

Pukkai

Jessica Kuper, ed. *The Anthropologists' Cookbook*.
London: Kegan Paul International, 1997: 200-203.

Sweetened milk-rice is one of the most common kinds of ritual food offerings in Sri Lanka, and it is also a sweet food which is cooked and eaten at home on special occasions. Milk-rice is known as *kiri bat* by the Sinhalese Buddhists and as *pukkai* by the Tamil Hindus and the Ceylon Moors (Muslims). Any anthropologist who proposes to do fieldwork in Sri Lanka must be prepared to consume vast quantities of it.

In the Tamil and Moorish region of eastern Sri Lanka where I have done research, the preparation of *pukkai* is a common element in formal religious rituals as well as a popular way to fulfil personal vows which have been made to supernatural beings. The Tamil Hindus prepare *pukkai* at the temple and offer it to the deity with fruit, betel leaf, areca nut and flowers. The hot milk-rice is scooped out of the pot and placed in large glistening heaps in front of the idol. After the priest has performed the formal rituals of worship (*puja*) and the god has finished eating the invisible parts of the *pukkai* (that is, the steam and aromatic vapours which waft upwards), the *pukkai* is distributed to the people who have come to attend the *puja*. All of the offerings which have been placed before the idol are believed to have been 'consumed' by the god, and what remains is the god's left-overs, a sort of blessed garbage which is shared among the worshippers. Throughout Sri Lanka and the neighbouring regions of south Asia, the public giving of cooked food from one person to another, and the refusal to accept food offered in return, places the giver of food in a clearly superior position. As an example, this is one of the ways in which a man of higher caste demonstrates his superiority to a person of lower caste. When the worshippers eat the god's *pukkai* and the other 'used offerings' after the *puja*, they are showing their inferiority as mere mortals in the presence of the deity. Of course, the *pukkai* and other offerings have to be prepared for the god by human hands, so elaborate measures are taken to prepare the *pukkai* in a pure and sacred manner.

One such ritualized way of preparing milk-rice among the Tamil Hindus is to conduct a *pongal*. The word *pongal* comes from the Tamil verb 'to bubble up and boil over'. A new clay pot is placed on an outdoor hearth in front of the temple or the household shrine room and is decorated with markings



Freshly grated coconut is mixed with water and squeezed hard to extract coconut milk for making pukkai

of sacred burnt cow dung, sandalwood paste, and vermilion powder. Sometimes also flower garlands are placed around the pot. The basic idea in a *pongal* is to heat the milk by itself over a brisk fire until it swells up and bubbles over the side of the pot in a messy but nevertheless auspicious and pleasing wave of white froth. One of the best times to do this is exactly at dawn, so that the heat of the fire can be adjusted to make the boiling of the milk coincide precisely with the first rays of the sun as they strike the side of the pot. Then, as the milk bubbles over, the rice is added to the pot, and the *pukkai* is cooked in the usual manner. This little ritual enhances the goodness of the *pukkai* by emphasizing the auspicious timing (sunrise) and the symbolic abundance of the overflowing milk. *Pongals* may be conducted at the house, at the temple, in the paddy field, at the threshing floor, or anywhere where health, prosperity and good fortune are particularly desired. At the annual Tamil festival of *tai pongal*, which is held in mid-January, the cooking of the milk-rice is carried out with the hope that the carefully prepared pot of *pukkai* will signal good luck and prosperity for the year ahead.

Pukkai is considered to be particularly suitable as an offering to gods because it is made from white substances (rice, milk) which are also very pure, noble and vegetarian. The rice may have been set aside from the very first threshing of the paddy harvest. The milk may be cow's milk (most sacred to the Hindus), water buffalo milk or coconut milk. Sweetening is provided by natural *jaggary* (brown palm sugar) or by white refined sugar, and this can be augmented by the addition of pieces of fruit such as dates, raisins and bananas. Sweet spices such as cinnamon and cardamon are also

added sometimes to increase the fragrance of the *pukkai*. In fact the general idea is to make the *pukkai* as rich, sweet and fragrant as possible for the god and for the people who are eventually going to eat it.

At the same time, special restrictions apply to the preparation of the *pukkai* if it is to be offered in a religious context. No menstruating women should even come near to the place where the *pukkai* is being made. If *pukkai* is offered to a god, it must not contain any salt. Salt is recognized to be an absolute necessity of the human diet, a substance which epitomizes man's worldly dependence, while the gods, who exist on another plane, have no need for it. If *pukkai* is to be eaten merely for enjoyment at home, however, salt may be added.

According to local standards in Sri Lanka, *pukkai* should have a somewhat gummy or rubbery consistency. For this reason, people prefer to use rice which has not been par-boiled to remove the excess starch. It is advisable to use rice which cooks to a soft and mushy consistency if possible. However, the consistency of the *pukkai*, its degree of sweetness and the types of fruit and spices which are added are all a matter of personal preference and may be varied according to taste.

Milk-Rice (*Pukkai*) (To serve 10-14)

4 cups milk (cow's milk, buffalo milk, or coconut milk – preferably thick, rich and creamy)	3 cardamons (inner kernels only) or 18 to 24 cardamon seeds
1½ cups rice	½ cup chopped dates, raisins or other dried fruit (4 oz./120 grams)
¼ cup parched husked green gram* (2 oz/60 grams)	1 large ripe banana, cut into pieces
2 sticks cinnamon	¾ cup brown sugar

If you wish to receive the utmost metaphysical benefit from the milk-rice, then you are advised to proceed with a *pongal* ritual as outlined above. However, if you would rather not have to get up before dawn to make the *pukkai*, or if you would prefer not to have boiling milk cascade over your cooker and onto the kitchen

*Green gram is optional, but it adds a very nice flavour if it can be obtained. Its scientific name is *Phaseolus mungu*, and the Tamil term is *paccai payaru*. It is a small yellow-green pulse which is available at wholefood shops or at Asian food shops, unhusked, under the name *moong bean*. If the green gram has not yet been husked, place it in a dry frying-pan over medium heat and stir constantly until the gram just begins to turn brown and a nice aroma can be detected. Remove from the heat and spread to cool for a few minutes. Then crush the green gram between two layers of cloth with a rolling-pin or a mallet. Place in a winnowing basket (or a large, lightweight tray) and toss gently to separate the clean kernels from the powdered husk. Discard the husk. Half a cup of unhusked green gram yields about ½ cup of parched husked green gram.

floor, it is perfectly acceptable to modify the procedures and adopt a less intricate style.

Place the milk, rice, green gram, cinnamon and cardamon kernels in a large pan over medium heat. Bring to the boil, stirring frequently. Reduce heat and stir constantly as the mixture thickens. Add additional milk if necessary to produce a thick, uniform, pasty consistency, like stiff pudding. Turn off heat, cover the pan, and allow the rice to continue to absorb moisture for at least 20 minutes. Then, after all rice kernels are soft, fully cooked and the consistency of the mixture is quite gooey, add dates, raisins or dried fruit, banana pieces and sugar. If the sugar is added too soon the rice ceases to soften and remains slightly crunchy – something which Sri Lankans find appalling. Stir to mix, then cover and allow to stand for about 20 minutes to soften fruit and release flavour. *Pukkai* is best served while it is warm, fresh and moist, on banana leaves or, if necessary, on plates.