A Guide to the Kandy Perahera

Posted on

Details of the grand parade

By Kalpana Isaac. Photos: Suresh de Silva



For two weeks at the end of July and into the first few days of August, the hill town of Kandy is transformed to the way it was before it fell to the British in 1815. Elephants parade the streets at night, officials and chieftains wear traditional costume and dancers leave to the timeless rhythm of the drums.

It is the time of the Kandy Esala Perahera when people give thanks in song, dance and pageantry for a bountiful harvest. Esala also signifies man’s strength and valiur in having conquered and tamed the wild elephant.

The significance of this perahere (procession of processions) dates to 310 AD when the tooth relic was brought from India. Before then there was an annual procession to pay tribute for the harvest and to ask the gods for sufficient water for the next crop.

Asking for water is still the main reason for the Esala perahera and is why the chief lay official of the Temple of the Tooth is called the Diyawadana Nilame for diya is the Sinhala for water. The last ritual of the perahera is the water cutting ceremony.

On the night before the perahera begins, the dancers and drummers gather together and rehearse. In ancient times it was the barber, or pannikaya, who saw to the costumes of each participant.

While the title remains, the pannikaya today is Simon Malagammana, actually a dance instructor, who personally checks everything. From the sending of the postcards asking the dancers and drummers to come along to seeing them off after the celebrations. Simon Malagammana and the four other pannikayass from the four devales (shrines) are responsible for all the arrangements, under the Diyawadana Nilame.

The perahera itself begins only after the tooth temple astrologer has charted the course of the planets and determined the Nekath Welawa, the auspicious time. When studying the course of the planets, he bears in mind that it is customary to end the perahera on Nikini Poya day, the full moon day of August.

Before the perahera starts there is the kap hituweema ceremony. A kap ruka is a celestial tree that bestows anything wished for. Only a few are witness to the ceremony when a 45cm-long piece of wood obtained from a jak tree is planted according to custom in the ground of each of the four shrines. Jak is a tree whose fruit is sometimes used as a substitute for rice in a villager’s diet.

The ceremony is conducted by the Kapu Mahattaya, the link between man and god who is traditionally the person who arranges marriages in Sri Lanka. He takes the kap and wraps it in white cloth, after it has been sharpened to a point. It is then planted in the grounds of the devale (shrine).

In earlier times the Gaskapanna, or tree cutter, used to cut the tree and the Vannakurala, or keeper of the forest, used to plant the kap. Legend has it that the kap represents the god of the shrine and that the drummers and the kodikarayas (flag carriers) used to venerate it by circling it in procession on five consecutive days.

Today five distinct processions form the Kandy Esala perahera. They are the Dalada Maligawa (or Temple of the Tooth) procession, and the Natha devale (dedicated to god Natha) the Vishnu devale (dedicated to god Vishnu) the Kataragama devale, and the Pattini devale processions.

The Kandy Esala perahera itself is divided into two events, the Kumbal perahera dedicated to the potter, and the Randoli perahera dedicated to a golden queen. Kumba means pot in Sinhala; ran means gold and doli for queen.

There are four palanquins in the Randoli perahera formerly used by royalty as litters. They are richly embroidered couches boxed in with curtains and attached to long poles which act as supports for the bearers who carry them on their shoulders.

The significance of their presence in the Randoli perahera is that the gods of the four shrines are supported to ride in the palanquins as they are carried in the procession. This accounts for the crowd reaching out to put money into the palanquins as they are temporary place dedicated to the gods.

It is the duty of the Diyawadana Nilame, the chief lay official of the Temple of the Tooth to inform the Mahanayake theros or high priests of the Malwatte and Asgiriya chapters of the dates of the perahera. The three of them are jointly the custodians of the sacred relic. The official also informs the priest in charge of the Thevava, which is the ritual offering of meals to the gods.

On the day of the procession, one hour prior to its commencement, a cracker is lit in the grounds of the Temple of the Tooth. Tho who have come to witness the pageant run hither and thither to get a good view. The cracker is lit to inform the four other shrine that the Tooth Temple procession is ready to take to the streets. The most important part of the Kandy Esala perahera is this, the Dalada Maligawa procession which leads the others.

The cracker also means that it is time for the chief lay official, the Diyawadana Nilame, to start dressing. With the help of only one man it takes him 45 minutes to

wrap the 30m of cloth around him and to put on the royal regalia required for the occasion. For the perahera, the Diyawadana Nilame has three outfits, two in varying shades of red and one in blue.

After he is dressed, the vidanaya, traditionally agricultural officers who used to surround him request permission to start the perahera. The officials are generally the kariya korale (the astrologer who charts the auspicious time to start the perahera) and the Gajanayake Nilame (the chief of the elephants).

The Peramunarala, literally the man who walks in front, is given ,he scroll containing the history of ;he perahera while the one in charge of the elephant has the silver gourd for the kumbal perahera and the golden gourd for the Randoli one.

Next, all the participants report officially for duty to the Diyawadana Nilame. He takes the key from the inner shrine room and walks into the inner courtyard of the Temple of the Tooth accompanied by two people carrying pandang or hand lanterns, mura ayudha or spears. They walk to the outer door of the main shrine where the Diyawadana Nilame offers the key to the priest in charge of the inner shrine.

The priest pays homage to the tooth relic and takes out the casket for carrying in the procession. This is placed inside the Dalada Karanduwa, a larger casket which is tied to the back of an elephant by the astrologer. When everything is ready a second cracker is lit and the procession leaves the temple grounds for the streets of Kandy.

The Dalada Maligawa perahera is followed by the four others. Natha devale takes first place owing to the belief that Natha, or Maithri, is an incarnation of the Buddha in one of his many births on the way to enlightenment. Vishnu comes second as folklore has it that Sri Lanka and Buddhism come under his direct protection, in addition to the belief that he is an incarnation of the Buddha. Kataragama devale takes third place as one of the most powerful gods in Sri Lanka. and Pattini forms the rest being classified as a godess.

The pageant is colourful and incorporates all aspects of our island culture and spectators never leave disappointed. Each player takes pride in playing the part assigned to him with a religious devotion seldom witnessed at other cultural displays.

Many in the crowd count the number of elephants taking part in the perahera. reasoning that the more elephants. the grander it is. The elephants are decorated with ornate regalia and battery operated lights, adding to the spectacle.

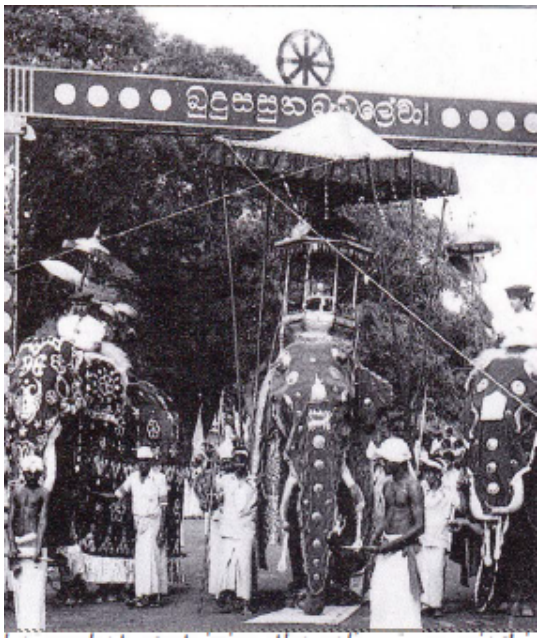
The main crowd disperses after the final night perahera since the day one which follows does not have the magic of the illuminations dazzling in the tropical night.

On the last night of the Randoli perahera, the Dalada Karanduwa (casket) is taken to the Adahana Maluwa, the crematorium of the kings and queens of Kandy, and is kept there for 12 hours in honour of its first resting place in Kandy which was the cemetery. The Adahana Maluwa is situated close to the Temple of the Tooth.

Here the ornaments adorning the Dalada Karanduwa are counted and put away with the chief lay official’s seal, to wait another year for the next Kandy Esala perahera.

The other peraheras continue to Getambe, a place outside Kandy town, for the water cutting ceremony. The procession arrives towards dawn and the ceremony 1s performed as the first rays of sunlight streak the sky.

As the procession winds its way back spectators treat the elephants with milk rice, sweet meats and sugar cane. Children are often asked to run under the bellies of the elephants to rid them of any stomach ailments and also make them grow strong and a healthy as elephants.



The casket containing the relic is carried in procession from the Temple of the Tooth on the back of an elephant.



Colourfully dressed drummers weave their way along the streets during the day perahera

If you don’t have a chance to witness at least one night of the perahera this year, you have a good reason for planning to return next year to join the Sri Lankans in one of the world’s grandest and most spectacular street parades.



Drummers stepping to the rhythm of their own drum beats.