

## OBJECTS AND SUBJECT OF DESIRE: FOREIGN TEXTILES AND THE ROYALTY OF THE KANDYAN KINGDOM OF SRI LANKA.

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**ABSTRACT:** *Kings of the Kandyan Kingdom of Sri Lanka had long acquaintance with foreign luxury goods. Certain objects that were exemplified royal magnificence and grandeur of the King. Textiles fell within this group and for the products of the Western and Eastern; particularly textiles were desired by Kings of the Kandyan Kingdom, as they were exotic. Kings of the Kandyan Kingdom received such commodities mainly through trade and diplomatic missions. There was high demand for textiles such as silk, lace, brocade, satin, muslin and velvet. Silk from China, Somara and Benaris and cotton textiles from India were exported through trade activities. As well as Kings often received dispatch of gifts from annual Diplomatic missions. Diplomats visited frequently to the Kandyan Kingdom in order to make good relationship between two parties since the 16<sup>th</sup> Century AD. Diplomatic relations are initiated by sending a messenger and gifts which were essentially included with textiles for the King's use. The aim of this research is to explain Kandyan Kingdom King's personal perception of foreign textiles. Kandyan reign of Sri Lanka ( 15<sup>th</sup> Century AD to 1815) is a well-known historical era for the strong effects of foreign influences on the society was selected as the study setting. Plenty of resources such as living evidences, documented information and murals are available in this setting. The research was carried out by studying wall paintings, original textiles and dresses of Kandyan Kings, sketches of foreign diplomats, relevant to the subject. Foreign textiles were considered in terms of the senses- colour, texture, handling and aesthetic taste. Luxury was conflated with sensuality and foreignness.*

**Key words:** Foreign textiles, Trade, Diplomatic missions, Kings, Kandyan Kingdom

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In Kandyan society the King was the head of civil institutions. 'Sovereignty' was considered as divine. The King and the royal family occupied the highest status. Historian Lorna Dewaraja (1985/86). states that "whole political system of the Kandyan Kingdom was based upon and the social system revolved around a monarchy which in theory, was absolute". In theory the power of the King was absolute. He was lord of the soil. Court rituals bristled with symbols of the god King as Ananda Coomaraswamy (1959) claims, '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'. Robert Knox (1966) also states concerning the King's manner, 'none can reproach the King'. The early traditional written records which describe the customs and rules about royalties explained well the consistency in traditional values and norms of the legitimacy of the King.

By 16<sup>th</sup> Century A.D the main imported trade items were textile and salt. In trading activities textiles were in great demand, especially luxurious textile materials such as silk, brocade, satin, velvet and muslin (Karunarthna 2017). These all were imported, expensive textiles. If the quality of each textile is considered, silk is smooth and soft fabric. Silk is more delicate when handling it and is stronger and more durable. Silk has a shimmering appearance. Satin

is also smooth and soft but has more glossy effect. Brocade is a lavishly decorated fabric. It is primarily woven from silk then embroidered with gold and silver threads. As well as velvet is a soft pile fabric that is made ideally from Silk. Fine muslin was woven in India. Coomaraswamy (1913, 196) gives exotic meanings about muslin in India as "Fine muslins have received poetic names such as 'running water', 'woven air' and 'evening dew'. The last because the muslin, lay on wet grass could hardly see". The rareness, durability, exquisite weaving techniques, colours as well as rich embellishments made foreign textile luxury to Kings. It was recorded that the South Indian merchants brought clothes to Ceylon by 1506 AD (Ferguson 1907, p 328). da Silva Cosme (1990,491) suggests that 'the material used seems to have been silk from China, Somara and Benares and cotton, as well as cloth made of goat's hair'. Moreover, Chinese merchants brought Silk to Ceylon (University of Ceylon Review 1954, 182-192). In the meantime, the Portuguese developed their trade in Ceylon; native trade activities were also gradually increased.

The Kandyan Kingdom of Sri Lanka located in the central hills of the country lasted almost 3 ½ centuries from 1474- 1815. The whole period faced different foreign influences. At its beginning, South Indian influences gradually descended. The Portuguese colonial occupation exerted an inspired of almost of 130 years from 1506. Then next the Dutch lasted for 163 years and the British for 33 years. As a result of colonial inspiration from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onward the natives soon embraced Western cultural values. Kings who ruled the Kingdom of Kandy were directly influenced by foreign influences. Diplomatic missions were carried out by both parties. The Portuguese carried out diplomatic missions with the Kandyan Kingdom in a small scale; however it reached to the peak during the Dutch occupation of the Country. The British also continued the tradition in considerable manner.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

Kandyan reign of Sri Lanka is a well-known historical era for the strong effects of foreign influences on the society was selected as the study setting. Plenty of resources such as living evidences, documented information and murals are available in this setting. The research was carried out by studying wall paintings, original textiles and dresses of Kandyan Kings, sketches of foreign diplomats, relevant to the subject. The study began with observational study. Besides, Kandyan tradition has a living culture as well. 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, enabled to build a strong logical analysis.

## **3. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS**

### **• Foreign Textiles through Diplomatic Missions and Trade Activities.**

One of the most eminent factors of bringing textiles to Kings of the Kandyan Kingdom was diplomatic relationships. Diplomats visited frequently to the Kandyan Kingdom in order to make good relationship between two parties since the 16<sup>th</sup> Century AD. Dutch Admiral Joris Van Spilberjen visited King Vimala

Dharma Suriya I in 1603 AD. John Pybus, Hugh Boyd (1762, 1782 AD) visited Kandy to obtain permission of the King to have trade alliances. Out of these significant personalities, fifty-four Dutch ambassadors visited Kandy between 1701- 1750 AD (Abeyasinghe 1985/86, 26-33). When they visited it was a custom to exchange gifts to show their faithfulness. The dispatch of gifts to the Kandyan Kings was carried out by the Dutch as well as British as an essential and important annual custom. Portuguese were also carried out this custom in a small scale (Abeyasinghe 1985/86, 21-4). The dispatch of gifts, the use of the Sinhalese words *pandurupakkudam* (meaning tribute from subordinate) and the Portuguese word *sagoate* (having the same meaning) and the Dutch documents describe as *jaarlijkgebruik* (yearly practice) (Abeyasinghe T.B.H., 1985/86, p.21/4).

Luxurious textiles such as satin and silk, accessories and other exquisite articles were imported only for the use of royalties and nobles during the Kandyan era. Queyros (Perera 1930, 736,754) states that during King Vimala Dharma Suriya I's reign 'Vinthanna' was the main port at export and import of cloths. King Vimala Dharma Suriya I (1592-1604) is depicted in the Journal of Spilbergen: the first Dutch envoy to Ceylon in 1602. Coomaraswamy (1959) explains that the King is depicted with a *somana* for the lower body. *Somana* were imported from India and Indonesia. The royal costume of King Vimala Dharma Suriya I show Western and Eastern hybrid characters (Ranathunga 2013). The Queen of the King Vimala Dharma Suriya I, Queen Dona Catherine (1602-1613 AD) is depicted with hand-made lace in the drawing. Literary reviews both show that direct Portuguese influences were manifested in her dress habits. The skirt part was voluminous and 'handmade lace bands' would have been attached all over making a horizontal design (Ranathunga 2013). Lace works was an exquisite Portuguese influenced item of Sinhalese ladies' dress during the 16th century. Perera S.G (1992, 45-60) gives some Portuguese words in connection with lace making. *Biralu* (bobbin), *Bikkuva* (in dress making the Sinhalese use *Bikkuva* for a pattern cut to a point. Lace makers apply it to points in lace.

Royal females including the Queen, princesses and their relatives of the early 16th Century were converted to Christianity. When KaralliyaddeBandara (1552-82) (Father of Queen Dona Catherine), was expelled to Mannar by King Mayadunne of Sitawaka(1521-81), KaralliyaddeBandara and his two children accepted the Catholic faith, expecting political protection from the Portuguese (Lankananda 1996, verses 73,76), they acquired considerable Portuguese cultural influences. The education imparted to princes and princesses' consisted of knowledge of the manners and customs of royalty in the West. When Dona Catherine married to King Vimala Dharma Suriya I and became Queen of Kandy she had enormous power, wealth and connections and much awareness of following Western dress etiquettes. The drawing where the Queen Dona Catherine is depicted is from Baldaeus in 1672. Silva R.K and Beumer say that 'we have adapted pictures from Brohier's translation of Baldaeus' Description of Ceylon, as published in the Ceylon Historical Journal Vol III, July 1958-April 1959, No 1-4 to support our Illustrations.

King Rajasimhe II (1635-1687) richly clad as a European gentleman. Christopher Schweitzer's (1676AD) travel records describe the King's costume as, his shirt and waistcoat are made of the finest cotton, with gold. (Hulugalla 1999, 140). During early phase of the Kingdom rich cloths of silk were used (Perera 1930, 736,754). Robert Knox (1966, 170p) determines that even though the high-status officers were allowed to use Gold, Silk was prohibited at all. King Rajasimhe II's (1635-1687) full costume resembles exotic sartorial taste as Knox explains,

"His apparel is very strange and wonderful, not after his own country fashion, or any other, being made after his own invention. On his head he wears a cap with four corners like a Jesuits three

tear high, and a feather standing upright before. Like that in a head of a four –horse in a team, a long band hanging down his back after the Portuguese fashion, his doublet after so strong a shape, the body of one, and the sleeves of another colour, he wears long breeches to his ankles, shoes and stockings”.

Letters exchanged between King Rajasimhe II and the Dutch reveal diplomatic missions and dispatch of gifts exchanged during the days. King Rajasimha II (1635-1687) is shown with a wonderful headgear in the manuscript of Robert Knox .“On his head he wears a cap with four corners like a Jesuits three tear high, and a feather standing upright before. Like that in a head of a four –horse in a team, a long band hanging down his back after the Portuguese fashion” The headgear would have been gifted to the King by the Dutch. King Rajasimha II writes a thanking letter to Dutch about gifts that he received. “The four plums are very good, and as such I welcomed them” (Ferguson 1909). Historians suggest that they were doubletless for Raja Sinhas’ wonderful headgear, as described and depicted by Knox. Valantyn does not mentioned these plums. But speaks of two large curious hats.According to historical records King Rajsimhe II was closely involved with foreigners, as he was fighting or negotiating with the Portuguese, Dutch, French and Danes at various times. Many Portuguese, French, Dutch, British admirals and ambassadors met the King to make a faithful alliance. It had been an essential custom to exchange presents at their meeting. Foreign goods made a huge impact on Kings’ perception on dress styles (Ranathunga 2017). King Rajasimha II was impressed on presents which he received by Dutch and writes “I well understand that they are sure to present me with only very precious things”. The King believed that the foreigners give always the best.

One of the elder brothers of the King Rajasimhe II was King Vijayapala who reigned the Matale District. Many letters written by the King to the Dutch including the King of Portugal were still preserved in a Museum of Netherlands.The letters explore his aesthetic sensation of textiles. King Vijayapala on his Baptism his dress was arranged by various exclusive foreign textiles.

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 mode entirely of rubies (Pieris, 1927, 44-45).

According to a number of articles collected from various quarters by the Dutch Governor Thomas Van Rhee (1692 -1697) a list of gifts referred to King Vimala Dharma Suriya II1687-1707 as follows (Pearson 1929, p.382)

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

By 16<sup>th</sup> Century pure theravadian Buddhism was stagnating in the Kingdom of Kandy. In order to re-establish higher- ordination (Upasampada) and other religious activities in Buddhism, two embassies were sent to Arkan by King Vimaladharmasuriya II (1687-1707 AD) for the purpose of bringing over competent monks to Ceylon (Mudiyanse N. 1971-1974, p.26). During the Sri Vijaya Rajasigha’s region embassies were sent to Arkan(1689 AD)(Pieris P.E, 1945 p.102). According to early records one of

the Sri Lankan mission was gifted twenty cloths of gold, twenty silk cloths (Pieris 1945, 103), three cloths made with gold threads, set with gems by Siam King (Codrington 1944/45,99).

From Siam 'full costume of high status' was introduced. This costume is still worn by novice at the higher-ordination occasion. This had both upper and lower dresses including accessories such as shoes, hat, gold head plate, belt, various rings, seven necklaces of different proportions, and ear rings. The full costume represented the Siam King's attire which was known as 'mulanduma, by native Sri Lankan. Sri Lankan Kings gradually got accustomed to embroidered cloths with gold threads, dazzling gems in Siamese tradition. King Kirthi Sri Rajasimha's upper garment is described as moja hette and is still well preserved in Kundasale Viharaya. This is woven with silk thread and has a frilled collar around the neck (Sinhalese Encyclopedia s.v. "LakdivaEnduma"). Gold textiles, gem studded crown, ring sets, cabaya (coat) of gold tissue were also described in King Kirthi Sri's clothing habits.

The 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 like wise 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 out side of the soles (Reven-Hart 1956,57).

Kings of the Kandyan Kingdom were belonged to different races, religion and socio-cultural backgrounds. The early phase was ruled by Baptized Sinhalese Kings. During the reign of King Narendrasimha (1707-1739) the existing Sinhalese Buddhist tradition was blended thoroughly with South Indian culture. The elementary reason was, King Narendrasimha the last Sinhalese King by blood had several matrimonial alliances with South Indian princesses (Raghavan n.d,54). This era had four Malabar Kings. The era began with Sri Vijaya Rajasimha (1739-47), Kirthi Sri Rajasimha (1747-82), Rajadhirajasimha (1782-98) and Sri Wikrama Rajasimha (1798-1815); the last King of the Kandyan Kingdom who bore the crown until the British captured the capital in 1815. They all protected the tradition of the Kandyan Kingdom and patronaged the Buddhism. Their personal desires may be varied; however, they were interested in foreign textiles. It was also recorded that a Dutch officer named Ras Macquet brought gift of coach for the new King of Kandyan Kingdom (King Sri Vijaya Rajasimha) in 1740 AD (Abeyasinghe 1985/86, 31). Most of the gifts were different kinds of imported textiles as follows,

Persian gold, silver clothes/Harlem Silk cloth/White Dutch Velvet/Chinese Silk, Damask/15 varieties of Bengal textiles/Textiles from different parts of India like Surat, Coromandel and Tuticorin / Handkerchiefs/ varieties of cloth from the information given that they were Red Blue and Purple colour/ Besides many minutia as Persian Rose water, gold and silver threads, tobacco, Medicinal stuff, Candy sugar and powder sugar, sandalwood, Japanese lacquer wear, horses and coach bodies and black dogs.

King Sri Wikrama Rajasimha who is in the portrait, wore a broad mante with a wad of gathers round the neck up to the shoulders. His lower shirt (yatakameesaya) was of fine muslin. A sleeveless jacket worn over it might have been of brocade or decorated fabric. Professor Tennakoon Vimalananda

explores an interesting description of costumes and jewellery of the Last King in his book 'Sri Wickrama, Brownrigg and Ehelepole'. Moreover, Professor TennakoonVimalananda has published some well documented articles of original form pertaining to the story of the first war of independence of 1818. D'Oyly states that the regalia of the last King was safely delivered by the Disava of Uva on 2nd November 1816 (Vimalananda 1970,85p). A sword with gold hilt, studded with small red stones and diamonds at the end, A sheath of wood covered with blue velvet, very much worn, with some gold work, red velvet band with gold embroidery, three cloths enfolding it, a gold four cornered cap or crown with carved work at top, the four faced and four corners studded with stones principally red. A few emerald and blue sapphires, A large brocade cloth a gold crest or top knot, A four cornered black beaver hat, gold laced, surmounted with white feathers all-round the brim was handed over.

King Sri Vikrama Rajasimha's some exquisite jackets have been conserved by the National Museum of Colombo. The jacket which is displayed at the National Museum gallery is long to the waist, has a round neck and long sleeves. The fabric is crimson and blue colour mixed velvet material. Vangeyzel (2008,240) describes another golden colour jacket which had been possessed by the King .Vangeyzel (2008, 240) describes that this is made of a cloth patterned all over. The ground is with large floral motifs leaves and buds. The sleeves of the jacket are puffed and at the front of the jacket has gold buttons. The author claims that the fabric of the jacket is an imported material. Further she (2008, 240) details that this is a hand woven fabric with gold metallic yarn, in the centre is a floral motif, a curled metallic gold filament is woven. The king used to have a cross belt which used to girth the sword upon the wearer. Vangeyzel explains that this is a maroon colour fully embroidered velvet belt which consisted of a gold buckle and a badge. The yarn used for embroidery is gold and silver metallic yarn. The author (Vangeyzel 2008, 296) suggests that stitches which were used for the design is similar to a 'French not' design.



*Figure 1: Gold cloth of King Sri WickramaRajasimhe (regalia gallery at the National Museum of Colombo/Courtesy the National Museum of Colombo)*



Figure2: Some exquisite jackets of the last king at the National Museum of Colombo. (Vangeyzel, G.E. 2008. *Traditional Textiles, In the Colombo National Museum. Published by National Museum Colombo.p.240-main register 24.11.395*)



Figure 3: The portrait of the King Sri Vikrama Rajasimha , Museum of Kandy

In the late seventeenth Century, many nationalities brought cloth from all parts of the 'Coromandel' coast into the Archipelago in large quantities, the Portuguese, Danish, English, French and Indian merchants bringing a great deal of cloth (Arsarathnam 1958,170).This textile material was imported from Indonesia by Sinhalese merchants by that time. Jayathilaka (2003, 31p) states, 'Before the occupation of the seaboard by European invaders, Sinhalese merchants used to frequently visit the Buddhist countries in the far East, and pilgrimages formed an excellent means of communication between Ceylon and those lands' In 1506 AD Portuguese merchants brought Brocade fabrics from Sumatra (Ferguson 1907, p.326). By the 16th century Sri Lanka had well established trade links with three Indian regions as trade in the Bay of Bengal, the west coast of India and the southern coast. The Bengali traders also brought in textiles such as silk and muslin (Silva 2005, 233). By the 18th Century the Kandyans had realised the importance of international trade and continued free trading through

Chilaw and Kalpitiya ports (Abayasinghe and et al.2015,83p). Specially, they exported elephants, arecanut, pepper, wax and imported textiles from South India. The cultivators had four important needs seed grain, agricultural implements, cattle and coarse cloth. Generally, they obtained these from local lenders or Moor and Chetty merchants (Silva 1942,361p) South Indian textiles are more referred to in the Kings clothing. Turner ( 1918-1919, 76-82p) who collected information about the town of Kandy about the year 1815 AD from some reliable persons. According to them Hetti vidiya was for Chetties (hetti) whose business it was to supply cloths from India for the King's use, reside here. The gold cloth, coloured jackets are obtained from Indian Chetties. Pieris (1964, 126p) gives a list of South Indian textiles. Their terms show South Indian origin.

Kattu tuppotti cloth /Kasav tuppotti cloth/ Suruttu tuppotti cloth/ Tharapodi sarasa cloth / Gindangi cloth / Kilakara cloth/ Anakuchchi cloth/ gopola cloth.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Royalty of the Kandyan Kingdom wore clothes made of imported textile. A high value textile played as symbol of office, with the culture amalgamated with it. Objects summarize complex meanings of parts of the social system of thought into a single expression is conveyed to the society. Symbols, objects can easily transmit ideas and values as they are simple and therefore understood by the majority. The unifying factor was that exclusive imported textiles always have high value, Kandyan royalty attire, suitable for courtly presence. Foreign textiles were considered in terms of the senses- colour, texture, handling and aesthetic taste. Luxury was conflated with sensuality and foreignness. Value rests on the common acceptance of a set of collective beliefs that determine its validity and efficacy in a particular social and cultural environment. Several commodities serve as the symbols of the imperial sovereignty conveyed the idea and values that were part of the Sinhala ideology, so their extensive use implemented a very direct and formalized means of control.

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