17th Century Accounts: Back In Time To The Kandy Perahera

Posted on

The Prince [of Wales] giving sugar cane to the elephant, 1876

The magnificent Kandy Perahera has been amply described in the English language, starting prematurely in 1681, as the Dutch ruled the maritime provinces and the independent Kingdom of Kandy was closed to the outside world. Since 1815, when the British acquired the kingdom, 'perahera penning' has become a vital component of any guidebook.

Words Richard Boyle

Robert Knox, a British sailor confined in the Kingdom of Kandy for 19 years during the mid-17th Century, provides the earliest account of the grand procession or parade, the Kandy Esala Perahera, in An Historical Relation of Ceylon (1681). "That they may honour their Gods, and procure their aid and assistance," he comments, "they do yearly observe a solemn feast and general Meeting, called Perahera; but none are compelled, and some go to one Pagoda, and some to another. The greatest Solemnity is performed in the city of Kandy."

Knox mentions "Gods" as the Kandy Esala Perahera originally honoured Hindu deities. The Esala—the Sinhalese month of July-August during which the ten-day festival is held—is thought to have begun in the Third Century BCE. Essentially it was a ritual to appeal to the gods for rain, and is termed the 'old Perahera'.

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One of the Island's greatest scholars, Ananda Coomaraswamy, explains in Mediaeval Sinhalese Art (1908): "The perahera was an annual festival held in honour of the four divinities, Natha, Vishnu, Kataragama and Pattini. It was observed in all the principle devales [shrines], but most grandly in Kandy, where it is still an imposing spectacle. The festival was commenced by the felling of a young

jak tree, which must have borne no fruit.

“The ground about the tree was cleaned, and censed with the smoke of burning *dummala* [a resin], the tree was anointed with sandal wood, and offerings made of a lamp with nine wicks, and of nine betel leaves, and nine kinds of flowers. The tree was felled by the wood-cutter of the Maha Vishnu Devale, wearing a clean cloth, and ceremonially purified. He divided the trunk into four, one part for each of the four devales, to which it was carried in state with drums and attendance.”

“On the day of the full moon, at an auspicious hour, the posts (kap) were set up in the ground beneath a temporary roof, and decorated with leaves, flowers, and fruits. The posts were called *Ehala-gaha* or July-tree. The actual perahera followed. During the first five days, known as the Kumbal-perahera, the insignia was taken in procession round the ‘maypole.’ During the next five days, called the Devala-perahera, the procession went twice daily round the outer court of the devale… During the last five days, called the Maha or Ran-doli-perahera, the procession passed through the main thoroughfare of the town…”

Excellent though this analysis is, one has to go back to Knox (1681) for a remarkable first-hand depiction of events of the ‘old Perahera’: “The priest bringeth forth a painted stick, about which strings of Flowers are hanged, and wrapped in branched Silk, some part covered, and some not; before which the People bow down and worship; each one presenting him with an Offering.”

“These free-will Offerings being received from the People, the Priest takes his painted stick on his Shoulder, having a Cloth tied about his mouth to keep his breath from defiling this pure piece of Wood, and gets upon an Elephant covered with white Cloth, upon which he rides with the triumph that King and Kingdom can afford, thro all the Streets of the City. But before him go, first some forty of fifty Elephants, with brass Bells hanging on each side of them, which tingle as they go.”

> “After them a great multitude of Drummers, and Trumpeters, and Pipers, which make such a great noise, that nothing else can be heard”

“Next follow men dressed up like Giants, agreeable to a tradition they have, that anciently there were huge men that could pull up Trees by the Roots. After them a great multitude of Drummers, and Trumpeters, and Pipers, which make such a great

noise, that nothing else can be heard. Then followeth a Company of Men dancing along, and after these Women of such Castes or Trades necessary for the service of the Pagoda, as Potters and Washer-women; each caste go in Companies, three and three in a row, holding one another by the hand; and between each Company go drummers, Pipers and Dancers."

> "…all the Beauties on Ceylon in their Bravery do go to attend upon their Gods in their Progress about the City"

"Next go some Thousands of Ladies and Gentlemen, the best sort of the Inhabitants of the Land, arrayed in the best manner their Ability can afford: At which time all the Beauties on Ceylon in their Bravery do go to attend upon their Gods in their Progress about the City. The Streets are all made clean, and on both sides Streets Poles stuck up with Flags and Pennons, and adorned with branches of Coker Nut-Trees hanging like Fringes, and lighted Lamps along both sides of the Streets, by day and night."

The modern Perahera dates to the reign of the Kandyan King, Kirthi Sri Rajasinghe (1747–1781). It was different to the old Perahera for one principle reason: the appearance of the Dalada, the Sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha, in the procession. This hallowed relic was brought to Sri Lanka from India in the Fourth Century BCE concealed in the hair of an Indian princess. It had all sorts of misadventures before it became the private property of King Rajasinghe and the public not allowed to worship it. However, in 1775, Rajasinghe decreed the relic should be part of the procession. Since then Buddhist celebration has merged with, and become the culmination of, the Kandy Perahera.

After the Kingdom of Kandy fell to the British in 1815, the custody of the Tooth Relic was transferred to the Maha Sanga, the Buddhist clergy, and a lay custodian called the Diyawadana Nilame was appointed to conduct administrative affairs.

There are numerous accounts and interesting details of the Kandy Perahera in English literature after the commencement of British rule. For instance, Major Forbes in Eleven Years in Ceylon (1840) reveals that although the festival lasted ten days, sometimes it took longer "if the procession was interrupted by meeting with the dead body of an animal, or any object considered unclean".

Like Knox, Forbes mentions the splendorous attire of the participants, but unlike Knox, was able to refer to the Dalada, the Tooth Relic: “It was very imposing, from the multitude of people, rich dresses, brilliant lights, and large elephants. On the last night, the casket containing the Dalada, borne on an elephant, accompanied the procession to the limits of the town.”

Charles Henry Sirr in Ceylon and the Cingalese (1850) describes the dark side of the perahera at this time: “The last tiger-tyrant King of Kandy, Sri Wickrama [Rajasingha], too often availed himself of the opportunity thus afforded him by the assembling of the chiefs at the Perahera, to carry out his bloody projects of brutal, savage cruelty and vengeance.” Sirr refers in particular to the brutal execution of the family of courtier Ehelepola Nilame, the most shameful act in the annals of the Island’s monarchy.

Finally in this compilation, 20th-Century references are dominated by Aleister Crowley’s remarkable opinion in his Confessions (1969): “I was not impressed with the sanctity of the proceedings; but as a spectacle it is certainly gorgeous. The very wildness and lack of appropriateness add to its charm. The processions to which we are accustomed in Europe and America are all so cleverly thought out that the effect is merely to irritate. The Perahera is a gigantic jollification; they bring out all their elephants, dancers, monks, officials, drums, horns, torches – anything that makes a blaze or a noise, and let them all loose at once.”