

Saying it with ‘Gokkala’ – tender coconut palm leaves

Posted on

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As a form of decoration it is the simplicity that impresses one most. It can set the mood for a ceremony or function. At a wedding, the tender whitegreen leaves signify joy. At an official or political event it creates the required mood of pomp, and at a funeral the mood of respect and sorrow. They are found everywhere, everyday. It is the most widely used decorative form in the country, and often the least mentioned.

“Gokkola”, the tender coconut leaf, is the most popular decorative medium in Sri Lanka. No ceremony or ritual in the country can be complete without it. In a culture where “saying it with flowers” was never the norm, except in religious offerings, gokkola has earned a unique position as a national art form.

The split leaves of the young coconut branch can have as many decorative uses as there are ceremonies or ritualistic needs, and there can be as many designs and decorative styles possible as there are artistes who could dream them up. Most rural children in Sri Lanka acquire some skills in “gokkola” decoration as they grow up. They begin with making little disposable playthings, birds and snakes, flowers, stars, parrots peacocks and pinwheels. They soon join the adults in decorating a village street for a wedding or funeral, or for a reception to a government official.

It is not long before the young boys know how a simple archway is made with a split half of a “gok” branch, and also the little variations in design which indicate whether the event is one of joy or mourning. Many a young boy acquires the skill by fetching and carrying for the more practised and skilled village artistes as they prepare an intricately worked “mandapaya” or altar for preaching and the chanting of Buddhist stanzas, or watch the village exorcist prepare a special altar, “bali thattuwa”, for a devil dancing ritual.

Although the skill in "gokkala" decorative art is fast being lost among city dwellers, there is no shortage of such decor in the city. There is hardly a day when SC\ffie part of Colombo will not have its streets decorated with these leaves. The most common examples are the twisted loops of the tender green leaves which are used as simple, instant archways, or the festoons assembled from split and trimmed strips of "gokkala", which make canopies above and fringes along the street.

But the more intricate decorations require more skilled hands and there is no dearth of such decorative master craftsmen in Sri Lanka. The work of the gokkala artist is strictly an overnight job. At best his creation can be kept for a day in the tropical humidity and heat, before it begins to dry and discolour. A light application of coconut oil on the leaf may help preserve and add a sheen, but not for long, which makes "gokkala" decoration unique as a disposable art form. What is made today with great care and the use of skills handed down from father to son, or teacher to pupil, is often dumped in the rubbish heap with little ceremony tomorrow.

Although good "gokkala" craftsmen are found throughout the island, the best are known to hail from the south and southwest, where the coconut tree abounds. These are also the regions best known for the rituals of exorcism and devil dancing, for which a great deal of "gokkala" decoration is used. It is used as part of the headdress of the exorcist, in the decoration of the temporary shelter where the ritual is enacted, in the altar which is complete with the most intricate designs, and in all of the interior decor of the place.

To see a skilled craftsman work with "gokkala" is fascinating. The most intricate "poruwa", or wedding throne, will be the work of one man, with just one or two assistants, working a full night. Sometimes the finishing touches will be done almost up to the moment when the bridal couple is led to the throne.

All the craftsmen use is a sharp and pointed knife to cut and slit the leaves and a large knife to cut the larger coconut branches. The rest is all the work of nimble and practised fingers and a great imagination. Very rarely will a hammer and nail be used to hold some large part of a decoration in place.

Often there will be patterns woven with the light green tender leaves which are the "gok" and the darker green mature leaves of the coconut. Such decorations are common at platforms where public meetings are held, or in the making of "pandals" – large decorative screens and archways. Sometimes words of welcome to an

honoured guest will be woven out of gokkola, even in Roman script.

The best of “gokkola” craftsmen will know more than 100 special designs and motifs and are able to adapt new design elements to this repertoire acquired from childhood. From the simple loops, panels, crowns, flowers and streamers the “gokkola” craftsmen will move on to the more elaborate altars and pandals, and the intricate symbolic decor used in religious and other traditional rituals.

With unimaginable speed and dexterity the “gokkola” craftsman slashes each blade of coconut leaf from the main rib of a coconut branch. The short length of leaves he holds in one hand are then notched, nicked, and scalloped to form a variety of designs from petals, spirals and spikes, cobra heads, peacock feathers, pigeons and parrot wings. Other elements used by the craftsman to help develop the designs and add contrast are the stumps of plantain trees and the large green leaves of “habarala”, popularly known as “elephant ears” for their size.

The visual elements created by the craftsmen are many and extend to all the necessities in traditional decor. There are “gokkola” vases and bowls, lamps and lamp stands. A stand for the lighting of little clay lamps burning coconut oil is made by affixing tiers of scalloped, curved “gokkola” onto the stump of a plantain tree and fixing curved pieces of coconut ekel between the tiers to hold the lamps.

At times the white-green decorative motifs done in “gokkola” are set off against the dark green of the huge “habarala” leaves. Garlands and chains, sprays and danglers are made to decorate the aisles of halls and the auspicious symbols of birds are hung from the canopies of ceremonial platforms and religious altars.

Although the tradition of gokkola decoration comes down through centuries, and local lore has it that the first “gokkola” craftsmen learnt their skills from the deities, today it cuts through Sri Lanka’s ethnic and religious divisions. Buddhist and Hindu temples, Christian churches and Islamic mosques all use “gokkola” for decor for various ceremonial occasions. In a country where national politics is almost a household pre-occupation, the path to political power seems constantly decorated with “gokkola”. The absence of “gokkola” decor at a political event, whether it is a vote-catching public meeting or photo opportunity for a minister, will be a glaring omission.

The next time you see an open coconut flower, fresh out of its spathe, placed in a clay pot which is covered with scalloped “gokkola”, take a closer look at the simple

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lines of the decorative piece, and also look around to discover the many other examples of “gokkola” decor which will be around. You will marvel at what the unknown craftsmen have achieved in this functional and disposable art form.



A gokkola spin wheel – intricately cut and shaped by skilful hands.