

Kem: Curious Beliefs



“Not today ‘Balagiri’ come tomorrow”

“Not today ‘BALAGIRI come tomorrow” they write on their front doors with chalk to ward off the evil eye and dissuade evil spirits from harming their precious little bundles of joy. Protective parents leave this message for the Evil spirit named BĀlagiri hoping to fool the spirit into turning back every time he sees the message on the door...

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The term ‘kem’ is derived from the Sanskrit kshema, which means protection. The earliest references to ‘kem’ are found in the 13th Century Sri Lankan literary works “Pujavaliya” as well as “Saddharmaratnavaliya”. However, ‘kem’ practices may have existed in Sri Lankan culture long before they were documented and as with any customary belief, ‘kem’ practices demand complete faith from those who practice them. These practices vary from elaborate, time consuming rituals to simple, instantaneous methods.

The simple ‘kem’ practices are usually reserved for minor ailments. In case of a toothache there are a few methods recommended. One method requires a fresh betel leaf and diligent chanting of a mantra seven times in a row. Once the charmed betel leaf is ready, the one suffering from the toothache has to bite into

the betel leaf to ease the pain. Touching the aching tooth slightly with slaked lime after chanting a mantra and drawing a star or a cross on a wooden pole or such inside the house is another remedy used to alleviate the pain of an aching tooth. To cure styes these age old beliefs recommend, waking up before sunrise and applying the juice of a 'Thuththiri' (type of grass) on the styes.

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To seek protection from the bad influence of Saturn, certain people still place kiribath (milk rice) with ghee presented on nine leaves from a 'Nuga' tree - for crows to feast on. However, today most people simply arrange the milk rice on a banana leaf instead. If a large number of crows come feast on the milk rice that is considered a good sign. However, this should only be done on Saturdays and Wednesdays. □To protect paddy and other crops, Sri Lankans used more elaborate 'kem' practices and unlike some of the simpler practices used for ailments, these methods are almost a dying art.

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When the fruits ripen and the harvesting season approaches fruit farmers sprinkled sanctified water (after chanting a mantra 108 times in a row), around the trees to prevent the fruits from bursting from their own ripe weight. In the valleys of Dumbara, vegetable farmers placed a coconut adorned with chalk lines running skywards, above ground and prayed to the deities.□After gathering the harvest the farmers boiled the milk from the coconut and offered thanks to the deities for protecting the harvest.

The most elaborate rituals were reserved for rice harvesting. Before paddy was brought for threshing farmers dug a pit of about three feet deep and half a foot in diameter in the centre of the threshing floor. This pit was called the Arakvala and during an auspicious time the farmers placed several items such as betel, areca nut, coconut, a bronze plate in which a mantra was printed, turmeric, Kohomba wood, a piece of iron, bronze coins, seashells, leaves of certain trees and a small round stone along with some ears of paddy inside the pit. Once the pit is closed, the trident (trisula), arrow and sword symbolising charms are drawn on the

surface of the pit with ash in three concentric circles. The Arakvala was meant to protect the harvest from unseen forces and spirits.

In order to repel harmful insects rice farmers used a number of methods, which varied from region to region. In some areas farmers soaked an enormous piece of cloth with a mixture of resin oil and tucked a rope at the edge of the cloth. Before sunrise two people dragged the cloth across the paddy field causing the insects to get trapped in the sticky cloth. In some areas, the farmers used to sprinkle sand (after chanting a mantra) on the field after planting the seeds to prevent harmful worms from infesting the young seedlings.

Thus, 'kem' practices were numerous and varied, however all methods had one thing in common; tremendous faith in the effectiveness of 'kem' was vital for the practices to work. In fact the most important rule of 'kem' practices is that whoever performs the practice should do it in utmost secrecy; no one else should be aware of it until the ritual is complete.

As dusk fell in deep shades of purple, ants flew towards the enticing bright light near my study, only to lose their wings as they drew dangerously close to the heat from the lamp. The table was littered with partial wings and struggling plump ants without wings. In desperation, I walked towards the lime tree in my backyard, picked a leafy branch and hung it near the lamp. This unusual method was supposed to diminish the flow of ants that monopolised the lamp's bright light: a 'kem' practice that many, who are fond of traditional beliefs swear by.

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