

SRI LANKAN FOOD

MEMORY, FESTIVITY AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN NEW ZEALAND

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ABSTRACT

Recipes that have been passed down from one generation to another serve as portable pieces of the Sri Lankan past. Therefore, food and generational memories go hand in hand as powerful transmitters of cultural heritage to the emerging generation of Sri Lankan-New Zealanders. This thesis employs typography to communicate generational memories and experiences primarily evoked by food. The research sets out to explore the formal and experimental properties of Sinhala and English typography through the use of word concepts and recipes. The research through design process explores the relationships between the verbal and the visual to communicate aspects of Sri Lankan cultural values through typographic form. Consequently, typography works as a tool for carrying cultural tradition forward in New Zealand. The research argues that Sri Lankan food acts as a cultural link but in the context of a continuous process of adaptation. Therefore, the role of a festive Sri Lankan recipe in New Zealand assumes a deeper significance. Actively combining and layering visual modes of graphic language and typography weaves together the ideas of generational experiences, the process of adaptation and Sri Lankan identity in a contemporary New Zealand environment. The production of graphic design work that incorporates both Sinhala and English typography has been very scarce. Therefore, through research for design and analysis this thesis will offer some insights into cultural visibility and its impacts on cultural identity drawn from the literature on food and generational memory.

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SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

1:1 CENTRAL PROPOSITION

Food plays an important role in Sri Lanka's festive tradition by evoking cultural memory and communication in Sri Lankan culture. The properties of Sri Lankan food can be expressed through recipes as they serve as portable pieces of the Sri Lankan past, easily adapted in the kitchen of the New Zealand present. Sri Lankan food is a unique language in itself as the cultural memory linked with its taste, texture, smell and ways and means of preparation are all powerful transmitters of cultural heritage. Food and memories share an intimate connection and a festive environment sets the scene for the design process. This research will explore the impact that food and memories have on Sri Lankan cultural identity in New Zealand through visual communication design methods.

1:2 PROJECT AIMS

- 1) To use typographic form to communicate cultural memory evoked by food, within contexts drawn from both everyday life and celebratory aspects of cultural festivals.
- 2) To explore the formal and experimental properties of Sinhala and English typography through the use of word concepts and recipes.
- 3) To explore relationships between verbal audio documentation and visual graphic communications to communicate aspects of Sri Lankan cultural values.
- 4) To draw upon the particular cultural values embedded in Sri Lankan food culture and festivity and use typography as a tool for carrying the culture forward.

1:3 CONTEXT

The expansion of the Sri Lankan immigrant community in New Zealand has created several opportunities for maintaining cultural identity and communication between generations. This section of the thesis explores a brief history of the Sri Lankan immigrant community in New Zealand and considers cross cultural communication as a visible form of cultural maintainance.

a) The history of Sri Lankan immigrants in New Zealand

i) Movement and migration

The term “diaspora” has been used to describe the experience of movement and migration. Cheran (2003) affirms that the term Diaspora is derived from the Greek *diaspeirein*, meaning dispersal or scattering of seeds from one place to another. The terms *diaspora* and *diasporic* communities are used as metaphoric definitions for expatriates, immigrants, displaced communities and ethnic minorities. Life is a continuous journey. Therefore, it is not very likely that people will live their entire lives in just one country or place. A key characteristic in New Zealand today is that its population is made up of many cultural communities. These communities include different generations (of members) who have varying degrees of closeness to their culture. Asian people now form a significant part of the New Zealand population and can be categorized into several individual ethnic groups.

ii) The Sri Lankan population in New Zealand

The immigrant population in New Zealand has been growing rapidly over the past decade. The eight largest Asian ethnic groups in New Zealand are as follows: Chinese, Indian, Korean, Filipino, Japanese, Sri Lankan, Cambodian and Thai. According to statistics New Zealand (2001 census) the Chinese ethnic group is the largest Asian ethnic group in New Zealand, closely followed by the Indian ethnic group comprising of 26 percent of the ethnic population. Although commonly categorized as part of the Indian ethnic community, the Sri Lankan ethnic group stands on its own and has risen over the years to three percent of the ethnic population. McGill (1982) stated that the first Sri Lankan immigrants migrated to New Zealand in the 1960s, chasing a brighter economic future. Others migrated to provide their children with a safe future and a

sound education. Consequently, Wellington has been the home to a large population of Sri Lankans for many years. The immigration process introduces possibilities for change, as well as new cultural experiences. Therefore, immigrants are faced with keeping in touch with their cultural identity while becoming familiar with the culture of their country of residence. Cultural identity is expressed in various practices such as rituals and festivals, food, language, literature and music. By observing cultural practices such as food, we may gain an understanding into the levels of cultural identity and integration into New Zealand society.

iii) Festivity in Sri Lankan culture

Sri Lankan culture is one that is vibrant, lively and full of festivity and celebration. In Sri Lanka, people celebrate nearly 30 public holidays a year, observing the country's national and religious festivals. There are ceremonies and rituals associated with every part of Sri Lankan life. For example, the first solid meal, the first hair cut, the first job, and "first" anything must be done at the right, and auspicious time. Most activities and rituals during certain festive occasions must be performed at precise times known as the *nakatha*. In between these rituals, the time is spent playing games, visiting family and friends, enjoying the food made for the occasion, and generally having a wonderful time. The arts, music and dance are a big part of the festive period and everything is very vibrant and joyous. Festive culture is an important way in which cultural values are kept alive and passed onto the emerging generation of New Zealand born Sri Lankans. Festive food embodies aspects of ritualistic festivity. Therefore, if one learns to appreciate the food then one can learn about the culture as well. Furthermore, food is related to cultural memory; it nourishes as it keeps us alive and connects us to the past. It connects us to our culture, our families and our heritage. It is not just the spices and ingredients that make Sri Lankan food so special. The ways in which the food is prepared, served and eaten contributes towards making the Sri Lankan food experience a culturally significant one. Traditionally, a festive meal in Sri Lanka is prepared either the day before or in the early hours of the morning. The women folk come together in the kitchen with their clay pots and pans and bring their ancestors' recipes along with them. The memories evoked by Sri Lankan food often work as the

secret ingredient as they have the fierce ability to nourish one's consciousness and a sense of identity.

b) Cross cultural communication and cultural presence in New Zealand

Festivals are a visible form of cultural presence in New Zealand. They have the ability to draw people into cultural traditions through food, dance, clothing and music.

When cultural variables play an important role in the communication process, the result is cross-cultural communication. Dodd (1995) implies that it is a special type of communication as one learns to respect and appreciate diverse cultural traditions. Cross-cultural communication bridges both the generation gap as well as the communication gap. Therefore, culture and communication are inseparable. Sri Lankan culture generates symbols, rituals, customs, festivals and language, which are an integral part of the lives of Sri Lankans living in New Zealand. The role of the Sri Lankan festive tradition in New Zealand assumes a deeper significance. It communicates several aspects of cultural tradition to both the emerging generation of New Zealand born Sri Lankans as well as to other members of the cultural community. Food plays an imperative role in Sri Lanka's festive tradition. Furthermore, food is a universal form of communication and offers a language of cross-cultural communication, especially to the younger generation. It is a medium that appeals to most generations and communities in New Zealand. The recipes, preparation, serving and sharing of festive Sri Lankan food plays a fundamental role in cross-cultural communication. Dodd explains that "a group's history provides a social continuity, an identity, as if to say, this is who I am" (2000, p. 38). For members of other cultural communities, food becomes a language that is offered and shared, tasted and appreciated at the same time. Ethnic dining plays a significant role in New Zealand life. Ethnic food has the ability to reach out to people and make a cultural connection through taste, smell and texture.

If a spoken language is not held in common, then food is a form of expression that often makes that cultural connection. The acceptance of Sri Lankan food in New Zealand culture resides in the harmonization and compromise between maintaining authenticity while consciously modifying it when required.

The deeper significance of Sri Lankan food in a festive context can be communicated through typography by actively combining and layering visual modes of graphic language. Bing (2002, cited in Chattopadhyay, 2004) claims that eastern and western cultural assumptions are challenged when visual communication design is employed to communicate cultural change and adaptation. He argues that the role of typography is not to glamorize the text, but to articulate it. This project utilizes typography in an aesthetic way to enhance cultural visibility, by incorporating all the inspiration it can draw from Sri Lankan festive culture, rituals and individual experiences. The Sinhala alphabet is a unique form, with a round, bubbly, festive appearance. Each letter has an identity of its own, symbolic of individual ingredients, experiences and people. The typography is part of how the community expresses itself, individually and collectively. Therefore, this project employs both Sinhala and English typography to characterize the deeper significance of Sri Lankan food in New Zealand.