Christmas Mood in Colombo

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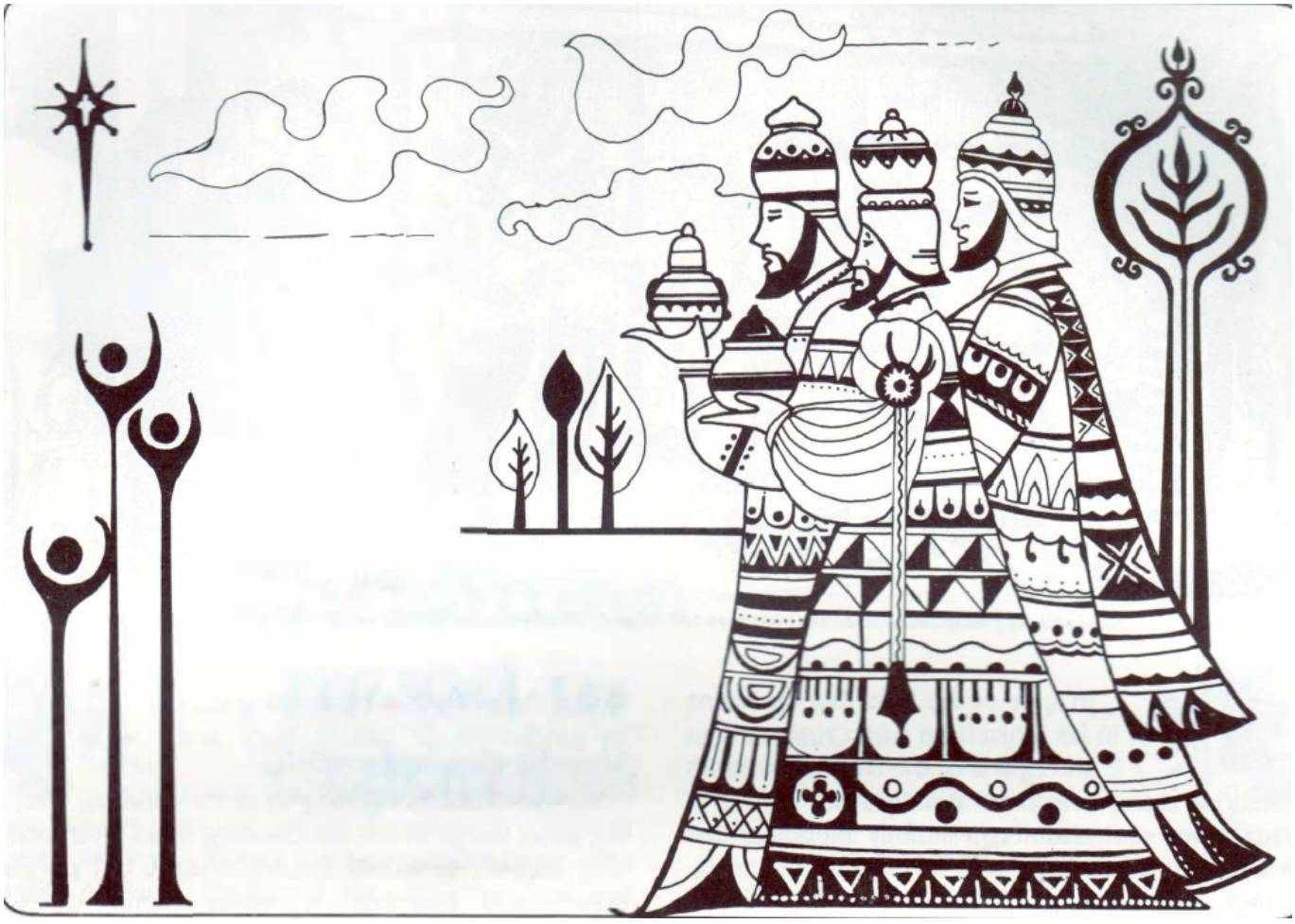

If the streets were lined with snow and the children playing with snow men a westerner would feel completely at home in Colombo during Christmas time. All other trappings of the festive season are found in Colombo. From carols and yuletide songs, balloons and buntings. Santa Claus and Toyland, Turkey, Cakes, and family reunions. It is a time when good cheer is spread out in abundance.

As Christmas approaches the air becomes charged with a new excitement and

anticipation. An aura of mystery and enchantment clings to the preparation which precede Christmas festivities prompting many non-Christians too, to share in the revelry: the sparkle and glitter of Christmas trees, the warmth and cheer flowing from gaily decorated homes and shops, the strains of time honoured Christmas carols and that feeling of peace and goodwill which ushers in the spirit of the season appeals to both young and old. The early sixteenth century saw the dawn of Christianity in Sri Lanka, with the advent of the Portuguese who brought with them their religion; Roman Catholicism.

Many converts were made by the Portuguese during their occupation of the island, which extended over a century in time, and even today, Roman Catholics outnumber Christians of other denominations. The Portuguese were replaced by the Dutch, who conquered the western region of Sri Lanka in the mid seventeenth century, introducing Protestantism to the island They in tum made many converts. The Dutch were defeated by the British, who colonized Sri Lanka in the late eighteenth century and introduced in Anglicanism, the faith followed by adherents to the Church of England. The British left Sri Lanka in the mid twentieth century, having converted many to their faith.

Modern Sri Lanka is predominantly. Buddhist, but Christianity, Hinduism and Islam also play their part in maintaining the multi religious and multi-ethnic fabric of her society. Yet, it is of note that Sri Lankans of all faiths celebrate the Christian festival of Christmas.

In spite of the links that Christians in Sri Lanka have with Christianity in other parts of the world, Christmas celebrations themselves have absorbed the flavor of local customs and traditions, skilfully blending East with West.

Christmas shopping is one of the highlights of the festive season in Sri Lanka as it is around the world. A wide variety of goods are imported especially for Christians and both Christians as well as non-Christians alike shop in search of novelties and bargains. Fort and Pettah the nucleus of shopping hum with the hustle and bustle of shoppers, streets are lined with pavement hawkers displaying their wares, which range from cheap toys to sparkling crystal ware.

It is through media that one gets the first intimation that Christmas is around the corner. Carols are played over the airways from the first day of December, early seasonal bargain sales advertised via press, television and radio, the first Christmas programmes telecast. Carol singing is one of the seasonal pastimes in which Sri

Lankans of all faiths indulge. Restrictive barriers of language are now eliminated, many popular Christmas carols having been translated into the Sinhalese, Tamil languages. Thus people of all ethnic groups, join in freely.

Open air carols are a popular feature during this month when the Armed Forces, Schools and business houses have their carol services and Christmas parties, where the people gather to sing carols by candlelight or lantern light and later on Santa Claus pays a welcome visit to bring the gifts to the children. With all the good things in life surrounding them, everyone is busy organising parties for orphanages, old people's homes and hospitals – where plenty of gifts, sweetmeats and love is generously handed out.

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Booths which sell fireworks and balloons of every description spring up overnight like mushrooms all over the city. As Christmas draws nearer, shopping becomes a stampede. Shoppers push and jostle one another in their frenzied rush to procure the last bargains of the season. Shoppers spilling out of gaily festooned well-stocked shops throbbing with the music of Christmas carols, are borne along by wave upon wave of humanity which overflows onto the highways and byways of the city.

Christmas is the season most eagerly awaited by children. The decorating of the Christmas tree with colourful baubles, tinsels and jets in Christian as well as in some non-christian homes and the setting up of the holy manger with its nativity figurines in Christian homes are joyful events to the young at heart. The fancy of Santa Claus and his Christmas gifts still prevails amongst Christian children in Sri Lanka.

The first stroke of midnight that heralds Christmas day is greeted by the peal of church bells, loud burst of crackers and the sirens of ships anchored in the Colombo harbour. Christian families usually clad in new clothes, attend either the midnight service in the churches, or the family services held on Christmas morn. Most hotels in Colombo hold dances on Christmas eve, which are also well patronised.

Christmas in Sri Lanka, like the traditional American thanksgiving is a family affair,

and family members who rarely find the time to meet during the rest of the year gather to partake of Christmas cheer. The Christmas lunch is given pride of place in the day’s festivities.

Santa Claus greets children at the entrance to many shops during the Christmas shopping spree .

Chicken prepared in a variety of different ways usually takes the place of the traditional turkey in most homes since turkey and duck is beyond the reach of many. However, the absence of turkey rarely detracts from the many mouthwatering goodies served. It is to these Christmas delicacies, that the existence of a multi-ethnic society lends most spice. Each culture has its speciality foods, which are made especially at Christmas. Traditional “Kavun ” and “Kokis “, deep· fried sweetmeats made of coconut treacle and rice flour are served by the Sinhalese people, while Tamil homes make savouries like ” murukku ” and rich sweetmeats using ” ghee ” -clarified butter. The Burghers, descendants from the Portuguese and the Dutch serve their own delicacies like ” love cake ” which is chock-full of nuts, ” breudher ” a dough cake stuffed with sultanas, ” foguete ” crisp twists of pastry with a filling of spiced pumpkin preserve and ” poffertges “, doughnut cake of a light golden batter fried to a deep golden brown. As in the west sparkling wines and Christmas Cake are traditionally served during Christmas. Many an accomplished housewife serves with pride her own special home-made milk wine, or other wines brewed from either paddy, beetroot, pineapple or raisin. These wines like the Christmas cake are prepared months ahead. The men however prefer to celebrate the spirit of Christmas with arrack, the stronger local brew distilled from the coconut and is much in evidence during Christmas festivities.

The Christmas cake served in Sri Lanka is richer and spicier than its western counterpart, as the eastern palate craves for spicier preparations. It is an extra special recipe built up over the years, flavoured with the Dutch and Portuguese cuisine. It is “out of this world” as any Sri Lankan would describe it -with different kinds of fruit, spices, nuts and a dash of spirits to make it a mouthwatering delight. The housewives begin preparation of the cake in September with the shopping up of the numerous preserved fruit such as candied peal, sultanas, raisins, cashew nuts, cherries and lime rind, where the whole family participates with plenty of enthusiasm and good humoured badinage. It is left to time -enhancing the flavour and improving the taste of the mixture. The giving of gifts on Christmas day extends even to subordinates and domestic staff. This practice has assumed the guise of a ritual today, and dates back to the largesse meted out by aristocratic families in the days of yore. Whatever the place or people, the bonhomie, peace and goodwill of Christmas extends beyond the barriers of race and creed, uniting all mankind and creating a feeling of wonder at the birth of the Christ child.

The mood of Christmas in Batik; A wall hanging depicting a Christmas tree, from the

Gift Boutique.
Photo Suresh de Silva

Crackers and fireworks are hot selling items during the Christmas season.