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Material Culture of Tea: Visual Analysis of Post-Colonial Sri Lankan Equipage

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Abstract — *Tea in Sri Lanka has evolved from a colonial export commodity into an integral part of local culture, becoming the second most consumed beverage after water. Sri Lankan tea, known for generations as 'Ceylon Tea', is renowned worldwide for its taste and aroma, and the country currently ranks as the fourth-largest tea producer in the world. Tea culture, like many colonial practices, was first introduced to the aristocracy of the country and then gradually transmitted down the social strata. As it spread, certain elements were removed, while new ones were added, creating a unique local adaptation. Tea preparation and serving equipage play a significant role in reflecting a society's social and cultural heritage. This research analyses visual media such as archival images, historical publications, and cinematic representations from the post-independence era, with a focus on the physical and design aspects of tea equipage. Images were categorized into five contexts to understand the varying roles and settings of tea. The identified tea equipage was digitally recreated using SolidWorks to gain a deeper understanding of the material culture. This study reveals that variations in tea preparation and drinking practices within Sri Lankan society have been shaped by factors such as personal preference, generational traditions, economic status, and social context.*

Keywords: *Tea Culture; Tea Equipage; Post-Colonial Sri Lanka; Cultural Adaptation*

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I. Introduction

Tea, second only to water in global consumption, stands as one of the world's most popular and economically accessible beverages. Its appeal transcends age, social, and cultural boundaries, with an estimated daily consumption exceeding two billion cups worldwide. (Speer et al., 2024) The origins of tea can be traced back to ancient China, where it began as a medicinal and ceremonial drink before gradually evolving into a popular social beverage. This early Chinese tradition laid the foundation for tea's journey across continents, where it was adopted and transformed to suit a variety of cultures.

Europe was introduced to tea in the late 17th-century, and although the beverage was well-received, various factors such as the dominance of coffee and challenges in trade limited its acceptance in some countries. But England, rather than all other countries in Europe, became a nation of tea drinkers. (Clark, 2001)

By the 19th-century, Britain had established itself as a tea empire, through its colonial activities. The colonial influence extended to the island of Ceylon (modern-day Sri Lanka), where the British introduced large-scale tea cultivation. Ceylon tea is celebrated worldwide for its high quality, and the island has been a key player in the international tea trade for over 150 years. Although Sri Lanka is widely recognized for its tea exports, local tea consumption has received comparatively little attention, with a notable difference in quality between export and locally consumed tea.

Tea preparation and serving equipage plays a significant role in every tea culture, as it not only supports tea rituals but also reflects the socio-cultural heritage of each society. Tea equipage has evolved over centuries, shaped by factors such as economics, politics, industrial revolution, and art movements. This study aims to explore the transformation of British tea culture within the Sri Lankan context, focusing specifically on tea equipage. The specific objectives are to:

- Examine how Sri Lankans transformed British tea culture, through the use and adaptation of tea equipage.
- Investigate how the material culture of tea equipage reflects differences across social strata and illustrates the varying roles tea played in different social and domestic settings.
- Identify and analyse the design elements of tea equipage used in various post-colonial contexts, highlighting material composition, functional ergonomics, and design aesthetics.

II. Scope of the Research

The central question guiding this research is: *"How have Sri Lankans transformed colonial tea culture into forms that align with their unique cultural usage and customs, with a particular focus on design aspects of tea equipage".*

Sri Lankans have developed their own tea culture, characterized by unique preparation methods, social practices, and equipage that align with the country's distinct socio-cultural values. While tea

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culture can differ significantly from country to country, it also varies within the same culture depending on occasion, and setting. For example, tea can range from an informal homemade brew to the luxurious presentation of high tea in a five-star hotel. This study will pay attention to the ways in which tea culture is expressed across different social strata and cultural contexts, capturing the diversity of tea-related equipment within the island during the post-colonial period, a time when the country was redefining its national identity following independence. Tea equipage will be analysed in two main categories: Tea preparation equipage and tea serving equipage. Then the design elements of tea equipage used in various contexts will be discussed, focusing on material composition, functional ergonomics, and design aesthetics.

III. Literature Review

A. Tea: The Second Most Consumed Beverage in the World

The main source of tea is the Camellia sinensis plant, an evergreen shrub. This plant has different types, including the Indian Assam tea (*C. sinensis var. assamica*). While China is known for introducing tea to the world, the plant originally grew in Southern China, North India, Myanmar, and Cambodia. Many countries now make different tea blends, but there are three main types of tea; Green tea (not fermented), Oolong tea (partly fermented) and Black tea (fully fermented). The difference lies in the 'fermentation', which actually refers to oxidative and enzymatic changes within the tea leaves, during processing. (Hicks, 2009)

Tea as a beverage offers a complex composition of beneficial compounds, including a balanced level of caffeine, essential oils, tannins, and various B-complex vitamins. The distinctive taste of tea is attributed to its essential oils, whereas its characteristic astringency and coloration derive from its tannin content. When consumed plain, tea is remarkably low in caloric content, containing approximately four calories per cup.

When observing the social and cultural significance of tea, its influence extends far beyond being just a beverage. Throughout history, tea has served multiple roles: as a medicinal remedy, a meditation aid, a form of currency, a diplomatic tool, and even a means of social control. Tea's remarkable versatility has touched human civilization in unprecedented ways, bridging social hierarchies and cultural divides, connecting field workers with monastics, tea pluckers with emperors, and Eastern traditions with Western societies. (Martin, 2007)

B. Where Tea Got Rooted: China

"Chinese tea aesthetics not only strived for the purity of tea taste but also cared for the autonomy of time and space for tea drinking." The essence of tea art and the tea ceremony forms the foundation of Chinese tea culture. "Art" refers to the skills and creative processes involved in preparing, brewing, and tasting tea, while the "ceremony" reflects the spirit with which these activities are performed. The term "artistic tea" highlights the idea of treating the entire process; from planting and harvesting to producing and selecting tea as an enjoyable artistic experience. This tradition emphasizes drinking tea in serene and elegant surroundings, such as near clear

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springs, within bamboo groves on mountains, in ancient temples, small pavilions, or personal gardens while appreciating nature. (Wang, 2011)

In classical Chinese culture, tea drinking was distinct from mealtime and was considered a "pure" activity. The Chinese placed special importance on the timing of tea drinking, treating it as a separate moment of pause and reflection. Tea drinking was seen as a break from the routine of daily life. Chinese tea traditions emphasized the tea itself, focusing on its aesthetic qualities. This included not only the aroma and flavour of the tea but also the appearance of the tea leaves, which were often highlighted. (Man & Petts, 2023)

C. From East to West: British Adaptation

Tea first arrived in Europe as a trade item in 1606, and soon it became a regular part of Portuguese and Dutch trade. The beverage initially gained popularity in Holland, but by 1647, demand waned, and prices fell. By the mid-17th century, tea had become fashionable in Paris, where the French introduced the practice of adding milk and sugar to tea. However, by the century's end, tea's popularity in France declined as other beverages like wine, coffee, and chocolate gained favour. England, rather than all other countries in Europe, became a nation of tea drinkers when the Dutch brought tea to London in 1657. (Martin, 2007)

Though inspired by China's tea culture, the English gradually developed their own distinct tea customs, adapting the foreign tradition to suit their preferences. In contrast to serene Chinese tea culture, English tea gatherings were lively social events often accompanied by other activities. (Gao, 2023)

Although tea culture originated in China, the tea cultures of the two countries differ significantly. British tea-drinking customs reflect the creativity, individualism, and sense of freedom characteristic of Western society. Unlike the Chinese, the British approach tea drinking with a practical focus, often consuming it for work, leisure, social interaction, or simply out of habit. (Liu, 2023)

"The love of tea (in Britain) was so widespread that it led to the introduction of new forms of material culture such as porcelain, which became a mainstay in British households. Porcelain took a place amongst the most fashionable and sought after goods in Europe. By 1791, for example, nearly 215 million pieces of porcelain had been imported to England." (Guerty & Switaj, 2004) The English introduced their own unique elements into tea ware. Items like silver vessels for milk and sugar, as well as slop bowls for waste, were unique to European tea settings and would not be found on a traditional Chinese tea table. Additionally, European teacups were typically paired with a saucer and teaspoon for stirring milk or sugar and designed to be wide and shallow enough to accommodate a spoon. (Gao, 2023)

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D. Arrival in Ceylon: Colonial Sri Lanka

In 1815, when the Kingdom of Kandy fell to British forces, completing their conquest of Ceylon, Britons began experimenting with coffee as a commercial crop. The venture proved successful, and coffee plantations soon spread across much of the island. However, this prosperity was short-lived. In the 1870s, a devastating coffee leaf disease (known as coffee rust) swept through the plantations, effectively ending Ceylon's dominance in the global coffee market. In response, British planters swiftly transitioned to tea cultivation, which would become the island's new primary cash crop. (Simon, 2017)

Scottish planter James Taylor pioneered tea cultivation in Ceylon. In 1867, he established a 19-acre experimental tea field on the Loolkandura Estate. The transition to tea was remarkably successful. By 1890, tea plantations had expanded to cover 230,000 acres across Ceylon. The industry's rapid growth was significantly aided by the infrastructure originally developed for coffee cultivation such as existing plantations, planter bungalows, labour force, transportation networks (including roads and railways), harbour facilities, and established mercantile systems.

Ceylon tea quickly gained international recognition, with promotional campaigns launched in major cities such as London and Melbourne. These marketing efforts helped establish "Ceylon Tea" as a distinctive brand, laying the foundation for Sri Lanka's enduring reputation in the global tea market. The production of Ceylon tea packs as a sales attraction began, and the word 'Ceylon' was used as a guarantee of quality. (Simon, 2017)

Soon, tea in Sri Lanka evolved from being a colonial export commodity to becoming a common beverage in local culture. While Sri Lankans favour black tea, their preparation methods differ from the ceremonial styles seen elsewhere. The traditional preparation starts with 'Kahata' (pure black tea without sugar) which later evolved into two main variations: 'plain tea' (sweetened) and 'milk tea.' (Sumuduni & Piyumali, 2016)

Mark Sheldon, writing in *Serendib* magazine (1985), explains Sri Lankan tea culture as: "Tea is the stuff of ceremonies in places like Japan and China as well as England and Australia. And has been produced in Sri Lanka since mid-1870s. In Sri Lanka, there are no special ceremonies surrounding the taking of tea. Here anytime is teatime, and an invitation to join someone over a 'hot cuppa' of the local brew is one of the special pleasures to which a visitor can look forward."

European cultural norms primarily spread through colonized societies through elite groups known as the comprador classes. These colonial-era elites, who maintained close economic and political relationships with colonial rulers, were the first to adopt European customs and practices, viewing them as prestigious and desirable markers of status. Once the elites adopt European cultural norms, they play a crucial role in influencing the broader society. They act as intermediaries, promoting these norms among lower strata of society, who then begin to imitate the cultural practices of the elite. However, this cultural transmission process wasn't uniform across society.

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While some groups embraced European cultural elements, others resisted these imposed practices. The result is a hybrid culture that reflects both indigenous and colonial influences, allowing societies to navigate their identities in a post-colonial context. Similarly in the tea industry, cultural transmission was not just about the beverage itself but also involved the creation of various cultural artifacts associated with tea drinking. As tea gained popularity, a demand for items that complemented the tea drinking experience arose. This led to the manufacture of various cultural artifacts such as tea boards, tea pots, silver spoons, and strainers. This cultural exchange highlights how tea and its associated artifacts became symbols of social status and cultural identity in various societies. (Goonetilake, 1976)

IV. Methodology

The research began with an informal yet systematic approach to understanding Sri Lankan tea culture. Initial data collection focused on gathering personal narratives and experiences from friends and family who lived through the post-colonial transitional period. To gain a deeper understanding, the research included structured discussions with three key experts: an official from the Ceylon Tea Museum, a senior representative from the Sri Lanka Tea Board, and a heritage conservationist involved in the Ceylon Tea Heritage Project. These interviews provided professional perspectives on the historical and cultural significance of tea in Sri Lanka. The experts offered insights into the transformation of tea culture, helping to contextualize the research beyond personal observations.

The secondary phase involved the collection of visual data. Sources included archival photographs, newspaper advertisements, and film footage showcasing tea-related equipment. Objects from Ceylon Tea Museum, Colombo National Museum, and the Galle Mansion Museum were photographed and analysed as part of the study. However, none of these museums provided detailed information regarding the displayed tea equipage, such as time periods or origins. Over 900 images and scenes related to tea in post-colonial Sri Lanka were collected from archival images (Times collection), historical publications, and films. Among these, approximately 100 of the images featuring proper tea preparation or drinking settings were selected. Images with insufficient contextual or metadata information (such as date, location, or background) were excluded. The visual data was categorized into five distinct social contexts and subsequently analysed under three sections, drawing on all the gathered information.

Next the images were processed, and the equipage in the scenes was identified. Annotations were then added to highlight the teapots, cups, creamers, sugar bowls, and other relevant utensils. Identified tea equipage was digitally recreated using the SolidWorks application. This stage also included some additional enhancements to develop accurate and detailed 3D models of the equipage.

By reconstructing tea preparation and serving equipage in 3D, it became possible to move beyond visual observation and engage with the physical and spatial qualities of the objects. The models

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allowed for a closer examination of form, proportion, and ergonomics, enabling comparisons of size, volume, and usability across different cultural contexts. The visual and tactile qualities of these models, such as surface finishes, curves, and ornamental details helped identify design aesthetics and cultural adaptations that were not always apparent in 2D imagery.

V. Discussion

Tea drinking in Sri Lanka, was initially embraced by the country's aristocracy, who maintained close ties with the colonial rulers. For these elites, adopting European customs such as tea drinking was a way to signify prestige and social status. Over time, these practices trickled down to other sections of society, becoming widespread. While many adopted European-inspired tea practices, others resisted these influences, leading to variations in tea culture across different social contexts.

The aristocracy of the country closely followed European traditions, paying attention to details such as the aroma of tea, serving aesthetics, and tea equipage, whereas the requirements of the general population differed. Most people have their own preferences, making tea a highly personalized experience even today. Strong black tea is the most favoured option, with the sugar level, strength of the tea, and the addition of milk or other additives (such as ginger or malt) varying according to individual tastes. Lower-grade teas like BOP, BOPF, and dust are commonly consumed by locals as they are ideal for making strong black tea and are more affordable. While high-grown tea is known for its superior taste and aroma, it is primarily exported. Due to its higher price of high grown tea, most people opt for mid- and low-grown teas.

Tea was consumed across all social strata on various occasions, with varying preparation and serving practices. Most practices were altered and blended with local traditions in the lower social strata, considering their lifestyles, values, and economic realities.

A. Social Strata and Occasion Specific Equipage

In political settings, tea-drinking practices closely mirrored British traditions, often involving complete tea sets. Despite periodic sugar shortages, sugar bowls remained a common feature. Similarly, promotional events in Britain and Australia, designed to promote Ceylon tea, prominently showcased porcelain tea sets, appealing to the tastes of British and Australian audiences.

Tea consumption among the working class, particularly labourers, presented a strong contrast to that of the country's aristocracy. Low-cost equipage made from materials such as steel, copper, and glass were prevalent. Serving plain tea (kahata), sometimes infused with ginger, was a common sight on the streets of Pettah. A significant symbol of this context is the use of "Asoka glasses," affordable and widely available tea glasses manufactured by Asoka Glass & Mirror Co., a pioneer in the Sri Lankan glass industry established in 1946. Metal cups and jugs finished with an enamel coating, known as "Belek" among the locals, were also commonly used due to their affordability.

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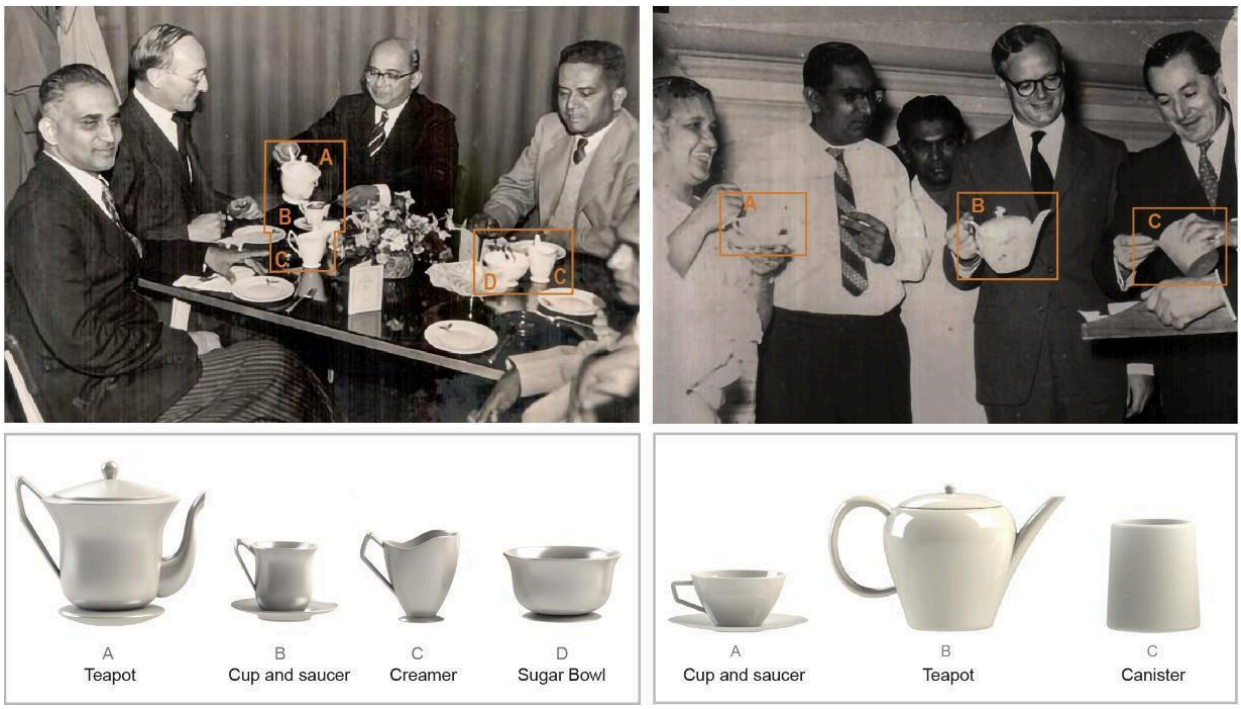
In residential settings, aristocratic and higher-income families used porcelain tea sets for both hospitality and daily use, reflecting their wealth. Conversely, lower-income families and those in rural areas relied on ceramic cups, metal jugs, and other simple utensils. Many ceramic items in these households appeared worn or damaged, indicating their prolonged use. Tea equipage in cinema served as a visual cue to depict the economic status of families and to emphasize the significance of events portrayed in films, especially in the 'Gamperaliya' trilogy. There is limited visual documentation of equipage in local eateries, making it challenging to analyse this context comprehensively.

Figure 1

Tea in places of importance - Settings such as political meetings, ambassadorial gatherings, and other high-profile events where tea was served.



Note. Images are from 'The Times of Ceylon Press' (Department of National Archives) https://archives.gov.lk/

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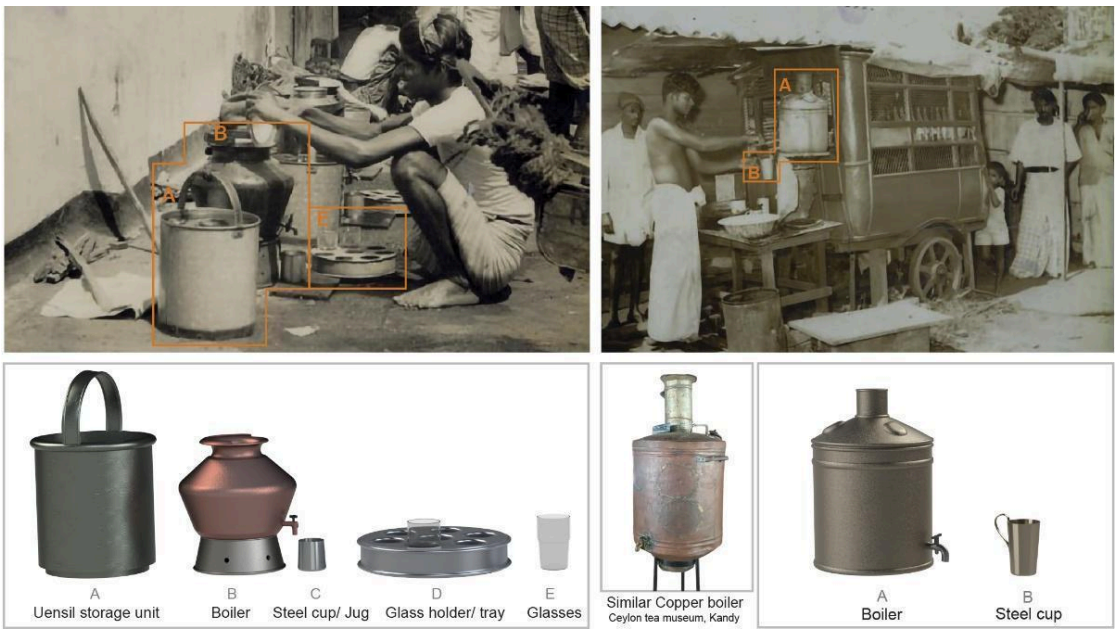
Figure 2

Tea in the international market - Images from 'Ceylon tea' promotional events, illustrating how Sri Lankan tea was represented and marketed globally. (L) Instant Ceylon Tea launch in Australia 1969, (R) New Ceylon Tea Centre in Melbourne

Note. Images are from 'The Times of Ceylon Press' (Department of National Archives) https://archives.gov.lk/

Figure 3

Tea in low-income communities - Scenes featuring workers, small stalls, and mobile tea vendors serving tea as part of the social fabric.



Note. Images are from 'The Times of Ceylon Press' (Department of National Archives) https://archives.gov.lk/

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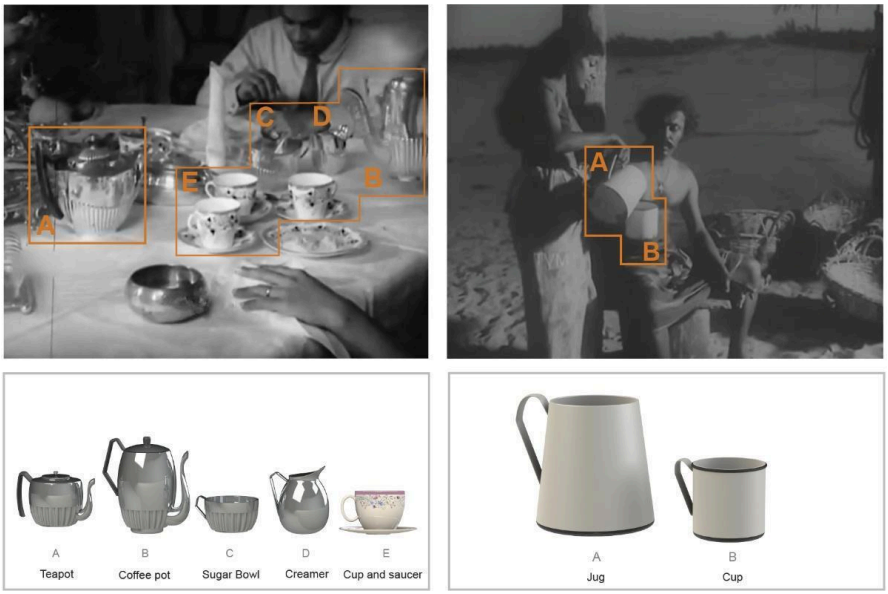
Figure 4

Tea in a residential setting - Everyday tea consumption within homes, capturing the domestic tea culture of the era.



Note. (L) A scene from 'Gamperaliya' movie (1963), a tea table, adorned with a fancy tea set. (R) Scenes from 'Bambaru Awith' movie (1978), setting - Kalpitiya a small fishing village.

Figure 5

Tea in local cafes and restaurants - The role of tea in eateries that catered to the broader public.

Note. A scene from 'Kaliyugaya' movie (1981). Tea was served in a teapot with a strainer, along with cups and saucers.

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**The digitally regenerated models above are created to a comparative scale. Some additions and enhancements have been made by the author to partially visible objects in order to create complete models.

In post-colonial Sri Lanka, the tea equipage largely remained unchanged compared to the British tea culture. Equipage used by the upper social strata continued to be very similar to British equipage, with porcelain tea sets serving as the standard. During the colonial period, Sri Lanka relied heavily on imports of porcelain from Europe and Asia, particularly from China and England. The production of porcelain locally was minimal. The industry gained momentum only in the late 20th century with the establishment of key manufacturers such as Midaya Ceramic Company Ltd. (1968), Noritake Lanka Porcelain Pvt Ltd (1972), Dankotuwa Porcelain Ltd. (1984), and Royal Fernwood Porcelain Ltd. (1994).

The 1950s and 1960s, during the closed economy period, saw an increase in demand for locally made porcelain goods, including dinnerware, tea sets and decorative items. By the late 20th century and into the 21st century, several new porcelain factories were established, catering to both domestic needs and export markets.

In contrast, the equipage used by the lower social strata was more economical and utilitarian, with items like teapots, creamers, and sugar bowls being replaced by simpler jugs. These sets were often made from low-cost materials like glass and stainless steel. Tea in these households was consumed primarily as a source of energy, rather than as an aesthetic experience. Above visual analysis suggests, while the upper social strata maintained the tradition of using porcelain tea sets to serve guests, the lower social strata had more practical, cost-effective alternatives, reflecting a functional approach to tea consumption.

B. Design Elements of Tea Equipage

The design elements of these items including materials, ergonomics, and aesthetics were analysed, A detailed breakdown of all design elements can be found in in the author's previous research, 'Evolution of tea culture in post-colonial Sri Lanka: A contextual and visual analysis.'

1. Tea Preparation Equipage

Tools and utensils used in the process of boiling water, brewing tea, mixing etc. The methods of tea preparation vary significantly, influenced by cultural practices, individual preferences, and serving sizes. This section includes tools and devices essential for brewing tea, which can be further classified based on their functions. Tea preparation equipment include:

- Heating devices for water boiling; heating devices vary from traditional kettles heated over open flames to copper boilers.
- Dispensers: tea dispensers are primarily used in large-scale tea preparation settings, such as tea shops, roadside stalls, or events.
- Other Equipment; storage and miscellaneous tools.

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Traditional heating devices, such as copper and steel boilers, reflect early adaptations influenced by the Russian samovar, featuring a central coal chamber and a bottom tap for dispensing hot water. In domestic contexts, kettles were more frequently used, typically heated on wood stoves or gas cookers. Evidence from photographs shows that prolonged exposure to open flames often left the kettles darkened by coal residue. Interestingly, the overall design of the kettle has remained largely unchanged since ancient Chinese times, emphasizing the timeless efficiency of its form.

By the late 1970s, the introduction of electric kettles and heaters characterized by stainless steel bodies and plastic components, marked a shift towards modernity and convenience, reflecting the growing influence of globalization and technological advancement. For larger servings, tea dispensers made of copper or steel were used. These vessels often took on cylindrical, or clay-pot inspired forms, fitted with a tap at the base for dispensing and a handle at the top for portability. Typically placed on steel stands in tea kiosks or at ground level.

Storage containers and canisters varied in material and purpose, ranging from glass and ceramic to plastic. Plastic was relatively rare, though one example was identified as packaging for instant tea in the international Ceylon Tea market. Most canisters were cylindrical, with slight variations in the lid design. In some contexts, sugar canisters were used in place of traditional sugar bowls, underscoring the adaptive use of equipment across different serving environments.

2. Tea Serving Equipage

Tea serving also differs from context to context. In sophisticated or institutional settings, porcelain tea sets including teapots, creamers, sugar bowls, and accompanying accessories such as trays, tongs, and spoons embodied refinement and elegance. Their designs emphasized smooth white finishes, slender handles, and decorative elements like gold or silver borders and delicate floral motifs. In some cases, stainless steel tea sets were paired with porcelain cups and saucers, merging functionality with aesthetic appeal. The incorporation of plastic handles and lids into stainless steel teapots and jugs improved insulation and handling comfort, reflecting thoughtful ergonomic considerations.

In casual and everyday settings, tea serving is far simpler. Tea is often poured directly into cups or mugs, with saucers sometimes accompanying them. Thicker and worn-out ceramic ware, often featuring a single floral motif or no decoration, was typically used in rural households as a gesture of hospitality, symbolizing warmth and respect toward guests. Metal jugs and cups with enamel finishes (Belek) were widely used in households as well as roadside tea kiosks. These items generally featured simple cylindrical forms and minimal colour palettes.

In urban market areas and lower-income environments, glass tumblers (Asoka glasses) became widely used due to their accessibility and cost-effectiveness. These vessels were typically cylindrical in form with minimal surface decoration, emphasizing practicality over ornamentation. To facilitate transport and distribution, a round steel glass holder with a handle was used, capable

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of carrying 7-8 glasses at a time. Such holders were commonly seen in marketplaces and on trains, where tea was served to large numbers of people.

The post-colonial transformation of tea culture in Sri Lanka demonstrates how a globally transported practice was localized, reinterpreted, and integrated into everyday life. Unlike the elaborate tea ceremonies of China or the formal traditions of Britain, Sri Lanka developed a practical and flexible tea culture. Tea is consumed primarily as a refreshment to combat fatigue or as a gesture of hospitality. Strong black tea, served plain or sweetened, reflects the local preference. Sri Lankan tea culture, shaped by familial transmission and economic necessity, may lack the artistic or ceremonial dimensions seen elsewhere, yet it embodies a uniquely Sri Lankan approach to this globally beloved beverage.

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