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Fusing worlds of coconuts: the regenerative practice in precarious life-sustenance and fragile relationality in Sri Lanka

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This article sets out to initiate a comparative framework for the analysis of food in its multiple articulations. Food is comprehended as a co-production and entanglement of two dynamics: precarious life-sustenance and fragile relationality. I illustrate this frame by discussing how ‘the coconut’ among the Sinhalese mediates the regeneration of a whole cosmos and within this, the relative positions of human and non-human entities, their altering inter-relations and negotiations of life and death. These negotiations and relationalities constitute two dynamics which continue to operate in between the wider regeneration of the cosmos and the particular events in which they are articulated specifically. This is illustrated by three rituals in which the coconut takes on the role of mediator of sustenance and relationality within the regeneration of worlds.

I am standing with my host brother on a piece of land comprising about 30 coconut trees owned by his family. We chat while the coconut picker climbs in a tree to select mature coconuts for our consumption. He says: “We use coconut for everything. We use it nearly every day in our food, and from that tree, we make all kinds of stuff, such as thatched roofs, brooms, mattresses and so on. We also use it in our offerings and decorations in many ceremonies”. This summarized statement refers to the multiple applications of the coconut tree, *cocos nucifera* (Chan & Elevitch 2006:4), which the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka designate as *kapruka*, something which provides all necessities of life. *Kapruka* is a mythical tree that produces anything one may desire and is therefore also used to refer to generous people and even sometimes to mothers (de Silva 1954:93). From a villagers’ point of view, this tree sustains life.

This apparently simple statement turns out to be more complicated when venturing into the multifarious experiences, ideas, and practices that are bound up with this tree and its fruit, the coconut. In what follows, I introduce a frame to render this complexity intelligible by suggesting two dynamics on the basis of which we can grasp the specific utilizations and evocations of ‘the coconut’, comprising tree and fruit, in three particular rituals. Two rituals deal with the human life-cycle, one regarding pregnancy and the other

one death, whereas the third involves rice in the harvest ceremony. However, before going into the coconut ethnography, let me as an introduction, swiftly introduce these two dynamics which I have come to designate as *fragile life-sustenance* and *relationality* throughout my fieldwork.

I have derived fragile ‘life-sustenance’ from explicit statements made by villagers, such as: “the coconut tree is the *kapruka*” and “rice is our life”. These expressions entail clusters of ideas, experiences, and signifiatory practices that surround both coconut and rice. For reasons of lucidity, I will focus here mainly on the ways in which ‘the coconut’ becomes constituted as a life-sustaining essence. The concept of fragile or precarious life-sustenance refers to the fact that food sustains concurrently biological, social, religious, economic, and political life (Counihan & Van Esterik 2008:1-9, Sutton 2001: 3-4, Appadurai 1981:494). However, being a source of life and of ways of life (Vasavi 1994), it can easily turn into a source of death and decay (see Bloch 1999). ‘Fragility’ refers to both ambiguity and ambivalence on the one hand, and bivalence on the other. Ambivalence entails that food can be both nourishing and frightening at the *same time*. This is illustrated by the lesser disruptions of food poisonings and food scares (Rozin 1999: 14-21), but also by the conviction among many mothers in the

Sinhalese village of research that pineapple can cause abortion during pregnancy. Hence, pineapple could be viewed as healthy for the mother, but deadly for the baby at the same time. In contrast to its ambiguity, the bivalence of this first ‘food dynamic’ points out a more isomorphic analogy to the double process of blossoming and withering of life *over time* in flowers, plants, foods and human beings. Further on, I will point at the ‘biological analogy’ (Gell 1975:154) between the life-cycles of human beings and coconut trees, which acquire a similar age of 65 years (Giambelli 1998:136) and which renders understandable the isomorphic referencing of human life to the coconut tree (and its flowers and fruits) in its own various stages in the life-cycle.

In short, fragile life-sustenance refers to the negotiation of life and death being brought about and evoked by food, here fluidly conceptualized such to include its organic attributes (leaves, tree stems, etc). Food becomes a potent and active mediator through which both life and decay are coped with, in life-cycle rituals. For instance, in the pre-birth *angulimala pirith* ceremony to mitigate the fear (particularly of miscarriage) associated with the birth-event, the pregnant woman is tied with a rope around her finger to a construction on the table involving various elements of the coconut tree, as these substantiate and evoke fertility and prosperity.

The second dynamic, fragile ‘relationality’, refers to food as a binding substance, connecting people to their social and natural environments. I have inferred this concept from my observations of everyday and ritual events in which family members gather around the hearth during the cooking process or when devotees prepare their offerings to non-human beings. The suggestion that food brings people together and expresses bonding throughout the cooking and consumption process is reinforced by what a friend said: “we can eat from the same plate, we are friends.” The way this relational dynamic is conceptualized here extends studies of commensality (Bloch 1999, Mars 1997) along with Meigs (1997) into the non-human realm, by including offerings to propitiate non-human entities. For instance, in the new rice ceremony, a large section of farmers offer the first rice, along with coconut, to the local ancestral deity to express their gratitude and to secure the forthcoming harvest. Again, fragile relationality emphasizes both ambiguity (along with Bloch (1999) and Mars (1997)), and bivalence as suggested in the first food dynamic. For instance, when the deity is not pleased with the offerings, the mutual understanding can break down and the next harvest jeopardized. This is an example of the bivalence of relationality, as it evolves over time and is analogous to the blossoming and decay of trees. Relations can be forged

through food, but as it binds, it also holds the key to the opposite, the breakdown of relations. Furthermore, when food binds, it ties one to a certain family, group, or class, and thus not to another one. Hence, it can easily turn into a dynamic of group solidarity and distinction (Bourdieu 2008: 169-225) *at the same time*. While strengthening ones' relation to a certain caste, one distinguishes simultaneously from another caste (Appadurai 1981:496). In short, ambivalence refers to two opposing forces of forging relations and separation at a similar time, whereas bivalence rather refers to these forces over time.

One could see these two suggested dynamics as similar. Throughout the discussion of the three rituals; the pre-birth *angulimala pirith*, the new rice ceremony, and the funeral, it becomes clear that relationality and life-sustenance are indeed intrinsically interrelated. In the new rice ceremony or *aluth sahal mangalaya*, people enter into a commensal relationship with the local deity in order to secure the future life-cycle of rice and its harvest in order to obtain a basic life-sustaining essence. However, relationality and life-sustenance point to two different things, relations and life-flows, which mutually constitute each other and which cannot exist without each other.

In what follows I will analyze at the hand of three rituals these two mutually constitutive dynamics that I am suggesting: precarious or

fragile life-sustenance and relationality. The first ritual discusses the role of parts of the coconut tree in the decorations in the pre-birth chanting of Buddhist stanzas in the *angulimala pirith* ceremony. Subsequently I turn to the new rice ceremony or *aluth sahal mangalaya* after the harvest of paddy. On this occasion the first portion of rice and various coconuts are offered to the local deity, through which rice and coconut mutually reinforce each other as life-sustaining and relational essences. Finally, I discuss the non-use of the overflowing of coconut-milk in funerals as well as related utilizations of the various other parts of the coconut tree. This will further consolidate the coconut as a powerful ambiguous and bivalent mediator between life and death, and of relationality. It should be noted that this frame of analysis is teased out in embryonic form on the basis of the totality of the three ceremonies discussed here. Each of the ceremonies highlights a particular way in which these two dynamics are substantiated in specific coconut forms and intermingle and co-produce concomitantly this specific event. Hence, the discussion points out that the dynamics continue to work throughout all of the rituals, even though in these particular instances the dynamics actualize in rather different shapes. Even more, these dynamics allow ritual participants to ponder on life and the place of life within the encompassing regeneration of worlds. They do so in

combination with the ritual evocations of other beings in the cosmos and of the mythical origins of the current world as situated in the cyclical recurrent emergence and decay of worlds.

I shall now discuss the way ‘the coconut’ evokes, substantiates and shapes precarious life-sustenance and fragile relationality in the first ritual, the *angulimala pirith* ceremony which I attended.

The *Angulimala Pirith* Ceremony

The first birth appears to be both joyful and daunting for the inexperienced mother to be. Stories of miscarriages and other accidents turn birth into an ambiguous event. Bad karma – the negative balance of good and bad deeds from previous lives – may be at play either on the side of the mother or the baby. Additionally, it is mentioned that as the pregnant woman is in a polluting state (*kilidosa*), she is susceptible to attacks by demons (Tillakaratne (1986:42), Kapferer (1997:30-35), Obeyesekere (1987:14-15,44-49)). In the village where I stayed, a mother was said to have turned crazy (*pissu*) during the birth of her child, because of the latter’s bad karma. This potential precariousness requires a *pirith* be chanted for protection around the sixth month of the first pregnancy, when the baby ‘has come to the belly’. This expression denotes the entry of consciousness or *mole* (thinking ability) into the formation of

elements (ether, wind, water, earth, and fire)¹ that compose the baby and the human person. This protection can be achieved through the transfer of merit to the baby in order to improve its karmic state, as one can never know whether it has a good or bad karma. During the following pregnancies, protection is also asked for, but in a less eloquent manner, for instance by making a vow to the local deity.

Pirith entails the chanting of Buddhist verses by virtuous lay-men in order to transfer merit and to ask for protection from the Buddha. It is believed that by the power of truth the recitation of his teachings, the dharma, exerts a positive influence on sensitive matters, such as ill-health. The lay-men chant within a *pirith* cage, called *mandapa*, which is made from stems of banana trees and young and old coconut leaves and which is erected inside the front room of the house. The pregnant mother finds herself in this cage as well, while her relatives and friends are outside the *mandapa* but within the room or outside. The decorations surrounding and inside the construct are of interest here.

¹ In the Ayurvedic doctrine, these five elements form the basis of all beings and foods. The latter are transformed through the digestive fire into the 7 components of the human body: food juice, blood, flesh, fat, bone, marrow, and semen (Obeyesekere 1998:201). This interpenetrating relatedness between the human body and the environment by way of their common elements can also be found in Kerala (Osella & Osella 2002:470-471)

At the entry of the *mandapa* there is an arch of a coconut leaf of which the pinnate leaves are tied together in decorative shapes. Such arches (*aarukku*) denote the entry into a sacred space where a ritual takes place. At both sides of the entry there is at each arch pillar a round earthen pot that is supported by a banana stem and older coconut pinnate leaves. These two pots are termed as *punkalase*, referring to the ‘full pot’ or to the full womb (Tillakaratne 1986:43). The ‘full pot’ is a microcosmic representation of the recurring origin of the world system or era (*kalpa*) situated in the primordial waters, and the mythical mount Meru and Lake Anavatapta (in Sinhalese Anotatta) that arose from it (Karunaratne 1990:151). At the entry, these pots each contain young coconut leaves and coconut flowers, and an oil lamp in the middle. However, these pots are not as full as the pot on the table inside the *pirith* cage, which is called the *pirith pän kale* (the *pirith* water pot), to which I return later and which sometimes additionally contains a whole coconut.

The ‘full pot’ and its decorations at the entry of the ceremonial arch are highly symbolic in this event that deals with the precariousness of life-transmission and sustenance. The coconut flowers in the *punkalase* are hermaphrodite, that is, one flower contains both male and female flowers in one inflorescence (Chan & Levitch 2006:3).

It enables the self-reproduction of the coconut plant and thus serves well by way of biological analogy (Gell 1975:154) as a single object to substantiate the union of male and female in the reproduction of life (as a fruit or child). More specifically, not being the fruit of this union yet, as the coconut is not in this pot at the entry, it is well suited to invoke the *potential* of reproduction and future life. These coconut flowers are also used as decorations in ceremonies related to human reproduction (e.g. marriages), prosperity, happiness, and hope, thereby extending fertility into a wider sense. Prosperity and fertility, I was told by informants, are inextricably related by what I term reproduction and sustenance.

Another argument in favour of this reading is that these coconut flowers resemble rice pods (as in their symbolic use in the harvest ritual on top of the tower, to which I return later), and thus further tangibly evoke prosperity and life-sustenance. This again, is substantiated by the story of the mythical Anavatapta lake with healing waters in the Himalayas (Karunaratne 1990: 137), the structure of which resembles the regeneration of a new world system in a new world cycle, and which is microcosmically represented by structure of the ‘full pot’ as well as the *pirith pän kale* to which I turn now.

On the table inside the *pirith* cage, we can see this type of pot, such as depicted on the picture below.



Figure 1. *pirith pän kale*

This *pirith pän kale* is placed in front of an image of the Buddha during the event. The new earthen pot is partly covered with young coconut leaves, and occasionally, on the opening of the pot, a full coconut is placed. In any case, the opening is covered by these young leaves and flowers. The pot is filled with *pirith* water, a kind of enchanted water which is believed to have healing powers, just like the water from mythical Lake Anavatapta.

Only a few linked this pot to a full womb as some authors (eg. Tilakeratne 1986) suggest. However, most people see it as a

representation of prosperity, which is related to fertility as people say that having a lot of offspring is a sign of good fortune. Hence the way of expressing the significance of the pot may be different among people, but the more implicit connection with regenerative fecundity remains there, as prosperity and fertility are linked. Moreover, in addition to referring to Lake Anavatapta and containing its life-sustaining and healing water, as well as referring to the regeneration of life throughout the world-cycles, the pot presents us with a good indication that it is linked to the womb and its regenerative capacity. This inference is further supported by the fact that the whole coconut, except its outer husk, which is on top of the pot, represents the baby (the five constituting elements) and its newly arrived consciousness or ‘thinking ability’ inside it as emerging within the pot-womb. As mentioned earlier, this ability or *mole* arrives after 6 months and announces the time that this ceremony has to be held. Interestingly, there are varying myths in Cochi, Kerala, and Sri Lanka that relate the coconut to the head of people believed to have a great *mole*. In the Sri Lankan story, the coconut emerged out of an astrologers’ head chopped off by a king on an extremely auspicious time (de Silva 1954: 96). In Cochi, in the legend of Kusi Raja, a worshipper of higher gods wanted to create a superior race of human being. After completing the head, the lesser gods became

alarmed and persuaded him to stop. The head became a coconut tree and was dedicated to Ganesh, the god of wisdom (Nevill 1886:70). These legends, even though not known by many, could explain why people to date continue to offer coconuts particularly to Ganesh. Thus, the coconut in the ritual decoration references the head of human beings as well as the entering of *mole* into the baby, only then becoming a full fledged person. The link between consciousness and coconut is corroborated by the self-sacrifice that the breaking of coconuts at certain offerings enact. Masakazu Tanaka (1997:97) states: “Coconut sacrifice is a standard ritual act, which is explained by the myth that Shiva used a coconut as a substitute for his own self-sacrifice... The offerer destroys his own evil aspects and attains a purer ritual status through the coconut sacrifice, which is a symbolic self-sacrifice.” Hence, the coconut is replete with connections to consciousness and human life, and it is this substantiation of human life and consciousness that plays an important role in the ritual decorations discussed here.

However, as we can see in the construct on the table, the baby-person yet has to be born and therefore remains only a potential of new life in this world. Hence, the coconut is not always used as this still insecure potentiality is predominantly represented by the flowers in-between the young coconut leaves, the pot, and occasionally the coconut, which in this

case remains covered. At the top of the flowers or at the ‘female side’ of the coconut, i.e. the side with the three germination holes, there is a white rope bundle that is tied to the roof of the *pirith* cage and to one of the fingers of the pregnant woman in the ritual space. Thus she becomes physically connected to this knot of significations by a rope which is positively influenced by the chanting of the Buddhist words and which transmits their protective and life-enhancing influence to the mother and her baby.

This inference that the coconut evokes human life is further enhanced by the analogy between the structure of the myth of Anavatapta and the pot on the table, a structure which will return in a similar way in the next ritual, the *aluth sahal mangalaya*. In this myth, the cosmic mount Meru emerged from the primordial waters of this world cycle. It transformed from the cosmic lotus stem into the world mountain on which there are 7 ridges that surround a pool, Lake Anavatapta. From this lake, there are four gates to the four wind directions, and from here spring the four holy rivers in India that nourish the paddy fields. Moreover, on the eastern bank, Siri, the goddess of prosperity and fecundity, has her bathing place. (Karunaratne 1990: 137-153). She is often depicted as goddess Lakshmi holding some paddy and money, referring to the wider well-known notion of prosperity, but also the less mentioned fertility. Her depiction

is placed at various other life-transition rituals as well. There is another story that adds to this cosmic link with fertility and reproduction. As told by an informant, God Shiva, who represents the sun, fertilizes Parvati, the earth goddess, and from there the paddy grows on top of mount Meru. This paddy is represented in the construct on the table by coconut flowers on top of the pot. Interestingly, Ganesh to whom the coconut is designated, is the son, like paddy is the fruit, of Parvati and Shiva (Fuller 1992). So, through these stories we start seeing a close link between coconut and rice in the god Ganesh, as the fruit of cosmic reproduction.

Moreover, T.B. Karunaratne (1990:151) states: “...the *kalasa* is a microcosmic representation of not only the Anavatapta lake, but also the primordial waters from which the cosmic mountain, Meru, rises into the firmament.” Hence, the *punkalase* can be apprehended as a microform of cosmic regeneration. How does all this relate to this construct on the table to which the woman is tied with a white rope? The pot is filled with water that is mythically taken from Lake Anavatapta, from which life springs. This water has mythical powers of purification and health, hence powers of life-sustenance. Furthermore, this water descends in the four directions and nourishes the rice of which the pods resemble closely the coconut flowers. Through this nourishment, the potential of

human life is sustained, hence the reference of coconut flowers to the potential life. The ‘full pot’ at the entry is supported by the banana stem, referring to the fact that Anavatapta is situated on mount Meru.

The water with magical powers also brings forth actual human life as substantiated by the coconut in the *pirith pān kalase*, referring to the becoming of a person from the time the thinking ability or *mole* enters. As the coconut is dedicated to Ganesh, the god of wisdom, the link between human thinking ability and human life on the one hand, and the coconut on top of the pot on the other, gets established. The coconut becomes the result of the microcosmic regeneration of the *punkalase* or womb, and links human reproduction to the larger world cycles in cosmic regeneration and sustenance of life.

We can see here a complex mix of myths, Buddhist ideas, biological analogies, and experiences at work through these constructs and the activities around it. Through the emphasis on fertility, prosperity and health, all related to the dynamic of life-sustenance, this pre-birth ceremony recognizes, negotiates and reproduces the experience that life-transmission and sustenance are precarious events. The coconut flowers and the coconut evoke terms of life, ponder on the delicacy of life and turn this precariousness into enhancement and protection. Even more, this regeneration of life in the womb becomes

situated within a cosmic regeneration and both are isomorphically represented through attributes of the coconut and new earthen pots filled with life-enhancing water.

However, the regeneration of the world holds the future of destruction similar to the way that birth is bound up with death either simultaneously (as in miscarriage) or as in the process of decay. Life and death are indeed internal to life and this is central to its ambiguity and bivalence. Awareness of this bivalence motivates the person to seek help from relatives, friends, and the Buddha to mitigate possible dangers inherent in giving birth. In chanting the Buddhist stanzas, merit is acquired and transferred to the baby. The sharing of merit forges bonds, and constitutes the baby as a relational being which will be later expected to share its merit as well. We can see that relationality between the unborn baby, mother, grandparents, friends, neighbours, and Buddha has to be maintained and that it is closely bound up with life-sustenance (Ingold 1990:230-232). The life of the baby depends on a good birth which this ritual seeks to bring about. Furthermore, specific biological entities are used to represent and experience possibilities of life and death. The life of the coconut and its foundational myths inspire the wish for a full blossoming of the tender and fragile life in the womb into a full family member and physical person with *mole*. Moreover, the coconut

connects, substantiates and mediates the reproduction of human life in the womb on the one hand, and the cosmic regeneration of the world on the other hand.

Indeed, the coconut becomes a medium through which the precariousness of both cosmic and human life-sustenance and fragility of relatedness get evoked and negotiated. Food is thus clearly not only about eating, but also about life and death in a more general sense. By looking at the whole tree, rather than its fruit only, hence through the inclusion of non edible 'natural entities' into this analysis of food, we have been able to trace in which complex ways the coconut helps the participants in the ritual to deal with the ambiguity and bivalence of life. To sum up, we can see that in the practice of this ritual the coconut in its capacity as mediator of life and death has been co-(re)produced: 'co' because it is through combined efforts with the Buddha and various people, 're' as it draws upon myths, ideas of merit and practical experience of the coconut, 'production' as the enhancement of a good birth takes place through the activities and experiences that are connected and condensed into the coconut by those present and which is acted with in seeking to bring about positive transformations.

This mediating capacity of 'the coconut', used here also in reference to other parts of its tree, draws upon these practices and

representations, and is further enhanced in this capacity through its utilizations in another ritual, to which we now turn. In this harvest ritual, or the ‘new rice ceremony’, the coconut and its attributes are used in mediating the relationship with the deities and rice, both of which are indispensable for the survival of people.

New Rice Ceremony

At the start of each paddy cultivation cycle, nearly all farmers hang a coconut in a tree or stick close to their field to ask for protection from the gods, hence acknowledging the ambiguity, and negotiating the precariousness, of cultivation due to for instance drought and pests. In return for protection, farmers promise the first portion of rice. They make this promise every year and so this ‘contract’ only works when the farmer has kept his word previously. The offering of this first portion happens either in the ‘overflowing of milk’ ritual (*kiriutereme*) or in the more extended ‘new rice ceremony’ (*aluth sahal mangalaya*) and consists mainly of an offering of milk-rice (*kiribath*). In the first stage of these ceremonies, the farmers prepare coconut-milk from the coconut that was hung at the start of the cultivation. The milk needs to be heated on firewood in order to overflow (particularly in the case of *kiriutereme* rite and sometimes in the new rice ceremony). Thereafter, rice is added to the boiling milk.

The result is a sticky whole of which, in both ceremonies, the first part is offered and the rest cut into diamond shapes for human consumption. The overflowing of milk is important here. It refers to prosperity and happiness (similar to the Hindu *pongal* ceremony (Beck 1969:571)), and this significance is further produced by the tension that builds up like a climax until the point of overflowing and the relief when it has succeeded. The milk-rice, as a result of this auspicious overflowing of milk, derives from this performance the same connotations of prosperity. Milk-rice is only prepared on such prosperous occasions, which further strengthens its joyous and life-enhancing connotation.

In the village where I lived, people only perform the *kiriutereme* for their local ancestral deity. This is less elaborate than the new rice ceremony performed in one of the neighbouring villages. A reason is that in that area, the deities are different and therefore require different forms of offerings. Let me introduce a rough general description of the cosmography for our purposes before going on to the ceremony in the neighbouring village.

Each village in the area is under the ‘jurisdiction’ of a guardian or local ancestral deity or *Mutta* (literally ancestor). These local deities occupy a lower position than the regional and larger gods in the Sinhalese hierarchic cosmography. Gananath

Obeyesekere (1963:142-147,1987:50-70) has extensively discussed the particular traits of what he calls the Buddhist pantheon, in which all these gods, whether high or low, are deemed to be under the supervision of, and even derive some of their powers from, the Buddha. These gods, like human and non-human beings, are caught in *samsara*, the cycle of death and rebirth. Therefore gods are creatures that need to acquire merit to improve their karmic state. They can do this by performing good deeds and by receiving merit from human beings. Through the improvement of their karmic state, they rise in status, getting closer to Buddhahood. The offerings of foods and merits in return for the good deeds by the gods, such as providing protection, reconfigures the cosmology, as the relative positions of deities alter through these. Some deities will therefore no longer accept meat as an offering as it would be demeritorious and lower them in their relative position within the cosmos. Thus, each offering entails a regeneration and a co-(re)production of the cosmos, within which relative positions and relations between both human and non-human beings are re-negotiated.

The new rice ceremony in the neighbouring village to which we turn now is very different from the *kiriutereme* in the village of stay. Nevertheless both are significant events in which the coconut mediates the regeneration

of life and the forging of relationality, both among human beings as well as between human and non-human entities. This difference among rituals indicates that these dynamics of life-sustenance and relationality work through many occasions, nevertheless allowing a high variety of articulations. One could pose the question whether it is possible to discern certain types of articulations in which the two dynamics combine with each other in a particular way. However, this falls out of the scope of this article as I aim to introduce them, not elaborate on them.

In the new rice ceremony an organizing team collects the new rice and the coconuts that were hung up at the start of the cycle from all participants (about 200), and separates from this collection the promised first portion for the offerings to the deities. This team also prepares the meal that the villagers share later in the evening. When the team is ready with all the preparations, a tower construction (*adukku kunama*), in which food for the gods (*adukku*) is placed, is brought to the middle of the communal village grounds where everybody is gathered. On top of the tower are coconut flowers that symbolize rice pods, as we have seen in the discussion of the pre-birth ritual and as inferred by way of morphological similarities. The structure of this tower again refers to the cosmic mount Meru on top of which the gods descend and reside and where the rice pods have emerged by the fertilization

by the sun (Shiva) of the earth (Parvati). As I was told by two informants, these rice pods are represented by the coconut flowers, as the fruit of cosmic regeneration. These mythological connections turn the interior of this tower into a sacred space. Hence, the foods placed in it acquire a more respectful term, *adukku*.

The men carry this tower with offerings in procession to the *devale* (worshipping place for deities). When the spirit medium (*kapurala*) has become possessed by the ancestral deity (*Mutta*) and when he hears the procession arriving, he runs out of the *devale* wildly. While at first those present are somewhat indifferent to the *kapurala*, gradually the whole event draws everybody into the experience and sensation of the presence of the ancestral deity (see also Schieffelin 1985). The regular outbursts of licentious dancing and utterances from the *kapurala* further consolidates this experience. When the ‘right’ sphere and sensory experience has been co-(re)produced by the *kapuralas*’ behaviour, the decorations (with their cosmological links), and incense, finally the collective and individual offerings can take place

We observe that in relation to a basic life-sustaining essence, paddy, a whole cosmos is again invoked, mobilized, addressed and regenerated through these events as well as through these mythological references present

within the decorations. Moreover, in giving foods, such as rice and coconut, these become mediators, through which the deities and human beings can reposition themselves in the cosmological hierarchy in a minor way and thereby reshape it. Let me turn now towards these offerings, and more specifically to one type of collective offerings as shown in the picture below.



Figure 2. Overview offering table

At the back of the elevated part in figure 2 we can see the whole coconut and a half opened one serving as an oil lamp (with coconut oil). To the left of this oil lamp we can see a ‘trinity of life’² construction, with a banana leaf on the bottom, raw rice on it, and a coconut on top, wrapped in betel leaves, the latter being used as an indication of respect. This construct is placed in front of the image

² The rice plant, coconut, and banana trees are combined in many ritual occasions and have a highly symbolic value with regard to life sustenance, hence I refer to those as the ‘trinity of life’.

of the local ancestral deity (Ratne Bandara *Mutta*) and his various attributes. Note again the evocative power of the structure of this offering as related to mount Meru (as paddy) emerging from the primordial lotus (banana leaf), supporting divine life that brought forth Ganesh, to which the coconut generally is dedicated. Furthermore, the coconut flowers (referencing the potential of life) behind the 'tower', the wrapped coconut (evoking future life, as I explained in the previous ritual) on top of it, and the coconut (existing life) besides it, are between the god's picture and the lower offering plate. The local ancestral deity has just given life in the form of rice through his protection, and people give him back the promised first portion, symbolizing a reciprocal exchange of life, thereby establishing an intrinsic link between life-sustenance and relationality. Furthermore, through this reciprocal exchange and generosity, both parties' karmic states are improved. Without caring and sharing – both said to be basic values – there is no life. By his protection the deity has enabled the harvest of the staple food, rice, which people refer to as life and as a gift from the gods. Reciprocally sharing life, people then give a portion of rice back, together with the various components of the coconut tree, co-evocative of life in all its stages. In this ritual, the link between rice and coconut, as life-sustaining

essences, is mutually constituted within a relational dynamic of sharing.

We can infer from this case that by including the mutual constitution of human beings and their environment (Ingold 1990:223) in the analysis of food, we gain a wider understanding of the way powerful evocations of the coconut and other parts of the tree (flowers) are co-produced. In the act of offering, the coconut acquires a capacity to negotiate or rather mediate human life in both their relatedness with deities. Besides the improvement of the karmic state and subsequent regeneration of the whole cosmos, by way of a mythological reference to mount Meru and through the particular interactions with the local *Mutta*, this offering ensures the continuation of a reciprocal exchange relation. Such interaction is deemed vital to the cultivation of the staple food, rice, and thus of life-sustenance. One can understand that this is a precarious process, as one is never sure that the deity will be pleased with these offerings, and if this is not the case, the continuation of protection and production of rice may be jeopardized. Then, the reciprocal relationship may break down, hence its bivalence. This illustrates how life-sustenance and relationality are interrelated as well as precarious and fragile, and how these dynamics are both orienting the actions and are being regenerated by their practice. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that rice and

parts of the coconut tree are indirectly exchanged in the paddy harvest ritual. I assume that this is a particular re-articulation of the everyday combination of rice and coconut in consumption. Finally, it needs to be emphasized that this whole co-(re)production of life is re-enhanced by the utterances and intemperate shaking of the spirit medium that adds both curiosity, fear, and power to the whole event of the new rice ceremony.

Let me now turn to one type of individual offering that takes place in the context of the new rice ceremony and which gives a more explicit reference to the coconut tree as a symbol of human life. This exchange is called the *paranayata parana*.

After the collective tribute there is space for individual offerings, thereby linking individual concerns for prosperity and protection with the collective ones. In the *paranayata parana*, mothers with a baby less than one year old come to show their gratitude to the ancestral deity for the protection he has offered during birth last year. In exchange for the living baby they offer a living substance. Ideally, I was told, one should have to return a human life, but this would make the exchange rather useless and not practical, nor desirable. Deities have ‘understood’ this difficulty and in many of the surrounding areas the local deities have instead been contented with receiving offerings of a living hen, as a sign of the baby’s life. However, this particular village

deity, like many others, adheres, as I was explained, to the Buddha and Buddhist values, and therefore does not accept the killing of a living being. It would lower him in the hierarchy of the Buddhist pantheon. Instead he requires another fully-fledged symbol of the life of the baby, that is a coconut sapling. Hence, in this *paranayata parana* or “life-to-life” ceremony, the life of the baby is exchanged for the life of a young coconut plant corroborating the suggestion that the offering of a coconut is a form of self sacrifice. This ceremony clearly underscores the argument that the coconut tree is a living entity through which people substantiate and regenerate their life.

We can see this substantiation of life in the coconut sapling, and thus of a particular (young) stage of life, operating by this direct reciprocal exchange. Moreover, in these acts of exchange both parties are drawing upon previous positions and acts (as protector and life-giver), and while doing so, these actors co-(re)produce the cosmos, and their particular place within it. Finally, it needs to be said that the coconut tree is not ‘accidentally’ chosen to mediate the regeneration of the cosmos and life within it. Others (Gell 1975:125, Giambelli 1998:136) have noted that the biological lifespan of the coconut tree is similar to those of people (about 65 years). Hence, they argue convincingly, by way of biological analogy

(Gell 1975:154) and inspiration, this tree takes a special place in the wider process of referencing human lives and their course of life (blossoming and wilting, hence its bivalent connotation) in many other geographical areas as well (see Rival 1998). Furthermore, as this *kapruka* lends itself to so many practical and pragmatic uses, it gets further co-produced as a tree with special significance throughout these uses.

In this discussion of the new rice ceremony I have shown how the coconut acts as a medium in the co-(re)production of the cosmos and human and non-human life within it. All this takes place in relation to a particular stage of the life-cycle of a staple food: the harvest of paddy. So far, I have shown that the fragile dynamics of life-sustenance and relationality are being regenerated for the better during both life-cycle events of human beings and rice through the offerings and sharing of coconuts in different shapes that substantiate fertility, prosperity and cosmic reproduction.

Let me now turn to the significant *non-use* of the overflowing of coconut-milk (*kiriutereme*) in the funeral and the way ‘the coconut’ is sometimes utilized to deal with death. This will further highlight the argument that the coconut ambiguously and bivalently mediates life-sustenance in the process of the blossoming and withering of life.

Funeral

In Sri Lanka, death is tied to rebirth just as birth is related to decay in cycles of becoming. Whether one gets reborn in a higher or lower status – closer to or further from Buddhahood – depends on the karmic state of the deceased. One can never be sure of the karma of somebody else, and therefore people transfer merit to the deceased in order to bring that relative or friend closer to ultimate bliss of the extinction of the cycle of death and rebirth. It is within this context that the following part of the funeral needs to be understood.

In this phase, close relatives of the deceased place a teacup on a tray in a plastic bucket and pour water into it until it overflows. The latter bears resemblance to the overflowing milk, to which I return shortly, and is being accompanied by recited Pali verses, which explicitly explain the symbolism. In short, the cup represents the upper area from which the water (as transitory life) flows to the tray, the valley with paddy fields, where this water feeds the soil for a good harvest (preparing a good next life), and subsequently flows over into the sea (nirvana). In this ritual, water materializes merit (Gombrich 1971:13) that the close relatives transfer in the wish that the deceased will not have a rebirth as a *preta*, a hungry ghost or a malicious spirit. Moreover, the sea to which the water flows can be assumed to refer to the primordial waters in which a world cycle ends

and from which a new era shall emerge at a certain point. Hence the cycle of human life acquires a referential link to the cycle of death and life of the worlds.

This overflowing of water resembles the overflowing of (coconut) milk, but these have different connotations. Both reference life-sustenance, albeit in different ways. Water is, in its reference to the primordial waters and to the healing powers of Lake Anavatapta, being established in its life-generating capacity in a more encompassing way than coconut-milk. The formers' life-force (in evoking merit and resultingly good rebirth) is acknowledged both in this life and the afterlife, whereas the latter's seems to be related to joyfulness and prosperity only in this life. We see the *kiriutereme* being performed at many occasions of prosperity, such as at the New Year and *pongal* in South India, harvest rituals, and offerings to various deities for vows regarding thisworldly matters. The overflowing of milk or *kiriutereme* denotes an overflowing of happiness, prosperity, hope, and protection against misfortune (referring to ambiguity). However, as it is also performed at life-transition rituals, such as the reading ceremony, the first cutting of hair, and the 'big girl ceremony' (when a girl menstruates for the first time), it is also related to fertility and growth (negotiating the bivalence with regard to blossoming and withering of life). Hence, in both cases it refers to life-sustenance

(prosperity) and relationality (with natural surroundings). So, it is unimaginable to have coconut-milk overflowing or to serve milk-rice at a funeral. When I asked people why this is not possible, in order to provoke slightly, they were flabbergasted and could only say that "it is impossible" or "it is only done at joyful occasions". This question seemed to cause an incommensurable link which therefore caused a shock to my respondents. However, some mentioned a practice, which nowadays has largely disappeared in my area of study, of using thick coconut-milk and lime to purify the whole house where the deceased had been placed on the bier and where all cooking activity had to be stopped from the point of death. It is only after this purification with this mixture, that the hearth fire can be lit again by using coconut shells. This fire, being referenced (as an ongoing activity) as the digestive gastric fire in the local health system (Seneviratne 1992:180), and being sustained by the coconut in this way in everyday cooking as well, connects the latter again to the sustenance of life. Hence, through the purificatory power of the coconut, the cooking process which had to be stopped after death can be started again and brings the house back to life, further consolidating the coconut as a life-affirming substance.

Furthermore, I have observed in some places that coconut stems are placed around

the burial ground. These stems are stripped of any leaves, flowers, and nuts, hence of its life-bearing capacity. Transforming ‘the coconut’ without a crown into a metaphor for the deceased person who has no more life-potency in this life is similar to the practice of cutting off the head at the germination poles’ side of the green maturing coconut and placing it on top of the earth covering the coffin. The latter practice is a reference to the end of growth in this life as well. Uchiyamada (1998:178) refers to a similar practice in Kerala where a ‘funeral coconut tree’ is planted on the grave without being watered. This tree dies out and again becomes a reference to the deceased family member beneath it and the absence of life-force.

Previously, I mentioned that life includes death, however, death is also about a transition to the other-worldly and rebirth or preferably nirvana, and hence, it is also about life. The overflowing of water, which is accompanied by verses expressing a wish for prosperity and fertility in the other-worldly, draws on a this-worldly life-affirming ritual, *kiriutereme*, which is performed in relation to prosperity, fertility, avoidance of misfortune, and which also involves other-worldly agents. Water, supposedly is a more encompassing symbol of life such that it is selected as a mediator of life and death both in this life – indicated by *pirith* chanting during severe droughts – and even in the afterlife.

The different utilizations of ‘the coconut’ and the non-use of overflowing coconut-milk, corroborate the suggestion that the coconut mediates the two dynamics of life-sustenance and fragile relationality both in relation to this world and the other world. The overflowing of water highlights the precariousness and fragility of life-transition to the other-worldly (danger of becoming a *preta*), whereas the overflowing of milk invokes the joyful expectation of prosperity, protection and fertility in the this-worldly. However, both acts include their opposite and hence recognize the related ambiguities and bivalences. In the overflowing of water, we see the expression of hope for a good rebirth and fertility, whereas in the *kiriutereme* we see also the recognition that things can go wrong.

Conclusion

In this article I have shown that we can comprehensively analyze the multiplicity of food by the two fragile dynamics that I suggested: life-sustenance and relationality. Throughout the pre-birth *pirith* chanting, the harvest ceremony, and the funeral, these dynamics combine in novel ways and co-produce particular articulations while remaining similar as forces. We see that these three rituals deal with both life-sustenance and relationality, while at the same time

recognizing the delicacy of these life-cycle moments of both human beings and plants, the latter being instrumental to human nourishment. Moreover, the offerings and utilizations of ‘the coconut’ enable the ritual participants to negotiate their life-transitions and achieve prosperity within the larger whole of cosmic regeneration. As the coconut condenses and substantiates these multiple references and dynamics, it indeed becomes a powerful actor in the negotiation, transition and regeneration of life, whether of rice, human beings, deities or worlds.

We have seen that in the pre-birth ritual, the coconut is physically connected to the pregnant mother through a white thread, linking the womb to the pot and, through its mythical connection, to the regeneration of the world within which relations with non-human beings (gods, Buddha) are evoked in order to enhance fecundity, prosperity, hence life-sustenance. Similarly, we see the world regenerated and refashioned through the offerings in the new rice ceremony by the way the coconut substantiates non-human and human beings, as well as individual sacrifice and cosmic regeneration. This happens within the event to secure continuity of life-sustenance and, as its corollary, relationality within the wider cycles of regeneration. Finally, in the funeral, the upward movement of life with on the top the coconut as fruit of life-transmission, as in the two previous

rituals, the movement turns downwards, back into the sea. Hence the transition to the afterlife as the future regenerated life draws upon an observance of overflowing milk, however emphasizing the decay after it, viewed from the perspective of this life, and therefore coconut-milk is no longer used. Water is used to denote the larger cyclical regeneration of worlds and lives. In relation to funerals coconut-milk is only used as a way to open up the possibilities for the ones remaining in thisworldly life, to get on with their lives.

In what we have seen here, the coconut and its tree turn into a potent mediator of the regeneration of worlds, and within this, the negotiation of precarious life-sustenance and fragile relationality. This is a less commonly acknowledged, though not less important, utilization to which this *kapruka* lends itself, besides all its pragmatic and practical applications. It is rather through this important mediation that this *kapruka* fulfills its potentialities. This is not only the case in Sri Lanka as my references to authors like Gell (1975), Giambelli (1998), and Beck (1969) have illustrated. It reinforces the two delicate dynamics of life-sustenance and relationality as a theoretical basis which enables a comparative analysis of apparently very distinct articulations of utilizations of food.

The concepts of fragile life-sustenance and relationality are rather broadly defined as to

allow for a comparative perspective between the multifarious ways in which food is enmeshed with everyday and ritual events. Life-sustenance covers a wide variety of related terms, such as vitality, self-regenerative power (which Rival (1998:3) sees as two separate qualities), fecundity, prosperity, joy, life-transmission, all related to a continuation of life. Moreover, this dynamic cannot be understood without looking at the other dynamic, that is the relationships it involves, as well as the commensality, exchange, sacrifice, sharing and generosity

that relationality entails. Even more, viewed separately, we could not grasp so clearly how these food dynamics are so involved in the regeneration of cosmos and worlds, within which all human and non-human entities are situated. Not only are they situated within, but through their entanglement and their force, these dynamics *orient* people in the co-production of the cosmos. Hence, it is possible to position oneself differently towards these orienting dynamics, which explains the multiplicity of articulations of these dynamics. 🍲

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