

## ‘Those behind the ivory craft’ Traditional Artificers Guilds in Sri Lanka

### ABSTRACT

The Sri Lankan tradition of ivory carving has a long history that goes back to pre-Christian era. It reached its supreme level in the Kotte Period (1371-1597) of the history of Sri Lanka. The craftsmen of different guilds gained experience in ivory carvings over the ages organized under a separate entity referred to as the Royal Artificers Department functioned under the guidance of a Foreman. The tradition of ivory carving was continued during the Sitawaka (1521-1594) and the Kandyan Kingdoms (1469-1815). The guilds were more strengthened and organized by bringing all its sub-divisions into one Department called Kottal Badda in the Kandyan times comprising mainly of gold and silversmiths, ivory carvers and painters. The craftsmen at this time began to pay more attention to the creations with gold and silver than ivory. There are several reasons for the decline of ivory craftsmanship which will also be examined in this paper. The Kottal Badda Department was further sub-divided into four workshops referred to as Pattal Hatara. The guilds belonging to these workshops were under the direct supervision of the Disave whose authority was delegated to minor headman called Vidane appointed to each workshop. The members of the guilds were endowed with royal grants of land for their maintenance. Thus with their longstanding tradition and experience helped them to produce excellent works of art. It is expected to elaborate on this topic with documentary evidence in relation to functions of the different guilds.

Sri Lanka possesses an age old tradition of] ivory carving. This factor was well established when a number of ivory objects dated 3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> century were recently unearthed by the archaeologists of the UNESCO sponsored Jetavana project of the cultural triangle in Anurādhapura from the northern āyaka (projection) of the stūpa including six ivory seals depicting auspicious symbols.<sup>1</sup> The tradition has that the first group of royal artificers to have arrived in Sri Lanka from India with Vijaya Circa 483 BC. *Rājaratnākaraya* records that Sirit Parākrama Radala, Sirit Nārayana Radala, Sirit Abhisheka Radala, Sirit Devanārāyana Radala accompanied Vijaya who were supposed to be the skilled craftsmen in different technological disciplines. When they established themselves, in recognition of their services Vijaya gave them the villages of Kadupitiya, Kammaltota, Nattambuva, Wevagama, Nimmagala and Aivandama.<sup>2</sup> Some members of this group were certainly knowledgeable in ivory carving.

Another group of eight arrived in the company of Therī Sangamittā (289 BC) who brought the sapling of Srī Mahā Bodhi had subsequently came to be referred to in literary works as Bodhyāhārakula namely, Bodhigupta, Sumitta, Chandragupta, Devagupta, Dharmagupta, Sūriyagupta, Gotama and Jutindara. They were entrusted to perform rites to the Srī Mahābodhi in Anurādhapura. These families mainly belonged to Kaṃburu (smith), Lokuru (brazier) and

<sup>1</sup> Karunaratne, T. B., The significance of the ivory seals depicting auspicious symbols from Jetavana stupa in Anuradhapura, *Ancient Ceylon*, vol. 2, no. 7, 1990, p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> *Rājaratnākaraya*, ed. Simon de Silva, Colombo, 1907.



9. Vaduvo carpenters<sup>7</sup>

The origin of local artificers associated with Indian legend Vishvakarma who supposed to be lord of arts and craft, fashioner of all ornaments. Vishvakarma is represented with certain forms and attributes. He has four hands, wears a crown, loads of gold jewelry and holds a water-pot, a book, a noose and craftsman's tools perhaps scepter in his hands. He is not worshipped by craftsmen with offerings and ritual nevertheless often first referred to in charms and songs connected with construction operations where he is being invoked to get rid of evils, disasters and help the builders. A Sri Lankan charm associated with Uluvahu Pāanīma 'jumping the threshold' to hallow and protect the building and its builders in its opening verses.

The traditional flag of Navandanna referred to as Hanumanta kodiya named after Hanuman the ape who according to the Hindu epic *Ramayana* helped Rama in his quest for Sita. Valentijn also refers to a painted flag named Anomante<sup>8</sup> for navandanna confirming that it had existed even at his time. It is difficult to ascertain why Hanuman portrayed so prominently in the flag of navandanna. One opinion has that it symbolizes Pāndya connection with navandanna and strength and courage of Hanuman, the other.

'The flag depicts Visvakarma the architect of the gods, crowned and throned on the heights of Himalayas. Holding in his left hand is a scepter and in his right hand is the book of arts and crafts. Hanuman, the lord of monkeys displays in his right hand the magic medicinal shrub Sanjivani with the crag of Dungiri which he has transported. Above is the emblem of the sun while below is the smith at work in his forge. On the right is a man on one knee blowing the bellows (maina hama) while the smith is striking while holding with a pair of tongs up on an anvil fixed to a wooden block and the fire blazes. Hanuman's right leg as well as his long tail which covers his head is tied with tiny bells'.<sup>9</sup> In another version of this flag Hanuman is the principal figure.

The artisan guilds were more strengthened and organized by bringing all its sub-divisions into one Department called Kottal Badda in the Kandyan times comprising mainly of gold and silversmiths, ivory carvers and painters working close to the King. The craftsmen at this time were paying more attention to the creations with gold and silver than ivory. "No artificers ever change their trade from generation to generation; but the son is the same as was his father, and the daughter marries only to those of the same craft; and her portion is such tools as are of use, and do belong unto the trade".<sup>10</sup> Robert Knox (1681) stated that 'the goldsmiths, blacksmiths, carpenters and painters are all of one degree and quality'.<sup>11</sup> Bryce Ryan (1953) very appropriately observes that the past divisions among the navandanna were 'more like guilds than castes'.<sup>12</sup>

I had the privilege of visiting Mangalagama, a village situated in the Deyāla Dahamunu Pattuva in Kinigoda Korale in the District of Kāgalla which is a hereditary village of the royal

<sup>7</sup> Codrington, H. W., *Ancient land tenure and revenue in Ceylon*, Colombo, 1938.

<sup>8</sup> Valentijn, Francois, *ibid.* p. 74.

<sup>9</sup> Waidyasekera, D. D. M., *The royal artificers of Mangalagama and their descendents*, Colombo, 2011, p.4.

<sup>10</sup> Coomaraswamy, Ananda, *Medieval Sinhalese Art*, Broad Campden, 1908.

<sup>11</sup> Knox, Robert, *Historical Relation of Ceylon*, Reprint, Colombo, [1981], p. 96.

<sup>12</sup> Ryan, Brice, *Sinhalese Village*, Florida, 1958.

artificers. The well-known landmark of this village is the recently renovated way-side shelter popularly known as Mangalagama Ambalama, located on the left between 53<sup>rd</sup> and 54<sup>th</sup> mileposts on the road from Colombo to Kandy. My visit to this village in 1973 was to look for the valuable archives of the Royal Artificers Department or Kottal Badda of the Sinhala Kings. There, I met Sri Navaratna Sakala Silpatilaka Nilavala, the grand old gentleman and the respected elder of the Nilavala line of traditional craftsmen. Nilavala was in his 80's and enjoying a quiet life after retirement from the government clerical service. After an informal discussion, he explained how he had inherited the small rectangular wooden box that he incidentally held in his hand. He carefully opened it and drew out from it five land grants or sannasas inscribed on copperplates and placed them on table by the side. Along with the sannasas he also had a land-grant written on an untreated stiff palm leaf known as karakola sannasa and 24 palm-leaves with undecipherable script. After reading this it was found that it is similar to vitti patraya referred to by Bell and the vitti vattoruva referred to by Lawrie containing almost the same tradition. The vitti patraya found at the residence of Nilavala contains the descendants of Nilawala lineage of craftsmen and a translation of which appears below.<sup>13</sup>

“The artificers’ guild or the ābharana pattalaya originated from the 18 kulas (clans) which accompanied Vijaya. These clans had mixed relationship with those who have arrived subsequently to attend to the rites of the Sṛī Mahā Bodhi (Bo-tree). The craftsmen of ābharana pattalaya performed the rituals of coronation ceremonies since Mahāsammata. Among them were six traditional offices coming down from Visva-Kula Deva such as

- (i) Sirit Karalnā Radala,
- (ii) Sirit Pot Karalnā Radala,
- (iii) Sirit Ubhayanārayana Radala,
- (iv) Sirit Manu Vikrama Radala,
- (v) Mahanakat Radala and
- (vi) Vidya Cakravarti Pandita Radala.

Of these, the craftsmen of ābharana pattalaya descended from the person who held the office of Sirit Karalnā Radala. The Master Craftsmen of this guild have been engaged in the crowning of 63 kings from the beginning up to Mahasen (276-303). Thereafter such Master Craftsmen disappeared and during the reign of Parākramabāhu IV (1415- 1467) there was not a single craftsman to be found to attend to the rituals of the coronation ceremony of this King Parākramabāhu. He summoned all the technicians, pundits and craftsmen of otunu pattalaya to the Royal Court and ordered them to start work at an auspicious time to make the regalia, namely, gold crown, sword and throne along with the siv-sāta-ābharana the sixty four ornaments of royal regalia. They first melted gold for the royal crown. However, they were unable to get the shine on it and efforts to do so were fruitless. Other workshop too tried the same without gaining any success. The entire Royal Court was disappointed and discussed the problem with the Chief Monk Ven. Dhammāṅkārā of Vijayabā Pirivena and with the others who were well-versed in arts and religion. The King requested them to find someone who descended from the craftsmen clans accompanied that Vijaya or those who descended from the clans which arrived to attend to the rites of the Sṛī Mahā Bodhi. The gold worth thousand kahavanu (medium of exchange) was placed on an elephant and sent throughout the country

<sup>13</sup> Paranavitana, K. D., Archives of the royal artificers at Mangalagama, *JRAS(SL)*, vol. XLVII, 2002, pp. 67-104.

along with drumming messengers (anabera). Ultimately, they found only one woman and a seven year old girl who had descended from those clans. The Royal Court become extremely happy with the results and constructed a workshop (kammatta mandapa) covered with beautifully painted fabrics and a white ceiling cloth. The two females were summoned there and were requested to start work. They took the gold in hand and made a vow that, “If it is true that I am descended from the craftsmen clans that arrived to attend to the rites of Srī Mahā Bodhi, if I have the right of inheritance to the office of the Coronation Pundit that has served all the kings of Sūrya Wansa (clan), may all these gold melt blaze displaying 64 features (laksanas)”. Immediately after this aspiration has been vowed the gold began to melt ushering a halo of five colours and displaying the 64 features. The King was highly pleased and requested her to make the crown and other 64 ornaments of royalty. While attending to this work she gave birth to a son (No connection has been referred to). The King ordered her son to be placed under the supervision of the Ven. Dhammānkāra of Vijayabā Pirivena and made arrangements for him to learn logic, grammar, poetics and drama. After the completion of his studies, he was appointed as Silapācari or the foreman of the Royal Smithy. Such was the origin of Āldeniye Rājakarunā Davunda Sippācari lineage according to the vitti patraya of the Nilavala.<sup>14</sup>

The Kottal Badda Department where these artificers belonged was further sub-divided into four workshops referred to as Pattal Hatara, i.e.

Ābharana (jewelry),  
Otunu (crown),  
Rankadu (golden sword) and  
Sinhāsana (throne).

The guilds belonging to these workshops were under the direct supervision of the Disāve whose authority was delegated to minor headman called Vidāne appointed to each workshop. The members of the guilds were endowed with royal grants of land for their maintenance. Thus with their longstanding tradition and experience helped them to produce excellent works of art.

These artificers were extensively patronized by the king because of their incomparable talents. Even the last King of Kandy, Srī Wikrama Rājasinha (1796-1815) was one of their patrons. The story has been told of the goldsmith Ratnavalli Navaratna Ābharana of Nilawala that seeing the King (Kīrti Srī) asleep one day, he (Nilawala) conceived the idea of setting a gem in the royal nail of the big toe; which task he succeeded in performing without awakening the sleeping monarch. His awakening was awaited with some trepidation, as to what his reaction would be, but the king was delighted at his skill and awarded him liberally’.

Another version of this lore is that, the King who was travelling from Kandy to Hanguranketa on horseback had sought shelter in the house of a jeweler after his horse had broken its legs and could take him no further. The King having made his way to the house amidst dense forest was given a mat and told to sleep outside by the lady of the house as her man was away at the time. The Jeweler, having arrived home, recognized the sleeping figure to be that of the King and quickly made a gem-set ring which he surreptitiously placed on the person of his King. The following morning, the monarch having found his way to the palace, ordered that the

<sup>14</sup> Paranavitana, K. D., *ibid.*

jeweler be summoned to court. Being much pleased with him,<sup>15</sup> he conferred on him a grandiose title of Äldeniye Rājakarunā Devasurendra Manuvīra Vikrama Sirit Karalnā Asarana Sarana Srī Dantadhātu Makaradvaja Bhuvanekabāhu Parākrama Devanārāyana Abhisheka Vijayasinha Vicitra Citra Karmānta Nirmita Sakala Silpātilaka Mudali Daunda Biyagama Vijayavaddana Sippācari Ratnavalli Navaratna Ābharana.’

On several occasions the craftsmen of the traditional guilds of Sri Lanka disappeared, first with the shifting of the kingdom of Anuradhapura to Polonnaruwa followed by invasions of Cholas and Pāndyas from India. The invasion totally dispersed the traditions and the craftsmen fled for their lives. They began to find their livelihood by engaging other professions particularly agriculture. Secondly, lack of royal patronage encouragement affected the guilds considerably. This is well indicated by the absence of artifacts between Polonnaruwa and Kotte. Their recovery during the Kotte kingdom is recorded in the vitti vattoruva quoted earlier in this paper. It is obvious that the Indian system of division of castes cannot apply in Sri Lanka, nevertheless the European writers indiscriminately used the term ‘caste’ to denote even many professions. The professions in the early modern Sri Lanka existed as a result of continuous adaptation of hereditary rights and passing of the traditional knowledge from generation to generation; therefore ‘the son of the master was as good as his father’. Inter-marriages within the artificers’ families further strengthened the respective professions and thereby they looked more like guilds than castes. The four workshops of the pattal hatara constituted of skilled craftsmen of different capabilities. It is obvious that the craftsmen of the Kandyan districts preferred paying more attention to creations of gold and silver than ivory. Simultaneously, the coastal regions of the island dominated by the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British and in their presence elephant became a trading commodity from whence their attention was drawn more to the elephant than ivory. This resulted in short supply of required quantities of ivory to the craftsmen. Presently the elephants, especially the tuskers are considered endangered animals and sale or possessing tusks is prohibited by law.

<sup>15</sup> Hussein, Asiff, *Caste in Sri Lanka from ancient times to the present day*, Colombo, 2013, p. 183.

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