

A cultural tribute to guardian deities

Posted on



The inception of the cultural extravaganza

Hues of orange, yellow and crimson were making breathtaking patterns over the evening sky as we headed towards Alan Mathiniyaramaya. The beautifully decorated temple premises, devotees clad in white with flower offerings and the two playful baby elephants were all blissful sights. The cultural pageant, diverse and vivacious in all aspects was about to unfold. Then there were us, awaiting to explore, to witness what would become a memory that will always be fondly cherished.

Words Dilshi Thathsarani and Hansani Bandara **Photographs** Damith Wickramasinghe and Dilshi Thathsarani

The newly refurbished Vihara Mandiraya (shrine room) and the devalaya stood elegant and proud amidst the traditional decorations—vibrant and colourful. All was ready for the

unveiling of the Devalaya amidst the highest form of festivities.

Following the opening of the renovated Devalaya premises by President Mahinda Rajapaksa, was the offering of the pooja to pay homage to the sacred guardian deities. The loud thunder-like sounds of the drums and the blow of conch shells intensified the air around, mixed with the constant “Sadu Sadu Sadu” of the devotees and the sweet smell of the incense, as the offerings were brought to the Devalaya on paavada (carpets) sheltered under uduwiyana (a canopy).

Then began the Narthana Pooja—a ritual where tribute is paid to the sacred deities through dance performances, singing and recitals. Spearheaded by Ven Uduwe Dammaloka Thero, Chief Prelate of Alan Mathiniyaramaya, the pooja was organised to celebrate the opening of the renovated devalaya, invoke blessings of the deities and to wish for long lasting peace and prosperity in the country.

History reveals that such customs were inculcated in the Sri Lankan culture as a result of the Indian influence the country has had in the second, 12th and 13th Centuries AD. We watched in amazement as the cultural extravaganza unfolded, making us proud to have been born in a country enriched with culture and such age-old traditions.

Swaying to the music of Buddhist and Hindu hymns, the dancers performed before the Devalaya premises with devout reverence. The first of a plethora of vibrant performances, the rendition was themed on offering flowers to the gods—‘Pushpa Upahara Pooja’. The ‘Bakthi Narthana’—another performance to pay tribute to the gods and pray for their blessings in return, then began as the graceful dancers enacted the subtly choreographed movements while chanting songs of praise for the gods.

Followed by the offering of flowers was the Hooniyam Yagaya—a cultural recital which is conducted to alleviate all that cause woe and crises. The Hooniyam Yaagaya is also a tribute to the gods Vishnu and Katharagama. I could feel my heart thud as I watched with much enthusiasm, the energetic yet intense movements of the performers made to the beat of the drums. The passion they had for the aesthetics of dance was reflected through every subtle expressions made by the dancers dressed in hues of red and white.

Dressed like the Devol Deviyo (God Devol) himself in conical hats with fan-shaped ears attached to them, skirts and jackets decorated in rays of fire, the Devol dancers took to the platform to enact the Devol Netuma (Devol Dance)—a dance performance that portrays the battle of fire between Prince Devol and Goddess Paththini.

The legend of Prince Devol narrates such that, Prince Devol was sent to engage in merchandise in Sri Lanka by his father, King Sri Raman Swarnasinghe as a result of a revolt in the palace where there were seven sons of the king from his seven queens, who claimed kingship. However, upon their arrival at the Southern shores of Sri Lanka, the troop has been averted from entering the country shore guards stationed at Unawatuna, Gintota, Udalugalpitiya, Dondanduwa and Hikkaduwa. When the Prince and his troop finally managed to set foot on the country from Seenigama—a small village near the coast, Goddess Paththini had resorted to challenge him in order to test Devol's skills by creating a fence of fire and asking him to jump over it if he wanted to enter the country. The brave prince having been able to successfully complete the challenge was then granted permission to enter the country. Thus, a devalaya had been erected on the place where Prince Devol and his troop had landed.

The dancers performed before the devalaya premises with devout reverence

There were two performances of Devol Netuma—one belonging to the Ruhuna dance tradition while the other was from the Sabaragamuwa Dance Tradition. The Sabaragamuwa Devol dancers made patterns in the air with their fire torches while the Ruhunu Devol dancers executed a mesmerising rendition much like the brave Prince Devol.

Reciting verses for gods has always been a significant part of cultural aesthetics in Sri Lanka and as such Mal Yahan Kavi—a collection of verses in praise of God Sumana Saman who is one of the guardian deities of the country, and Waran Kavi—and a set of verses praising the Goddess Paththini thus unfolded. It is hard to imagine how the dancers could recite the verses themselves while displaying such an energetic performance.

It was past midnight when we finally remembered to check the time. We had spent almost six hours, lost in an overwhelmingly amazing cultural display! And the best was yet to be unravelled.

Following a recital of Hewisi which was a Shabdha Pooja—a ritual of paying homage to the gods by playing various instruments, particularly drums or Hewisi; was the Sath Paththini—a dance performance where all the seven phases of Goddess Paththini were portrayed. Adhering to the old customs the act was done by seven men each vividly acting out a different phase of the goddess. Indeed a rarity and one we have never witnessed before.

Dikgei Netuma—what succeeded the Shabdha Pooja is another religious performance that has been long lost amongst the cultural and societal transformations. Usually performed by women before statues of gods in the Dikgeya (a shrine hall in the devalaya), the Dikgei Netuma is a tribute to the gods which—according to the tradition—could only be witnessed by the Kapumahaththya (clergy) of the devalaya.

Sleep was nowhere near our minds. We never wanted the night to end as we watched the Torch Dancers displaying their breathtaking performance of Pandam Netuma—where the dancers weaved patterns in the air blowing fire with their torches—unraveling the energy and the thrill. The torch dance had been choreographed as a fusion of both Matara and Raigama Dance Traditions. Symbolising prosperity and fortune, next was the enactment of the Pol Mal Netuma (where the dancers carried coconut flowers).

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Nearing dawn, the third phase of the Narthana Pooja commenced with the Kohomba Kale and Kavadi dances. To the rapid tempo of the Thavil drum the devotees danced, driven by faith and piety that the powerful gods will protect them from harm's way. It is both shocking and wondrous to see devotees piercing metal rods into their skin on the chest and back but showed no signs of pain at all—as if they were in a trance. They would even go to the extent of firewalking—walking barefoot over a bed of hot embers or bathing in hot milk; all to prove their piety and invoke blessings of the deities.

The Dolos Gara Netuma—a cultural dance featuring the 12 phases of the Gara Yaka (a mythical creature in Sri Lankan folklore) marked the finale of the Narthana Pooja. The Gara Yaka Dance is performed symbolizing the purification of the premises from was-dos (evil spirits).

The conclusion of the ceremony followed after the offering of the first portion of the Deva Danaya to the gods (the meal prepared to offer to the gods) and the completion of the Kap Situweema; a stick buried at the very inception as a vow made in the hopes of successful completion of the ceremony, is at the conclusion is retrieved from the earth while prayers are said thanking the gods. Deva Danaya is also shared with the devotees after offering the gods and thus, we got the opportunity of feasting on a meal that was prepared for the gods which indeed was divine.

The sun was rising from the East announcing the dawn of a brand new day. Looking at the sky we find the heavenly beauty of the sunrise and we bid our farewells. Such a rich culture and a fusion of rituals and blessings—such is Sri Lanka.

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