

ARAB AND PERSIAN INFLUENCES

As a child in Sri Lanka I was always fascinated by the cars that passed on the street whose back seat passengers were curtained off from public gaze. I learned early that these were most likely to be cars belonging to a Moor family, the curtains there to provide privacy for women of the family. Moor meant a Sri Lankan Muslim. I don't know how I knew it, but I understood that they were spice merchants and also owned jewellery businesses in the Pettah. In later years, my father told me that many of the butchers in the Central Market were Muslims, as Islam had no prohibitions on the killing of animals for meat (the pig excepted), whereas Buddhists and Hindus did.

At that time I didn't stop to wonder about the origins of this community, but the story of the relationships between the Arab peoples, Persians and Sri Lanka is fundamental to the story of the spice trade and the development also of Sri Lankan foodways.

Trade in the Arabian Sea

Trade between Sri Lanka and the Arab and Persian kingdoms (modern Iran, Iraq, Yemen,



Saudi Arabia) was clearly well-established by the time the Sassanian Empire formalised diplomatic relations with the court at Anuradhapura in the 5th century CE and Persian merchants established a community there. But the relationship was of much longer standing and had developed from two sources. The first was the export from Sri Lanka of spices and gems, the latter emphasised in an Arab name for the country Jairtu-ul Yāqūt or the Island of Rubies.ⁱ Ninth and tenth century Muslim

writers mention also timber, kittul treacle (a palm extract) medicinal herbs and iron.ⁱⁱ The author of the Arab manuscript *Akhbar as-Sin wa-l-Hind* (851) describes an island off the coast of India called Langabalus [Lanka?] where the local people offer from their boats "coconuts, sugarcane, bananas and palm wine: [this] is a with beverage that is sweet like honey when one drinks it the moment it is tapped from the coconut palm, but if it is left for a little while it is transformed into wine, and, after a few days, into vinegar".ⁱⁱⁱ

Then, too, Sri Lanka had a central position between Africa, the Arab peninsula, India, and China, and so provided an excellent site for an east-west trading exchange through its west coast ports such as Mantota, Kalpitiya, Puttalam, Chilaw, Negombo, Colombo, Kalutara, Beruvala and Galle.^{iv} The *Kitab-al-Massilkwa'l-Mamalik* of Ibn Khurdabdhbih, c 845 CE, is a work of geography in which Sri Lanka is mentioned several times as Sarandib (Serendib).^v

Following the establishment of Islam in the middle of the 6th century CE, and the expansion of the Muslim empire under the Caliphates, there was increased trade between these states and South Asia. Muslim traders now settled in these areas, and being exclusively men they intermarried with local communities, creating the Moplah community in Kerala, and the Moors in Sri Lanka. A significant cultural outcome of this was the emergence of Arabic Tamil as a common language among them.

The relationship between Sri Lanka and the Arab world continued after the decline of Baghdad and the rise of the Fatimid and Mamluk dynasties in Egypt. In 1283 CE, Bhuvanekabahu 1 of Yapahuva was sent on a trade mission to the Mamluk court possibly at the urging of Arab advisers to the king to establish more direct relations with the kingdom now controlling the spice trade to Europe.^{vi}

Sri Lanka also became an important site of Muslim pilgrimage in about the 9th century CE when the Sripada, the famous mark on the sacred mountain in Sabaragamuva long considered to be the footprint of the Buddha, was interpreted as the footprint of Adam, the first point at which he touched the earth after the expulsion from Eden, from whence the mountain became commonly known as Adam's Peak.^{vii}

Arabian and Persian influences on Sri Lankan cuisine

So what was the impact of these peoples on the foodways of Sri Lankans? The two cookery books I have that were written specifically for Muslims in Sri Lanka don't have any background information in them that places these dishes within a historic or even cultural foodway context, unfortunately.^{viii} Similarly, recent material on a Sri Lankan Muslim website has an extensive discussion on current Moor culinary habits but does not have extensive discussion on their origins.^{ix} Most of the dishes that are described are similar to those found in Sri Lankan cookbooks generally – vegetable, meat, chicken curries; pickles, dhals, sweets.

However, all three discuss buriyanis, dishes where rice is cooked together with meat, fish, chicken or vegetables and spices. *Buryani/biriyani/biriani* is usually credited as being of Persian origin. Davidson says the term '*biriani*' means 'fried', but Achaya has it coming from the word for rice in 'old' Persian *virinji*, later *birinj* which make more sense since you don't fry a buriyani at any stage.^x Nasrallah, however, claims it for the medieval Muslim Arab world first, with its similarity to *timman tachina*, rice cooked with meats and vegetables, and argues for it returning to Iraqi cuisine as biriyani via India in a more spiced form.^{xi} The direction of the development of particular dishes is difficult when they are of such ancient origin and their creation is undocumented, but whichever it was, Persia or the Muslim Arab world out of which it developed, it found its way to Sri Lanka.

The Muslim cookbooks I have don't list *pilau/pilaf/pullau*, but Deutrom does in the first published English language Sri Lankan cookbook, and it was certainly a dish at the Burgher table of my childhood. Davidson gives the derivation of the term as from

medieval Farsi *pulaw* but leaves it undefined.^{xii} Two modern Persian cookbooks I have give the dish as *polou/polow*.^{xiii} The difference between a buriyani and a pilau in Sri Lankan cooking is that with the latter the rice is cooked in the stock made from cooking the meat and spices with the dish then being served with the meat embedded or layered with the rice.

In contrast, appearing in the Muslim cookbooks and not the Sri Lankan cookbooks written for a more general audience are recipes for *kurma/kuruma* which are variations on the family of dishes called variously *qawurma* (Turkey/Syria/Lebanon), *ghourma* (Iran), and *korma* (Pakistan, Northern India)^{xiv}, with the Sri Lankan Muslim version similar to the latter, that is, somewhere between a spiced braise and a stew, though with the distinctly Arabic addition of rose water.

Then we have some quite unique dishes in the Muslim cookbooks. *Albasra* I am yet to find any parallel for in any of the Arab/Persian cookbooks I have looked into. I take by its title that it is a dish particular to Basra in Iraq, or in some way associated with it. It's a dish of spiced shredded boiled chicken layered between thin pancakes. Similarly, *adukku roti* is a baked dish of layers of crepes and spiced minced beef, and *kanufa* is a similar dish to *Albasra* with minced meat replacing chicken.^{xv}

Ellish/a is a dish of mutton and wheat where the mutton is boiled with spices till shreddable, then mixed with wheat that has been soaked and then made into a paste. This is basically *haleem*, also known as *harriseh* (so *ellish/a*), a dish whose origins are said to be Persian and supposed to have been a favourite dish of Mohammed and so of his followers through whom it spread into the Middle East, the Arab lands, and across to Afghanistan and Pakistan. The oldest recipe for it I have come across is in the 13th century *Kitab-al-Tabikh* where it is given as *harisa*, and I have recipes for it in current Persian cookbooks.^{xvi}

Sutta eracci is a kebab dish particular to the Muslim communities of Batticaloa in Eastern Sri Lanka.^{xvii}

Not unexpectedly, there are strong parallels between Sri Lankan Muslim specialties and Moplah/Malabari Muslim cuisine, the Moplah's being descendants of the intermarriage of Arab traders and Kerelans. Moplah *alisa* is Sri Lankan *ellish/a*.^{xviii} In the Sri Lankan version I have, rose water is added, rampe (pandanus) is used in the spicing, and the cooking liquid is coconut milk, which makes it a truly Sri Lankan fusion dish. The linguistic similarity between *ellish* and *alisa* may indicate that the dish entered the Sri Lankan repertoire via the Moplah community.

Similarly, Achaya gives the origin of *godhuma*, the Sanskrit for wheat, as Persian *gandhum*. In both the Sri Lankan Moor community and the Moplah community, *gothamba kanji* is a common breakfast dish, made from wheat boiled either plain till a gruel or with the addition of chicken and coconut milk.^{xix} In Sri Lanka you also find the

incomparable *godhamba roti*, made of wheat flour and similar to Malaysian *murtabak*, the latter name coming from the Arabic *muttabbuq* meaning folded and its origins ascribed to Saudi Arabia and Yemen, and the *godhambi roti* is indeed characterised by being made from a very elastic dough that is tossed dramatically in the air till it is large and thin whence it is dropped onto a hot plate, fried and folded. Sometimes an egg is cracked onto the crepe when it is first thrown onto the plate. The ideal *godhamba* has a lovely oily feel to it and is quite transparent in parts. It's interesting here that Sri Lankan cuisine has swapped the word for wheat with the word for folded.

Moplah cuisine also has *biriyani*, and *birinji*, rice cooked with turmeric in the water, which in Sri Lanka is more usually known as yellow rice and is clearly the same as the Iraqi *timman asfar*.^{xx} The evidence is clearly stronger for Achaya's derivation of the word *buryani/biriyani* than for Davidson. I haven't yet found a Moplah parallel to *Albasra*.

Heading for the desserts, sweets, pickles and such, *fereni* is a Persian dish of rice cooked with milk, rose water and sugar, and transforms into *firiny*, a dish of semolina and vermicelli cooked in water till to which sugar, diluted condensed milk and rose water are later added.^{xxi} This is similar to Indian *firni*. There's an interesting apparent linguistic re-assignment of Persian *torhsis*, which are pickles of vegetables or fruits in vinegar, to *thosy/dosi* in Sri Lankan Muslim cooking which are fruits and vegetables in a spiced sugar syrup preserve.^{xxii} Achaya gives the origin of *jelebi*, that unctuous fried spirals of flour soaked in sugar syrup that is one of, as from either Arabic *zalabiya* or Persian *zalibiya*, and I have a modern Persian version that calls it *zolobiya*.^{xxiii} *Muscat*, another sweet based on flour and water, but boiled this time, is a favourite across all Sri Lankan communities and for which there are recipes in all the Sri Lankan cookbooks and I have found a recipe for a similar sweet, *masqati*, in a modern Persian cookbook.^{xxiv}

Wattalappam, (called *Vlah*, in Deutrom's book) the crowning glory of Sri Lankan desserts, is a steamed pudding of coconut milk, jaggery (palm sugar) eggs and spices. It appears in both the generalist Sri Lankan cookbooks and the Muslim targeted ones. Its origins are ascribed as Arabic but I have yet to find a parallel recipe. There is a tantalising reference in Nasrallah to a recipe in the 10th century cookbook of al-Warraq to a custard like dessert made with 30 eggs, and there is also reference in the cookbook to using steam as a cooking method, but I don't yet know if the two occurred together.^{xxv} There are no recipes for anything like this in the Baghdadi recipes of al-Baghdadi, the other noted Arab medieval cookbook writer.^{xxvi} However, *wattalappam* is very close to steamed egg custards from South East Asia and it may be that this is the actual source.

Sri Lankan *sherbet* and Persian *sharbat* are the same fruit syrup based thirst quencher., both etymologically deriving from Arabic *sharab*, a sweetened drink.^{xxvii}

Finally, there is the fascinating possibility that the basic technique for curries, the cooking of meat and/or vegetables in liquid in a pot over the fire, may have originated in

ancient Sumer and Mesopotamia. The evidence comes from the development in this area of a type of hearth - the *turuna* – which allowed the cook to place food to be cooked in an earthenware pot on top of a clay oven/stove combination.^{xxviii} The *tunur* was also used to bake flat breads which were pressed up against the sides of the oven section. *Tunur* becomes *tannur* in Arabic, and thence *tandur* in Sanskrit, hence *tandoori* cooking in Pakistan and India.

Of course, whether any of the dishes discussed here were direct transpositions from Persian and Arab cuisines to Sri Lankan cuisine generally or the Sri Lankan Moor community particularly has to be left open to conjecture. The opportunities were clearly there. However, Indian merchants from Northern and Southern India were also part of the trade in spices and other commodities, and we have to consider that any similarities we find between Sri Lankan foodways and those of Persia and the Arab countries may also have come through Indianised versions of these dishes, and indeed through the development of Moghul cuisine in Northern India out of Persian cuisine, biryanis and pulaos in particular.

Whatever the process, the influences, and indeed, whole adoption of some dishes is clear.

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ⁱ The spices would have been pepper and cardamom. Cinnamon was not produced in sufficient quantities for export until the 11th century CE with the establishment of the Tamil kingdom of under the Magha dynasty of Kalinga/Orissa who saw its revenue potential.

ⁱⁱ Dewaraja 2002

ⁱⁱⁱ Zouali 2004

^{iv} Shukri 2002

^v Dewaraja 2002

^{vi} Dewaraja 2002

^{vii} Dewaraja 2002

^{viii} Noordeen 1995, Young Muslim Women's League 2003

^{ix} <http://www.sailanmuslim.com/news/wp-content/uploads/moor-culinary-habits.pdf> 2011

^x Davidson 1990 & Achaya 1994

^{xi} Nasrallah 2003

^{xii} Davidson 1990

^{xiii} Batmanglij 1998, Hekmat 2001

^{xiv} Davidson 1990

^{xv} <http://www.sailanmuslim.com/news/wp-content/uploads/moor-culinary-habits.pdf> 2011

^{xvi} al-Baghdadi (Perry 2005), Batmanglij 1998, Hekmat 2001

^{xvii} <http://www.sailanmuslim.com/news/wp-content/uploads/moor-culinary-habits.pdf> 2011

^{xviii} Abdulla 1993

^{xix} <http://www.sailanmuslim.com/news/wp-content/uploads/moor-culinary-habits.pdf> 2011

^{xx} Nasrallah 2003

^{xxi} Batmanglij 1998, Noordeen 1995, Young Muslim Women's League 2003

^{xxii} Batmanglij 1998, Noordeen 1995, Young Muslim Women's League 2003

^{xxiii} Hekmat 2001

^{xxiv} Hekmat 2001

^{xxv} Nasrallah 2003

^{xxvi} al-Baghdadi (Perry 2005),

^{xxvii} Davidson 1990

^{xxviii} Bottero 2002