An offering to the gods

Posted on
A pooja watti with a variety of whole fruits and a garland of varying hues

Dusk began to fall spreading its grasp far and wide. One by one street lamps flickered on illuminating the crowd that thronged towards the Kataragama Devalaya. In the crowd, a lone figure carrying what seemed like a large basket atop his head, stood out. Slow and steady, he weaved his way through to reach the massive gates of the devala grounds to finally place his precious cargo — a silver tray full of pooja watti…

Words Krishani Peiris **Photographs** Indika De Silva

It was about seven in the evening as we neared the sacred grounds of the Kataragama Devalaya.

The twinkling lights of the numerous fruit stalls beckoned us to partake in the ritual of purchasing a *pooja watti* before proceeding. We were enthralled by the sight before us as an assortment of
fruits such as apples, bananas, oranges, pineapples, wood apple, avocado and watermelon were neatly stacked in shelves in some stalls while in others small trays piled with fruits were arrayed.

Garlands of various hues hungin neat rows while at the foot of the shelves, there were trays of varying sizes. A poster within each shop displayed the various types and prices of the *pooja watti* on offer for devotees to select from.

Approaching a stall with a sign that read Amara Pooja Bhanda, we were eagerly welcomed with beaming smiles. After sifting our gaze through the long list of *pooja watti*, we settled for a *gedi pooja watti* (a *pooja watti* consisting of whole fruits) and one with cut fruits. After listening to our request, Premakanthi, the owner of this makeshift shop, quickly set about preparing the *pooja watti*.

A *pooja watti* with cut fruits is offered to make a wish while mostly the *gedi pooja watti* is offered to fulfil a vow. The *dakum pooja watti* and the *vishesha gedi pooja watti* at the bottom of the list caught our attention. This is used for the *muluthan pooja* when one offers *pani bath* (rice with honey mixed) along with dates, grapes,

coconut and cashew. It is customarily offered with fruits as well as sweetmeats.

A *pooja* is often conducted to make a vow or to honour gods. The *pooja watti* is a representation of a person's faith showing that they respect and trust the gods who have aided them in attaining their hopes. It aids in freeing the devotee from the vow.

"We perform the *pooja* by offering whole, uncut fruits to gods," revealed Premakanthi, as she deftly arranged the *pooja watti*, without missing a beat. "Only *pooja watti* with uncut fruits are taken inside to the god's chamber by the Kapumahaththaya as gods require the aroma of fruits. When you take a tray of cut fruits, the aroma of the fruits will be gone by the time you reach the devalaya."

However, sometimes devotees offer *pooja watti* with cut fruits to make a vow while whole fruits are kept to pay tribute after a vow has been fulfilled.

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Every week on Wednesdays and Thursdays, Premakanthi makes a trip to the *Sathi Pola* (weekly fair) in Tissamaharama and Embilipitiya, to purchase most of her wares while fruits such as apples and oranges are brought down to Kataragama by acquaintances.

As we stood watching, Premakanthi took a basin of water to which she added some turmeric and a cut lime to both clean and ward off evil. Next she took seven betel leaves, washed them in the basin before laying five in a circle on a silver tray, and keeping one in the middle. A king coconut, wood apple, pineapple, mango, bananas, an apple and orange soon followed and were deftly arranged before placing the remaining betel leaf in the shape of a cornet in order to keep the offerings (*panduru*).

As a final touch, flowers, a packet of incense and a garland were added before the *pooja watti* was covered with a red shawl. Keeping this aside, Premakanthi set about preparing the second *pooja watti*, which comprised five betel leaves, cut fruits, flowers, incense and a garland covered by a newspaper.

Slowly we edged inside and handed over our *pooja watti* to the *Kapu mahaththaya* who took it inside and after a while returned half of the fruits, cut, to be shared among ourselves and the gathered devotees

“For each god there is a specific colour. For goddess pattini we use a yellow garland and mangoes specially. For Kataragama Deviyo (God Skanda) it is fruits that are more red in colour, wood apple in particular, and a red garland. For Vishnu Deviyo the colour is blue. Also the number of fruits we keep is always an odd number—five, seven, nine or 21. The significance in choosing an odd number is that it shows that a *pooja* should be offered with one belief and should be trusted with all your heart and not go in two directions as is indicated by an even number,” Premakanthi explained.

After arranging for the *pooja watti* to be delivered to the devalaya we bid adieu to Premakanthi. As we left, a three-wheeler laden with sugar canes pulled up and vendors, one by one, came and brought the required amounts for their stalls.

As the bell tolled we hurried to the devalaya while our *pooja watti* was brought to us by a man hired by the vendor. He quickly instructed us to get into the queue making its way around the main devalaya. Slowly we edged inside and handed over our pooja watti to the *Kapu mahaththaya* who took it inside and after a while returned half of the fruits, cut, to be shared among ourselves and the gathered devotees.

As the crowd thinned, we observed the basket carrier gathering up the empty pooja trays on to the larger tray and hurrying through the grounds, perhaps to come back with more…

