The Oil Lamp Delivering Hope

Posted on

Wisdom, hope, and new beginnings flow from the somber flame of the oil lamp. Pahana in Sinhala and Vilakku in Tamil, the oil lamp lighted in homage to great teachers and gods, has also sustained humans for centuries. Sri Lankan oil lamps represent the elements of art, of the meeting of form and functionality. Raw material shaped by the hands of artisans embodies a remarkable combination of craftsmanship and professional knowledge of balanced scales and judgment.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.



Lighting of the traditional oil lamp on special occasions is a sign of culture and

prosperity.



Deepam Pancharati is waved to deities in Hindu Kovils.

Lighting oil lamps have a special significance. Every auspicious occasion or otherwise is marked with the lighting of an oil lamp. In Buddhist worship, the oil lamp symbolizes the desire to acquire merit. Or to avert the evil influence of a bad planetary combination. Most Sri Lankan homes light an oil lamp either at dawn or dusk or throughout the day for the gods enshrined in the home altar. At the dawn of a new year, families herald the beginning with the ritual of lighting an oil lamp by the household's elders.

It's the same with the Sinhala and Tamil New Year, where the oil lamp features prominently at the center of the festive table, with festivities commencing not before the oil lamp is lighted. Diwali, the festival of lights celebrated by the Hindu community, is resplendent with an explosion of flickering lights illuminating the night. At weddings, it's customary for the bride and the groom to begin celebrations with the lighting of the oil lamp. In the Hindu religious ritual of Aarthi, meaning the ceremony of lights, a lighted lamp (Deepam Pancharati) are circled in clockwise motion three times before the image of a deity. In churches, an oil lamp in the sanctuary signifies the presence of God, who symbolizes light.

Of particular significance is the lamp called the Dolos Mahe Pahana, meaning the twelve-month lamp, sometimes found in Buddhist temples and devalaya. It is called thus because it is expected to keep burning all year round. In fact, every ceremony begins with the lighting of the oil lamp. This ritual is an overt expression of the sentiments of the people gathered. People who desire not just happy beginnings, but also delighted hereafters.

The oil lamp is definitely a rich symbol of hope. As we enter a new year, lighting a lamp to summon that start is a harbinger of good things to come. It is a hope for prosperity. Many narratives surrounding the historicity of the oil lamp and its entrance into the country's mainstream cultural lexicon are spun around written texts and excavated objects. They provide a window to its importance among our ancestors and the royalty. It's said that from prehistoric times the natives used a carved-out stone for a lamp. The clay lamp with the single wick was the most standard type used for a long time, dating back to the Anuradhapura period. According to the ancient chronicle Mahavamsa, King Dutugemunu, who ruled in the second century BC, lit a thousand lamps, with ghee as the illuminant and white wicks burning continuously in twelve sacred places.

The oil lamp is definitely a rich symbol of hope. As we enter a new year, lighting a lamp to summon that start is a harbinger of good things to come. It is a hope for prosperity.



Lighting of oil lamp at weddings and ceremonies is a rich symbol of hope.



Sanctuary lamp in Churches, fueled by oil or wax, indicates and honors the presence of Christ.



Kuthu vilakku, a traditional Hindu ornamental oil lamp lit at an auspicious event.



An ancient lamp with an elegant design.



Lakshmi Dheepam is usually found lit in Hindu homes.



A variety of intricate brass lamps from the Kandyan era.

Then in the first century AD, King Vasabha is also said to have lit thousand oil lamps at Thuparama, Chetiyapabbata, Ruvanweliseya, and the Sacred Bodhi Tree. To this day, the earthen lamp in the size of the palm is widely used in worship and rituals. The widely held belief is that Buddhism in its early years on the island didn't have oil lamps in worship. Hence, the influence of Hindu culture from neighboring India, which came with frequent incursions and interactions during the reign of Anuradhapura, may have influenced the use of oil lamps in Buddhist worship. This is most likely because Hindus consider fire and oil holy from ancient times. Of course, lamp making is an art in itself. That art had evolved to demonstrate external influences and metallurgical advancements during the kingdoms of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, and Kandy. Despite the significance of the oil lamp in the Anuradhapura era, little in the way of evidence remains now. Evidence suggests that most lamps made through the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa periods are of a maximum of one to two feet tall and devoid of excessive decorations.

> Over centuries past, the oil lamp may have changed shape in the convoluted hands of artisans. Still, the energy and grace resident in the lambent flame continues to illuminate the islanders' lives with enduring hope of better things to come.

Excavations from Polonnaruwa suggest that by then, artisans had come of age in their skill in sculpting bronze and stone oil lamps. It also seems plausible that oil lamps had become an integral part of art and religion by then. Various artistic elements were added to adorn the simple structure of the oil lamp. There was detailed carving even on stone oil lamps. Stone and bronze oil lamps were made in varying heights. An excellent example of ingenious craftsmanship in lamp sculpting during the Polonnaruwa period was found at the Dedigama Kota Vehera. This 12th-century lamp is thought to have been made during King Parakramabahu I's rule. Known popularly as the elephant lamp or Eth Pahana, it represents an expert understanding of metallurgical techniques and fluid behavior inside tubes.

As one of the most celebrated archaeological assets found in 1952, the hanging lamp is made of bronze with an elephant and a rider, standing in a basin that could be filled with oil. The elephant's belly also acts as a vessel for holding oil, while a

foreleg serves as a channel to pour the oil. As the oil levels of the basin dip low through a hydraulic pressure system, more is supplied from the excess oil stored in the elephant's stomach. Such was the unique technology that was available in ancient Sri Lanka. The lamp chain is modeled with the most exceptional artistic skill, incorporated with the figures of female dancers and drummers. The archway under which the elephant figure stands is also of fine work.

The remarkable craftsmanship in brass lamps that became widely used in the Kandyan period of the 18th and 19th centuries replaced the earlier bronze lamps. The National Museum has a stunning collection of brass lamps in standing and hanging forms from the Kandyan era. Some of them had the flexibility to be raised or lowered. It's widely believed that brassware is a Dutch colonial import. It's also possible that it arrived from the Indian subcontinent or was brought by Arab traders. The brass industry prevailed in India from ancient times. In the Middle East, it's said that brassware was produced as way back as the fourth century BC. The standing brass lamp usually features five wicks in a spoke-like form in a star-shaped tray atop a central center post with a more oversized circular drip tray at the base. Among the oil lamps that stand out from the Kandyan era is the lamp design in the composite pose of a bird-man with spread-out wings, believed to have Javanese influence.

Some Kandyan era lamps resemble flowering plants and fruit-bearing trees. The brass lamps used today are a testament to the extraordinary external influences the country experienced with the arrival of Indian royalty and their brassware artisans. Under their chisel, brass lamps became elaborate with the addition of the rooster, peacock, dragon, lotus, and the indigenous leafy vine-like liyawela design. Unlike the lamps from earlier periods, the brass lamps made in the Kandyan era as much as becoming elaborate became more prominent and taller. Today's variety includes a pedestal, hanging, and table lamps.

Often brass lamps are decorated with a rooster at the top. According to Hindu mythology, the rooster is the symbol of the fire god Agni. Brass oil lamps at places of worship have a religious symbol at the crest. Another variety of oil lamps of Hindu origin features an open back that enshrines the figure of a deity. The lighting of lamps features prominently in Buddhist rituals and ceremonies of Sri Lanka. In fact, clay lamps lighted with coconut oil are a popular offering of much importance in Buddhist worship described as Pahan Pooja or the ritual of light offering. The Buddha is regarded as the dispeller of the darkness of ignorance. The theoretical basis for the practice is the figurative contrast between the light of knowledge and

the darkness of ignorance. There are instances when people of an entire village participate in a Pahan Pooja, such as offering 84,000 lighted lamps in memory of the 84,000 elements of the Dhamma.

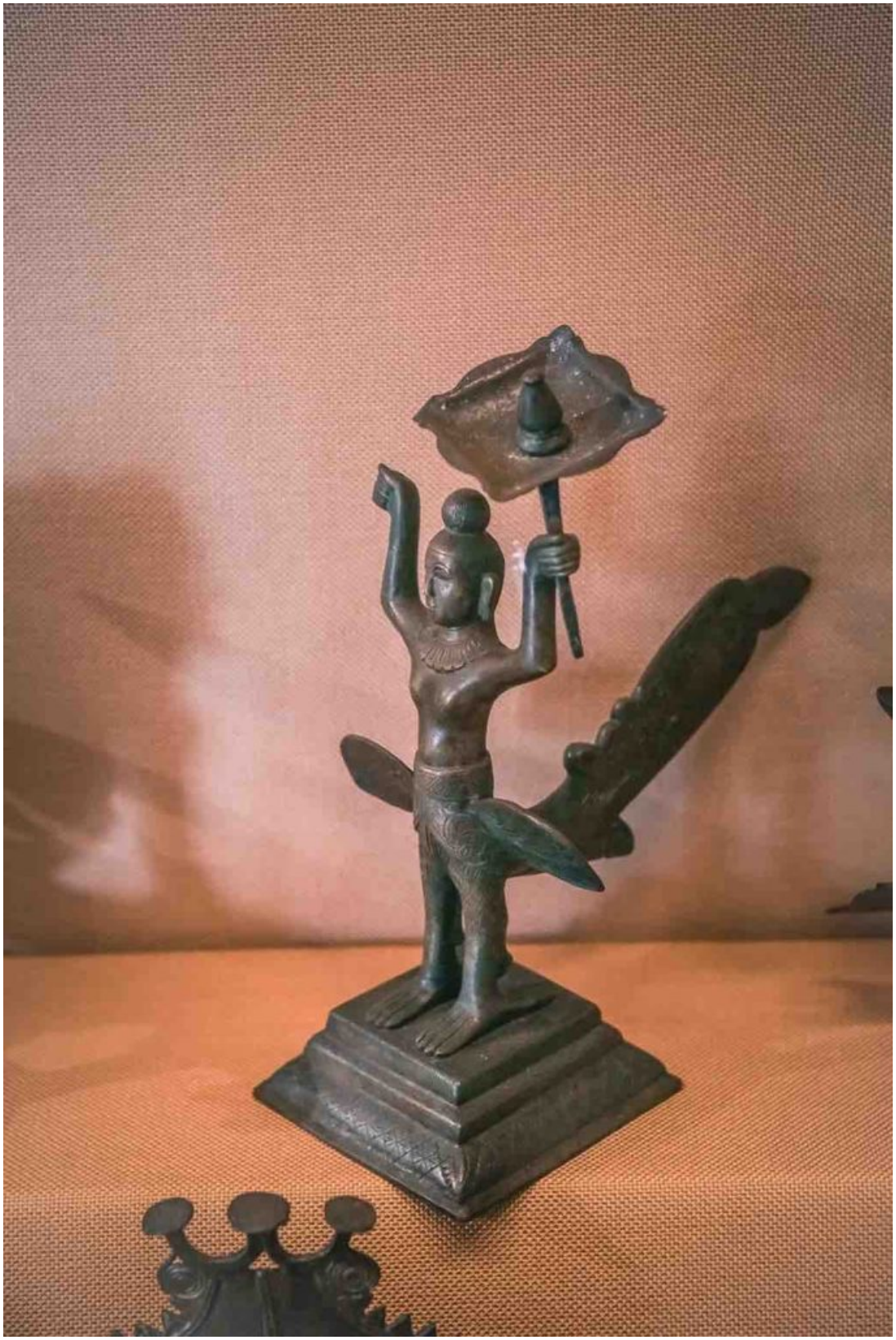
The Sacred Bo Tree and the stupa are the two important places where the ceremony is usually performed. The offering of lamps is one of the main aspects of the worship of the Sacred Bo Tree, known as Bodhi Pooja. As it was under a Bo Tree that the Buddha attained Enlightenment, it is pretty natural that lamps be lit under that tree. Thus, the entire ceremony becomes a spiritual exercise, the merits of which are transferred to all other beings, gods, humans, and spirits. Over centuries past, the oil lamp may have changed shape in the convoluted hands of artisans. Still, the energy and grace resident in the lambent flame continues to illuminate the islanders' lives with enduring hope of better things to come. At the beginning of a new year, the tradition of lighting an oil lamp continues undiminished. As the natives light the flame, they hope the dazzling light will brighten the dream-lined path of their future and once again give them the occasion for a fresh start.



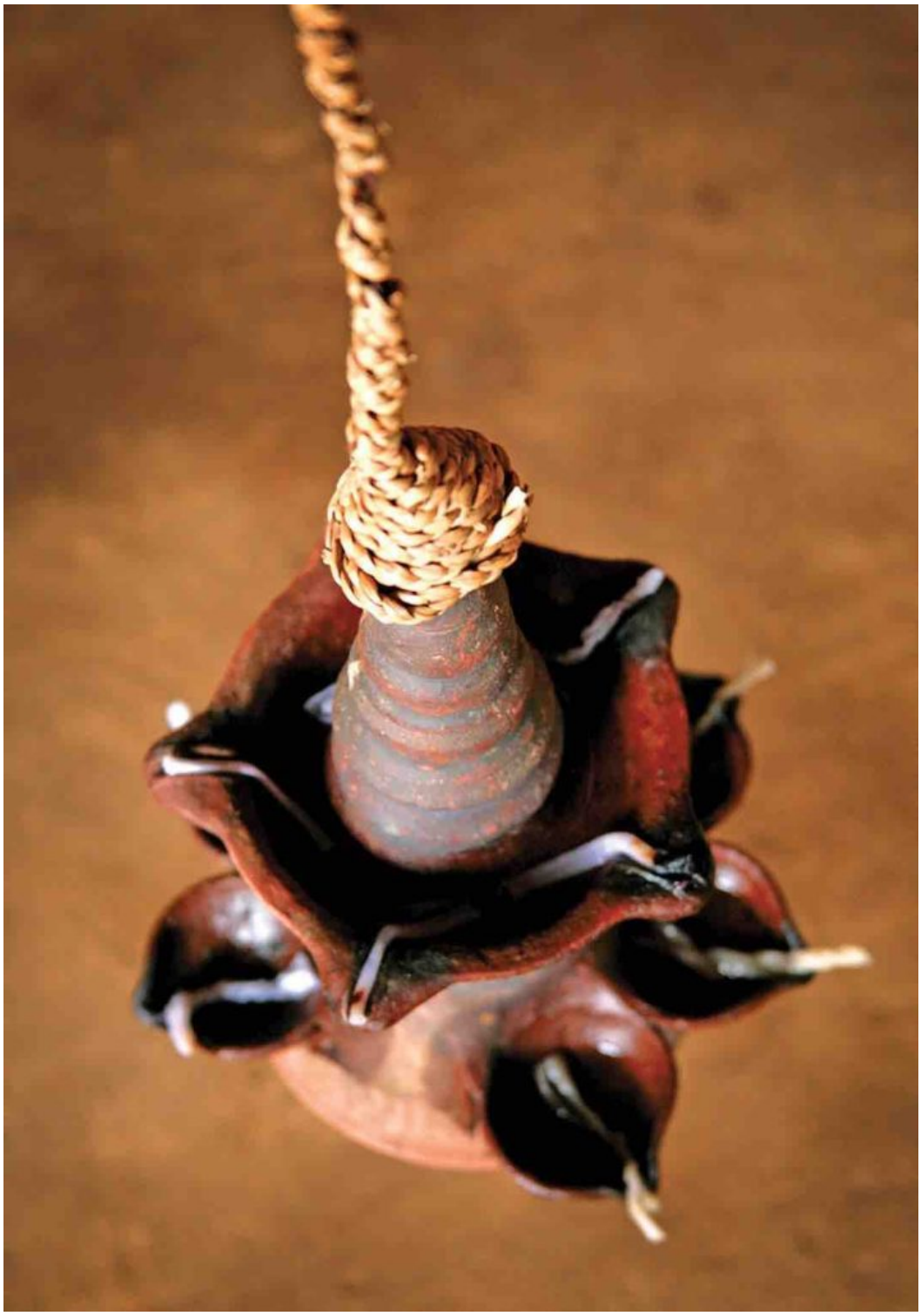
A stone lamp from the Polonnaruwa era.



Remarkable elephant lamp or Eth Pahana.



Resemblance of bird-man – a novel design.



A hanging pahan of unique design embodying culture and radiance.



Pahan Pooja at the Buddhist Temple to invoke blessings.



Lighting of lamps resembling the Dharmachakra (The Wheel of the Law) – a divine moment.