Refreshing Thambili in Nature’s Goblet

Posted on

Theja Weeratne



The wayside vendors or pavement hawkers are a common yet popular sight in Sri Lanka selling their wares with slick salesmanship and an ever flashing smile. Fruit sellers on the pavement in the city exhibit the fruit in season in colourful and attractive, piles, or strung up in temporary stalls making the streets a veritable fair.

The golden King Coconut or Thambili (Cocos Nucifera) a species of the Coconut is in season right throughout the year. It is nature’s bounty to thirsty tropical folk. You will see people from all walks of life stop at the Thambili seller to quench their thirst, blissfully unaware of the excess water dripping down their shirt front.

The good natured seller will deftly twist a golden nut from a cluster of nuts, till the stem snaps free and with practised dexterity and a sharp knife, slice off the tender top of a Thambili leaving a small opening to drink the sweet refreshing water. Once you gulp down the cool water which comes in a naturally sterile case, hand it back

to the friendly seller who will readily invite you to a further treat awaiting you, by slicing off a sliver of the hard outer husk of the nut fashioning a ready made scoop and then split the nut in two baring the edible insides. You can now feast on this white milky kernel, which can be scooped out with the instantly turned out spoon. The kernel which is known as the ‘Londa’ is served also with sugar or honey for accompaniment and to enhance its flavour.

The young coconut or Kurumba, a green coloured nut is also sold for the refreshing water inside. However, the Thambili is indeed the more popular, fetching better prices, lovely to look at with a delecately sweet water, which comes in the world’s first nature-made, disposable container of a soft drink. Untouched by human hand this water which contains glucose and potassium salts has often been used as a glucose drip in medical emergencies. A Thambili is often the first refreshment offered to a visitor in a typical Sri I.ankan home. In most homes with sufficient garden, a Thambili tree is a cherished plant and takes pride among the fruit trees. It is a must in any sick room being mild and easily digestible, for convalescents and often makes up for a get well card sent by concerned relatives or friends. It is also a perfect pick-me-up after a thick night – the best known antidote for a hangover, when the body’s phosphate balance needs restoring. Moreover its popular as an excellent shandy for alcoholic drinks, specially the local spirit, Arrack.



Dozens of golden Thambili nestle in clusters among the branchless – a top a tree ready to be plucked

Housewives prepare wine from Thambili by adding sugar to it and allowing it to ferment for a length of time to a delicate tasting wine, comparable in quality and bush to other better known fruit wines.

At “Pirith” ceremonies where Buddhist blessings are chanted by monks, the Thambili is blessed and used for drinking to counteract sickness and misfortune. An alms-giving to Buddhist monks is incomplete without the first item on the menu – a Thambili with which the monks wash their hands and cleanse their mouths of the betel chew.

For all auspicious events in the lives of the Sinhalese, the Thambili takes pride of place – along with other symbols of fertility and abundance. Puberty rituals are not perfect without the healthy and colourful nut as a centrepiece. Pregnant women are advised to gaze at the gold coloured nuts nestling among the fan-shaped green-yellow branches – for a similar complexion to be transmitted to the unborn child. A

bunch of Thambili considered a token of prosperity and fortune is used for various rituals, and as offerings to deities – a custom prevalent in agricultural communities. This same nut will be served to you by the sophisticated hoteliers with a straw for easier drinking, adorned with a ***‘lei’*** – Hawaiaan style. You will also see it adorning a Buffet spread accompanying the local, food to give it the stamp of the East. The Thambili goes hand in hand with the image of sandy beaches, frolicking girls on tropical isles while you sip the cool water of the Thambili – many a western executive’s dream holiday, away from it all. It is a safe bet if one feels dubious about the available drinking water.

The first impression of a visitor on arriving in Sri Lanka are the stretches of ‘forests’ of coconut palms lining the miles of sandy beaches fronted by the deep blue sea and sun, sun, sun. The Thambili tree shorter than the coconut tree, as a rule, can be seen amongst the clusters of green trees, significant with the spine of its branches tinged yellow and its yellow nuts.

The life sustaining Coconut tree the value of which is impossible to overstate, has every part of it used for food, shelter, fuel, medicine and many other utility purposes. It is the island’s fourth largest export earner.

Botanical evidence seems to point to the fact that the coconut is a native of Tropical America and that it was carried westward across the Pacific. It is presumed that it reached Sri lanka, via New Guniea and Malaya from Polynesia. According to local tradition the earliest known palms were on the Southern coast near Weligama where the medicinal value of coconut oil was discovered by King KustaR aja – a supposed leper (whom the figure carved on a rock near Weligama is believed to represent). History tells us that it was along the south-west coast of the island that coconuts came to be first established, but it may be that it was fostered by the more enterprising inhabitants of the populous western side of the island at a time when there was scarcely any settled population on the east coast.

Little interest seems to have been taken by the Portuguese but with the arrival of the Dutch the cultivation of the palm was stimulated.

However, the Coconut tree and in several instances the Thambili has seemed an inspiration of verse and many a tale of the history and folklore of the island.

The ancient Sinhala poets have compared the colour of the Ran Thambili (golden) to the epitome of a perfect complexion of a beautiful woman. Andare the fabled court

jester has been inspired by the Thambili to compare them to a beautiful damsel’s young breasts, in his cleverly and wittily composed impromptu verses or “Kavi” which are attributed to him.

Bunches of Thambili have been used since ancient times in traditional decor and festivals. “Pandals” or archways which are a common feature in the life of the Sri Lankans are built at an entrance for any celebration or significant event. A Gedi Thorana is one which has bunches of Thambili or any other fruits m season, strung up decoratively, on the basic structure of wood.

According to ancient scraps of folklore when ‘Seth Kavi’ (blessings) was chanted for King Panduwas in the 5th Century B.C. yellow coconuts were required to be p(aced at the feet of the king. The ‘Seth Kavi’ were a composition of verses on the origin of coconuts called the ‘Pol Upatha’. Legend says that the Nine Rishis went to the land beyond the seven seas to fetch the golden nuts – for the king. Since then these golden yellow nuts have been used for the royal caste denoting its superiority over the other varieties of coconuts which were in tum used for the lesser castes, according to the ancient people when caste segregation was rigidly observed.

Sri Lanka being an agricultural country and renowned for the luscious fruit found in all seasons through the year – fruits are used in every kind of decor for all ceremonies and ancient rituals. ‘Khomba Kankariya’ a ritualistic ceremony originated in the Kandyan Kingdom to evoke the protection and blessings of the Khomba yasksha or God was first performed for King Panduwas.

A ‘Maduwa’ or shed made speciall for this ceremony is decorated with cender coconut leaves, bunches of Thambili and an ortment of fruit. Thambili is again used for the offerings which are kept on a tray with incense and flowers – a gift to the gods to solicit their blessings.

Oil, extracted from the Thambili is used for medicinal purposes and is believed to have a cooling and soothing effect on the body – when applied. Thambili oil was used by the maidens of long ago -when a woman’s hair was her crowning glory – to brush her long tresses and to heighten the blackness of her hair and make it sleek and glossy. Whichever time you are in Sri l.anka, you will have the opportunity of tasting the king of coconuts – a treat worth waiting for. Wherever you go – you will find it on the roadways, hotels and on the trees. And if you fancy it plucked fresh off the tree – there will be many who will shin up the tree for you – with the traditional Sri l.ankan smile as an accompaniment.



Wayside Thambili seller has a brisk sale in the morning. (G. Hettiarachchi.)