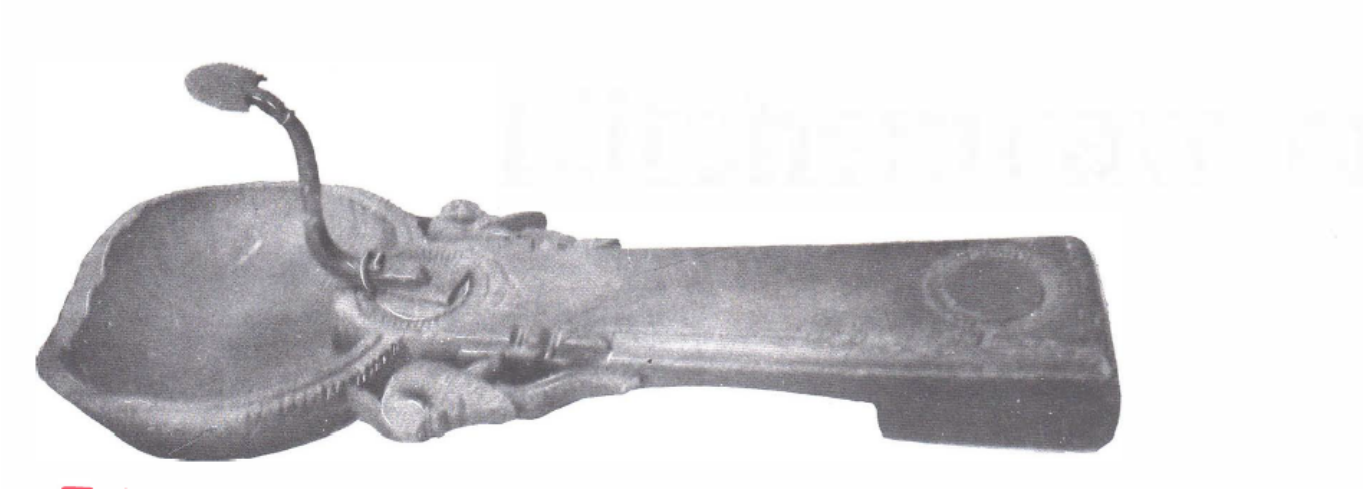
Kitchenware of the yesteryear

Posted on

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Take away from today’s kitchen the mixer and blender, the gas or electric range and microwave. Remove also the latest beaters, peelers, choppers, bread slicers and those powerdriven mini-saws which make short business of frozen meats, and what do you have? A place where the average house-person-husband or wife-would despair. How does one get the cooking done’ Want a linle help’ I suggest you pay a brief visit to the Colombo National Museum’s section which displays the traditional kitchen equipment of the Sinhalese. Many who are surrounded by the modem gadgetry of cooking, and would imagine a kitchen before the age of electricity as a primitive cooking shed with hearth, pots and ladle, will surely be surprised at the sophistication of most of the utensils on display. Proof that the people of Sri Lanka paid a great deal of attention to how they cooked things, and were always seeking innovations of their own time and age to make the culinary art more interesting, and easy.

The amount of kitchenware from the past on display in a few large showcases is stunning for its variety. It extends from the primitive implements of the aboriginal Veddahs, right down to the innovations influenced by the Dutch and British and up to the early years of the present century. Among the Veddah objects on display is a

primitive coconut-scraper fashioned out of a three-pronged branch. Part of the main branch and two projecting branches are used as seat and support, and the third branch is used to hold the metal scraper. Certainly an item used by the later Veddahs, following their interactions with the Sinhalese. In the Veddah section is a well-preserved winnow made of palm leaves, which has changed little in shape and design to this day. Also interesting is a wide-mouthed vessel made hide in which food and liquid could be stored, a convenient idea even for today. The Sinhalese who did most of their cooking and storing of food in clay and metal pots had developed an extensive range of pot hangers, which could find a place in the most modern of today’s kitchens with little variation. There are hangers made of bark, leather, reed and string; those that hold a single pot, or two to three pots. The reed and string hangers are pleasing artistic creations strong and functional, with woven floral designs allowing for ventilation, which could decorate a kitchen anywhere. Also interesting is the number of rice bags and food boxes on display. Most of them are done in local hemp, while a few are in more stiff bamboo reed. They vary in shape from flat quadrangular boxes, to squat square boxes, and the more rounded ones. They all have plenty of space within, strong at the edges and seams. There is greater variation in design in the round boxes, which are still in use. Most of these, known locally as “kurani petti”, have been designed for the storing and carrying of sweetmeats or cooked rice. In the rural areas of Sri Lanka it is not uncommon to see people visiting relations with several of these laden with food, specially at New Year time, and when there are the traditional visits in connection with marriages. They are also used in carrying food when offering alms at temples, and are convenient food carriers on pilgrimages and other long journeys.

Of spoons there is an abudance. From the common coconut-shell spoon which is found in every Sri l.ankan home, the collection extends to large ladles with deep coconut shells held by ornate handles, used in feasts where large numbers are served. There are the “special use” spoons such as the flat baking spoons, and the frying spoons with perforations to let the oil sieve through, made both of coconut shell and metal. There are also spoon racks to help keep a kitchen tidy, which are of woven hemp, or more permanent fittings done in carved wood as decorative pieces.

The Sinhalese had developed many moulds for the making of sweetmeats and special foods. The most common of these is the string-hopper mould, by which threads of soft flour paste are pressed out on to little trays for steaming. There are several variations in designs in the hand-held and table-top range. There are fancy cake moulds, biscuit moulds, and the special mould made of bamboo for the

steaming of “pittu”-a popular Sinhalese breakfast preparation of rice flour and grated coconut, which is now a favourite dinner dish at many tourist hotels.

One cannot but be fascinated by the many moulds for sweetmeats from the tiny cutters and the small-hinged moulds to the large floral pattern of the metal “kokis” mould which came from the Dutch. (“Kokis from the Dutch “kookjies’ -haYe you heard of cookies?) There are several large moulds on which milk rice (rice boiled in coconut milk) is spread. These are flat wooden trays with floral and other pretty designs engraved in them, so that the milk rice when it is turned over, shows the design pressed on top of it.

Of special interest is a biscuit barrel of distinctly Western design, which looks like the captain of a ship. It is dated 1900-1902 and carries the legend that it was made by the Boers at Diyatalawa. That was where the British interned the Boer prisoners-of-war at the tum of this century. The Sinhalese of the past obviously took great care to use the proper proportions of ingredients in cooking. There is a large collection of measures used both for large quantities of grain such as rice and maize, and for the smaller measures of spices and seasonings. They are made of wood, hide, rattan, bamboo and metal and could measure from a few milligrams to a whole bushel.

Bags for storing and carrying grain, the special reed bags used to carry cooked food to the rice fields to the farmers working there the woven trays on which food is served the sieves for straining coconut milk and so many other special utensils which were in use in the lifestyle of the Sinhalese. It shows they paid considerable importance to how they cooked their food, stored and carried it, and tried to make the chores of the kitchen as easy as the skills and technology of the day allowed.



Uda Halla’ in which pots can be hung.