

Traditional Food & Beverages of Sri Lanka

All living beings live by food. ("Sabbe saththa aharatthika") In other words, food is essential for our existence. Moreover, the great sages of ancient times (*Hrishis*) have declared that our disposition and qualities depend on the food that we take. Further, there are three categories of persons according to their food preferences; the righteous and gentle "*Sathvikas*" prefer soft and delicious food, rough, nonchalant and indulgent "*Rajasikas*" prefer acidic, hot and spiced food, and the lazy, less enthusiastic and less intelligent "*Thamasikas*", savor unclean and stale food.

Food and beverages and their consumption in Sri Lanka have a long history and tradition. The traditional Sri Lankan's did not consume food solely for the purpose of nutrition, but also as for many therapeutic reasons. Therefore, the food was consumed with multipurpose objectives. Due to this reason, those Sri Lankans were able to built giant tanks and colossal *stupas*, fight and prevent foreign invasions, and to create a prosperous country by the development of agriculture.

Hon. Walpola Rahula Thera, in his book "Buddhist History of Sri Lanka" has stated that Sinhalese of the past never starved and consumed three meals per day. Rice was their staple food while various other curries, green leaves, lotus yarns (*nelum ala*), lotus stalks (*nelum dandu*), curd (*deekiri*), ghee (*githel*), treacle and bee honey, and 'popped and sweetened rice' ("*habala pethi*") were other components of the meal. The monks had a separate code for food and food consumption. According to the "Thonigala" stone scripture, curd (*deekiri/dhee*), honey (*miyawata*), treacle (*peni*), gingely (*thila*), ghee (*bujnathela*), salt (*lona*) and green leaves (*palahawata*) have been named as suitable food for the monks.

The staple food of the Sri Lankan is rice. Rice is obtained from the paddy plant. Paddy was also known as "*salee*" in the past. Paddy included two broad categories, "*Maa wee*" and "*El wee*". Various evidence points out that there had been more than 1500 traditional paddy varieties. The rice prepared from these different paddy varieties was diverse in taste, aroma and their nutritional values. In addition to rice, other grains containing carbohydrates, such as millet, *paspalum scrobiculatum* ("*amu*"), corn, maize, barley, and *eleusine coracana* ("*kurakkan*") were also used widely. Green gram, cow pea, long beans, *masura*, lentil, *kollu*, and *gingili* were essential capsular ("*shimbi*") grains of the traditional food. These grains were extensively cultivated in the dry lands (*chena*), and they were commonly known as "*katusara*" (coarse) food crops.

The main difference between the normal grains such as paddy and the capsular "*shimbi*" food crops was that the latter was richer in proteins, and therefore specially included in the diet of babies, growing children and expecting and nursing mothers.

Food habits of the traditional man were determined by the requirements of the occasion. The farmer who leaves the home early in the morning to work in his paddy field or "*chena*" required a heavy diet containing carbohydrates, to maintain his energy while doing hard work, until the mid day meal ("*embula*") is brought. Usually such heavy diet was either "*heel batha*" (rice cooked in the previous night), "*diya batha*" (rice cooked in the previous night mixed with onions and water), "*rotti*" or thick porridge ("*thalapa*") from corn or "*kurakkan*". In the past, the five types of food ("*pancha prakaara bhोजना*") were recommended for the consumption. These included; rice, *komupidu*,

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sweetmeats, fish and meat. Curries ("*maalu*") were complementary for the rice and hence it was known as "*bathmaalu*" (rice and curries). In the consumption of rice and curries, drinking of water ("*bath per*") was also essential. Drinking water was usually filtered clean water. Drinking water was retained in various containers or pitchers known as "*kothalaya*", "*kendiya*", "*guruleththuwa*", or *kalaya* (pot) and coconut shells were used as mugs in the drinking. The portion of rice and curries that were taken away for the consumption in another place was known as "*bathmula*" (parcel of rice). The rice served on leaves of the lotus plant, "*kenda*" (*Makaranga peltata*) plant or plantain was known as "*bathpatha*". Rice was also served in a bowl (*paathraya*) or a plate (*thetiya*). When the chieftains were served with "*bathpatha*", it was held on a stand known as "*serukkalaya*". Special bowl used to retain gruel was known as "*hambu horuwa*". "*Witha*" or "*maalawa*" was used to drink toddy and other liquor.

Rice preparations:

"Milk Rice" ("*Kiri bath*") had a special place in the day-to-day consumption as well as in all festive occasions. The milk used in this cooking was either cow's milk or coconut milk. "Milk rice" was also known as "*ksheera bhaktha*", "*ksheera payaasa*", "*madhura payaasa*" or "*kiripindu*".

"Pesi batha" was considered as a connoisseurs' special in the past and was in the menu for the royals and chieftains. To make "pesi batha", rice was cooked and then tempered together with vegetables. "Pesi batha" was also known as "rasa batha", or "mansoudhana". The "embul batha" prepared with the sediment residue of spiced curry ("kaadi") was also similar to the "pesi batha". There are reports to indicate that sometimes, ghee and meat of peacocks were also added to the "pesi batha". "Pesi batha" could be consumed without any other curries. The "kaadi batha" was cooked with "kaadi" and tempered with ghee. Rice prepared with broken rice grains and milk was known as "hendi batha", "sunsaal batha" or "kadasaal batha". The rice prepared in the previous night was consumed in the following morning either as "heel batha" or as "diya batha" with water, onions and salt added. The belief was that the nutritional value as well as the medicinal value was at its highest in this "heel batha", compared to all other rice preparations. The medicinal value could be enhanced by the addition of cows' milk, curd or buffalo milk, and due to this reason this rice preparation was also known as "beheth batha" (medicinal rice). Curd and treacle were added to the parched rice at the bottom of the pot ("dankuda") to make another sweet preparation called "paawaru batha"

Reports indicate that the villagers used not only paddy grain but other dry land ("katusara") grains also in the preparation of cooked rice. They added to the diversity of food and helped in the preservation of physical health of the consumers too. Katusara rice was named after the respective grains that were used in their preparation. Thus, they were known as "amu rice", "undu rice", "thana rice", "iringu (corn) rice", "thala (gingili) rice" etc. Literary works indicate that seven varieties of rice were consumed at that time. The "oolu (water lily / *Nymphaea lotus*) rice" which was in the menus in the past, is

prescribed even today to diabetic patients. The rice prepared with the broken parts of the corn grain was a very popular food in the past, and even today it is known and consumed as "iringu rice" in certain parts of the country. The rice preparations served at wedding ceremonies were commonly known as "magul batha", but included four distinctive preparations identified as "kedara batha", "aadara batha", "laadara batha", and "yodara batha". The first meal prepared at a house after a funeral was known as "mala batha". Rice offered to the demons and various evil spirits was known as "pideni batha" or "puluu batha", while what was offered to deities was known as "muruthen batha". The rice preparation for the officials of chieftains was called "adukkuwa". Among all types of grains, "kurakkan" held a special place all the time. Kurakkan flour had a very high demand and various food preparations from such flour viz. "thalapa" (thick porridge), rotti, gruel, "ginipoo" and "helapa" were very popular.

Tubers and Yams :

Various tubers, roots and yams were supplementary food that provided useful carbohydrates at that time. They were common in the villager's menu. During the Anuradhapura era, the most widely used tuber was "kidaran" (*Amorphophallus campanulatus*). In the literary works, it has been identified as "soorana". Among the traditional tubers and yams, there were many other edible varieties that contributed immensely to the food security of the villagers. When these yams were consumed, that was considered as a whole meal most of the time. Most widely consumed yams were; "kukulala" (*diospyres sativa*), "kondol" (*dioscorea alata*), "kahata ala", "vel ala", "kandala", "udala" (*dioscorea bulbifera*), "katuala", "gonala" (*dioscorea intermeda*), "hirithala", "engili ala", "panu ala" (*dioscorea spp.*), "nool ala" (*typhonium trilobatum*) etc.

Jackfruit tree (*artocarpus heterophyllus*) was called as "rice

tree" in the past, due to the immense food value of and the food security that was provided by the jak fruit. As much as 23 food preparations and 6 sweetmeats were prepared using the jak fruit.

Gruel Preparations

Another item that had a special place in the traditional meals was "kenda" (gruel). It had been called as "amu" or "hambu" and sometimes "kaadi" in the past. Rice was the main component in gruel preparations. With the addition of other items different nutritional and medicinal values were obtained to suit the different requirements. They were used not only for their nutritional value but also for prevention and cure of various ailments. Among these different gruel preparations, what was known as "diya kenda", "lunu kenda" or "hulu kenda"/ "hulu ken" was the most widely used. It is mentioned in the literature that Arhath Maliyadeva Thera was offered a medicinal gruel ("beheth hulu kenda") prepared with the addition of 11 medicinal herbs, as a cure for a stomach ache. When sweeteners such as ghee, honey or orange juice were added, such gruel was called "rasa ulu ken". There are records to indicate that sometimes even maldive fish or meat was added to further enhance the taste. When the juices of various green leaves were added such gruel was called "kola kenda". They were regarded as higher in nutritional and medicinal value and even today it is popular as a breakfast item. In literary works, they have been identified as "embul (sour) kenda" or "embul hambu". It is mentioned that, gruel had sometimes been tempered with butter or ghee to enhance the taste. Such tempered gruel had been known as "smoked diya kenda".

Sometimes, grains other than rice were also used to prepare gruel. "undu (*Phaseolus mungo*) kenda", "kudu (broken rice) hambu" were two such preparations. The occasion of feeding the babies with their first rice meal was known as "hambu

powana mangalya". Expecting mothers were given an "*undu kenda*" specially prepared with the addition of certain medicinal herbs.

Meat and fish consumption

Sri Lankans of the past honored the Buddhist principle of right of living of all living beings, and at the same time loved and preserved the fauna and flora. But it didn't mean that they were strict vegetarians. Literary works of the past indicate the meat and fish were relished by the ancient people. Additionally, the properties of different meats and the methods of their preparations and even the methods of preservation have been described in ancient culinary books and traditional recipes. Wild boar meat and "*walapothu*" fish which had more fat, were preserved by a unique process called "*kurukkulaya*". The other common methods of preservation were salting, sun drying, smoking, or in the case of flesh of game; by keeping immersed in bee honey.

This paradox seems to be cleared by assuming that people of the past did not farm animals for the consumption of meat. Therefore, animals raised domestically were never killed for consumption of their meat. Meat for consumption was entirely procured as flesh of game. The animals that were generally hunted for this purpose and the type of meat used are mentioned in the traditional recipes. In hunting too, certain ethics and traditions were adhered to.

In the traditional recipes, two kinds of meat have been mentioned; "*goda mas*" (those of land animals) and "*diya mas*" (those of fish). In ancient texts, they have been identified as "*maansa*" (meat) and "*machcha*" (fish) respectively. Both were delicacies valued by the connoisseurs and were rich in proteins. Available evidence indicates that fishing was done in inland water bodies, but not so widely in sea. Among the fresh water fish; *loola*, *kaavyiya*,

madakanya, *weligowwa*, *thetiya*, *petiya* (carp) and *aanda* (eel) were specially sought after. Fish was an important component of the traditional daily meal. When irrigation tanks get dried up during the dry season, the fish in those tanks were caught with the permission of the "*wel vidane*" - the official in charge of the paddy fields and tank. The fishing was done as a common exercise of the entire village, and the harvest was shared among everybody according to the quotas long established by the traditions.

Among the meat of land animals, those of buffaloes and cows (beef) and goat (mutton) were taboo. Since they were domesticated animals, killing them and consumption of their meat was considered as a very lowly act by the society. Those who violated these social taboos were lowered from their social status and were forced to join a lower caste such as "*chandala*" or "*kasala shodhaka*". There were stone inscriptions announcing the abolishment of killing these animals. Some ancient kings totally prohibited the killing of all kinds of animals for any purpose.

The land animals that were hunted for meat included wild boar, elk, deer, porcupine, giant squirrel and iguana. The game birds included pigeon, quail, and peacock. Once hunted, not only their flesh but other internal organs (offal) also were selected to make various delicacies. They were known as "*pancha madhura maansa*" (the five delicious meat preparations). There were five different methods of cooking meat; fried, bubbled, sweetened and spiced etc.

Additionally, the meat curry, fried meat and roasted meat were other popular preparations. Sometimes meat or fish were simply put on live charcoal. Eggs of various birds such as fowl, peacock and quail were also popular. The meat of peacock, hare, deer and wild boar were considered as the most delicious. There are references about fowl but it is not very clear whether it was caught from wild or domestically raised.

Vegetables and Curries

The Sinhalese word "*maalu*" means fish, but it is also used to describe all forms of curries, be it vegetables, fish or meat. A vegetable curry was an essential item for the common man, in the consumption of rice. The curries offered to the Buddhist monks were called "*viiyanjana*".

In addition to green leaves, there were a number of indigenous vegetables consumed. In various written texts of the past, there are references about cucumber, pumpkin, snake gourd, ridged gourd, brinjal, drumstick, jak fruit, long beans, green gram which were used as vegetables. Some of those such as "*mulu ala*" are extinct today.

Some of the traditional vegetable preparations such as vegetable curry, dry cooked vegetables ("*melluma*") or fried vegetables are used even today. The other methods of cooking such as "*aanama*", "*embula*", "*niyambalaawa*", "*hath maahuwa*", "*eta hodda*", "*miris hodda*" were important components of the traditional culinary art, but are rarely seen in the contemporary cookery. Seeds of the jak fruit preserved in sand ("*weli kos eta*") were dry cooked to prepare the "*niyambalaawa*". Green gram, dhal or cowpea were boiled, drained and eaten. "*Kaayan*" was a curry preparation used as an appetizer, and as a cure for stomach disorders. It was prescribed for mothers at post-confinement. The "*Saraartha Sangraha*" describes the "*kaayan*" curry prepared with meat of the tortoise or black fowl as a tested cure for jaundice.

As it is done today, spices were widely used to enhance the flavour of the curries even at that time. The fact that spices facilitated easy digesting is mentioned in the old culinary texts. Among such spices, curry leaves, ginger, garlic and "*goraka*" (*garcinia cambogia*) were widely used. In the traditional jargon, these spices were commonly known as "*thuna paha*" (the three and five). The "three" were; chillies,

salt and cummin seed, or; ginger, pepper and long pepper. The "five" had regional variances. In some areas that was; chillies, ginger, long pepper, mustard and turmeric. In some other areas, the "five" was; cummin seed, black cummin seed (black or Baraka seeds), coriander, mustard and dill seeds. In some other areas; "perunkayam" (asafetida), garlic, ginger, mustard and "wadha kaha" (curcuma domestica), and in other areas; cummin seed, black cummin seed (black or Baraka seeds), cumin fennel seed, "asamodagam" and "sathakuppa" were considered as the 'five'.

In addition to the spices, what was essential for a curry was the sourness/acidity. To get the sour taste, *citrus acida* ("dehi"), *citrus aurantium* (sour orange), *citrus medica* ("nas naran"), *citrus hystrix* ("kudalu dehi") and "goraka" (*garcinia cambogia*) had been used. Additionally, curry leaves were used to enhance the flavour and facilitate the digestion. But, there are no records to indicate that "rampe" (*pandanus odoratissimus*), "sera" (lemon grass), cardamom or cloves were used. Instead of red chillies which are widely used today, pepper had been extensively used in the past.

Beverages

Various beverages were also inevitable in the culinary habits. The most common and widely used beverages were milk and butter milk. They were made from two

types of milk. The five tastes or five preparations ("*pasgorasa*") of cow's milk or buffalo's milk were delicacies and considered as noble and extraordinary. For the exclusive use of the monks, "*ashtavidha paana*" - a beverage using eight ingredients - were prepared. According to "*Sadhdharmalankaraya*", those eight ingredients were the juices of mango, rose apple, seedy plantain ("eta kehel"), fleshy plantain ("mas kehel"), bee honey, grapes, water lily and "*boralu dhamana*" fruits. Additionally, these ingredients have been used separately and exclusively to make other beverages. Such drinks were; "*kasa per*" (young coconut water), mango juice, rose apple juice, sugarcane juice, banana juice etc. When juices of the sugarcane were offered to the monks, bee honey, ghee, and jaggery have been added to enhance the taste.

Sweetmeats

There are records about 18 traditional sweetmeats. They have been commonly called as "*poopapupa*" or "*awulpath*". Some of those sweetmeats were "laalu", "athirasa", "aggala", "pulusbadana", "wilandawata", "kolawata", "hendi kevm", "pena kevm", "ginipoo", "salapoo", "kabalapoo", "esitipoo" and "golageta". The common ingredients used in the preparation of all these sweetmeats were rice flour, green gram, ghee, treacle or honey, and gingerly. These sweetmeats were prepared either by frying in deep oil, steaming, or roasting in an open pan.

Conclusion

All these are indicative of the fact that traditional food and beverages of the Sri Lankans of the past comprised of diverse, tasty, healthy and natural items that were rich in nutritional values. Those people had their inherent culinary art and food habits that were helpful in making generations of strong people that were healthy in both body and mind. That was how they were able to built man made wonders, prevent and fight foreign invasions after invasions and even to conquer overseas. As a result of the modernization and globalization, the traditional food and food habits have been abandoned and the contemporary generation has become sick, weak and impotent. But we are not yet all too late to come out of this trap and restore our traditional food and food habits, to give birth to a new generation of healthy and strong people.

References:

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Typical Village enclosure in Nuwarakalawiya
(Kanimaduwa: Gangoda)



Typical Paddy tract in a Nuwarakalawiya Village,
harvest-time
(Kanimaduwa: Gangoda)

(FARMER B. H., 1957, PIONEER PEASANT COLONIZATION IN CEYLON, OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS)