

Coconut Tree of Life

Posted on

Maureen Seneviratne



The concept of a “Wishing Tree” that gives good things to those who need and deserve them is a mystical notion as old as man; and the “Tree of Life” is depicted in ancient art and sculpture almost everywhere in the world. But the coconut palm, in the most practical interpretation has been a veritable tree of life to people in whose lands it grows and flourishes.

As in Sri Lanka, no one is sure whether the palm is endemic to Sri Lanka; reference to it is found in ola leaf books several centuries old. Tales dating back to the 2nd century B.C. relate how a giant warrior once uprooted a grove of coconut palms with his bare hands thereby winning lasting fame and appointment as a high general under the king’s favour.

Today coconuts thrive on the island’s south and west coasts and deep in the west’s hinterland where the soil is sandy and the climate dry. In local parlance the coconut palm is described as the “tree of a hundred uses.” Legend has it that it grows best and yields most when planted near human habitations and within reach of the human voice. Nowadays plant enthusiasts deliberately talk to their plants to make them thrive. A hundred years ago a girl

who brought a dowry of a dozen coconut trees was considered worth winning. Even today a sixty-acre coconut plantation can assure a family their basic comforts. Every panicle of stem, leaves, and fruit are turned to so many accounts that the tree is almost invaluable. Coconut leaves dried and thatched are used for roofing, and none are cooler. They are used for baskets, brooms and torches known as 'culu lights' carried by villagers in the dark. For fuel they'll strike up a fire in seconds. In fresh form, they serve as fodder for cattle and are buried in the soil as manure.

The stem of the leaf is used for making fence poles, pingoos (yokes) for carrying goods on the shoulders, fishing rods and innumerable domestic utensils. The "cabbage", or cluster of unexpanded leaves, is made by villagers into pickles and preserved in vinegar which is itself made out of coconut sap. This sap known as "toddy" is taken from the spathe (flower); a small slit is made and the 'juices' allowed to drain carefully, very very slowly into a clay pot tied to the tree.

Toddy is full of natural yeast and is drunk unfermented, straight from the tree as a wholesome 'health' drink, or fermented with the addition of sliced onions and green chill is to give an extra 'kick'. It is distilled to make 'arrack', the national spirit and a popular hard liquor. Juice from the spathe is boiled to make palm treacle and this is further boiled down to a most delicious, golden-brown candy, locally known as 'jaggery'. There is no more delicious dessert-dish than buffalo curd and palm treacle or grated 'jaggery'. When allowed to mature, the nut is used for several purposes, chiefly for cooking. It is the kernel inside, brittle and white, which is scrapped or lightly grated, mixed with water or blended in an electric blender to extract the thick, rich, foamy milk which is used in making the savoury Sri lankan curries. The dried kernel is known as 'copra' and used to distil oil for a myriad of purposes, including as a cooking oil. Several internationally reputed soaps, shampoos and cosmetics have coconut oil as their bases. The young nut, known by its local name of kurumba, is husked, the nut split in two and the 'water' inside gathered as a drink to quench the thirst. It is indeed an excellent refresher on a hot day. The nut of the 'golden coconut' (the ran tbambili) is used mainly for its water and is full of vital goodness. It is even given intravenously to sick persons. Coconut refuse, what remains after the scraped or grated kernel has been squeezed for its milk, makes poonac, an excellent feed for cattle and pigs. The shell of the nut is cleaned of its fibrous tissue and used to make drinking cups, spoons, hookahs, beads, knife handles, etc. Today it is even carved into small dishes for sweets and savouries, the outside lacquered in attractive colours and designs. The coir or fibre that is found covering the nut is called the husk and is treated and used for mattresses, cushions, ropes, cables, cordage, canvas, fishing-nets, fuel, brushes, oakum and floor mats. Highly refined coir is a valuable product for luxury items as well.

Last but not least the coconut palm's mighty trunk is used for rafters, laths, railings, boats, troughs, furniture and firewood. Articles made of coconut wood, so light and finely grained, are used in the best of homes. And the tender shoots growing from around the tree make a rare vegetable delicacy highly prized by gourmets. Indeed, the uses of the coconut tree are interminable and the owner of a vast plantation would be called a laxapathiya - a millionaire who needs only to ensure that his trees flourish, and he need worry no more.



Husking coconuts.