

Stilt Fishermen Of Koggala

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The stilt fishermen silhouetted against the glow of the setting sun

Seated precariously on a narrow stretch of wood with his back bent in a graceful arc, the fisherman peered into the depths of the ocean. Gently he lowered the fishing rod and tugged at it until a satisfied smile pulled at the very corners of his mouth... High up on a stilt, situated above the rolling waves of the Indian Ocean, the Stilt Fisherman strove to find his upkeep...

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It was about seven in the morning as we stepped on to a small beach strip in Koggala. Shivering in the stirring wind, we contemplated the scenery that unfolded before us. Fishermen, about ten or more, perched on stilts in the ocean, 20 metres from the shore,

captured our gaze and took us through time to a place where the age old vocation of stilt fishing was rampant around our small isle.

The particulars in regard to the beginning of stilt fishing is murky, though one fascinating tale told by A W Wilson Silva, a stilt fisherman of 82 years, says that the fishing technique was introduced to Sri Lanka in Gantara, Matara long ago by traders who have come into the country in sloops. It is said that one merchant had observed how these traders would go to sea, to return after a while with their meshed bags filled with fish. Curious as to how this was accomplished, the merchant has inquired from one trader who has told the merchant that he will teach the technique before he leaves the country. True to his word, it could be assumed that the trader had shown all the ropes of stilt fishing to the merchant, which was then passed down from generation to generation.

Now stilt fishing is synonymous with the fishing industry down south and Koggala is known as an old ford favoured by fish such as koraburuwo and bollan, popular catches amongst fishermen. The fish are said to come near the shore in droves with the current in the early morn, to go back at dusk to deep sea. Hence, there we were, standing on the sandy shores of Koggala observing the stilt fishermen hard at work with the backdrop of the rushing waves creating the perfect picture in the morning sun. Fishing is done in two slots, one being in the early morning between five and eight and the other being in the late afternoon at around four until the sun sets. As such, even as the skies darkened ominously with the threat of rain, the fishermen did not give up and strove harder, some tugging at the fishing rod while others made sweeping motions with the rod – the two methods of fishing employed by the fishermen. Stilt fishing is carried out in the ‘Varakan’ time or the off season – a duration of six months – close to shore where the water is only three and half metres deep.

Koggala is an old ford favoured by koraburuwo and bollan

Curious about the technicalities of the industry, we set about unravelling the details of the craft. The wooden stilt, three and a half or four metres in length – depending on the depth of the water – is usually obtained from the *Alstonia* tree found nearby. The pole is smoothed out and fashioned with ridges and small wooden pieces of wood tied along the pole, called *pa petta*, so that fishermen can easily manoeuvre their way up without slipping. The seat, named *petta*, made out of three cinnamon branches tied firmly to the stilt, creates a perch that could deftly carry the weight of a grown man. Assembled thus, the fisherman first find a place among the reefs suited for catching fish, before making a hole with a crowbar. Once the hole is deep enough, the stilt is sunk into place while removing the crowbar and is shaken to secure it firmly among the reefs.

Maybe out of all the gear used in stilt fishing, the most remarkable would be the angle or the bili katuwa as called by the fishermen. The mould used to create the angle is made out of the outer covering of the squid, called the dalipoththa. When the squid grows larger, this outer covering peels off and is washed on to the shore where fishermen gather the hard cover to smooth out and etch eight or more grooves completing the mould.

The angle, itself, is made out of white lead and steel wire. First small pieces of steel wire are cut and then fitted snugly into the grooves, before a small lump of white lead is melted and poured into the mould and then cooled for a few minutes. The angles, stuck together, are separated and then hammered and bent to produce the angles. As we watched the whole process, it was evident that years of experience and familiarity are needed to create the perfect angle to catch fish. The angle is then attached to a kithul pitta (a long thin pole made out of the stem of the Kithul tree) of about one metre long with thangus thread. It is said that long ago fishermen used the pineapple leaves to make the thread for the fishing rod. No lure is attached as the fish who see the small shining angle dangling in the water quickly hasten to gobble it up, mistaking it for shrimp, only to be lured in to the gathering catch of the fishermen.

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Back on shore, the sun was setting and a group of people have gathered to watch the fishermen silhouetted against the fading glow of the sun. One fishermen just starting out with a bag clutched in one hand and the fishing rod in the other, waded chest deep into the water to clamber on to his stilt. Comfortably seating himself, he hung the bag on the pole, before quickly settling down to fish with one hand grasping the stilt for balance. Fishing vendors stood patiently observing the scenery, until a fisherman approached the shore to sell his wares, where each haggled to sell and buy fish. Having sold his catch the fisherman again waded into the sea and to his stilt, to continue fishing until the sun sets and it is too dark to see...

