

THE RESURGENCE OF LOCALISM IN FASHION: CELEBRATING THE TRADITIONS AND FOLKLORE THROUGH STORYTELLING

AUTHORS

Shashiprabha, Thilakarathne
University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka

Sumith, Gopura
University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka

Alice, Payne
RMIT, Australia

Ayesha, Wickramasinghe
University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka

Corresponding Author: Thilakarathneersj.20@uom.lk

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ABSTRACT

Localism represents a movement that aims to establish a profound connection between a community and its geographical surroundings, fostering a mutual relationship in the production and consumption of locally made products. This movement emphasizes on responsible land use, aligning ethical behaviour with social responsibility and environmental sustainability. The integration of localism with storytelling becomes particularly potent in conveying and preserving traditions, rituals, and crafts that face the risk of disappearance. Contemporary youth, in contrast to previous generations, are exploring innovative avenues in fashion, avoiding rigid adherence to established concepts. When combined with storytelling, localism highlights the importance of celebrating and safeguarding traditions. Folklore, is a vibrant source for tracing cultural origins, offering a unique tool for highlighting contextual and holistic cultural values. This study examines the folklore of Kuweni from Sri Lanka, an entrancing narrative with deep roots connecting diverse communities across the island. The story intertwines with various craft practices, including handloom weaving, jewellery-making, body adornments, pottery, furniture design, and architecture. While tangible evidence directly linked to these crafts may be absent, the narratives establish an intangible cultural heritage reflecting the rich craft culture of the country. To explore these connections, the research utilizes a qualitative mixed-method approach, drawing upon literature and empirical data from scholars and local communities. Inductive and deductive thematic analysis uncovers themes in folklore, shedding light on local legends and craft traditions in Sri Lanka. The study seeks to highlight the concept of Kuweni by integrating Sri Lankan craft knowledge, experiences, and design inspirations with a tangible outcome. That will help to rejuvenate localism in fashion, infused with storytelling, as a new form of expressing folklore that will be appreciated by the new generation. This approach plays a pivotal role in promoting intangible cultural heritage globally, ensuring that these precious traditions endure through time rather than being lost.

INTRODUCTION

Folklore plays a significant role in symbolizing concepts and transmitting knowledge and creativity across generations as a code of belief or action (Gomme, 1885; Gupta, 2007). The narrative of Kuweni is a captivating story directly linked to the origin of the Sinhalese nation and the contemporary indigenous community (Vedda) in Sri Lanka. Kuweni, recognized as an indigenous Yakka tribal woman, aided Prince Vijaya from North India in seizing the power of Sri Lanka during the 5th century BC (Geiger and Bode, 1912, pp.54–64). This folklore is widely known in Sri Lanka and is documented in ancient literature, emphasizing its historical significance. Shapeshifting qualities, craft practices, various folk arts techniques, both performing and non-performing folk art are noteworthy features associated with the Kuweni's story. These aspects highlight the narrative's importance as a primary source of inspiration for creative disciplines.

In the contemporary world, storytelling has been recognized as a powerful tool and an ancient art form that evolves impressive ideas and emotions. Storytelling synthesizes information and communicates it in a holistic approach (Eriksson and Karlsson, 2014). Typically, storytelling consists of four basic components: character, plot, climax, and outcomes. The relationship between these components creates chronology and causality, which is the order of events and the happenings or causes of the event (Kim, 2021). Therefore, these components and events can be used to develop a successful chronicle for fashion or textile product development.

Storytelling has an inherent connection with human emotional engagement. Consequently, it can be effectively employed in the context of fashion products and their consumers. Within the fashion industry, psychological obsolescence stands out as a primary driver for the conspicuous consumption of fashion products (Fletcher, 2015). To mitigate this, an experimental framework should be developed by establishing a unique, personal attachment to the fashion product through a narrative. This approach aids in forming a robust emotional connection that extends in various directions, including local wisdom. Local wisdom, craft practices, and local knowledge are directly intertwined with fashion localism, as the land encompasses all the physical, human, and social components embedded in that specific location (Fletcher, 2015).

Localism is a politically centered philosophy that accelerated its prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic (Perera and Ranaweera, 2022). Fashion localism is linked to the development, consultation, and promotion of local fashion products. By encouraging both consumers and businesses to support local enterprises, localism strengthens the interconnectedness within the community and the environment, fostering social equity (Perera and Ranaweera, 2022). A specific ecosystem is always unique from another based on its knowledge, cultural practices, as well as the products it creates. Therefore, localism reflects the skills, stories related to those skills, motifs, and visual language of a specific place. This indicates that localism is the opposite of globalization because it challenges the concept of a "one-size-fits-all" economy and creates multifarious alternatives that contribute to local empowerment (Fletcher, 2018).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Storytelling has emerged as a crucial endorsement for fashion concepts, fostering emotional connections among consumers, fashion brands/products, and their manufacturing processes. Moreover, storytelling has evolved into a promising trend in the contemporary fashion industry. In this context, the narrative of Kuweni in Sri Lanka serves as a thought-provoking story that intricately weaves together various approaches into a coherent framework, establishing connections between storytelling and localism. This interconnection ultimately contributes to the development of a tangible creative outcome. Therefore, the primary objective of this research is to revive the holistic values embedded in Kuweni's folklore through storytelling and localism, simultaneously revitalizing craft practices and traditional knowledge in fashion product development.

METHODOLOGY

This research has taken a Pragmatic Research Philosophy where Pragmatism enables the researcher to explore dynamic pathways to find a solution to the research problem. As Dudovskiy (2012), states the ontology of pragmatism can be either subjective or objective. The study follows a Qualitative data collection technique and a mix of inductive and deductive reasoning to investigate the symbolic values of folklore in a Social Scientific approach. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), Qualitative data are considered a source of grounded and rich descriptions of an identifiable local context, which helps to maintain the sequential flow and drive fruitful explanations. Secondary data were collected from literature sources, and the primary data were collected from two corresponding samples: professionals and the local community from the Sri Lankan context, specifically related to the folklore of Kuweni.

Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, discussions, and observations were used to gather data from these participants, leading them to share their experiences and express their research areas (Sekaran and Bougie, 2013). Semi-structured interviews help to build a friendly relationship between the participant and the researcher, enhancing rapport (Clarke and Braun, 2019). Questions were more focused on the archaeology and history of Sri Lanka, narrowing down to folklore and finally related to the narrative of Kuweni. The data collection was conducted following the Ethical Clearance (EDN/2021/01) granted by the Ethics Committee of the University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka.

The folklore-related data analysis used Thematic reasoning initially so that new themes emerged. Then the initial themes were assigned to the Scientific Approach (SA) and Social Scientific Approach (SSA). The scientific approach comprises four main sub-areas (Gomme, 1885), while the Social Scientific Approach comprises ten major areas (Gupta, 2007, and Islam, 1985), as illustrated in Figure 01. This is more of a reasoning. Consequently, the overall data analysis can be characterized as a mixed method of inductive and deductive thematic analysis. This approach facilitated the identification of the most suitable themes related to the folklore of Kuweni.

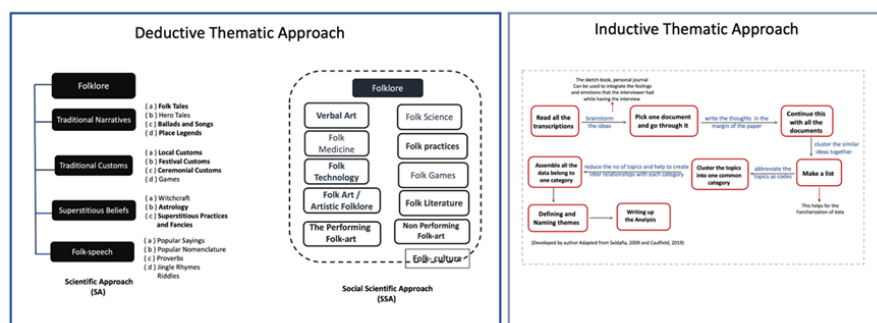


Figure 01: Deductive Thematic Analysis developed by author adapting Gomme (1885) Gupta (2007) Islam (1985) and Inductive Thematic Approach adapting Saldana (2009) and Caulfield (2019)

The next step involves exploring fashion-related outcomes stemming from the chosen themes and initiating creative practices to achieve a fashion or textile result. Practice-led Research (PLR) is an innovative research approach used by practitioners in the creative arts, design, and media within the research framework. The goal is to create a body of creative work, distinct from scholarly writing—a necessary component in a creative discipline (Vella, 2005). Through active and creative practices, researchers generate new knowledge about the use of techniques and materials (Choi, 2016).

During the course of a Practice Led Research (PLR), the integration of an individual into the creative PLR unfolds as a sequential process and the progression is susceptible to modifications based on the extent of interaction involved. Within this framework, the identification of crafts such as weaving and dyeing, along with other craft-related activities, emerges as a pivotal aspect. The creative PLR, in this context, serves as the medium through which the potential

application of these crafts in fashion or textile product development is discerned. In the pursuit of this objective, a thorough examination and experimental exploration of the identified crafts are undertaken to ascertain their viability and appropriateness for the development of fashion and textile endeavours.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Through the application of deductive and inductive thematic reasoning, several significant themes relevant to the narrative of Kuweni have been identified. These themes encompass place legends, folk technology, as well as performing and non-performing folk art. With further investigation of these themes, there were numerous elements came to light.

For instance, the story of Kuweni in Sri Lanka unfolds through various place legends, as illustrated in Figure 02. Furthermore, Kuweni, characterized as a shape-shifter, assumes diverse forms such as a yakkini, hermit, female dog, mare, lovely maiden, warrior woman, and a leopard in different narratives. Her multifaceted life is marked by conflicting roles, transitioning from a neglected royal daughter to a regional leader, lover, betrayer to her community, wife, queen, mother, and ultimately an abandoned woman. This narrative is rich with multiple emotions, life roles, symbolic interpretations, and key incidents. These elements collectively constitute the key components of storytelling, contributing to the complexity of the tale of Kuweni.

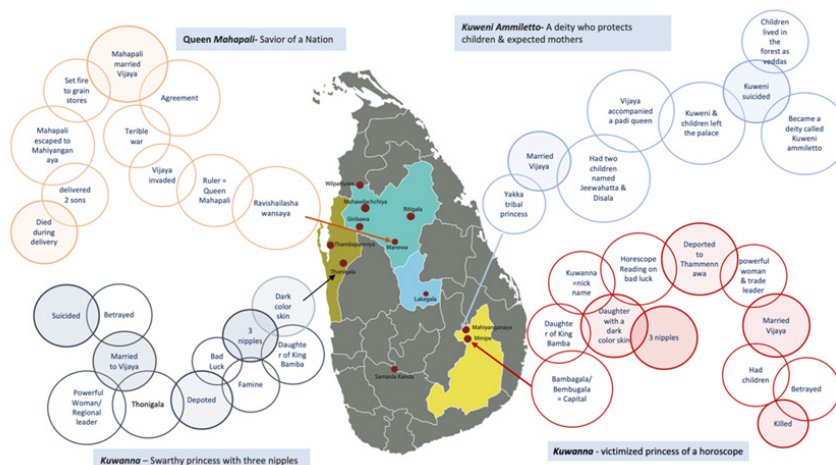


Figure 02: Place legend-based Kuweni stories in Sri Lanka developed by the author

Every place legend carries its unique narrative directly connected to the story of Kuweni. Despite that, the place legends are composed of different craft communities and skills intricately linked with localism. It is believed that Kuweni was spinning cotton as a hermit when Vijaya arrived on Thambapanni, the north-western coastal area of the island. Therefore, weaving can be considered a major craft that can be identified from folklore. Furthermore, rush and reed communities live in and around these areas. Eco-dyeing techniques, incorporated with folk technology, were identified from these place legends to experiment with the traditional eco-dyeing technique. Nonetheless, Lakgala, Mahiyanganaya, and Minipe are very famous for the gem industry, and there are archaeological evidences of ancient ironworks in Sri Lanka. As such, there can be other craft communities in different place legends where there are relationships to Kuweni's story.

Kuweni emerges as a woman characterized by a spectrum of profound emotions and diverse life roles, akin to the experiences of the contemporary woman. The amalgamation of these emotions and her shape-shifting attributes presents an opportunity to infuse a fashion or textile outcome with a narrative element attributed to that. By incorporating storytelling into the design process, a unique fashion outcome can be crafted, fostering a compelling connection between the product and the consumer. In this paradigm, the consumer is not merely donning a fashion

product; rather, they become custodians of the intangible cultural heritage embedded within the product's narrative. The production of these fashion items is entrusted to local artisans, leveraging their traditional knowledge and practices. Through this convergence of storytelling, traditional craftsmanship, and cultural heritage, fashion products become more than just articles of clothing; they become carriers of a rich and meaningful cultural legacy, fostering a deeper appreciation for and preservation of the values inherent in a specific cultural context.

CONCLUSION

The connection between storytelling and localism is inherent, given that folklore is intricately tied to specific contexts and origins. In this symbiotic relationship, stories become mirrors reflecting the local social identities, folk technology, practices, and knowledge of particular communities. The unique skills and knowledge specific to a place, coupled with traditional raw materials and techniques, can experience the revitalization and preservation of oral traditions. These oral traditions, serving as conduits for cultural transmission, not only rejuvenate local practices but also play a crucial role in creating an emotional bond between the product and its consumer, fostering a sense of connection and authenticity.

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