

Fashion Syntax: Concept of Contextual Dependence

Priyanka Virajini Medagedara Karunaratne

Senior Lecturer, Fashion Design & Product Development, Department of Textile & Clothing Technology, Faculty of Engineering, University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka
virajinimk@yahoo.com

Abstract— Fashion is a mode of language where man's has the ability to transcend his expression. Like language in this sense, dress functions as a kind of syntax, according to a set of more or less constant rules depending on whether it is dealing with traditional costume fashion. When article of clothing (item) and new dress forms have many possible meanings there is likely to be a certain degree of ambiguity. Moreover among the articles of clothing that are worn together many have numerous possible meanings and they also interact with one another to produce additional ambiguities. A contextual perspective allows people to manage and perceive appearances in everyday life, or the historical contexts in which people find them. The contextual approach enhances the people's understanding not only of appearance from people's viewpoints, but also how common such viewpoints are within a culture. The process of contextualizing allows people to see changes in the meanings of dresses as contexts dissolve into one another. The Kotte period of Sri Lanka marked the culmination of emerging novel dress features. The existing fashions were mixed and matched with South Indian and traditional Sri Lankan items of clothing. With the Portuguese invasion novel dress fashions were introduced with new articles (items) such as attached collar (tippet), buttons, cuffs, hats, and new dress forms like trouser (pantaloon) coat (cabaya) and jacket (hettaya). The royalties adopted new dress features into their original native dress. The objective of the present research is to explore how the articles of clothing and new dress forms mediated through fashion language and created new and different meanings in different contexts. The qualitative research method was adopted for the research. The research reveals that a fresh or new style may appear inappropriate when it is first introduced, but its novelty is essential to the arousal of interest in perceivers.

Keywords— Contextual perspective, fashion language, social situation

I. INTRODUCTION

During the sixteenth century the Kotte era (1411-1597AD) marked a new turning point in Sri Lankan dress fashion. The Portuguese conquered the island and established their power gradually throughout the lowlands of Sri Lanka including Kotte. Their influences in political, economic, cultural and social strata were huge and indirectly affected the lives of people of the society. By this time the royalty was directly inspired by western sartorial trends and led drastic changes in the way of practicing traditions of Sri Lankan fashion forms.

The royalty had direct contacts with the Portuguese Kings and diplomats and they embraced certain items of dresses, mixed and mingled with their traditional dress and created a novel dress. This process of mingling, of mixing and matching of several dress details is called hybridization and showed a dramatic composition of western, south Indian and Sri Lankan dress details. The royalty inspired the Portuguese dress items such as attached collar (tippet), buttons, cuffs, hats, and new dress forms like trouser (pantaloon) coat (cabaya) and jacket (hettaya). Besides they created novel dress forms by mixing the new items into their original native dress. The objective of the present research is to identify what type of articles of clothing did royalty inspired and embraced and how did they created their new dress forms and represented themselves in different occasions which assigned different meanings in order to the each contexts. The fashion language of the novel dress forms brought a huge impact to the successors of the royalty and for the elites who served the King as fashion is trickled down from the supreme to the rest of the strata of the society. The historical narrations of Sri Lankan dress fashions of the royalties show that the religion of the particular society played a pivotal role in forming the ideology of the wearer. However consequently with the advent of the Portuguese to Ceylon in 1505 AD the

state religion was instrumental in changing the ideology of the royalty after their conversion to Christianity.

A qualitative method has been adopted for this research. The conceptual frame work of the study is based on the Semiotic model. The Semiotic model seems to be a more plausible and relevant theory in the matter of understanding how meanings are generated. Semiotics is a model or theory of signs and revealed meanings by social interaction. Sequence of in-depth observational studies carried out with temple murals, cloth paintings, wood and stone carvings, sculptures and special ivory carvings at Munich Treasury in Germany along with the continuous literature review. In the research many multiple observations were carried out. A protocol or a particular system for recording information is needed to note observations on the field. Therefore observations are recorded as descriptive notes with multiple descriptive sketches. Descriptive notes include description of physical setting, important features of the painting, or sculpture, several series of sketches of distinctive details, parts, features, forms and shapes of observed dresses and personalities. Demographic information was also included with dates, names of the places and field settings.

For literature review used documented manuscripts, chronicles, books, original records of foreign travellers, published research pertaining to the area and inscriptions used for gather and sort data. The process of the research is inductive; the researcher builds abstractions, concepts and theories from details.

Validity of the data were confirmed with cross checking literary sources along with random interviews with selected scholars, artists , village headmen, high priests of the selected temples with gathered images. Data analysis was conducted as an activity simultaneously with data collection, data interpretation and writing narrative sub topics. There are several simultaneous activities involved in the research process. The analysis is based on reduction (de- contextualizing) and interpretation (re- contextualizing).

Among the period dress fashions selected dresses such as Long coat (*cabaya*) collars (*tippet*) Short jacket (*hettaya*) Short jacket with collar (*manthe hettaya*) Long cloth (*thuppotti*) and Trouser

(*pantaloon*) were observed and analyzed. The systematic pictorial analysis reveals many new meanings created, which influenced transmission of its “context”.

II. FASHION: A VISUAL COMPONENT

In cognitive sciences, the perspective of a social significance is linked to taste and the sense. Stereotypical repetition of types of behaviour and images, filters, encrusted with sense and the senses where signs, especially visual signs become imperatives. Fashion is its visual component, is communicated as the new, the unexpected, the unpredictable, but also signifies possible meanings to the society.

A. Fashion Syntax

Articles of clothing (items) have possible meanings. Sometimes it relates or differences are brought in ways in which items succeed each other or combine together in a chain of discourse. This can be considered as the difference between things that may come before and after one another. When a person chooses body adornments, attention is usually paid to how well the person’s choice of head dress, lower body dress, jewellery, for example, considering the king’s attire, fit together as an ensemble. Furthermore difference could be seen between the crowns, lower body dress, jewellery and accessories of the king’s attire. All were necessary to form or signify the whole king’s attire. It is also the difference between the lower body dress, head dress, jewellery, and accessories of other males’ dress. The king would normally wear a crown, jewellery and lower garment. All were necessary to form the signifying whole of the ensemble.

Each area of the body from the top of the head to the toes can be a location for the articulation of styles of dress. According to the paradigmatic relation similar items of dresses can be classified theoretically. The relationship between items in a paradigm is ‘this or this or this’ also it runs horizontally. (Barnard 2002, 90) At every location of the body, the person has a choice regarding how to articulate with styles of adornment, whether to wear a crown or not, a necklace or not and so on. This pattern embedded in sign and sign systems is identified by Roland Barthes as categorical opposition. The choices are regulated by the paradigmatic relation of the society’s particular

dress code. As a system of signification all dress codes regulate all fashion alternatives such as size, shape, colour, and style. (Gottdiener 1995, 38)

III. CONTEXTUAL PERSPECTIVE AND APPEARANCE VIEW POINTS

Contextual perspective allows people to manage and perceive appearances in everyday life considering the actual social situations or as historical contexts within a culture.

A. Cultural View Points Regarding Appearance During the Kotte Period

The King was the culminating point of the pyramid in society and represented the state and the centre of political life. Beside the term Rajan and all other terms, titles for the King already existed in Sanskrit literature in Sri Lanka. The concept of King is distinguished by the term Maharaja (Great king) or *Rajadhiraja*ⁱⁱⁱ (Ruler of the King)(Pathmanathan,1986/87)*Mahipathi* (Lord of the earth) and *Deva*(god).The title corresponds to 'Our Majesty'.(Geiger 1960) Over a long time throughout history culture built certain stereotypes for the King as a living God that affected the cognition of people in society. The representation of the god in sculpture or in paintings therefore could be hypothesized as the representation of a King. Because the artists of the period had no such imagination of how the god should be represented, he saw the live model of the King who was considered the Lord of the earth.

The King used sixty four royal ornaments which he had to wear at his consecration and at important state occasions. These ornaments were also signifiers and signified royalty. The King used fine silks. He used a silk cloth for the lower dress and shawls for head covering. It was because of the culturally built social code regarding silk and fine cotton that people understood royalty or luxurious sophistication. Coomaraswamy states that the Sinhalese cotton was of a very different quality; 'no muslin was made, but the best stuffs were thick, soft and heavy like the finest linen'. (1984, 196)The dresses of the King were of white colour. Besides, he wore a shawl of white colour. According to tradition he used a white silk cloth to wrap the head before the coronation crown was placed by the Purohitha Brahmin. Here colour became the signifier and signified purity. Tradition and the culture give value to the colour white. The pictorial references show that the King dressed differently

according to the day and the place where he should be represented.



Figure1
The King is at the senate



Figure2
at the audience hall

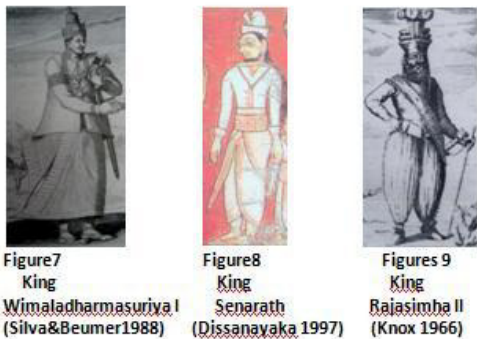
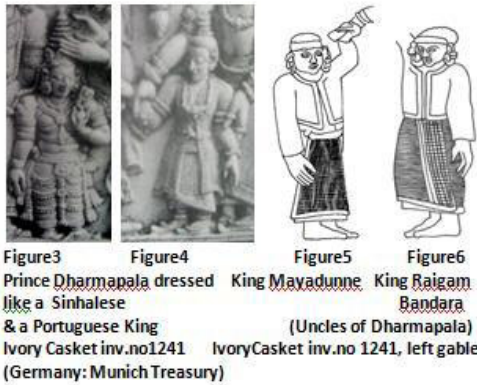
D. The Portuguese Influenced life style: Kings became Christians and adopted the western lifestyle

Sometime later in 1557 AD Prince Dharmapala (grandson of King Buwanekabahu VII of Kotte) and his queen were baptized with the names of Dom as Dom Joao Pareira Pandar (1557AD) at the hands of Joao de Villa de Conde and the queen as Dona Catherina. The Portuguese names were the fashion at court. Baptism became a rebirth under a foreign name and every female royal convert was dubbed as Dona. To denationalize the race was not the missionary's object, and yet such was the inevitable consequence of the course he pursued, for with baptism came a rebirth under a foreign name and every royal convert was dubbed a Dom.

It is noticed that most of the early kings of the Kandyan era were educated under Portuguese Franciscans and baptized by them. King Wimaladharmasooriya 1(1591-1604) was one of them, son of a noble called Wirasundara Mudaliyar who was known among the Portuguese by the name of Dom Joao de Austria Mudaliyar. However from his childhood he was known as Konappu Bandara. He embraced Buddhism after he became the King of the Kandyan Kingdom, as it was an important qualification for the kingship. However his personal desires and Western attitudes could not be eliminated from his dress sense. His enthusiasm for Western culture was clearly evident through early travellers' notes. (Hulugalle 1999)

The son of King Senarath (1604-1635) (Wimaladharmasuriya's brother) King Rajasinga 11 (1635-1687) also grew up in the Portuguese

environment and his dress habits show how he changed his mind with the impact of the environment he had grown up in. Knox's statements are quite important to understand the King's dress habits displayed throughout his life time. Knox says, 'he was not wont to keep to one fashion, but changes as his fancy leads him'. Furthermore careful observations of Knox state, 'his apparel is very strange and wonderful, not after his own country fashion, or any other, being made after his own invention'. (Knox 1958)



Prince Vijayapala (a petty prince of Matale District) was also one of an interesting royal character who had completely turned into a western life style. On his coronation he dressed as an English gentleman. An eye-witness, Captain Joao Rebeiro said, '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'. His long hair was curled at the ends, and his beard was worn in the Portuguese fashion, with a

moustache which was not very full. (Pieris 1927) These evidences show how the early Kings of the Kandyan era eagerly embraced alien Western dress and novel items of dresses.

III. THE PROCESS OF CONTEXTUALIZING

The process of contextualizing allows people to see changes in the meanings of dresses as contexts. In everyday life it is seen that contexts are prone to dissolve into one another because people love to get dressed in a different way. By the time of conversion of the Sinhala Kings to Christianity the Portuguese introduced novel dress items to the traditional dress arena. The long sleeved upper body coat or cabaya, the long sleeved upper body short jacket or hettaya, short jacket with a broad tippet or round collar, or short jacket with a broad neckline without a collar or décolleté, trousers or pantaloons and many accessories such as buttons, hats, shoes, belts and stockings. During the Kotte era western meanings of dresses (contexts) were mixed with traditional so called Sri Lankan meanings of dresses leading to novel interpretations.

Prince Dharmapala's Long coat + Long cloth

King Mayadunne and King Raigam Bandara's circular neck lined short jacket + a Long cloth

King Wimaladharmasuriya's short jacket with a tippet + a Long cloth

King Senarath's short jacket + Long cloth

Prince Dharmapala coroneted in Lisbon and he adopted the Portuguese long sleeved long coat instead of covering his bare upper body with an abundance of jewellery. He well manipulated such dress items like a long coat with an unsown wrapped long cloth or redda for the lower body. Here the context of a long coat mediated in a totally different social environment which the contexts (meanings of dresses) already developed. However when the long coat integrated with the long unstitched wrapped cloth context was valued based on different aspects of society. Then the context becomes critical in the interpretation of appearance. It became related to social and physical construction of the body. As this is mentioned in the above successors of Prince Dharmapala followed the same dress practice. The

controversial qualities of the dresses such as stitched and unstitched dress forms mixed perfectly and its composition absolutely created a new dress language within the period.

Visual representations of the temple murals show how the Kings were immersed in Western fashions and adapted them according to their contemporary social dress norms and values. They patterned the jackets with different types of sleeves, necklines, collars, fastenings, and decorative trimmings such as frills and ornamental cuffs with traditional designs and motifs.

E. Development of New Forms of Upper Body Jackets



Figure 11
Gangaramaya temple,
Kandy
Lewella, Kandy



Figure 12
Degaldoruwa temple,
Kandy



Figure 13



Figure 14

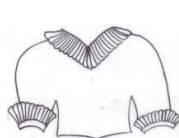


Figure 15
Hanguranketha temple , Kandy



Figure 16

IV. CONCLUSION

The research reveals that novel fashion stimuli are basic to fashion change. A fresh or innovative style may appear inappropriate when it is first introduced, but its novelty is essential to the arousal of interest in creating new fashion styles and perceivers who seek for new trends. New fashion suggestions were received favourably from a more dissimilar source.(Leavitt and Kaigler-Evans,1979) It seems that receivers may prefer to

interact with people whom they perceive to be similar to themselves; they may be influenced more in some contexts of similar and or novel appearance because of the arousal or stimulation these appearances may provide in order to be noticed.(Kaiser 1997)In conclusion, the concept of contextual perspective prompted the articles of clothing and new dress forms to become dress signs and created messages in one context and made it possible to move across contextual boundaries (Sri Lankan, Portuguese) because they borrowed some appearance cues (signs) across different contextual boundaries.

These concepts are derived from the scientific basis would be recommended for application of different avenues of the field of fashion. Therefore the applicability of fashion meanings of Kotte period to the present as well as to the future is possible. The knowledge gained from the study can be applied to the fields of fashion, identified as fashion advertising, fashion photography and fashion journalism. Contemporary society is valued on a pecuniary culture. In this culture dress and fashion becomes highest demanding consumer consumption product.

Barnard, Malcolm. 2002. Fashion as Communication. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Coomaraswamy, A. 1984. The Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon. New Delhi: Today & tomorrow's printers & publishers.

Dissanayaka S B, 1997, 'DiyathilakaNuwara, Department of Archeology,Colombo, XXplate

Geiger, Wilhem. 1960. Culture of Ceylon in the Medieval Times. Wiesbaden: Heinz Bechert.

Gottdiener, M. 1995. Postmodern Semiotics. United States of America: Blackwell.

Kaigler-Evans,K.(1979)*Perceived Similarity of Sources and Receivers Innovativeness:Facilitators of Transmission of Information about Fashion*.Perceptual and Motor Skills 49:243-246

Keiser, B. Susan.1998. The Social Psychology of Clothing. New York: Fairchild Publication.

Knox ,R. 1966. Historical Relation of Ceylon.Dehiwala: Tissara Publications.

Pathmanathan, S,1986/87,Buddhism and Hinduism in Sri Lanka: AD 1300- 1600, Kalyani, University of Kelaniya, vol V/VI, p 102

Pieris P.E,1927, 'The Prince Vijayapala of Ceylon' (1634-1654) from the original documents at Lisbon, Colombo :CAC press,p.10

Silva, R. K. De and Beumer, W.G.M. 1988. Illustrations and Views of Dutch Ceylon 1602-1796. London: Serendib Publications.

BIOGRAPHY OF AUTHOR



¹Author is a Senior lecturer of Fashion Design and Product Development of Textile and Clothing Technology, University of Moratuwa. She obtained her PhD in Integrated Design from the Faculty of Architecture, University of Moratuwa in 2013 and credited as one of the first two PhD s in integrated Design in Sri Lanka. She holds a BA (Hons) Fine Arts Degree with a first class from the faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya in year 2000. She has experience in lecturing for more than 13 years. She started her academic career as a temporary assistant lecturer at the University of Peradeniya, visiting lecturer at the faculty of Architecture, University of Moratuwa. She is an artist who has won several gold and silver medals at international and all island art competitions.

Note: The title *rajiraja* which came into vogue in the island during the 12TH century was applied to Parakramabahu VI. In the case of Parakramabahu VI the assumption of this epithet by him may have been inspired by the revival of the power and influence of the Sinhalese monarchy under him after a long period of decline. He brought 'the whole island under one umbrella' during his long eventful reign and this was considered to be a remarkable achievement. To his subjects the assumption of this epithet by Parakramabahu VI may have implied his overlordship over the kingdom and principalities which existed in the island at that time. The more prestigious *Maharadhiraja* was commonly used in much of the Kotte period.