

Festival of Mystic Magnificence: The Kandy Perahera

Posted on

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Torch spinners like this lead the way at the Kandy Perahera. Photo: Gamini Jayasinghe

The Kandyan dancer from Sri Lanka is an image familiar throughout the world. His colourful and imposing costume, dazzling and sparkling in the light; the intricate and rhythmic movements of his dance, particularly rich in symbolism and most complex in technique, have enchanted everyone who has watched him perform. It

is not so well known, however, that the Kandyan dance represents some of the most ancient art forms of symbolic movement in the world and that the dancer's repertoire consists of many and varied expressions of this art. There are the simple peasant dances woven in the morning of the world, like the harvest, dances, stick and drum dances, and there is the classic "Ves" dance which is part of the dance-drama the Kohoba Kankariya, only performed at sacred festivals.

The origins of this mystic dance are now lost but legend credits it as having been revealed and taught to men by the gods themselves and first performed as an exorcism ceremony to cure a demon-addicted ruler of ancient Lanka. The ritual is yet basically an exorcism of evil and its malefic influences that threaten ruler and ruled. Parts of the dance, are however, now performed on diverse ceremonial occasions as well.

All the colour and the mystery associated with the "mystic East" from times immemorial are present in the Kandyan dance and this, perhaps, is part of its appeal to all, irrespective of their understanding of the symbolism integrated in every movement and every beat of the accompanying drums. The full panoply of the Kandyan dance is witnessed each year in the Esala Dalada Perahera (procession) which takes place in Kandy in the month of July/August. It is the Esala tree blooming in its golden clusters in hill-girt Kandy that gave the perahera its name: the Sri Lankans named the lunar month of July-August after the flower. Kandyan dancers in all their vivid grace and rhythmic beauty participate in the rich and splendid pageant. It is at the same time a public demonstration of a people's faith and annual enactment of their most sublime beliefs.

Sri Lanka has been called a "land of festivals", for many races and religio-cultural groups have merged into the mosaic of its populations and each of these celebrate their own traditional religious and secular feasts with pomp and ceremony at varying times in the year.

But the world-famous Kandy Perahera belongs to the nation. Throughout all the changes and vicissitudes of centuries – and island's 2,500 years old – the Perahera has been held, growing from small beginnings to become the flowering of a national identity.

Peraheras or processions are not an uncommon sight in Lanka. From ancient times they have been an expression of piety, of festivity, of public rejoicing; in honour of sacred relics of the Buddha exposed to public veneration; in honour of gods of the

Hindu pantheon; in honour of the Christian deity or the saints and the Blessed Virgin; in honour of a visiting dignitary; as a ceremony of public reverence, entreaty or gratitude to the gods.

The month of “Esala”, the eighth month of the lunar calendar, is traditionally the month of festivals in Lanka. At this time the harvest has been gathered, the golden Esala flowers (carthato carpus fistula) are in bloom, the bow 1 of the sky is deep, flaw less blue and all over this tropic island the sun shines brightly; the perfect setting for a festival.

The Esala festival dates back to remote times. It had become a tradition in North India before the time of the Buddha (625 B.C.) The story is told that it was on the night King Suddhodana and Queen Maha Maya celebrated the Esala festival in their city of Kapilavastu that the queen conceived her son, Prince Siddharta, later to become the Buddha, the Enlightened one.

The festival was originally celebrated by the Hindus in honour of god Sri Vishnu, the preserver. The celebrations spread to Lanka with the migrations from India but in Buddhist Lanka it became associated also with certain momentous events in the Buddha’s life which had taken place on Esala ‘Poya’(full moon) days. Not only his conception in his mother’s womb, but also his renunciation of the world in his quest for the cause of human suffering, his first sermon after his Enlightenment and the performance of a great twin-miracle all took place on Esala full moon days in his lifetime.

Throughout the long centuries of monarchy in this land, having its historical beginnings in 500 B.C. or thereabouts, and now in modern times of a republic, Esala celebrations are a feature of the socio-religious cultural life of the people. However, it was in 1775 A.D. that the festival in Kandy took the shape and significance we know today. It was there it evolved into the most spectacular festival in Asia. “Asia in epitome” as it has been described.

The king of Kandy at the time – Kirti Sri Rajasinghe- was a devout Buddhist. He was aware that of all Buddha-relics in the land it was Tooth Relic that was the palladium of the kingdom.

The Annual festivals in honor of the Sacred Tooth Relic, enshrined in the Dalada Maligawa- Temple of the Tooth Relic sited near the royal palace, were held from time to time, ever since it had been brought to Sri Lanka from India in 311 A.D.

On the advice of a visiting delegation of devout Thai Buddhist monks who had been brought to Kandy to perform Upasampadha (higher ordination) ceremonies-King Kirti Sri Rajasinghe combined for the first time the annual Esala festival held in honour of Hindu deities with a public procession in honour of the Sacred tooth Relic. The relic itself, in a splendid gold and jewel encrusted casket was carried by the king, seated on his richly caparisoned royal elephant. Today the caparisoned Maligawa Tusker carries only the casket while the relic reposes in its shrine in the temple.

Everything else is as before. Full of traditional grandeur. A soul-stirring sight replete with ritual and ceremony. All those taking part in the perahera: the dancers, musicians, the torch and pennon bearers, those who ride and guide the elephants, the chieftains with their retinues, continue a tradition of office and service from ancestry and jealously cherish the honour. Throughout the year they may engage themselves in earning their livelihoods in a society now almost fully secularized: they are no longer all maintained at State expense as in days of yore. But in the month of Esala, at Perahera time, they come to play their part in this procession which is such a deeply moving experience not only to the participants but also to the audience gathered in their thousands on either side of the path of the Perahera, and which has never needed to be rehearsed. The Perahera winds itself out through the gates of the Dalada Maligawa in the order laid down by age-old custom. It comes, moving slowly, majestically in a colourful line. Whip crackers split the air with sound ahead of it. Flag bearers wave aloft the national emblem, the Buddhist flag and other diverse pennons. Torch bearers light the way with blazing flares of burning copra. They are followed by temple officials and the richly decked chieftains.

Musicians surround them: drummers beating a frenzied tattoo, flute players, conch-blowers. The martial tune is the "Gaman Hevise", the ancient Sinhalese war march. And then the troupes of Kandyan dancers; nowhere and at no time are hundreds of them to be seen performing in this manner: all the sacred, mystic cult-dances full of significance. And some sing, as they dance: ancient chants, to ask for blessing, to ensure the purification of the land and continuous fertility for man and beast so that the nation will prosper and all will be well for Sri Lanka.

The perahera is divided into two distinct stages, the smaller Kumbal Perahera, which goes round the temple square on the first five nights, and the larger and more colourful Randoli Perahera which goes through the streets of Kandy from the sixth to the tenth nights.

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Each night the number of elephants, drummers and dancers increase, until in the final nights there are from eighty to a hundred elephants, and over a thousand drummers and dancers. The Randoli Perehera gets its name from the palanquins carried in the rear of the procession which depict the consorts of the deities whose processions go ahead. The culmination of this unique pageant is the Day Perehera, When the procession goes through the streets of Kandy in daytime, and the Diyawadena Nilame, the lay custodian of the sacred Tooth Relic, reports to the Head of State that the annual pageant has been successfully concluded.

In, all it is ten days of undiluted colour and pageantry, when Sri Lanka's past merges with the present in a grand spectacle of sight and sound.



The "tammattama", a twin drum beaten with a cane striker. Hundreds of such drummers perform at the Perahera.

Photo: Gamini Jayasinglle

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These drummers play the “Hewisi”, the ancient battle drum or Sinhalese. at the Kandy Perahera.

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A Kandyan dancer.