The making of the Beraya

Posted on
Drums, an integral part of traditional Sri Lankan culture, are meticulously crafted to produce beautiful melodies.

The traditional Sri Lankan drums are crafted with care, producing rhythmic melodies while presenting an esthetically pleasing look. The village of Kuragala in the Kandy district is known for manufacturing these drums. Four generations of traditional drum makers in the village have faithfully stayed true to their craft, creating the bera or drums.

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Photographs Menaka Aravinda.

Wood stumps that would transform into bera were lying around the workshop, and the noises produced by machinery and tools formed background music. At midday, the craftsmen were busy at work. We watched spellbound as the manufacturing process unveiled in front of our eyes. Men, women, and even little children helping their elders at work reminded us of the organized chaos of a beehive.

We met up with Upul P Silva, a traditional artisan, who had comprehensive knowledge of traditional drums and their making. We were fascinated to observe the creation of the drum.

Several different Sri Lankan drums are associated with each region; the Geta Beraya for Kandyan dancing, Yak Beraya for Ruhuna, Davula drum for Sabaragamuwa traditional dancing, and so on. While wood from esala, mimosa or jak is ideal for the geta beraya, kithul, coconut, and mimosa are best suited for the yak beraya.

In the case of the geta beraya, the typical length is believed to be about two feet two inches. The stump is first roughly chipped to resemble the shape of the beraya. Then, it is fixed to a lathe. Small wooden chips flew everywhere while experienced hands shaped the revolving wood. What emerged was the familiar shape of the geta beraya; narrow on the ends, with a larger center.

Sandpaper is used to smoothen out any remaining splints. The next step is to hollow out the body. A group of ladies completes this task with a hammer and chisel. Thin decorative stripes are carved onto the surface to add beauty to the shell. The hollowed body is then left to dry in mild sunlight. A layer of varnish brings out the natural colors of the wood and ensures durability.

While walking around the various work stations, we learned that the entire drum could be manufactured in the village itself. The craftsmen themselves produce the leather that covers both ends of the drum. They transform rawhides to durable material ideal to cover the hollows on the ends, which are known as the bera esa (eye of the drum). The hides are cleaned, sun-dried, and soaked in water to avoid tearing. The craftsmen then cut circles with a diameter larger than the end of the shell from the leather. The kepum hama (a protective circlet), is secured over the bera esa using weniwara kerella (braided stripes of cowhides). The leather is further cut into long, thin laces known as warapati. These laces connect the two bera es running over the drum body in a zig-zag pattern. Upul obliged us by demonstrating this process while explaining that the beraya is tuned by adjusting the warapati.

The sound produced by the drum is known as the kathawa (story). According to Upul, the drum maker would play the drum, releasing, tightening, and rereleasing the warapati until the kathawa is just right.

Proudly displaying the various drums manufactured within the village, Upul showed that each drum produces a different sound due to the type of hide used to cover the ends and their thickness. The beat of the drum seemed to echo the pulse of the island, of traditions passed down from one generation to the next. As we left the workshop, Upul had already joined the others, crafting yet another drum that would serenade the listener and delight the onlooker.

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