



Stocking up the harvest

He walked sturdily along the bund across the field, his head buried out of sight under the hefty bundle of mature paddy fresh from the field. As he approached on to the landing where we stood under the refuge of a shady tree, he favoured us with a cheerful gummy smile. “How is the harvest this season?” We inquired. “Ah tsunami tsunami,” he said and hustled off to collect the next bundle.

Words Prasadini Nanyakkara Photographs Indika De Silva and Damith Wickramasinghe

The sun unleashed its relentless blaze upon the lands that seemed parched in this extended dry season. The outskirts of Anuradhapura bore the unmistakable signs of lands committed to cultivation. This time of the year however, instead of lush green paddy fields we found, golden brown fields with only a hint of green, or bare fields where the harvest had been reaped. As the dry grounds lay in wait for the first relish of rain, some roadside fields were streaked with sooty black scorch marks or smoke unfurled as the farmers burnt remnants of the harvest to ready the fields for the next season.

Often the harvesting was ongoing and the paddy cutting machine colloquially christened the

'tsunami' careened across the field leaving mounds of straw in its wake. Another was termed the 'boothaya' or the demon that functions a step further, packing the harvest into bags as it cut. Whatever conveniences that had arrived in these parts to make life that much easier for farmers, it still held a charm of its own for those far removed from it. Everywhere we looked the harvest season was in full swing.

It was farther out in Galkulama that we chanced upon an occasion of interest about to unfold. A group of villagers had gathered near a shrine with pots and pans at the ready. A 'Deva poojawa' was about to be conducted where a first offering of the new harvest is made to the deities. When we arrived, turmeric water was being sprinkled around to sanctify the area of preparation and bowls and coconut shells with turmeric water were kept aside for use. Several tasks began to unfold simultaneously about us. What seemed like an endless pile of coconuts was gradually being grated by hand under the shade of a Bo tree nearby. We too took refuge in its shade to watch the villagers toil earnestly to make a success of the preparations. The old shrine which had been there since the 1950s was where the villagers worshipped the gods Ganesha, Aiyanayaka and Pullaiyar. Just adjacent was a more recent shrine, though villagers continue to worship and make offerings at the old shrine where it is believed the divine power truly resides.

[A Group Of Villagers Had Gathered Near A Shrine With Pots And Pans At The Ready. A 'Deva Poojawa' Was About To Be Conducted Where A First Offering Of The New Harvest Is Made To The Deities](#)

In the quiet balmy afternoon, light conversation meandered amidst the gaining momentum of activity. A hearth was prepared to boil green gram while other ingredients were being readied as well. One deseeded dates and macerated them, another washed the Nadu rice and it took three members to tackle all the coconuts. Each of the utensils was washed in turmeric water before use. Incidentally as is customary only male individuals partook in this spiritual practice that is carried out twice a year during the Yala and Maha harvest seasons. While the ingredients for this sweet rice were being prepared another arranged an offering of fruits. Complete with seven fruits, we made note of apple, woodapple, grapes, banana, melon, pineapple and guava, the offering was placed on a banana leaf along with a coconut and incense and offered at the shrine as he murmured a quiet prayer. The shrine was a simple and inconspicuous structure with a basic stone erection as the symbol of the God, the only one that has remained to this day. He then invited us to place coins at the altar as an offering which were of course first washed in a basin of turmeric water.

This pooja is held as a fulfillment of a vow to the gods for the bountiful harvest granted and to renew vows for the next season as well. Aside from the quota of rice for the pooja, a much

larger portion was also being prepared separately to distribute amongst villagers and passersby. As a result as much as 18 kg of rice from the first harvest had been brought for this occasion. We watched and waited as steam and aromas doused the air. The coconuts finally lay as a pile of empty shells and the creaming had begun. In the meantime a design was being chalked on to the clay pot in which the rice for the deities was to be prepared. Into this pot the thick coconut cream was poured and placed upon the lit hearth to boil. Here there was no grandeur of elaborate festivity but the diligence with which they engaged the simplest task added much meaning to it all.

[This Pooja Is Held As A Fulfillment Of A Vow To The Gods For The Bountiful Harvest Granted And To Renew Vows For The Next Season As Well](#)

Meanwhile, hot cups of tea were downed, or some others preferred to beat the heat sucking on ice. At last the pot of coconut milk boiled over and the rice was added and left to cook. To this, a generous dose of crushed jaggery, the prepared dates and green gram were mixed in. In the absence of fine measurements was an instinctive hand and a few debates. Finally this concoction was covered with a banana leaf and left to cook. And then it was time to cook the rice for the masses. This time quantities were multiplied manifold, and the vessel brimmed with its heavy contents. A special spoon had to be carved out of wood chopped from the nearby thicket for stirring in the large quantities.

It all took two hours from the time of our arrival. At last the clay pot containing sweet rice for the deities was taken from the hearth and carefully placed on a mound of leftover coconut powder at the foot of the shrine. This was so that the pot wouldn't topple over. The larger basin of rice was hauled to the entrance of the new shrine. The old shrine's altar was laden with fresh banana leaves and the kapuwa or the lay priest served three mounds of the sweet rice at the shrine. On a separate banana leaf fruits and incense were also placed for the bhoo mahi kanthawa or mother earth for it is from the earth that rises their harvest. After consecrating the altar with smoked charcoal in a coconut shell the lay priest began his prayers. All stood still and solemn as the pooja ensued, enveloped in the rustle of the Bo tree and the balmy afternoon breeze.

As the quiet ritual ended, passersby and school children on their way home made timely pitstops, knowing that the serving would begin. It was time for us mortals to share the meal and as we were told – more the merrier. Nothing is discarded and there was plenty to go around. One by one they took a washed banana leaf and soon helped themselves to the warm sticky rice. We were graciously offered a generous portion of sweet rice and fruits as well and we sat down among roots and rocks to enjoy what turned out to be a very delicious meal indeed. The sweet rice made with a collective goodwill and the warm camaraderie

extended, were the perfect ingredients to complete this special spiritual imbibe.

With much gratitude and exchange of good wishes it was time for us to head on our way. It was indeed a memorable encounter and this harvest season now held a new meaning for us all. On our further travels across the region we glimpsed many more fields where the harvest had already been taken leaving the fields bare. We happened upon what felt like the next link in a chain of events, where a local was busily spreading unhusked grains to dry in the sun. These would be used as seedlings to sow in the next season. We could not help but reflect pensively upon a simple and honest way of life. A charmed life, not without hard toils, but a good one.

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