# The Drum Makers of Kooragalla

Posted on

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It is unlikely that the average visitor to Sri Lanka will go to Kooragalla. Yet practically everyone vi its Kandy, the most popular time being when the Esala Dalada Perahera (procession of the sacred tooth relic) is in progress: ten nights of it, with drums predominating. And those drums were made in Kooragalla, a village set on the ide of a ravine off the Kandy to Gampola Road, approximately 6km from the Peradeniya Junction.

The villager of Kooragalla have supplied drums for the sacred Shubdha Pooja (sound offerings) in many a Kandyan temple, including the Dalada Maligawa (Temple of the Tooth Relic) for hundreds of years.

Ironically. the people of Kooragalla are still regarded as outcasts of Kandyan society, being a branch or tribe of the formerly despised Rodiyas (or beggars). The elders of the community will tell you that the have existed in this pot and manufactured drums for ri tuali tic rites since the 14th century.

This was before Kandy (Maha Nuwara or Senkadagala as it is also called) became the capital of the Interior Kingdom. In those days Gampola was the capital and it is in the environs of Gampola that the drum makers still live.

Today the lines of differentiation have blurred somewhat, but the people have long memories and the villagers of Kooragalla are well known in the area. Now many castes and ethnic strains mix and mingle, but in the days of the Kandyan Kingdom (14th to 19th centuries), death was the punishment for. anyone from a superior caste who dared to marry into the Rodiya clan.

It was unthinkable for a woman to take a man from this clan as a lover or her husband; her punishment was assured: a huge stone would be tied to her neck and she would be drowned in the Mahaweli Ganga. As for a man, he ventured among these outcasts only at his peril.

Yet, even if the villagers could not legitimately enter the Maligawa (temple) or any of the lesser temples abounding in their surroundings and make offerings like other vorataries did, it as the drums they made and tuned so perfectly that were used in the ceremonies.

None of the villagers know how they came to learn this sensitive art of making and sealing and tuning a drum. They produce all manner of drums and claim there were over _()() different kinds of drums in Sri Lanka.

John Davy, writing in his Account of the Interior published in the early 19th century, gives us a little more information about their antecedents: “The Rhodees it is said are the descendents of those who were punished by being made outcast for ontinuing to indulge in ea tin□□ beef after it w prohibited. and of tho-e who have ince been degraded for high trea on. Though considered the vilest of the vile, they are not entirely destitute of lands, nor were they quite exempt from taxation. For the little land they hold, they were required to furnish hides, and ropes made of hides, for taking elephants … “

The approach route to the village, up a slope rising directly from the main road, is lined with sheets and strips of hide hanging outside the few mean houses made of wattle and daub. None of the present inhabitants know of making ropes of hide to noose wild elephants, however, for there has not been an elephant kraal in the hill country for more than a century.
The villagers of Kooragalla are expert at curing hide. Scattered outside their dwellings are great blocks of wood, trunks of coconut trees, jak trees, tamarind and other hardy species from which the drums are hewn and shaped. It is incredible that these povertystricken people, lacking m formai education, relying on nothing but their in.trinsic, inherited and long-developed skills and techniques, are able to manufacture drums that are in demand all over the world, as well as locally, for temple and other ceremonials.

The villagers may not be able to explain in words but they can vividly demonstrate in practice the methods of manufacture they still use. The implements themselves are ordinary: pickaxes, sharp knives, and metal scoops of various shapes and sizes. They are used on the wet, pliable woods, while their fingers obtain the right tension from the hides and from the wild creeper and rope strappings which cover the faces of the drums.

Everywhere in the village, on the mud-floored, open-sided “verandahs” of their dwellings, and in the cramped rooms of their houses (especially in the home of the village chief whose house is the only one built out of bricks and mortar with a cemented floor and a tiled roof) are scattered drums in various stages of manufacture. Whatever day of the week and whatever time of the day, the people of Kooragalla are engaged in their work. As they work, they will talk, if you stop by to converse with them.

They will tell you that once their villages were far more extensive. their own numbers much larger. After the best land was appropriated for the tea plantations

many of the villages were absorbed into estate territory.

The villagers, uninterested in taking employment on the estates. and shunned by those who did. were left only these bare. eroded ra ines in which to ettle and continue their age-old raft.

Development passed them by. People continued to ostracize them. Their children were not welcome in the schools. It is only now some of them attend; most drop out by their fifth grade. Their men were not encouraged to engage in any other work, only begging was permitted them as it had been done in ancient times. The men, and a few women, go as far as the Eastern Province at harvest times in that area, to beg for rice which they sell en route and return home with the money to buy their few needs.

As for the drums, the need for these bas grown less in modern times. The poojas (offerings) are till made in temples although fewer devotees participate in them. Offerings and rituals to the local deities. as for example the exorcism ceremonies in which drumming play an important part, have also grown fewer. Secular and domestic cu toms. in which the village drummer played their part, are no longer regarded as so important. As the demand for drummer and drums grows less, so does the villagers already meagre income.

Except at the time of the perahera. Then drummers want the best drums and they place their order with the drum makers of Kooragalla. The villagers supply the best and are proud of it. Even if they can only stand on the sidelines and not participate in the great Kandy Perahera, they know the have made the drums on which the ceremony depends.



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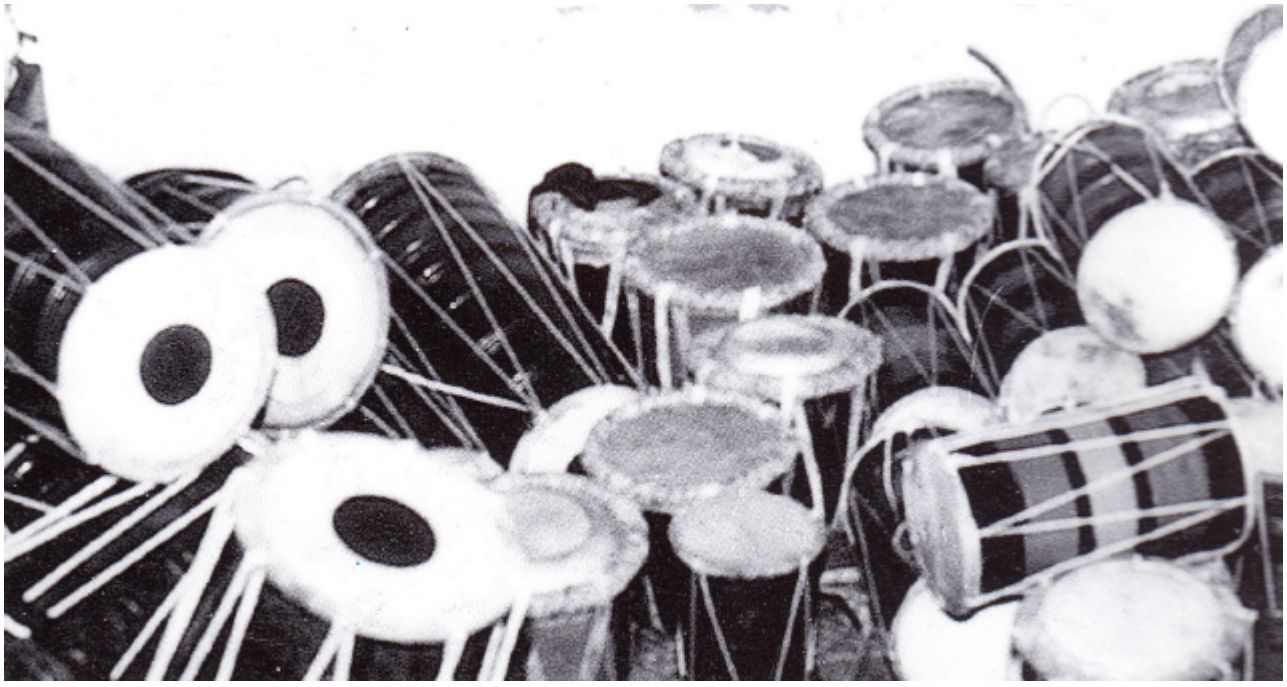

Drummers want the best drums.