In Celebration of the New Harvest: Aluth Sahal Mangallaya

Posted on



President Maithripala Sirisena, Atamasthanadhipathi Ven Pallegama Sirinivasa Nayaka Thero and Minister Duminda Dissanayake overflow the pathraya with rice. P Harrison, Minister of Rural Economic Affairs is also in the picture.
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Being the staple food crop of Sri Lanka, farmers have celebrated rice harvests, especially after the arrival in the Island of the sacred bo-tree at Anuradhapura, by offering the first harvest to the Buddha and guardian deities and seek blessings for the next crop.

Words Richard Boyle



Golden harvest, the pathraya
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Sri Lanka is blessed with two major rice-growing seasons due to the two monsoons experienced in opposite parts of the Island. The south-west monsoon nourishes the Maha crop, and the north-east monsoon the Yala crop. Harvesting of both is celebrated in the *Aluth Sahal Mangallaya,* (literally translates to "New Rice Festival"), which begins with the Maha on Duruthu Poya Day in January, and held at the Sri Dalada Maligawa in Kandy. Then in April, prior to the mid-month Sinhala and Tamil New Year festival, the Yala harvest is celebrated at the Sri Maha Bodhi Vihara at Anuradhapura.

The Sri Maha Bodhi Vihara is of special significance as the temple is the holy site of the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi, Sri Lanka's sacred bo-tree, also the oldest documented tree on Earth. It is said to be a sapling of the original Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi at Buddha Gaya, under which the Buddha gained Enlightenment, brought to Lanka by Sanghamitta, the daughter of Buddhism's early advocate, Emperor Ashoka of India.

Sanghamitta was a *Theri*, who is an ordained *bhikkhuni*, a Buddhist nun. When she landed in Jaffna with her retinue including no less than 18 classes of artisan to attend to the cultivation and ceremonies concerning the sapling, she was greeted by her father's spiritual ally, King Devanampiya Tissa. He ruled (307-267BCE) the glorious ancient Anuradhapura Kingdom, to where the sapling was taken in a four-day procession and planted in the Mahameghavana Park circa 249 BCE, making it over two and a half millennia old.

It is believed the *Aluth Sahal Mangallaya* first occurred sometime after the sapling was planted, when Buddhism was established. Thus, the sacred bo-tree became the

site where rice from the Yala harvest was offered to the Buddha and the Sri Maha Bodhi Vihara. And looking to the future, an appeal was made for adequate rainfall during the next season.

Today, many of the hallowed *Aluth Sahal Mangallaya* rituals remain. Once the Yala has been harvested, threshed and winnowed, the Ministry of Agriculture informs the Sri Maha Bodhi Vihara. The festival is usually held during the first week of April.

One change is that the festival now receives State rather than royal patronage, the Chief Guest being President Maithripala Sirisena. It begins with thousands of farmers and villagers from the North-Central Province as well as other parts of the country gathering near the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi.



A painting: Sanghamitta arrives in Sri Lanka with the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi sapling

All of them carry their maiden rice in a small terracotta bowl, known as a *pathraya,* but only some join a procession along a special road from the *Sinha Kanuwa* (Lion Pillar) junction at Anuradhapura to the Sri Maha Bodhi by eight am on the dedicated day.

Accompanying them are the time-honoured Sinhalese and Tamil dancers, performing the customary dances of their own communities, and drummers that are known as the *hevisi* (percussion), who play a two-drum combination. D*avula,* a double-headed instrument that is suspended horizontally from the waist, is played with either sticks or hands. And the *tammattama,* a double kettledrum, is played by

striking the heads with *kaduppuva,* curious looped sticks.

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This train of celebration enters the *maluwa,* the entrance of the Sri Maha Bodhi, from the easterly direction, to the impassioned cry of *"Sadhu, Sadhu, Sadhu!"* in reverence of the Buddha. The destination of the farmers' rice – which consists of different varieties – is a much greater *pathraya* than the one they carry. Made of brass, this ancient, majestic bowl, resting on a circle of elephants, supported by a circle of dwarfs, can hold 100 kilos
of rice, and is placed on a special podium.

Carrying the harvested Yala crop
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The artisans who arrived along with Sanghamitta created the great *pathraya.* They also encouraged the beautiful decorations, called *gokkola,* now firmly associated with this celebration, made from the tender, pliable, yet strong new leaf of the coconut palm. About a half-metre in length and thumb-size in width, it can be easily woven. The *gokkola* decorations surround the *pathraya,* together with a sheaf-like flowering coconut blossom stems, and the fibrous trunk of a banana tree.

The Chief Incumbent of the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi Viharaya places a handful of rice from the first offering into the golden pathraya after which it is filled, first by the Ministers and Provincial officials, then farmer by farmer, and finally by the President and then the Chief Incumbent until it overflows.

Later the Chief Incumbent blesses the hardworking farmers present for their highly successful husbandry; the glorious Parakrama Sumudraya at Polonnaruwa – the largest ancient *wewa* (a reservoir) in Sri Lanka – for its contribution to the irrigation of the crop; and to the land for its fertility and bountifulness. Next the filled-to-the-brim gold *pathraya* is then offered to the *Maha Sangha* (the Buddhist order of monks and nuns), the President gifts a bowl of organically grown rice, while also distributing bowls of rice paddy to the farmers from the country's nine provinces. In contrast, the Chief of the Veddahs, the Island's indigenous community, makes the customary age-old offering of bees honey and ghee (clarified butter) with his

hunting axe slung over one of his shoulders.

Finally, the offering of a tray of silver coins to the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi by the President concludes the *Aluth Sahal Mangallaya.*





