Sweep Away

Posted on
The ekles of the broom, gathered into a right circle

Sitting cross legged on the steps leading to the house, with hands tucked under my chin, I watched fascinated as my mother continued to sweep the garden. My eyes danced back and forth following the motion of the ekel broom as she moved, slow yet brisk—almost meditative—sweeping the fallen leaves into a pile, her moment of solitude uninterrupted.

Words Krishani Peiris **Photographs** Indika De Silva

A memory I still fondly reminisce, though mundane it seems, is watching my mother sweep the garden with an ekel broom. An ekel broom is made of the dried and scraped centre stems of the coconut frond.The sound of the broom as it dragged across the sand making a soft swishing noise still echoes in my mind, reminding of a childhood spent roaming freely and not restricted by four walls. It is this same feeling that I felt as we stepped into the threshold of a house in Maha Oya, having caught a glimpse of a lady hard at work making ekel brooms.

As we stood there observing, she pulled up a sizable chunk of wood, which we presumed to be her workstation. Then she grabbed a wooden pole, about one and a half metres in length, and proceeded to sharpen one edge with a machete. Once the desired sharpness was achieved, keeping the pole aside, she took a specially made iron ring with a screw, and a bunch of ekels. The ekels were snugly fitted into the ring, tightening the screw about four inches from one edge.

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Every now and then she knocked the ekels against the floor to line them up evenly. Taking a strap of red metal, about eight inches long and two and a half inches wide, she wrapped it tightly around the ekels, right above the ring, before moving the ring on top of the strap. Then with a wooden hammer-like object in hand and the machete she continued to strike and align the ekels and the metal strap for a

perfect fit.

Next, steadily but slowly and at times forcefully, she began to insert the wooden pole taking care to ensure that it sat within the middle of the bundle of ekels. Afterwards in order to remove the iron ring, nails were hammered onto the metal strap and the wooden pole to keep the ekels in place. Measuring the length of the ekels, the excess was chopped out before starting the most important process—flattening out the ekels to create the fan shape of the broom.

The challenge is to create a broom that maintains the fan shape for a long period of time. To do this a particular device has been designed. The device consists of two wooden slabs connected by two screws that can be used to move the slabs closer or apart. Having set the ekels between the wooden slabs, they were tightened together and then by hand the ekels were spread in the shape of a fan. Keeping the ekels snugly in the device, a thinner metal strap fashioned in an elliptical shape was next inserted above the first metal strap, keeping a gap of about two inches. This strap was nailed to the pole to keep the shape as well as to ensure the durability of the broom. Excess points were then sawn off and final touches added, completing the whole process.

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Materials for the brooms are obtained from nearby stores or salesmen in lorries that pass through the town. And ladies who have perfected the art make about 25 brooms a day depending on the demand.

A wave of nostalgia engulfed me as I stood there gazing at the countless brooms aligning the wall. An image of my mother with the ekel broom in hand, dragging it along the sand to create patterns that would be erased by a gust of a wind, or by footsteps which would tread the path made by the ekel broom, came to my mind.

In my imagination, she continued, enjoying the moment.

