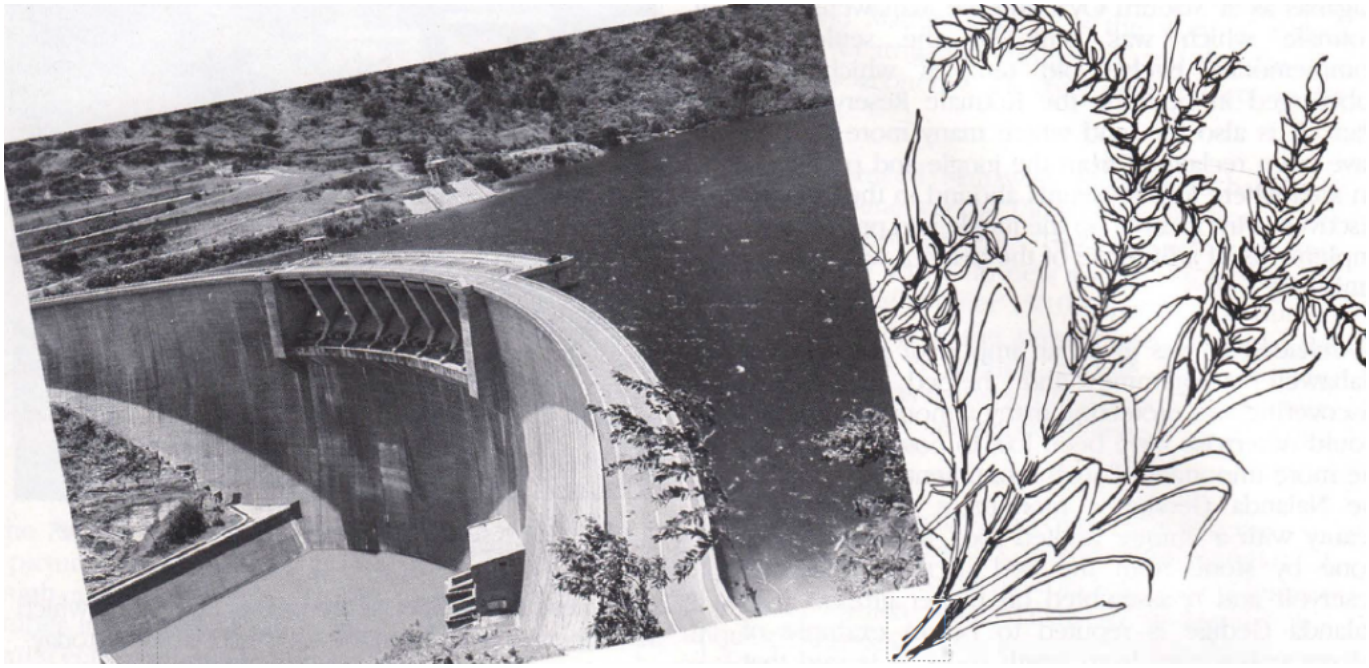
Cultivating Rituals and Traditions in Fertile Fields

Posted on

Maureen Seneviratne



Wherever you wander in Sri Lanka, once you move out of the city of Colombo and take any of the routes into its hinterland, you will see spread out on either side of the road, sometimes stretching almost into infinity the chequered patches, squares and rectangles of endless paddy fields.

Paddy, as the growing corn is called, provides the rice, the staple crop of the people of the island. It is around this staple that a whole colorful culture has grown rich both in ritual and tradition.

The success of a king in the days of old was judged by his ability to keep the people fed, with rice. It is a measure of this test which led them to commission the great reservoirs of Sri Lanka, each vying in size with the work of a predecessor, all providing water for the plant, obviously the thirstiest among food grains known to

man. The seed of the paddy plant needs to be sown in moist mud and grown in its early stages with its “feet” immersed in water. Thus the need for the vast quantities of water to irrigate the fields, when the skies don’t bestow their blessings in the form of regular, seasonal rain.

If rice has added many different shades of green to an already verdant and luxuriant tropical scenery, it has also added a whole rainbow of rituals and traditions which are observed today with as much fervour as they were in the early days of cultivation. In fact, there is an elaborate ritual for all stages of the cultivation process, from the first turning of the soil, to the bunding, irrigating, sowing, weeding, transplanting, reaping, threshing, winnowing and finally cooking.

Although the traditions may vary in detail from one region to another, they are, in the main, all aspects of the farmer’s awareness, over the centuries, that he is at the mercy of powerful and unknown forces much stronger than him. If the Buddhist faith of most and the Hindu faith of many others have given them a measure of patience, they have not prevented the farmer’s belief in the many deities, and the supernatural forces, whose help is needed for a successful harvest.

The little altar made of tender coconut leaves in the corner of a field being made ready for ploughing is prepared to make offerings to propitiate one of many deities. It could be the Mother Goddess of the Earth who has to be suitably pleased before the plough turns the soil, or the Rain God who needs propitiation for the skies to give of their abundance in time. Similarly there are rituals in honour of the Sun God for good seasonable weather during which the plants can grow and ripen, and some offerings to those mischievous gnomes of the earth who could make the best-laid plans of a farmer go awry unless they are well pleased.

While ritual has its important role, the extent of exhaustive labour required for rice cultivation has also brought about a unique sense of community among the rice cultivators of Sri Lanka. Whether the field is large or small, owned singly jointly or severally the tasks and labors of cultivation are all shared by one and all in a village. In fact, it is the community demand of rice which has been at the roots of the community structure of the Sri Lankan village.

Even after the arrival of the tractor, which has made the task of the cultivator considerably easier, the men of the village would divide the labor involved in repairing the bunds and tilling the fields of each other, and join in all the necessary rituals before the seeds are sown. The community of the paddy field is also

extended to the larger community of the village, whereby the thatching of a roof, the plastering of a wall, the laying of a floor, or even the building of a house for one is a task in which everyone joins. All that is needed is the selection of the auspicious day and the invitation with a sheaf of betel leaves.

In older times, it was customary to broadcast sow the paddy seed times by hand. A lone farmer in his span cloth would traverse a muddy field on foot, spreading the seed from a basket held by his waist. Today the system of first planting the seeds is prepared nurseries and then transplanting them is more the order, due to the realization of the better yield it gives.

While the conversation of Sri Lanka’s geographical dry zone which covers the plains of the North Central, North Western and South Eastern region into the rice bowl of the country was made possible solely due to the success achieved in the construction of reservoirs, and channels the industry of the rice cultivation is not confined to these level tracts. Among the finest sights for the traveller in Sri Lanka, whether by road or rail are the terraced paddy-fields of the hill country. On any of the mountains of Sri Lanka’s hill country, not covered by tea, rises tier upon tier of well-sculpted paddies with some as wide as 15 to 20 feet across at the bottom, steadily narrowing till at the peak it may cover the area sufficient for two men to stand. These terraced fields, which have often been described as works of art of the rural scenery as well as the large tracts in the valleys between hills are all watered by the abundant rains of the central region of the island.

Many who do not realize the labors of the farmers often call paddy the lazy man’s crop. This is mainly because of the long period of apparent rest the farmer can take after the field is prepared and the seed is sown, leaving it to nature to help the seed sprout and the plant to ripen. But this is only part of the toil and worry. There is the weeding and protecting from insects, pests, birds and even larger animals that could in a brief period destroy a whole season’s hard work.

If the men do the initial spade work as it were until the seed is sown, most of the other work is left to the women, in an interesting division of labour little changed through the centuries. It is they who transplant the seedlings and weed the fields. They do not do the actual reaping, but carry the huge sheaves of ripe paddy on their heads to the threshing floor. The backbreaking task of weeding is often relieved by the many melodies which they sing together as they bend low in the blazing tropical sun. These songs form part of the rich tradition of folk music in Sri Lanka. Here is a translation of one such “Nelun Gee” or weeding song, still heard

echoing in the green valleys of the hill country: “Anoint your head with oil and comb your hair, cousin; adorn yourself with bead necklaces; drape yourself with garments, cousin, and let us go to weed rice paddies.”

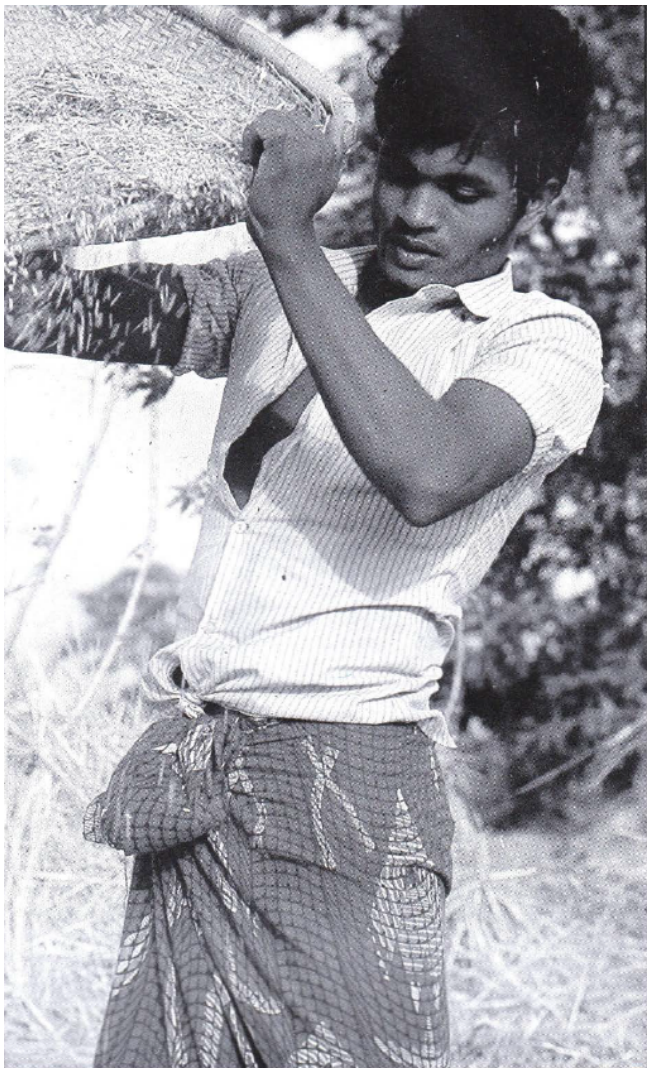
Some of the most beautiful folk melodies are the “Pal Kavi” (literally ‘plant’ ditties) sung in plaintive strain by the young men who spend long nights in the watch huts amidst the fields, guarding the ripening crop from wild animals in the nearby forests who may come out at nightfall to trample the crops or burrow into them. Today, however, many a lad will take along his transistor with cassettes in plenty to listen to and drive away the wildest beast as well, so loud does he prefer his electronic music! There are two main crops of rice grown each year. The “Maha” crop is sown in October or November and reaped in January or February: this is the “Great Harvest” to which much time and effort is devoted. There is also a second, or ”Yala” crop, taken later in the year. In some areas three crops can be grown. When the first sheaves of a harvest are gathered and the first corn is threshed, an offering is made to the Buddha at the temple nearest to the harvested fields. The rice is offered also to the gods in thanksgiving for their bounty. This festival, the “Aluth Sall Mangallaya” – the Festival of the New Rice – is, no doubt, as old as man’s first senling down in villages to farm the land and grow the once wild grains in an ordered manner. Here in the villages of Sri Lanka it is celebrated with much pomp. Rice is cooked with milk – the mystical and festive ‘kiri bath’ – in the open fields and served to all who participate with a variety of fruits, especially bananas. But first the portion is put away for the offering at Buddha’s shrine, for the monks in the temple, and for the hidden deities. This last is placed in a corner of the now stubbly-brown fields. Festive drums are beaten and glad songs sung. Everyone is merry and the feast is prolonged to midday. There is reason for satisfaction: the barns are full and bursting with the staple!

The leaders of modern governments have not been free of the great demands of rice. From the time of the Dutch Governors of the maritime regions, to some inspired British Governors down to the post-independence period, the production of sufficient rice has been among the principal tasks of the rulers of Sri Lanka. The old reservoirs have been repaired and restored and ambitious new irrigation and hydropower schemes built. They include Gal Oya built shortly after independence, Uda Walawe built in the sixties and more recently the Mahaweli Diversion Scheme, diverting the waters of Sri Lanka’s longest river to the reservoir and fields of the Dry Zone.

Despite all this effort and the fact that paddy is the most widely grown crop, self

sufficiency in the staple has not yet been realized. Even today rice is taken from ships as described in the ancient chronicles which depicted life in the pre-Christian era and the dream of all governments is to repeat the 12th Century success of Parakrama Bahu the Great when rice was in fact exported and Sri Lanka was known as the Granary of the East.

Until that goal is reached and even after, the farmer will urge his water buffalo through the muddy field as he did in the past, and the songs of women will echo in the hills and valleys as the rural farmers of Sri Lanka continue to enhance the rich green culture of rice.



A farmer winnows the paddy to sort the husk from the grain.