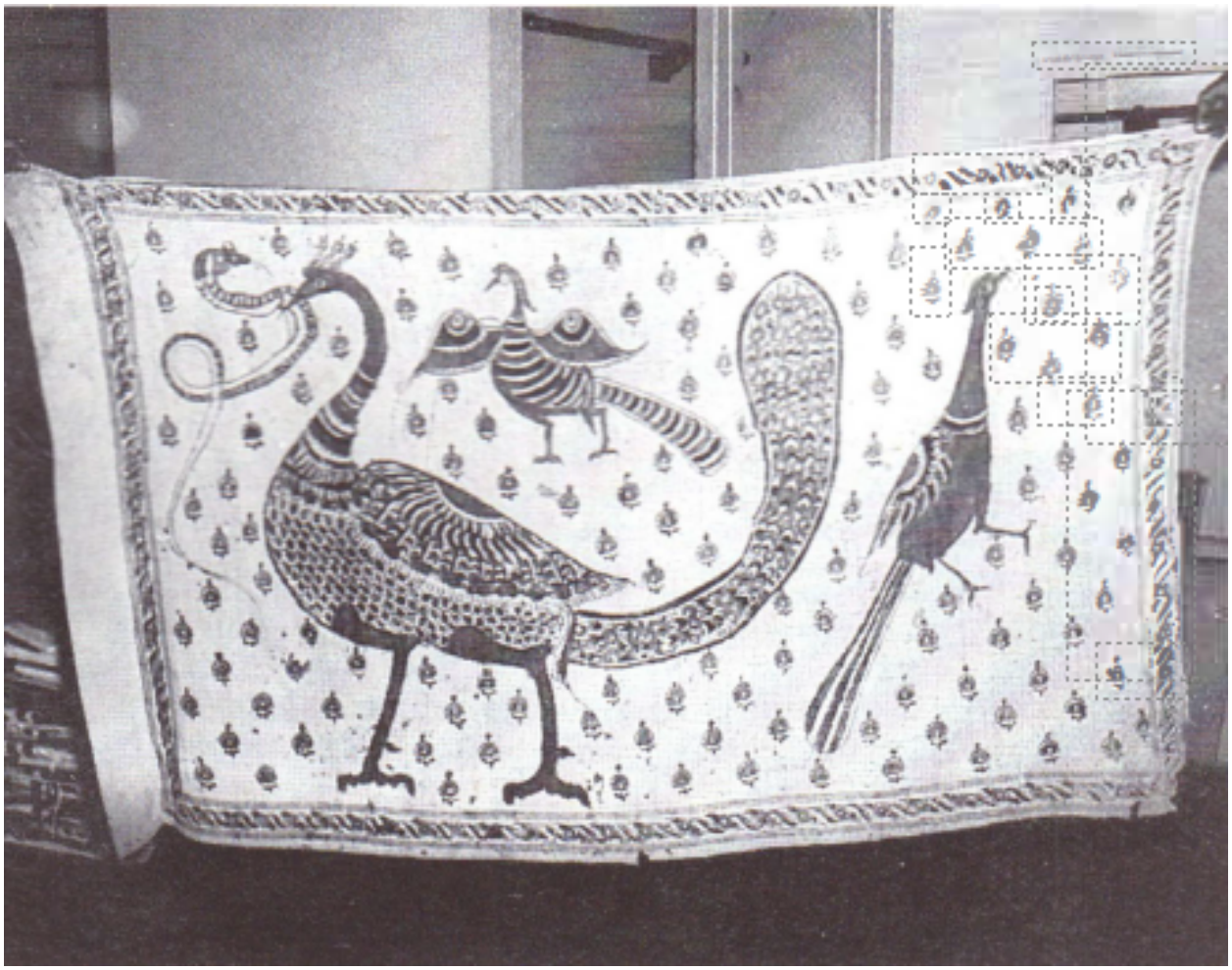
Heraldry on Display: The Flags and Pennants of Sri Lanka

Posted on

By Maureen Seneviratne



A peacock carrying snake – one of many traditional flags of Sri Lanka.

Flags always tell a story: a story of a people’s pride in their cultural heritage and their political status. In Sri Lanka flags and mentioned from earliest times and used in festivals of both a secular and religio-cultural nature, being carried by pennon-

bearers or strung along processional routes.

Hereditary clans and castes had their own flags. So of course had the royal family which took preeminence over all others. Temples and monasteries had their special banners too as we know from the – mana' cloths dating back to the 17th Century at east. some of which have been discovered through meticulous search and now lie displayed in the Colombo Museum.

In the magnificent Museum building, one climbs the broad wooden stairway, so handsomely and graciously carved, to reach the upper floor on the right side of which are the old Sri Lankan flags, some of them perfectly preserved.

Most of the flags that are exhibited at the Museum are those dating back to what we call the Kandyan Period (circa 1400 to 1900 AD) when the last remnants of sovereignty in the island held sway in the interior kingdom within and surrounding the city of Kandy in the central hills. Today's provinces of Uva and Sabaragamuwa, the Four and Seven Korales were also a part of this kingdom. Hereditary chieftains held power from the ruler in Kandy in what as a feudal system socially, politically and culturally.

From research undertaken it is evident that each district under its hereditary chieftain had its own flag, while the chief himself had the right to carry also his own family pennon when on tour or in any ceremonial procession. Flags of the Kandyan provinces are found in the Museum and some of them are impressive indeed. As for example the Flag of Satara Korale (the Four Korales) with the sun in splendour in the middle in a shade of burnished red and two crescent moons on either side, also in red, all stitched on to raw cotton in a shade of beige or light cream.

The stark simplicity of the flag of the Matale District is in itself impressive: sheer white with narrow red borders. The old flag of Uva District shows a stylized eagle, while the flag of the Three Korales (Tun Korale) is the ancient mystical symbol of the double-headed eagle. All the symbols are in red silk accompanied by stylized floral motifs done in embroidery on raw handwoven cotton.

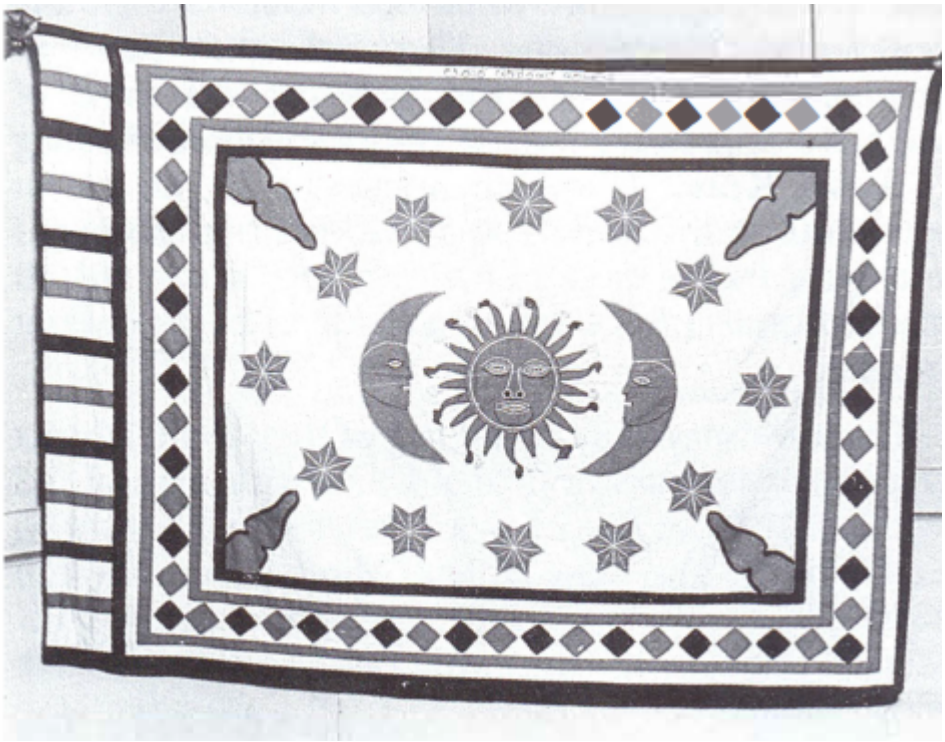
The Nara-singha motif – the human-faced lion is found on many flags and painted cloths and has been copied over countless centuries. Among the more commonly used but significant symbols on most Sri Lankan flags dating from ancient and medieval times are those of the lion and peacock in diverse heraldic shapes and poses. It is evident that these were once the totemistic emblems of the peoples who

colonized the island from early times. The lion (sinha) was the totem of the race of people who arrived from North India as far back as the 5th Century B.C. in great waves, one group of whom had a princely leader called Vijaya who occupied the north and north-central regions and subdued the other tribes already settled in the country.· The peacock was the symbolic ‘herald’ of another division of these early colonizers who in tum became powerful enough to depose the ruler and take over the government of the country.

You will find several flags and banners depicting the lion and the peacock among those exhibited in the Museum and all in several stylistic forms. The lotus motif is also prominent in medieval flags, and as these are copies of those that existed earlier, we can be sure that this was a very early feature, dating back to the advent of Buddhism in Lanka. The lotus blossom, symbol of the pure teachings of Lord Buddha, was used decoratively in buildings and in flags. The bull, the cockbird, the swan (hansa) are other auspicious motifs on old flags.

The lion is prominent on the flag of Colombo also displayed in the Musuem and it is interesting to note that this flag pre-dates European influence in the country, thus positively dating the heraldic beast – so prominent in Sri Lankan flags and pennons – to the original totemistic lion. The lion has always been the symbol painted or sewed on to royal banners in Lanka from remote times to the last kind, deposed in 1815 A D by the British. When the Union Jack was raised on the flagpole in Kandy in that year, Kind Sri Wickrema Rajasingha’s banner was taken down and the later deposited along with the eagles of Napoleon at the palace of Whitehall. Curiously the battle of Waterloo was fought and won by the British on the same day that the city of Kandy was occupied and the last kind taken captive. Tehe lion of Lanka and the eagles of Napoleonic France were later hung in the Great Hall of the Chelsea Hospital in England.

A selection of temple pennons and flags of the Hindu shrines are also displayed in the Museum, along with several painted cloths used by prelates when in procession on ceremonial occasions such as Buddhist relics festivals of the Hindu deities. A few flags belonging to the old Kandyan feudal aristocracy are also exhibited, though these are but a handful when compared to what exists and have been traced to ancient temples and old family chests, jealously preserved by incumbents and descendants.



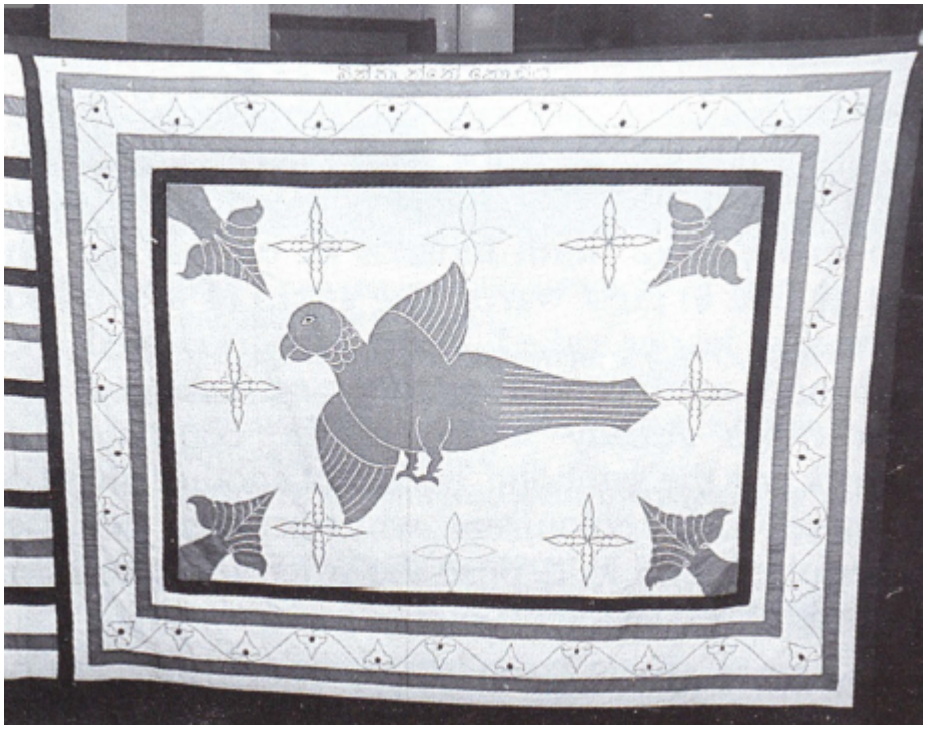
The flag of Sachara Korale with the sun in the middle in burnished red and two crescent moons on either side, stitched on raw cotton. (Suresh de Silva) Courtesy: National Museum Colombo.



Vellasse Flag with a leopard as the centrepiece and floral designs.
Courtesy: National Museum Colomba.



Nuwara Kalaviya Flag with the Gajasinghe the elephant -headed lion.
Courtesy: National Museum Colombo.



Bintenne Flag – a parrot in the centre
Courtesy: National Museum Colombo

During the Kandy Perahera, as well as at all Hindu religious processions to mark the festivals of the deities, the pennon-bearer has pride of place. At the shrine of the god Skanda-Karteikeya at Kataragama, in the deep south of the island, it is significant that only a red flag with the “Ve!” (weapon) of the god is displayed at his shrine: no graven image of this powerful deity is ever placed in his sanctuary.

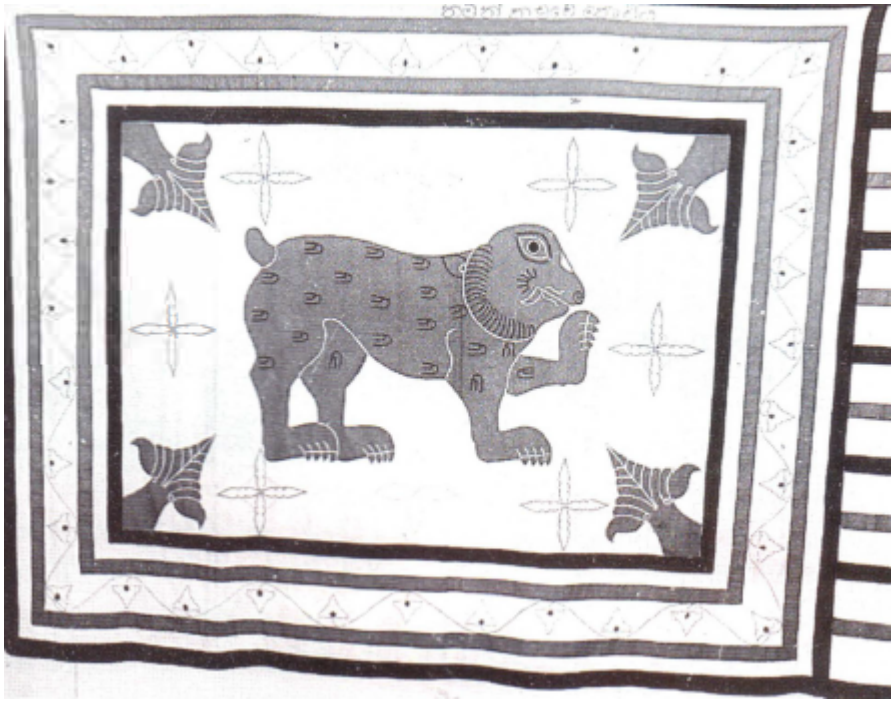
At the Buddhist cave temple complex of Dambulla in the north-ccentral region of the island are to be found pictorial representations of the flags and banners of some of our earliest kings, copies and re-copied and carefully restored over a period of at least two thousand years. Many remote temples and religious shrines also have their own flags proudly displayed at all times and even more so during the religio-cultural festivals enacted in their premises annually.

To those interested in the subject and in the symbolism of ancient heraldry in Sri Lanka, with its fine traditions dating back to Vedic times on the Indian Sub Continent and transmitted to our own culture, a visit to the Flag Room of the Colombo Museum only serves to stimulate this interest towards further study and research. The flags displayed are in a splendid state of preservation though some of

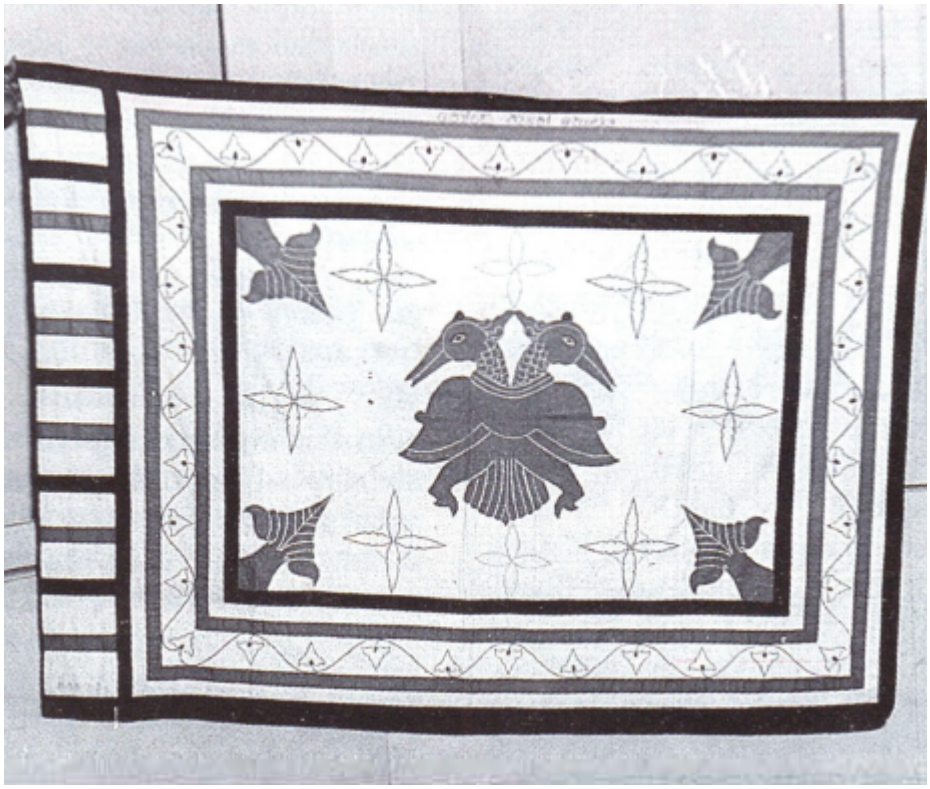
them are well over 200 to 300 years old.



Walapane Flag – Mayura Kodiya with a peacock carrying a snake in its beak.
Courtesy.- National Museum Colombo.



Tammankaduwa Flag with a bear in the centre and floral motifs.
(Suresh de Silva) Courtesy.- National Museum Colombo.



The Tun Korale Flag with the double-headed eagle –bherunda pakshiya.
(Suresh de Silva) Courtesy: National Museum Colombo.



The flag of Uva District showing a stylized eagle.
(Suresh de Silva) Courtesy: National Museum Colombo.