How Art and Crafts were able to influence.
1.3. How Upper crust (aristocrats) of the society can give high value to some cultural aspects.
1.4. The ability of making cultural mixes by enforcing constant influences within a limited time

**State and religion were key tools of accepting or rejecting new cultural habits.**

Socio-Political structure is the main force in influencing in fashion during Kandyan era. Lorna Dewaraja states that whole political system of the Kandyan kingdom was based upon and the social system revolved around a monarchy which in theory, was absolute⁴. In theory, the power of the king was absolute. He was lord of the soil. Lorna suggests that
even though ‘The king in the theory, had absolute power, but in practice it was seldom’.
But it can be assumed that the ideology grouped all the Kandyan in a common belief. The
Dutch Governor Jan Schreuder (1757-1762) bemoans about the loyalty of the people as
even low country people ‘the mere mention of the King’s name is sufficient to seduce
them from their allegiance to their lawful masters without the least reason what ever’.
There fore it seemed that traditional values and norms about the upper crust of the society
were never changed from its ideology. There for the royalty had the power of making
influences. When a reliable person introduces new etiquettes the traditional values and
norms are also modified and it is accepted by the rest.

The royal costume of King Vimala Dharma Suriya I (1591-1604) was a combination of
Indian and Western dress etiquettes. The King Rajasimha II (1635-87) and prince
Vijayapala of Matale show more western dress desires. An array of necklace with seven
pendants into different proportion was included in the royal costume during 17th
Centaury. The Nayakkar Kings show western dress patterns like jacket, trouser,
handkerchiefs, sandals and even shape of the crown was western. However the
embroidery, trims and embellishments, colour, designs and material of those dress
patterns were based on South Indian and Batavian concepts.

when king accepted it was adorn by culture.

King wore

Change in culture

The dress also changed

The collective idea of queen’s costumes also generated multiple dress attitudes. The First
queen Dona Catherine shows Portuguese dress etiquettes. According to temple murals of
17th Century Kandyan queens wore jacket, redda (long lower cloth), necklaces, heir pins,
mottakkiliya (Canopy or kerchief), lansoluwa (Shawl).
Art and Crafts as a way of influencing.

By constant association of foreign influenced art and craft gradually accepted by the society. Designs, patterns, colour, shapes make necessary opportunities to associate daily routines of a community.

Art and craft → Tradition → Culture

Values and norms

Kandyan decorative motifs and design elements provide huge design opportunities for colour, designs for jewellery, fabric designs, and even patterns of dresses. Unlikely other administrative eras much South Indian craftsmanship can be seen in Kandyan jewellery tradition. A variety of jewellery items came to use during the Kandyan era. Coomaraswamy A, in his ‘Medieval Sinhalese Art’ describes about many south Indian origin craftsmanship, craftsmen and jewellery names which were popular during the Kandyan era. Therefore art has huge ability of carrying influences into a culture.

Upper crust (aristocrats) also can give high value to some cultural aspects by paving rules.

The best evidence supports through elite male costumes. The full costume from head gear to foot wear was a combination of different cultural attainments. Time to time most of the dress items were added to the main costume but some do not have a clear meaning. Codrington H.W explored an interesting discovery of Kandyan elites dress items. He investigated each and every item of the full costume. He formed that ‘malgaha’ or ‘borale’ which stands upright on the hat appears to have come into use suddenly after
According to Knox’s descriptive sketches of elite costume, the early elites wore conical hat instead of hatara-mulu toppiya (four cornered hat) which was essentially worn by later elites. During King Rajasimha II’s period the elites were used to wear tuppotti cloth without a trouser underneath. According to Codrington’s collection, the full elite costume consisted of 12 items and most of them definitely appeared after later time. He explained that the trousers (reli kalisama) extended up to the ankle; in later times these had frills at the bottom. Further more he suggests that Sward (kaduwa), not the kastane might be a Dutch make, and silver hilt and the scabbard of red velvet was an Indian workmanship. As found in the National museum collections a varied forms of hats have appeared during later periods namely hatara-mulu toppiya with green or scarlet colour, ata-mulu toppiya (eight-cornered hat), jagalath toppiya (decorative, ceremonial hat), sudu wata toppiya (white round hat). The method of wearing of elite costume is also has gradually developed through the Kandyan period. The method of wearing has resulted an extravagant body form which derived a meaning of high status.

The ability of making cultural mixes by enforcing constant influences within a limited time.

There is ability of making cultural mixes in dress habits if those cultural attitudes are able to enforce constantly within a short time frame. The Kandyan kingdom lasted almost 3 ½ centuries from 1474-1815. The whole period faced six different cultural enforces. At the beginning South Indian features were heir by Gampola Kingdom (1342-1412). Portuguese colonial occupation was inspired almost of 130 years. Then next the Dutch lasted for 163 years which was a considerable time period and British for 33 years. South Indian dominant cultural feature were fast and strongly digested into the community because of the 76 years of residence Nayakkar influences. As a result of colonial occupational inspiration by 16th century onward the native culture fast embraced western cultural values. The King and the royalty became Christians and followed western etiquettes. Therefore it is obvious that when the culture changed the dress also changed consequently. When the royal authority was changed the culture modified in order to.
1.5 Language had the ability of make huge change in morals.

The language communicated the cultural aspects fast. Shibutani T, accentuate the capability of language as a successful vehicle of carrying culture into the community that ‘each social world, then is a culture area, the boundaries of which are set neither by territory nor formal group membership, but by the limits of effective communication’\textsuperscript{10}. Analyzing early Franciscans and their failer missionary activities in Sri Lanka, Peter Don W.L.A describes that ‘one of the formidable obstacles the pioneer missionaries, the Franciscans, had to face was their ignorance of the local languages. But later they succeeded because they learnt not only Sinhala but Tamil also’\textsuperscript{11}. The King Vimala Dharma Suriya I, his queen, her children and the King Rajasimha II, Mayadunne, prince Vijayapala all royalties were fluent in Portuguese and Dutch\textsuperscript{12}. Christianity brought with it not only a religious faith but also a culture, which was twofold, namely, the general culture of European society as influenced and moulded by Christianity during the course of many centuries. Apart from a religious and moral education also they were taught also Portuguese language and literature then take part in various religious exercises as singing and playing western music instruments\textsuperscript{13}. Consequently, they were imparted a knowledge of the manners and customs of royalty in the west. There for it is obvious that the language has the ability of imparting cultural values and norms.

According to above description it is evident that the Kanadyan costumes show multiple cultural mixes. Multiple cultural features were combined into every costume. It might have been a common custom to wear different cultural etiquettes by all the Kandyans during the era. It is interesting to observe that all the social categories were accepted adapted and admired the difference. Many different cultural aspects fast digested and find survival in Kandyan fashion tradition. The main reason for this tradition is the nature of the Kandyan culture and its ability then opportunities that the culture had.
The change which occurred through political, religion and language gradually came to practice. Native folk roles and poems wonderfully describe how traditional values and norms of dress have been changed over time. The dress as a cultural symbol changed with the change of culture with its norms and values. Davy J describes in his historical records how female beauty was formed in the early society that,

“her hair should be voluminous, like the tail of the peacock; long, reaching to the knees, and terminating in graceful curls; her eyes, the blue sapphire and the petals of the blue manilla flower. her nose should be like the bill of the hawk; her lips should be bright and red, like coral on the young leaf of the iron-tree. Her teeth should be small, regular and closely set, and like jasmine buds. Her neck should be large and round, resembling the berrigodea. Her chest should be capacious; her breasts, firm and conical, like the yellow cocoa-nut and her waist small almost small enough to be clasped by the hand. Her hips should be wide; her limbs tapering; and the surface of her body in general, soft, dedicate, smooth, and rounded”¹⁴.

According to historical record of the first Dutch Admiral Joris Van Spilbergen even by 1602 A.D the Sinhalese women similar to above description¹⁵. However, soon after the female were advised not to show their beauty. The later image of Sinhalese women presented mysterious, gloomy appearance.

Clothes should be worn till ankle level,
Not to show her breasts,
Even not to show her navel point,
And not to show her teeth when smiling,

(the meaning of a 18th Century poem)
It can be suggested that the former Sinhalese society paid positive attitude for Sinhalese women with joyful and free lifestyle. But it seemed that gradually the values were changed. Later image of Sinhalese women presented a mysterious, gloomy appearance. From 16th century onwards Sinhalese women started to wear different cultural dresses as a product of all enforces such as skirts, gowns, hats, bodies, ohoriya (a way of wearing the sari according to the Kandyan style), Hindu style of wearing sari, long lower cloth and jacket.

At the beginning the Kandyan culture showed a multiple attitude of western and eastern affiliations that rapidly entered into the community. The Kandyan society consisted of Christians, Buddhists, Islamic and Hindu communities. When the time elapses these diversity had steadily been developed and inter-maligned.

### 2. Communication as a contributory factor of perception

Communication increases the perception of people; mainly the ability of discrimination of fashion. In Kandyan era communication of Sinhalese society with foreigners occurred through gifting and trade activities. Other cultural intermingling like interracial marriages also helped to increase the communication between cultures. Kandyan era is the period during which communication was being increased worldwide. Global navel technology grew up to high standards. Thereby world trades developed. New communication methods were invented. All these factors contributed to the facilitation of communication. Thereby influencing of new fashions occurred, by the process of perception, with the help of advanced communication.

#### 2.1 Presents

According to historical records Kandyan Kings were always enthusiastic by foreign gifts. During reign time many Portuguese, French, Dutch, British admirals and ambassadors met Kandyan kings to make a faithful alliance. It had been a constant and essential
custom to exchange presents at their meeting. These foreign goods made a huge impact on kings’ perception on dress styles. According to letters which were written by Kandyan kings it was well proved that they highly admired foreign textiles, dresses, accessories and what ever the foreign goods. King Rajasimha II admired about the presents which he got by Dutch that ‘I well understand that they are sure to present me with only very precious things’\textsuperscript{16}. Kandyan kings attire was made of foreign textiles like fine muslin, satin, brocade, lace, silk, velvet. These textiles were only used for kings dress preparation. Therefore it had also been a luxurious privilege. Pybus says that King Kirthi Sri Rajasimhas’(1747-82) upper garment seemed a robe of gold tissue\textsuperscript{17}. King Rajasimha II, prince vijayapala of Matale were very fond of Satin, lace, and velvet. This fondness and admiration of foreign textiles were never diminish but increased through frequent presents which they received. They percept foreign cloths are the best. There should be some stimulus like sight, hearing, touch or taste to grasp some stimulus. Satin and Silk fabrics are exclusively soft and fine fabrics. Therefore the King was able to discriminate between the sense of smoothness of the gifted fabrics and the roughness of local products. He attracted to foreign cloths due to perception process. Each and every time when king’s attire was described the words of Silk and Satin are mentioned by historical reporters. Satin, Silk kind of fabrics were strictly prohibited for common people during the reign time. Therefore it can be suggested that they imposed such rule because they understand the best and ordinary fabrics.

According to a number of articles collected from various quarters by Governor Thomas Van Rhee (1692 -1697) a list of gifts referred to King Vimala Dharma Suriya II (1687-1707)\textsuperscript{18},

1. 1 throne with its accessories all the gilt leather
2. 1 great mirror with gilt frame
3. 2 chamber screens
4. 3 carpets
5. 1 clock
6. 8 pieces of lace for carvats
7. 45 pieces of white lace
8. 1 piece of Surat cloth
9. 4 pieces of Dutch material with Gold and Silver flowers and stripes
10. 1000 assorted bells etc.

This list of gifts definitely explains how much he particular about dressing. All cloths and accessories represent the best manufacturer. When King Vikramabau (1542-1551) was baptized it was symbolized through European dresses that he was gifted. The presence of the small band of Portuguese had, however, put Vikrama Bahu into higher spirits and given him greater courage, as an alternative he requested symbolic payment in the form of a Portuguese style *cabaya* and a *barrette*. This is a good statement of how courage and high status cognate through foreign gifts.

According to historical description King Rajasimha II always wore a wonderful headgear which is completely different from traditional practice. But he admired and believed that his headgear is the best. This hat was a gift of Dutch. According to King Rajasimha II’s letters to Dutch the king thanked them about gifts. ‘The four plums are very good, and as such I welcomed them’²⁰. Ferguson suggests that they were doubletless for Raja Sinhas’ wonderful headgear, as described and depicted by Knox²¹. Therefore it can be suggested that presents had considerable capacity of changing once perception. The sudden impression is also important. When Vimala Dharma Suriya I received plenty of gifts by Dutch Admiral it is said that, ‘when the king had received him, the presents were laid upon a carpet’²². Plenty of foreign goods may be delighted him very much.

2.2 Trade

The main communication mode of people in kandyan era with foreigners was trade. Trade was done in both states level and as well as through minor merchant. Foreigners wanted to communicate with Kandyan people mainly for trade purpose. These mixed cultural features appeared as secondary out come of trade.
By 16th Century A.D the main imported trade items were textile and salt. However by last phase of 18th Century almost of all the stuff of living needs were imported from all around the world. According to Pybus (1762) silk, teas, Sugar, Candy, China-wear, Japan copper from Batavia, Iron and steel from Europe, piece goods from Bengal were imported23. Further more he explained how much demand was there for foreign goods that ‘the company reserves the importation of to themselves, for which the demand at Colombo, where the warehouse is every day open, is very considerable’24.

3. Colour perception

Colour is a factor which related to visual perception of a person. Colour had been a successful stimulus in influencing foreign attire as well as an inhibitor during Kandyan reign.

During Kandyan era limited colour was used in dresses. Red, blue, yellow, green and white were mostly used. As a result of availability, durability, cost such factors each colour was given characteristic value and symbolic meaning.

White

White was mostly used colour. It shows equality, piece and purity. People who belong to different castes, status wear white which contribute to equality at the temple. According to auditory stories Dolapihilla describes that no men may wear a full white dress during Sinhala times. It was a mangala colour of the monarch25. McDowall’s welcome was described that ‘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’26. And also it is said that ‘offensive weapons were also draped in white as an emblem of piece’27. White denoted importance and significance of the occasion to Sinhalese King. According to Spilbergens description King Vimala Dharma Suriya I clad with white cloths at their historic meeting. White was
a symbol of auspicious. ‘Mandarampurapuwata’ (poems which describe 18th century historical incidences) reported that king Senarath (1604-35) wore white cloths on the way back to the Kadyan Kingdom after defeating Portuguese at Randenigala. Knox says according to sumptuary laws people of high status always wear white colour. When Sinhalese Buddhists observe the eight percepts (ata-sil) white cloths are worn to denote purity.

3.2 Black

Black was un-interested colour in Sinhalese dress styles. Black was always used to highlight borders of cloths in a small quantities and hardly seen full black dresses. This is because according to Sinhalese culture black depicted demons, bad spirits, sin and misery. In Degaldoruwa temple murals jujaka brahmin of ‘vessantara jataka’ is depicted in black colour. In Sinhalese folk stories there are some characters like kalukumara (black prince). Therefore, it was difficult to influence Sinhales people with black dress. The influence in black colour occurred with the change of the culture with Christianity. In Christianity priests wore gray robes. And Christians participated in funerals with black. So black was accepted colour in some occasions in Christian culture. How Sinhalese people influenced in black dresses is shown by the description of some historic moments. By Kirthi Sri Rajasimha’s days it became a custom to wear black at the cremation. According to tradionary stories Dolapihilla, p., explains that all commoners, Adigars and the successor of Sri Vijaya’s wore black turbans, somana, cloths at the cremation of Sri Vijaya. Dolapihilla explains that black was the mourning colour of the Sinhalese. 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 that was a revolution in fashion colours of attire. John Davy explained that at funerals it was a custom to wear black mask and handkerchief by the person who was to associate with funeral rituals.
3.3. Yellow

Yellow is bound to Buddhist and Hindu religion and practice from the time immemorial. It is a unique colour of kandyan culture worn by only Buddhist monks and Hindu brahmins who occupied at 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 full yellow colour attire, because it may be considered as a sin. Therefore, yellow has been given a high position and un-replaceable colour. Ordinary people were difficult to influence in dresses of wide spread yellow during Kandyan era. Although there ere some fashions and accessories of yellow colour, there were hardly seen any costumes of which main colour was yellow .On the other hand Buddhist monks and Brahmins had no substitute colour and they were given the high position when they were in yellow robes. When Franciscans visited Kandy during the days of Vikramabahu (1542-1551) sight of Buddhist monks were prominent to them because of their colour of robe. It was expresses 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 townsfolk’ 32. The importance the society has given and the perception of the society of kandyan reign is reflect from statement of ‘abandoning the yellow robe’ to denote the recant. There were deviant colours of Buddhist robe but they were hues of yellow. This unique color remains as a sacred colour up to date which is evident from restraining of using political parties for their colour codes. Yellow decorations are only used for funerals of Buddhist monks.

By analyzing colour of culture during kandyan era it can be suggest that people percept colours in common way although there are some differences in perception in individual level. As a community people had common perception of values and norms of certain colour. Ability of influencing these colours depends on this use pattern of perception.
Summary –

• Colour

Perception of colour is unique to individual culture. Therefore, it is difficult to influence people with different colours other than culturally accepted colour categories. The factors affecting perception of colour has a strength base with indigenous culture. In individual community also there are so many social groups, age groups. Between them also favorite and unfavourite colour will different.

• Communication and culture.

Communication increases peoples perception by increase of knowledge. Cultural perception based on values and norms. These two factors bound people in a culture with each other because of bearing of similar attitudes.

• Communication error.

Communication errors are perceived in culture as new fashions so erroneous communication can be tested in influencing in fashion. This erroneous communication happen when attention and the strength of the stimuli of the perceived person is not enough.
End Notes -

1 Kandy was the last Kingdom of ancient Sri Lankan administration which extended from 14th century to 1815 AD. Kandyan era is the period during which most foreign influences came to Sri Lanka within a short period of time, namely Tamil, western (Portuguese, Dutch, British), Far East etc. This has caused huge impact on Sri Lankan society in every aspect. When talk about foreign influences on Sri Lankan attire of the Kandyan period is marked with an important sign by these influences. It had unique geographical location also; the way of assimilating foreign clothing attitudes on Kandy had been special due to its geographical difficulties. Kandy is located in central hills covered with dense impenetrable forests. From the early times it remained as a place where an outsider can not reach easily. Its geographical location separated and isolated Kandy from the coastal region. Thus it was not opened for direct foreign influences as coastal people did. Because of the communication and traveling difficulties, it was found the influences were automatically filtered, mixed or omitted. As a result the kingdom held strong cultural features.


6 Ibid,p126.

7 Nayakkar Kings of the Kandyan Kingdom – The Nayakka of Madurai were governors of provinces under the Vijayanagar empire, with the fall of the Vijayanagara empire, the Nayakka of Madurai, like these of Tanjor, assumed independence (Raghavan M D ; Tamil Culture in Ceylon, A General Introduction, Kalai Nilayam,19 Milagiriya Avenue, Colombo 4,p.27.During the region of the king Narendra simha (1707-1739) of the Kandyan Kingdom had several matrimonial alliances with South Indian Nayakkar princesses ( Raghavan M D; 54pp). The King Narendra dasininha subsequently married other two sisters of her , died without children nominated the brother of queens to succeed him ,this began the Nayakkar dynasty(Raghavan M D ; Tamil Culture in Ceylon, A General Introduction, Kalai Nilayam,19 Milagiriya Avenue, Colombo 4,p.54). This phase had four Nayakkar kings beginning with Sri Vijaya Rajasimha (1739-47) followed by Kirthi Sri Rajasimha(1747-82),Rajadhirajasimha (1782-98)and Sri Vikrama Rajasimha (1798-1815);the last king of the Kandyan Kingdom until the British took hold of the capital in 1815.


12 Ibid, p.156-157

13 Ibid, p.154


15 It is described the most beautiful maidens of the Kandyan territory. ‘The upper part of their body is naked. Their arms, hands and ears are half adorned with Gold and precious stones. They have beautifully embroidered clothes on the lower part of the body’. Paranavitana K. D (trans.), 1997, Journal Of Spilbergen-The First Dutch Envoy to Ceylon 1602, Published by the Author, p.28.


18 The original throne was presented to king Vimala Dharma Suriya II 1687-1707 by Governor Thomas Van Rhee, probably year 1693. The above conclusion was made in order to the Dutch records of the period 1690-1700._, 1929, The Throne of the Kings of Kandy, Journal of Royal Asiatic Society (Ceylon Branch), Vol.XXII, p.382.


21 Ibid, p.269.


27 ibid., p. 5.


30 Dolapihilla, P., 2006, In the days of Sri Wickramarajasingha, Ratmalana: Vishva Lekha, p. 11.

31 Davy, J., An Account of the interior of Ceylon and its inhabitants with travel in that Island, 1921, Tisara Prakasakayo Ltd., p. 122.