

# SOME CONTEXT OF COLOUR AND THE DRESS OF THE KANDYAN KINGDOM OF SRI LANKA

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## Abstract

Colour of the dress has been derived through inherited values, customs and norms of culture since time immemorial, ultimately colour, dress, and culture have been interwoven into the lives of the people. The objective of this research is to discuss cultural explanations for how people perceived colour in order to communicate different meanings through dress. The selected study setting is the Kandyan era of Sri Lanka which was the last Kingdom of ancient Sri Lankan administration, extended from 15th century AD to 1815. The era was a well-demarcated of foreign influences in dress. During the reign, both Western and Eastern foreign influences spread over the Kingdom, namely South Indian, Western (Portuguese, Dutch, British), Siamese. These influences have caused a huge impact on Sri Lankan dress in every aspect like novel dress items and patterns, silhouette, accessories, headdress, dress materials and colour. Colour had been a successful stimulus in influencing foreign attire. The analysis is explored through actual descriptions made by observational - participants, historical records, murals of the period, folklore which depicted the dress of the era relevant to the subject. According to the cultural exploration of colour perception, it was found that people perceived colour in a common way although there were some differences in perception at the individual level. As a community people had a common perception of values and norms of a certain colour and that was cleared through common ceremonies like the temple, funeral and marriage ceremonies. Perception of colour is unique to individual cultures.

## Keywords

Colour, Culture, Foreign influences, Dress, The Kandyan era.

## Introduction

Colour is the most treasured and significant cultural expression of the historical dress of the Kandyan Kingdom. Colour signifies meanings of beliefs, rituals, and traditions of the Sri Lankan culture. 'Culture' is, in the words of Tylor (1913), anthropologist, "Culture has 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) values refers to 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 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) states that 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.

Colour had been played as a symbol of expression of the status, values, and norms of the royal clan. Coomaraswamy (1956) 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 1956) 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. 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 (Hann and Jackson, 1987). Perception refers to a use of assumptions to integrate incoming sensory information into a model of the world based upon which we make decisions and take action (Smith, et al 2003.). Coomaraswamy (1956) states that art is of first importance as the form of culture which most easily humanizes his toil and spiritualizes his ideas. All art is a very essential part of the culture, an integral and inseparable part of any noble 'civilization'. Buddhism became indeed the chief patron rather than the opponent of fine arts.

## **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. The study began with the observational study of folklore, songs, and traditional stories, temple paintings, sculptures, sketches 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 ever than early administrative eras. As well as 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. Original written sources and true pictorial evidence 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 a very significant sign with ample visual and written evidence. Reliability of the data which was incorporated in the research is of much concern. Therefore, pictorial data were cross-checked with different literary sources, enabled to build a strong logical analysis. It is intended to discuss some selective colours which were included in the Kandyan dress mostly.

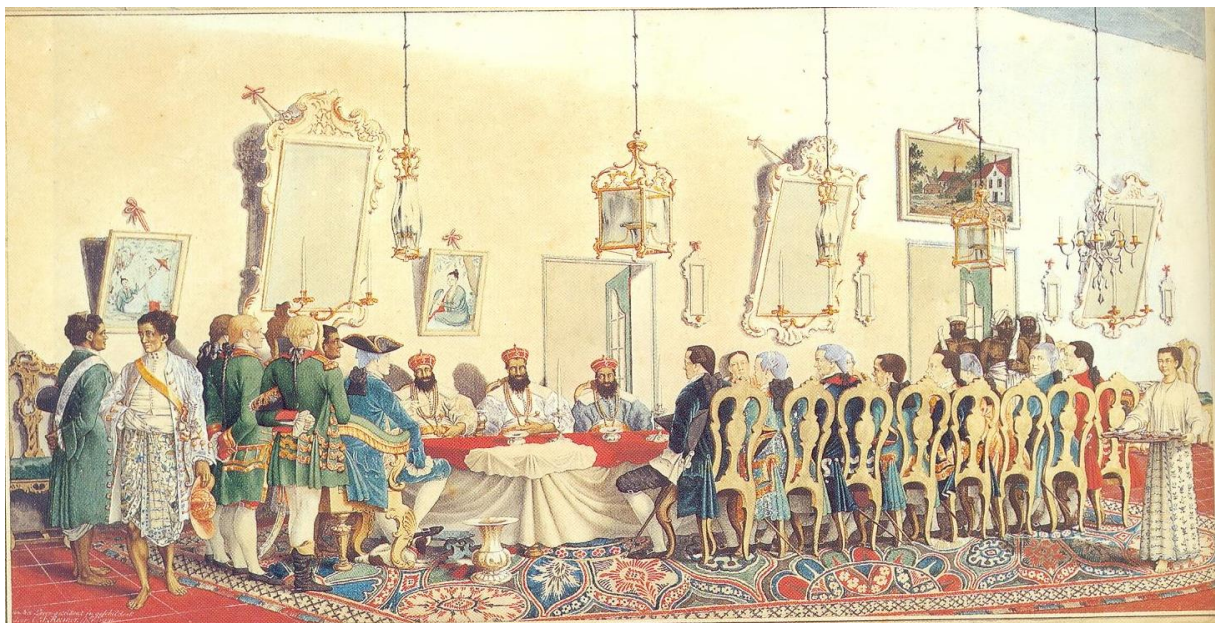
Historian Nira Wickramasinghe realized the advantages of studying folk culture in building the perception of past society. Wickramasinghe (2003) states that peasants do not write, they are written about. The speech of humble folk is not normally recorded for posterity; it is wrenched from them in courtrooms and inquisitorial trials.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **White**

White was the most used colour. It shows equality, peace, and purity. The perception of white has not been changed even today. When Sinhalese Buddhists observe the eight percent white clothes are worn to show purity. People who belong to different castes, status wear white which contributes to equality at the temple. White was an auspicious, symbol. According to the travel journal description of Dutch Admiral Spilbergens who visited the Kingdom of Kandy in 1602 King Vimala Dharma Suriya, I was clad in white cloths at their historic meeting (Paranavithana, 1996). '*Mandarampurapuwata*' reported that King Senarath wore white clothes on the way

back to the Kandyan Kingdom after defeating the Portuguese at Randenigala (Lankananada, 1996). Knox in the reign of Rajasimha II (1634-1687) wrote that the noble wear doublets of white or calico, and about their middle cloth of white next their skin (Knox, 1966). Furthermore, he described that the country caps are all of one colour either white or blue. According to traditional rumours, 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 "All the entrances were clad in white from head to foot, each carrying a gun covered with puffed white muslin" (Mons Jonville, 1948). And also, it is said that "offensive weapons were also draped in white as an emblem of peace" (Mons Jonville, 1948). Rebeiro who was in Ceylon from 1640-1656 stated that high-status people wore white cotton cloth, a kind of fine white shirt of cotton with narrow sleeves trimmed before and behind with stripes of a finger (Ferguson 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.). The state dress was 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 wore their state dress, the material is apparently white silk. The collar is white (Codrington, 1910.). Doyly in his diary, dated June 16, 1812, recorded that courtiers were presented with a white round hat 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 stated that 'chiefs wear a square white hat, the jacket is of white silk, the collar is of white colour' (Codrington, 1910). According to Coomaraswamy embroidered on white cotton, was a copy of part of an embroidered jacket said to have been used by a Queen in the Eighteenth Century (Coomaraswamy, 1956). White denoted importance and significance of the occasion to Sinhalese Kings and high officials.



**Figure 1: 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. (Silva, De R.K., and Beumer, W.G.M.,1988, Illustrations and views of Dutch Ceylon. London: Serendip Publications.)**

## **Black**

Black was an insignificant colour in Sinhalese dress. Black was always used to highlight borders of cloths in a small quantity and a full dress of black has not been depicted. The reason might be black depicted demons, bad spirits, sin and misery in the culture. In the Degaldoruwa temple murals, a Brahmin named *jujaka* of 'vessantara' story is depicted in black colour. In Sinhalese folk stories, there are some characters like the Black Prince. The influence of the black colour occurred with the change of the culture with Christianity. Christians participated in funerals in black. 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 to 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. Coomaraswamy (1905) also states that blue cloth called KaluKangan was used for mourning purposes and for awning during the Kandyan Kingdom. The customs at a funeral is explained by Dolapihilla (2006) 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". John Davy (1921) explains that at funerals it was a custom to wear a black mask and handkerchief by the person who was to be associated with funeral rituals. Therefore, it can be suggested that there was a tendency for changing traditional perceptions of colour through constant foreign influences.

## **Yellow**

Yellow is bound to the Buddhist and Hindu religions and has been practiced from time immemorial. It is a unique colour of Kandyan culture worn only by Buddhist monks and Hindu brahmins at reign. Buddha sculptures were painted in yellow. It was considered a sacred colour and unacceptable to be worn by people other than spiritual personalities. Even the King was not fully clad in yellow, because it might have been considered as a sin. Therefore, yellow has been given a high position and an un-replaceable colour. Ordinary people were difficult to be influenced by dresses of widespread yellow. Although there were some fashions and accessories of yellow, there were hardly seen any costumes of which the main colour was yellow. On the other hand, Buddhist monks and Brahmins had no substitute colour and they were given 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 were prominent to them because of the colour of 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 townsfolk" (Silva, 1967). The importance that was given to the colour yellow by the society is reflected in the statement, 'abandoning the yellow robe' to denote disrobing. There were deviant colours of Buddhist robe but they were hues of yellow. This unique colour remains as a sacred colour to date.

## **Gold**

The early European travelers 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 jewelry, other items of regalia and gold encrusted garments that were the stuff of legends. The coronation of Prince Vijayapala (Prince of Matale District) younger brother of King Rajasimha II is described in detail, showing how the colour gold symbolised as an emblem of royal majesty (Pieris, 1927). 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 that the King's upper garment seemed an open robe of gold tissue. The description of

his sartorial taste is more into gold and dazzling gems (Reven-Hart, 1956). According to examples of jewellery which are displayed at the regalia gallery at the Museum of Colombo, neck chains and pendants of royalty are of gold.

One of the 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 the rise of the royal court. 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). 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). Gold dress denotes the signal of royal status. According to a good example, Velagedera, the King's personal attendant, reported around February 25, 1815 that Ahelepola adigar had 'Put the golden hat and jacket 'of the King upon himself despite Velagedera's protest (Obeysekere, 2017). Silk and gold textiles in the Indic court were not just the preferred fabric for state ceremonies. 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 honors and office was reflected in the prompt and ceremony and especially in the garments worn on occasions of state ritual (Maxwell, 2003).



**Figure 2: Gold cloth of King Sri Wickrama Rajasimhe (regalia gallery at the National Museum of Colombo/ Courtesy the National Museum of Colombo).**

### **Red, Green, and Blue**

The colours are rare and only used in royalties' clothes. Turner (1918-1919) explains that the Gold cloth, coloured jackets are still (by even 1830) obtained from Indian chetties of Hetti street of Kandy. Professor Obeysekere (2017) reviewed William Granville who had been an eye witness of the King Sri Wikrama Raja Simhe when his deportation to Vellore in 1816 speaks about his sartorial etiquette when the ship reached the shore Pulicat as 'He wore trousers of satin striped yellow, green and red, with a multitude of gold buttons. Colour of the fabric can be traced out of collections of Museum. Some items belong to Kandyan families. Four borders,

braid edging, the innermost border, and the center are decorated with limited colours of red, blue.

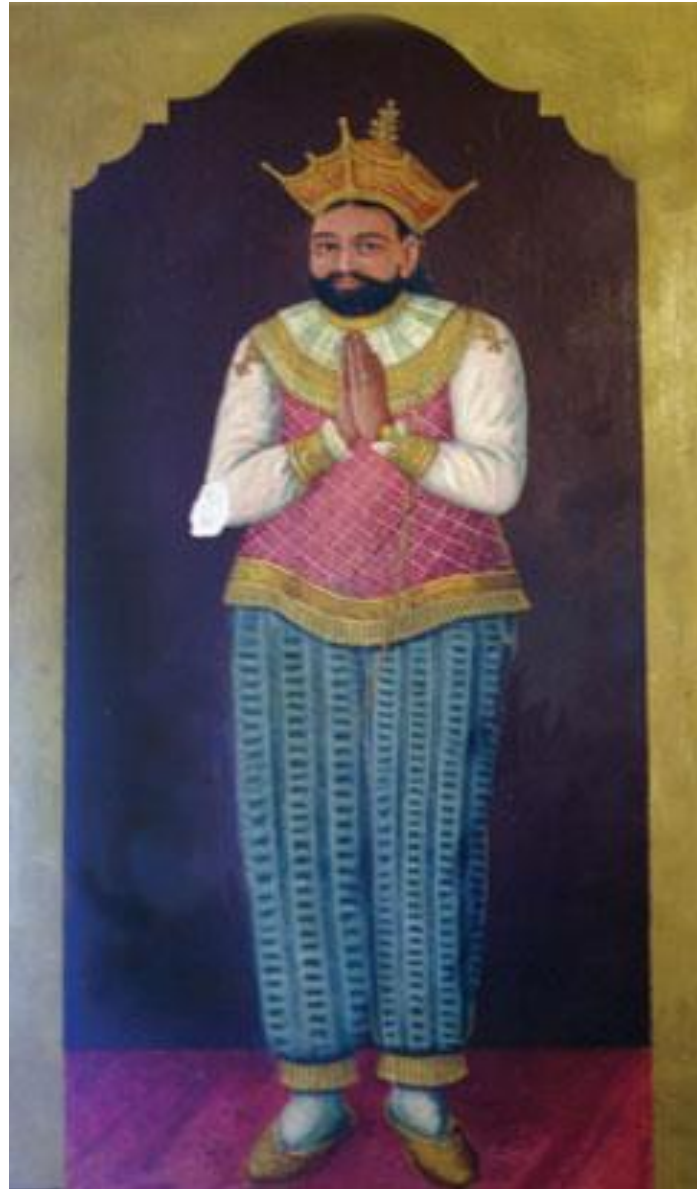


Figure 3: King Sri Wickrama Rajasimha , Asgiri Temple painting.

### Discussion and Conclusion

During the Kandyan era, limited colour was used in dresses. Colours might have not been resisted well. Cotton was largely used. Better colour fastening methods, mordants, dye substances could have been limited. Dye recipe were confined. Limited dark colours can be seen such as yellow and brown. White was mostly used and yellow, green, red and blue were limited. Tones and hues of colours are rarely evident. As a result of the factors of availability, durability and the cost, each colour was given characteristic value and symbolic meaning. Colour was a symbol of social status, dignity, power, wealth. According to the historical exploration of colour perception, it was found that people perceive colour in a common way although there are some differences in perception at the individual level. As a community, people had a common perception of values and norms of certain colours and that was cleared

through common ceremonies like festivals at the temple, funeral and marriage ceremonies.  
Perception of colour is unique to individual cultures.

- White -purity
- Black -misery
- Red -Power
- Gold - Dignity
- Yellow -Sacred

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