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## **Reimagining the Cosmopolitanism of Sri Lanka Through Cultural Artefacts**

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### **Background**

The history of Sri Lanka correlates with its geographical position at the southern extremity of the South Asian peninsula on sea routes between Asia, Africa and Europe (Biedermann & Strathern, 2017; Somadeva, 2006; De Silva, 1981; Bandaranayake, 1974). Due to the geographical location of Sri Lanka, a range of influences and the mingling of races and cultures throughout history have shaped the island's character as a test-bed for a cosmopolitanism that is embodied in its material culture (Biedermann & Strathern, 2017). However, socio-cultural disruptions and ethnic conflicts emerged at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to the adverse impacts of colonisation and recent waves of globalisation. These disruptions have endangered the material culture of Sri Lanka and diluted its historical cosmopolitanism. To preserve and protect the island's material culture from ongoing erosion, and to reimagine and renew the cosmopolitanism of traditional Sri Lankan crafts, this paper aims to renew Sri Lankan craft culture through a close study of traditional bridal regalia, a highly regarded and elaborate craft form.

The colonial impacts experienced between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries have transformed the socio-cultural domains of Sri Lanka. This transformation has been accelerated by the emerging complexities and dynamics of globalisation in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Drawing from theorists Arjun Appadurai (1996) and Charles Taylor (1995) the social imaginary is considered here as the key player for these transformations as it exposes the tension between globalisation and multiple Sri Lankan modernities (Gaonkar, 2002). I define multiple Sri Lankan modernities as the collective agency of various imaginaries of different groups of Sri Lanka. Appadurai (1996, p. 33) suggests that the social imaginary explains the foundation of globalisation through his model of global cultural flows composed of five scapes: ethnoscap (people), mediascapes (images), technoscapes (machinery), finanscapes (money) and ideoscapes (ideas). Based on this model, he explains how deterritorialisation, by which he means transnational cultural flows, has become one of the 'central forces of the modern world' (p. 37). His reasoning is that

deterritorialised groups – such as diaspora – tend to imaginatively reinvent homeland traditions. He further proposes that recreating a culture remotely can also reproduce ethnic conflicts brought about by colonialism due to diverse cultural tensions. I interpret Appadurai's account as a credible explanatory framework for understanding how Sri Lanka and its diaspora are shaped by colonisation and globalisation and by the civil war between 1983 and 2009.

Appadurai (1996) proposes that the critical point of globalisation is that the unpredictable and deeply disjunctive forms he calls 'scapes' are each 'subjective to its own constraints and incentives' (p. 35). For example, the COVID-19 pandemic is currently exposing unpredictable and inconsistent health care provision internationally. Additionally, the pandemic has created a reduction in the mobility of people and an acceleration in the flows of images and ideas. Against this background, members of the Sri Lankan diaspora around the globe have forged new dialogues with their nation-state and adapted to changes in cultural flows for the benefit of potentially new Sri Lankan social imaginaries. It is hoped that new avenues to appreciate the differences and to acknowledge the diversity and the plurality of different societies will emerge as the economic crises created by the pandemic subside. Drawing on Appadurai (1996), I contend that it is important to explore 'group identities' and to increase the 'potential scope of embodied experiences of group affinity' (p. 157) through the recording and reimagining of the cosmopolitanism of traditional Sri Lanka crafts. In sum, to counter the social imaginary of segregation underpinned by the modern nation-state and to re-imagine its early cosmopolitanism, this paper attempts to record and renew the embodied cosmopolitan identity of Sri Lankan traditional crafts culture. I see this as a viable strategy with which Sri Lanka in the post-pandemic future can embrace the different cultural identities that have been diluted and damaged by ethnic conflict.

To explore and decode the cosmopolitan identities of Sri Lanka the paper starts with a discussion of how the traditions of Buddhist Sinhalese and South Indian Tamils were combined in Kandy. I then describe my research approaches to documenting the symbols of traditional bridal regalia, through hand-rendered and annotated paintings of bridal regalia based on my visual analysis of historical Sri Lankan postcards and photographs. The bridal jewellery artefacts I refer to are largely selected from the collections of family heirlooms to ensure authenticity.

## **Methods**

I work with digital images of traditional jewellery as the primary source of information (Achterberg, 2007). Jon Wagner (2011) identifies the 'interface between visual studies and material culture' as a field of inquiry focused on 'pictures of artefacts' (p. 19). He suggests that images of artefacts can be utilised for artefact-oriented research because they record the materials, techniques, and outcomes of human agency. Based on the photographs I develop precise hand rendered drawings that I then annotate. My drawings for this research aim to bridge the sensory and semantic gaps in the digital images of the jewellery artefacts. The sensory gap is the loss of information in a reproduced image compared to the physical object it depicts which I see as related to faded photographs that are poorly lit and show jewellery worn on the body and therefore partly occluded (Grubinger 2007). By reducing the sensory gap, the processes of tracing and rendering assist me to extract the subtle details in the designs, iconography, materials, and the manufacturing process of the artefacts. The semantic gap is the 'space between the features or information extracted from the visual data and the user interpretation of the same data' (Chen et al., 2005, p. 279). Bridging the semantic gap for future users of the visual records, my renderings are annotated not only with physical details but also with the cultural meanings of the icons incorporated into the artefacts. I define iconography as the identification, description, analysis, and interpretation of symbols included in the traditional bridal artefacts of Sri Lanka.

### **The cosmopolitanism embodied in traditional Sri Lankan bridal regalia**

Traditional Sri Lankan bridal regalia refers to the ensemble of the bridal jewellery worn in Kandy. My rationale for selecting traditional bridal regalia for this research is that it records the history of cultural influences, revisions, and renewals over several generations in Sri Lanka. Recognised as the most consistent repository of the traditional art, craft, and design of the island (Wickramasinghe, 2014; Coomaraswamy, 1908), Kandyan jewellery worn by the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka between 1594 and 1815 was continuously produced until the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Dissanayake, 1986). Appadurai (1981, p. 134) describes the Kandyan Kingdom as a 'first-rate ethnography' because of its inclusion of the many cultural dynamics and tensions between Vedda, Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim spiritual practices that coexist in Sri Lanka as well as the waves of Portuguese, Dutch and British colonisation that brought with them Christianity.

The bridal regalia brings together a cosmopolitan array of symbols from the traditions of the region, as well as Buddhist beliefs that are each connected to the layered histories of Sri Lanka and its neighbouring countries in the Indian Ocean. The various interactions of Sri Lanka with waves of Portuguese, Dutch and British colonisation are also appropriated and adapted in the cosmopolitan heritage of Sri Lanka. Appadurai (2013) argues that cosmopolitanism does not 'dissolve or deny the intimacies of the local' but rather dissolves indignities and exclusions (p. 198). Further, he proposes that cosmopolitanism engages with democracy as a space of 'dignity as well as equality' (Appadurai, 2013, p. 198). Cultural studies scholar Ien Ang (2014, p. 12) characterises the complexity of cosmopolitanism as a labyrinth, and she claims, when seen as a 'complex interweaving of seemingly opposite forces' of different cultures, that 'a different way of thinking about cultural diversity' emerges. She describes the labyrinth of cosmopolitanism,

Not as a mosaic (where each element is a separate entity), nor as a melting pot (where all differences are dissolved), but perhaps as a maze (where identity and difference are seen not as opposites but as simultaneous, complementary and entangled presences) (Ang, 2014, p. 12).

Drawing from Ang (2014) and Appadurai (2013), the next section explores diverse cultural influences and cosmopolitan identities that were integrated in Sri Lankan traditional jewellery during the Kandyan period, and the development of the official Sri Lankan traditional bridal regalia initiated by the nationalist movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Diverse cultural influences embodied in traditional bridal regalia**

Several studies (Ranathunga & De Silva, N., n.d.: Coomaraswamy, 1908) claim that the influences of South Indian on traditional Sri Lankan bridal jewellery is connected to the marriages of South Indian and Kandyan royal families in the 1700s. The Nayakkar Dynasty of the Kandyan Kingdom that resulted (1739-1815), now recognised as the last monarchy of Sri Lanka, meant that South Indian culture has substantially influenced Kandyan culture ever since. Nayakkars are from the *Vaduga* caste, a Telegu language group from Madurai in South India, and brought with them cultural practices that have both directly influenced and been adapted in Kandy. Historian Ananda Coomaraswamy (1908, p. 213) contends that the families of Kandyan chiefs were often recognised for their service with gifts of jewellery and swords that embodied South Indian craft. More recently, fashion researcher Gayathri Ranathunga (2016) has also described the direct relationship between the Kandyan elites and the Tamil royal families. Both authors contend that the jewellery and craft

culture of Sri Lanka that arose combined South Indian and Kandyan traditions. This does not mean, however, that the craft cultures from South India were literally replicated in their original South Indian form in the context of Sri Lanka.

The South Indian crafts people, known as the *silpin*, who migrated to Sri Lanka during the Kandyan period, adapted Indian craft concepts for local Sri Lankan craft traditions. According to Coomaraswamy (1908), the crafts that emerged in Kandy mixed Tamil and Sinhalese techniques and he points out that the motifs of Sri Lankan jewellery are 'common to both India and Ceylon', as Sri Lanka was known at the time (p. 62). The appropriation of Indian influences in the local cultures of Sri Lanka meant that Hindu-Dravidian elements were diffused and adapted for the Buddhist-Aryan context of Sri Lanka.

Close scrutiny of the influence of South Indian Tamil iconography in Sri Lankan bridal regalia confirms that the appropriations and adaptations by local Sinhalese crafts people have become an important aspect of local Sri Lankan culture. Anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake (1986) concurs and emphasises that the South Indian inspiration for traditional Sinhalese jewellery was in turn influenced by Arabic culture that was widespread in the region at the time. Despite the Portuguese and Dutch colonisations of Sri Lanka there are few traces of their craft cultural practices in Kandyan craft culture. The most prevalent influence is the introduction of faceted gemstones that have replaced the traditional cabochons of Kandyan period jewellery due to British colonisation. Apart from this shift in the treatment of gemstones, the dominant cultural influences are appropriated from South Indian and Arabic influences and have been adapted and appropriated in Sri Lanka. Most probably the impact of the Islamic Mughal Empire on South India was transferred to Sri Lanka through various waves of South Indian migration. I contend that the strong influence of South Indian culture on Kandyan period designs of traditional bridal regalia expresses a cosmopolitan blend of Sinhalese and Tamil cultural attributes. As shown in figures 1 and 2, some of the elements of the regalia, for example, the headdress of the ensemble, are common to both Sinhalese and Tamil cultures.



Figure 1: Tamil bride, Sri Lanka, n.d. Most probably late 19<sup>th</sup> century or early 20<sup>th</sup> century.  
Source: Sri Lankan Post Card, <https://www.ebay.com>



Figure 2: A wedding portrait of Mr. Nissanka Wijeyeratne & Ms. Nita Dullewe, 1954  
Source: Wijeyeratne family collection

### **Development of traditional bridal regalia**

From the perspective of this study the development of traditional bridal regalia in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a project of modernity. Theorists Arjun Appadurai (2014, 1996)

and Charles Taylor (2001, 2000) describe how modernity transforms traditional societies by introducing new conventions. They emphasise that the contemporary social imaginary is shared by the masses of the society as a practice and a collective agency, and they contend that the gradual development of modernity from the colonial world to the globalised present was created in the context of imperial colonisation.

Because of the cultural combinations evident in the artefacts of the Kandyan period and because the British colonisers subscribed to a belief in and commitment to renewing heritage traditions in the island, Kandyan crafts came to be seen as the authentic relics of the nation by the leaders of the nationalist movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the production of a local culture that was distinct from the influences of Western modernity during British colonisation, the jewellery of the Kandyan elite in the 1800s, shown in Figure 3, was reimagined by the nationalist movement in the 1920s as an ensemble that was deemed suitable for bridal regalia in wedding ceremonies nation-wide.



Figure 3: Kandyan Sinhalese woman wearing traditional Sinhalese jewellery, c. 1880

Source: <https://www.mediastorehouse.com>

The nationalist Sri Lankan movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century established a set of conventions for Sinhala Buddhist identity that in the process obscured the history of cosmopolitanism of Sri Lankan cultures that is embodied in traditional bridal regalia.

The recent changes to the design of bridal regalia brought about by globalisation and newly emerging and competing multiple Sri Lankan imaginaries means that traditional symbols are replaced with modern elements. Documenting and reimagining the historical cosmopolitan identity of traditional artefacts has significant potential for preserving the meanings of traditional regalia and for recreating an inclusive Sri Lankan future that counters further dilution of the meanings that are embodied in the traditional jewellery forms. In the next section, I will describe my renderings that document the traditional jewellery designs and explain their iconography and embodied cultural meanings. These renderings are the basis for a series of jewellery designs with which I plan to reimagine the historical cosmopolitanism and the diverse cultural identities that comprise contemporary Sri Lanka.

### **The documentation of the traditional bridal regalia**

Traditional bridal regalia consist of twenty-six pieces. It is worn with the Kandyan style of saree—the ‘*osariya*’. The jewellery items that form the traditional Kandyan bridal regalia is considered a ritualistic adornment of the bride that includes; *Nalapatiya* (the headdress), *Ira/Handa* (the sun and the moon hair broaches), *Kondamaala* (hair ornament), *Dimbithi* (earrings with tassels and pearls), *Maala hatha* (seven pendants with long chains), *Pethi maalaya* (a long necklace of beads in the shape of bitter gourd seeds or flowers), *Agasthi maalaya* (an agate necklace), *Gedi maalaya* (a necklace with rounded beads), *Haritchiya* (a brooch worn on the shoulder), three bangles on each hand (*gedi valalla*, *seri valalla* and *gal valalla*), *Ketchchagama* (an armband), *Havadiya* (a waist-let), and—optional—*Salamba* (anklets).

### **Iconography of *Ira-Handa***

The symbols of sun and moon shown in Figure 4 are placed on either side of the bride’s head for the Sri Lankan wedding ceremony. The two pieces were originally made of gold and set with precious gemstones: rubies, emeralds and pearls. The sun is represented by a complete circle and the moon by a crescent. These symbols are related to the longevity and endurance of the relationship between the couple. Sinhalese traditions associate the sun with masculinity and the moon with femininity. The opposition of day and night represent the social imaginary of gender in Sri Lanka and the historical iconography of bridal regalia. The sun and moon adornments are influenced by South Indian jewellery and are thus worn by both Sinhalese and Tamil brides of Sri Lanka.



Figure 4: *Ira-Handa* - Sun and the Moon. Hand rendered drawing by the author.  
Source photograph: Patrick and Mayanthi Nugawela Collection.



Figure 5: *Bherunda Pakshi Padakkama* – The Double head bird pendant. Hand rendered drawing by the author.  
Source photograph: Patrick and Mayanthi Nugawela Collection.

### **Iconography of *Bherunda Pakshi Padakkama***

The double head bird pendant that is shown in Figure 5 is a relatively large pendant worn with a long chain of metal loops or beads. The pendant expresses the motif of the double headed bird— *Bherunda Pakshi*. The motif is used as a symbol in both Eastern and Western cultures (De Silva, 2009; Coomaraswamy, 1908).

Coomaraswamy (1908, p. 85) observes that the motif also appears in Russian and Austrian heraldry, where it is known as double-headed eagle and he speculates that it was initially derived from the Eastern heraldry and introduced to Europe by the Medieval Christian Crusaders who migrated to the East at a later period (Coomaraswamy, 1908; Dissanayake, 1986). In Sri Lankan traditions the mythical bird with two heads symbolises the marriage where the two heads must collaborate for the sake of survival (De Silva, 2009). The incorporation of the motif into Sri Lankan bridal regalia expresses hope for the expected longevity of the marriage of the couple. As this brief history of the symbol of the double headed bird indicates, there were myriad cultural influences on Sri Lanka as a country located on the Indian Ocean trade routes, a plausible explanation for why cosmopolitanism flourished in the region.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper I have argued for the preservation of the material culture of Sri Lanka impacted by colonisation, globalisation and civil war. Through annotated paintings that document Sri Lankan traditional bridal regalia I aim to show how the diverse cultural identities that make up the cosmopolitan identity of the island are embodied in the craft of the region. I contend that documenting these traditional artefacts counters the further dilution of their cultural meaning and their significance in embodying the cosmopolitan identity of Sri Lanka. My hope is that through my designs for new craft objects that are based on this documentation I can contribute to the renewal of group affinity, respect and plurality through Sri Lankan craft as the economic and cultural destabilisation brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic subsides.

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