‘Cooking’ Life

The Vibrant Entanglement of Food and Human Beings in Sri Lanka.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

One warm evening under a star-filled sky, my host brother and I participated in a Sātuwe anti-sorcery rite aiming to undo the effects of a harmful spell cast upon a neighbouring homestead. Our neighbours decided to perform the rite to get rid of their misfortunes and ill-health. After exploring various possible causes of their hardship they opted to invite a kapurāla (spirit priest or medium) to detect possible spells. The kapurāla and the afflicted family collaboratively came to the conclusion that someone had thrown ashes on their land to perform a preta bandana, a powerful malicious spell in which they were incarcerated and ‘tied’ to the influence of the pretas (hungry ghosts). The afflicted domestic members felt that their capacity to act according to a free intentionality had diminished, so their agency was impaired. Hungry ghosts emerge when people at the moment of death have a craving for something (often one’s home, relatives, and home-cooked food). As the dying persons cling on, they get stuck in-between death and rebirth as pretas, defined by their greed, existential lack, and insatiable hunger for food and love. The presence of such pretas is generally feared as they often (yet not necessarily always and intentionally) inflict harm on the living persons. Preparing for the rite to expel the pretas from the compound, we washed ourselves and avoided eating meats, as these attract hungry ghosts. In a first stage of the ritual, the kapurāla uttered powerful mantras (verses) to invite the more powerful deities, of what Gananath Obeyesekere (1963:142-147, 1987:50-70) terms the “Sinhalese Buddhist pantheon”, to “see the smell” (suwende balande) of the fruit-offerings and incense. When it seemed the deities were pleased\(^1\), the kapurāla drew upon the Buddha’s and deities’ varam (power and permission) to expel the pretas from the home and its adjoining compound. Thereafter he performed the dehi käpīme (cutting of lime rite). The lime is very sour and has the ability, as the kapurāla explained to me, to absorb evil effects and to seduce the pretas to become attached to the lime, an attachment made possible by their greedy, hungry, and degenerate state. Moving the lime back and forth over the limbs of the family members and cutting it at the outer end of their limbs, the bondage between the pretas and the family members was then severed, liberating them from the inhibiting bond. The pretas usually remain tied to the halved limes, so these halves had to be discarded and fried immediately to avoid someone touching them and getting bound in the preta’s influence (Bastin 2002:68). Following the

\(^1\) One can never be entirely sure whether they will be pleased, but certain procedures help to increase that likelihood. For deities, fresh looking fruits are deemed suitable to their taste.
Dehi käpīme the kapūrāla walked through the various rooms of the house, throwing resin into the burning torch he is holding, creating spectacular outbursts of fire to chase any possibly remaining spirits out of the house. He repeated these acts on the adjoining compound. While the pretas were being chased out of the whole compound, we carried food baskets with food offerings towards the opposite side of the entry gate. The baskets contained meats and (nearly) rotten fruits, the favourite foods of pretas. Given their insatiability and never-ceasing lust, the pretas were bound by their own desire towards the ‘attractive’ food offerings, at least for some time. The family that was freed had to refrain from eating meats for at least one month as these ingested meats could attract the pretas back towards them.

The day after this event, my host brother, Bhuddika, narrated some previous happenings that led to the performance of the ritual. Nearly all members of the neighbouring family had been suffering from one or another form of ailment for quite some time. Tharupiyum, the eldest son, suffered from severe pains in his leg, whereas his younger brother, Pradeep, had been enduring gastritis for some years. Moreover, when receiving income, none of the family seemed able to set aside money. They felt unable to control their desire to spend it immediately, and they attributed this loss of capacity to act on their desires to the presence of hungry ghosts. Hence, their ill-health and inability to cautiously engage with money, expressed in financial difficulties, motivated their recourse to a kapūrāla to diagnose their situation. The collaboratively accepted diagnosis traced the presence of the pretas to the malicious act of a jealous family member who threw the ashes of a deceased person on the compound. Apparently, some 20 years ago, land had to be divided among the children of their deceased parent. One of the siblings turned envious towards the neighbouring branch of the family as they received their piece of land. The jealous relative threw the ashes to attract the pretas as a way to inflict harm, hoping that the family would leave the place and that she would be able to acquire that piece of land after all.

During our interview the kapūrāla who performed the ritual explained that he currently perceives an overall increase in preta-related problems. He stated that as people acquire more material wealth, they turn more greedy and jealous. The double implication is important, accounting for a sense of escalation. People perform more malicious spells out of envy, on the

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2 In this monograph I utilise different names or pseudonyms as to protect the privacy of private persons, but I do refer to the real names when it concerns public figures.
3 In fact, they contacted this local kapūrāla after villagers had invited a specialist from the Kandy area to see whether the village as a whole was cursed because several people were facing hardships. That specialist noted a lot of preta activity around the compound of this particular family, and so they contacted a local less expensive kapūrāla to further diagnose their situation.
one hand, and more people become *pretas* themselves, on the other hand, as they have gotten used to cultivate greed and consumerist desire during their lifetime. The statement of this particular kapurāla was corroborated by various other kapurālas who attributed this increase to the shift in economic policies in 1977 when the Sri Lankan economy was opened up and liberalised, providing a fertile breeding ground for *pretas*. The kapurālas’ political economic reading of the *preta*-phenomena resonates with the analysis of the rapid social change made by Bruce Kapferer (1997) and socially engaged Buddhists (Sivaraksa et al. 1999). The latter argue that the neoliberal economy, based on consumerism, profit, and selfish competition, cultivates desire in people and leads them away from non-attachment as professed in the Buddhist ideal of achieving nirvana. Hence, the kapurālas explain that because of this lifelong indulgence in desire and greed, it becomes harder to let go of any craving at the moment of death, hence the current increase of *pretas*.

Strikingly, south of Galgamuwa, Kurunegala, which is a half-hour drive from my fieldwork site, a new settlement emerged since about the end of the 1970s where several kapurālas are at work to date. Each of them is specialised in dealing with specific deities to cater to specific desires of the offerers or supplicants. This ‘supermarket’ of five different shrines concentrated in one village contrasts with the ways in which other shrines are spread across several villages in the wider area. The liberalisation of the market in 1977 thus appeared to lead to an increase of spirits as well as the workload of kapurālas. They have organised themselves into a kind of kapurāla-market, thereby commercialising the consequences of economic liberalisation (increase of *pretas* and other forms of sorcery) and concentrating a range of healing possibilities into one location, catering to the needs of ‘customers’.

The political economic reading of *pretas* on the part of the kapurālas provides us with interesting contrasts and consistencies with the ways in which some social movement organisations approach current changes in the economy labelled as neoliberal. Both kapurālas and activists deal with greed and excessive desire. Yet, they deal with different expressions of greed. Kapurālas aim at appeasing the malicious effects inflicted by hungry ghosts, whereas activists of the alternative globalisation movement, including organisations such as Via Campesina and the Occupy movement⁴, critique corporate greed and excessive consumerism. Hence, *pretas*, entrepreneurial profit-makers, and consumers are intrinsically connected by way of their institutionalised greed, albeit being expressed in different articulations in ritual

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⁴ Initially emerging as the Occupy Wall Street event critiquing corporate greed which gradually diversified into several occupy locations and formations.
and political registers. Besides their common preoccupation with excessive desire, *kapurālas* and activists share a concern with the insecurities, precariousness, and detrimental effects that arise from such unbalanced forms of desire. The *kapurāla* traced the economic hardship of our neighbouring family back to the presence of *pretas*. A more Marxist oriented social movement organisation, such as the Movement for National Land and Agricultural Reform (MONLAR) in Sri Lanka, would rather blame the family’s precarious economic situation on the inequalities emerging from the neoliberal economic impetus to consume, compete, extract from the poor, and accumulate capital incessantly and in excessive ways. So, we can see the two common concerns with desire and insecurity being shared by ritual specialists, afflicted people, and activists, even though these are being differently articulated.

Generally stated, the villagers, ritual actors, and activists share an analysis of defining the situation of social change as precarious. All respond to it by creating a space to transform the situation. In everyday life, this attempt consists of negotiating well-being by way of procuring, preparing, and consuming healthy and tasty food, whereas in ritual, the spirits are summoned to provide protection and help in cultivation and life-transitions. In activism, this space is created by communicating the analysis to influence policy-making to positively affect the wider community. Whether or not these practices are in vain matters less than the mediation established between the visible, tangible, and practical world, on the one hand, and the invisible world of global forces or spirits affecting the former, on the other. This mediation of seemingly opaque forces and the tangible pragmatics of life have particular salience for people trying to make sense of transitions and seeking to transform these in beneficial ways as to sustain and regenerate life. The cluster of all these similarities and differences among the various tropes of human action in everyday, medical, ritual, and activist life constitute the basic template of this research.

The events of crisis, diagnosis, and response described above form a key fragment of social, ritual, and domestic life that emerged from a ten-month fieldwork in a Sinhalese village of about 80 families in the Kurunegala district in the North-Western Province of Sri Lanka. Earlier I had carried out a three-month MA dissertation research in 2004, and worked and lived in Colombo for five months in 2006. After my ten-month fieldwork, from October 2008 until August 2009, I returned for another period of six months to conduct research on food activism in Colombo in 2010. The maps of Sri Lanka and the area of my main fieldwork-site are given below.
Map 1: Location Kiribathgama on road rap (Survey Department Sri Lanka 2007:153)
Map 2: Location Kiribathgama within administrative structure of Sri Lanka

(Survey Department Sri Lanka 2007: 191)
Map 3: Location Kiribathgama in relation to the Dry Zone and Wet Zone of Sri Lanka

(Survey Department Sri Lanka 2007: 59)
The village, which I give the pseudonym Kiribathgama (milk-rice village) for reasons of anonymity, is situated in the Dry Zone and is centred around three irrigation reservoirs that provide water for the paddy fields of the subsistence farmers. The villagers perform various life-transition rituals as well as harvest rituals to deal with possible insecurities that such moments of transformation may bring about, expressing a wish for a good life. The fragment that we just discussed embeds itself with these general concerns of insecurity and life-sustenance that permeate ritual events, and is thus instructive of the themes I treat in this manuscript. In what follows, I tease out some of the transversal themes that emerge from our fragment and that run throughout the topical themes that I discuss next. On the basis of the combination of these themes I will distil particular research questions and subsequently turn to an overview of the organisation of the study. Finally, I will expand on my approach and methodology before elaborating my theoretical frame in the second chapter.
Transversal Themes

There are various themes that run throughout the topics treated in this monograph. As seen above, I have already succinctly pointed out two at the hand of our key rite: desire and insecurity. A crucial third theme, although so far less discussed is food. The fourth and final transversal theme of regeneration likewise permeated this rite in its aim to restore well-being and the agency to lead a fulfilling life. This latter theme involves dynamics of transformation and mutual becomings that are explored as the theoretical basis in our following chapter. Let us now expand on the three first themes: desire, insecurity, and food.

Desire

The Sātuwe event revolved clearly around desire in its manifold expressions and formations. When discussing desire, I generally use it in a generic way as to heuristically highlight desire’s connections to, and immanence in, everyday, ritual, and political life, even though its expressions vary. Indeed, desire actualises in different contexts into various potential expressions, such as gluttony, avarice, envy, pride, greed, lack, need, hope, effort, fantasy, the will to live, etc. Desire, as the generic concept contains its ambiguous (both positive and negative) elements that at certain times find their expression in a “context-driven actualisation”\(^5\). In our case, the context of the inheritance and distribution of land among siblings enabled greed and envy to flourish in one person, who then allegedly strove to acquire the land by manipulating non-human beings defined by their hunger, greed, and never-ceasing lust. By throwing funerary ashes, the envious person attracted hungry ghosts whose new presence disturbed the afflicted family’s engagements with their own desires, losing the capacity to spend money cautiously. The forces of desire unleashed in them could no longer be balanced and so hardships arose. Moreover, our neighbours were themselves in the danger of becoming pretas if their raging desires could not be quelled and calmed in time before their death. The desire to lead a fulfilling life spurred the family’s action to undertake this ritual. During the course of the event, the greed of the pretas was played upon by way of the sour lime and the food offerings. The offered foodstuffs seduced the pretas by manipulating their never-ceasing lust and craving. Evacuating these foods from the compound could then keep the pretas away as they would be trapped in their attachment to the foods. Hence, our fragment clearly shows the centrality of the generic desire in its multitude and all

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\(^5\) This notion will be further explored in our theoretical chapter.
its different expressions in terms of envy, greed, lust, hunger, good life, healing (connected to regeneration), and so forth.

Buddhism, which informs the moral universe of the Sinhalese, deals extensively with desire. In discussing the Buddhist Canon, David Webster (2005) lists 24 different terms connoting desire, some of which can be viewed positively. Buddhism is often theorised in Western scholarship as having a very negative attitude to desire in general. In this case, some confuse desire with *tanha* (greed), which they view as the fundamental object of concern in Buddhism. Indeed, *tanha* plays a pivotal role, but the diversity of Buddhist attitudes to desire cannot be reduced to their stances with regard to *tanha*. I will go deeper into the plural Buddhist approaches to desire when discussing the theoretical frame, but it suffices to state for now that the Buddhist Canon views desire ambiguously. On the one hand, desire acquires a negative force in its formations and expressions of attachment, clinging, craving, and greed that lead to suffering and bring about rebirth. As the ultimate goal exists in reaching nirvana, a state of equipoise and without clinging, the fire of this craving desire must first be calmed as to be extinguished in the last phase. The negative, excited, excessive, and consumerist forms of desire are hindering the path to liberation from rebirth and becoming. Yet, on the other hand, to get oneself on the path towards nirvana, one does require some form of desire, including effort, concentration, compassion, and aspiration, and these also have to be left behind in the last step before entering nirvana. Hence, in our example, the afflicted family had a positive desire to quell their money-spending drives to improve their lives and therefore had to deal ritually with the many negative expressions and formations of desire, such as the *pretas*.

The political economic reading on part of the *kapurālas* as well as the activist critiques on corporate greed highlight the fact that desire is not merely a ritual or religious concern, but also a matter that permeates economic and political life. Our example shows precisely how the economic and ritual aspects are entangled in terms of the economic hardships and ill-health inflicted onto the family. Yet, we will see that the invisible (at least to most people) hungry ghosts disappear in the political economic rendering of social activists, like those from the Colombo-based MONLAR, and are be replaced by similarly invisible (at least to most villagers) global structures of Capital that produce visible effects and formations, such as consumers and corporations. The readings of the *kapurālas*, socially engaged Buddhists, and our activists point in different ways to the shared concern of desire in the face of anxieties produced by rapid socio-economic change, loathed by some and desired by others. Living a
successful life by meeting the Buddhist aspirations of a calm desire becomes complicated in a neoliberal consumerist economy, where successful living entails thriving on accumulative greed, both by consumers and entrepreneurs. These competing ideals of the ‘good life’ (accumulation, non-attachment) increase the insecurity of how to achieve it and bear an existential point: the fragility and precariousness of life.

To sum up, given the pervasiveness of desire throughout the different registers of ritual, health and well-being, economics, domestic life, and politics, integrated in our key event, I utilise generic desire as a heuristic guiding line, comparative tool, or transversal theme throughout this monograph.

**Insecurity**

As we shall see in greater detail in chapter 5, villagers perform a variety of rituals which at face value pertain to the cultivation cycle or the life-transitions of human beings, but ultimately share the concern for the good life, engaging notions of desire, insecurity, and regeneration. Various harvest rites create and express joy, but likewise aim at securing a good harvest during the next season. Similarly, life-cycle rituals around birth, marriage, and death are geared towards effectuating a safe transition. Both harvest and life-cycle rites thus acknowledge the possibility that things do go wrong while simultaneously attempting to enhance the possibility of a positive and successful outcome (pointing at our fourth transversal theme of regeneration). The material vitality of our bodies, foods, and weather, among other aspects, enmesh with our strivings to achieve favourable outcomes, and as such these forces create indeterminate and unexpected effects in which our achievements do not always match the expectations (Bennett 2010:31-34). Acknowledging that human beings have no ultimate control, the villagers solicit the aid of deities and other powers to enforce a good outcome, such as a bountiful harvest, a fertile wedding, or a good death and afterlife.

Hence, particular insecurities and anxieties are embroiled with certain ideas of successful living and the good life (Jackson 2005). In other words, anxieties are closely linked to the types of desire that inspire particular aspirations that may be within or out of reach. Indeed, Western scholars, such as Sartre and Lacan, tend to view desire as necessarily bound up with lack and therefore tied with anxiety (Goodchild 1996, Webster 2005, Bailly 2009). These connections of hope and insecurity with regard to the good life are negotiated, not by seeking immediate satisfaction as in consumerism, but rather by ritually negotiating the conditions in
which a good life and its regeneration are made possible. Yet, the ideas of successful living that embroil with specific forms of desire are plural. In our prime example, health and economic prosperity (not excessive accumulation) informed the idea of a better life on part of the afflicted family. Harvest rituals performed by subsistence and commercial farmers alike engage the wish and hope for a bountiful harvest, which subsequently can be transformed into social fame and prestige if it is shared by the reputed farmer\(^6\). In weddings, \textit{savubhâgya} (general prosperity) and \textit{sasrika} (fertility) constitute core concerns for the young couple and their relatives. For dying people, the accumulation of \textit{ping} (merit) is pivotal in achieving a good rebirth or at best nirvana. Hence, as this selective description of successful living indicates, the ideas around the good life (and death) and the related hopes, fantasies, aspirations, and desires are likewise diverse. As pointed out earlier, additional ideals of ways of living and fantasies have emerged in the changes that occur in society. Success in education, profitable business, high positions in bureaucracy, working in Dubai or other important commercial centres in the world are all likewise aspired to by many of the villagers I lived with, hence joining in with an ambiguous reconfiguration of ideals on leading a successful life and often joined by an increased sense of lack and failure.

The combination of various avenues for achieving the good life involves an enmeshment of various types of social, religious, cultural, and economic values that coalesce at certain events into an assemblage of not necessarily harmonious parts. Our prime example is illustrative in this regard. The increase of \textit{pretas} points at the successful cultivation of desire driven by the inculcation of consumerist dispositions. Simultaneously, this increase leads by way of sorcery attacks to ill-health and economic hardships. It is as if desire punished itself through the \textit{pretas} by way of a feedback loop. We see thus a new mixture emerging of local concerns with excessive desire from the perspective of Buddhist generosity and of economic aspirations of becoming a successful entrepreneur and consumer. This mixture in fact creates a superposition of these components that enables the new phenomenon of increased presence of \textit{pretas} and sorcery attacks. This phenomenon where the interaction of component-parts create a sum not reducible to these parts by way of their superposition—counteracting or enhancing existing phenomena—is what Karen Barad (2007:71-94) labels \textit{diffraction}. In our case, this entails that economic subjectivity is superposed by dispositions of the Buddhist perspective on desire, creating the diffracted phenomenon of the increase in \textit{pretas}. In other words,\(^6\)

\(^6\) This entails a very similar dynamic of value transformation to the case described by Nancy Munn (1992) among the Gawa in Papua New Guinea.
diffraction entails a new phenomenon that emerges when two other phenomena enmesh, such as in the case when two stones are thrown in the water and the different waves start shaping each other in new ways, at some places counteracting each other and at other locations enhancing one another. In this study, I wish to flesh out such processes of diffraction and complex interactions, of which the increased presence of pretas is but one illustration. This is a case where the magic of capitalism is combined with Sinhalese magic and where we see a local occult economic practice emerging as a way of becoming successful subjects again and making sense of a rapidly changing world in which the means of achieving successful outcomes become more opaque (Comaroff & Comaroff 2001).

Therefore, we observe a multiplication of possible avenues of achieving a successful living (economic, social, ritual), which complicates the ways of how to live a life, increases anxieties and possible failures, and spurs creativity and novel phenomena in their enmeshment. Increased fragility and precariousness could explain the recourse of more people into different kinds of magical solutions (ranging from sorcery to casino speculation and short selling). Yet, movements like MONLAR stick to the politics of ‘rationally’ influencing policies, albeit in a passionate way as is engrained in the very activity of ad-vocacy as vocation. They seek out instances of economic exclusion and signal these in order to pressurise the government of Sri Lanka to take action. More specifically, our Colombo-based activists focus on the inequities that commercial agriculture and agri-businesses bring about, forcing millions of people into economic precariousness and deprivation. In order to increase its pressurising power, MONLAR has become a member of Via Campesina, a global network of peasant organisations that advocates food sovereignty at international forums, such as the World Social Forum, and by campaigning against the World Trade Organisation (WTO), World Bank, and International Monetary Fund (IMF).

To sum up, insecurity, precariousness, fragility, or anxiety is bound up with desired ways of living and constitutes the transversal theme of the generic insecurity throughout this work.
Food

Food plays a vital role in the negotiation of desire and precariousness in their different shapes, and as such it constitutes the predominant transversal theme in this study. In our key moment and subsequent brief discussion, I mentioned food in a trivial way just as in many ethnographic works, thereby aiming to tease out the contrast more clearly with my foregrounding of food in this work. Generally, food often appears here and there, but it does not receive the treatment it deserves, although much has improved lately with the increasing popularity of food studies. Food easily passes under our radar, swarming the obvious, everyday, carnal, and non-verbal aspects of our lives. Likewise, it has easily and all too often fallen out of the purview of grand scientific analyses and accounts, which is surprising, for food shapes human life. It is a core aspect of human beings crafting their lives and of fashioning themselves with particular tastes and flavours of life. Food indeed brings us back to the gut, visceral, and sensorial ways of living one’s life throughout different locations in the world. Moreover, before we even acquire the language to communicate with foreign people, we get to taste some of the foods they share as a form of non-verbal or pre-verbal communication. Early travellers and colonisers got to know the food before they could speak the language of the ‘natives’ (see the vivid descriptions of Robert Knox [1681] for instance), and this continues to be the case in touristic encounters and also in initial fieldwork encounters of anthropologists. Food, and the physical need for it, entangles with our encounters before we can communicate linguistically and brings the encounter to a carnal, visceral, and intimate level. Food thus operates in large part below the radar of the verbalised and cognised level, and as such it offers us a striking vantage point from which to study the fashioning of lives by various groups of people. My interviews about food-related practices rarely proved fruitful, precisely as the interviewees could hardly verbalise their relationships with food because it predominantly operates at a level in which human beings are unaware and thus not so much at the level of conscious cognition and verbalisation. Reducing food experiences to such cognised levels obfuscates much of the integrated experience of food. Hence, my participant observations of food habits and practices were primordial sources of information whereas my interviews provided valuable additional material to think about. Food is not only a colourful, tasty, and savoury topic of study, but it also provides us with a fascinating sensorial, practical, and evocative material methodology of research. I will elaborate on the conceptual development of food as a methodology of research in the next

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7 I return to the deployment of research methodologies towards the end of this introductory chapter.
theoretical chapter, but let me give a little taste of its methodological importance by returning to our initial key moment.

In the Sātuwe rite, meanings did not just become pasted onto an inert matter of food. Instead, its agency and vibrant materiality became deployed in remedying a situation of unease. In South Asia, food is generally apprehended as a powerful agent in carrying across moral and evil aspects from one person to the other, hence the taboos on sharing food between castes (Appadurai 1981, Khare 1976, Daniel 1984, Kapferer 1997). Its ‘porous’ properties were mobilised in the dehi käpīme, in which the lime absorbed the pretas and their malicious effects. The cutting of the lime enacted and effectuated the undoing of the incarcerating bond between the members of the afflicted family and the pretas. Following that, pretas were offered their favourite foods in small offering baskets. They received red meat and nearly rotten fruits, suitable to their degenerate and desperate state. The distinctions in offerings adopt a certain cultural logic. Offering pretas attractive foods would upset the deities, whose powers the kapurāla moreover has to draw upon. Deities do not like to be brought onto the same levels as pretas by receiving the same kind of food. So, we can see a process of distinction taking place by way of food consumption practices in the invisible world of these non-human beings, just as Pierre Bourdieu (2008) has described the ways in which belonging to a socio-economic class is fashioned by the type of ingredients, plates, and utensils people use in their meals. The food offerings thus refashion and reinforce the hierarchies in the Sinhalese pantheon. If the deities were not pleased by the offerings, the kapurāla could not get varam from them to do his restorative and healing work. As one can never be really sure whether this permission has actually been granted, great care is taken to offer the finest, best-looking, and sweetest-smelling foods to facilitate the deities’ goodwill and to increase the likelihood of receiving this varam and success in the rite. A good meal brings about miracles, not only in relation to the invisible world of deities, but also in lengthy political negotiations. Thus, our brief account illustrates the vital and mediating capacity of food in negotiating a situation of ill-health and unease. Moreover, food is extremely powerful in this renegotiation and refashioning of health and well-being, for it is intricately bound up with desire, not only the desire of human beings, but also with the greed of pretas.

To sum up, food powerfully and actively entangles human and non-human life. Hence, our methodological conceptualisation in the next chapter will expand on the entanglement of food, desire, insecurity, and life that is productive of various other (ritual and political) arrangements that populate our lives. In our rendering, both food and its associated process of
cooking, holographically condense (as three-dimensional miniatures) the wider ‘cooking’ of life. Food and its entanglement with human processes turn *machinic* (Deleuze & Guattari 2009) and creative, not mechanic, in the gestation of various other life forms, arrangements, experiences, and institutions centred around food. Indeed, food, which skirted our radar in our prime example, becomes the core transversal theme as both a topic and a methodology in this study, inasmuch as it remains entangled with desire, insecurity, and regeneration.

A number of parallels can be drawn in the existing literature. I pick out one here at this early stage. We see that our transversal themes of desire, insecurity, food, and regeneration are similar to those of Miriam Kahn’s (1986) seminal work about the Wamira in Melanesia. She describes a people, viewing their balanced desire as vital to the mutual synergy and regeneration of food and human beings, and to the avoidance of death and decay. Her work is permeated by the issues of food, desire, and precarious balances, as is this monograph. Yet, my account differs in the ontological, or rather ontogenetic, emphasis on the actual permeability, radical relationality, and mutual transformability of food and human beings. I explore these similarities and differences with Kahn’s work further in our next chapter.

Let us now turn to the topical themes that coincide with the four spheres in which I study these transversal themes and that as such constitute the chapters of this book.
Topical Themes

In this chapter, I will discuss how the transversal themes coalesce into particular entangled states in the distinguished realms of everyday life, ancient medical and Buddhist texts, ritual action, and social activism respectively. We will look at the varying ways in which the entanglement of food, desire, insecurity, and regeneration expresses itself in these different forms that emerge through processes of context-driven actualisations.

Everyday Food Life

So far, I forged the conditions to approach food as a methodology. Here, I approach food more as a topic of study in and for itself, even if both methodological and topical takes on food are hard to disentangle. The topics that will be discussed as part of the overall rubric of “everyday food life” are very diverse and would have dispersed in all directions, had I not followed the assembly lines of food in the village where I conducted my ten-month fieldwork.

I take up the movement of food in its assembly line as a creative kind of wayfaring line (Ingold 2007:72-84)\(^8\) in which food wanders in a zigzagging mode through different contexts where it enmeshes with different entities and contexts, and where these interactions cause mutual transformations or becomings of both itself and its surroundings and entities. Food then not finds itself in a network of relations and interactions, but rather in a meshwork. I start following food’s wayfaring assembly line by looking at domestic food life as the consumption of food motivates its production.

The domestic life of food revolves pivotally around its actual cooking and preparation, mobilising gendered and age-related practices, transferral of skills, embodied learning\(^9\), and lastly, experimentation. In French, experimenter, means both experimenting and experiencing, so when I use “experimentation”, I evoke the experimental, experiential, and also the becoming-experienced-in (derived from on Dewey in Noddings 2010:268-278) connotations of the word, as they are all implied in the everyday cooking practice. Besides the cooking of food, I will discuss the ways in which eating how, when, with whom, and where are

\(^8\) Hence, I use the term “assembly” not in the sense that Tim Ingold does in his juxtaposition between “assembly lines” and “wayfaring lines”. This opposition is correct only when assembly is conceived of in mechanic terms, whereas I follow Deleuze and Guattari (2009) to define the “assembly line” as a lifeline of an entity, in which the entity has enmeshed with other lines and becomes transformed in that enmeshment. Hence, it follows the machinic, creative, multiple, and diversified approach of Deleuze and Guattari to enmeshment of lines that enables mutual transformations and mutual becomings.

\(^9\) Just as in my earlier remark on the non-verbality of food, I likewise learned to cook before I could communicate on a basic level.
performed. Various gendered, caste, and age-related codes on consumption come into play and are performed, renegotiated, and experimented with every day.

After this first aspect of the domestic sphere, the chapter on everyday life will move towards the paddy fields, the small home gardens, and *hena* (slash-and-burn) fields, to present an overview on food’s wayfaring evolution from seed to harvest, and the multitude of factors that come into play in achieving the successful or deplorable harvest output in the end. We will look at issues of hiring and sharing labour, tractors, harvesting machines, as well as issues of wild elephant raids on the fields, management of irrigation systems, agricultural extension services, and farmers’ groups. Hence, we look at the ways in which food articulates (connects with, expresses, materialises, and condenses) itself differently (and not only its value) when moving from the domestic sphere to the more public village politics of organising food cultivation.

In brief, the wanderings and various growth, gestation, and cooking phases of food will be discussed under the chapter of everyday life, while taking into account the insecurities, desires, and the various aspects of socio-cultural life in the village as shaped by (the rhythms of) food. Moreover, we will see how the zigzagging wayfaring movements of food in the moments of its flourishing into a new state—evolving from seed to flower, from flower to grains, from grains to cooked food, and from cooked food to excrement—all involve a mutual becoming. It entails not only an autopoiesis of food, but as it is entangled with human beings and desire, all three get mutually transformed and regenerated in the process of the wayfaring assembly line, by way of which these enmeshments and mutual becomings closely relate to the fourth entangled transversal theme of regeneration.

However fascinating, it would be impossible to specifically trace the assembly lines of all particular foodstuffs that make up the taste palate of the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. Therefore, I will focus predominantly on two iconic foods, which are consumed on a daily basis and of which the plant remains are utilised in many different ways: rice and coconut. Nevertheless, these foods would not be as tasty without spices and curry side dishes, so I do occasionally take these additional foodstuffs into account as to avoid obfuscating the diversity of the palate and the interrelations among its ingredients. Yet, aiming to show the mutual becomings effectuated by our being entangled with food, I need to reduce the diversity in order to show the overall extent and the pervasiveness of the particular assembly lines of rice and coconut, as these two already enmesh and mix with numerous aspects of life in Sri Lanka. Rice and
coconut are, besides being consumed daily, also pivotal in rituals, politics, and international trade. Because of the recurrence of rice and coconut in everyday meals and in most rituals, I chose the combination of coconut milk and rice, *kiribath* (milk-rice) as the affix of the pseudonym for my *gama* (village) of stay, thus becoming Kiribathgama. Yet I had to distinguish my pseudonym from the existing town of kiribathgoda in western Sri Lanka. Let us now turn to the topical theme of ancient texts.

*Food in Ancient Ayurvedic and Buddhist Texts.*

In what follows, I will explore the role of food in shaping life as analysed according to Ayurveda, a South Asian health system, and Theravada Buddhist doctrine. We will see how food relates and shapes the various components and forces that take part in the process of assembly and assemblage of human life and the world as interrelational. For instance, in its enmeshment with human beings in the mouth and digestive tract, food is in Ayurvedic rendering decomposed into several components that are transformed under influence of the gastric fire and that nourish several humours and bodily elements of the human person. The related notion of health consists in observing a balanced intake of food and its associated qualities as to remain a healthy person co-composed of beneficial balances of these humours and bodily elements. We will analyse these dynamic processes of balancing and transformation at the hand of the Charaka Samhita (Shree Gulabkunverba Ayurvedic Society 1949), the text where the basic Ayurvedic principles are most clearly explained.

Following our Ayurvedic textual analysis of the world as shaped through food and the aspect of maintaining good health and well-being, we will subsequently turn towards the analysis of Theravada Buddhist texts to focus more on the aspect of desire as mediated by food. We will explore how it is possible to refashion oneself as a virtuous person through the particular and practical ways in which one relates to food by specifically discussing the following texts: the Agañña Sutta, the Āhāra Patikūlasanānā, and the Vinaya Pitaka.

These ancient texts are part of the collective subconscious and continue to permeate everyday practices of preparing and consuming food. The textual discussion of these ancient texts therefore provides an insight and useful background in understanding the fundamental

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10 The reason is the same as to why I alter the names of private persons in this text: that is to secure the privacy and anonymity of people according to the anthropological traditions and ethics.
entanglement and interpenetration of food, human beings, and the world, a meshwork which we see at work in both everyday and ritual action.

*Ritual*

Rituals in the village of Kiribathgama are very much part of daily life, and as such, our division of everyday and ritual life is necessarily arbitrary given the fuzziness of “everyday” and “ritual” in the first place. In the small village of stay and its immediate surroundings, one can attend almost weekly some kind of larger collective ritual (involving more than just the nuclear family members). Broadly defined, ritual entails repeated sequences of practical actions and techniques in engagements with the invisible world and non-human agents to transform the way of being-in-the-world. These may include smaller rites that occur at a daily basis within the confines of a family, such as offering incense and small bits of food to the Buddha at the domestic shrine, or large-scale annual harvest festivals that mobilise the whole village. I opt to treat ritual separately, as many of the daily concerns, desires, and mediations of food tend to be condensed in specific ways and articulations according to contexts of the respective ritual (e.g. harvest, life-cycle, or death). Hence, ritual utilisations of food become highly evocative of the ways in which food, desire, and insecurity are entangled and how this entanglement is dealt with in different ways in each of the rituals. As such, the ritual discussion of food forms a core chapter in this monograph.

Since the inception of anthropology, the aspect of rituals in life has taken a central place in anthropological theorising. Rituals have been accounted for by way of their function in the establishment of group bonds and collective identity in functionalist and structural-functionalist approaches, spearheaded by Bronislaw Malinowski (1984), E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1969), and Radcliffe-Brown (2006). Functionalism and structural-functionalism view rituals as parts of holistic and integrated systems of cultures. Still in a structuralist vein, although not viewing societies as harmonious static wholes, Victor Turner (1974) highlighted the liminal and transformative aspect of rituals, and focussed on the ritual also in and for itself (Handelman 2004). He drew upon Van Gennep’s stages of the ritual process, in which Turner highlighted the *liminal*, betwixt-in-between, phase of ritual, in which various meanings of society become subverted, freely connected, and transformed to torque back onto society. Hence, symbols and meanings of society acquire new significations through rituals. The subversive potential of rituals motivates some scholars, such as Jean and John Comaroff
(1999, 2001) to approach certain rituals as forms of resistance. Ranjini Obeyesekere (1999) discusses Sri Lankan theatre during the crackdown on the 1980s JVP-uprising as one of the few limited spaces in which political subversion remained possible, as theatre plays drew upon ‘safe’ ritual themes, thereby creating an allowed space for political criticism and ridicule. Other scholars such as Gananath Obeyesekere (1981, 1987) and Tanaka Mazakazu (1997) have focussed on the psychological and symbolic aspects of rituals, in which transference, symbolisation, metaphorisation became central. Later on, scholars such as René Devisch (1993), Edward Schieffelin (1985), and Bruce Kapferer (1991,1997) have focussed on the performative aesthetics, but more importantly, on the praxiological and actual transformational potential of ritual as performance, in which object and subject become re-entangled and where practice and representation are one. Ritual acts upon a mode of being-in-the-world and transforms this very being by way of somatic processes. I draw further upon this somatic-transformative approach, and attempt to merge it with the vibrant materiality of food, which collaborates with ritual action to enable the envisaged ritual transformations to occur, hence food’s entanglement with regeneration. In our key example, we have already seen some of the healing effects that food can generate in the liberation of people from a *preta bandana* through the Sātuwe rite. Rituals are core moments of transformation in which certain experiences and meanings emerge into the radar of our awareness, at least temporarily. Henceforth, I deem rituals to be vital entry gates into the transformative capacities of food in its entanglement with human desires and anxieties, such as will become clear in the discussion of food offerings in obtaining favourable outcomes, prosperity, and safer life-transitions. In ritual, food becomes intense, condense, and an allegorical materialisation of processes of life, desire, anxiety, and transformation. Food matters, as it is involved in the *mattering* of people’s core concerns that become particularly explicit, worked on, and transformed in the seething ritual event which regenerates life in conjunction with food’s action. In those events, the ritual cooking of food becomes the allegorical ‘cooking’ of life that this practical activity condenses. Here we can see why ritual is that important in its enmeshment with food as a means to effectuate transformations in obtaining good harvests or effectuating life-enhancing life-cycle transformations (pointing at our regenerative theme).
Activism

As mentioned earlier, there is a lot about food that escapes our attention and that resides in our taken for granted practices that centre around it. This elusiveness of food in our daily life may in part account for the reductionist views in more common political economic and scientific narratives that focus on its seemingly more visible and tangible aspects\(^{11}\). In the penultimate chapter of this monograph, I will re-present a more familiar political economic account on food production, consumption, and markets, in Sri Lanka as connected with global trade and policies.

Following a more theoretical exposé on the overall political economy of food, my account will initially focus on the historical national and international aspects of food. This includes topics of international trade, colonisation, politics, resistance movements, nationalism, Marxism, and liberalisation of the economy. This historical political economy constitutes the context of the food activism that I will discuss by way of the case study of MONLAR.

In addition to exploring the analysis, vision, organisation of the work, and life narratives of the activists of MONLAR, I will turn to the particular case of the global food (price) crisis of 2008 and discern how MONLAR links this event to the industrialised agriculture, which it sees as epitomised by the green revolution of the 1960s and 70s. The green revolution\(^{12}\) is the event where new high yielding varieties of grains were developed on the basis of a higher responsiveneess to chemical inputs with the goal of increasing the food supply to feed the growing world population. MONLAR discusses these and other agricultural issues predominantly in terms of the political economic categories of inputs, outputs, land, labour, and capital.

Hence, we will see that food becomes connected and articulated with different phenomena and categories at higher levels of generality and encompassing larger geographical areas than for instance ritual action does. I situate this difference in the personal life narratives and personal lifeworlds of the activists, as they are occupying different positions in society as those farmers they claim to represent. For instance, the activists living in towns are more dependent on the market to obtain their food than the subsistence farmers are, and these

\(^{11}\) Just like the sentiments and affects surrounding food, relations of production or of oppression are not visible in themselves either, but the practices and comportments of these relations are.

\(^{12}\) I deliberately write green revolution without capital letters as to point out its ambivalence. Utilising capital letters would convey a sense of millenial relief that the green revolution holds to its proponents that have faith in technological fixes to complex problems.
personal practical engagements with food may account for their high emphasis on food markets. So, I explore their activist articulation of food in political economic terms.

Subsequently, I will link the specificity of the activist articulation of food to the general dynamics of political economy, focussing on abstraction. Indeed, we see in the activist articulation that food is abstracted from the intimate, sensorial, experimental, medical, ritual, and practical lifeworld and is brought to the larger national and international levels as well as broader abstract categories of a higher generality. This abstraction includes three processes: scale-making (articulating food at higher and larger national and international scales), reductionism (focussing on a few aspects or food components), and generalisation (bundling multiple aspects into broader and more general themes and categories). This process resonates with the processes enclosed in the grand narrative schemes of politicians, political economists, and many scientists. I will argue that this overall abstraction is related to the dynamics of political advocacy and mobilisation.

Finally, I will compare activism more explicitly with ritual at the hand of our transversal themes and see how these themes actualise differently in the respective contexts of ritual and activism. Despite the differences in articulation of food when compared to the everyday, medical, and ritual, it is clear that the activists do share with villagers underlying common concerns with desire, insecurity, and regeneration, such as for instance in the case of the shared concern with excessive desire articulated into the forms of pretas or entrepreneurs and consumers as driven by greed. The materiality of food plays out these issues of desire and precariousness in the gut of people. Whereas sharing and generosity are encouraged on an everyday basis, and greedy, selfish, and stingy accumulation (euphemistically termed as ‘interest’ [Robertson 2001:52-57]) are discouraged, food becomes a means through which to play out these values in everyday, ritual, medical and spiritual, and even political life. This balancing of desire is crucial in preventing hardship for others, as was illustrated in our key example. Everyday sharing with visitors is something one cannot refuse, even though one is not always as generous as one claims. Likewise, ritual offerings are part of a give and take relation with deities who offer their protection and enhance prosperity if they are treated well at the rites in their honour. MONLAR, in its turn, critiques the accumulative drives of corporations apparent in their patenting of seeds, increasing profits at the cost of the poor, and attempts to engage in land grabbing. Instead, they propose putting agriculture back into the hands of farmers who should preferably enter into a give and take relationship with nature. In this regard, MONLAR proposes regenerative agriculture, in which farmers feed the soil with
organic manure as to allow the soil “to become an eternal spring of gifts”. Some of the work of MONLAR consists of training farmers in adopting the practices of regenerative agriculture, and in this regard, the organisation not only shares concerns of desire and insecurity, but also of regeneration with the wider concerns among the population. Still, MONLAR’s work is predominantly political, attempting to advocate policy change, and it is in these context-specific articulations of food that some of the problematic abstractions lie. Then again, the passions engaging these predominantly male activists elicit drives and desires for public influence and power. Indeed, the wish for political and public power plays a part in the translation of food into more masculine domains of the public sphere: agriculture, land, and markets instead of food’s intimacy in family relations around the hearth for instance.

With this introduction of the four transversal themes of food, desire, insecurity, and regeneration, as well as the four topical themes of everyday, ritual, medico-spiritual, and political activist life, we are prepared to start taking stock of the vast range of heterogeneous components of the food assemblage along its wayfaring lines of assembly into formations that link up with these themes. We are now also able to clarify the research questions.
Research Questions

The overall research focuses on food and the ways in which it is entangled and enmeshed with the other transversal themes and topical issues that discern particular realms of existence. In other words, the research thus examines whether it is possible to study the diverse aspects of life through food and thus to develop food as a methodology of research into various ways of living. From this follows the question of how we can conceptualise food such that it works as a method while being in tune with recent debates on matter–meaning and human–non-human relationships. The final general question entails how this food-based approach will help us look differently at life in the making and the multi-species interrelationalities involved.

In the theoretical chapter of this monograph, I will first work out an embryonic conceptualisation of food that should allow us to utilise food as a vehicle to venture into our discerned spheres of life: everyday village life around the hearth and the fields, ancient texts of Ayurveda and Buddhism, ritual regeneration and transformation of life, and activist articulation of food in political economic terms. Hence, the theoretical conceptualisation of food has to be able to account for and deal with a large heterogeneity. After this preparation, we will be ready to submit the vehicle of food to the test, treating each of these four topical themes through which we will solve specific research questions that arise in those particular contexts:

1) How do the everyday engagements with food in its cultivation, procurement, cooking, and sharing holographically condense and substantiate the sustenance and regeneration of life and relationships in what I will allegorically call the ‘cooking’ of life? How is food’s entanglement with desire, insecurity, and regeneration shaped in these everyday practices? How does food produce the rhythms of the bubbling of life’s ‘cooking’? In which ways does food thus (rhythmically) shape everyday life in a Sinhalese village?

2) How does food, according to the ancient texts of Ayurveda and Buddhism, shape life both metaphysically and practically? In which ways does food constitute the human being in both its somatic and psychological aspects? How does food negotiate insecurities and desires in a way that well-being and regeneration of life are sustained? In which ways can food help human beings craft themselves to become healthy and balanced persons on the path to nirvana?
3) How does food holographically condense the concerns of insecurity, excessive desire, and potential degeneration, and turn into a collaborator in ritual human action to achieve life-enhancing transformations? How does food then help achieve these transformations regarding similar concerns in relation to very different ritual settings and explicit aims?

4) What constitutes an activist articulation of food as entangled with concerns of precariousness, greed, and regeneration? How and why does MONLAR tie in with this activist articulation in political economic terms? In which ways does this articulation share and differentiate from concerns as engaged in the previous three context-driven actualisations of food? What do these different articulations tell us about scales and levels of existence that food populates?

In the overall conclusion, we can then briefly review this food-based approach and show by way of one additional example how this cross-topical approach, which my interdisciplinary and inter-cultural frame of food entails, enables us to perceive novel meshworks from which we can learn from the ways of being we study.

While teasing out our transversal and topical themes, I have shown in which directions the answers will take us to. Yet the wider and deeper relevance of this food-based approach will only become fully clear when I introduce my theoretical frame in the next chapter. The methodological conceptualisation of food is based on an inter-philosophical, inter-cultural, and inter-disciplinary polylogue between assemblage theory (Deleuze & Guattari 2009, Delanda 2006), quantum physics theory (Barad 2007), Ayurveda, and Theravada Buddhism. To lift the veil partially, I define food as an assemblage that is enmeshed and entangled with the component-assemblages of desire, insecurity, and human beings. All four entities exist of heterogeneous elements, qualities, and components that interact, and so create resulting expressions that are context-driven. Moreover, according to Ayurvedic and Buddhist perspectives, the fire element in interaction with these assemblages radically transforms them, and it is by way of foregrounding the heated and transformational capacities of fire that I render the various practical and imaginative engagements with food as ‘cooking’, thereby ‘igniting’ assemblage theory along alchemic lines following Noëlle Châtelet (1998), but in a more South Asian fashion. Moreover, as assemblages interact, they exchange components and as such mutually regenerate and transform each other, causing multiple becomings. It is heuristic in this case to think of the process of digestion, which energises the human person and transforms food into excrement. Hence, the seething entanglement of food, desire,
insecurity, and human beings transforms and ‘cooks’ these entities that mutually co-evolve, regenerate, transform, and become, thereby regenerating life and the world. Hence, our broad research questions spin off from this core approach to food as an entangled assemblage participating in the production, gestation, and ‘cooking’ of various arrangements that make up human life throughout ritual, textual, everyday, and activist expressions.

Let us now take a closer look at how I will structure my answer to the general research questions and specific issues that have arisen so far.
Set-Up

The overall structure of this monograph is peculiar in the sense that it is structured into a few large chapters. As I wish to initiate a new conceptual methodology of research *through* food, it is quintessential to illustrate that my frame works not only in for instance a ritual setting, but also that it functions across different contexts if it aspires to enable comparative research. I test my frame in four fairly different settings, which I have labelled the topical themes. Each of these settings, contexts, or spheres could make a separate book if food and its meshworks were treated in full ethnographic detail, but then the comparative aspect and the applicability of my overall conceptualisation of food would be less powerfully demonstrated. Therefore, this study is marked by a breadth and wide diversity of topics to illustrate that my embryonic frame works, even though it remains open to improvements. This option of course led to a decrease in detail or a decrease in resolution compensated by the wider and comparative view of the whole and parts that enter into the picture by zooming out (Stroeken 2010:109, 113), but I tried to keep this loss of detail to a minimum.

The four chapters—everyday life, Ayurvedic and Buddhist texts, ritual action, and social activism—stand quite independently on their own and could be read fairly independently from each other, but the overall frame exerts its full power when applied in their combined complexity and multiplicity. Indeed, the strength of the suggested conceptualisation of food lies in being able to simultaneously account for a wide variety of settings and contexts, and their similarities and differences, even if one restricted utilising this frame of food to the context of say ritual.

The overall structure of this work is reflected in the four main chapters that are preceded by the introduction and the theoretical exposé, and followed by the general conclusion. Let me briefly recapitulate the structure of this work as visualised below on the basis of the themes.
Topical themes:

**everyday life**
- relations of give and take and compassionate sharing
- greed, competition, and one-way extraction of resources

**medical and Buddhist texts**
- balance: health, well-being, and liberation
- imbalance: ill-health, suffering, and samsara

**ritual action**
- regeneration of life, world, and relationships
- breakdown of human–non-human relationships, jeopardising life-sustenance

**social activism**
- regenerative agriculture based on give and take relationships and food sovereignty
- industrial and commercial agriculture based on selfish extraction of resources

Transversal themes immanent in the themes above:

- desire
- insecurity
- regeneration

All components and processes above are entangled with the assemblage of food that is the core guiding line throughout as depicted below.

Template nr 1: Overview over themes
In chapter 2, I will thus introduce and embryonically elaborate my theoretical and methodological conceptualisation of food as an assemblage that expresses itself differently across different contexts. Indeed, food’s context-driven actualisation is resulting from its interactions, entanglements, enmeshments, and transactions of components while it moves across these milieus and contexts. I will elaborate this frame in polylogue with quantum physics, Ayurveda, and Buddhist philosophy to remedy, in their mutual resonance with assemblage theory, some of its shortcomings. Moreover, based on the centrality of fire in both South Asian systems of thought, I further modify assemblage theory according to alchemic lines into the allegorical language of ‘cooking’. I foreground this heating element’s role in accelerating heated transformations and becomings as well as the cooling and decelerating moments of stabilisation. The accelerated and decelerated becomings in our alchemic rendering of interacting assemblages as ‘cooking’, vitalises assemblage theory and brings back the sensorial to the forefront by including desire and anxiety in the seething entanglement of food and human beings. The vibrant entanglement fractalises into multiple formations, arrangements, institutions, and relations that make up human life, such as ritual food offerings, intimate sharing relations, medical treatises, and agricultural policies. To end, this theoretical chapter enables us to take stock of the various components and dynamics of the food assemblage as entangled with desire, insecurity, and regeneration as well as its diverging articulations and context-driven actualisations in the overall ‘cooking’ or regeneration of life.

In the third chapter, I turn to an inquiry into the different ingredients or components of the food assemblage in everyday village life. I will focus on the rhythms of each of the components to illustrate how an assemblage works and how each of the components has its specific vibrations that in their combinations superpose and create something new: the agency of the assemblage with its distinct composite rhythm, temporality, and spatiality. First we will look at the domestic individual and collective rhythms as they are produced around the activities of preparing and consuming food and how these diverge around age, caste, and gender-related lines. The music of food cultivation and procurement forms the next part where I will show how the more seasonal and collective rhythms of cultivation influence personal temporalities. For instance, given the collective dependency on the irrigation reservoir, farmers decide collectively when to start cultivating and this affects domestic rhythms and division of tasks as well. Moreover, I will not only focus on human beings, but also on the way non-human beings and entities partake in shaping the overall rhythm of the
music of village life, whether these entities mix harmoniously or insert a false tune. For instance, elephants clash with people in a competition for food and alter sleeping cycles as farmers have to guard their fields during the nights. Hence, I show how food becomes the conductor of the different elements that make up the concert of life in the village.

Chapter 4 turns less dynamic and sensorial as we turn to the crystallisation of food-related dynamics of health and well-being into ancient texts. Health is evidently a core concern in the sustenance and regeneration of life and this is treated in depth in the Charaka Samhita, a core text of Ayurveda. I will discuss this text in detail as it elicits the composition of the human person and the fundamental impact that food has on this composition and on the balances that are required to lead a healthy and fulfilling life. I treat it in such detail as these principles have become part of the practical epistemologies of living that people perform in their dealings with food, even though they are only able to explicitly mention some of the general principles. Subsequently, I flesh out Buddhist canonical attitudes and solutions regarding the entanglement of food and desire to achieve well-being and to stay on the path to nirvana. I will discuss the Agañña Sutta, the Āhāra Patikūlasaññā, and the Vinaya Pitaka in particular, while placing these texts in the background of wider approaches to the various forms of desire in Buddhism as will be discussed in chapter 2.

In Chapter 5, we will explore the ways in which food holographically condenses the concerns of insecurity, desire, and regeneration and how it collaborates with ritual action in transforming a particular situation. More specifically, we will look at various life-cycle and cultivation-related rites and examine what the cooking and offering of particularly rice and coconut do in obtaining protection or securing a beneficial outcome. In particular I will analyse rites pertaining to birth, marriage, death, healing (such as the Sātuwe), harvests, New Year, and the Vesak Poya. I will show that food collaborates in transforming the acknowledged state of insecurity into the envisaged good life filled with prosperity and fertility.

The penultimate chapter 6 brings us to food at the higher and wider national and international levels and scales as articulated in political economy. We start off with a traditional historical political economic account of Sri Lanka narrated through food to illustrate the power of food in shaping national and international relations and to prepare the stage in which activist approaches to food emerge in contrast to the frame of food elaborated in this work. We will see how spices, especially cinnamon, tempted colonisers to take control over the island. I will
also show how the ancient times of the kings and irrigation technology continues to shape present day nationalist politics. This historical discussion establishes the context within which we can situate and articulate the activist discourses and practices of MONLAR as a movement that aims to influence policy-making. I will not only look at their activist vision and articulation of food at the higher and larger levels, but also bring to the fore the people behind their public activist being and their personal engagements with food, showing how these private aspects of being constitute the existential ground for the form of activism they perform. Following this descriptive part, I will compare MONLAR activism with ritual action highlighting repetitions and differences. I will explore the shared concerns of desire, anxiety, and regeneration, and the differentiated articulation of this in the political economic actualisation of food in their work, and the dynamics that underpin this differentiation.

Chapter 7 concludes the discussion by asking again how food can serve as a methodology of research and by giving a succinct review of the ways in which food entangles with desire, insecurity, desire, and regeneration articulated in specific ways in the realms of everyday, medical, ritual, and activist life. As such, food connects with and condenses these aspects and turns into a powerful conductor of the music of the ‘cooking’ of life. I will wrap up by eliciting one more new link that pertains to recurring hierarchies in society and politics that reproduce the hierarchy between rice and coconut. This enables me to illustrate that by studying ways of life through food, we can see novel connections between phenomena in societies.
Approach and Methodology

During one of the introductory courses of anthropology I was confronted with a distinction between *emic* and *etic* approaches to the study of cultures. Unlike emic accounts, etic approaches entail a study of another culture from a perspective not internal to that particular culture or social group but rather from the external observer (Kottak 1997:24). Hence, etic approaches often involve the deployment of an ethnocentric perspective on the Other and still hold sway in many accounts on the Third World, itself being an ethnocentric concept (Escobar 1995). The strength of anthropology and ethnography, I was told, lies in its emic approach, that is to understand the studied culture from within and based on its own premises. While worthy as a stance to strive for, I argue that a full emic account is impossible because of our different life histories and positionalities vis-à-vis the studied subjects. Yet, this is not to say that we should give up any attempt to avoid etic perspectives or give up on any emic attempts. Instead, we oscillate between both poles, which enables a cross-fertilisation between perspectives. In my own work, I attempt to reach this ideal of oscillation and de-centred analysis in which I, as an anthropologist, become betwixt-in-between and drawn towards the contexts in which I grew up, where I was trained as an anthropologist, and finally, in which I conducted my fieldwork. I become part of the ‘cooking’ of life and relationality with others, and as such, I become affected and different and so do my ideas and ponderings written down in this text.

Hence, in line with Derrida (1991) and Remotti (1991), I suggest viewing anthropology rather in terms of *anthropophagy*, especially viewed in connection with mutual becomings and transformations as expounded in assemblage theory. I mentioned earlier that the digestive process is heuristic in expanding on assemblage theory, and I will discuss that at length in the next chapter, but let me already give a taste of this for our current purposes. When food enters the human body, the mouth and digestive machines (Probyn 2000:14-20, Châtelet 1998:40) activate. The force and actions of the grinding teeth and the shower of saliva affect the food, altering its composition and creating a messy expression of the food assemblage. Meanwhile food releases components, such as heat and taste, which affect the tongue and the whole human person becoming nostalgic of, for instance, grandmother’s food. When the food goes down the digestive tract, it releases energy, vitamins, and proteins, energising the human body as long as the food is not poisonous. The gastric juices do their work and transform food’s expression further. After the whole process of digestion is over, the person is urged to release himself from the abject, which the food turned into: excrement. The anus-machine enacts a
cut in this meshwork where all entities have become transformed. Hence, I suggest that using this alimentary metaphor, anthropophagy, for anthropology summarises both our sensitive and open take on the research subject, as well as provides an awareness of our previous becomings and influence on the same subject.

While sharing my life and the food with my Sinhalese hosts, we came to learn about each other, without becoming fully the other and without becoming fully submerged into the other’s being. I have to admit that “eating them well” involved a great deal of balancing acts in order for me not to become vampiric (Roy 2010:12-14) in the sense of not getting affected by my hosts while greedily devouring them, but also in the sense of avoiding becoming completely devoured by them. At some point during my fieldwork, I let myself flow with their ways of living, so I was on the verge of losing myself, which did not seem to do good to either party. I felt drained, and they only perceived a weakened version of my personal flavour. To have a mutually enriching encounter, I think it is vital to not become fully submerged in the others’ way of life, but to remain in an open state of exchange and a sensitive mutual transformation.

The methodological and theoretical development of food reflects this concern of openness in the combination of four different sources into an intercultural approach, in which assemblage theory, quantum physics, Ayurveda, and Buddhism become transformed into a new rhizomatic entity. Moreover, my anthropophagic approach reflects itself in the account of the multiple ways in which food articulates itself differently throughout everyday, medical, ritual, and activist tropes. In fact, I have personally been enmeshed with various registers of engagement with food, increasing my sensitivity to the fact that food can become many different things and for the processes of articulation (both in the sense of expression and translation) that drive these differentiations. For a few years, I worked part-time as an agricultural labourer on an organic farm, where I became acquainted with some of the medical and political justifications in favour of organic food and agriculture. Later on, I became involved in Food Not Bombs\(^\text{13}\), where we cooked and shared food with homeless people on a weekly basis. Simultaneously, I participated in a food collective, in which we attempted to distribute organic food to low-income people, hence becoming aware of class-related aspects of organic food. Finally, I did voluntary work with Vredeseilanden, a Belgian NGO that works on securing access to markets for farmers in the South and on shortening market food

\(^{13}\) For more information on this initially US movement, see http://www.foodnotbombs.net/
chains in the North by aiding initiatives, such as food teams, that entail direct marketing. 

Hence, I became familiar with the different expressions of food before I went to conduct my research in Sri Lanka, where I became affected and astounded by the even greater diversity of food articulations. Hence, this work attempts to integrate these differentiations and relentless becomings of food and human beings into an embryonic frame of analysis that allows for the rendering of the fractalisations of arrangements, social institutions, and relations that emerge around food.

Sharing my life with my host family, the activists in Colombo, and others, I became enmeshed with Sinhalese life. Even more, while eating their food and learning to cook Sinhalese, I became physically enmeshed with my own research topic. Through these daily carnal engagements with the food and bodily exchanges of cooking skills, I acquired the most valuable information in this praxiological way, studying habitual practices and conducts in an embodied way. Yet, my practical entanglement entails that my experiences and derived information are necessarily gendered and age-related. I, being a white middle-class male from Belgium in his mid-thirties, was assigned a particular position as a visitor and outsider from the start. As an outsider, one has access to practices, ideas, and engagements that some insiders do not receive, but the inverse is also true. I can very well imagine that I did not get full access to some intimate female-related issues in relation to life-transition rituals and particular utilizations of food. I tried to remedy these shortcomings by conducting interviews with female translators. I worked with translator as my Sinhalese was not sufficient to conduct long open-ended interviews, yet, I could generally understand what was being said. These conversations were recorded and double-checked by other translators and professor Meddegama to neutralize the potential distortions that occur in translation. The interviews proved a great source of information as I conducted about 120 open-ended interviews, ranging from one hour to even six hours long. Still, the sensorial and non-verbal aspects of food often skirted the radar of the interviews. So, for issues directly related to food, my participant observation proved the most fruitful. For wider discussions on village life and the role of food in it, the interviews unpacked a lot of interesting additional information.

After my ten-month stay in Kiribathgama, I spent altogether nine months at the School of Oriental and African Studies and in its library, six months as a non-degree student at the university of Chicago, and several weeks at Peradeniya to explore the textual information in Buddhism and Ayurveda, as many people referred to these even if they had not read these texts themselves. Finally, I spent six months in Colombo and at the office of MONLAR,
where I conducted interviews with most of the activists, which I knew from a previous six-month work period in Colombo and my three-month MA dissertation research. By engaging with their documents over the course of five years, I acquired a good sense of their ideas, so in the interviews I looked more into their personal life stories. Finally, I spent a week at the head office of Via Campesina in Jakarta where I had casual conversations with activists. After this time of altogether 16 months of fieldwork in Sri Lanka, I hope I can offer a sufficiently sensitive feel of the field in this work.

Let us now move onwards to the theoretical and intercultural frame of this work in which I initiate food as a methodology of research.
Chapter 2: The Vibrant Entanglement of Food and Human Beings in Mutual Becomings

In the previous chapter, I gave a brief account of a heuristic key moment, a healing ritual, from which I distilled four transversal themes (desire, insecurity, regeneration, and food) as well as the broad topical themes (everyday, ancient textual, ritual, and activist tropes of articulation). Here, I will develop food conceptually, not only as a topic of study in and for itself, but also as a methodology that takes into account food’s entanglement with human life in general as well as with desire, insecurity, and what will be further elaborated as our fourth transversal theme, regeneration. I will thus theoretically initiate a conceptualisation of food’s entangled dynamics with which we can account for multiple phenomena that make up human life, such as ritual, economy, politics, intimate relations, connections to visible and invisible worlds, human-animal relations, etc. Simultaneously, I will show that there is nothing essentially inherent in food that determines its specific function in particular phenomena. Instead, food acquires its particular and multiple expressions (as in phenotype) throughout its wayfaring enmeshment with human beings, desire, and insecurity in the contexts of domestic, medico-spiritual, ritual, political, and activist life. Hence, food’s expression is rather context-driven in its concomitant becoming with other entities and environments.

In what follows, I will give an overview of this chapter and how we will zigzag through different theoretical and philosophical approaches to concoct a concept of food in which the remnants of the various approaches entangle into a new singular conceptual expression. In the first step, I will swiftly scan some approaches in food studies in anthropology and point out some of their shortcomings. To provide an initial answer to the quandaries highlighted, I take recourse to assemblage theory in the second section, based on readings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2009, 2011) as well as Manuel DeLanda (2006). I also discuss some authors who relate to assemblage theory and who critique the latter from their respective vital materialism (Bennett 2010) and agential materialism (Barad 2007) approaches. Taking the voiced critiques into account, I will modify the assemblage approach as I apply it to the conceptualisation of food as a machinic assemblage that is entangled with and holographically condenses human and non-human life. In the third phase, I consider and formulate some wider critiques on assemblage theory and other related materiality, affect, and emergence theories. Generally, I am concerned with the apparent “tyranny of the present” (Moore
2011:182) and the sometimes excessive decentring of human subjectivity in those theories. Within the field of social and cultural anthropology, these new affect or materiality approaches stand often in a very tense relation with the human subjectivists, and I suggest drawing inspiration from Ayurveda and Buddhist philosophy to find a way out of this theoretical materiality–subjectivity conflict. I will place assemblage theory in a polylogue with both strands as they all resonate with each other, and as to render our theoretical frame of food inter-cultural and inter-philosophical to enable cross-cultural comparison. I will integrate into our frame the ways in which Ayurveda and Buddhist philosophy analyse the world and engage with desire, insecurity, and the human being. Lastly, as an antidote to the abstract language of assemblage theory, I bring back to the fore the sensitivity of food by altering the language, not the spirit, of our frame into allegorical terms of ‘cooking’ to have a more visceral and sensorial way to approach food in its entanglement and mutual becoming with human beings, desire, and anxiety in the regeneration of the world.

Let us now turn to a succinct overview of food studies in anthropology and some of the concerns which we attempt to address by way of our conceptualisation.
Anthropology of Food

Since early anthropology food has featured well in various monographs, yet not systematically, centrally, and theoretically, apart from a few exceptions, such as Audrey Richards’ (2004) seminal work. Food has often been on the fringe of anthropological and ethnographic theorising, even though in some of those works food performs an important side role. Marshall Sahlins (1976:24-38), for instance, discusses the ways in which the structural opposition between land-people (owners) and sea-people (chiefs) in Eastern Fiji plays itself out in food-related practices and arrangements. In his account, food tells something about something else: a system of symbolical-practical-structural relations which food reflects. While approaching structural relations from a more practice-oriented perspective, Sahlins’ account of food in this particular instance carries remnants of the structuralist approach coined by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1983), who explored the mythological ways in which the categories of the raw and the cooked relate to the respective cognitive categories of non-, or less-human, and human. Hence, in these examples food is not so much a topic of study for itself, but rather for something other than itself in which food expresses other social and cognitive relations. Mary Douglas (2008) and Anna Meigs (1997) likewise study food for its wider symbolic (and structural) relations.

Sidney Mintz (1985) is one of the few anthropologists who took food seriously in and for itself and thereby fleshed out the power of a small foodstuff of sugar, motivating and forcing people to travel around the world. Only since the 1990s, we start seeing a boom in food studies (one only has to look into several edited volumes by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik 1997, 2008). Simultaneously the food studies trend has diversified and fractalised into studies on food and migration (Crenn, Hassoun, & Medina 2010), activism (Williams-Forson & Counihan 2011), memory (Sutton 2001), taste and class (Bourdieu 2008, Warde 1997), sex (Kahn 1986), and I could continue endlessly when including medical, nutritional, and biological researches. What these current different studies show, however, is that food is often studied in relation to one particular theme or issue, and less from a holistic perspective, such as earlier authors appeared to do in exploring food’s connections to other aspects of human existence and societies in their whole. Marianne Lien (2004:7) links this increased focus on topical concerns to the emergence of the anthropology of food as a subdiscipline and notes likewise: “as a result of such delineations, the complex entanglements that were the hallmark

14 Food repeatedly materialised the first engagement of anthropologists with their hosts even before they could speak their language.
of more holistic anthropological accounts tend to be lost.” Yet, some authors make headway to connect food to plural issues of concerns, such as David Sutton, Pierre Bourdieu, and Miriam Kahn mentioned above, but also Judith Farquhar (2002) who studies the connections of food with appetite, post-socialist politics, sex, and health, and Fransesca Bray (1994, 2007) who studies rice and food in their linkages with gender, technology, and history.

We will highlight that the research topic, method, and researcher, or altogether the apparatus of measurement (Barad 2007:141-146, 280-287), determine the findings and conceptual conclusions. In this vain, we can easily grasp that a well-directed focus in food studies, looking only at food for itself and into one aspect, but not for something other than itself and its wider relations, runs the danger of disabling a comparative or overarching conceptualisation of food. As this research looks at the different articulations (expressions, transformations, and translations) of food in ritual, everyday domestic life, ancient textual traditions, and political activism, I initiate in this section an embryonic frame of analysis which allows to alternate between and combine studying food for both itself (food as a subject of research) and for something other than itself (food as a methodology).

We could, however, find such integrative frames in the concepts of gastropolitics (Appadurai 1981:495) or gastrosemantics (Khare 1992:1, 27) in which one respectively looks at food and the role it plays in relations of hierarchy (e.g. caste), conflict, and competition over social and economic resources, or in which one approaches food as a comprehensive cultural language. Or, more satisfactorily and holistically, we could define food as a total social fact (Mauss 1990:78-79) or total social phenomenon (Scholliers 2007) in which food becomes not a mere institution, but rather an entire social system. Yet, “fact” is problematic because of its static connotation and thus its inability to account for the alterations that occur in the dynamic functions and structural relations around food, both in its physical and social aspects. With regard to the changing social aspects of food, Nancy Munn (1992) has eloquently demonstrated that the value of food can be transformed from an intimate consumption item through exchange practices (food sharing and exchange for circulating and enduring items, such as canoes) into the overarching public and political value of fame in the island of Gawa, near Papua New Guinea. Hence, she shows how food can be a fairly similar material entity that can potentially articulate different values depending on certain human practices and materials with which it gets embroiled. This point is vital as it accounts for the different expressions of food in ritual, textual, domestic, and activist tropes of articulation.
Points of Concern

As interesting as these latter totalising approaches to food may be, they do not sufficiently engage with something that food in particular blurs: the human–nature divide. These approaches, including the concept of total social fact, remain trapped within the human side of this divide. Philippe Descola and Gísli Pálsson (1996:2-3) as well as Tim Ingold (1990:208-211) have since long taken issue with this historically manufactured dichotomy in its particular Western form, even though it should be cautioned that similar distinctions may exist across different cultures (Moore & Sanders 2006:18-19). This human–nature or culture–nature distinction resonates with particular–universal, meaning–matter, subjective–objective, and mind–body divides (Viveiros de Castro 1998:469-470) in its obfuscation of the mutual implication of human and, ‘natural’ or ‘non-human’ entities. Moreover, studying other people’s engagements with their environment through the frame of a radical separation between the human and non-human easily fail to understand, for instance, an Amazonian perspective in which plants are persons and part of society (Descola 1996).

Science and technology studies (STS) have grappled with related divides and how to redefine them. Bruno Latour (2005), in coining the Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), tries to resolve the human–non-human divide by flattening the hierarchy that had been installed earlier when designating the human as the unique abode of agency (and so Latour disentangles agency from subjectivity). Latour (1993) places the microbe, laboratory instruments, and hygienic concerns on a single plane as they compose a network of actants, all endowed with a capacity to act and to affect the other actant or actor in the network. Hence, both the microbe and the microscope have an ability to act, just as human beings may have, although in my view this can vary according to circumstances. For instance, a microbe may wreck havoc in an already weakened human body, whereas in another time, it would be destroyed by the body’s strong defence system. In this materiality trend, agency is decoupled from human intentionality and gets distributed among human and non-human actants or actors, and as such the human subject gets decentred (Latour 2005:71). Yet, as Latour (2005:72) himself recognises, the frame of “human–non-human” still remains anthropocentric, but he specifies it does not intend to denote a specific ontological domain.

Actor-Network-Theory emphasises that no actor is ever alone in acting and that it is never clear where the overall action comes from (Latour 2005:46). Yet, it remains possible to trace associations between human and non-human actants that lead to the emergence of a set of
affairs. We see can see a close resonance with the focus on heterogeneity and emergence in assemblage theory (Deleuze & Guattari 2009) and the emphasis on the inclusive totality of phenomena in vital materialism (Bennett 2010) or of agential materialism (Barad 2007). However, the status of the heterogeneity within the actants, as the sources of action that can be either human or non-human (Bennett 2010:viii), is not very clear, nor whether an individual metaphysics after all haunts much of ANT. Karen Barad (2007:56) only mentions ANT in passing, but taking her approach to a logical conclusion, I infer from her radical relational and total approach that ANT is based on a Newtonian physics in which singular entities or particles (human or non-human) are a priori ontologically separate, localisable in space and time, and their associations traceable (Barad 2007:137-138). The prior distinguished relata then relate and create an emergent set of affairs. Yet, Bruno Latour (2005:46) argues that in his rendering the boundaries are not clean-edged and action is not inherent in these entities; it is rather action being influenced and dislocated by being affected. From their individuality, these entities (also the observing apparatus) inter-act and enter a posteriori into a network of associations where action is distributed. Hence, this implies a prior separate existence of entities, which in the radical emergence theory of Barad only emerges from a total phenomenon and a process of differential becoming. ANT thus does not depart from a fundamentally relational ontology in which entities themselves cannot a priori be separated, but rather differentiate and individuate through their fundamental relationality (Barad 2007:332-333).

To understand the reach and implications of these two potential objections—heterogeneity of actants and individual metaphysics—to ANT, we need first to take a closer look at assemblage theory and implicit critiques within agential materialism (Barad 2007). Suffice to state for now that in our assemblage approach, any entity or phenomenon is heterogeneous in its composition as it emerges from relational becoming and individuation entailing connection and disconnection. Hence, I define a human being not as a pre-determined individual entity, but rather as a relational node of individuation, emerging from interacting performances, cells, discursive practices, economic dispositions, parenting, food, and so forth. The human node thus shares to some degree heterogeneous components and relations with other differentiated nodes that likewise emerge from mutual becomings. Let us now look in more detail to assemblage theory and its resonances with various materialisms. Note that we are not talking about historical or Marxist materialism, but rather vibrant and agential materialisms that decentre the human subject.
Assemblage Theory

Manuel DeLanda (2006), and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2009) view entities and combinations of entities as assemblages that are emergent syntheses of heterogeneous components. For instance, the human being is an assemblage of neurological and bodily mechanisms, sense impressions, associative processes, and emotional dispositions (DeLanda 2006:49) whereas Hans riding a horse becomes an assemblage of eyes, weight, pride, roads, the house on the street, etc. (Deleuze & Guattari 2009:257-258). Hence the boundaries of assemblages do not necessarily coincide with the face-value boundaries of individual entities. Moreover, the emergent wholes are not reducible to the sum of the parts that act on each other (as in mixture), but the parts are rather creating a new resulting expression (as a new entanglement), open to ongoing transformation (DeLanda 2006:4-5). The parts are not effaced into a seamless whole, but they continue to exert their actions within the heterogeneous assemblage. Hence, an assemblage is a kind of machine of acting heterogeneous components and immanent with desire as the creative force as argued in the earlier work of “Anti-Oedipus” (Deleuze & Guattari 2011). Moreover, component parts can be detached from the whole and may be “plugged into a different assemblage in which its interactions are different” (DeLanda 2006:10), creating a different expression of the assemblage as a whole. Hence, there is nothing intrinsic to the assemblage that determines in a singularly determined causal way the shape it will get. Rather, its expression emerges from the resultant of the ongoing interactions of the components within the assemblage acting on each other and altering its expression. In this way, assemblage theory provides us with a non-essentialist, non-static, and non-linear approach to emergent entities.

The ongoing emergence of assemblages that acquire their expression by exchanging components with others while temporarily forming an interassemblage, become reminiscent of Barad’s (2007) formulation of phenomenon (as synonymous to interassemblage). In such phenomenon, determinate entities (assemblages), such as the object and measuring agency, emerge and differentiate from their intra-action within the phenomenon (intra-action as in contrast to inter-action, which is relying on metaphysics of individualism [Barad 2007:128]), and after which there is enacted a cut leading to the emergence of two differentiated entities or assemblages. Moreover, by way of exchanging parts in interaction, not only assemblages but also their component-parts alter in their respective expression and actions (here assemblage is then the phenomenon). For instance, a microbe forming an assemblage with the cat and that wreaks havoc there does not necessarily harm human beings. The transformability
of the parts derives from the fact that components of an assemblage emerge differently out of
an interaction. Parts can be assemblages themselves and as such, they retain a capacity to act,
even while transforming and acting differently, yet this capacity is not inherent in the
component, but emerges from its location within the relationality and interactions which
unavoidably affect and transform it. It is a relational notion of action and power to affect
actions of other components and assemblages by way of which power is immanent in
relations and the social field, very similar to Foucault’s notion of power (Patton 2000:49-56).
Components are never in isolation and if they were, they would not have a capacity to affect
and be affected. Moreover, component-parts can be exchanged between assemblages of
varying scales (DeLanda 2006:33-45). In discussing these part-to-assemblage or micro-macro
relations, DeLanda (2006) regards human bodies as component-assemblages of larger
organisation-assemblages and moreover include wires, computers, ideas, ethos, and so forth.
In their turn, organisations are components of national or global assemblages (see also Ong &
Collier 2005).

We can summarise with Jane Bennett (2010:23): “Assemblages are ad hoc groupings of
diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts.” She goes on: “The effects generated by an
assemblage are, rather emergent properties, emergent in that their ability to make something
happen...is distinct from the sum of the vital force of each materiality considered alone. Each
member and proto-member of the assemblage has a certain vital force, but there is also an
effectivity proper to the grouping as such: an agency of the assemblage” (Bennett 2010:24).

Recall that assemblages can exchange parts and that therefore the totality of the interactions
of the parts within the assemblage alters. This in turn modifies the expressions of the trans-
acting assemblages involved in a process of mutual becoming. Hence, the most crucial point
and contribution of assemblage theory for our purposes is that through the mutual implication
and transactions between assemblages, which are forming an interassemblage during their
interaction or intra-action\(^\text{15}\), they effect a \textit{mutual becoming} as both alter in their articulation

Let me make this clear by developing an example by way of the digestive process. When I
receive rice on my plate, I have an assemblage, which is a resulting and ongoing expression of
the components and forces of eight amino-acids, complex carbohydrates, oil, bran, fire-heat,

\(^\text{15}\) For reasons of clarity and flow, I will continue to predominantly use “interaction”, but to denote relational
action from which entities differentiate, enmesh, and mutually transform, whether at the levels of assemblages,
component-parts, or contexts.
cooking effort, smell, market dispositions, consumer tastes, deity protection, gendered divisions of labour, etc. On the plate, this complex assemblage forms an interassemblage with the adjoining curries that are assemblages themselves. This interassemblage constitutes the meal, which while eating includes additional behavioural and moral codes. Moreover, the fingers of my right hand become part of it and interact (or intra-act within the newly formed interassemblage) with the other components to turn it into a small ball of rice and curry to bring it to my mouth. By then the finger actions have entered the food assemblage and disrupted it to such an extent that it already looks as if it is partly digested even before entering my mouth. The conjoined forces of the actions of my fingers form an operator or assemblage converter (Bennett 2010:42) as this component causes a drastic alteration, catalysing the transformation (in conjunction with the fire element and my desire for this food, but we will return to this later). Upon entering the mouth, the food ball enters a moment of intensive exchange with the mouth assemblage or machine: About 100-200 bacteria attack the food that is turned moist by the shower of saliva. The forces of the teeth and the tongue turn it around, transform it further, and bring it to the edge of the digestive tract. In exchange, it releases heat, taste, and the love or dedication of the cook\(^{16}\), all of which affect my state of mood and memory. Likely, a particularly hot spice interacts with other components thereby effectuating a sweating and coughing reaction in my body. As it goes down the tract, I get more enmeshed with the food. My gastric juices work upon the messy substance to release its nutritional components. While this process takes place, my body gets fed, my memory flies off to previous days, and my stomach takes up the energy it needs to do the digestive work. After my ‘digestive nap’, I feel energised to get back to work. Later on, I have to release myself from the food I ate. The anus machine enacts the cut between me and the by then abject excrement. Noëlle Châtelet (1998:40) puts it succinctly: “manger, c’est se connecter, au-delà de connections intermédiaires, la bouche et l’anus” [eating is connecting, apart from intermediate connections, the mouth and anus] and eating does more, as it is an act of ultimate transformations. This is a source of surprise as we tend to forget the importance of food.

“L’idée que tout ce que nous absorbons (air-aliment-eau-sperme) nous traverse entièrement pour ressortir plus loin transformé (gaz-excrément-urine-bébé) ne cesse de nous surprendre et la surprise s’acroît encore du fait que la matière ne se contente pas de se métamorphoser en une autre matière repérable, mais aussi en énergie, en intelligence ou en bêtise, ...” [The idea

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\(^{16}\) Such as the spirit of the giver or hau of the food gift (Mauss 1990:11).
that all we consume (air, nutrition, water, sperm) passes through us entirely to exit further in a transformed way (gas, excrement, urine, baby) never ceases to surprise us, and the surprise even grows bigger from the fact that the matter does not only content itself with effectuating a metamorphosis into another traceable matter, but also into energy, and intelligence or foolishness, ...] (Châtelet 1998:39).

She furthermore puts the machinic process of eating, connecting the mouth machine with the anus machine, in a nutshell by quoting Brillat-Savarin (in Châtelet 1998:41):

“Les lèvres s’opposent à ce qu’il (il s’agit du corps esculent, de la bouchée de nourriture) rétrograde; les dents s’en emparent et le broyent; la saline l’imbibe; la langue le gâche et le retourne; un movement aspiratoire le pousse vers le gosier; la langue se soulève pour le faire glisser; l’odorat le flaire en passant; et il est précipité dans l’estomac pour y subir des transformations ultérieures, sans que, dans toute cette opération, il se soit échappé une parcelle, une goutte, ou un atome, qui n’ait pas été soumis au pouvoir appréciateur ” [The lips resist the retrograde stuff (entailing food stuff, mouthful of a meal); the teeth seize and mould it; the saliva drenches it; the tongue bungles it and turns it around; a sucking movement pushes it further towards the gullet; the tongue lifts it up to let it slip down; the smell sniffs it in passing; and it is hurried towards the stomach where it will undergo its final transformations, in which, in this whole operation, no chunk, bit, or atom will escape the power of appreciation].

We will later see how this description remarkably resembles the mode and detail with which the Buddhist Āhāra Patikūlasaṅkha describes this process to make us ponder the repulsiveness of food.

To sum up, throughout the inter- or intra-action of the food ball and myself (including the mouth machine, digestive tube, and anus machine), we both pass through several states of transformation, or rather we both transform persistently. We are implicated in a mutual becoming: I turn into an energised person, ready to get entangled with other materials and work, whereas the food-turned-into-excrement, cut away from our entanglement by the anus, continues to interact with other bacteria and goes on performing new mutual becomings. Indeed, assemblage theory emphasises relentless emergence, transformation, and becoming.
Moreover, the expressions of assemblages thus emerge from inextricable entanglements of heterogeneous ‘natural’, ‘human’, and ‘cultural’ forces and components. Recall that as we attempt to develop an intercultural frame, we will later look into the way Ayurveda renders the process of digestion and integrate its implications into our frame. In this system, the fire plays a more prominent role in digestion and enables a more alchemic rendering, which Noëlle Châtelet (1998) also points at when she refers to the kitchen as the belly of the house and space of radical transformation that predominantly takes place on the fire or heat of the cooking plate.

*Potential Materialist Criticisms on Assemblage Theory*

Let us now turn to a critique that we could formulate on both assemblage theory and Karen Barad’s (2007) notion of phenomenon if we would radically think through her own critique on metaphysical individualism. Assemblage theory appears to retain the individual metaphysics of ANT (see earlier section) if, unlike our approach, assemblages are interpreted as always coinciding with seemingly separate entities. Indeed, sometimes they do after a cut is enacted and sometimes they do not. Moreover, assemblage theory could displace this metaphysics towards the interior level of ever individually discernible and localisable heterogeneous components within assemblages. Barad (2007:128, 333) notes that individual metaphysics entails the assumption of the possession of inherent, separate, and determinate properties that define one’s ontological individuality. She stresses that it is only through the intra-actions within the phenomenon that determinate entities emerge and that properties of the components of phenomena become determinate. Components emerge within phenomena, and intra-actions enact the condition of exteriority (separation among components) within phenomena (Barad 2007:140, 150). Hence, when assemblage theory states that component parts may be “plugged into a different assemblage in which its interactions are different” (DeLanda 2006:10), one does get the impression of an a priori individual entity at work in which the capacity to act becomes an inherent property. Yet, assemblage theory stresses the avoidance of such essentialist rendering. Moreover, in my reading of it, the world and its entities are in a relentless state of becoming and emergence (with cuts and stabilisations as part of it) through unavoidable interactions in which both assemblages and its parts continue to affect and be affected. Action is not inherent in parts or assemblages; it is part of relationality as such. Hence, “the capacity to act” is an unfortunate formulation that possesses
an aura of essentialism, but points at the relentless relational generativity as rendered in assemblage and affect theory. Moreover, I have earlier stressed that the actions of the components alter in their new assemblage-settings when being exchanged in the process of mutual becoming of assemblages. Hence, components likewise reconfigure and emerge in assemblage theory just as in Barad’s (2007:333) notion of the intra-active emergence within phenomena (or interassemblage as the primary ontological unit). Hence, with this clarification of the status of component-parts within assemblages as altering and emerging in intra-action within or in interaction between assemblages, I suggest that our approach to assemblages does not differ radically from Barad’s notion of phenomenon. Yet, I will later voice cautionary remarks with regard to this one-sided emphasis on emergence, mutual becoming, differential becoming (Barad 2007:170), and the ongoing configuration of the world.

Where does Karen Barad draw inspiration from in problematising the individual metaphysics that haunts so much of the academic disciplines, and which leads so often to static and essentialist approaches? While drawing upon quantum physics, she argues that the notion of an individual entity, as separate from other entities, can be traced back to Newtonian physics in which a particle is an entity that can be localised at all times. Being a point in time and space, however small or large, is what defines the singularity of a particle and the entity’s ‘particle behaviour’ (Barad 2007:97-107, 250-252). Yet, the indeterminacy principle in quantum physics states that the more a quality exhibits particle behaviour the less it behaves like a wave and vice versa (Barad 2007:303-304). The basis for the mutually exclusive complementarity of these ‘behaviours’ is situated in their interaction with the measuring instruments. The measuring instrument must then be made to either measure wave or particle properties measuring interference patterns or paths (another version of “You find what you look for”). Moreover, the particular behaviour only comes into existence in intra-action with the instrument deployed to measure either waves or particles. Niels Bohr found that the apparatus of measurement is thus inseparable and even productive of the activity measured, and the two are as such in an entangled state (Barad 2007:308-309). This entanglement renders intelligible the notion that the researcher or measuring apparatus and the observed intra-acts with the phenomenon, which both former bring into being. It is not that the instrument actualises a potential, as if it were intrinsically inherent or pre-existing, waiting to be unearthed by something exterior. Instead, the measuring apparatus effectuates a particular (particle or wave) behaviour, as it entails a mutually implicated emergence, such as in the mutual becoming of assemblage theory (Barad 2007:332-340). Following Niels Bohr, she
contends that the measurement of the properties of particle behaviour or wave behaviour is a phenomenon, in which the observed and apparatus of observation intra-action (as opposed to inter-action between individual entities) to co-constitute the phenomenon in its totality. Hence, she argues for a radical relational ontology (Barad 2007:332-336, 352) in which there are no a priori relata, but in which differentiations are enacted between certain components. As understanding Barad correctly, it becomes nearly impossible to make a priori statements about ontology as we can only start speaking about entities while we, as differentiating entities, enact cuts among ourselves by which we become intelligible to each other as we have emerged as separate entities in a relation of exteriority (Barad 2007:206-208, 335). Only after a relational origin-al becoming we can talk about something and a phenomenon, so it seems that Barad places us relentlessly at the origin of becoming (we come back to this later).

The fact that we have no language to talk about the ‘cosmic undifferentiated soup’ prior to individuation and differentiation renders it difficult to talk and write in such radically relational terms. Hence, unsurprisingly, whereas Barad critiques certain approaches to assemblages and ANT for their individual and Newtonian metaphysics, she herself gets trapped in the difficulty of avoiding such ‘individualist’ language, as evidenced in her utilisation of terms such as particles, components, and intra-action within phenomena (seemingly displacing individuality within, just as we could potentially ascribe to assemblage theory), even though these emerge a posteriori after differentiation. Hence, her concept of phenomenon with intra-acting components appears very similar to the way we conceptualise assemblage theory. Recall the example of Hans riding a horse on the street in which the entanglement of eyes, weight, pride, roads, the house on the street, etc., creates an expression of a heterogeneous assemblage or phenomenon. Just as the assemblage acquires an agency of its own, the entanglement is not reducible to the sum of its parts as in mere bricolage, which entails a mix of individual entities creating a result that equals the sum of its separate parts (Barad 2007:346). Entanglement should indeed not be understood as a collection of mere relations between individual relata, but rather as a new emergent and becoming phenomenon with an agency of its own (Barad 2007:271), reminiscent of the alchemic mixture and our rendering of assemblage. Later, I will argue that the excessive insistence on emergence leads Barad and many assemblage theorists into difficulties when they attempt to express phenomena in words (probably as language is too slow for relentless generativity and focuses on stable entities).
What Barad’s rendering of “phenomenon as entangled state” further draws attention to is the question of the blurred nature and dynamics of the emerging and enacted boundaries of assemblages as well as of their component-parts. While intra- and inter-acting in mutual becoming, the boundaries and entities are not really distinguishable in what is reminiscent of the matrixial borderspace, as coined by Bracha-Ettinger (1995, 2004:74-79) in which she gives the example of the foetus borderlinked (as differentiation in co-emergence) with the mother in the womb by the umbilical cord. The boundaries only emerge in their subsequent differentiation and individuation, yet while remaining permeated by heterogeneous relations and becoming components. The matrixial spaces that link the borders are where the differentiation and mutual becoming comes to life through processes of intense exchange, permeation, osmosis, and enmeshment. For instance, just as the foetus in the womb does not have a clear-cut border that separates it from the mother, the food being in the digestive tract is not easily distinguishable from the human person, not even afterwards when their paths diverge in the toilet room, as parts of the food are still acting in the person and thus both remain entangled (hence, the anus-machine has not enacted the full cut of exteriority). The border space (the surface) of the digestive tract is where a lot of the trans-action and mutual becoming takes place. In the digestive entanglement and enfleshing of food and human being, the parts and actions of the interassemblage become non-localisable and deterritorialised (we will come back to this concept) in their intra-action and mutual becoming. Indeed, I define “entanglement” (as in the spirit of quantum entanglement) as a mutual or intra-becoming. Moreover, the effects of such an intimate entanglement do not disappear at the moment of separation, such as when the baby is born, or in our example when the excrement leaves the body. The effects of the entanglement continue to exist in the by then differentiated becomings even after the cut is enacted, and become later superposed by additional entanglements that further transform and reconfigure the participating elements (Barad 2007:310-317, 346-350). For instance, a new culinary experience can evoke a past joyful memory, creating a new entanglement of food, body, and enjoyment encompassing the current experience and past memory. Hence, we continue to see in assemblage theory and the work of Barad a heavy emphasis on generativity, becoming, entanglement, and emergence, even when past becomings do continue to influence the future becomings amidst enacted cuts.

So far we have discussed ANT, assemblage theory, and touched upon critiques formulated by Karen Barad. In response I have clarified our approach to assemblage theory, entanglement, and mutual becoming. I have also indicated what food would look like in our assemblic
rendering of the digestive process, but this rendering of food in assemblage terminology needs to be fine-tuned further.

*Food as a Machinic Assemblage*

Following assemblage theory and Karen Barad, I likewise define food as an assemblage or as an emergent whole; a synthesis of heterogeneous components that act upon each other while mutually transforming and creating the resulting entanglement that just like each of the components has an agency of its own in their relationality. Because of these acting components and the agency of the assemblage as such, “assemblage” may be referred to as a “machine”, as Deleuze and Guattari (2011) did in the first book of in the two-volume “Capitalism and Schizophrenia”. In “Anti-Oedipus” they gave particular prominence to desire as an immanent creative force and rendered it less prominent in “A Thousand Plateaus”. I will partially re-introduce the aspect of desire in my assemblage approach applied to food. But, as we have clearly seen in our quick scan of food studies, food is not like any other assemblage. In its life from seed to excrement, it is productive of relations of intimate sharing (taking over the role of the umbilical cord linking foetus and mother), labour exchange, harvest rituals, markets, policies, relations with invisible phenomena, international trade agreements, and speculative financial arrangements. We could thus go further and define food, along with Deleuze and Guattari (2009:71, 88-90, 145, 333) as a machinic, *not mechanic*, assemblage that produces a variety of other heterogeneous confederations and aggregations in human life by passing through different assemblages and milieus, forming interassemblages, causing intermingling, and producing multiple becomings. The word machinic sounds mechanic, but it is not synonymous with it. “Machinic assemblage” is in a way a pleonasm as both composite terms are similar, but I use it as this pleonasm further emphasises the multitude of creative and mutual becomings instead of the singular linear deterministic causality that inheres in a rendering of distant individual entities where the one mechanically ‘impacts’ the other. The conceptualisation of food as a machinic assemblage can account (at least in part) for the agential capacity of food to tie us into complex entanglements with various components of ‘natural’, ‘social’, ‘technological’, ‘ritual’, and ‘political’ arrangements, blurring the distinctions between these tropes (the reason for drawing upon assemblage theory in the first place).
How does food as a machinic assemblage work in a world that is a kind of ‘super-assemblage’ constantly in a state of becoming, entanglements, and differentiations resulting from the ongoing actions and alterations of its component-parts, which are themselves assemblages? Moreover, the scale is not stable in itself or fixed, and as such, small assemblages can interact (or rather intra-act) with and even catalyse transformation in larger-scale aggregations to create new formations in their inter- or intra-exchange of components. Indeed, assemblage theory allows us to circumvent the age-old problematic of deterministic scale-relations (in which the macro determines the micro, or in which free agency belongs only to the micro, or vice versa). Rather, scale emerges as part of the differential becomings that emerge after the cut is enacted in the entanglement.

Let us look at an example of how food works as a machinic assemblage. Recalling the assembly wayfaring lifeline of food from seed to excrement, in which it enters in multiple relations of mutual enmeshment and exchange of components with other (often larger) entities throughout its own life-course (blurring the boundaries of what constitutes food as its former beings as plant or animal are included), we can understand how food becomes machinic or productive. When the paddy seed is taken from the bag, it has already become an emergent expression of the components it has collected and shaped, such as aspects of technological innovations (green revolution breeding techniques in specialised farms), intellectual property rights, scientific and political aspirations to make postcolonial Sri Lanka self-sufficient in food, and packaging and storage techniques (without it the seeds may look and act differently). I could go on for a while, but suffice to state that by the time the farmer takes out the seeds, he unpacks a complex entanglement, with which he himself now inevitably becomes embroiled. By taking hold of the seeds, the farmer enters and becomes part of an entanglement with markets and agricultural extension officers that promote green revolution seeds. The seeds have been producing these particular arrangements around it and the farmer becomes an added component in the maintenance of ideas and institutions that emerge around paddy seeds. The seeds, moreover, enact additional relations between seed-exchanging farmers (bringing people together in closer friendships or at times causing friction) and their families. When the seeds are sown—bringing together groups of collaborating farmers—and when they are nestling in the mud, they adsorb (adding while preserving some aspects of their agential qualities [Bennett 2010:35]) elements from its new milieu-assemblage: nutrients from the earth, water, sunshine, care, human effort, divine and chemical protection against pests, and so forth. While adsorbing, the food assemblage alters into a plant which releases sweet
scents when its pods fill with a milky substance that gradually hardens into paddy. The smell of the paddy incites competition for its consumption among elephants and human beings, so again it produces various arrangements for protection against the voracious appetite of elephants, and for the exchange of labour during the harvest period. Hence, food enters a milieu, adsorbs components, while releasing its own, and effects mutual transformations by producing various arrangements in the milieu (relations of keeping watch) that effectuate food’s own resulting expression (elephant or human excrement) (Deleuze & Guattari 2009:312-318). Food, as a machinic assemblage thus effects transformations and multiple becomings, including of itself. Yet, given the radical relationality of life and becoming, food cannot do this alone.

Food thus enters into milieus, exchanges components with it, thereby effecting mutual transformations and so producing various arrangements that emerge around it, hence, entailing milieu- or context-driven actualisations\textsuperscript{17}. So, we can understand that there is nothing inherent or essential in food that expresses its economic, political, or ritual value. We see a clear resonance here with the dynamic of quantum entanglement. Recall that the measuring instrument involves a context-driven actualisation of either particle or wave behaviour. The entanglement effectuates the resulting observation of which the measuring apparatus is part in the becoming or emergence of the phenomenon. Hence, there is nothing intrinsic to the parts or the phenomenon as they become in their entanglement. Hence, both milieu and food entangle in a becoming, embroiled with even larger contexts, yet simultaneously involving individuation and differentiation. Altogether, assemblage theory as conceived of here involves several processes as part of connections and formations of interassemblages, component exchanges, mutual becomings, cuts or differentiations, and overall wayfaring assembly lines. Moreover, the effects of such former entanglements cannot be erased (as such the former entanglement continues to work in the being transformed), yet they can become superposed and encompassed by new entanglements and new becomings. Hence, when I state that food is a productive or machinic assemblage, it never produces transformations in isolation (hence the fundamental relationality of our frame). It thus emerges as a particular expression in intra-action with other entanglements by way of a process of context-driven actualisation and as such, we have a non-essentialist and non-

\textsuperscript{17} I derive this concept from Liane Gabora and Diederik Aerts (2005) who discuss evolution in terms of interactions with contexts. I differ from them in that they use the notion “context-driven actualisation of potential”, whereas I omit “potential”, given its evocation in social sciences of an innate property waiting to be unearthed.
A little sidestep here is necessary. Mutual entanglement or becoming is not about dialectics whereby “a” determines “b”, in its turn determining “a”. This often entails a tautological way of reasoning in the nature of generalising formula such as “social ties made out of social ties” (Latour 2005:70), which often occurs in claims of a higher level of generality, as in politics and activism. I am not talking of singular causalities, but rather about complex and multiple causalities that co-emerge simultaneously in their entanglement. We are talking of quantum non-locality\(^{18}\), in which it becomes impossible to accurately localise a particular component in the process of mutual becoming and entanglement, as it becomes one entangled phenomenon, with its own agency and actualisation.

To sum up for now, food is a machinic assemblage that in its entanglement with various other assemblages effects mutual transformations that entail context-driven actualisations, and which is thus productive of various arrangements, aggregations, and assemblages that populate the world and human life. We can see that this approach is ontological (questions about being), or rather ontogenetic (questions of becoming), blurring distinctions between what we would call material and meaning, human and non-human, macro and micro, and so forth, yet while still allowing to discern phenomena of differentiation and individuation. If we would not have such a differentiating ontogenetics, we would end up with a complete void, a cosmic soup, or some kind of divine monistic substance, impossible to write about. Yet, there remain some difficulties with the theory as concocted so far. Let us now look at some of the objections raised and attempts to remedy those.

\(^{18}\) For instance, current research is further inquiring into the issue of whether smell involves processes of quantum vibrations. See http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-21150046
Shortcomings of the “Ontogenetic Assemblage-Entanglement” Approach

Before discussing my own and other scholars’ reservations towards assemblage theory, materialist approaches, affect theory, and our concocted entanglement, let me briefly summarise why we should adopt an assemblage approach in the first place, and not further explore the avenue opened up by defining food as a total social fact. Recall that I wish to exhibit sensitivity to the heterogeneity of life with which we as writers and readers are inextricably enmeshed and entangled, and that I refuse to exclude in advance certain forms of existence that common essentialising concepts prevent us from recognising (the refusal is often in the name of empirical science). Moreover, if I wish to develop an intercultural frame to study food in societies where animals and plants (as potential proto-foods) are perceived to be sentient (Schmithausen 1991a, 1991b) or even as possessing personhood (Descola 1996), then it is necessary to be able to account for the agencies in non-human entities and heterogeneous entanglements as well, without necessarily taking recourse to animism ourselves, as this would likewise not be inter-culturally sensitive. Finally, I insist on a dynamic and relational rendering of the world, life, and heterogeneous entities, by way of our emphasis on ontogenetic entanglement and mutual becoming in the ongoing regeneration of life and the world—regeneration henceforth being our fourth transversal theme entailing its capacities as both an ontogenetic dynamic and existential concern.

Yet, there remain several issues to deal with if we wish to operationalise this approach into a methodology for interdisciplinary food studies. A first difficulty in our approach so far rests in its relentless focus on mutual transformation, emergence, and becoming (instead of being). The ongoing generativity of assemblage theories leads in Henrietta Moore’s (2011:182) words to a “tyranny of the present”. At first sight, there seems to be no space for enduring structures, learning processes, memory, and historicity. Moreover, it becomes nearly impossible to use language to capture these processes of becoming, as once we have spoken the word, we are already too late, lagging behind the altering and emergent becoming. As everything is constantly becoming and emerging, we find ourselves in an ongoing origin-al or primordial generation of the world, impossible to capture these processes in something as slow and historic as language. It is as if there is no history or context into which we are born, and in which we subsequently partake in its regeneration and/or perpetuation. With the exaggerated emphasis on emergence and becoming, and less on repetition and stabilisation of individuated and differentiated entities, there is, to put it bluntly, only a cosmic undifferentiated soup before the present that we cannot talk about (see the difficulty of talking
in consistent terms as noted earlier). We seem to be part of the origin of cosmogenesis in which anything can emerge. DeLanda (2006:38) succinctly re-phrases this concern of relentless generativity: “It runs the risk of placing too much emphasis on the historical birth of a particular assemblage, that is, on the processes behind the original emergence of its identity, at the expense of those processes which must maintain its identity between its birth and its death.” In short, we need to bring historicity back into this dynamic account of entanglement or mutual becoming. In fact, this move precisely fits the spirit of the approach, as becoming entails evolution in a non-linear causal sense. In fact, historicity is implied in the very terms of transformation and becoming, even more so than in “being”. The contradiction between the single-sided focus on relentless generativity stands in stark contrast with the historicity that is actually implied in assemblage theory, and its very generativity itself. Contrastingly and awkwardly, the more common ‘optical’ approaches that use static optical metaphors (perspective, reflection, seeing the larger picture) seem to be more inclusive of historicity, yet not in its dynamicity. Hence, we need to combine the best of both worlds by including a historical aspect in our dynamic approach.

Yet, we can find some openings for the integration of historicity within assemblage theory, being exactly rooted in its dynamicity. From Deleuze and Guattari (2009:174-175, 306-307) we can understand that the trans-acting assemblages move and embroil with each other while exchanging components. These assemblages are thus moving, destabilising, and transforming and this is what they refer to as deterritorialisation. Thus, to follow up on our example, when my hand moves to bring the food to the mouth, we have a double spatial movement or deterritorialisation. The displacement of the hand in space and time effects another deterritorialisation of the foodstuff. Thereafter, when the teeth and tongue move the food ball round and round, both mutually deterritorialise while transforming. Transformation and deterritorialisation are thus bound up with each other and extend the initially geo-spatial connotation to include destabilisation (DeLanda 2006:12). The whole process of digestion transforms both entities in their mutual becoming and thus entails a deterritorialisation or destabilisation of both. The fact that some entities can move, transform, and destabilise (all pertaining to Deleuzian deterritorialisation) includes the possibility of its opposite as well: territorialisation and stabilisation into more enduring phenomena. Often, such stabilisations evolve into repetitions of majoritarian, dominant, and arborescent processes (based on singularising and essentialising approaches), bringing to life crystallised or molar (Deleuze & Guattari 2009:291-294, Massumi 1992) categories, such as those of the ‘white’, ‘middle-
class’, ‘heterosexual’, ‘male’ forming the fourfold composite metric with which minoritarian races, classes, genders, and sexualities are compared. For Deleuze and Guattari (2009:291-294), minoritarian populations have the molecular potential of destabilising and deterritorialising these fixed, repetitive, and powerful comportments crystallised into structures that came into being by attracting impersonal foucaultian power, and that become effective and enduring in their repetition throughout different spheres in society (the white male as the metric in education, economics, and religion) and across different societies (the white male coloniser as the metric for the colonised). Most people attempt to become majoritarian by living up to these dominant ideals (a concern voiced by Paulo Freire [1996]). Hence, while Deleuze and Guattari (2009:233-309) advocate becoming-minoritarian (becoming-animal, becoming-woman), they thus also acknowledge the existence of enduring and powerful processes (Patton 2000:42-48). I suggest that the disproportionate emphasis on emergence by many readers of Deleuze and Guattari (2009), derives in part from the elusive distinction between their political project of liberating desire from the arborescent Oedipal male dominated society and its derived dominant categories (Goodchild 1996), on the one hand, and their more descriptive rendering of the structures, on the other. In fact, taken these aspects of their writing together, a transformative structuralist approach with which this overall monograph fits quite well, is not alien to Deleuze and Guattari (2009, 2011), just as some argue that Lévi-Strauss with his emphasis on transformative actions may be even counted as the first post-structuralist (Viveiros de Castro19). I suggest that the blurry distinction between both types of writing—as a political project towards the future and as a rendering of current and stabilised affairs—in their work, accounts for the appropriation, among several scholars using assemblage theory, of this excessively generative vocabularium (derived from political project) even while describing a state of affairs. We then see the strange mix between a very dynamic and ‘futuristic’ way of writing about the world in which we live, yet without its historicity. We can include historicity and enduring formations in assemblage theory by way of its openness to the oscillation between stabilisations and destabilisations in the ongoing (re)-becomings which we will turn to later.

My critique is moreover directed towards some of the assemblic approaches that put us at an ahistoric origin of relentless becoming, yet with a future pregnant of endless and unconstrained possibilities. It seems that the salvational and millennial beliefs in endless

19 http://lettre-cdf.revues.org/220?lang=en,
http://www.archivesaudiovisuelles.fr/FR/_video.asp?id=1664&ress=6144&video=130261&format=68
opportunities and possibilities of technologies has displaced or deterritorialised itself into the open-ended generative vision of some STS scholars (who are eager to take up these assemblage and materialist approaches). Coinciding with this endless alterity, open-endedness, and processes of becoming, is the enablement of this continuous generativity by the adoption of a reductionist vision on life, where Henrietta Moore (2011:175) observes that life gets reduced to matters of matter, elements, relations between them, and being linked with affecting and to be affected.

It is not without reason that ANT, assemblage theory, and other materiality approaches seem to flourish in STS, maybe because of this potentially shared millennial faith in the endless possibilities of what technologies can do (agency). Yet, I suggest there is more to this, and Karen Barad (2007:242) quickly seemed to acknowledge this. The study of laboratories or research centres where scientists develop new technologies for prostheses, invitro-fertilisation, and so forth, provide interesting assemblages of technologies, gendered performances, and posthuman cyborgian becomings. Yet, applying Bruno Latour or Karen Barad to the study of divination, visionary experiences, and sensory performances in rituals in Sri Lanka may seem less easily commensurable (and may account for the rare references to them in ritual studies). Yet, Bruno Latour (2010) has in his original and symmetric fashion illustrated that the dynamics in worshipping deities in front of their statues is maybe not all too different from the work performed in laboratories. Both entail a work of fabrication of truth by several means that merge fact and fetish into the concept of “factish” (Latour 2010:22-23). Both scientific and divine truths are fabricated and make people act when these fabrications turn into reality (with their real effects). The factish is: “that which allows one to pass from fabrication to reality; as that which gives an autonomy we do not possess to beings that do not possess it either, but that by this very token give it to us” (Latour 2010:35). The factish as an actor in the network or as a component of an assemblage affects and is being affected. It is something that makes one do things that nobody controls, as the agency is distributed in that totality of relations. Hence, when discussing what rituals do I will describe the factishised dynamics involved, including the performative actions and materialised means (food offerings) that make these rites produce real effects (Latour 2010:102-104). Indeed, I argue that it is also possible to focus on such agencies within rituals by exploring the role of food as we did in our prime example of the previous chapter. Yet, we need to modify the materialist language to include a sensitivity for the ‘material’ effects of the intangible and invisible aspects that are likewise mediated in ritual action. Indeed, it should be recalled that
assemblage theory stresses heterogeneity and so we should avoid the pitfall of overemphasising the so-called material aspects. This occurs often under influence of a waxing trend to study phenomena through materials, but the definition of what is ‘material’ is rarely questioned and seems to be based on implicit Western-based conceptions. To illustrate, I guess there would be very few adepts of the new materiality trend that would perceive the human mind as derived from matter, as is the case in Ayurveda.

To recapitulate, ANT and assemblage-based STS studies tend to focus on newly emergent phenomena (in which human beings sometimes seem to have more of a hand in the making than for instance other ‘materials’ such as food) in which we witness their origin-al becoming and as such, these phenomena lend themselves well to a focus on emergence. The emphasis on relentless becoming in most assemblage-related theories (as I suggested to be inconsistent with the more structuralist aspects of Deleuze and Guattari) meshes less easily with many enduring ritual practices and can in their rendering not account for the striking historic continuity between ritual formations as described in ancient and colonial writings (stabilising and crystallising practices into words), and those rituals I observed recently. Hence, I argue for the inclusion of a historical perspective.

The difficult wedding between trendy materialist approaches and those ‘traditionally’ developed to study the defining topics of anthropology (rituals, power relations, taboos, and sacrifice20) is further complicated by the implicit take-it all or leave-it position held by ANT and assemblage theory. Their paradigms of actants, actors, or assemblages do rightly pay attention to the shared world which human and non-human entities populate, but spur us to abandon the existing paradigms of subjectivity, representation, and language at once and altogether, as these two groups of paradigms are perceived to be incommensurable (Moore 2011:181). Yet, the inverse seems to be true as well when Henrietta Moore (2011:185) states: “Affect is not just a series of intensities and differentiating impulses that coalesce at certain moments into singularities—people, objects, landscape—because the experiences, feelings, sensation, and emotion generated by relations and encounters in this specific environment are taken up and spun out in discourse—symbolised, politicised and projected forward as well as back in time, impacting on the processes and experiences of subjectification.” At first sight she seems to only make her pro-subjectivity position clear, without really engaging in her conclusion with the points made by assemblage theory. Yet, we will see that she does leave an

20 All continue to be very relevant in many parts of the world of today.
opening, when we will venture into our attempt in bridging both exclusivist approaches by stressing the heterogeneity within assemblage theory and by way of looking at Buddhist philosophy and Ayurvedic theory.

Related to the reduction of life to affect (affecting and being affected), matter, elements, components, phenomena, and assemblages, is the decentring of the human subject as it is flattened out or put on a similar plane of existence with microbes, wires, screens, and so forth. The point of taking into account non-human entities in the relentless generation of the world is indeed succinctly made, but do we not run the danger of going to extremes? Bennett (2010:ix) notes, yet without really engaging with her observation, that it is the human subject that is writing about these things, that philosophises, and that reads this assemblage of ideas, words, computer, coffee, and food. I suggest that it is possible to give a particular place to human beings and their subjectivity in this relational ontology or ontogenetics by way of viewing them as particular nodes, differentiations, or individuations of the relational exchanges of components. The nodes, like the human ones, form unique becomings with specific properties exactly by way of their relationality with the human and non-human world and not by way of an a priori determined individuality. To conclude our overview of criticisms, I argue that we can find a way out of these theoretical quandaries by applying Barad’s diffractive methodology and thus by reading assemblage theory through Ayurveda and Buddhist philosophy, which we turn to now.
Ayurveda and Buddhist Canon

In this section, I suggest that by way of the resonances and consistencies between Ayurveda, the Buddhist Pali Canon, and assemblage theory, we can more explicitly build a bridge between assemblage theory and subjectivity approaches. More specifically we will look at where these Asian systems of thought locate, and how they deal with, questions of consciousness, perception, Dependent Origination, and desire in order to further modify our theoretical concoction.

Resonances and Consistencies

Deleuze & Guattari (2009, 2011) have drawn upon Spinoza to develop their assemblage approach (Bell 2006). Jane Bennett (2010:21) states that Spinoza’s ontological vision is one: “according to which all things are “modes” of a common “substance” which has itself multiplied and diversified in assemblage theory.” The monistic view from which assemblage theory diverged resonates with the Ayurvedic view, drawing upon Indian Samkya philosophy, in which primordial matter (*prakṛti*) has evolved into the five elements (water, earth, fire, wind, and ether) that permeate the entities populating the world (Obeyesekere 1977:155-156). Hence, Ayurveda, which is an influential health system in South Asia that influenced Theravada Buddhism, views entities in the world as being uniquely composed of various identical substances, but in differentiated combinations and balances. All entities are made up of the five elements, specifically entangled in the human person throughout its three humours (wind, bile, and phlegm) and seven bodily elements or *dhātus* (food juice or nutrient fluid, blood, flesh, fat, bone, marrow, and semen) (Obeyesekere 1998:201). Moreover, all entities contain the qualities of *rasa* (flavour), *guna* (beneficial quality and healthy), and *dōsa* (absence of beneficial quality and state of ill-health) (Seneviratne 1992:179-184). Contrastingly, in the Buddhist view the human person is composed of a particular combination of the five aggregates: those of materiality, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness (Buddhaghosa 1976:489). The materiality aggregate includes four elements: earth, water, fire, and air, and 24 derived materialities, including the senses and sense-objects (flavour, visible data, sound, odour, touch), which are sensed upon contact, activating the sense-consciousnesses. Moreover, the derived materialities include masculinity, femininity, life, lightness and impermanence of matter, and physical food, which are not sensed but cognised through the mind. Hence, in both Ayurveda and Buddhism all entities are composed
of identical elements and aggregates distributed in specific individuated ways. Assemblage theory resonates with both in that entities are emergent entanglements and differentiations of heterogeneous elements. Moreover, as the Buddhist impermanence of matter and the life faculty, as part of the 24 derived materilities, point at the dynamic, conascent, and transformative character of entities, we further see a clear resonance with the ever-emergent nature of assemblages. Finally, in its theory of the aggregates, Buddhism opens up the possibility to include besides the materiality aggregate other assemblages, such as those of feeling, perception, and consciousness. Interestingly, Ayurveda locates the mind and ego-consciousness in the heart and within the materiality of the flows and balances of humours, through which consciousness is shaped. Hence, Ayurveda offers a ‘material’ somato-psychic account of consciousness and desire, instead of a psychosomatic one (Obeyesekere 1977:159). Moreover, the mind itself has in this line of thinking evolved from primordial matter and not from primordial consciousness (Obeyesekere 1977:156), something that ought us make question the label of new materialism.

In Buddhism, the components of the feeling, perception, and consciousness aggregates are both material and non-material. Regarding the consciousness aggregate, Buddhaghosa (1976: 506-510) lists 89 kinds of consciousness (viññana [consciousness], citta [mind, consciousness], and mano [mind] are synonymous). In it, the profitable, unprofitable, and indeterminate forms of cognisance (having an effect on the karma) are divided into the sense sphere (joy, knowledge, equanimity), fine-material sphere (levels of attainment on the path to nirvana), the immaterial sphere (e.g. boundless consciousness), and the supramundane. Parts of the consciousness aggregate include: eye-consciousness that has contact with visible data as well as the consciousness of the ear, nose, tongue, and body respectively. Finally, the mind element cognises the six kinds of objects (the sense data and the mind objects) and has, similarly to Ayurveda, a heart basis. Besides the consciousness aggregate we have the feeling aggregate that is fivefold, including bodily pleasure, bodily pain, mental joy, mental grief, and equanimity emerging within the experience of an object or tangible datum, except for equanimity that arises by non-attachment, which is of a different nature (Buddhaghosa 1976:518-520). Finally, the perception aggregate likewise has as its cause an external objective field, whereas the formations aggregate refers to the dynamic of agglomerating or adding together (making associations). Yet both the perception and formation aggregates are not dissociated from consciousness (Buddhaghosa 1976:520-521). This brief overview clearly indicates that the Buddhist rendering of mind, consciousness, perception, formation, and
feeling does not fit a clear dichotomy between mind–body (as the heart is basis for the mind) and cognisance–matter (the two are so inextricably enmeshed in Buddhist theory).

Ayurveda and Buddhist theory thus force us to rethink our (at least mine) implicit assumptions pertaining to the divisive boundaries between matter and subjectivity, which inform the mutual exclusivity between materiality and subjectivity approaches as mentioned earlier, and which we return to later. In combination and resonance with these Asian perspectives on the aggregations and consciousness, our assemblage approach does open up spaces for human subjectivity, desire, and intentionality, as it indeed incorporates heterogeneous (material and non-material) components. Moreover, we can include aspects of historicity that relate to human subjectivity and that are enmeshed in processes of learning and remembering, while still retaining the dynamic, composite, heterogeneous, non-essentialising, and productive character of our approach. Let us now explore in more detail how desire and consciousness are participating in the mutual becomings and transformations, as rendered in Buddhism and Ayurveda.

**Desire, Anxiety, Consciousness, and the Human Subject**

David Webster (2005:51) notes that the Vedic texts (of which Ayurveda is part) only partially refer to desire and then often in the context of ritual and sacrificial contexts. Yet, those texts state that desire is central to all activity. The differentiation of the world, as we have seen earlier, implicates desire in its creation. As such: “desire forms part of the fabric of the universe” (Webster 2005:53), and so desire is everywhere and immanent, permeating and animating life. In the Ayurvedic texts, the views on desire, mind, ego-consciousness, and desire are treated more partially and more practically in relation to mental health and healing. We will discuss Ayurveda in greater detail in chapter 4, but suffice to state that according to this health system, mental health gets disturbed when the five elements and three humours get out of balance. Humoural imbalances occur as a consequence of an unbalanced intake of certain foods (with their own specific hot, cool, heavy, light, and *rase, guna*, and *dōsa* properties), so psychological and other health problems can be treated through an adjustment of the diet (see also Hippocrates and Galen, from whom we derived the humour-based concepts of melancholy, colère, etc). Thus, in Ayurveda, it is in a radical way true that one physically and mentally becomes what one eats (a popular expression of our rendering of entanglement and mutual becoming). For instance, nutritious foods (sweet cooling foods that
increase and “excite” the phlegm humour) in combination with little exercise can cause an excessive desire for sex. Hence, besides more exercise, the increased consumption of counterbalancing foods or a diminution of the intake of nutritious foods is then required to ease this excessive desire (Obeyesekere 1977:163-164). Food in general, and nutritious food in particular, is the fuel for the gastric fire that ‘cooks’ the food in its digestion. The burning fire creates the feeling of hunger as well as of (sexual) desire. People with a lively gastric fire are often hungry, and deemed to be impatient, intemperate (badegini bareya: gastric fire person), and full of emotional heat, but we return to this point when introducing our concept of ‘cooking’. Excessive desire can either be fuelled or tempered by way of ingesting certain cooling or heating foods that impact the humours. When those humours (excited or calm) reach the heart, where the mind and self-consciousness are located, the effects of the foods start taking place (Obeyesekere 1977:160). So, in Ayurveda we see a somatic, symptomatic, curative, and practical approach to well-being and desire (and so, problematising a clear-cut distinction between physical and mental), while acknowledging the systematic and powerful enmeshment of food and desire. Contrastingly, in Buddhism, desire is dealt with in more existential and systematic terms. Inheriting the Ayurvedic views on the powerful capacity of food to incite desire, Buddhism views food with suspicion and formulates rules for monks to deal with it carefully (e.g. Vinaya Pitaka) as a means to prevent their desires from flaring up.

It follows from our succinct description of Ayurveda that food and human beings share similar components (elements) and that food clearly affects the human person (by way of humours) as a whole, including the person’s consciousness with which desire is often associated. Hence, Ayurveda and Buddhist philosophy corroborate the understanding that food and human beings are mutually implicated in each other’s becoming. The Ayurvedic rendering of the digestive process, which we will discuss later, will further clarify the mutual enmeshment of food and human person.

Returning to Theravada Buddhism, David Webster (2005:158) states that desire arises within the complex of the five aggregates or khandhas which remain in a state of flux (impermanence of the emergent whole). Moreover, in the Buddhist teaching of the twelve-fold Dependent Origination or Paticca-Samuppāda, desire, emotion, and consciousness emerge in the multiple interaction of the following elements: “ignorance – formations – consciousness – mind and body – six sense bases – contact – feeling – craving (tanha) – grasping – becoming – birth – ageing, death, and suffering”. This chain should not be read in terms of linear causalities (just as it should not in our multiple becoming), but it entails the
complex interplay of conditions that allow the emergence of various effects, such as *tanha* or desire (Webster 2005:148-149). Thus, desire emerges out of a plurality of conditions, while becoming an enabling condition (among others and in interaction with those) for other phenomena, hence its immanence in both the suffering and creation of life.

Because of its arising and conditioning, desire nearly acquires a metaphysical quality or cosomogenic principle in its generativity of life while remaining immanently operative within the five aggregates and being sparked by their interaction. David Webster (2005:137) opposes the foregrounding of desire in the form of craving or greed (tanha) as the sole creative principle. Instead, desire arises as the result of a co-production, yet it is itself also pervasive and productive. Viewing desire as both a cause and a consequence would seem tautological if we were to interpret those in terms of singular causalities. Such view is also reductionist in the Buddhist context as desire is immanently part of the interactions that it creates and from which it arises and actualises. In this sense, the approach to desire is very similar to that of Deleuze and Guattari in “Anti-Oedipus” (2011) in which desire is immanent to the functioning of machines or assemblages. The apparent fuzzy status of desire in Buddhism derives from the Vedas, the ancient Hindu texts that have influenced Buddhist doctrine and in which desire is a creative power that permeates the universe (Webster 2005:53) and is so distributed throughout, just like the five or four elements. The immanence of desire in assemblage theory (Goodchild 1996) hence resonates again with our Asian perspectives. To bring desire back more explicitly to assemblage theory I regard it as immanent in relations of mutual becoming as well as individuating in those becomings, including within particular human nodes in which it acquires a specific expression in its intra-action with the other fellow components that altogether allow for the emergence of a human subjectivity. Recalling Henrietta Moore’s (2011:185) objection made to assemblage approaches, stating that: “... the experiences, feelings, sensation, and emotions generated by relations and encounters in this specific environment are taken up and spun out in discourse...”, we thus see that she does open up a way to think about desire and feeling. She even does so in a way that is analogous to the Buddhist reasoning which I have elicited and from which I derive my approach to desire in assemblage theory.

To return to the Buddhist discussion on desire, David Webster (2005:98-140) discusses 24 of the manifold desire-related terms that unfold throughout the Buddhist Canon. As mentioned in our introduction, Buddhism has a varied approach to desire which cannot be reduced to the Buddhist approach to *tanha* as if it were the metaphysical cause of existence and suffering.
Indeed, desire is at times viewed negatively, but sometimes also in a positive manner, such as in the case of a certain forms of desire (e.g. effort, compassion) deemed necessary to achieve the last phase before entering nirvana (at the last step all desire has to be let go of). Given its ambiguous nature as being both degenerative as well as creative in the Buddhist view, it is heuristic to clarify the status of desire in Buddhism a little further in comparison to the ways in which it has been viewed in Western scholarship. The range of at least 24 different desires discerned in Buddhism integrates and is more diverse than the two main divergent approaches to desire that Webster (2005:188) discerns among certain scholars in the Western philosophical tradition. On the one hand, there are authors such as Sartre (Webster 2005:43-44) and Lacan (n.d., Bailly 2009, Goodchild 1996:88-89) that tie the notion of desire to those of anxiety, uncertainty, or lack, where desire is seen as the consciousness of an undefined absence. This sense of lack can be traced to the Judeo-Christian notion of the Fall (Sahlins 1996, Loy 1998) which continues to articulate itself differently in economic-oriented notions of scarcity (Sahlins 1972), as well as to a Buddhist kind of Fall as narrated in the Agañña Sutta (Collins 1993) that we will explore later. On the other hand, scholars such as Deleuze and Guattari (2009, 2011) view desire more as creative and powerful, rendering it as a force that generates relationships and interactions of assemblages through their mutual transformations, syntheses, and actualisations, and that thus drives productive processes, (Goodchild 1996:4) akin to the Vedic view on desire as a creative force. In Buddhism, both strands of thought seem to be integrated as desire plays a pivotal role in the Dependent Origination of life (viewed ambivalently) and the achievement of nirvana (hence, the creative and liberating role of desire) as well as causing the degenerative state of humanity in the Buddhist Fall and suffering (the degenerative and destructive force of desire). As we will see in later chapters, according to some of the Buddhist texts food plays a pivotal role in inciting desires and clinging.

Indeed, as we have derived from our key moment in the previous chapter, food and desire are intrinsically linked. The productivity of the machinic food assemblage emerges precisely from food’s entanglement with human beings, desire, and insecurity. Given the Vedic, and Deleuzian and Guattarian distributed action of desire in the differentiated world, and given the power of food to incite gluttonous desires as well as to move people over the world (Mintz 1985), we could well describe food as an active assemblage of which the desire- and sense-components work in the production of desirous human beings and their seduction. In this vein, as well as in Buddhist rendering, food strikes people through the senses, as its sense-
objects or components (touch, smell, odour, etc) enter through the sense “doors” (eyes, ears, nose, tongue) interacting with the other components of the human assemblage. Through contact, the sense-components of food affect and activate each of the sense-consciousnesses, brought together by the human mind into an integrated experience (Buddhaghosa 1976) and forming the emergent human synthesis. Moreover, as the Buddhist story of the Fall into humanity and lower rebirth (the Agañana Sutta) highlights, food (milk-rice) is here again ascribed a powerful agency and nearly a cosmogenic power by way of its intricate relation to the incitement of clinging desire that has lead by way of its consumption to a degenerate existence as human beings. So, in the latter story one becomes cosmogenetically what one eats.
Entangling the Stock of Ingredients into a Fine-Tuned Food Conceptualisation

In my rendering of assemblage theory, I have defined entities as being emergent wholes, composed of heterogeneous components, be it Buddhist aggregations (composing the human person, but in reduced form also non-human beings), Ayurvedic elements, humours, and properties, or dispositions, consciousness, desire, cells, microbes, metals, particles, etc. Hence, assemblage theory allows us to have a comparative frame as it can account for such inter-cultural diversity of components and emerging phenomena or assemblages. Food is one such assemblage, an entanglement of blurred matter and meaning that both permeate its various components. Moreover, we noted in the works of early anthropologists as well as in Ayurveda and Buddhism the powerful agency of food in its effectuating of mutual or multiple becomings during the temporary interassemblages it forms, and from which after their separation emerge, for instance, an energised person as well as excrement. Hence, to stress the productivity of food, I have, in line with Philip Goodchild’s (1996:50-51) rendering, defined food as a machinic assemblage (entailing a pleonasm) that in its entanglement with human beings, makes differences, effectuates transformations and becomings. So, food effectuates, produces, and enables other assemblages to emerge, differentiate, and individuate as to populate the regenerating world and thereby enabling itself to enter into various relations and arrangements in which it articulates itself in specific ways through its context-driven actualisation.

As we can infer from our discussion on Ayurvedic and Buddhist views on human subjectivity, the mutual becoming of food and human being only occurs by way of their entanglement with desire and anxiety (lack, absence, uncertainty, regeneration, and degeneration). Desire, in all its creative and destructive forms, emerges from the sparks generated by interacting or intra-acting assemblages or components to which desire remains immanent. As such, desire remains distributed in the mutual becomings it further enhances. Hence, by way of recourse to Buddhism and Ayurveda, we have been able to attribute in our assemblage theory a specific place to the human subject, as a particular node of individuation of elements, specific (materiality, consciousness, etc.) aggregates, and desire, with which food is bound to interact.
**Historicity**

To take our critique with regard to the tyranny of the present or history into account, we need to further modify the statement that food in its entanglement with human beings, desire, and insecurity and as a machinic assemblage effectuates, generates, produces, and enables multiple becomings. In this multiple transformation, food is thus not an individual singular entity that determines or produces singular outcomes in which it tautologically reproduces itself. Instead, by way of its heterogeneous multiplicity and in its entanglement(s) with surroundings, food becomes co-productive of its own resulting expressions within arrangements and assemblages that emerge around it and that populate our world. Yet, such formulation does not yet come to terms with our concern of including historicity in this ‘emergence approach’, in which for many it seems that stabilised formations only emerge and do not appear to pre-exist becomings. I insist that such molar, territorialised, and stabilised formations do form part of the world-in-making where we are born into and which we join in its making. However, at times such molar formations do destabilise, deterritorialise, dissipate, and join in with the entangling processes of emergence. Because of this historical dynamic, I stress that we are not only part of a co-production of life in conjunction with food (as if we are at the origin of cosmogenesis), but rather we join with food in the worlds’ co-(re)production and (re)generation. Pre-stabilised phenomena with rigidified boundaries (such as ancient Ayurvedic and Buddhist texts) do get temporarily drawn into the blurring processes of mutual becoming and (at times) subsequently re-territorialise or stabilise, including by way of the cuts enacted and ensuing boundary work performed between individuated entities.

The processes of stabilisation and destabilisation, and territorialisation and deterritorialisation are moreover linked to the repetitions and differences that occur throughout. Events, practices, and transformations that recur in large numbers across time and space form enduring phenomena that acquire power in the Foucaultian sense of impersonal and immanent power that shape the comportments of others and events and arrangements that flow from it (Prado 1995). As such, structures of power emerge and crystallise, but only by the repetition of the very acts and dynamics that sustain them. As such the historical emergence and the everyday practice in the present are connected. If a ‘swarm’ of people suddenly no longer acknowledge the rules established by economic theory, the economy that is structured in the way as we know it would immediately collapse and be history. Indeed, structures emerge and are maintained by the repetitions of the very acts and becomings that brought them to emerge, just as the cuts that enact the differentiation of phenomena are maintained by ongoing
boundary work. I will for instance show later that the wide distribution of the ritual cooking of milk-rice across Sri Lanka and parts of South Asia and its historically recurrent enactment is a structural element of regenerative rituals in its repetition and boundary work (for instance, by not performing this rite in certain other occasions). As such the milk-rice becomes an assemblage that is articulated with specific components, an articulation being repeated millions of times and so sustaining the power of this assemblage. Of course, notes Bruce Kapferer (1997:57, 312) on the Deleuzian notion of repetition and difference, both are mutually implied to the extent that both are in a way identical. In each of the emergent phenomena, there is some repetition and conversely each repetition entails some differences. This explains gradual transformations unless a catalysing component or assemblage converter is added (an accident or other powerful component) that affects and transforms the whole assemblage drastically. To stress this multitude of agents, repetitions, and differences, it would be advised to use a correct synonym for mutual or differential becoming and regeneration: co-(re)production. I wish to stress the correctness of this notion, given that I will not utilise it much throughout for reasons of fluency. However, it should be remembered when I use words like becoming (whether mutual or differential), regeneration, and to be introduced later as ‘cooking’, that I in fact evoke co-(re)production as defined below.

Co-(re)Production

To recapitulate, I define food as a machinic assemblage that, in its entanglement with desire, insecurity, and human beings as well as in its mutual becomings with its milieus, co-(re)produces phenomena, aggregations, and assemblage arrangements that make up life, emerging by a process of context-driven actualisation in the world’s becoming. By moving within heterogeneous milieus, food forms interassemblage entanglements, while transforming the articulation and actualisation of the phenomena with which it is entangled, as well as of itself, in the process of mutual or differential becoming.

The notion of co-(re)production requires some further clarification by discussing each of its components separately.

1 Co: Firstly, food is a particular context-driven expression of the intra-action or inter-action of heterogeneous components (existing of human and non-human aspects) resulting in its specific articulation. For instance, the nutritive qualities of food (rase, guna, and dōsa), medical potentials, seductive force, and sense-objects (e.g. smell, odour) conjoin with the
South Asian context into an emergent ambiguous assemblage. It is ambivalent with regard to its power to incite voracious and gluttonous clinging to life as a degenerate ‘anti-Buddhist’ state of being. Secondly, as food feeds itself into milieus, it forms interassemblitic entanglements, exchanges components, and thereby effectuates mutual transformations and becomings (*extra-action*) of both itself and its milieu. For instance, food enters into the Ayurvedic milieu of South Asia and acquires as such a powerful agency, by way of the mutual and radical interpenetration of similar elements throughout both human and non-human entities (Osella & Osella 2002:470-471). Henceforth, food and human beings become radically porous and as such both become prone to an intrusion of unwanted qualities and moral and physical impurities. Hence, sustained by everyday practices of sharing, the taboo on transacting food with ‘morally lower’ people from lower castes is produced, as the food easily adsorbs their impurities and affects the ‘morally higher’ castes by releasing these polluting components (Daniel 1984). Food indeed absorbs or adsorbs the qualities of the carriers or feeders (Khare 1992:7). Finally, yet following from the previous remark, food entangles and interacts with other component-parts of its milieu, such as desire, insecurity, and human beings, mutually transforming each other or maintaining their stability (as a territorialised or stabilised becoming by way of repetition). For instance, the training towards a restrained dealing with food allows calming the fire of desire, thereby bringing the person closer to the release of craving and the extinguishing of the flame of desire upon entry to nirvana while simultaneously maintaining and stabilising Buddhist attitudes to food and desire in society. Hence, we use “co” to denote food’s intra-action, extra-action, and inter-action (I continue to refer to all three possible modalities of action by using the familiar term interaction) in the emergence of arrangements, relations, formations, and becomings.

2 (*Re*): I mentioned earlier that I include “*(re)*” to integrate historicity into our approach. “Re”, without its brackets, refers to repetition, reproduction, enduring states, and boundary work that inhibit components exchanging and prevent mutual becomings to stabilise formations. For instance, the Judeo-Christian-informed distinction of the human from the rest of the creation continues to exert its effects as various people and scientific disciplines (biology, sociology) perform boundary work to sustain this epistemological separation. Hence, I utilise “re”, firstly as to insist that not everything is newly emergent as a kind of ‘cosmogenetic origin perspective’ would hold. Secondly, because intra-, extra-, and interactions occur with pre-existing and pre-stabilised components and milieus, that at times get drawn into the seething entanglement of mutual becomings. For instance, the Buddhist notion
of the Fall, the Ayurvedic theory of porous entities, practical codes of interaction, learning processes, and performances join in the re-enactment of rules of sharing and eating food (e.g. in relation to caste and desire). However, some occasions force people to experiment with new practices and interpretations (e.g. inviting a rich low-caste person to a wedding could produce moral quandaries for other high-caste guests). Thirdly, as we can see from our examples, I put “re” between brackets as indeed regeneration of life is neither perpetually new nor a mere repetition. For instance, new food ingredients imported to Sri Lanka involve an experiencing, experimenting, and becoming experienced with, in which these practices conjoin with the habitual praxis of cooking that resonates with the Ayurvedic rules as laid out in its basic texts in the Charaka Samhita. To conclude, the “re” acknowledges the co-existence in life of the individuated as well as the ‘to-emerge-as-individuated’.

3 Production: Firstly, this notion is utilised as to stress not only the creative actions of human beings, but also the vibrancy and vitality of other heterogeneous assemblages with which human entities entangle and establish creative becomings. Hence, secondly, I am not really talking of production as a solely human faculty, as in a Marxist rendering of production, but I do play with the latter’s evocation by stressing that food enacts becomings in its entanglement with desire, insecurity, and human beings in the regeneration of life and the world (which is why it should be gradually clear by now that this has acts as our fourth transversal theme throughout this work). Hence, the human subject acquires a special location in the role of production, but without the radical separation from the surroundings. For instance, food and people mutually fashion each other through their entanglement with desire. Moreover, in manipulating the power of food, through the establishments of particular food arrangements and practices, people perform work on their desires and produce themselves as restrained beings, morally better than gluttonous, voracious, and greedy people (one only needs to look at various depictions in paintings about the lower classes). Hence, in conjunction and by way of their radical relationality with food and desire, people refashion themselves as to be counted as fully human. As Khare (1992:5) states for the Hindus: “food directly matters to the formation of a Hindu’s inner being and its becoming from one birth to the next.”

Food as a machinic assemblage, in its entanglement with its milieus, desire, insecurity, and human beings, co-(re)produces new entanglements and becomings (more or less stabilised and repeated). As we will see throughout this monograph, food does actively participate in shaping the: domestic relations of sharing, self-fashioning as a moral subject, establishment of labour relations during cultivation, providing of the conditions for divine protection by way of
offering, and in constituting a passionate topic for political activists. In its context-driven articulation, food expresses, transforms, and translates itself differently throughout these varying domestic, ritual, political, and economic tropes of existence with which food enmeshes and which it shapes.

So far we are left with a carefully crafted and fairly complex definition of food that attempts to take into account all previously voiced concerns and objections in relation to the human–non-human divides, inter-cultural openness, and questions of desire, consciousness, and the human subject. Moreover, the conceptualisation, opens up a less metaphoric or less symbolic and more ontological reading of the earlier discussed work of Miriam Kahn (1986), which deals largely with the same transversal topics with which I am engaging: food, desire, anxiety (in terms of death, decay, and degeneration), and regeneration of life. She situates herself explicitly within symbolic anthropology. Hence, the confusion remains whether the Wamira of Papua New Guinea merely view the mutual implication of food, desire, and the human person and a careful balance of life-forces as to be symbolically conducive to regeneration of life, or whether they experience this mutual regeneration viscerally and somatically, only to be subsequently symbolised by the anthropologist. In my rendering their synergy with food would not be merely symbolic (if I would obtain the same findings in studying the Wamirans), but would be taken as a way of becoming, actualisation, and expression.

As Miriam Kahn (1986:1, 6) herself and others render her work as symbolic, this depiction brings to bear another issue with which we must deal before going on to the last modification of the frame. If we would relegate the Wamiran statements about the mutual synergies between food, desire, and human beings to the symbolic realm, we would re-instate a dichotomic division between the scientific universal real and the particular cultural signification ‘pasted’ on top of it. I contend that in many materiality and STS studies, such divide is unintentionally re-introduced in favour of the material side by reducing human subjectivity to relations of matter and the capacity to affect and be affected, thereby getting rid of intentionality in an overly-eager decentring of the human subject. Of course, in that case I am not referring to “material” as rendered in Ayurveda or Buddhism, but from a ‘scientific’ perspective. Indeed, we have seen that the concepts of matter and material evoke different things to different people. In Ayurveda, the human mind is derived from primordial matter and not from the primordial consciousness. Yet, from a ‘scientific’ perspective the material Ayurvedic mind would not be material, but rather a mere cultural local interpretation by Asian
people. Is it then in such Ayurvedic rendering that intentionality, experience, and somatic engagement with anxiety are only material or related to meaning, or a blurring of both? And from which perspective? Or, is “material” fiction in the first place, a differentiating separation from meaning enacted by boundary work? Why then call it material (hinting at Bennett [2010] and Barad [2007])? Is then the ‘real’ in anthropology more real than in Ayurveda and less than in quantum physics? Indeed, relegating transformative relationships to the symbolic or to the material run the danger of reinforcing a hierarchy in what counts as ‘true’ knowledge. I speculate that there seems to be an ‘ethno-techno-scientific-centric’ tendency in STS and other materialist approaches to equate the material with the scientific and the rest with ‘merely’ meaning and culture. In such rendering, the material in the Wamira food practices and significations could then easily be reduced to a mere meaning-making and cultural processes that are engaged with and pasted on material components, re-introducing a meaning–material (culture–science) divide. The acids, cells, and DNA of foodstuffs are then in this line of materialist and STS approaches material, whereas the Wamiran synergies and Ayurvedic elements only are cultural. Such an approach would re-instate a colonial type of hierarchy among knowledge-practice systems whereby there is a division between a universal, true, and scientific knowledge, on the one hand, and a merely local knowledge or rather interpretation, on the other. Such rendering of course goes against the grain of the explicit intentions of these materiality strands (probably the naming leads in part to the confusion), which attempt to overcome such simplistic and dichotomous categorisations. Our rendering of assemblage theory attempts to avoid a re-establishment of such molar categories by viewing components as heterogeneous. Nothing is purely material and nothing is purely meaningful either. Herein lies my doubt about whether to label Kahn’s work really as symbolic, as it would relegate the Wamirans’ experience to the realm of signification and not to the real of lived, somatic, and ontogenetic experience, even though symbols themselves do in fact participate in the performative entanglement of matter and meaning in experience. I am convinced that with a careful assemblage approach we could overcome this fuzziness about the materiality and meaningful symbolic aspects of the intimate relations of the Wamirans and their food as well as of Ayurveda. Moreover, with assemblage theory we have a means to take the relevance of Kahn’s study out of any particularism and put it in a comparative perspective, thereby adding power to her work. Assemblage theory likewise enables us to place in a cross-cultural and comparative perspective the transactional approaches of McKim Marriott (1990) and Valentine Daniel (1984), according to which food and persons are embroiled in flows and transactions of essences (here components).
Yet, the strength of the works of Kahn, Marriott, and Daniel in comparison to my conceptualisation of food so far, is that they import and foreground the sensitivity and flavour of their field research more successfully than I can with assemblage terminology, even though I did secure a place for human subjectivity as part of a relational individuation. Hence, while retaining the spirit of and the motivation for our conceptualisation, I will further transform the representation and language, not the actual theoretical frame and its dynamics, of our conceptualisation of food’s enmeshment with life in the following section.
**Cooking and ‘Cooking’ of Life**

We have a careful conceptualisation defining food as a machinic assemblage that in its entanglement with desire, anxiety, and human beings co-(re)produces various assemblages while transforming itself and those other assemblages in a process of context-driven actualisation. Yet, it obfuscates the sensitivity and sensoriality of food as it acts in life and in the fields we study. So, it is important to re-word this conceptualisation by developing synonyms that better evoke the sensoriality and viscerality of the Sri Lankan without altering the reference to the dynamics inherent in our dynamic definition of food. In what follows, I will by way of a discussion of the process of actual cooking of food and its digestion as rendered in Ayurveda, gradually foreground the fire element to describe the processes of becomings in terms of ‘cooking’. This allows our frame to tie in more closely with the local way of being and perceiving, but also connects our assemblage approach more closely with alchemic approaches by foregrounding the heated transformations. Noëlle Châtelet (1998:33) states in this regard that: “la magie du feu réside dans sa faculté surprenante de transmutation. Du cru au cuit la distance est alchimique” [the magic of fire resides in its amazing capacity of transmutation. The distance between the raw and the cooked is alchemic].

In such an alchemic fashion, the actual cooking of food turns gradually into an allegorical materialisation of the ‘cooking’ of life in which the ‘cooking’ of the world and its entities gets holographically condensed in the actual cooking of food. Indeed, food and its cooking connect several heterogeneous components, processes, and forces, and condense these into what is a transforming three-dimensional miniature or hologram, hence the holographic condensation. And, as we shall see, the distinction between cooking and ‘cooking’ blurs at times when looking at Vedic, Ayurvedic, and Buddhist philosophy, hence the reason for calling it an allegorical relation, as cooking and ‘cooking’ are more strongly and intricately connected than by mere metaphoric or symbolic analogy.

Let us now transfer our attention to my village of stay in Sri Lanka, where I am standing in the kitchen with my two host sisters, Nihinsa and Vidusahani. We are joined by an uncle, Geethan, who is telling stories of what is going on at his work. Some of the children from the neighbouring house are playing and running back and forth. The bustling atmosphere surrounds us all, as I clean and cut vegetables for the curries. Nihinsa rinses the rice from little stones and sand, and Vidusahani lights the hearth-fire using the log that Kavith and I had collected earlier in the day. After I finish cutting, Vidusahani adds spices to the oil in the pot
on the crackling fire, and I hand her the vegetables. The whole event becomes an assemblage of my dedication, stories of Geethan, the crackling fire, childrens’ noise, domestic sociality, kitchen utensils, various foodstuffs, acquired skills, and memories that all intra-act in making this a sociable, fun, and lively event. While the rice boils in the rice-cooker in the adjoining living room, we continue to chat and laugh. Vidusahani devotedly keeps the curry bubbling by manipulating the fire and the log that feeds it. The bubbling content of the cooking pot acquires an intensity that must be kept at a certain balance as to avoid burning, overflowing, or cooling down. In this heat, the ingredients mesh and interact with the fire, the earth of the pot (people say that cooking in an earthen pot gives a better taste than in a metal pot), the stirring actions of my host sister, and all transform into the emergent mālu (curry), which will later be served for lunch. If the sociality distracted my host sister from her cooking, the taste could be altered if she forgets to stir the concoction, possibly emitting a burnt smell. Hence, sociality participates in the resulting expression of the curry. Happily, the food does not burn and its smells seduce us and cause our stomachs to grumble. Yet, the taste still has to be brought to perfection (what exactly this means for whom may vary), and each of us tastes and comments, by way of which we reach a collaboratively negotiated and experimented result (experimented as in the double French meaning of the word *experimenter*: experiencing and experimenting). The cooking of the food thus radically transforms the food, but simultaneously regenerates our relationships, tastes, interactions, and *being experienced with* cooking. By way of our entanglement with food, we get practically regenerated as a domestic unit of sharing and consuming (including the rules of intimacy and distances that are implicated in sharing). The cooking of food thus enmeshes with our efforts, desire for good food, sociability, fun, and domestic practices. The actual cooking reconfigures the whole entanglement into a renewed sense of satisfaction and belonging. At face value, the cooking of food effectuates so far only a metaphorical ‘cooking’ and transformation of life. Yet, as we go further, we will see that from an Ayurvedic perspective, it is not merely metaphorical.

I will not explore the event of eating and sharing here, as that will be discussed more in depth in our next chapter. Instead, we now turn to the Ayurvedic rendering of the digestive process as to give one of the several indications why stating that mutual transformations and becomings in terms of ‘cooking’ is not merely metaphoric. Rather, cooking stands holographically in a synecdochal relationship to ‘cooking’ as actual cooking suffuses the ‘cooking’ of life that it represents. Yet, ‘cooking’ stands in an allegorical relation to cooking as ‘cooking’ of life involves at times metonymical (when used in relation to actual cooking)
and symbolic (when used with other instances not related to cooking at all) relations (Daniel 1984:107). Hence, depending on the perspective of the actual cooking or ‘cooking’, we enter into a synecdochal or allegorical relation respectively. Combined, I take the cooking of food as an allegorical materialisation of the ‘cooking’ of life from the perspective of ‘cooking’, whereby from the perspective of concrete cooking this materialisation comes to stand for the synecdochal and holographic relation. Let me attempt to make this clearer by finally turning to the Ayurvedic digestion process.

I start eating the rice with the curries, constituting a balanced combination of hot and cold foods (hot entailing its heating effect on the body, cold entailing a cooling effect). When the food enters the digestive tract, the food turns into the food-juice essence that feeds the digestive fire transforming the food into the six other essences or dhātuṣ: blood, flesh, fat, bone, marrow, and semen. The seven essences then feed the corresponding essences of the body accordingly. So, while digesting, the digestive fire of the human being re-assembles, transforms, and cooks the elements of food into seven component-essences or dhātuṣ of the human body (Obeyesekere 1998:201), which the five elements continue to permeate. The seven bodily dhātuṣ re-combine into the three body humours: va (air), pit (bile), and sem (phlegm) (Seneviratne 1992:180), which need to be balanced in order to maintain both good physical and mental health. Like the five elements and the three humours, the dhātuṣ remain in a constant flux according to the heaviness or hotness of the food swallowed (Seneviratne 1992:180-181). The balances and components composing the human assemblage thus alter conjointly with the food pulp being burned and transformed by the gastric fire. The body thus adds various juices and gastric fire to the food as the fire cooks (should be taken metonymically and not metaphorically in Ayurveda) the food in its digestion and transformation. Moreover, the gastric fire transforms food into excrement and finer waste (e.g. hair, nails). Enfleshing a mutual becoming, the person gains strength and (mental) health, whereas food is turned into waste. Additionally, food feeds the gastric fire as well and thus upholds as such the good health and life of the devouring person. Hence, in the digestive inter-action or intra-action between the assemblages of food and human being, the gastric fire cooks this process of mutual transformation while maintaining itself. It should be noted that in Sinhalese, the terms of kitchen (kusiye) and stomach (kuse) are closely related. Indeed, the kitchen can stand for the ‘stomach’ of the house (Châtelet [1998:39] argues something similar) in which the hearth-fire performs the role of the gastric fire in the initial phase of digestion in the actual cooking process external to the human body. Seneviratne (1992:190-
194) argues that what I label *external digestion* reverberates in the concern with lengthy cooking (in contrast to stir frying as in Chinese cuisine). Conversely, the gastric fire is the ‘hearth-fire’ of the stomach where it cooks and transforms the food. So, in this discussion we see that cooking becomes by way of the gastric fire, inter-exchangeable with digesting, and that actual cooking suffuses ‘cooking’ and digestion for which actual cooking stands (the synecdochal relation). On the other hand, digestion as ‘cooking’ becomes a metaphor for actual cooking. Yet, as we will see now, ‘cooking’ stands in plural singularly metaphoric relationships, together merging in the allegorical relation.

Moreover, ‘cooking’ among Hindus and among Sinhalese entails: “all those conditions and stages that help raise crops in the field, including “ripening”, and those which help its actual procurement and handling up to the actual ingestion” (Khare 1976:3) and I would add digestion. Additionally, Charles Malamoud (1996:48) has found that according to Vedic texts, the sun cooks everything in the world. The vital role of the sun as a fire-source of life-formation (like gastric fire) is indicated by the celebration of the sun in the annual Hindu New Year by way of the performance of the *Ponkal* (Tanaka 1997:118), which entails, as I will show later, the ritual boiling of milk-rice as the epitome of the regeneration of life. Hence, the transformative and life-sustaining role of the gastric fire resonates with the role of log-fire as employed in the actual cooking of food, and the effect of sun-fire required in the growing, ripening, and ‘cooking’ of food-bearing plants. In fact, drawing upon the Sanskrit notion of *lokapakti*, which Charles Malamoud (1996:1-2) translates as “cooking the world” and which is used to refer to the (often ritual) transformative practices of human beings, we could state that the cooking of food effectuates a ‘cooking’ of life. The latter emerges around the machinic assemblage of food in its entanglement with human action in the regeneration of the world. Valentine Daniel (1987:188) notes that the notion of heat is most obviously associated with transformations in cooking, but also with other moments of transition, such as in rites of passage. In life-transition rituals, as we shall see later, the actual cooking of food (often milk-rice) allegorically materialises the wider ‘cooking’ or co-(re)production of life. Defining such dealings with food as ‘cooking’ further emphasises the dynamic, transformative, and alchemic capacity of food to regenerate life.

So, sun-fire, hearth-fire, and gastric fire become assemblage converters that transform and cook the assemblage of food throughout its life cycle in conjunction with human activities. Just as in the digestive process, the plants, foods, and human beings exchange components throughout the life cycle of food. During cultivation farmers take care of saplings and ‘plug’
effort and skill into these young plants. During their growth, these plants are infused with forces of protection from deities, nutrients from the earth, and ‘cooked’ by the fire of the sun. Similar processes of exchange of components take place during the preparation and cooking of food, a process of destabilisation and transformation accelerated by log-fire, yet at times entailing a stable transformation as a repetition of procedures crystallised in recipes. Throughout these different processes, food is rendered ripe, cooked, edible, and tasty. During its subsequent consumption people not only extract Ayurvedic elements, but also love and care (related to social relations) that was put in during the preparation of the food. Hence, throughout the life cycle of food, components are exchanged with the human assemblage and thus the two co-produce each other in the process of cooking by various fires.

The transformative heat and ‘cooking’ seem to permeate the Vedic world, just as desire does (Webster 2005:53). Moreover, both heat and desire appear to be related and in everyday parlance, as many say that a person with a strong gastric fire is likely to be very active and passionate. Likewise, people perceive the pimples on the skin of young people as signs of their sexual heat and their strong gastric fire. However, heat’s exacerbation of a lust for life must be balanced to not burn or destroy life. People with an excess of passionate heat due to a raging gastric fire are called badegini kareya, literally meaning “gastric fire person”. Such individuals are more likely to be oversensitive and hot-tempered, burning and destroying their social relations, just as the food in actual cooking can become burnt by an imbalance of fire and heat. Hence, in the attempt to avoid such burning consumption of relations or the body, the gastric fire needs to be counterbalanced by eating specific cooling foods that calm this fire. Likewise, the heat in rituals must also be carefully managed by the spirit priest in order to avoid him becoming devoured and destroyed by it (Tanaka 1997:129-150). Or, as Gananath Obeyesekere (1998:203) has noted, people fear the possible destructive heat of the goddess Pattini, who is otherwise important in the regeneration of life. So, the transformative and regenerative fire is ambiguous (referring to our transversal theme of anxiety and precariousness in maintaining life-conducive balances), and thus must be carefully managed throughout the various cycles of cooking food and ‘cooking’ life. The heating, acceleration, and bubbling over of various assemblages must be counterbalanced by cooling efforts and deceleration (the water element plays an important role in this cooling down and is implicitly incorporated in our terminology of ‘cooking’, yet not as much foregrounded as the element of fire). The alternation of these ambiguous processes of heated destabilisation, transformation, and deterritorialisation, on the one hand, and the (likewise ambivalent) cooling stabilisation
and re-territorialisation, on the other hand, both embodied in ‘cooking’ and cooking, infuses assemblages with the pulse of life.

Like in Ayurveda, the fire element as related to life, becoming, and desire is a central component in the Buddhist doctrine. Thanissaro Bhikku (1993) notes the intimate relation between fire and desire in the Buddhist Pali Canon and so the liberation from desire in nirvana is often described as “extinguishing of the flame of life” (Bastin 2002:80).

Hence, we see that fire, heat, desire, and human beings entangle with ritual (as we will discuss more in depth in chapter 5) and everyday cooking in what becomes an allegorical materialisation of the ‘cooking’ of life. Food, in its seething and bubbling entanglement with desire, insecurity (of right balances in heat and desire), and human beings, ‘cooks’, co-(re)produces, or regenerates various concoctions that come to spice and populate our life. Food emerges thus as an expression of the resulting entanglement and intra-action of its own heterogeneous ingredients. Both food and its components transform in the process of actual cooking while exchanging ingredients with the human person and while engaging aspects of desire (dedication, effort) and insecurity (right balance of fire, achieving good taste, and social fame). In the process of cooking, both human beings and food exchange components and as such they mutually transform and become as renewed assemblages. The various forms of fire (sun-fire, gastric fire, log-fire, fire of passion) heat up, ‘cook’, and vitalise these exchanges between assemblages and accelerate their transformations. Fire enables assemblages to melt, spill over into each other, and achieve through their temporary mutual deterritorialisation, an alchemical renewal and regeneration of the assemblages, their milieus, and their components in the concoction and regeneration of the world.

When we look at assemblage theory through our South Asian-informed perspective on cooking and ‘cooking’, we can see that rendering its aspects in cooking-related terms foregrounds even better the processes of mutual transformation, emergence, and becoming. It also makes it possible to relate better to assemblage theory as we bring back to the fore the more passionate, sensorial, and experiential aspects of co-(re)production as ‘cooking’. Moreover, my rendering further clarifies some of the concerns which I voiced in explaining why I selected assemblage theory in the first place as well as the modifications I performed throughout in response to its subsequent critiques. Note also how cooking and ‘cooking’ at times come to coincide.
1. Cooking as well as ‘cooking’ (as co-(re)production) entail a focus on non-determined processes of machinic and creative emergence and becoming. Hence, I retain the open-endedness and indeterminacy of the multiple heterogeneous intra-actions between ingredients (components) that, in interaction with other forces and the milieu, enmesh and entangle in the particular resulting expression (e.g. burnt or good smelling food, energised body, ritual food, etc.).

2. Cooking and ‘cooking’ entail a phenomenon that extra-acts with its milieu while transforming it (e.g. while being stirred food emits smell-objects, leading cooks to add more spices and stomachs to grumble).

3. Cooking and ‘cooking’ entail entangled interactions with desire, human beings, and anxieties. Their overall entanglement produces powerful domestic arrangements, ritual events and political economic institutions (we will see these connections worked out throughout our following chapters). Both the entanglement as its produced mishmashes are at times destabilised, deterritorialised, and intensified in their heated acceleration towards disintegration, whereas at other times they become stabilised, territorialised, and molarised in their cooling deceleration under the pulsation induced by the fire element (being an operator or assemblage converter).

4. Cooking and ‘cooking’ stand for the co-(re)production as worked out earlier. Hence, they entail the “(re)” as we need pre-stabilised ingredients to dissipate in our new concoction whereby the ‘old’ ingredient-components become non-localisable in the newly emergent seething entanglement of becomings. Cooking blurs the boundaries between previously emerged ingredients (human–non-human, meaning–matter, etc.) in the bubbling moment of transformation and mutual becoming. Yet, the cooling down, deceleration, and stabilisation following the process of cooking allows to account for the emergence, differential becoming, and existence of enduring stabilised formations.

5. Cooking and ‘cooking’ emphasise the productive, creative as well as integrative entanglement of food, human beings, desire and insecurity in the regeneration of life and the world, including its intimate, social, ritual, political, and economic arrangements and concoctions.
6. Cooking and ‘cooking’ are thus machinic (creative and experimental), not mechanic (deterministic, singular causalities). Neither do these words sound mechanic (which is the case in the machinic terminology).

7. Cooking and ‘cooking’ include an attentiveness towards the destructive capacities of excessive heat and desire, the imbalance of which inflicts harm and insecurity on others (as in our examples of the Sātuwe ritual, the burning of social relations, and ritual heat).

8. Cooking and ‘cooking’ put the human subject in a radical relationality with other ingredients of life that get integrated and entangled in this seething process. Yet, my framing in terms of cooking allows for a specific place of the human. We have learnt from Lévi-Strauss (1983), Bourdieu (2008:169-225), Mintz (1985:3), Kahn (1986), and Remotti (1999:111-118) (but also from Buddhist philosophy and doctrine as we shall see in greater depth later) how the human subject refashions itself as human through the practice of cooking and eating. Finally, archaeological research has shown that we have physically become human (including our familiar physical and mental properties) since we domesticated fire and used it for cooking purposes, altering our brain’s capacities (Wrangham 2009). So, even archaeologically, we have become what we eat, and we continue to become so through our mutual becomings and cooking.
Conclusion

I have now concocted our final conceptualisation of food as a machinic assemblage that in its seething entanglement with its milieu, human beings, desire, and insecurity co-(re)produces multiple arrangements that are context-driven actualisations in the regeneration of the world and life. In our new terms, translated by way of ‘Google translation’, we end up with the following: Food is a productive whole of heterogeneous ingredients that in its seething entanglement with its milieu, human beings, desire, and insecurity ‘cooks’ the world and life within which multiple context-driven concoctions emerge. The actual cooking thus gradually (through gastric fire and fire of passion and desire) turns into an allegorical materialisation of the ‘cooking’ of life in which food and actual cooking holographically condenses and synecdochally suffuses the ‘cooking’, and in which the multiple forms of ‘cooking’ allegorise (symbolise and metonymise) the concrete cooking.

With this in mind, including the definition of ingestion and digestion as a form of ‘cooking’, my methodological call for an anthropophagy henceforth transforms into a participation in the ‘cooking’ process. I, as an anthropologist, then become an ingredient-component of the ‘cooking’ of life in my fieldwork, through which I become entangled, transformed in the process of a mutual (and thus not vampiric) becoming.

With our definition at hand, and having ingested the various sensitivities and concerns of our crafted conceptualisation of food and its wider dynamics, extending into various allegories, we can now move on to start looking at the multiple becomings as concocted in entanglement with food. We will first illustrate the actions of the ingredient-components and the overall food assemblage by way of their rhythms rendering the cooking and ‘cooking’ in terms of music and its accelerated and decelerated rhythmic transformations of the components, assemblage of food, and its milieu that is shaped by this rhythmic and machinic assemblage. Thereafter, we will move on towards the crystallisation of food into ancient texts of Ayurveda and Buddhism, to then turn to the ritual transformative dynamics, before concluding with the discussion of the transformation of the assemblage and articulation of food in activism into generally political economic terms. Let us start wayfaring through these four different realms that food enmeshes with and shapes.
Chapter 3 : Food in the Rhythmic Mix of Everyday Life

In the previous chapter, I introduced our approach to food that enables it to become both a topic of research as well as a vehicle for studying other phenomena. In this chapter, we will turn to the ways in which food shapes everyday life. I will explore how certain components of food as a rhythmic machinic assemblage act according to various rhythms that together make up the more intimate Sinhalese bubbling sound of the ‘cooking’ of everyday life. I will describe the various rhythms and cycles of food preparation, the flexible structuring of the days according to tea breaks and meals, and the flows of the days and years as directed by various modes of food procurement and cultivation. Moreover, I will describe the ways in which each component-rhythm affects another and thereby illustrate that each component emerges differently after this conjuncture in what I have earlier termed a relation of mutual becoming. The different component-rhythms encompass several short, medium, and extended temporalities and spatial movements in relation to food, and some may prolong or shorten after inter-action in their entanglement. I will also sketch the ways in which food in its different components provides multiple and an overall collective rhythm to village life. Food is indeed composed of heterogeneous components that are simultaneously social and physical and have their own particular rhythms that make up the pace and sounds of the ‘cooking’ of everyday life imbued with its own overall composite rhythm, movements, temporalities, and flavour. The larger ritual collective rhythms of food offerings during cultivating seasons and life-transition moments will make up the topic of the ritual chapter.

However, before proceeding to the concerto of the ‘cooking’ of life, it is necessary to discuss my personal entanglement with food procurement and preparation during my fieldwork, as my host situation has been influential in the food arrangements in which I have been implied and from which I have learned a great deal about the powerful role of food in shaping life.
Context of Research

Two years before I started my PhD-fieldwork, I met Buddhika who was studying architecture at the Moratuwa University south of Colombo. Several times he invited me to his home and we soon became good friends. Before long, I noted that this would be an interesting village to do my research in. Hence, I asked him what he would think of this idea. He said his family would be honoured and pleased to offer me a place to live to support my work. We agreed that his mother would also cook for me and in return I would make some monetary donations at cost-intensive ritual occasions that the family organises at times. I would also regularly bring foods from the market and the local convenience store, and I would assist (and thus observe) in the day to day domestic tasks. This set up would have been similar to my arrangements with my two previous host families in the year 2004 in a village near Eppawela and in 2006 in Colombo. As we would follow the regular domestic sharing circuits and the general form of reciprocity between male and female members of a family, our arrangement did not need to involve much negotiation of moral quandaries, just as it did not during the previous two stays.

Yet, while I was in Belgium before returning for my PhD fieldwork in October 2008, my host mother-to-be had passed away. By that time, her four children had reached adulthood, so they were already taking care of themselves. Yet, the youngest one, Kavith, had up till then stayed home to assist his mother as the father had died many years ago in an attack during the civil war. Kavith and his mother were financially supported by my friend Bhuddika (working as an architect), his elder sister Nihinsa (working as an assistant manager at a spectacle shop in Kurunegala), and his younger elder sister Vidusahani (working as an assistant at a fertility clinic in Colombo). The house where they grew up suddenly was no longer that cosy space of domestic intimacy and safety. In fact, the house had been the central locus of the whole extended family, as it was not only their parental home, but also that of the grandparents. As such, this house remains the main house or māha gedere of the whole host family.

After their mother died, the bustling and rhythmic activities of cooking, eating, cleaning, and living in the house fizzled out. The deceased mother’s younger brother, who still lives together with his wife and four daughters in a separate house on the same compound, could not bear the financial burden of caring for four extra people (one full-time and three part-time) on top of his four daughters. Thus, the children moved elsewhere and the focal point of their domestic life shifted towards the house of punchi amma (literally, little mother) or mother’s
younger sister. Hence, she became a sort of surrogate mother to my host siblings. Living at her place provided my host siblings with some practical advantages. She and her husband and their two sons live close to Māwattagama, situated more centrally and only a few kilometres from Kurunegala on the road towards Kandy. In towns as Kurunegala and Kandy, there are already more opportunities to find good education facilities and jobs. Nihinsa was working in a spectacles shop in Kurunegala and her stay at punchi amma’s place reduced the costs of living. In return for her presence and that of Kavith, she contributed financially to make up for the additional costs that punchi amma’s family had to bear. Kavith also stayed there for most of the time to look for jobs in Kurunegala, but he oscillated between this place and Kiribathgama to regularly check on the parental house. When there, he generally counted on the care of his uncle’s family. Another advantage of their aunt’s house is its proximity to Colombo, at least in comparison with Kiribathgama. After about three hours drive by car one arrives at the outskirts of Colombo, where both Vidusahani and Buddhika still live and work.

**Entry into a Domestic Network of Sharing**

My host sisters and brothers often travel between their work, punchi amma’s home, the parental house, and to their mother’s elder brother, who at that time lived at two different locations in relation to his work, such as visualised below.
Map 5: Network of recurrent travel among close family members, derived from the road map in the atlas of the Survey Department of Sri Lanka (2007:153)
During the first month of my fieldwork, I followed these travels of my host siblings between these points of the network of the extended family while looking at how food gifts shape their movements and relationships. In this way, I got to know all the members of the extended host family and immediately came to apprehend the crucial importance of food transactions. In what follows, I will describe in this regard one of the trips that we made from punchi amma to the main house in Kiribathgama to point out the ways in which food sets the rhythm of visits and travel.

Leaving Home

One morning, my host brothers and sisters decided to leave from punchi amma’s place and go to Kiribathgama. I was eager to join them and when we announced our plan, punchi amma told us that she had already started preparing lunch for us, which meant that we could not refuse the offer and that we would have to wait and leave after lunch. This instance shows that hosts can and sometimes do keep their guests with them by way of food, changing their rhythms of action and how they plan their trips and other affairs. In this case however, punchi amma may have reasoned that we would become hungry during the trip and that as a ‘good’ host and relative she had to make sure that this would not happen. Yet, she had not even asked beforehand whether we would like to have lunch and if she had done so, we would have entered into an elaborate word game of politeness in which we would initially refuse, only to yield to her generous and hospitable pressure after a while to accept her gift and friendship. The word game of acceptance and refusal involves a fragile balance between not showing one’s eagerness (which is seen as a sign of greed) to accept an offer, on the one hand, and not completely refusing the offer, on the other. The fact that she did not ask us and that she had already started preparing lunch avoided the possibility of this play and simply obliged us to eat with her family and thus leave later. Her food offer changed our time and rhythm, and kept us longer in her generous company satisfying both our hunger and her interest of not wishing to let us go. The latter is part of a slight but pervasive fear I often noticed of being separated or being left alone. When people actually leave, they do not say that they leave, but instead that they “go and come back” (gihing ennang). This expression renders the separation into individual paths and life rhythms more tolerable for people who live their lives in very relational and collective ways. Be it as it may, after lunch we started collecting some fruits from the garden to take with us to share with sudu māma (deceased mother’s younger brother), connecting the homesteads through the gifts of food. While we were getting ready to

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21 The refusal of the gift is very powerful and puts a relationship in jeopardy (Mauss 1990).
go, the youngest son of punchi amma decided that he wanted to join us. We waited for him to get ready and by the time we were ready to leave, it was time for sweets and the following cup of tea. By 4:00 p.m. we were still there having shifted our plans for reasons of lunch, fruits, tea, and sociality. Food directs the individual and collective rhythms, and their relations indeed.

Flexible Time

These kinds of plan alterations are very common and I found them sometimes frustrating, as it complicated my way of planning my work. My inculcated temporal disposition of linear-time planning as an entrepreneurial ‘control freak’ clashed with the more impermanent and flexible temporal structure of the Sinhalese habitus—the internalised dispositions that structure behaviour and experimentation with possibilities (Bourdieu 1990:52-65). My rigid relation to time in terms of planning would often mismatch with the temporal dispositions of my host family and friends. Buddhika once told me that I resembled a mechanic person that dances to the tunes of the clock-time marked by repetition more than creative variation. Someone else explained to me during an ethnographic conversation that it is impossible to control time. He said: “Time comes as it comes. Everything will happen when the time is ready. You cannot force time. And, everything changes anyway, so it is useless to spend time in planning things.” This explanation is very interesting because in my personal experience flexible planning demanded more effort, but the converse is also true that rigid planning does not work when dealing with people who have flexible notions of time. Whenever I did make plans, they had to be constantly re-negotiated when somebody else changed plan, bringing about a chain of changes in other plans I had made. Overall, I personally felt that sticking to a plan would be much less time-consuming, but that would entail a more individual rhythm and sticking to this could isolate me from my social relations. I soon concluded that I had to let myself float on the stream of time without trying to swim and thus “go with the flow”. As such, I did less planning and took the interviews as they came. This approach proved to be more efficient, but not always easy as I had to let go of control over things and time. I also noticed how such flexible time is better apt to deal with the needs of others and unexpected events. Indeed, the individual(ist) control over time stands in stark contrast to the relational, collective, and flexible mode of being-in-time.

I speculate that this flexible time practice continues to provide an experiential and existential ground (Csordas 2003) from which recurs the practical experience of impermanence that once
crystallised into a core Buddhist teaching, which in its turn of course further shapes such engagement with time. For many Sinhalese, time seems to be outside of human initiative and is thus ever shifting. By accepting and living according to this notion of flexible time, people simultaneously experience and reproduce flexible time, thereby materialising this basic Buddhist teaching of impermanence and ongoing flux of being. The experience of an incapability of controlling time takes away the impetus to attempt rigid entrepreneurial planning and controlling time, which does not make sense in such flexible context. Yet, as just mentioned, this flexible approach allows one to be more open and adaptable to others’ wishes, such as punchi amma’s invitation to stay longer.

Stop Over

Only by early evening did we leave homewards to Kiribathgama. However, on the way we decided to stop over at the elder brother of their deceased mother (loku māma or literally, big uncle) near Wariyapola on the way between Kurunegala and Galgamuwa. We could not arrive without any food, so we bought some fruits, sweets, and a chocolate cake. The travels towards and through places where family members are settled include very often a stop in which foods and (mostly non-alcoholic) drinks are exchanged, involving the sharing of food gifts and receiving of tea, biscuits, and often an entire meal after the careful balancing between acceptance and refusal. Such food stops on the regular travels between these points of domesticity and familiarity that are scattered across the country do refresh and regenerate family ties. Moreover, our stop near Wariyapola involved visits to several domestic units, visits that each time included the consumption of some sweets and a cup of tea. By the end of our stop over, we had dinner with everyone we had met that evening. Some of them brought one or two curries for us to taste. Such exchange of side dishes occurs often among neighbouring families in villages and diversifies the food consumed. That evening, the exchanges were numerous and brought more than 20 people and numerous curries together in the intense commensal event.

Arriving at the Māha Gedere in Kiribathgama

After this round of visits we arrived around midnight at the maternal home with loads of food gifts, including fruits we brought with us from punchi amma as these fruits (e.g. rambutan and jack fruit) do not grow in the area of Kiribathgama. We also brought other foods that we received while visiting the village of loku māma, which we shared the following day with the family of sudu māma. This is a clear example of how a large travelling family network is an
important source of a diversified intake of food, and also how food is inextricably tied in with the regeneration of both family and friendship ties. Hence, it is important to look at the ways in which food moves across such networks of people for reasons of health and as these exchanges are very much part of everyday life, but also because these travels and exchanges shaped my personal gradual introduction into the fieldwork site more in particular.

An Implicit Arrangement of Food Sharing

After this first month of travelling, getting acquainted, and following the cross-country circuits of food sharing of the extended host family, I settled at the māha gedere in Kiribathgama. During the following three months of my stay, we had rolled into an implicit food sharing arrangement between my nuclear host family and the neighbouring one of sudu māma to provide for my food requirements. Most of the time in Kiribathgama, I was staying in the house with Kavith, as the other three host siblings were working elsewhere in Sri Lanka for most of the time. Just as before my arrival, he continued to get food from his neighbouring relatives and, as an ‘adopted brother’, I joined in with this arrangement. At other times we cooked our own rice and adjoining plates, and shared some of them with sudu māma’s family who then used to reciprocate by giving us some of theirs. When Kavith and I cooked, we generally made simple side dishes that men tend to learn to prepare. We often made pol sambol (grated coconut with lime and chilli), dahl, and potato curry, which we then shared with the uncle’s family. In return we often received a share of the more time-consuming and complex dishes. Once a day, I tried to cook my way, but I soon noted that I was having difficulties in adapting myself to the new cooking environment. I was particularly lacking the experience and skills to rightly balance various components, such as the intensity of the log-fire, the round shape of the pots, and specific properties of ingredients, in order to achieve an attractive looking and tasty concoction emitting seductive smells. Trying to cook a ratatouille niçoise with bitter gourd, snake gourd, and brinjal fitted neither the European or Sri Lankan habitual standards and categories. Indeed, my cooking dispositions were still maladjusted to the new cooking environment, utensils, methods, and ingredients. This is an example of hysteresis, which in this case entails the mismatch of my cooking dispositions or habitus with the habitus that is required to successfully and tastefully cook Sri Lankan food on a rural hearth. Pierre Bourdieu (1990:62) defines hysteresis at individual and collective levels in the following way:
“In fact the persistence of the effects of primary conditioning, in the form of the *habitus*, accounts equally well for cases in which dispositions function out of phase and practices are objectively ill-adapted to the present conditions because they are objectively adjusted to conditions that no longer obtain. The tendency of groups to persist in their ways due *inter alia* to the fact that they are composed of individuals with durable dispositions that can outlive the economic and social conditions in which they were produced, can be the source of misadaptation as well as adaptation, revolt as well as resignation.”

This dynamic of hysteresis also applies to the earlier discussion about the clash in temporal dispositions, which Pierre Bourdieu (1977) discusses more specifically in his book “Algérie 60” regarding the specific temporal dispositions that sometimes mismatch when people make a transition from being a rural farmer towards becoming a market vendor. To return to my cooking, while fine-tuning, experimenting, and getting experienced with the new cooking environment, I gradually improved my European-style cooking before acquiring the skills to cook in a local way. Still, even after a while, I could not achieve the same standards. At times when I came close to the European or Belgian standard, I was eager to share some of my food in a reciprocal fashion. Yet, given the small quantities eaten, I reckoned that my cooking was less popular.

At other times, when my host sisters were home they used to make sufficient food for both us and *sudu māma’s* family to partly reciprocate their uncle’s care for Kavith and me. These occasions enabled me to assist in cooking and learning about the preparation of more complex side dishes to flavour the rice. All of us then hung around in the kitchen while chatting and laughing. The bubbling pot on the hearth became as always the centripetal force around which family members and visitors regenerate relationships in the kitchen. Indeed, the cooking of food ignites the hearth which brings the house to life in the ‘cooking’ of life in all its relationalities among family members and friends. Hence, when the mother died, the house died along with her, as no one remained there to keep the hearth going at a daily pace. The burning fire that cooks the food in the kitchen (*kusiye*) is like the gastric fire of the stomach (*kuse*) that it also precedes in the overall transformation of food, linking stomach and hearth, and so the fire keeps regenerating the human body, domestic relations, and the house. This is clear from the fact that if someone passes away, all cooking of food in his or her house is stopped during a certain period. After the burial and subsequent purification rites, which we
will explore in the ritual chapter, the hearth can be lit again as to bring the house back to life. Hence, this ritual practice illustrates clearly that food is the initiator of the rhythm of life of both the house and its inhabitants, and that human beings and their houses are intimately related, something which Valentine Daniel (1984:105-162) eloquently describes among Tamils as well. In other words, it illustrates that food is a machinic assemblage co-(re)producing life in entanglement with human beings (mostly women in this case), rhythms, relations, fire, hearth, and house. Given that my sisters were home intermittently while bringing the house to a higher pitch provided a clear contrast with the times that my host brother and I were there by ourselves and cooking with less skill, complexity, and intensity.

We continued this relationship of sharing within my host domestic unit and with the uncle’s family for about three months, but I gradually started feeling increasingly uneasy about the insufficient reciprocity on my part. I started feeling lost in their generosity and I needed to find a solution for this while exploring other options. I could not resort to eating the white spongy bread available at some bakeries in the area, as it is not very nutritional nor healthy. However, this would have been much less time-consuming than cooking three times a day. In larger towns, eating bread twice a day as I do at home would have been an option as there is more variety of bread. So, when I was in Kandy or Colombo I did sometimes turn to time-saving bread consumption. As they did not have food stalls in the village I could not collect my rice there either, such as is possible in towns and cities. Neither could I start cooking myself three times a day, as that would not provide much information on Sinhalese cooking and social relations. Moreover and related to the latter point, all these options to provide for my food requirements would set me outside of the domestic circuits of sharing rather drastically. Finally, I did not have the time to be cooking rice and curries three times a day, as I needed to get out, conduct interviews, do research, and learn the art of cultivation as well. Hence, I soon learned it is impossible to combine all the work and thus that the division of tasks in a domestic unit also has the advantage of getting everything done (I am not pronouncing myself of how it is being divided). Additionally, I knew by that time that things were going to get more complicated as I needed to start conducting interviews and collaborating with research assistants who would stay over. Being their host, I thus needed to be able to take care of their food supply as well.

In sum, even while sharing some of my concoctions, bringing vegetables from the market, and contributing in some ritual expenses, I increasingly felt parasitic and anticipated this to get worse if nothing was done to deal with upcoming changes in my work. Hence, I asked my
host brothers to help me find a solution, the search of which laid bare many aspects of the practical and moral quandaries involved in working out a food sharing arrangement. It required some time and experimentation before we had finally come up with a solution that balanced these aspects about which I have written about in greater detail elsewhere (Van Daele 2013a), but which I will summarise in what follows owing to the instructiveness of this search in relation to these food-related quandaries.

**Searching for a New Food Arrangement**

While exploring solutions to the issues of my food supply, I carefully tested the proposal to give a monthly payment in return, as I did during my two earlier stays in Sri Lanka. My host family in Kiribathgama did not accept this as I had turned more into their guest brother through our relation of sharing for the last three months. I had to come up with other alternatives, but in doing so, I had to keep in mind the necessity of finding a good balance in scaling down our relation of sharing and avoid giving the likely impression that I was rejecting their gift. I was aiming for a more transactional arrangement in which I could accept gifts, reciprocate sufficiently, and not become parasitic. Above all, the arrangement would need to leave me sufficiently free and disconnected from the domestic collective rhythm to be able to organise and do my research work. I then proposed that we ask someone to cook for me in return for monetary payments. When discussing various options of whom to hire, we had to take into account components of intimacy, money, reputation, gender, caste, and skill. The option of paying a local handyman was explicitly rejected on the grounds that he is a man (deemed less capable in general) and poor (less experienced with a varied palate of ingredients). Yet, when opting for female cooks we could not select an unmarried woman as my regular presence at their door to collect the meals would raise suspicion about their chastity. When opting for elder women we found out that they felt insecure about whether I could tolerate their spicy food. Even after reassuring them that I had got used to the spices, it was of no avail. I suggest that the doubts they had in cooking for a foreign man demonstrate that the sharing of food still remains subject to the negotiation of intimacy and distance, particularly when it concerns a long-term relation of exchange. Indeed, when arriving as a visitor, it is never a problem to receive food, maybe even on the contrary. Scanning some potential candidates, we arrived at a woman who could use some extra money and who lived in front of us. If her poverty was no issue, but that of the handy man was, I infer that it was rather his gender that was involved in his rejection, but also his lower caste background,
which is rarely openly discussed\textsuperscript{22}. The front house woman agreed, but she increasingly found it difficult to accept payments because of the feelings of familiarity our food sharing engendered. She started calling me \textit{puta} or son after a while. As she could not afford it to offer me food for free she withdrew from this arrangement after a few weeks. We then found a professional Muslim cook who had a commercial take on food and so for him my terms of the transaction (cooking for monetary payments) were clear and familiar. This worked well and when I had research collaborators staying over, he had no problem in supplying me with extra meals as he is used to cook large amounts for parties and other occasions. Yet, when he had to start delivering food elsewhere, he could no longer include me in his delivery round and so we had to look for another solution. Finally, we asked a more distant relative in the village whom I had met before and she was willing to cook for me twice a day. She was distant enough to be able to accept money in direct exchange for food and she could use it to take care of her sick mother. The sharing of food did engender a relation of familiarity as I gradually became invited into her house more often, but this did not prove to become problematic for our arrangement. She cooked breakfast and lunch as for dinner it was impossible to collect the food there in the evening because of the wild elephants roaming the area (and also the possible gossip my daily presence in the evening might raise). For dinner, I cooked my own food, fetched some snacks or white bread from the few shops nearby, or received some food at \textit{sudu māma’s} house. This arrangement worked well as we were able to balance these components of money, intimacy, reputation, gender, and age. Moreover, it brought me closer to the neighbouring host family again, while not being fully usurped in their generosity and thus keeping a large part of my freedom for planning and organising my research work. Hence, my work and life rhythm did become more individualist without becoming totally separated from the collective rhythm of my host family. It was the negotiation of this balance that was articulated through the sharing of food and the reciprocity it summons. Moreover, the balancing of individual and collective rhythms directed by food also revolved around the question of merging completely with the hosts or remaining a separate individual.

Indeed, for personal and work-related reasons, I felt the need to keep a sense of myself as an individual person in charge of its planning and rhythm while simultaneously dissipating or decentralising partly into the radical relationality and collective rhythm of my hosts.

\textsuperscript{22} See the book volume on the blind-eye turned towards issues of caste, edited by Kalinga Tudor Silva, P. Sivapragasam, and Paramsothy Thanges (2009)
Particularly food plays a vital role in this mutual, exchange, convergence, adaptation, and transformation that needed to remain balanced. I had to balance openness and acceptance, and my individual tasks and habits that were negotiated along the food gift. In other words, this balance had to avoid becoming lost in their generosity or accepting their food without adjusting to them. The latter would turn me into a vampire whereas the former would make me usurped into the host family’s social body. In relation to vampirism, Parama Roy (2010:12) states that: “In such a scene of ingestion, one assimilates the other totally to reproduce oneself without being altered or disturbed in any degree by this consumption; the other loses its character of otherness, if it can be said ever to have possessed it, in this process.” Rather, the anthropologist sharing food during his fieldwork should be at the forefront of the real anthropophagy (Remotti 1999), which I discussed in the introductory chapter, eating the other in what is an intimate relation of mutual exchange and mutation of both visitor and hosts. The experimentation with a suitable arrangement for my food needs thus had to respectfully negotiate our alterity and involved a search for a balance between: “the interiorization of the other as well as a submission to incorporation by the other; that is what is ‘eating well’” (Roy 2010:14, Derrida 1991). Indeed, such a balance that seeks to avoid vampirism and parasitism necessarily entails a negotiation of intimacy, distance, and reciprocity, while allowing for a mutual transformation by way of exchanging and sharing food. The difficulty of these fragile negotiations of reciprocity, intimacy, cuisines, tastes, ways of provisioning, eating, and so forth, is what all anthropologists have to engage with, in their fieldworks, but rarely write neither theorise about. As is clear from the various modifications in my food arrangements, the fine-tuning in relations of sharing indeed entailed a careful balancing effort during a mutual adaptation in a mutable relationship that is always in flux (Coleman 2011:10).

To sum up, food negotiated my entry into a domestic circuit of sharing as well as my entry in relationships of sharing in the village of stay. It also determined the rhythms of travel, consumption, and other activities. In what follows, I will further foreground this rhythmic structuring of various cycles of life by food and turn to how the rhythm of life is directed by food in some of its different components in everyday village life, both in relation to preparation and procurement. Adopting a particular narrative technique and style, I will describe a so-called average day into which I compress my observations made at several times and occasions. I will exclude however, some of the more exceptional and ritual events, as I discuss these in the ritual chapter. As mentioned earlier, this distinction between everyday and
ritual life in my writing does not reflect any actual and systematic separation in village practice. On the contrary, ritual permeates everyday events and structures these to an extent that it is hard to distinguish these two. In fact, small rites are very much part of everyday life, such that I will include here the description of one of these: the daily evening *mal pūja* or flower offering to the Buddha in the home. Let us now turn to the energetic refreshing dawn in Kiribathgama.
Everyday Village Rhythm and Life of Food

Starting the Machine

The Concert of Tea

Around 5 a.m., the sounds of nocturnal animals give way to the morning music of the birds. One bird starts the concert that gradually gathers momentum by encompassing the sounds of various birds, insects, and other sorts of animals. In contrast to northern European houses, the Sri Lankan ones tend to be very open and porous (just as the human person is conceptualised) and thus the whole concert enters the home with full force. The tropical architecture in Sri Lanka allows the houses to be more permeable not only in relation to sounds, but also to temperature changes, smells, shifting winds, and animals (including spiders, cockroaches, scorpions, and snakes). These various elements enter through the openings under the roof, between the bars of the open windows, or under or above the doors. The sounds of singing birds, the fresh morning wind, and the first rays of the sunlight announce the bustling energy of the morning and touch upon and even penetrate the human body. While everybody responds to these sensorial signs and wakes up, the women first go into the kitchen to light the log-fire of the hearth. The sounds of the water pouring into the kettle add to the crackling sound of the log-fire and the background of the concert of multi-species life outside. Each of the components of the drink assemblage, such as the pot, water, human effort, social intentionality, fire and wood, generate noises that together make up the music that fills the kitchen. Soon, the water starts ‘dancing’ to the tones$^{23}$ and starts transforming into steam that spreads throughout the kitchen. The sounds touch and enter through the “ear-doors” into the person who reacts by feeling responsible (mostly one of the women as their ears have been trained to catch these sounds and react as part of the set of inculcated and embodied gender dispositions and habitual performance), and whose consciousness is then triggered to act. She takes the kettle from the fire and starts making tea. She pours the hot water in a bucket filled with a mix of milk-powder and sugar in which the tune of pouring water acquires a higher tone as the bucket fills. Then she pours the bucket of milk through the tea bag filled with tealeaves into another bucket. The music changes because the water flows slower through the tea cornet, after which the sound changes again when she pours the tea into everyone’s cup. The change in sounds and smells and of course in the human voice, all signal that the tea is ready. Tea in Sri Lanka generally includes milk and if it does not, it is called “plain tea”.

$^{23}$ In Sinhalese, people sometimes say kind of jokingly: “wature natenewa”, which literally means “the water is dancing”, to denote that the water is boiling.
Then, everybody goes to the kitchen or the living room and the slurping sounds of drinking tea alternate at high speeds, as everyone has to get on to the tasks of the day. The morning tea is the machine that gets everybody going in their productive activities. Being the igniter of a bustling atmosphere in the morning or a resuscitator of conversations later in the day, it is in my experience generally drunk at a high pace. The cup does not rest for long on the table as long as it is not empty. When finished, everybody washes their cup or sometimes someone washes all of them, then everybody goes on to their domestic tasks or other work. The sugar and theine of the black tea transform into energy during the digestion process (Recall the earlier mentioned fascination of Noëlle Châtelet [1998] in this regard). This transformation of matter into ideas and energy incites action in everyone to a level that fills the domestic atmosphere with energy.

Co-Generating Rice and Side Dishes

While my host sisters keep the fire going and start rinsing the rice from sand and stones, Kavith teaches me how to make pol sambol, a side dish with grated coconut, chilli and lime. During the other days when the sisters were not there, this simple side dish depicted below became my responsibility and regular contribution.

First, I select a coconut that we collected and stored earlier in a room or barn, and I start pealing it by forcefully dashing it onto an upward standing knife and tearing the outer peel apart, such as depicted below.

24 All pictures in this monograph are taken by the author and are therefore not referenced.
It took some time before I acquired the right skill to balance the various components of force, right locations (of weak places in combination with sharp points of the large knife) and speed, conducive to a clean coconut where the inner peal or endocarp remains intact. Later, this endocarp must be broken into two equal parts, which likewise requires a balancing of physical forces and the sharpness of the knife. The effort I invested in transforming the coconut to something ready to be grated already increases the pace of my breath and incites a desire for breakfast in combination with the fact that my gastric fire has been ignited by the morning tea. Still, a lot of work remains to be done as the cooking of a meal altogether takes between one and a half to two hours. So, I bring these halve coconuts to the kitchen to start grating them, sitting on a small wooden piece of furniture with an iron grater sticking out, having the same shape as a cutting knife, but depicted below.
Moving the coconut back and forth over this serrated iron, the then grated coconut falls into the bucket below as shown here.

One part of the grated coconut is used for the *pol sambol* that I am making, whereas the other part is used as the basis to make coconut milk for the adjoining curry and *parippu* or dahl made from lentils. I then cut the chilli peppers in small bits and lay these on the grinding stone to grind and mix these with lime juice and later with the grated coconut. The result is a reddish coconut mixture to which some add a few small pieces of tomato as well. In Ayurvedic terms, this dish is cool or *sitelay* and will play its role in balancing the hot-cool components of the meal.

After one of my host sisters has rinsed the rice and put it on to boil, one of my host sisters then pours water over the grated coconut and squeezes the pulp to have the first portion of tasty milk, which is kept aside until later. This is repeated a second time, giving a more watery mixture that is poured immediately into the round earthen pots where *parippu* (lentils) as depicted below and sometimes another side dish (in the morning often a potato curry) are heating up.
Meanwhile, in another pot, several spices (including chilli, cumin, cardamom, and cinnamon) are frying in the coconut oil, producing sounds and releasing smells, affecting my nose and eyes to the extent that I have to leave the kitchen. I am being attacked by powerful components that affect me and cause a strong visceral reaction. When she adds the coconut milk to this spicy mixture and adds the second portion of milk to the bubbling dahl, the kitchen is safe again for my inhabited senses, as the spicy ingredients are less penetrating. The smell becomes agreeable and spurs sounds in our stomachs. We chat and joke about ordinary events that happened the day before or that we anticipate for the day. My host brother collects and cleaves wood to sustain the hearth-fire. One of the sisters chops potatoes and plunges the pieces into the heating blend of coconut milk and spices. The potato curry starts bubbling while we continue to chat, laugh, and discuss. By then, the bubbling potato curry has adsorbed the forces of the knife, fire (of both wood and passion), our efforts, care, good atmosphere (stress often affects cooking badly...), social intentionality, taste aspirations, the earthen pot, ingredients, moral codes of gendered divisions of tasks in cooking, and so forth. Yet, in its seething transformation, these heterogeneous ingredients enmesh and emerge in different forms, such as the altering smells and sounds that touch our senses and signal
when it is ready to take it from the fire and cool it down. Indeed, these smells, tastes, and visual images affect some of the components of the human assemblage and incite transformations, such as when I had to run out of the kitchen when the spices were at their most active in emitting smells or when my stomach started grumbling for food, and so affecting my subjective experiences. Hence, it is clear that the entities (food, human beings, and fire) that we tend to perceive in a Newtonian way as separate are instead being entangled, interpenetrating, and transforming in relations of mutual becomings.

To sum up, the cooking of food brings us together in the kitchen in a joined effort to prepare the meal, but in which the sisters take on the most of the tasks whereas the men assist. In cases where the mother is there, the balance of the effort shifts even more to the female side of the family members, as she carries out most of the tasks. Conjoining with the animal sounds outside and the cooking sounds in the kitchen, our human conversation adds to the music of the ‘cooking’ of everyday life that revolves around the cooking of the food. Even though our actions are involved in relation to different ingredients or components of the food assemblage, there does emerge an overall concerted rhythm and movement around the cooking event which is more than the sum of each of the partial tunes of these individual actions and components. The resulting meal becomes the synthesis of our conversations, bodily reactions to spices, negotiations of forces and materialities, balancing of ingredients, aspirations, and grumbling stomachs expressing a powerful desire to eat. The food feeds itself into the milieu of the cooking event, the kitchen, and active cooks, and thereby acquires additional components and transforms both itself as well as the entities in its milieu. The smells that emerge during the transformative cooking process seduce and turn us into craving beings. The curry, *pol sambol*, and all these aforementioned components that are both physical and social, conjoin in creating the overall expression of the meal that cools down. Yet, it should be noted that these components do not necessarily create harmonious wholes, but sometimes act against each other. A peculiar smell reaching us during the ‘dancing’ coconut curry could destabilise us and make us uncertain of what we could have done wrong. We would then become partners in search for a solution (adding more spice) and experiment with it in such a way that it appeals to us and lowers the intensity of insecurity. Or, if I mess up in breaking the coconut in two halves, some parts of dishes will get delayed in getting prepared. The wrong tune of a slower rhythm in one of the components changes the way the other ingredients act and particularly their temporality, which does affect taste and smell in some cases when one part may be overcooked or so. Such false tunes, when components
counteract others, do indeed alter the overall expression of the food concoction and can thereby affect (not determine) our ensuing mood of the day.

A Sudden Visit

Sometimes the cooking process as described above may be altered because of some unexpected component. A passer-by knocks on the door a little before 6 a.m. and is welcomed even if he or she comes at an inconvenient moment. Guests always have to be made welcome and be placed before one’s personal wishes. The cooking process is interrupted and a new rhythm of additional components sets the tone. One of us hosts repeats the whole procedure, tonality, and temporality of the tea process in all its aspects and takes biscuits from the cupboard to present on a nice plate. Having a guest around, the aesthetics of the presentation has to be well cared for. The visitor also receives tea in a nice china cup after having been offered a biscuit. The cup confirms the person’s distinguished status as a guest. Thus one the one hand, we are receiving and relating to the guest through our offer of tea, but on the other hand, we serve it in such a way that sets the guest apart from us, showing that he is not part of our domestic unit. The ability of food and drink to simultaneously forge relations and enact distinctions in these relations is what I term the ambivalent food dynamic of relationality. The plate on which the biscuits are placed and the china tea-cup transform the domestic situation into one of a more formal host-guest interaction. The visitor takes a biscuit and his moulding teeth produce crunching sounds on top of the lively morning conversation. Coming from a background in which the morning coffee is drunk while reading the newspaper and serves to slowly, and often silently, wake up to the world of the living, the high-pitched energetic level of social intentionality and interaction in the early mornings continues to astonish me. The morning music of life plays at a higher pitch in Sri Lanka and it is even possible for people to adjust its tone any time by adapting to unexpected elements in the assemblage of the morning events. Even more, the guest will most likely be invited for breakfast and after the obligatory game of insistence and refusal, it is likely that the guest or guests will accept the offer. In that case, extra food has to be quickly prepared to make sure there is plenty of food on the table, as that displays generosity and makes the guest feel welcome. If there are several guests, the female members will often add a helping hand, whereas the male hosts entertain the visiting men. There is of course flexibility in these adaptations to the cooking process according to the level of formality of the visit or according to whether the breakfast was already prepared. In the latter case, the guest or guests receive the food first (again in very nice plates) and we would then later prepare some extra for ourselves. Anyway, the morning visits tend to be
lively and full of energy. For instance, Geethan is a younger uncle who used to come by regularly during the first months of my fieldwork and who often enjoyed the food he was offered. He did so until he got married and got his food from his wife (again a clear example of the simultaneous binding and separating capacity of food, as he ate into his own family and less into ours). Ever since, he still continues to drop by, but very quickly, entering like a morning whirlwind to be gone equally fast. Only a cup of tea can sometimes keep him a little longer. Generosity and hospitality come first, even when it is very inconvenient. The time of visit can still be reduced in certain cases, but the guest needs to be offered at least something. Otherwise one is not a ‘good’ host.

Relational and Individual Rhythms of the Body

The basic approach of other people coming before oneself implies and strengthens the sense that the rhythm of individual life is not fully in one’s own hands. The individual timing becomes part of and shaped by a collective rhythm composed of and superposed by multiple individuated ones where the person with the highest status has most influence (e.g. elder, rich person, guest). The individual self is not of primary importance, but rather the other is, depending of course on the relative hierarchical position among the group. The most influential and high status person, depending on the way the group is composed and on the context, will in descending order have relatively more influence on the overall collective rhythm. For instance, within a general domestic unit, the hierarchical order would be something as follows: grandfather, father, grandmother, mother, eldest son, eldest daughter, younger son, and younger daughter. If a rich male of moderate age then joins this family for a holiday trip or pilgrimage, he will likely steer the timings of the breaks and so forth. If a young woman would join, this capacity to influence the collective rhythm would remain with the grandfather or father. This example illustrates that an individual self disintegrates in its relationalities with the others and so becomes constituted as a relational node that emerges, individuates, and is in a constant flux in context-driven ways throughout these shifting and recurring relations and contexts.

Moreover, and as mentioned earlier, the precedence of others before the individual ego makes a rigid planning redundant, as adaptability is more valued in such relational context than self-centred entrepreneurial planning skills and their systematic execution. The flexibility required in the personal dispositions that make up the flexible and relational habitus then leads to an experience of everyday life in which events and plans have to be continuously changed and adapted to the altering rhythms of life. The fact that others can make you change your own
plans quite rapidly conversely leaves someone with the freedom to let oneself change mind and plans easily. The flexibility of thoughts and their rapid alteration allows for an openness towards other paths that cross and intermingle with one’s own, but also enables a self-liberating freedom from rigid and mechanic modes of thinking and being.

Expressed in linguistic terms, the person who thinks is in the Sinhalese language not the subject but the direct object. Literally translated, one does not say “I think”, but rather “mate hittenewa” meaning “the thoughts occur to me”. Hence, thoughts are not authored and controlled by the subject, and can change rapidly. Meditation, as I have been told various times, is in fact geared towards letting these ideas flow without becoming affected by them such that one can reach a state of calm. It is thus different from the subject-authored approach of controlling and suppressing ideas, which often creates opposite effects to inner peace.

Hence, we have here a more destabilised and deterritorialised approach to ideas that I suggest is grounded in the very relational mode of being in everyday and practical life and this is an example of how being a flexible person is grounded in the relational experience. This suggestion is corroborated when looking at the flexibility that is required in the dispositions of farmers in order to be able to suddenly overturn their work according to the ever-shifting components of rain or sunshine. Rigid planning has no sense when having to collaborate with these ‘unreliable’ ecological ingredients. Hence, we have here an example of how the habitus of flexibility entails “An Ecology of Mind” as well (Bateson 1973).

The flexible rhythms and ever shifting musical tones of the relational ‘cooking’ of life were the hardest aspect of Sinhalese village life for me to adapt to. The local flexible rhythm and tone was alien to my personal way of life embodied in the personal pulse of my habitus. This led to disruptions in my personhood while I was trying to uphold my sense of individuality and habituated rhythm in face of disintegration and dissipation into relations and collective rhythms, thereby becoming a relational node. When I am in Belgium I go to sleep and get up at fairly similar times of the day and eat my three meals at specific designated times (recall that a friend said that I am a mechanic robot listening to the clock). This pulse of life is incorporated into my bodily rhythms as well. After my morning coffee, I am quite sure that I soon have to go to the toilet and relieve myself. My digestive machine has become mechanic by the internalisation of the mechanic clock on a repetitive basis and has as such become comfortable with it. Arriving in Sri Lanka and living closely with my host family with more flexible rhythms in relation to when going to sleep and when to eat (lest in relation to getting
up, which is structured by the environmental wake-up call), my bodily rhythms were regularly upset. My digestive system often oscillated between laziness or constipation, and excessive activity or diarrhoea. It often got upset in my attempt to adapt to the flexible flow of life of the people with whom I shared my life. This instance shows clearly how the rhythms of the various components of life are embodied and taken the visceral and carnal level. And, it is exactly around these very corpo-real aspects of cooking and digestion that the other rhythms of life (e.g. work, sleep) revolve and get embodied as well.

The Flexible Meal

The irregularity of daily rhythms is enhanced by the fact that the consumption of food does not necessarily take place immediately after it is cooked and ready. Generally, it first has to cool down before it becomes possible to eat it with the right hand. Hence, many activities fill the space between cooking and eating, further making the timing of breakfast undefined, at least in contrast to what I am used to at home. However, in those cases and times when people work at an office or factory, breakfast is more often consumed according to determined clock-times. Hence, on those working days, the clock rules in more systematic ways for people working in larger enterprises, particularly in a city as Colombo. In villages, people seem to claim somewhat more flexibility to these hours. During their spare time or for those who engage in subsistence farming in general, the rhythm indeed tends to be more variable and flexible. Thus, if people are not in a rush to go to work for an (additional) income, the breakfast tends to be postponed by various activities, such as sweeping the courtyard, soaking clothes, fetching drinking water at the communal water pump, and so on.

Some days we would have breakfast as early as 6 a.m. whereas other days it could only be at 10.30 a.m. depending on the various (unexpected) components that added to the morning tasks and events. The breakfast meal generally consists of boiled rice and mostly two and sometimes three side dishes. The rice is made from either rice that is steamed before (tambapu hāl) or that is raw (kākulu hāl). The steamed rice is husked after it is steamed whereas the raw rice is immediately husked in one of the locally owned mills. Both types of rice tend to be cooked in water for regular meals whereas only kākulu hāl is used for the preparation of milk-rice. This is related to the fact that this unsteamed rice is a little stickier when cooked. Moreover, kākulu hāl is Ayurvedically a little hotter than tambapu hāl and is thus more often cooked when the weather is cooler. Note also that the name of rice also transforms in the cooking process when it turns from hāl to bath, both denoting rice. The breakfast rice is often combined with pol sambol and parippu and potato in either a fried form.
or in a thick or more fluid curry. Below, we have a picture of these typical breakfast ingredients.

At least this used to be the case during the periods that I learned cooking in a Sri Lankan way from my younger host brother. These side dishes are easy to make and thus form the substance *par excellence* with which men tend to make themselves useful in the kitchen to help their wives or when they have to make food for themselves. This happens at occasions when their wife is away and no woman is there to replace her, or when they live at a boarding at university or a far away job. Sometimes, for a change we experimented with making pumpkin or beans in spicy gravy. However, most of the time, when I was there with only one of my host brothers, we would make sufficient amounts of one of these simple dishes to exchange with *sudu māma*’s household, and we would receive in return a more elaborated curry from aunty or *nānde*. This imbalance would then be resolved when my host sisters returned and cooked more elaborate meals to share with uncle’s family. Indeed, when they were there, the food tended to be more diversified and I could learn more about cooking more elaborate dishes.
The Sequenced Consumption of the Meal

When the food is ready and has cooled down a little, the domestic members eat the food following a general sequence and order according to status, age, and gender. The guests, senior men, and male hosts receive the first portion of the food and eat in the living room at the table. If lower caste men are present, they take their share later and eat in a chair that stands elsewhere in the room or sometimes in another room, indicating that caste-related food taboos among Sinhalese are not as strict as in the Indian case described by RS Khare (1976). This ordered mode of consumption is what I repeatedly experienced, but of course differences occurred across various households and depending occasions such as weddings where numerous guests are present (Appadurai 1981). As a close friend, Buddhika could initially join me, and the men significantly senior to him, as long as I was regarded as a high-standing foreign guest, a standing that gradually disappeared as I got incorporated into the domestic structures. If I had not been there, Buddhika would take his meal a little after these men, although as a successful architect today and his concurrent ascent in status should have enabled him to be more often among those to receive the first portion. My description of the structural sequence of what I call homogeneous consumption groups that order the consumption of the meal is derived from my observations of repetitions and differentiations that tie in with the notions of stabilisation (or territorialisation) and destabilisation (or deterritorialisation) (DeLanda 2006:12, Deleuze & Guattari 2009). From such repeated observations and recurrences, I have derived the structural trend from what I have seen that when the men are finishing their plate at the table, the children come and take their food, but often sit elsewhere while consuming it. In a similar repeated fashion, the women, who generally put the most effort into the cooking, get to take their share last and eat with the children in the kitchen or at the dining table when the men have finished and left (see also Appadurai 1981:507 and Yalman 1971:92). Indeed, unlike many Western countries, Sri Lanka has no extensive ‘table culture’, with which I suggest there is no habit of family members (and guests) to join together and simultaneously sit around one table to share a meal. Instead, the meal is consumed in separate groups that form respective composite bodies of consumption that eat together according to an ordered sequence. Hence, the food connects people within these groups that are established in the concurrent hierarchies of gender, caste, age, and status, and that simultaneously separates them from others. This is again an example of the ambivalent or ambiguous relational dynamic of food: its capacity to simultaneously bring people together and distinguish them, by attracting them together and thus away from
others, such as in the example of Geethan who initially took his meals with us but now since he has a wife cooking for him eats there.

The Ambiguous and Bivalent Relational Capacity of Food

The meal is often the centripetal locus where plans, problems, and events are discussed within the consumption groups and occasionally across those. Food thereby collaborates with the people in the regeneration of their relationships. While it has the capacity to bring relatives and friends together along with their aspirations, desires, interests, and concerns, it also has the ability to spur disagreements and quarrels. In not a few cases, the (domestic) quarrel can be about the food itself and the way it is prepared (e.g. spices, length of cooking, etc.). Hopefully then, the next meal does the trick to appease tensions. The smoothing power of (good and tasty) food that brings about a convivial mood among its devourers is conducive to solving conflicts and tensions. Politicians in long-term negotiations, with which Belgium has an extended tradition, have noted that it is often around an exceptionally good meal where it becomes possible to open up deadlocks and take crucial decisions. Hence, the relational capacity of food works in different contexts (here domestic and political, but as we will see later it is particularly powerful in ritual events).

However, when something holds the key to the establishment of relationships in agreement, it simultaneously holds the key to the opposite: the shutdown of connections. It does so simultaneously, as discussed earlier, but also over time, thus relating respectively to food’s ambivalence and bivalence. In short, the ambivalence or ambiguity refers to the double sidedness, worth, or value at the same time or moment, whereas bivalence refers to a double positive and negative worth over time, entailing the movement from a positive evaluation in one moment to a negative one at another time, or vice versa. For instance, while sharing food with one group, one simultaneously excludes eating together with another group, such as is clear in caste-related practices and in our example of the sequenced eating order of consumption groups. Hence, food simultaneously includes and excludes and this enacts the dynamic of ambivalence. In fact, food is not only ambivalent with respect to relationality, but also in relation to life-sustenance. For example, a foodstuff can be both nutritious and dangerous for allergic people at the same time. In the other case, when someone has been sharing food for some time and phases out this generosity, the consequence for the relationship will probably be worse than if one did not have a sharing relation in the first

25 I thank René Devish (letter to author April 4, 2010) for this subtle but vital suggestion.
place. The friendship engendered by sharing may then wither over time, just as flowers blossom and wilt, presenting us with a case of the bivalence of relationality.

Moving Back to the Collective Rhythms

At certain occasions, the importance of a topic to be discussed may subvert the regular and recurring rhythm of who eats first and last. In these cases, for instance when a marriage partner has to be evaluated, the meal brings everybody together during which the discussion exceptionally lengthens the commensal event. There may even go some time between taking lumps in the hand, moulding it, and bringing it to the mouth. The pace of eating slows down compared with the recurrent everyday rhythms of eating. The plate may be even set aside for a while before taking an additional second and maybe even a third portion. Normally, and that is what I suggest by saying there is no such type of table culture as in Belgium, one continues to eat without setting the plate aside to drink and chat, and to then continue finishing it. Generally, people eat from their plate at one stretch until it is empty or refilled. What often struck me is the speed with which the plates are emptied. The difference in the speed of consumption became clear as the member(s) of my consumption group (most often host brothers and guests) used to finish before me and then had to wait until I finished. Generally everybody waits until each of the fellow eaters has finished to wash their right hand and rinse their own plate. Hence, the rhythm is collective but simultaneously structured by individual actions (of course with the necessary variations that confirm the rule). The remains of the food on the hand dry up, and as it is impolite to lick these away this drying, sticking, and increasingly repulsive gruel, it inhibits someone from doing other things. Hence, out of respect for the others, I often tried to speed up my pace of eating to attempt converging to the rhythms of the members of my consumption group, at least to a certain extent, as my body did not always accept this acceleration. Indeed, when brought together in the collective sequence, our diverging rhythms of eating and digesting thus sometimes clashed for both parties, with someone often ending up waiting with gruel sticking to their hand.

To sum up, I have described how the morning activities get started and revolve around food and the timings of its various components: lighting the hearth-fire, making the water boil, peeling and grating coconut, investing effort, aspiring good taste, eating according to moral codes, and so forth. In what follows we will see that while the digestive machine does its part of the transformative job, cooking the food with the help of the digestive fire, the energised persons move to their other tasks of the day. I will describe the rhythms and activities of the tasks performed after breakfast and thereby show, rendered philosophically, that food in fact
transforms the world through energising and inspiring the human person cultivating the fields or maintaining houses. Hence, food is the creative machine that fractalises into a whole range of becomings of food into energy, bodily action, and into modifications in the environment and the world.

Creative Productions

As the description so far has evoked, the morning rhythms are relatively collective, but they do partially differ according to gender, and also age. Yet, these differential rhythms diverge more drastically when people move to the tasks of the day. Children and adolescents go to school or tuition. Adult women and men go to their jobs, or as in many other cases in the village, women perform various other domestic tasks, such as cleaning and washing, whereas the men go to work in their fields, particularly during the cultivation season. Indeed, the men’s rhythms of daily activities are very much influenced by seasonal cycles and weather patterns. Let me start by discussing their activities and thereby move towards another rhythmic component of food with a different temporality and spatiality: that of cultivation. Yet, before proceeding, I need to provide a general context.

What Is a ‘Farmer’?

Most men in Kiribathgama are involved in some form of farming, but almost everybody will say they are farmers. Even those who do not farm at all and who rent out some of their fields will present themselves as farmers despite the fact that their prime income is not obtained from farming but from a job in the public or private sector. Indeed, there is something confusing about the category of the farmer and peasant and the way it is used as a self-reference. First of all, there is the variability in amounts of time spent on farming (full-time or only a few hours per week). Second, there are the differences in types of farming (e.g. subsistence farming or as labourer) and finally, the type of food and methods of cultivation may differ (paddy farmer or, hena or chena [slash-and-burn] farming). These three complicating factors render the category of “farmer” or “peasant” quite multiple and diverse, and as such hard to circumscribe (Bernstein 2010:2-9, Kearney 1996). In the Sri Lankan context, the complexity of this category is further compounded by the existence of the Goyigama caste (or farmers’ caste) at the apex of the Sinhalese caste hierarchy. This caste consists of people who may own land and some who farm, but it is not an exclusive occupational group as people from all castes are involved in farming. Mick Moore (2008:172)
notes that the translation of Goyigama as farmers’ caste is misleading as it rather indicates a social status, connoting “honourable citizens”, who have been free of service obligations upon which the Sinhalese caste system was based and so free to pursue agriculture. However, the fact that the farmers’ caste is at the top leads some of its members who perform non-agricultural jobs to proudly say that they farm in order to affirm their affiliation. Moreover, even though the caste hierarchy is under pressure of the changing economic status of members of various other castes, the positive evaluation of the Goyigama caste as well as of paddy farming continues to exist. Hence, many would say they are farmers even while not having any experience with it. However, while it is desirable to be a farmer in this general sense, confounding caste status and the ideal of profession, nobody would like one of their children to actually become or marry a farmer. Likewise, none of my adolescent interviewees expressed a wish to make farming their main income-generating activity. These youngsters also feared that it would be hard to find a marriage partner if they would become actual farmers. Farmers indeed face a lot of hardships, as they have to deal with insecurities-related to weather patterns, higher input prices, elephant attacks, and many other disturbing events. So, while this profession is socially valued, economically one possibly ends up at a lower status than a low caste person who has a public sector job with all the social advantages. Given that my fieldwork village is populated with people from the Goyigama caste, this concern of maintaining socio-economic or claste (merging caste and class) status remains very important in face of the caste hierarchy being under pressure of economic status ascendency of other castes. In fact, we see that actual farming has become less attractive because of the many push factors, such as those mentioned above, and because of the pull factors of the other jobs that emerge, but people do continue to draw upon the farmer status and nostalgic imaginary. Indeed, I argue that this ambivalence to farming is related to the nostalgia for the grandeur of the ancient rice-based kingdoms, to be also discussed in chapter 6, and the caste hierarchy, on the one hand, and the current challenges that actual farmers face in the context of altering economic structures and status hierarchies that get disconnected from caste, on the other.

26 As I will discuss in chapter 6 with regard to the overview over the history of Sri Lanka.
The Village Setting

Kiribathgama is situated about 12 kilometres from Galgamuwa on the Kurunegala-Anuradapura road. On the smaller road to Ehetuwewa one encounters a village with a concentration of a few shops predominantly owned by local Muslims. It is there that inhabitants from the village of research find their ingredients and smaller implements for both cooking and cultivation. From there it is about two kilometres towards the village where I stayed.

Map 6 (reprise of map 4): Google Earth overview over village area.

When walking towards my hosts’ house, I would often meet people and sometimes get a lift on their motorcycle. The dirt road is indeed a place of movement and quick exchanges of friendliness. When arriving into the village, one passes the upper side of the large irrigation reservoir, depicted below, and enters first in the hamlet where I lived.
The two other hamlets of the village could be reached by crossing the road on the bund of the large and small village tank respectively. These irrigation reservoirs or *wewas* are the ‘wombs’ of the village from where the collected life-water flows through the ‘veins’ into the paddy fields nourishing the ‘heart’ of life, or the paddy. These analogies were drawn by a previous host father in a conversation in which he furthermore compared the village temple to the mind. In fact, the *wewa* as the ‘womb’ is more than a diluted analogy in the sense that both are similar in that they are actually life-giving re-sources. Hence, the *wewas* or tanks as the source of life takes a central stage in the village, as depicted below.
Figure 1: A schematic overview of the tank-based village (Dharmasena 2004:5)

Map 7: A Google Earth visualisation of figure 1 turned upside down from Kiribathgama.
This is not surprising as these reservoirs are crucial for a successful cultivation, the more as the village is situated in the Dry Zone of Sri Lanka, still receiving between 1000 – 1250 mm of rainfall annually and falling at a different period than in the Wet Zone (Survey Department Sri Lanka 2007:59, see also map 3, page 7).

Overall, this rain supply is very irregular as the largest chunk comes between October and January. Each year everybody of the village hopes for sufficient rain to fill the tanks until they overflow (a mark of abundance) so that all the fields can be cultivated and a full harvest can be obtained. It is not without reason that these three months are referred to as the *māha kanne* (big season) where plenty of food is available. The *yale kanne* (little season) lasts from July to September and tends to provide a refill, sometimes sufficient to have an additional cultivation cycle on less fields. So, in contrast to many other places in Sri Lanka, in Kiribathgama there is generally only one season where paddy can be harvested from all the available fields. In the irrigated Mahaweli scheme in the Dry Zone, the water supply is secured and the farmers there enjoy the prospects of two full harvest seasons per year. The impact of regular irrigation on food security is big and given that it is irregular in our village of study, it is no surprise that Kiribathgama is situated in an area that is counted by the atlas of the Survey Department (2007:225) as one of the locations most prone to food insecurity. Hence, the village cultivation rhythms clearly revolve around the filling of the tank by the heavy rains during the last three months of each year. Below, we have the maps depicting food vulnerability and the Mahaweli scheme.
Map 8 Location Kiribathgama in area vulnerable to food insecurity (Survey Department Sri Lanka 2007:140)
Map 9: Location Kiribathgama vis à vis the Mahaweli scheme (Survey Department Sri Lanka (2007:140))
When taking the road further to the junction, one arrives at the water pump where people gather, chat, and fill the water bins. Turning left from here and passing by the tank on one side, such as depicted below, and the paddy fields on the other one arrives at another village hamlet where the Buddhist temple and the shrine of the village deity are located.

The road ends when reaching the paddy fields and the jungle that border this hamlet. Taking the other road from the pump towards the right, passing the small tank and another range of paddy fields, one enters into a third hamlet that edges on an area popular among wild
elephants. The road passes further through thick scrub jungle and leads towards a temple school and provides a shortcut to the main Galgamuwa-Kurunegala road. Yet, it is often avoided due to the presence of these elephants.

At the side of this road leaving the third hamlet, we find some *chena* or slash-and-burn fields, depicted below, where *thale* (sesame), *kurakkan* (millet), and other grains than paddy are cultivated.

These are cultivated on the *goda bimme* (high and dry land), different from the *mada bimme* (low and wet land) of the paddy fields. The home gardens where vegetables and fruits are grown amidst the various fruit and coconut trees are also situated in the *goda bimme* or *gangoda* area of the village, besides the jungle and the paddy fields. The cycle of the *chena* cultivation is entirely dependent on the rains as these fields are not incorporated in the irrigation system. In addition, paddy and *chena* cultivation are done at different times, as it is hard to keep both fields simultaneously protected against wild elephants and other animals. The foraging of leaves, roots, and fruits adds to the diversity of the food palate along with the illegal hunting that sometimes takes place in the late evenings or nights. We will later return to these various modes of food procurement constituting the different rhythms of everyday life, but let me now turn to paddy cultivation, something that takes a central place, not only on the plate, but also in overall village life.
The Rains Catalysing Decision-Making

During my fieldwork in 2008-2009, the rains arrived very late and hesitantly, at least in our area. Moreover, tanks in other neighbouring villages filled more rapidly and soon their fields looked freshly green, whereas our village fields remained brownish and fallow. Seeing the neighbouring villagers flourishing in their cultivation, the farmers in Kiribathgama grew ever more impatient as their stocks of rice dwindled. One day, there came a lot of rain, but it fell softly permeating the soil and repleting the groundwater level. Yet, in order to fill the tank, more pelting rain and downpours were needed to have a run off of water gushing through the drainage canals towards the tank. Several villagers claimed that the delay in filling the village tank was also due to the fact that the drainage canals had not been cleared for a long time. They suggested that the farmers’ association should organise a *shramadane*, a collective sharing of labour, to clean these after the next season. Hence, if nothing were to be done, the villagers would continue to lag behind neighbouring farmers in obtaining their harvest and in bringing their produce on the market, putting them in a disadvantageous price-bargaining position. The realisation of the importance of clearing the canals, I was told, returns in the same rhythmic repetition as the annual rains, but nothing seems to be done about it. Everyone complained about the village inactivity to solve the drainage issue, but they all seemed to look elsewhere for the solution and the blame.

Suddenly, the heavy downpours came for a few days in the middle of December. Hence, a vital component for cultivation, pelting rain, catalysed the movements and intensities of other components, as the level of water in the tank increased. The rhythm of village life changed rapidly and the music of life acquired a higher pitch. Soon, a decision regarding the start of cultivation had to be taken. Yet, there was a lot of discussion, which exposed a deep (political economic) cleavage in the village. On the one hand, there were the landless agricultural labourers with little income, who had less food reserves, and who were the most eager to start. They initiated the discussion about the start of cultivation by going to the agricultural extension officer who mobilised and presided over the farmers’ association meeting where such decision is generally taken. On the other hand, there were the land owners upon whom the former depended on for the land they cultivate for a share. My host family belonged to this group and they rented out all their fields, although they let me cultivate, by way of experiment, a small plot which had been fallow and often flooded for five years. Some of the

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27 This situation indicates that the access to food can differ across short distance and that it can be a very local issue.
other owners cultivated their own plots and they were more divided as a group on whether to start.

The whole discussion concentrated on determining whether the amount of water in the tank was sufficient to irrigate the paddy all the way up to the harvest. Many considerations came into play in this discussion and became articulated with each other, making it clear that this event became a complex assemblage of its own. First, there was the question of having sufficient water in the tank if the rains would stop. If sufficient, then there would be no problem. Yet, the fact was that this is hard to discern and assess. The ‘pro-starters’ group claimed that there was already enough water, but admitted that it was not sufficient to irrigate all the fields. The ‘contra-group’ claimed that the reference line which the water level has to reach should be higher, given the sedimentation accumulated on the bottom and making the tank shallower than it looks because it had not been cleaned for many years. The land owners also warned that the water of the tank serves not only for cultivation and thus that sufficient water needs to be reserved for bathing and washing. Hence, in the uncertainty spurred by irregular rains, we see a conflict of interests emerging in that those who depend on the wewa for their food and income prioritise its utilisation for cultivation, whereas the others mostly depend on it for other purposes. The ‘pro-starters’ argued that if there was not enough water yet, there would be soon, as more rain should arrive by the start of January, the end of the rainy season. The owners gave in to the demands posed by the majority of the members of the farmers’ association at a meeting attended by a politician from the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). He was on a campaign trail for the provincial council elections of 2008 and 2009 and attended this meeting, according to the generally pro United National Party (UNP) landowners, to galvanise personal support by arguing in favour of starting cultivation. Even though they had agreed, the owners still criticised this perceived move as careless for both the labourers and the villagers as a whole. If the village would run out of water before the end of the season they argued that the trouble would be worse for everybody and that there may then not even be enough water for the next cycle either. They proposed saving the water so that there would definitely be enough for the next cycle and for all the fields. However, the labourers felt the immediate pressure to get a new supply of much needed food and income. Happily, the worst-case scenario of too little water did not materialise, but it was a close call, and some fields could not be harvested in the end.

In sum, we see that economic status and party politics came into play in this decision-making event triggered by the arrival of rains. I was told by various villagers that the animosity
between UNP and SLFP supporters sometimes grows ugly during the heydays of the elections, which became true when a shooting occurred between two candidates on the main road, a kilometre away. This animosity shapes in fact a general cleavage in the village and plays out in different forms as well. For instance, various interviewees have confirmed that the funeral association that takes care of everything concerning funerary rites remains split according to these political lines. So, one association arranges the funerals of predominantly the UNP supporters and the other one mostly of SLFP voters. This split does not recur in the temple association where people are able to collaborate, but not always in a harmonious way. This prevalence and influence of party conflicts in local-level village politics and general daily life has been well-described by Jonathan Spencer (1990).

Rental Contracts

The landowners had thus hesitantly agreed to support the start of the cultivation season despite the fact that they perceived a risk that cultivation would fail and that everyone in the village would bear the cost of this. Another ensuing discussion emerged about the type of rental contracts. There are two main types of land rental contracts: one based on a quarter basis and another one on a half basis. In the first case, the labourers work on the land and give a quarter of the harvest to the owner. He does not provide inputs and thus the landless farmers have to bear all the costs of the fertilisers, seeds, machine rentals, and pesticides and insecticides. Hence, the farmers that rent on a quarter basis carry all the risk, but may end up with a higher profit. The risk for the owner is that he may only receive 25% of a profitable harvest in this quarter system, whereas he could have 50% in the half basis system. In the latter, the owners invest in the inputs and receive 50% of the harvest, so they benefit from a high yield, but also share the risk. As they did not expect a good harvest, they thus collectively opted for the quarter basis rental. The fact that they decided this rather collectively, suggests that their decision is informed by their doubts on the outcome and seemed also prompted by a wish to get even with the renters who pushed them to give in.

Selecting Rice Varieties Collectively

A final point of discussion in the farmers’ association revolved around the selection of the rice varieties to be cultivated. Everyone depends on the water from the same reservoir, which has to be shared in equal amounts. This implies that everybody is supposed to select varieties that require similar amounts of time to grow and thus use similar amounts of water to mature. Hence, this dependence on one reservoir often contributes to the selection of similar varieties.
across the village. Moreover, farmers have to start and finish at the same time to save on water. If one only irrigates a field here and there, and later some others, one is wasting water in the channels and other fields leading to the canals that supply those particular fields. Hence, the fields are interdependent in their location in the irrigation matrix accounting for the collective cultivation rhythm. Another reason for all farmers to start the work simultaneously and to select similar varieties is also to be able to harvest at the same time. If all the paddy fields mature at the same time, everybody has to guard their fields together and the risk of insects or wild animals is distributed more evenly. If others have already harvested before somebody else, the latter will have to defend his plot alone against insects swarming or elephants coming together to consume the last bit remaining. To defend a lone-standing plot is deemed impossible. Hence, the cultivation cycle becomes collective as a whole but also in the rhythms of each of its components: the growth cycle of seeds, the water release, the release of smells attracting insects and elephants, the harvest, and many more. This collective rhythm of the village cultivation is sometimes a challenge for food activists who seek to introduce pre-green revolution varieties of rice in the fields, as one has to convince a whole village at once, at least in these cases where the village is tank-based and where the threat of elephants and other animals is real. The insect problem can be solved in a variety of chemical and indigenous (indigenous and ingenious) ways. Anyway, as the water in the wewa was limited in this particular instance, they opted for some green revolution varieties that could be harvested after three months.

Starting up the Cultivation Machine

After these decisions were made, the village filled with bustling energy, intensity, joy as well as insecurity. Yet, this euphoria soon shifted to increased anxiety when it became clear that the rains had stopped too early and did not show any sign of returning. Everybody knew that it would be a hard season to come through, as they already had used a lot of precious water from the tank, not for cultivation, but for the preparation of the fields. They had hoped that they could use the falling rain for the water-consuming preparatory phase and save the water in the wewa for the actual growing of the saplings. The decision could not be reversed, as everyone had already started their work, and so they could only hope for the best.

While preparing the fields, some friends got together and established labour sharing groups, such as in the attam institution in the past in which cultivation labour used to be shared at village level. Together, they started ploughing each other’s fields in turns after everyone had cleared the bunds. In this way they could hire the tractor for only one or two days and push
down and share the costs. In Kiribathgama, nobody was using the buffalo anymore, not for ploughing or for harvesting. Many lamented this evolution on the grounds that ploughing with a buffalo prepares the soil much more thoroughly, but everybody had shifted to the tractor, as it is faster. Given that the rhythm has to remain collective it would be impossible for some to continue working with buffaloes, as they would then lag behind. So, interestingly, the ‘tradition’ of maintaining a collective rhythm in enterprises often forces people to join the powerful new trends, tools, and seeds that are part of the general increase in speed of cultivation. This is a result of technological developments that ease the work and that are geared to extract resources at a higher pitch, moreover enforcing this faster rhythm on plants through bio-engineering.

Several times, I joined the work with clearing the niyere (bunds) of the weeds with the mammoty (on picture below) and by pushing re-emerging weeds with my bare feet back into the mud and under the water to suffocate and destroy these wal päle (wild plants). Thereafter, we could have someone plough the field with the tractor. These intensive tasks were performed by men and adolescents who returned to give their fathers and relatives a helping hand. Some of the others had to hire labourers from elsewhere to get the job done in time.
After these preparatory works on the paddy fields, they started levelling the mud and drawing some smaller drainage canals to evacuate the water if necessary. What remained were pōruwas or ‘plateaus’ upon which the seeds are sown or where the seedlings are later transplanted onto, as depicted below.

The period from preparation to sowing is, besides the harvest, the busiest period in the cultivation cycle for farmers. Most of the tasks mentioned so far—clearing the bunds,
ploughing, and sowing—are executed by only men. The levelling of beds may involve female labour, but I only observed this in a few cases. When asking why mostly men do these tasks, I did not receive any other explicit explanation than the practical reason that the work is too heavy for women, which is a way of pragmatically grounding the reproduction of culture (Sahlins 1976). Nobody explicitly mentioned that the male ploughing of mother earth and the subsequent sowing of seeds would be a differential repetition of the sexual act on the marital bed. Yet, the very fact that women cannot be imagined doing this work could point to such implicit connection. Corroborating such implicit link is the word pōruwa, which denotes and connects these cultivation beds linguistically to also the platforms on which the marrying couple stands during the wedding ceremony, and second, to the implement to level these plateaus. I will return to these connections in more detail when discussing the wedding ceremony in the ritual chapter. A final reason to suggest this link between the cultivation and marital bed can be derived from the observation that some activists establish an opposition between “the masculine extractive agro-technology enabling an aggressive approach to nature” and “an agriculture that respects and restores the regenerative capacity of mother earth”. The activist opposition between extractive and regenerative agriculture will be discussed under chapter 6 as part of the political economy of food.

Domestic Rhythm as Affected by Cultivation

To return to our ‘average day’, it is evident that during these busy times of meetings, preparatory works, and kicking off cultivation by sowing the paddy seeds (bittere vī: literally, egg paddy), the domestic rhythms of cooking and eating are affected and altered. I have noted that the breakfast is often prepared earlier in the day during such busy times. Men then take their food while it is still very hot, as a packet wrapped in plastic and newspaper to the field, or have their wife or one of the children bring it to the field. In this exciting period, the food and drink supply for the men makes women oscillate between the fields and the domestic hearth, adding another movement to the already complex spatial rhythmic movements of the wife in the kitchen, the house, and the compound. When all utensils, jars, and pots are rinsed after the breakfast, it is almost time to prepare the morning tea and bring it to the sweating men who are working in the scorching sun. The group of men take a break as depicted below and welcome the sweets, biscuits, and tea or plain tea, and enjoy a cigarette or bīdi (a rolled leaf used as a cigarette) thereafter.
When everybody is finished, the wife takes the dirty cups and the teapot with her to wash at home and starts preparing the lunch, which is the most elaborate meal of the day. Hence, when the men are busy in the field, the pitch of the rhythm of domestic tasks accelerates as additional tasks and movements have to be performed. Moreover, other remaining tasks, such as cleaning the house and washing clothes, have to be done more swiftly or have to be postponed to later in the day or to a calmer period.

Procuring Food at the Market

One of the other tasks that women perform while the husband is in the field or at his job, is going to the weekly market to buy additional food where she meets her female friends to chat and have a cup of tea. Such market excursions are an important manner of refreshing friendship relationships out of the domestic sphere. It also serves to replenish and diversify the food palate by obtaining products that are not available in the village, whereas they are at the larger market at Galgamuwa, of which we see a photo below.
Not only women buy food at this weekly pole or market; men also bring some foods or utilities when they return from work. Indeed, as usual there are many variations possible, but the frequency of the recurrence of certain practices and modes of organisation of domestic and cultivation tasks allows us to discern trends, which I call structures of repetition, in which recurrent actions and occurrences crystallise into a structure sustained by these repetitions. In the case of who goes to the market, there is some flexibility in these gendered repetitions, whereas in coconut picking, ploughing, and sowing I have observed almost no differentiation in the repetition of gendered performances of these tasks as belonging solely to the realm of masculinity.

**Collecting and Foraging**

The collection and foraging of food is another food procuring activity that both women and men engage in during the day and which receives less attention during the times when all effort and focus goes towards the preparation of the paddy fields (kumbure). With foraging, we might in all our exoticism start imagining women or men venturing secretly into the jungle for hours. Yet, most foraging occurs close to the house. Many varieties of green leaves (kole varga: leaf types), shredded to make a side dish called müllum, grow in the domestic
compound or at the village roadside and are collected in-between various tasks during the day. Indeed, one hardly notices when people forage as it occurs while they walk to the store or hang clothes to dry in the garden. Foraging not only brings various healthy leaves on the table, but also fruit, such as papayas, bananas, woodapples, and various types of mangos that grow in the village gardens and forest. Although most foraging occurs in short intervals close to home, women in my interviews estimated that they still spend on average about one or two hours per day on foraging. Given its ‘invisibility’ as an undertaking, unlike in many other more exotic representations of foraging, it is often underestimated as a daily food procuring activity in relation to the importance of its contribution to the diversity of the diet. However, foraging at times does become a more extended and systematic enterprise. For instance, when collecting lotus roots in the \textit{wewa}, women join together with a few friends for a few hours, as this task is quite challenging.

\textbf{The Wild, the Jungle, and the Anti-Buddha?}

Sometimes villagers collect firewood and various ingredients in a notorious scrub jungle adjoining the hamlet where I was based. In this area the beneficial village guardian deity has no influence as it is under the ‘jurisdiction’ of the Guruma Muttā, who rules this clearly delineated area. The Guruma Muttā is a male ghost who is not deemed to be very dangerous, but evil enough to scare both men and women. It should be noted that when asked explicitly, most people deny the existence of the Guruma Muttā, but references to his existence do emerge when they are speaking freely in a long conversation, after which some now and again have to admit that their initial denial is not really true to their convictions. The fact that everybody goes to school, where they learn that these beliefs are mere superstition and from which villagers obtain the inculcated sense of backwardness and shame in believing in these invisible beings and phenomena, renders and trains the villagers to be hesitant in expressing such convictions. To obtain this covered and hidden knowledge and enable truly free speech, the interview requires sufficient time to get familiar (helped by long-term fieldwork interaction prior to the interview) so that they feel at ease and almost forget being interviewed. This is further made possible by adopting an informal conversational style and by taking the time to gradually circle around the actual question where they start taking up the issue before I do. In this way, they started talking about certain ghosts without me mentioning these.

During one such interview, an elder woman narrated that she once fainted when she went to collect some firewood in that notorious zone. She woke up at home and did not recall what
had happened. Another woman had found her and helped her home. The fact that she had lost control over herself and did not know if something bad had happened frightened her deeply as the anguish again filled her eyes while talking about it. The fear completely overtook her and we had to pause the interview. Likewise, a man recalled hearing his name being whispered somewhere between the trees in that very area. He tried to see who spoke to him, but could not see anything. He experienced this several times while crossing this stretch of jungle on the way to his brother, who had similar experiences. The fear incited by these occasions made them think about virtuous Buddhist ideas in the hope that they would be protected, but it seemed to do the inverse. They gradually came to understand that by thinking or speaking about these ‘proper’ ideas they made things worse. Hence, they discerned a causal connection, and experimented with thinking and speaking about ‘improper’ things, such as sex and other fantasies that are suppressed under the increasingly pious Protestant Buddhism (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988). That seemed to please the Guruma Mutta and the two men have been left in peace since they started doing this. Nowadays, when they enter the area they break a little branch in the Mutta’s honour at the border of his jurisdiction and then temporarily shift towards a mode of speech and thought deemed unsuitable for devout Buddhists.

This is at least the reflection that emerged in combination with the interview, which is a format that spurs people to articulate things that are not always easy to articulate. They may become only conscious about these habits during the course of the interview and reflexively explained it in this way. As we recall from our discussion of Karen Barad, the measuring apparatus, in this case the interview, brings into existence the very phenomena it seeks to study. Hence, it is not sure how this interview has shifted their way of passing through the forest afterwards.

With this cautionary note on the influence of my presence and open interviewing technique (not to produce the particular content of the answers), we can see that these two stories are revelatory with regard to the Buddhist–non-Buddhist and the corresponding civilised–non-civilised (or wild) juxtaposition. We will later explore this opposition in greater detail, but suffices for now to note that it is predominantly played out or articulated through desire in the form of sexuality and other matters of worldly existence and samsara—the cycle of death and rebirth. In the Buddhist cosmology, as Gananath Obeyesekere (1963, 1987) has eloquently described, all beings are subject to this law of samsara, with some beings located at lower and higher states, ranging from low to high: hungry ghosts, demons, local deities, regional ambivalent deities, and powerful benevolent gods. Hence, here is an example of how these
beings are united under a singular Sinhalese frame exposing a Buddhicisation of the cosmology. The local beneficial Bandāra Muttā who is a Gambāra Deviyo (Gam=village-bāra=protection-Deviyo=deity: village guardian deity) is on the ascent in this Sinhalese Buddhist cosmology, as he provides protection for the villagers under his jurisdiction and as he is deemed to protect Buddhism as well. The Guruma Muttā is lower in karmic status, which is the balance of ping (good deeds) and pau (bad deeds), and he is sort of the antithesis of the Bandāra Muttā.

Hence, we see emerging a hierarchy of beings that are more and less Buddhist, repeating itself in the hierarchy of good and bad, and civilised and uncivilised respectively. Sinhalese historiography, as elsewhere, often equates Buddhism with civilisation and the human world (Eckel 1997:337), such as in the account of the ancient chronicles where the Indo-Aryan settlers arrived from India to the island filled with demonic and wild beings to be brought civilisation by the arrival of Buddhism and agriculture (Fernando 2000:13-16, de Silva 2005:3-9). It is thus no coincidence that the area of jurisdiction of the more Buddhist Gambāra Deviyo is the village, and the area of the Guruma Muttā is full of dense shrubs and ‘jungle’. The hierarchy of civilised (Buddhist) and wild (non-Buddhist) then repeats itself in a different form in the gama (village) – kālē (jungle) juxtaposition on a sort of continuum in which the cosmic city where the powerful deities dwell is at the apex. A note of caution: kālē is translated as ‘jungle’, but denotes something quite different from a jungle as in the Amazon region. The Sinhalese use this word in a variety of settings: a garden grown wild, a place within the village that is not being used, the paddy fields that remain fallow during the dry season, or a bunch of small bushes of trees. It denotes in fact the wild within or at the fringe of the domain of civilisation, so this distinction is not clear-cut as in the Western-borne nature–human dichotomy (Descola & Pálsson 1996:9-10). The area of the Guruma Muttā is such an area that has grown wild over the last twenty years (hence there is no forest with old trees of considerable height). This area used to be utilised for chena cultivation until 20 years ago when it was abandoned due to the intensification of the human-elephant conflict. The area has thus become a wilderness at the fringe of the village land where the Guruma Muttā thrives.

The ‘uncivilised’, as embodied by the Guruma Muttā, being pushed towards the outskirts of the ‘civilised’, marked by an increasingly pious Protestant Buddhism, involves a dynamic of pushing the Other-within outwards and projecting it on the Other-outside (Kristeva 1991). The village of the Gambāra Deviyo purifies itself in becoming more Buddhist by expelling
and projecting the inner defilements onto the neighbouring area and the Guruma Muttā that rules it. Indeed, the Guruma Muttā is a sort of Antichrist or rather ‘Anti-Buddha’ that thrives on the edge of the civilised. This dynamic expulsing the foreigner within repeats itself in the juxtaposition between the clusters of the village/Bandāra Muttā/civilised/Buddhist assemblage, on the one hand, and the jungle/Guruma Muttā/wild/’Anti-Buddhist’ one, on the other.

When villagers venture in this area, the tension inherent in this juxtaposing dynamic plays out differently according to the piousness and gender of the person in question. For some, the presence of the Guruma Muttā is a constraining factor, whereas for others it seems to have a liberating effect. The fainting of the old woman and her loss of consciousness may involve a similar process that occurs with the increasingly common entry into trance at devotional rituals where intensities run high (Bastin 2002). In this way, the woman being shielded from Buddhist influence and the near presence of the Guruma Muttā could easily have triggered a release of intense energies in her. This may be related moreover to an increased control over female sexuality in general, noted by Gananath Obeyesekere (1977:11) and since the war in particular; a control leading in the Ayurvedic sense to an excess of heat due to the suppression of these energies. The two brothers sort of enjoyed the possibility of letting themselves go in their thoughts and words while being there, releasing themselves from suppressed thoughts and energies as well. The context of the jungle allows thus both men and women to temporarily actualise as different persons for a while, but men generally have this release more often in their greater freedom to move around and engage in various activities. For instance, young men have their moments of excess in gatherings and parties, expressing itself more in loud banter and in drinking. Women live with a higher pressure of being virtuous and may therefore experience this release in more intense ways, such as by fainting or entering into trance. Moreover, women tend to go more often to the temple and follow the Buddhist rules of morality than men and this may also explain according to these two brothers that the Guruma Muttā specifically targets women more intensely. To generalise, whereas men tend to find it enjoyable to let their energies and thoughts be released and explore the ‘improper’ zones (hence, the Other plays a role of Buddhist purification by allowing the release in that area), most women feel uneasy going there. In this way, the Guruma Muttā reinforces gender divisions in moral purity while increasing village control over female sexuality, as particularly pious women avoid this place and thus remain more closely under the purview of fellow villagers. Also pious men try to avoid staying in this location too long in order to not be
tempted away from Buddhism. So, we can see how the ‘Anti-Buddha’ simultaneously provides an avenue of liberation from a Protestant Buddhism for some, while simultaneously enforcing it for others, and thereby having effects on the composition of the meals, as certain leaf varieties are collected less often.

Deceleration of Lunch

Flexible Lunch

To return to the rhythms of everyday life, we see that the various morning activities, such as cooking breakfast, cleaning, and cultivation and foraging of food are quickly followed by the rhythms of cooking lunch. The music of lunch preparation plays similar tunes and rhythms as in the morning, involving the lighting of the log-fire, rinsing rice from stones, preparing side dishes, and so forth. Hence, I will not repeat a minute description here, apart from mentioning that the cooking of lunch is more extensive as extra ingredients are added to the cooking producing the lunch-specific tone of the bubbling and dancing rhythms, sounds, and smells. Generally, lunch is the main meal and has at least one extra side dish, such as papa dum, tankfish, or a more complicated curry of jackseeds. Lunch is jokingly called the “king’s diet” and is eaten somewhere between 12 p.m. to 4 p.m. Children often eat their lunch when they return from school after 2 p.m. (of course depending on the grade they are in). People working outside the village eat a lunch packet they have brought with them from breakfast or buy a parcel at a food stall. Sometimes, some even eat lunch when they return in the early evening between 4 and 5 p.m. The time of eating is indeed very flexible and was hard for my mechanised body, dancing to the tunes of the clock, to adapt to. When the men are working in the fields, they also require their food in time to keep their machines energised for their transformative labour. Hence, to not waste too much time, the wife of the man whose field is being prepared brings the lunch to the field. It occurs quite rarely that prepared and cooked rice and side dishes are brought onto the open fields, hence, the special name that lunch acquires: muttetu or ambula. In normal occasions, lunch is called dawal kāme or literally noon food.
Porosity of Food

The transport of rice and curry towards the open field is quite unusual given some concerns around eating that endure in a softer form today than which I have seen described by Nur Yalman (1971:204, 1973). In his account, the Sinhalese avoid being watched while eating for concerns of demons and, I would add, the evil eye. These may badly affect the food that is being eaten. The evil eye, and for that matter also the evil mouth and thought, exerts its effect as follows according to popular explanation: the passer-by can look at the food and become jealous of it and therefore implicitly wish it to become bad for the other, as in the idea of “If I cannot have a nice meal then you will not get it either”. Hence, Yalman noted that most people eat their food in a concealed place often situated at the middle or the back of the house with windows and curtains closed. In my observations this protective behaviour is not that strictly maintained (anymore). Moreover, in working contexts, people bring their rice packets and eat together. Sometimes, we also sat in front of the house and were watching passers-by while eating. The sense of severity of the threat conveyed by Yalman’s description would not make this possible. However, the distance between the street and us was quite large and it was hard to have our food meet eyes, even though I have no clear information of how far the influence of an evil eye can reach. Still, it is clear that the concern of protection continues to exist to date. A low caste person would not be seated at the same table as us, and we would receive unknown people outside or at the entry if we were eating. Moreover, kitchens and dining areas are still being built in the back of the house and these are often among the last places where one comes as an unfamiliar visitor. R.S Khare (1976, 1992:6) has noted that food, particularly during the transformative process of cooking, is very vulnerable for malicious influences and moral properties of the cooks, explaining the strict Hindu rules and restrictions on inter-caste preparation and sharing of food. In South Asia, the person and other entities are very relational and this explains their permeability and mutual interpenetration (Osella & Osella 2002). This is particularly the case with cooked food, which is more than raw food adsorbative, porous, and thus prone to effects of evil looks, thoughts, and words. The protection against these malicious influences is a concern that spurs people not only to protect their food, but also their children, cattle, homes, and fields. It is very common to see a charred or blackened pot with a face drawn upon it in front of a field or house to attract attention and catch the first malicious looks or thoughts, which otherwise could for instance jeopardise the harvest.
Returning to our lunch in the field, we now understand why it is not evident, given food’s porosity, to bring the cooked food from the safe domestic realm to the more vulnerable realm of the field. Here, the food is consumed in the open air and sometimes shared among people of possible different caste backgrounds, particularly when labourers are hired. But, we should not forget that these are days of hard work that are filled with joy, hope, and anticipation of a possibly good ensuing harvest. The name change of lunch in the field, eaten at such occasions pregnant of potential prosperity, emphasises the specialty of the occasion. Anyway, after the hard work of the morning, the lunch is very welcome. The workers and farmers sit in the shade of trees and enjoy the meal. When they are finished, they rinse their hand and drink a glass of water. In the end, the wife, helped by her husband or children, takes the pots and plates home to wash.

A Deceleration

The bubbling of life includes in its music both movements and temporalities of acceleration and deceleration. The heat of the day often spurs slowing down in some way, and lunch provides an excellent opportunity to do so. Sometimes, the workers take a little rest, have a cigarette, and chat before returning to work. In less busy periods, some people have a quick nap after lunch. Usually if I arrived at someone’s house during this period, the sleeping person would deny having a nap, pointing to the obligation of making guests feel welcome at any time (by not showing that he has been disturbed) and also to a negative attitude to laziness, which sleeping during the day embodies. It is reminiscent of some kind of Protestant ethic (Weber 1989) among these Protestant Buddhists that seem to frown upon any sign of laziness. My younger host brother explained that many impure thoughts arise during sleep because the mind is switched off and is no longer in control, evoking a notion of suppressing thoughts and feelings as part of the Protestant form of Buddhism. Meditation, as some villagers explained, along with Alan Klima (2002:176-179), is not about suppressing thoughts, sensations, and feelings, but rather about letting them arise, leaving them be, and not engaging with them to achieve full concentration (samādhi), for instance by focussing on one object of attention as to be absorbed in its investigation without being disturbed by other arising thoughts. Having a nap is thus neither similar nor amenable to achieving this concentration and certain emptiness of mind, and according to Protestant Buddhism sleep even fills the mind with corrupting ideas. Moreover, these arising thoughts may lead to the release of semen, which is seen as unhealthy in Ayurveda. As we shall see in the following chapter, its “untimely” dissipation is considered to be leading to numerous disorders, weaknesses, and even death. Be it as it may,
people do decelerate and take a nap without being eager to admit so. Yet, at such busy times as during the preparation of the fields the men avoid slowing down too much as it then gets harder to accelerate again. Instead, they get back to work quickly as they attempt to get as much done as they can before the sun goes down (and this is not flexible).

The Afternoon Accelerator

During the afternoon, another cup of tea will contribute to the structure of the working rhythm, marking another break and a subsequent energised restart. Yet, given the flexible notion of time, it will happen in a more flexible way than the exact timing shaped by the tea breaks in the industrial context described by Sidney Mintz (1985). The sweets, sugar, and tea join to provide instant energy to get the cultivation machine going again, bringing together the movements of the ploughs, mammoty’s, pōruwas, and working men, aided by vibrating voices singing songs to speed up the working rhythm. The digestive fire transforms the tea, sugar, and foodstuffs into energy to prepare the soil for sowing. Food in its fluid and solid forms is indeed the machinic assemblage that starts up, several times a day, the various human-tool assemblages that transform the environment in the process of cultivation. If not excessive, the sun adds energy to the working men, so the solar fire and the digestive fire collaborate with the machinic assemblage of food in enabling the regeneration of life through the preparation and transformation of the fields. Various components inter-act and sometimes resonate in a harmonious concert, but sometimes a false tune emerges when they go against each other (e.g. a tractor breaking down). Still, both co-generate the event of cultivation as an assemblage with its own cycle and rhythm, deeply marked by the rhythms of food breaks. Overall, cultivation is thus the result of ingredients enmeshing and transacting with each other at paces that accelerate and decelerate in the bubbling of life.
Towards a Heightened Intensity of the Evening

A Busy Sunset at the Kadē

While the sun sets, the children play cricket or other games on some of the bare ‘jungle’ lands, school or temple grounds, or domestic compounds. Blue- and white-collar workers stop over at a kadē or small shop in Gallewe, about one and a half kilometres from Kiribathgama. It is a cluster of about 20 different shops and food stalls, where the returning workers hang around, such as depicted below.

This village is where people meet and get a tea with a bun, a sandwich-like snack available in various shapes and sometimes filled with a spicy sambol mixture of chillies, lime, and onions. In other cases, they have their tea with various Indian snacks in which vegetables, fish, or meat are wrapped in a layer of pastry. Or, they have some wadē, made of fried mashed chickpeas, to go with it. The farmers also arrive there after they have had their bath. It is a place where the rhythm of work decelerates to make place for the accelerating social intensity of interactions and causerie. Again, a phase of food consumption and procurement brings people together spurring various discussions and strengthening village relationships. Before people return home they buy more ingredients from the shop. Sometimes, fishermen sell fresh fish on the side of the road, such as depicted below, but that happens generally a little earlier in the day.
If these workers arrive late from work, some buy āppe (small bowl-shaped riceflour pancakes), indēppe (riceflour strings), or kottu (kind of pasta being fried and chopped on a hot plate) with vegetables to bring home for the evening meal. At designated times the Muslims of the settlement go to the Mosque to pray. This little but busy place is a kinaesthetic network of local inhabitants and outsiders criss-crossing each other while being on the move to and from their homes nearby. The Buddhists and the Muslims (who often speak Tamil) generally do not interact closely apart from trading in the shops in Gallewe that are mainly owned by Muslims. Most villagers tend to have their preference for one particular shop with which they establish relationships of trust with the specific owners. This personalisation of the trade and commodity relationship across language and religion is very interesting and should be researched more, but again I found this to be a striking example of the socially binding capacity of food in its context-driven actualisation as a commodity (generally seen as objectifying and controlling relationships). Yet, the relation of trust and familiarity that people look for in the establishment of a more stabilised and repeated trade relation questions a clear distinction between transactions as part of a ‘pure’ market exchange in contrast to a ‘gift’ exchange, a contrast which Mary Douglas problematises in the introduction of the translation of Mauss’ ‘The Gift’ (1990).
The Bustling Evening Bath in the Wewa

Besides the junction, surrounded by food stalls, small shops, and the Mosque, there is another location in village life that tends to become very lively around sunset. In fact, this increased intensity and energy is reminiscent of the bustling life that explodes at dawn. When people have come home and when the farmers have finished a hard day’s work, they go to the wewa to bathe. Given the fact that my host brothers and I always went to bathe at the same place at the bund of the tank, just as others did, I reckon that everyone has their habitual place. The places are not strictly divided according to gender, but the people tend to bathe alone, together with friends of the same gender, or with their small children and wife. If someone is bathing at the same spot upon arrival, one waits to see if it is suitable to go into the water as well, regardless of gender. If a woman was bathing on ‘our’ spot, we would wait until she was finished or sometimes ask if we could bathe there as well, depending on our familiarity. The wewa in the evening is another bustling time and place where meetings take place and things are discussed, for instance about work or about a quarrel in the village. Indeed, the irrigation reservoir is one of the centripetal places in which village life comes together, swirls, accelerates, and regenerates before the enmeshed life trails separate when people return homewards. Again, the irrigation reservoir is a food-related entity that brings villagers together. Other such places and moments of intense interactions are the spaces in front of shops, the temple at certain events, rituals, and some parties, all where food attracts more people. In the wewa, villagers chat, swim, play, and wash their clothes (both men and women do so) while bathing, such as shown below.
In another corner of the tank, where my host aunt and her daughters go, there is often a large group of women and their daughters who wash larger amounts of clothes and sheets while chatting and discussing their men and other concerns. It has only been human interactions in and around the wewa that I have been discussing so far, but human and non-human interactions occur as well. While swimming, I become aware that the tank is abundantly filled with fish, so much that my arms push them away and make them jump out of the water. Particularly during the full moon, this creates a beautiful glittering and mesmerising event around me. The water dances with the jumping fish and becomes reminiscent of the bubbling water when boiling (recall wature natenewa: the water dances\(^\text{28}\)). As I stand in the water and talk to a passer-by, the small fish feed themselves on decaying skin between my toes and on my body. Later on, it is possible that these same fish end up in a curry on my plate in what is a cyclical exchange of food between the human and non-human. The whole ensuing procedure of washing and drying myself in public required some habituation to acquire the skill of reaching every corner of the body without dropping my sarong and becoming naked in front of everyone. Particularly, if it became late, the pressure to get ready quickly increased

\(^{28}\) As we shall see later, the ritual boiling and overflowing of milk evokes for fishermen a large catch of fish struggling to escape the net in the water.
because of, not necessarily the two crocodiles that dwell in the *wewa*, but rather the presence of the wild elephants in the evening as well as the annoying mosquitoes.

**The Elephants**

The elephant is a catalysing component that drastically affects the working of the village machine and its various components. The radical influence of elephants on human village life illustrates clearly how components act upon each other and mutually transform in their interaction, affecting the rhythms and overall music of the ‘cooking’ of life. Indeed, the elephants greatly affect the movements and their timing as people try to finish all outside tasks, such as fetching water at the pump and bathing in the *wewa*, to avoid any unnecessary travel in the night. The fear is deeply engrained and is real given the fact that two people were been killed by elephants since I was there during the first phase of my fieldwork in 2008. These human-elephant clashes render these animals highly feared even though they remain revered as well. Edmund Leach (2011:34-35) also has noted this deeply ambivalent attitude towards elephants that is given in by a complex set of aspects, turning elephants into an assemblage that condenses various concerns with which it is connected. In that sense, just like food, but also in relation to food, the elephant becomes a kind of gestalt or hologram of various concerns and changes in society as well as altering human and non-human relations. Let me explore this conceptualisation of the elephant in greater detail as it provides an enriching additional take on village life and its various rhythms.

**Ambiguous Elephants**

The elephant is generally revered in Sri Lankan society and among villagers for a variety of reasons. One of the more underlying and implicitly enduring factors is the special place that elephants have in ancient mythologies in both Hindu and Buddhist texts. One such particularly interesting text, mentioned by Teresa Cannon and Peter Davis (1995) is the Matangalila, which is translated from Sanskrit as “the elephant-sport” by Franklin Edgerton (1931). The Matangalila is a fascinating thousand-year old text that explains the origin of elephants, their division in castes, Ayurvedically-based humourology, must, character, personality development, and so forth. Here we restrict ourselves to its account of the origin of elephants that have also played a role in shaping the world. The story goes as follows: the Cosmic Egg (Hiranyagarbha) was taken by Brahma the Creator and was broken in two shells upon which he breathed while singing holy melodies. In the right shell emerged the cosmic white elephant (which returns also in other stories), Airavata, and seven (auspicious number)
other male elephants. In the left shell came Abrahma and seven female elephants. Together, they formed eight pairs that became the foundations of the earth and they were positioned at the four cardinal directions and their intermediate points, hence being the dig-gajas, the elephants of the directions of space. The myth ends by stating that the Creator has placed a sacred mystery in each of the elephants in which he concealed wisdom (Edgerton 1931:47-48, Cannon & Davis 1995:10). Not many villagers would know about this myth, but they do share this sense that elephants are very wise and smart beings. Some even attribute more "mole or "thinking ability" to elephants than to human beings. This connection between wisdom and elephants is corroborated by the fact that the god of wisdom is the elephant-headed Ganesh who is also the god of auspicious beginnings (hence offerings are made to him when leaving for a journey or starting up a business). I suggest that this recurring association between wisdom (which Buddhism highly values) and elephants, which is given a foundational or world-generating shape in the myth, can account for their employment in various religious rituals and in Buddhist processions (perehära), such as the famous Kandy perehära in July where the tusker of the Temple of Tooth or Dalada Maligawa carries around the sacred relic of the tooth of the Buddha.

Elsewhere, we see the other side of the general ambivalence explained as the elephant makes a ‘Fall’ reminiscent of the human Fall, either in the version of Buddhism, Hinduism, or Christianity. This story is recounted in the matangalila and the Gaja-Sāstra of 600-500 B.C.E. (Cannon & Davis 1995:12, Edgerton 1931:44-45). In this account, the elephants initially roamed freely in the air and on the earth because they had wings. One day, they descended to earth to sit all together on a branch of a banyan tree. Under this branch there was a sage teaching his students. The branch broke off and accidentally killed one of his students. The sage was furious and cursed the elephants for their indiscreet behaviour. They lost their wings, divine power, and would be condemned to have their stomachs “burn with fire” and become the vehicles of human beings and gods (Cannon & Davis 1995:12). In the matangalila (Edgerton 1931:44), the sage is quoted as saying: “O god, when our kinsfolk [referring to the elephants] have gone to the earth by the power of fate, they may be a prey to diseases, because of unsuitable and undigested food due to eating coarse things and overeating, and other causes.”

There are two points that these stories foreground and illuminate with regard to the present-day ambiguous valuation of elephants among villagers. First, on the positive side, there is their wisdom, connection to Ganesh, and they are the vehicles of certain deities. In my area of
research, the Wanni region, there is a regional deity called Ayanayake who is seen as a god of
the jungle and who uses elephants as his vehicle. Jokingly, someone said that Ayanayake
seems to sometimes lose control over his vehicle. Still, out of respect for this powerful deity,
one has to respect the elephant as well. For securing protection against wild elephants and
other animals that destroy crops, farmers perform offerings of sweet milk-rice to this deity.
The second point of the story is the burning fire in the stomach with which elephants should
learn to live with since their ‘Fall’ and this brings us to the crux of the negative and hateful
valuation of elephants: the competition for food. As we shall see in the following chapter
where we discuss Ayurveda, this fire may refer to the gastric fire important in not only
digesting food, but also in spurring desire, which can turn both the human person and the
elephant voracious when it becomes excessive. Like human beings, elephants have since the
‘Fall’ thus become subjected to voraciousness, greed, and craving in which both beings’
extensive desire puts them in a relation of competition for food. Their shared relation to
voraciousness as incited by food ties human beings and elephants together in a drawn-out
conflict. During a group interview with six of the eldest men of the village, the explanation of
excessive want on part of human beings was explicitly stated as an explanation of the
allegedly intensified human-elephant conflict. The diagnosis of excessive desire entails a core
evaluation of social change as a whole and also in relation to the human-elephant relations.

The Elephant as a Holographic Condensation of Certain Issues

We can say that the elephant is a network that links with human beings, desire, and aspects of
socio-economic change. It moreover condenses these components into its assemblage and so
becomes a hologram or three-dimensional miniature image of these concerns as well as of the
phenomena we will discuss further. The excessive desire and competition for resources, as
discerned by the villagers as the main cause underpinning the human-elephant conflict, also
drives of the factors that further exacerbate this conflict.

Most interviewees claimed that there has been a sudden intensification of the human-elephant
conflict in the area since the 1990s and blame it on the nearby large Mahaweli resettlement
and irrigation scheme (see map 9, page 120) developed as part of the post-colonial drive for
self-sufficiency in food, to be discussed in chapter 6. The scheme converted large swathes of
Dry Zone forests into land for human habitat and into paddy fields (Tennekoon 1988:295-
298). Resonating with the reasoning of environmentalists, villagers say that this conversion
has destroyed much of the habitat of elephants that therefore end up in villages to look for
their food. Because of the environmental concerns aired before, in 1989 the government
installed the Kahalla-pallekele sanctuary nearby as part of an elephant corridor to restore part of their lost habitat and to diminish the human-elephant conflict. The presence of a safe haven may have attracted restless fleeing elephants towards that area and its surroundings. Secondly, some traced the origin of ‘the problem’ to the war, which may have chased elephants from the forests of the north and east southwards to the area. Finally, another explanation blamed the changing mores of how to deal with fellow non-human beings. The elephants are highly revered, as we discussed above, and as part of this respect, elders recounted that elephants had to be addressed with a soft voice, friendly speech and with calming ritual verses or mantras. The elders and even some youngsters lamented the loss of these respectful behaviours and some believed that by reintroducing these mores it could be possible to ease the traumas caused by the human-elephant conflict on both sides. The loss of both respectful behaviour and knowledge was often discussed as a wider sign of disrespect for traditions, following from new social developments.

To recapitulate, the elephant has thus turned into a holographic assemblage of various components of socio-economic change: the aggressive competition for natural forests and other resources, the war, and the disappearance of respectful behaviour to elephants in particular and of traditions in general. As mentioned earlier, the elders in the group discussion explicitly articulated and connected these changes and the ensuing human-elephant conflict to increased want of human beings in combination with the elephants’ voraciousness, indicating in this context their Buddhist inspiration. So, here we can see how excessive desire, expressed in competition for resources and selfish extraction of resources as part of the development drive and social changes that accompany it, is invoked in the explanations of the hardships of everyday village life through the idiom of changed relations with elephants.

Elephants in the Night

Now let us return to how this conflict specifically affects the rhythms that shape everyday village life. Recall that we arrived in our description at the evening time when people bathe in the wewa but have to watch out to not stay there too long after dark. Indeed, it is particularly during the evening and night-time that the flow of life is shaped by the presence and fear of wild elephants. So as it is dark after 6 p.m., there is still a lot of activity of people trying to get everything done in time, such as bringing foodstuffs home, fetching water from the village pump, washing up, and paying visits. By 8 p.m., the atmosphere is much calmer on the roads and paths that connect the hamlets and homes. Hence, friends and relatives visit each other less than I observed in other villages without such pressing elephant issues. Yet, sometimes
one does take the risk, but while staying alert to be able to flee in time if necessary. Walking and cycling in the night were particularly advised against by fellow villagers and the Wildlife Department who were trying to find a solution for the badly affected area. Sometimes if my host brothers and I did visit Geethan who lived in the hamlet on the way to the nearby temple school, the hamlet deemed most prone to elephant activity, then he would come and fetch us on his motorcycle and bring us back as a precaution. The tension about elephants thus did not disrupt social life totally, but did affect it to a large extent by compressing the rhythm of outside activities to only a few hours. However, in the case of parties where alcohol is consumed, it is possible to see, or rather hear, a man returning homwards on foot and in high spirits, forgetting the potential danger that he might point at when sober.

The elephant also determines rhythms even more drastically when regarded at the level of the cultivation cycle. Indeed, about three weeks before the paddy is ready to be harvested the milky substance inside the husks are hardening into grains. In this process the emerging paddy emits sweet smells that spread and wave across the fields and the roads into the noses of human beings, but also into the jungle where it affects elephants and incites their attraction to the paddy fields. This is a tough period for the farmers who then have to repair or build anew a watch-hut (pälē) in a high and solid tree surrounding the fields, such as the one depicted below.

At the village level, several tree cabins are built that enable an overview of the fields because they are placed in such a way that farmers can communicate by torch-light and sound to warn each other about possible elephant arrivals. Men guard their fields during the night for about three weeks. Some sometimes pay labourers to do this task, whereas men with less means must go through this period of little sleep themselves. During this time, the evening meal has to be prepared earlier so that the men can leave in time. They sometimes take food for the
night in case they get hungry, but this tends to be more snack-type items that go well with tea, or in many instances alcohol. Several farmers try to make the best out of it by making a fire to stay warm and having a drink while they are awake. Friends may also come to keep them company for a few hours. I joined a few times, and once while we were having a small night party in the fields, and as we were chatting, discussing, and singing to help this difficult period to pass by, indeed a nocturne of village life, we were suddenly interrupted by the sounds of excited shouts from elsewhere. “The elephants are coming!” One of the men took his gun and aimed it in the direction where we heard the elephants trumpeting. As the music accelerated and fire crackers and fireworks indicated the pace, flashing torch lights, cracking sounds, and shouting men made up the sonosphere of the stressed elephants that were trampling the fields while trying to escape. Below is a picture that shows the impact of elephants passing through a field at an earlier stage of cultivation.

Some damage was already done, but to prevent worse, the elephants needed to be driven back to the jungle as quickly as possible. Yet, some heard that the elephants started to make different sounds and come closer. Another man took his gun and escorted Buddhika and I away from the place. They no longer wanted the responsibility of watching out for us if something happened or they wanted to avoid us seeing what might happen (shooting elephants is illegal in Sri Lanka). This event describes the volatility of the rhythms making up
the atmosphere that can move between boredom and a fun heated party, and which can even erupt into a frantic scene of preparing for battle once the elephants announce their arrival. Several times, when there were no such interruptions, I stayed all night to keep the guarding and singing farmers company only to be awoken by the rays of the sun.

The Elephant-Affected Dietary Composition

The elephants impact the cultivation cycle and thus the diet in another important way. As the farmers have to guard their paddy fields during the pre-harvest period, they are generally not able to combine paddy with chena or vegetable cultivation, except when they have a little garden at the homestead. It is impossible to simultaneously guard both fields against wild animals and elephants, unless one has sufficient men available in the family or the ability to hire labourers to do so. This is rarely the case, as nearly all young men seek their luck elsewhere in education, the army, or in other jobs in cities and abroad, and as the costs of labourers drive up input prices beyond their possible return. Only after people have finished reaping, threshing, and collecting paddy to store at home, such as depicted below, they then can think of another form of cultivation.
They will start *chena* cultivation if there is sufficient soft rain to permeate the soil (recall that pelting rain is required for the filling of the tank for paddy cultivation whereas soft rain is better for the other forms of cultivation). These soft rains, *thale văsse* (sesame rains), are named after one of the seeds, *thale* (sesame), often cultivated in *chena*. When these rains arrive, some farmers take on the whole task to clear the fields by burning the jungle that is on the way of re-colonising the fields. They then cultivate these *chena* crops and vegetables, and likewise have to guard these during numerous nights. Many farmers cannot make the effort of engaging in such tough combination of cultivation and other work, so a lot of the ‘highland’ fields have not been cleared and cultivated for a long time (such as the area of the Guruma Muttā) and have turned into a dense scrub forest attracting more elephants to this area, thus further amplifying the difficulties for the remaining cultivators. Indeed, everybody blames the elephants for the diminishing of the variety of cultivation and diet. There is a sense that elephants are winning the battle and this provides an extra push factor out of the village. Hence, if an elephant is caught, it attracts a large cheering crowd as the elephant is captured and driven into the truck to be transported to a wildlife sanctuary, such as shown below.
Even though my interviews suggest that the flight from agriculture (and thus from this agriculture based village life) is more complex, as for reasons of lowering status of farming, decay of irrigation structures, and attractiveness of earning a lot of money elsewhere, I surmise that the elephant becomes the holographic condensation of all these issues and as such turns into the focal blaming point of villagers. The profound frustration is clearly articulated when farmers refer to the elephants as the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) with which the Government of Sri Lanka was waging a war at that time. So sometimes when the farmers said that the LTTE had a party on someone’s field or at their house the night before, it meant that the elephants had come for food.

The Wild entering the Domestic

The fear of elephant attacks does not diminish after the paddy is brought and stored at home. Often, when relaxing and chatting in the evening, the fire crackers and shouts become part of the evening concert of insects and nocturnal animals. Sometimes, these human noises are much louder and closer, alerting us that elephants are coming, not to the fields, but to our homes. Indeed, when the harvest is stored inside the houses, elephants attempt to break in and fetch their share of the harvest, such as happened on the picture below.

This is worse than when they trample a field, as the labour and inputs have added value to the paddy and as the house becomes damaged as well. During my fieldwork, several houses were broken into, and apparently one elephant was known to be particularly bad and was recognised by the strange sounds it produced on its rampages. The villagers named that elephant “the housebreaking elephant” or “geval kadande aliya”. One evening it came close to our house while we were all watching television. After hearing that sound, sudu māma returned with one of my host brothers to protect his house. Thankfully, the rest of us were
able to deter it with our torch-lights. Sometimes, this happens at night as well and then one has to be ready to get up and try to prevent the elephant from breaking in.

The Evening Slowdown or...

Often, the evenings flow smoothly and later decelerate into the sleepy rhythms of the night. Nevertheless it remains a moment of the day filled with domestic tasks such as cooking and washing up, particularly for women. For dinner they mostly prepare rice and one or two side dishes on top of the remainders of the lunch that they recycle into an additional curry. With the arrival of the refrigerator, they could keep leftovers fresh to use later or the next day. If used for this purpose, the fridge could alters the time of cooking as the whole procedure of making curries does not have to be repeated, but I have seen it most often being used to reduce the regularity of shopping, as it enables the wife or husband to buy and store more ingredients at once. Also, it affects the types of deserts and drinks that they consume, as soft drinks and ice cream can now be kept within domestic reach, thereby altering the overall composition of food intake as well (e.g. increasing consumption of sugar). Indeed, the fridge affects food intake and rhythms for those few households in the village that have them. Yet, most remain without as even the supply of electricity is restricted to a few parts of the village. In the cases when it has been a busy day or when the wife returns home late, the household may instead of rice eat indiāppe, āppe, kottu, or bread that is brought home as take-away earlier in the evening and joined by the usual side dishes. In few instances, the husband prepares dinner himself, with or without the help of his daughters or a female relative. In the case of my neighbouring nuclear host family, this was sometimes the case, as nānde worked at a hospital and therefore had very irregular hours. In those moments, sudu māma then took on the role of cook if his wife had not been able to prepare something earlier.

Often, while some household members are cooking, others watch TV. Besides the conversations and the bubbling and crackling sounds in the kitchen, the television tends to provide a dominant ‘backing’ vocal (but to me an often irritating one) to these domestic tunes that last whole evening. After dinner, the women are sometimes aided by a male relative in doing the dishes, cleaning the kitchen area, and preparing ingredients for the next day’s cooking, whereas the children, men, and visitors often sit in front of the television while chatting and discussing. The mesmerising TV screen does not always draw all of the attention, even when everybody sits in front of it. As the evening unfolds and the night is near, the household members stop their activities to have a small pūja or almsgiving in front of the little Buddha statue and shrine that decorates most of the houses. The white and yellow
flowers (red ones are deemed unsuitable for the Buddha) collected at dusk are offered on a tray to the statue where they release a sweet smell along with the burning incense. The smell fills the room and enhances the short moment of solemnity. The family members stand in front of the image with their hand palms touching in front of their head and often reciting the Vandana (Homage), Tisarana (the Three Refuges), and Panca Sila (the Five Precepts), which I will discuss in greater detail in chapter 5. They finish by showing their respect and get back to the activities they were engaged in. Not everyone does this daily, but I regularly observed it and sudu māma’s family performs it on a daily basis before going to sleep.

A Sudden Acceleration

Some evenings, the gradual easing down can be disrupted by visitors. I recall one evening where we were relaxing from a very intense week in which we had just celebrated the April New Year and organised the one-year commemoration of my host mother’s death. Exhausted from the various overnight preparations of sweets and elaborated meals, my host sisters had decided to recycle some of the remainders for dinner, but just after they had started cooking, we heard people arriving at the compound. They were about ten, including several members of an extended family who came to convey a marriage proposal to the eldest sister, Nihinsa. This was thus an official kind of visit, which required a whole range of formal regards. This unexpected visit seemed to test Nihinsa’s cooking skills and her ability to adjust her cooking to unforeseen circumstances. Indeed, cooking skills are an important consideration in the selection of a marriage partner (food as a binding mechanism again...). They arrived around 8 p.m. without having eaten and needing to return to their village that same evening. Hence, Nihinsa immediately understood that she had to quickly prepare an elaborate meal for altogether around 20 people. We could not eat the food we had planned to eat and neither could we prepare different food for ourselves. The latter would be awkward and would give the message that we would not want to share with them and engage in a relationship. Thus, an entirely new meal had to be prepared for everyone to help the relationship between our families grow, as eating from the same plate entails becoming ‘one’ through the shared substance that is ingested (Curtin 1992). Food’s ambivalent relational capacity had thus to be negotiated, and Nihinsa clearly knew what she had to do.

After paying her formal respects by offering them water at the entry to invite them in, she had to go to the kitchen to first prepare tea and offer the guests bananas and New Year sweets before they were finally served tea. Meanwhile, nānde and her daughters were mobilised and started preparing side dishes in their kitchen and moved back and forth between the back
doors of the houses to help Nihinsa and Vidusahani. Luckily, some of the relatives of my extended host family were still there from the festivities and they, at least the women, moved into frantic action as well. Hence, the adjustability of the cooking wife-to-be also depends on the social network she can quickly mobilise, which I suggest is also part of the test. Meanwhile, the men talked and got to know the guest family, starting with inquiring about their place of residence, which is an idiom through which to speak about caste in a less explicit way. Next, they asked questions about jobs, income, and fortune of both the potential marriage partners and their family members. In such proposed marriages the wedding is a more businesslike affair that connects not only the wedded, but also the families. The coolness of the discussion increased the formal sense of the event. Meanwhile, the rhythm in the kitchen was frantic with the women bordering on despair. They were making fried rice with shredded vegetables to go along with the five different side dishes and the papa dum. They prepared the meal in less than two hours and so around 10 p.m., the visitors received their first share and the men of my host family joined a little later. Meanwhile, the women were looking after the guests and added additional portions on their plates whenever they accepted under influence of the women’s generous insistence. It struck me that the explicitly stated goal of the first visit is to allow the potential marriage partners to get to know each other, knowing that they have been separated all evening and having just exchanged looks and a few words at the beginning. However, it was the men of both families who got to know each other a little better.

When the visitors left, everyone present of the extended family discussed the partner, and it was clear that this would become a collective decision. They wanted my opinion as well, but I tried to remain outside by answering that more information is needed. They shared a similar feeling, and it was decided to get more information before proceeding further. Yet, the family of the groom-to-be had invited my host-family quite quickly and accepting this invitation would mean that it would be very hard to refuse the wedding afterwards. Hence, my host family had to take a decision to accept the marriage proposal already soon after the first meeting as the groom’s family had apparently been convinced quickly of the suitability of Nihinsa. She had thus passed the test of flexibly adjusting her rhythm at a time when most would have been exhausted after all the New Year cooking and visits. Four months later, she

29 As Kalinga Tudor Silva et al. (2009) note, it is nearly taboo to mention caste explicitly. Yet, speaking about place of descent is a subtle way to find out about caste background, as caste and place are connected. Weddings remain one of the few contexts where caste is important, as highlighted by the explicit mentioning of caste in newspaper ads.
married the guy in what is called a proposed marriage. She did not have much say in it, as she was under the social pressure of the whole family because she was 35 years old and they deemed it unsuitable to remain unmarried for longer. However, my host family told me that if she would have vehemently opposed, they would not have forced her, hence the difference between proposed and arranged weddings. With the increasing importance of love-marriages on the basis of a romantic ideal, this was still hard for her to accept, but as my host brother (who was in charge of the family since both parents died) said: “She has had her chance for many years to find a partner herself.” This implies that proposed or arranged marriages seem to serve as a backup if love marriages do not materialise. I will expand on weddings in the ritual chapter, but I discussed this visit here, as it shows how daily rhythms tend to be flexible and that this adjustment capacity, flexibility, and a dependable social network are highly valued.

A Moment of Final Excess

As I noted earlier, my host-family prepared fried rice for these formal visitors. It struck me how often fried rice is served for first-time visitors or at parties. Also when eating out or when taking food from a take away, it very often involves fried rice. It is also often the food that is eaten after drinking alcohol, except when one drinks at home and the wife cooks the food, having to adapt her plan to incorporate the visitors and make extra food for the guests.

Fried rice involves the stir-frying of both shredded vegetables and already cooked rice. Many times, fried rice is not served together with cooked side dishes, but rather with fried and oily meat, fish, and in some cases vegetables. When asking why and when they prefer it, some students in Peradeniya mentioned they opt for fried rice when eating at the canteen, while preferring cooked rice at home. Combined with the articulated concern for food safety at canteens and locations of large-scale cuisine, I observed that fried rice is preferred, as these food providers and the source of food are experienced to be more anonymous. It is a question of trust and this coincides with the explanation Buddhika once gave about why he mostly selects fried rice when eating out during his trips. He said that one can never be sure whether cooked rice at these eateries has been standing for a long time, and thus he feels insecure about the quality. With fried rice, the anonymous food providers have to fry it just before serving and that makes Buddhika feel safer, as the frying may kill bacteria. So, we can see there is an explicit concern with food safety that motivates the preference for fried rice in certain occasions. I suggest that hygienic purity is not the only reason.
Another explanation or connection can be found in the porosity of food in South Asia and particularly during cooking. As mentioned earlier, the porosity refers to not only food’s absorption of water during the transformative cooking process, but also of the moral properties of the cook. I suggest that the care for the moral purity of food ties in with and articulates itself often through the explicit concern for food safety thus combining a double sense of food purity: both hygienic and moral, which ties in partly with the Western double notion of purity of food in the laboratorial hygienic and cultural authentic sense as described by Sidney Mintz (1996). The preference for ‘fried cooked rice’ in relation to distant and unknown food providers implies that frying neutralises the potential absorption of the moral properties of the cook as well as his or her potential evil looks and thoughts. This would also explain the selection of fried rice when eating together with people that are not familiar. Hence, the fried rice serves as a precaution to the frailty of eating together in a context where cooked food is prone to evil looks and thoughts of fellow consumers in the house, such as in the case of first-time visitors, or in restaurants or food stalls. Indeed, during travels and while moving around in non-domestic and non-familiar space, food consumption requires various precautions to address these concerns of purity in the double sense, and eating fried rice is one way to do so.

The explanation for the preference for fried rice and oily foods in cases where people drink alcohol however should not be mainly searched in the realm of moral purity, even though it could play a role in neutralising the morally ambiguous consumption of alcohol. A more convincing explanation may be found in relation to Ayurvedic ideas of hot and cool foods. I will go into Ayurvedic ideas in greater depth in the following chapter and so suffices for now to elicit that “hot” or usnay in Ayurvedic rendering does not denote heat in terms of actual temperature but rather in terms of a heating effect on the body. For instance, a pineapple cooled in the fridge will still be classified as usnay. I suggest that the events of men drinking together entail a moment of excess of heat (just as in certain rites [Bastin 2002]). Hot, fried, and greasy meats are often part of the ‘bites’ or snacks that go together with drinking along with the spicy chickpeas and fried fish. Most of these ingredients have a heating effect on the body, just as alcohol, but are also seen as morally polluting; particularly fried meats are attractive of demonic influences as well. So, this excess of heat and impurity needs to be counterbalanced in the end or afterwards, and perhaps fried rice that is cooked earlier provides this protection and counterbalance. This can be inferred from the basic text in Ayurveda, the

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30 I thank Jonathan Spencer (conversation with author, March 22, 2012) for suggesting me to explore this track.
Charaka Samhita, which states that cooked rice is light and cooling, and that in combination with frying, this rice becomes suited to neutralise toxic substances.

When there is a party, the way it evolves depends often on the type of alcohol that is consumed, whether beer, rā (palm wine), arrack, or kasippu—an illegal and very alcoholic potion. With beer or rā, the conversation becomes livelier and sometimes ends in singing. With the other alcoholic drinks, one can almost be certain that it ends in livelier singing and dancing at an ever increasing pitch, until it suddenly stops and makes place for eating before (sex and) sleeping. The event gradually but forcefully bubbles over to cool down and stabilise again, an oscillatory movement which we will see returning in various rituals, some of which are led by ritual priests who are likewise in a state of heat in case of possession. None of them would admit consuming alcohol, as it does not fit the ritual teachings, but I did see some spirit priests drinking to loosen up to be more open to the deity and acquire more ritual heat to convincingly perform for the offering audiences. The heat of alcohol at parties is then compounded by the heat of the oily “bites” or snacks, shaping the temporary autonomous zone (Bey 2002) of excessive heat or the liminal phase (Turner 1974) of the rite-like event of drinking alcohol. The chaotic subversion as part of destructive renewal seems to be part of drinking that remains limited in time and strictly contained by eating. In Sri Lanka, drinking is stopped from the moment one has dinner after which everybody goes to sleep fairly immediately. Contrastingly, in Belgium most of the alcohol is drunk during and after dinner. The rhythm and tempo of drinking are also related to the sequences of eating in the domestic sphere. If the party takes place at home where non-drinking members are present, it occurs at a more ‘hidden’ location, as drinking tend to be somewhat ‘secretive’. Still, everyone can guess from the various movements of men that some drinking is going on. The women who cook for the guests as well can determine to a certain extent when the drinking finishes. This is because the women and children are supposed to wait until the men have finished eating before they can take their food. Hence, the sequence of eating checks the potential of drinking excessively over time. If this would appear to be happening, the drinking men would be blamed by their peers and relatives for keeping his family hungry and awake. However, if the drinking event seems to be going on for a while, the others and particularly the children (who tend to come after the men in the regular sequence) do sometimes start eating before the men. The timing of when to eat at such evenings easily becomes a point of conflict, as men get carried away in singing while the children and women get sleepy while moreover knowing that they have to get up earlier than the men. Sometimes an angry look by one of them helps
do the trick. The men finish their glasses quickly and go to the room where they eat louder and sometimes sloppier than usual. The collectivity of the eating and sleeping rhythm thus contains excessive drinking and potential mishaps. Moreover, in the case of drinking at home, the rhythm thus remains collective keeping in check individual deviations incited by alcoholic intoxication. In other cases, when the rhythm is shared with only male peers of similar age, the drinking can easily get more excessive, leading to boisterous behaviour (mostly among young men). There is no check on time by people outside of the drinking group or by a meal shared with them, as groups of friends then take food from a food-stall and determine their eating rhythm. Sometimes such drinking parties end up in quarrels, fights, blackouts, and stories that make one ashamed and the other laugh.

Other times, these more secret gatherings of men end up in hunting excursions in the night. Hunting occurs less regularly, as it has become illegal in many instances (as part of the Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance enacted in 1937, which is amended several times ever since [Central Environmental Authority 1994]), but people still do so and then get an extra variation to their diet. With the increasingly strict Buddhist ideas that permeate society and politics, hunting is now frowned upon by most villagers, or at least they say so. One of the hunters of the village who often protected villagers from elephant attacks was himself killed in such an attack, but because of his known hunting activities, some villagers aired the idea that it was his deserved punishment for hunting. In this climate, it proved hard to find people who would immediately confirm that they hunt or have hunted, and then it still would take time in the interview before arriving at a meaningful discussion on hunting without bumping into a protective wall of denial. Even then, those willing to talk about it were mostly elder men who have stopped hunting. Only after a while, the atmosphere during these interviews became excited and lively in which the (ex) hunter mimics the prey he had hunted. This shift between shame and enthusiasm suggests that hunting has become more taboo, but still remains a source of pride to men who hunt in the subverted sphere of the night where the (Buddhist) structure of the day applies less. Being present at one party that preceded a hunting venture, which I did not join as I felt they were not eager to have to take the responsibility of protecting me against the dangers of wild animals, I noticed this shift in behaviour as if they were becoming animal and becoming predator to become better hunting human beings. This observation hints at the mimesis and balancing acts between animality and humanity that Rane Willerslev (2004) eloquently describes regarding his hunting research experience. I argue that this shift in behaviour rather entails a temporarily ontological transformation in
being that occurs during the moment of the impending hunt—as a context-driven actualisation—in which they are becoming animal through a process of entanglement between prey and hunter as they interact and transact. The subversion or ‘anti-structure’ of the night, combined with the consumption of alcohol in exclusively male company, enabled this anticipatory transformation to succeed and to get eager to leave. I obtained several interviews of elder men who demonstrated with their whole body that they have been experienced in the art of seducing and misleading animals. They explained that they could be successful in catching animals by becoming like them and touching or affecting them in the hunt. One such interview took more than six hours as the man was enthusiastically showing his ability and skill to become several particular animals as to mislead them in their personal and specific ways. Yet, like most interviews on hunting, this man would also return to the Buddhist structure of the day by condemning hunting in the end. He concluded that he had done a lot of harm to life (pau) and therefore currently participates in temple rituals to obtain more ping to acquire better karma before he dies. It is as if the interview in itself became a liminal space of excess in which a temporary ritual-like subversion, becoming-different and lines of flight into multiplicity (Deleuze & Guattari 2009) were actualising only to become recaptured by the structure of the day in which Buddhism powerfully shapes the collective Sinhalese being.
Conclusion

In this chapter, we have at the hand of an account of everyday life further elicited the dynamics of food as an assemblage by conveying a sense of the rhythms of several of its components. We have explored, felt, smelled, and tasted some of the ingredients that have each their own rhythms and that affect each other, all participating in the co-(re)production of an overall collective music of the ‘cooking’ of life.

I started this chapter by foregrounding the initial differences, in ways and rhythms of doing things, between myself and my hosts, and how we continued to adjust our rhythms of life and eating to find a way to live together that would be enriching to each other as in a true anthropophagy and not as in vampirism. After this introductory juxtaposition of the rhythms in their contrast, interaction, and mutual adaptations in an ongoing balancing act, I have turned to various components that relate to food and as such make up the food assemblage that, as a whole, structures the day. Moving from the concert of the detailed aspects of balancing the heat of the fire, the intensity of cutting and grinding, the social interaction and attentiveness, the round earthen pots, and the amounts of spices in the making of tea and breakfast, we turned to the ordering within and across the different meals. After these intra- and inter-meal rhythms, we arrived at the rhythms of the various modes of obtaining and procuring food, starting from the cultivation cycles as enmeshed with the weather elements and animals, such as elephants, bringing us back to the composition of the diet within the level of the meal. Indeed, these components and their rhythms or cycles make up the overall music or ‘wheel’ of village life brought into movement and diverging into creative variations, as spurred by the machinic assemblage of food that relates these various components. Through their inter- and trans-actions, both these components and the overall assemblage of food transform in these relations of mutual becomings. The arrival of an elephant in the evening may distract the wife cooking dinner, as the husband tries to chase the elephant away, disturbing the balance of heat, and burning the food, creating further frustration. As these components are entangled in relations of mutual transformations, one change creates a whole complex cascade and superposition of modifications that may be connected only indirectly. One change in combination with other changes co-(re)produces an alteration in the overall assemblage of food that actualises according to the context. We have moreover seen that these rhythms do not remain constant, but alter in their interactions in relations of mutual affectedness and becomings. The arrival of a visitor spurs an increased pitch of cutting extra vegetables and adding extra firewood to increase the intensity of fire and speed up the rhythm.
of the bubbling dish to get the extra food ready in time. Hence, the heterogeneous components alter throughout their inter-action as they actualise within the assemblage that connects them with each other and the wider context. These constituent cycles and rhythms of components bring forth the cycle of life as it revolves around the overall machinic assemblage of food that spurs the music of the village in its ‘cooking’ of life. Indeed, the many rhythms of the various components of village life revolve around food and its procurement, preparation, and consumption. Moreover, through these heterogeneous connections, many of the components or ‘ingredients’ of food link up food with ritual action, health issues, human-nature relations, politics, and economics, and allow food to become a holographic condensation of all the components it brings together, connects, and transforms, hence being the machinic assemblage. We will now turn towards the ways in which food collaborates, and as such establishes connections with scriptures in maintaining health and appeasing desire by looking at Buddhist and Ayurvedic writings, thereby increasing the diversity of components of the overall food assemblage under consideration.
Chapter 4: The Inspired Crystallisation of Food in Ancient Texts

So far, I have actually been writing about food as it emerges from intra-actions of its components, inter-actions with other entities and extra-actions in relation to the contexts in which it finds itself\textsuperscript{31}. I have been describing food in terms of its dynamics, rhythms, productivity, temporality, and spatiality to give a sense of the workings of food as an assemblage. We have seen how each of the components of food emerges with its particular rhythm in the music of the ‘cooking’ of life as it transpires around the cycles of food throughout cultivation, procurement, preparation, consumption, and digestion. In particular, I have fleshed out the relational dynamics from which food and other entities as well as their respective components emerge through a process of mutual and differential becoming by way of showing how a change in the tonality and rhythm of one component (e.g. distraction in the cook) may lead to an altered expression in the other entangled entity (e.g. a layer of food being burnt) and how all conjoin in the overall (harmonic or non-harmonic) music of the vibrating assemblage of food. Thus emphasising the dynamics of food, I have been focusing on transformations by teasing out the ways in which the rhythms affect each other in some of the food-related aspects of everyday village life. Yet, I also referred to some of the repetitions that are involved in these rhythms, such as in the case of sequenced eating of homogeneous consumption groups. Both repetitions and differentiations are part of life and connect with dynamics of stabilisation and destabilisation as well.

In what follows, I will focus on such figures of repetition and crystallisation, exploring a body of ancient philosophies and ways of life eternalised into words in various Ayurvedic and Buddhist texts. The role of food as crystallised in the ancient texts that I will discuss illustrates the repetition of principles in everyday engagements with food to date. These bodies of text retain their powerful influence, whether by their explicit learning and transmission of the texts, or, above all, by way of the learning the cooking skills passed on by generations and embodying these principles, as expounded here. The summary and discussion of this large corpus allows moreover to foreground the three transversal themes of desire, anxiety, and regeneration more explicitly and to explore how Ayurveda and Buddhism, as important sources of inspiration to date, deal with these issues in their entanglement with food. In other words, we will discuss these themes more explicitly by exploring the ways in

\textsuperscript{31} For reasons of clarity, I stick to the word ‘interactions’ to denote these three possible realms of action.
which these texts render the everyday relationship between food consumption and health (pertaining to sustenance and regeneration of life as a response to the anxiety for ill-health), on the one hand, and food eating and desire, on the other.

To explore these issues more in detail I will first delve into the Ayurvedic approach to food as explained in one of its basic texts, the Charaka Samhita. This specific text clearly explains the basic principles of the Ayurvedic health system and medicine, in contrast to the Susruta Samhita and Vagbhata Samhita that specifically focus on surgery and paediatrics respectively. Through our detailed summary and discussion of this text of several volumes (Shree Gulabkunverba Ayurvedic Society 1949) we will get a clearer idea of the radically mutual constitution and interpenetration of food, human beings, and their environment. As a corollary of this, we will get a sense of the deep enmeshment and inextricability of the social and physical aspects of the human person, as Filippo and Caroline Osella (1996) have carefully described in the context of Kerala. Moreover, from the description will emerge clearly the fundamental Ayurvedic approach, from which Buddhism derives inspiration, of the constant flux emerging in the ongoing balancing and re-balancing of components, whether hot-cool properties, the humours, the proto-elements permeating the world, the savours, and the dhātus (body elements). This flux emerging from the never-ceasing interactions of heterogeneous components corroborates our notion of emergent assemblages that individuate through relationalities and that alter when one or more components change as the balances that sustain them change as well.

The Charaka Samhita was written between 2000 and 2700 years ago (Rodrigues 2006:41), but its principles clearly resonate in the cooking practices of today and the fragmentary articulated knowledge surrounding it. So the actual practice and ingredients do diverge from these texts, but draw upon the same principles. A person may consider an ingredient to be cool whereas in the text it may have been defined as hot, or vice versa, but then still this person draws upon these very same principles of maintaining a hot-cool balance. During my interviews, I came across a wide variation in how to classify specific ingredients except in very clear cases where everybody agreed. Hence, I focus more on the abstract and crystallised principles than on the actual diverse articulations in practice. Nonetheless, I represent sufficient detail as an illustration of these principles. Be it as it may, the basic idea of achieving and maintaining a personally adapted balance between certain types of food in order to achieve a balance in humours and body elements, in relation to the environments in which one finds oneself, is clearly reflected in the daily attempts to cook healthy. Villagers do so mostly through the
balancing of hot and cool properties as these are widely known, and also in relation to effects of ingredients on the humours, but this knowledge seems to be more fragmentary. As stated earlier, these principles are embodied in the modes of cooking that daughters learn from their mothers through a practice of practical learning that renders them partially skilled. During my interviews regarding the specifics of cooking and ingredients in relation to Ayurvedic principles, they often advised me to see a local physician or veddemahattea, “who knows about this Ayurvedic stuff”. Indeed, the details of Ayurveda are known quite vaguely and most of the knowledge about it is very inarticulate, so many obtain more knowledge at times when they are sick and go see the local physician who gives advice on their diet, just as we in Belgium learn from visits to the doctor or hospital regarding our habits.

Moreover, we should note that Ayurveda is also used in a very general way in daily parlance, combining in fact other healing systems as well, such as the Unani (Arabic) and Siddha (Tamil Nadu) systems (Wolffers 1987:64). Yet Ayurveda, being spread over South Asia, has been articulated locally with other health practices. Hence, the scholarly ideas expounded in the ancient texts of Ayurveda have intermingled with local re-appropriations and translations. Tudor Silva (1991:153) states that the local Sri Lankan traditions acquire terms, such as: “athbeheth (medicine-at-hand), godavedakama (local therapies) and parampara vedakama (ancestral medicine)” and that these are sometimes used: “to distinguish what remains of the indigenous herbal tradition from pure Ayurveda.” Other terms, he notes, are: “Sinhala vedakama (Sinhalese medicine) and deshiya vedakama (indigenous medicine)” and these refer explicitly to the formal Ayurveda. Yet, both are influenced by Ayurveda, which is sometimes used as a container concept that encompasses the various variations in medicine prevalent in Sri Lanka. On top of this all, Ayurveda is also actively promoted and institutionalised in Sri Lankan society by way of the establishment of the Department of Ayurveda under the Ministry of Indigenous Medicine in 1961 and by its teaching at the University of Colombo. So given its presence in my fieldwork site, I suggest that we take a look at the textual roots and illustrate (thus necessarily partially) how the food-related principles repeat themselves in present day cooking in the ongoing attempt to achieve and maintain good health, conducive of the sustenance and regeneration of life.

With regard to the second topic of eating and desire we will look at some of the Buddhist texts and see how the principles expounded in these, repeat themselves in present-day

32 http://www.ayurveda.gov.lk/
practices of eating. We will first look at some texts that are very illustrative of the Theravada Buddhist ambivalent relationship to food from which we can better grasp the more practical rules of the monastic code or Vinaya Pitaka. In fact, these practical rules seek to prevent the seductive capacity of food to overrun the eater. These rules are directed for monks that have been ordained and are thus not oriented towards lay people. Yet, while reading this code I noticed a high recurrence in these principles as embodied in everyday practices of eating. Hence, the same caution is required as with regard to the Charaka Samhita. Villagers have generally not read these texts, but these principles, prescriptions, and philosophies of life repeat themselves through their embodiment in practice while swarming the non-verbal sphere. Indeed, by practical repetition of these actions prescribed in Ayurveda and Theravada Buddhism, the justifications and the conscious aspect of these practices gets dis-articulated and dis-jointed and submerged by practical reason and by explanations, such as that it is the way they do things.

The enduring resonances, recurrences, and repetitions at mostly non-verbal and almost non-conscious levels are also challenging an excessive notion of emergence prevalent in many new or vital materiality approaches. Practices indeed emerge from interactions and transactions with food, but seem in some cases to stabilise, territorialise, molarise, or crystallise into repetitions that as such form a structure. Yet, it can only be sustained by recurring actions and so a structure does not remain stable by itself. It has to be maintained as such, because if not, the stabilisation would destabilise and alter. The divine source of inspiration in the Charaka Samhita and the Buddhist philosophy in the Vinaya Pitaka and other texts have historically perpetuated and crystallised certain principles of engagement with food into written words, but simultaneously these principles have been actively maintained and repeated through the passing on and the acquisition of specific cooking skills and practices of eating in the domestic sphere.

Let us now turn to the summary and discussion of the Charaka Samhita, starting with the basic constituting elements and principles of the world, human being, and food, as well as the role of their interaction in achieving good health and well-being. The Charaka Samhita is said to be promulgated by Brahma (the Creator in Hinduism) to the god Indra, affirming its divine truth and cementing itself in society, and further expounded by the sage Atreya. In my

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33 In fact I do not understand why it is called a “new materiality” when in fact the initial goal is to transcend the materiality–meaning dichotomy. Instead, it often reinforces the materiality side of it and sharpens the pro-and contra materiality debate which seems to have evolved into some kind of a not very constructive trench war.
summary and discussion I am drawing upon a detailed translation (Shree Gulabkunverba Ayurvedic Society 1949), and I am aware of the shortcomings of working with a translation. Yet, given that I am not specialised in Sanskrit, I have deemed it better to use this translation than omitting a discussion of it, given that this text contributes to better grasp the often unarticulated background from which stem the present-day Sinhalese cooking and consumption practices.
**Charaka Samhita**

*Introduction*

The entire Charaka Samhita consists of various sections in the following order: the Sutrasthana (section on general principles, referenced just as the other sections in the following way: “Susth chapter nr: verse-to-verse nrs”), the Nidanasthana (Nisth, section on pathology, thus referenced as: “Nisth chapter nr:verse-to-verse nrs”), the Vimanasthana (Visth, section on specific determination of measure), the Sarirasthana (Sasth, section on human embodiment), the Indriyasthana (Insth, section on the sensorial prognosis), the Chikitsasthana (Chisth, section on therapeutics), the Kalpasthana (Kasth, section on pharmaceutics), and the Siddhisthana (Sisth, section on success in treatment). In what follows, I will focus on certain themes that are treated throughout this collection of sections: the constitution of the world, person, and the central role of food in shaping these, their mutual articulation and constitution, the dynamics of flux and balancing elements and humours, and finally the nomenclature and aetiology of diseases. As mentioned earlier, the details of the text are not the main focus here, but rather the principles and dynamics as embodied in the details. Let us first turn to the discussion of the components that make up the world and its entities and as such we will be prepared to discuss the category of the person in greater depth and in its intimate relation to its surroundings.

*Components of the World and Person*

*General Introduction*

As Gananath Obeyesekere (1977:155) has pointed out, the Sāmkya philosophy is related to Ayurveda and it postulates various principles that return in the Charaka Samhita, such as the elaboration of two leading components. These include purusa or spirit, which has no activity and remains passive while upholding a unity in understanding, senses, mind, and the sense-objects (Sasth 1:35), and prakrti or primordial matter (Sasth 1:4). Prakrti is itself constituted of three guna or fundamental properties: sattva (mind or intelligence stuff), rajas (active principle or energy stuff), and tamas (mass stuff). Prakrti then develops into buddhi or intellect (note that it is seen as part of matter and not of spirit) and ahamkāra or ego-consciousness (again as part of matter). Two sets of evolutes emerge from this ahamkāra. On the one hand, there is the set dominated by the sattva guna and which entails manas (mind or consciousness), the five sensory organs, and their related motor organs. On the other hand,
there is the set dominated by the *tamas guna*, from which emerge, in combination with *rajas*, the five subtle elements (*tanmatras*) or sense-objects of sound, colour, touch, smell, and taste. Each of these is composed of the five proto-elements, wind, fire, earth, water, and ether, but one being predominant in their related sense-objects.

All entities of the world consist of these five proto-elements, albeit in different compositions, and contain variable combinations of the three *gunas* (Obeyesekere 1977:156). The similar composition of the basic constituents in their altering combinations and balances, render all entities heterogeneous as well as radically permeable, porous, and interpenetrating. The human person is made up of these five elements, just as any other entity in the world, and includes the mind on top of that. These five elements are modified into the seven *dhātus*, essences, or body elements of the human body (blood, marrow, bone, fat, semen, flesh, and vital essence), of which each one also has the three *gunas* inherent in it (Seneviratne 1996:180). The food eaten is likewise composed of these five proto-elements only to be transformed by the gastric fire into a nutrient essence that feeds the respective *dhātus*. Moreover, the proto-elements and body elements also support the three humours (*tri-dōsa*): phlegm (*kapha* or in Sinhalese *semme*), bile (*pitta* like in Sinhalese), and wind (*vata*, also like in Sinhalese). These three humours are respectively associated with the water, fire, and air elements (Rodriguez 2006:41). They are in a constant flux, and the aim of Ayurvedic medicine is to maintain an equilibrium suitable to the constitution or dominant humour of a particular person through ongoing adjustments in diet, medication, and routinisation of behaviour (Seneviratne 1996:180). I have already explained in chapter 2 that the gastric fire cooks the food into the necessary *dhātus* of the body, explaining the necessity of a balanced intake to maintain a balance in the body elements, as imbalances in these body elements and also humours lead to disease. Then there are also the flavours, savours, or tastes that have agency in their relationship to the various entities described, as they also have an effect on the humoural balances and co-constitute together with the basic proto-elements the phenomena and qualities of the seasons, foods, and senses. Hence, all substances, entities, seasons, and so forth, are permeated by the six flavours, the three fundamental qualities, the five proto-elements (that in human beings transform into the three humours and seven body elements) and moreover, the five qualities of heaviness, lightness, coldness, heat, and fluidity, or dryness.
Let us now take a closer look at each of these different components of the world and the human person, and start with the basic proto-elements and the three humours. Both are common knowledge among the villagers of all generations (a little less among youth though).

The Proto-Elements

As summarised above, we have the five basic constituting proto-elements of earth, fire, water, air, and ether. Each of these has its specific properties and actions as elicited by the Charaka Samhita in the Sutrasthana in the verses of number 26. First, it explains that the earth element is clearly present in those substances that are heavy, rough, hard, slow, stable, clear, dense, gross, odoruous, and that promote plumpness, compactness, heaviness, and stability. The fluid, unctuous, cold, slow, soft, and slimy substances as well as those full of taste are predominant in the water element and produce moisture, union, softness, and delight. The element of fire is predominant in substances that are hot, acute, subtle, light, dry, clear, and abounding in the quality of form, and generate burning, digestion, radiance, lustre, and colour. The substances that are light, cold, dry, rough, clear, subtle, and that pertain to touch are predominant of the air element, producing dryness, depression, morbidity, clearness, and lightness. Finally, there is the ether element that is present in substances that are soft, light, subtle, smooth, and related to the quality of sound, and that yield softness, porousness, and lightness.

The Humours

The proto-elements are the basic building blocks of the humours. The kapha or semme humour consists predominantly of the water element, the vata of wind, and the pitta of fire. Each of these three humours has its specific properties, actions and effects, and arousing and calming influences.

Vata, often translated as the wind humour, is dry, cold, light, subtle, unstable, clear, and rough (Susth 1:59; Susth 12:4). The overall exciting factor of vata entails an excess in substances and actions. Moreover, seasons that are homologous to vata reinforce it, and so the opposite of this season and moderation are alleviative factors (Susth 12:5-6). Among the specific exciting factors are those that induce dryness, lightness, coldness, hardness, roughness, and porousness, whereas the sedative agents of vata are those that promote unctuousness, heaviness, heat, smoothness, softness, sliminess and compactness (Susth 12:7/3-7/5). The role of vata or the wind humour in the human body and the universe is predominantly related to movements. The Sutrasthana (12:8/1) states:
“It is the impeller of upward and downward movements; the controller and conductor of the mind; the inspirator of all the senses; the synthesizing principle in the body; the impeller of speech; the cause of feeling and audition; the source of auditory and tactile senses; the origin of all excitement and animation; the stimulator of the gastric fire,..., the modeller of the foetal form; the sustaining principle of life. All these are the functions of the normal vata in the body.”

When it is abnormal, it destroys or deforms the foetus, prolongs the period of gestation, gives rise to fear, grief, and depression, and impairs strength, complexion, well-being, and life (Susth. 12:8/2). The vata also shapes the universe and in its normal condition it: animates fire; governs the procession and orbits of the sun, moon, the constellations, and planetary systems; produces flowers and fruits; enables the fertilisation of seeds and their germination, the growth of crops, and absorption and evaporation of moisture in plants (Susth. 12:8/3). In its excited condition, the vata in the universe becomes destructive: eroding mountains; uprooting trees; churning up seas; causing earth quakes; spurring the formation of rain clouds; dumping snow, dust, sand, and blood; unsettling the six seasons; retarding the growth of the crops; releasing the wrath of clouds, sun, fire, and wind (Susth 12:8/4). Hence the vata in the universe is the animator, and it is as such no surprise that vata is also defined as: “God, the Author and Everlasting One” (Susth 12:8).

Pitta or bile is unctuous, hot, acute, fluid, acid, mobile, and pungent (Susth 1:60). The fire that is predominant in the pitta humour can give rise to both good and evil consequences when it is in a quiet or excited condition (Susth 12:11/1). As such it can respectively bring about digestion and indigestion; vision (we will see that the fire element is predominant in sight) and loss of vision; the normality and abnormality of temperature; the healthy and diseased look; intrepidity and fear; delight and anger (explains that those with an excessive gastric fire are seen as passionate and hot-tempered, as mentioned in chapter 2); and lucidity and confusion relating to the vision mentioned earlier (Susth 12:11).

Kapha or phlegm is heavy, cold, soft, unctuous, sweet, stable, and viscid (Susth 1:61). The kapha in the body can likewise give rise to beneficial as well as detrimental effects, such as compactness and flabbiness, plumpness and emaciation, virility and impotence, knowledge and ignorance (Susth 12:12).
The three humours in their normal condition combine to: “make a man whole of his senses, possessed of strength, good complexion and ease, and assured of great longevity” (Susth 12:13/2). Ayurveda is called the science of long life and aims to achieve this by ever balancing the humours such that they are conducive of good health. If they are “excited”, all three humours can be quieted by substances of antagonistic qualities with consideration of climate, dosage, and season (Susth 1:59-62/0.5). Indeed, the basic dynamic of restoring health entails balancing and counterbalancing of the various flavours, humours, and proto-elements within the human body in their relation to the outside environment and season. As such, Ayurveda is a kind of eco-health system, as it takes into account not only internal balances, but also considers these balances in relation to outside forces with which these internal components continue to inter-act, corroborating our relational conceptualisation of the human person.

**Flavours or Rasa**

*Rasa*, translated variably as flavour, savour, or taste, is an essence constituted by two elements: water and earth. The variations of flavour emerge when these two elements are combined with air, fire, and ether, altering the balances and predominance of one of the elements (Susth 1:64). There are six tastes: sweet, acid, salt, pungent, bitter and astringent (Susth 26:9/1). When the water element is predominant, the entity’s sweet flavour is born. The acid or sour taste emerges when the earth and fire elements are predominant. The salt flavour is born of the preponderance of the water and fire elements, whereas the pungent taste exists in the combination of the air and fire elements. The bitter taste comes from the air and ether elements and the astringent taste is born from the air and earth elements (Susth 26:40/1). The sweet, acid and salty savours subdue *vata*, whereas bitter, pungent, and astringent flavours with their predominance in air provoke it. *Pitta* is subdued by astringent, sweet and bitter tastes and is excited by pungent, acid, and salt savours. *Kapha* is subdued by astringent, bitter and pungent tastes, whereas it is excited by sweet, acid, and salt (Susth 1: 65-66). So, here we see how flavours are agents that affect the humours and, via these, the health of human beings.
The Human Person

After this introduction of the three basic building blocks of the world and its entities, along with their properties and actions, we can now look at how Ayurveda conceptualises the human person. The Charaka Samhita states early in the text that the human person is an aggregate of mind, spirit, body (consisting of the five proto-elements), time, and space (Susth 1:47-48). Interestingly, it also states that the senses animate substances and beings (hence the emphasis on taking good care of the senses) without mentioning consciousness or any other form of intentionality. Rather, as we have seen in the theoretical chapter, consciousness arises upon contact of sense-objects with the senses and this consciousness is located in the heart of the human being (Susth 29:7). Let us now explore into greater detail to how the human person is composed in Ayurveda and start by looking at the formation of the foetus.

Foetal Formation

According to the treatise, the sperm of the man is composed of four of the proto-elements—air, fire, earth and water—and all of the six flavours. The sperm causes fertilisation and the formation of the embryo by being “deposited in the womb” (Sasth 2:3-4). The foetus emerges from the composition of these four elements derived from both father and mother, the mother’s diet during pregnancy (you not only become what you eat, but also what your relations eat, hence a fundamental relational rendering of life), and finally, one’s own past actions, which determine the psychic composition (Sasth 2:26-27). It is important to note that Ayurveda is part of a tradition which, in contrast to Buddhism, conceptualises a soul or self that continues to exist and which migrates from body to body in a process of rebirth. Buddhism likewise conceptualises karma and samsara, the cycle of death and rebirth, in which the form into which one is reborn is determined by the balance of good and bad actions. Yet, there is a tension related to the question of how past actions can influence a person if there is no such thing as a soul or self in Buddhism. I suggest this tension has arisen because of the emergence of Buddhism in a Vedic and Hindu context, and as such it is influenced by these ideas yet, it also developed new ideas, such as the non-self, without having really solved the tension this new theory has created. The way a senior monk once tried to explain a way out of this tension was by stating that karma is not attached to a self, but it attaches itself to a new formation of elements that is born. When this formation is influenced by this karma, a particular consciousness of the person arises. Yet, for many of my interviewees, karma is linked to one’s previous personhood, whether in human or non-human shape, and this seems to imply that they hold a vague notion at least of an ātman or soul that
transmigrates after death. People indeed used the Hindu notion of ātman during several of the interviews, suggesting that the Buddhist theory of non-self is either difficult to grasp or not satisfactory for explaining the commonsense understanding of death and rebirth.

To return to the foetus, its overall conception in the womb thus arises from the sum of composing factors emanating from the mother, father, spirit, concordance, nourishment, and the mind. The blood, flesh, and fat of the foetus are elements derived from the mother and these elements are engendered in the emerging organs of the heart, liver, kidneys, stomach, colon, and rectum of the foetus. The bones and semen are derived from the father and are engendered in its hair, nails, and veins. The purusa or spirit enters the womb and links itself to the embryo-in-development (similar to the explanation given by the monk above), and the purusa-derived properties merge in the eternal, ageless, deathless, invisible, endless, immutable, and embodied soul. The spirit-engendered components of the foetus include the mind, the senses, respiration, excretory urges, desire, pleasure and pain, voice and colour, consciousness, egoism, and effort. The concordance of the three humours is required for conception, as excited humours could impair either the semen or womb. The concordance-engendered aspects of the embryo include health, absence of excessive appetites, clarity of the senses, complexion, virility, and sex-vigour. The nourishment is crucial for the foetus to live and causes the differentiation of the limbs, invigoration, satisfaction, plumpness, and enthusiasm. Finally, there is the connecting agent which is the mind, derived from prakrti and which engenders and ties the spirit to the sentient organism. The mind-born parts include inclination, purity, memory, envy, fear, anger, and enthusiasm (Sasth 3:5-13; 4:4). Hence, we see that the embryo emerges from the assembly of multiple components and complex relationships between those, including spirit, mind, humoural concordance, proto- and body elements from mother and father, and nourishment.

The text goes on to describe the various stages of the development of the embryo in the womb, which we will look at only partially, starting from the sex act when the semen is “set in motion by the ecstatic self” and emerges from the man’s body. The semen subsequently mixes with the “secretion of the woman after entering the womb” (Casth 4:7). Nur Yalman (1971:137) notes moreover that semen is a very powerful dhātu, a power reflected in the word denoting also the relics of the Buddha and recurring in the word for the sacred tomb or dāgoba (contraction of dhātu garbhaya or “dhātu in the womb”), linking religious power with that of fertility and life-regeneration. To return to the foetus, its mind is the instrument of the spirit that collects the needed ingredients for itself. It first draws the ether to itself and later
attracts the remaining four elements, beginning with air. This takes place in a fraction of time and in this way the spirit takes refuge in the embryo, which remains a jelly-like mass without any particular shape during the first month (Sasth 4:8/1-9). Between the third and fifth month the sense-organs appear and then sentience emerges in the mind (recall the foundational and animating role of the senses), which is situated in the foetal heart that rises from the mother’s heart. Both hearts are connected by way of channels that carry nourishment and sometimes also the inclinations and desires of the mother. Hence, the mother’s well-being is crucial as hers is identical with that of the foetus. So, it becomes evident why many villagers stress along with this text that the pregnant woman should receive anything she wants. Of course there are some exceptions to what she can receive, such as the very heavy, heat-producing, and pungent articles. However, if the craving (in Sri Lanka this phenomenon is recognised as the dole dukkha) for such unwholesome article becomes intolerable, then the ingredient has to be given together with a wholesome one that neutralises the former. Anyway, the longing has to be fulfilled and removed in this way, because otherwise, if repressed, the vata can be irritated and can enter the foetus and destroy it (Casth 4:15/1-19). The idea that a pregnant woman should be taken very good care of, by for instance respecting her wishes and cravings is often clearly articulated among the villagers. Also the importance of the food for both mother and child is clearly recognised. For instance, during several interviews, the pineapple was most often named as being inedible for pregnant women as it is too sour and hot, drawing clearly upon the basic Ayurvedic knowledge and principles. Yet, the popular idea among villagers that consciousness ‘arrives’ in the baby around the sixth month of pregnancy does thus apparently not derive from Ayurvedic thought, as here consciousness arises between the third and fifth month of pregnancy when the heart of the baby emerges in its connections with that of the mother. After eliciting the co-composition of the baby, we now turn to that of the human person in general.

Influences of the Rasa

The rasa also plays a particular and constitutive role in the human body and person. These rasa are not so much the qualities that we perceive through the senses, but are rather understood as “nourishing essences” that are diffused throughout the various entities and substances, and that have a determining effect on health (Zimmerman 1987:8-9). We have earlier noted the elemental constitution of these flavours as well as their influences on the humours. The rasa moreover affect health by way of their influence on the body elements or dhātus, but their effects are specific to the flavour in question.
The sweet flavour, predominant in the water element, increases the body nutrient fluid from which the dhātus (blood, flesh, fat, bone, marrow, semen, vital essence) emerge and as such this flavour: “prolongs life, clarifies the sense-organs, alleviates pitta and vata, promotes cheerfulness, vitality and satisfaction. It enlivens the functions of the nose, mouth, throat, lips and tongue. It is unctuous, cold and heavy.” If used excessively, it produces corpulence, softness, lethargy, heaviness, and weakness of the gastric fire. It can lead to an increase of mucus, constipation, and other diseases born of kapha (Susth 26:43/1-43/2).

The sour taste, predominant in earth and fire, adds relish to the dish, stimulates the digestive fire, builds up the body, activates the mind, enhances strength, and regulates the movement of vata. This flavour is light, hot, and unctuous, and helps moistening and moving the food downwards. If used in excess, it provokes thirst, dissolves kapha, and increases pitta (Susth 26:43/3-43/4).

The salt taste, marked by preponderance of water and fire, is not very heavy, not very unctuous, but is hot. It is digestive, laxative, increases secretion in the mouth, and is curative of vata. If used too frequently, it provokes pitta, increases the blood (and can thereby cause imbalances not only among humours but also among the body elements), and can disturb the functioning of the sense-organs (Susth 26:43/6-43/7).

Pungent taste, marked by air and fire, purifies the mouth, stimulates the gastric fire, and causes the nose to run and the eyes to get wet. It is curative of obesity, excessive fluidity, and allays kapha. It is light, hot, and dry. If used in excess, it can destroy “manhood”, give rise to weariness, and produce great heat in the body. Because of its air and fire qualities, it potentially causes vata disorders in the legs, arms, and back (Susth 26:43/9-43/11).

The bitter flavour, predominant in air and ether, is dry, cold, and light, and is a digestive stimulant and appetiser. It purifies breast milk and gives strength to the skin and flesh. If used too much, it dries all seven body elements and creates many vata disorders (Susth 26:43/12-43/13).

The astringent savour, combining air and earth, consumes the body fluid, is dry, cold, and not light. It sedates kapha, blood, and pitta, but in excessive use, it afflicts the heart, distends the stomach, narrows the body channels, inhibits flatus and semen, and engenders various other vata disorders (Susth 26:43/14-43).
By way of these flavours’ particular actions and influences on the humours, the *rasa* thus exert beneficial or detrimental effects according to their measure and balance, but also in relation to the specific composition of the person regarding the predominance in humours, which we discuss next.

**Humoural Predominance**

Human persons are defined and marked by particular balances in elements derived from the parents, but also by the predominance of one of the three humours in more or lesser degree. Hence, some people have a primary articulation of *vata*, some of *pitta*, and others of *kapha*. There are also some that have an equibalance in their humours. All these people then have to consume articles that balance the flavours in such a way they resonate with their constitution in humours and thereby keeping the humours in a healthy balance. Let us further look at the types of persons distinguished in the Charaka Samhita.

As the *kapha* humour is unctuous and smooth, soft, sweet, firm, dense, slow, stable, heavy, cold, viscid, and clear, the person with a predominance of this humour tends to have smooth-looking limbs, profusion of semen, desire for sex, stable body, little thirst and hunger, clear and bright looks, mellow complexion and voice, and is plump, stable, and slow in actions and speech. Because of such qualities, these persons are possessed of strength, wealth, knowledge, vitality, gentleness, and long life (Visth 8:96/1-96).

As *pitta* is hot, acute, fluid, acid, and pungent, the person with its predominance is generally intolerant of heat, is hot in the mouth, has pimples (in the ritual discussion we will note the heat implied in pimples), is plagued by excessive hunger and thirst, is possessed of scanty and soft hair, has an acute digestive fire and is a constant eater, has no capacity to bear suffering, has a small quantity of semen, has a limited sex-appetite, and has few offspring. Hence, the text rather negatively regards *pitta* people as being of moderate strength, knowledge, experience, and life-span (Visth 8:97/1-97).

As of the *vata* people, their dryness gives them a dry low, hollow, and hoarse voice. Their lightness makes them inconsistent of behaviour, diet, and speech. Because of the unsteadiness of *vata*, such people are restless and in their abundance, they talk a lot. Their swiftness predisposes them to be quick in their undertakings and in their variations of mood. They are quick in liking and disliking and fast in grasping and forgetting. Owing to their cold quality, they suffer from cold and owing to their roughness they have rough hair, face, body, and
nails. Hence, given the combination of these qualities, *vata* persons are deemed to be of small strength, short life-span, scanty offspring, and of meagre wealth (Visth 8:98/1-98).

The people possessed with the equipoise of the three humours have the good qualities mentioned of all combined (Visth 8:99-100).

**A Sensorial Being**

Recall that in chapter 2, I mentioned the “sense-doors”, “sense-objects”, and “sense-consciousnesses” that drive perception and overall consciousness in the Buddhist context. I also indicated earlier how in Ayurveda the senses animate entities and thus that they are of foundational importance in one’s life and consciousness. Hence, we see a similarity between Ayurveda and Buddhism in that both perceive the senses and their contact with the sense-objects as primordial in the arising of consciousness. Let us now take a closer look to the ways in which each of the senses relates to a specific proto-element as written down in Chapter 8 on “The Regimentation of the Senses” of the Sutrasthana.

The text distinguishes five sense-faculties, sense-materials, sense-organs, sense-objects and sense-perceptions of each. The mind (*sattva guna*) is supersensual, occupies henceforth a special place, and leads the activity of the sense-organs that contact the sense-objects (Susth 8:3-7). The five sense-faculties are: sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch, and each sense is an aggregate of the five proto-elements in which one of them becomes predominant in a particular sense-faculty. Fire is predominant in sight, ether in hearing, earth in smell, water in taste, and air in touch. The five sense-organs are the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and skin, whereas the respective sense-objects are shapes, sounds, smell, taste, and touch. The related perceptions include visual perception, hearing perception, smell perception, taste perception, and perception of touch (reminiscent of the Buddhist sense-consciousnesses). Sensing occurs when each of the senses contacts the related objects that have the same predominance of a particular proto-element (Susth 8:14). The perceptions that arise from contact then become the overall result of the coordination of the senses, the sense-objects, mind, and soul, which are all fleeting and in a state of flux. The text adds that: “The mind, the mind-objects, the understanding and the spirit constitute the aggregate of spiritual elements and qualities” (Susth 8:7-13). By excessive contact, non-contact, and mis-contact of the senses and their objects, there arises a misunderstanding (Susth 8:15). Given that a right understanding is crucial to physical and spiritual well-being and that the senses are the basis for such understanding, the care for the senses is crucial. Indeed, the treatise makes a whole list of how
to preserve the sense-organs, of which their purity and maintenance of clarity is crucial for the ‘normality’ or health of the mind or consciousness. For instance, the text mentions that the sight faculty has to be well-maintained by looking at beautiful shapes. In sum, just as in Buddhism, the senses are the basis of a pure understanding and consciousness that are conducive to well-being.

The Systems of Circulation

Besides the seven body essences, the three humours, the six flavours, the senses, the spirit, intellect, mind, and consciousness, Ayurveda discerns in the human person various channels that carry around some of the components we have so far elicited. If these channels are obstructed or if they carry morbid humours, they can become a factor of disease. The channels are classified according to the substances they transport.

The main channel carries the life-breath or prana, and is situated in the region around the heart and the central cavity. When this channel is blocked, it causes death. Likewise, particular channel disorders get provoked as a result of specific actions, circumstances, and imbalances, such as: heat, indigestion, excessive drinking, and eating of very dry foods (disturbing the water channels); excessive worrying, and eating heavy, cold, and very unctuous substances in immoderate quantities (affecting the nutrient fluid channels); indulgence in foods and drinks that are irritant, unctuous, and hot, and excessive exposure to sun and fire heat (upsetting blood channels); consumption of large and heavy foodstuffs, and sleeping in the day after eating (obstructing channels carrying flesh-forming elements); lack of exercise, excessive consumption of fats, and general day-sleep (causing malfunction in channels conveying fat forming elements); excessive exercise and indulgence of vata promoting factors (messing up channels conveying bone forming elements); injuries and indulgence in things that are incompatible to the body (troubling channels carrying the marrow forming element); suppression of sexual urges, excessive indulgence in sex, and untimely coitus (disrupting semen channels); indulging in edibles and women while under the urge to urinate (obstructing urine channels); eating in excess and suppressing defecation (troubling feces channels); and finally excessive exposure to heat, anger, and grief (causing malfunction of channels conveying sweat). Lastly, foods and activities that arouse the morbid humours and that are destructive to the body elements do badly impact the overall channel system, as they affect all of the channels (Visth 5:10-24).
We have now discussed in detail the various components of the human person and how these elements act on each other, creating either an ill or healthy person. The seven body elements, essences or *dhātus* will be treated extensively as part of the texts dealing specifically with food because of its immediate relationship with these body elements. Let us now turn to the relationships of the human person, body, and balances in relation to the environment in a wide sense and the seasons in particular.

*The Seasons and the Environment*

Chapter 6 of the Sutrasthana, entitled “The Seasonal Dietary Regimen of Man”, elicits the full force of Ayurveda as an eco-health science, as the third verse states that an adjusted behaviour and diet according to the season promotes vigour and complexion. In the present-day cooking of many Sinhalese, the meal is balanced according to the food’s hot and cool properties (affecting humours) in relation to whether the weather is hot or cold. For instance, raw rice is deemed slightly hotter than steamed rice and so the former is more often prepared during the cooler mornings and the cooler seasons. So, this ecological importance of weather and climate, both mediated and articulated by the seasons, in determining the composition of the meals is a recurrent concern in both this treatise as in everyday practice.

The text discerns six seasons that are divided in two main groups. The first three seasons (from the North Indian perspective from which it is written) occur during the sun’s northern course and consist of the dewy season, spring, and summer, whereas the sun’s southern course constitutes the second group consisting of the rainy season, autumn, and cold season. The first group of seasons is called the period of absorption and the second, the period of liberation, emission, or release. The latter is marked by the predominance of the water element as: “the moon with unabated vigour aggrandises the earth by surrounding it with her cool radiations and nourishes it constantly” (Susth 6:4). People then eat hot foods that increase *pitta* to counterbalance the cooling watery influence of this weather. By contrast, the period of absorption is marked by the predominance of the fire element. Through this period of absorption, the hot rays of the sun absorb the moisture from the earth and winds further dehydrate it, thereby giving rise to the dry tastes—bitterness, astringency, and pungency—leading to the gradual waning of strength in people. The liberation or release period is marked by rains, thereby increasing the non-dry group of tastes—sourness, saltiness, and sweetness—during which the strength waxes (Susth 6:3-7). So, here again, balances between the flavours
and the hot-cool properties of food have to be adjusted according to the seasons as to maintain the beneficial balance in the flux of humours. Moreover, we clearly see the dynamic of the oscillation between waxing, acceleration, and growth, on the one hand, and the waning, deceleration, and withering, on the other hand, such as was introduced in the rather alchemic rendering of assemblage theory in terms of ‘cooking’. As this alchemic approach is informed by Ayurveda and above all my observations of the ritual processes, we will return to this dynamic of oscillation as inherent in the notion of flux in greater depth in the ritual chapter.

We should also note that the gastric fire is also sensitive to the seasons and to food, given that it is nourished by it. Hence, it requires a large amount of food and particularly heavy foods, as the gastric fire needs more nourishment during the cold season. If, in the cold season, the gastric fire does not receive sufficient fuel, it can start consuming body fluids and can subsequently arouse the wind humour. So, being heavy, the juices of fat animals and of aquatic or wet-land varieties have to be eaten more often, alongside milk products, oil, new rice (probably referring to the unsteamed käkulu hāl which is seen as heating but also heavy), and warm water. The foods and drinks to be avoided are thus those that are light and provocative of vata or wind (Susth 6:9-18).

In the dewy season, a similar regimen to the cold season has to be practiced with the execution of extra care to avoid pungent, bitter, and astringent foods and drinks that are provocative of vata (Susth 6:20-21).

In spring, the absorptive force of the sun becomes more pronounced than in the dewy season. Its hot rays liquefy the by then accumulated kapha or phlegm. In this process, the body heat can be affected and give rise to many diseases. To prevent these, one has to avoid heavy, acidic, unctuous, and sweet articles, and also has to sleep a bit during the day to reduce the kapha (Susth 6:22-23).

In summer, the text goes, “the sun drinks up the unctuous element of the earth. During this season, therefore, foods and drinks that are sweet, cool, liquid and unctuous are conducive to health” (e.g. milk), whereas foods that are salty, sour, pungent, and hot should be abandoned as well as exercise (Susth 6:27-29). “One should abstain from sexual intercourse and seek the coolness of woods, waters and flowers” (Susth 6:32). In this hot season of absorption, the digestive fire grows weak and can succumb to the morbid effects of the humours at the start of the rainy season (Susth 6:33).
Indeed, during the onset of the rainy season, the humours get provoked by hot and moist exhalations from the earth, the precipitation of the rains, and the acidity in the water. Hence, this season requires moderation—avoiding day-sleep, exercise, sun, and sexual intercourse, and taking well-seasoned foods and drinks. Particularly on cold days, unctuous articles with pronounced acidic and salty tastes are required for alleviating vata (Susth 6:34-37).

When the body suddenly heats by the rays of the sun in the autumn, the pitta becomes easily excited and thus the text advises food and drinks that are sweet, cooling, slightly bitter and curative of pitta (Susth 6:41-42). Wet-land animals, curds, day sleep, and easterly winds have to be avoided (Susth 6:45).

The prescriptions of suitable foods according to the different seasons now lead us to look at the rendering of food in the text in greater detail.

**Food and Eating**

After having explored the components that constitute the entities of the world and the human person in their complex interactions and in relation to the seasons, we now turn to food as being the key actor that integrates and shapes these multiple interactions and negotiates the flux of balances. First, we will explore various substantive and functional classifications before proceeding to the Ayurveda’s practical advice on how to eat healthy.

**Food in General**

The Charaka Samhita classifies food as follows: “Food is all of one kind, eatability being the common feature. But it is of two kinds as regards its source, one kind being inanimate and the other animate. It is also two-fold in respect of its action, consequent on its being either wholesome or unwholesome in effect [this is not always an inherent quality, but rather context-driven as certain ingredients are good only in certain circumstances and bad in others]. It is fourfold in respect of mode of taking, viz., being used as a drink, eatable, masticable and lickable. It is sixfold in respect of taste, because there are six categories of taste. It is twenty-fold in respect of properties, viz., heavy, light, cold, hot, unctuous, dry, slow, acute, stable, fluid, soft, hard, clear, viscid, refined, smooth, rough, subtle, gross, dense” (Susth 25:36).
These classifications are generally obvious, but the classification of the animate and inanimate sources of food requires more elaboration later, when I discuss the local articulation of this distinction in greater detail, as it has bearing on the Buddhist rules of eating as well. The flavours and their impacts on the humours have been discussed earlier and the classification between wholesome and unwholesome foods is made with the aim of achieving good health. The role of food is summarised in the text by stating that it: “is the fuel for the maintenance of the gastric fire. It invigorates the mind. If used as directed, it promotes the proper distribution of the body elements, vitality, complexion and the acuity of the sense-organs” (Susth 27:3).

Foods are classified in a different way as well into categories that possess specific qualities, flavours, and effects on the humours: grains, pulses, meat, vegetable, fruits, greens, wines, water, milk (and its products), sugarcane (and its products), and cooked food and its adjuvant (Susth 27:6-7).

First, there is the category of grains in which various types of rice are classified as cooling, sweet, and soft vata stimulants—except for one variety of rice—and red rice is considered as the best (Susth 27:8-11). Most people I spoke to agreed that red rice is very healthy, but they viewed rice as largely neutral with a slight inkling towards the cool side of the hot-cool distinction, except for raw rice that leans more towards the hot side. Millet, barley, and wheat likewise belong to this category and exhibit similar properties, yet, many of my interviewees would disagree with this statement that wheat is sweet, cooling, heavy, and curative of vata (Susth 27:21). Many deemed wheat instead to be unhealthy, hot, and provocative of pitta. Hence, it emerged from these statements that maintaining a balance between hot and cool is generally seen as important and that they do draw inspiration from Ayurveda in their engagements with food. Yet, the above examples also illustrate that the actual classification of items may differ from the formal texts of Ayurveda while agreeing on the general principles, but this occurs most often in relation to food ingredients that are neither outspokenly hot nor cold. It is also interesting to note that hot foods are generally equated with being potentially unhealthy and cool foods as being healthier. Given that wheat is perceived as something brought by colonisers in the form of bread and the fact that most imported stuff from the West is classified as hot, may further explain the consideration of wheat as linked with the ‘hot-foreign-unhealthy’ tripod. This perception is also further strengthened in the government’s push to replace wheat by rice flour in bakery products, officially to decrease dependency on
expensive wheat imports\textsuperscript{34}, but also clearly serving a more nationalist agenda. This attempt is part of a larger fight of the government, and particularly the more nationalist elements of it, against “wheat terrorism” in which wheat products are to be removed from government hospitals and banned from schools\textsuperscript{35}.

To return to our textual classification, we have the category of pulses of which the green gram is considered the healthiest. It combines the astringent and sweet flavours, and is dry, cooling and curative of \textit{kapha} and \textit{pitta}. Black gram, chickpeas, lentils, sesame seeds, and legumes also belong to this class (Susth: 27:23-32).

Then follows the class of meat, which is divided into eight sub-categories. The first are the so-called tearer group that eat their food after tearing it from its place, thus classified according to their own way of eating. This category includes cows, horses, dogs, crows, owls, and foxes. The second group are called burrowing creatures as they have their living place in holes in the ground, hence classified according to their dwelling location. This principle of classifying recurs in Sri Lanka as well, such as in the case of \textit{bimme inne sattu} or animals dwelling on the ground, \textit{gas ude inne sattu} or animals dwelling in the treetops, and \textit{wature inne sattu} or animals living in water. These burrowers include frogs, iguanas, geckos, and porcupines. The third subdivision of the meat class entails the wetland creatures, including buffaloes, cows (hence belonging to two of the categories that are thus not exclusive), hogs, elephants, and antelopes. The fourth group are the aquatic creatures dwelling in water (categorised by their dwelling location again), including tortoises, crocodiles, and crabs. The fifth group are those that move about on the water, such as aquatic birds. Sixth are the \textit{jangala} creatures that roam on the \textit{jangala} type of land, including sambhars, spotted deers, hares, and gazelles. The \textit{jangala} type—those of the dry lands—is opposite from the \textit{anupa} type, which involves the animals of the marshy or wetlands discussed earlier (Zimmerman 1987:viii). Next are the gallinaceous birds that “scatter the food with their claws and pick it up”, such as the various types of quails, peacocks, partridges, cocks, and the storks. Finally, we have the peckers, those that pick their food, including king fishers, parakeets, and pigeons (Susth 27:35-55,5).

The tearer and the burrower groups, the aquatic creatures, the water roamers, and the wetland animals are heavy, hot, unctuous, sweet, provocative of \textit{kapha} and \textit{pitta}, and curative of \textit{vata}. These are wholesome for people whose digestive fire is strong (Susth 27:56-57,5). The meats

\textsuperscript{34} http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2010/05/16/fin01.asp
\textsuperscript{35} http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11697567?print=true
of the other three groups—the gallinaceous birds, the peckers, and the jangala animals—are, on the other hand, light, cooling, sweet, and lightly astringent in their savour. They are beneficial for those suffering from an imbalance in one of the humours or discordance in which pitta is predominant (Susth 57:59-60.5).

Following the grains, pulses, and meats, the text discerns the class of vegetables, of which it lists a wide range, but here I restrict myself to the reproduction of a few examples to further illustrate the basic categorisations, principles, and dynamics of food. The text includes the following ingredients in its discussion of their properties and effects: lotus stalk and white gourd, which are heavy, dry, sweet, and cooling; tender leaves of the banyan, holy fig, and of the lotus, which are astringent in savour, cooling, and useful in diarrhoea of the pitta type; cucumber, which is sweet, heavy, and cooling; the betel yam which is not very hot and curative of vata (Susth 27:88-124).

Likewise, the category of fruit includes a whole range, such as for instance: grapes, which are healthy, sweet, aphrodisiac, unctuous, and cooling; wood apple, which is astringent and increases vata; the ripe mango, which subdues vata and increases flesh, semen, and strength (Susth 27:125-165).

The division of greens includes a lot of spices, such as basil, curative of kapha and vata, and promotive of pitta, and coriander, which is not very pungent but rouses the morbid expressions of the humours. There is also onion, promotive of kapha, curative of vata, strengthening, heavy, and aphrodisiac, and garlic that is unctuous, hot, pungent, and heavy (Susth 27:166-177).

Regarding wine, it suffices to note that it is generally regarded as acid and hot (Susth 27:178). Yet, sometimes it is described as healthy and as such shows that alcohol in Ayurveda is not unequivocally considered bad, as in Buddhism. “Fresh wine is generally heavy and provocative of the humours and old wine is purificative of body-channels, digestive-stimulant, light, and appetising. Wine is exhilarating, pleasant, strengthening and relieves fear, grief and fatigue. It gives courage, virility, mental exaltation, satisfaction, plumpness and vitality. If it is taken by virtuous men in a proper manner and systematically, it acts like nectar” (Susth 27:193-195).

The way water is classified is also interesting as it illustrates the process which I termed context-driven actualisation as the properties and effects of water alter according to the
relations it establishes. The treatise states: “All water is of one kind and falls from the heavens ordained by Indra. While it is falling and after it has fallen, it is affected by changes of place and time” (Susth 27:196). The dynamic of mutual becoming and context-driven actualisation becomes very clear when the text states that rain that falls is affected by the seasons, wind, and the sun. Moreover, upon touching a particular type of soil (and thus establishing a relationship) the fallen water acquires the properties of this earth. So, when the celestial water with its properties of coldness, purity, wholesomeness, palatableness, clearness, and lightness falls on white soil, it acquires astringent taste; on yellowish-white earth it turns bitter; on tawny earth it turns alkaline; on brine earth it acquires the salty savour; the water flowing from mountains becomes pungent, and the water falling on black earth becomes sweet. The rasa of celestial water, hailstone, or snow is indistinct. Generally, the celestial water is considered to be the healthiest. Regarding the interaction of celestial water and the seasons, the text elicits the following effects: the fresh water falling in the rainy season is heavy, viscid, and sweet. The autumn rain-water is thin, light, and not viscid whereas the late-autumnal water is unctuous, aphrodisiac, and heavy. The winter water is slightly lighter and is curative of kapha and vata. The water of the spring is astringent, sweet, and dry, whereas the summer water is not deliquescent. Thus, while falling, water acquires properties upon contact with the soil and the seasons, as well as in other respects, such as the kind of rivers in which it flows or according to the wells it fills depending on its location in wet, mountainous, or arid lands. For instance, if the river flows to the west, the water is pure and wholesome, or if it flows during the rainy season, it can become provocative of all three humours (Susth 27:196-216).

After the water, the chapter treats the category of milk and its products. It discerns eight types of milk in following order: “milk of sheep, goat, cow, buffalo, camel, elephant, mare, and woman” (Susth 1:105-106). It does not mention coconut milk in this list and this coincides with the general apprehension that it does not belong to the class of milk among villagers as well. The text considers milk to be cooling, and this is also how villagers during interviews classified both milk as well as coconut milk. Given that cooling properties are regarded as healthy, both ‘animate milk’ and ‘inanimate (e.g. coconut) milk’ are regarded as such. It is particularly wholesome for people suffering from excited dōsa of vata and pitta. The cow’s milk is seen as the best among the varieties of milk being: sweet, cooling, unctuous, soft, thick, glossy, heavy, slow, and clear. These properties are similar to those of the vital essence and therefore milk is promotive of it. Milk is then “the foremost vitaliser and rejuvenator.”
Also curd and ghee are generally thought of as healthy. Yet, curd is not good in autumn, summer, and spring, as it becomes unwholesome for disorders of \textit{kapha}, even though it is auspicious and curative \textit{vata} in general. Ghee seems to be more unequivocally good for health, as it is: “promotive of memory, intelligence, vital fire, semen, vital essence, \textit{kapha}, and fat.” It is moreover curative of \textit{vata}, \textit{pitta}, insanity, and inauspicious looks (Susth 27:217-233,5).

In the class of sugarcane and its derived products, we see a surprisingly wide variety mentioned, which is interesting given the fact that sugar was not widespread during the time the Charaka Samhita was composed. Yet, this variation suggests that sugar, by the time of the writing of the treatise, had already been processed and used for some time, corroborating the observation of Sidney Mintz (1985:23) that the first historical references of sugar bring us to India. Yet, he traces the first reference to Buddhaghosa, whereas the Charaka Samhita is almost a thousand years older and refers moreover to a range of sugar-related products. It mentions for instance that, if the juice of sugarcane, obtained by chewing and sucking (cooling, sweet, and increasing kapha), is boiled to half of its original quantity, one obtains \textit{gur}, which is heavier and purer. The text goes further in stating that crude sugar is purer and that sugar candy and crystal sugar are extremely pure. The purer, the more cooling it becomes (Susth 27:237-240).

The section of cooked foods entails a discussion of various specific preparations of which I focus predominantly on rice for our purposes. Rice that is well cleansed, squeezed out, and softened, is regarded as a light food (steamed rice is likewise softened and is viewed by villagers of Kiribathgama as light and cool), whereas cooked rice which is not properly softened, is heavy (referring to unsteamed rice, which villagers deemed to be filling and heating). Fried rice is generally good for toxic substances and \textit{kapha} disorders (Susth 27:257-258). This explains why fried rice is so often combined with alcoholic drinks. The section on classification of food items concludes: “There is no substance which may not be used as a medicine” (Susth 27:330). This popular saying is known by several villagers who are aware that if used in a bad or excessive way, these potentially beneficial substances may turn into a poison in their relational becoming (Zimmerman 1987:9).

So far, we have focused on the classification of food items and their specific effects and have pointed out in certain cases that these effects can change according to processes of combination and transformation. Let us now turn to a more systematic treatment of the factors
that drive the ingredients’ actualisation into something wholesome or unwholesome, as being treated in the Vimanasthana of the Charaka Samhita. The text mentions the following eight factors:

- qualities (e.g. heaviness as the recurring or ‘innate’ property acting in relations),
- preparation (radical modification of these properties brought about by heat, storing, maturing, flavouring, and the material of the receptacle [may explain the importance that people attribute to earthen pots in achieving a good taste and in ritual preparations]),
- combination (the combination produces a surplus of special properties which none of the constituent components possessed [here the resonance with my alchemic rendering of assemblage theory is striking...]),
- quantity (the amount or measurement of the food one eats has to be determined according to the strength of one’s gastric fire, which has to be balanced as well. Heavy foods that have the properties of earth and water inhibit the gastric fire whereas the light foods with the fire and air properties stimulate it. This balance in types of food requires a careful measurement in order to maintain a beneficial strength of the gastric fire),
- habitat (as qualities in substances vary because of differences in soil, use, and climate),
- time (either in relation to seasons or in relation to the stage of a developing disease),
- use (according to the dietary rules),
- and the user (in relation to constitution and habit) (Visth 1:21-22).

All these factors have to be carefully balanced to achieve good health and well-being. This concern for balance articulates itself in the requirement to diversify the various elements and flavours that co-constitute food to acquire and maintain the health-conducive balance in body elements and humours. Let us turn, by way of illustration, to a more detailed discussion of the role of flavours in food and the approach of balance involved.

The overall prescription advises diversifying the flavours in cooking as to maintain an individually adapted balance of both humours and body elements; a balance that is the crux of Ayurveda. As seen earlier, this involves a negotiation that takes into account the predominance of the humour in one’s constitution and the seasons. When foods disturb these
balances in a detrimental way, they are termed ‘incompatible’. They can thus be incompatible due to their particular properties, but also *become* incompatible according to place, time, and in combinations with other articles, hence offering us another example of mutual becoming in a process of context-driven actualisation. Moreover, some foodstuffs become incompatible because of the ways of preparation (e.g. cooking and frying) and according to the doses (Susth 26: 81). The text gives concrete examples: “the flesh of domesticated, wet-land or of aquatic creatures should not be eaten in conjunction with honey, milk, black gram, lotus stalks or sprouted grains” (Susth 26:84/3). Or, as in another example, entities that are incompatible with milk include mango, plantain, lemon, wood apple, jackfruit, and coconut (Susth 26:84/11). Such incompatibilities arise from particular combinations, but they can also arise from the point of view of the body humours, gastric fire, bowel tendency, state of the person, and rules of eating (Susth 26:86-87). For instance, if a vata-provoking meal (e.g. pulses), enhancing movement, is given to someone who is exhausted because of physical activity there is an incompatibility with regard to the state of the person, as he or she requires counterbalancing foods to ease the troubles. There is also incompatibility if a kapha-exciting meal (e.g. curd in summer) is fed to someone suffering from lethargy of sleep, we have an incompatibility with regard to the state of the person as they require instead counterbalancing foods to ease their troubles (Susth 26:95-96). Another form of inconsistency is the culinary incompatibility that comprises undercooked, overcooked, or burnt food (Susth 26:9/1). Incompatibility in rules of eating entails for instance that food should not be taken at a solitary place (Susth 26:101). The latter is interesting as it confirms earlier discussed practices of eating not in solitude but shielded away from passers-by, not from an explicit caste-perspective (even though this text is presumably written by high caste men), but here from the perspective of health concerns. Nevertheless, the incompatibility could still pertain to a more implicit concern of retaining moral purity and avoiding potential evil influences, which indeed is also considered in other sections of the Charaka Samhita, as we will see. The effects of these different incompatibilities can be serious: impotency, blindness, abdominal affections, insanity, fever, foetal diseases, and death (Susth 26:102-103).

The Charaka Samhita moreover elicits very specific and practical rules with regard to eating: “partake not of a meal without having had a bath; without offering to the household gods; without first feeding the elders, guests and dependants [recall the sequence of the meal we discussed in the previous chapter]; without cleaning the hands, feet and face; partake not in a meal served by ill-wishers [recall evil thoughts or looks], with the face towards the north”
The text also establishes such specific rules pertaining to food more directly. It advises eating the food while it is still hot, as it then relishes the food, stimulates the gastric fire and the peristaltic movement, and breaks up mucus. Unctuous food is wholesome as it likewise activates the gastric fire and the peristaltic movement, and also because it makes the body plump, brightens complexion, and strengthens the sense-organs. As mentioned earlier, the food should also be devoured in adjusted quantities in order to not disturb the gastric fire and the balances of *pitta*, *kapha*, and *vata*. Moreover, the food of the previous meal has to be entirely digested before starting the next meal, as the new food mixing with half undigested food provokes all of the humours. When the meal is completely digested, the humours return to their seats and only then the gastric fire is kindled and a sense of hunger can emerge. All parts of the digestive system are then cleared for the next meal. It is also not advised to eat antagonistic foods, such as mango and milk (coconut milk is ok). The text mentions moreover that one should also eat in an agreeable environment and circumstance. Eating in a hurry has to be avoided just as eating too leisurely. Laughing and talking while eating can lead to the same disorders as when eating too rapidly. This resonates with the daily practice of consumption that I discussed in the previous chapter and contrasted with the extended dining periods of the ‘table culture’ in Belgium. Lastly, and as mentioned before, the food has to be eaten according to the personal (humoural) constitution (Visth 1:24/1:25).

To recapitulate, we have by now obtained a general idea of the way food *works* and the ways in which it has to be prepared, combined, balanced, and eaten in order to maintain the necessary balances conducive of health and well-being. We now return in detail to the process of digestion as rendered in Ayurveda and the Charaka Samhita.

### The Transformative Process of Digestion

The proto-element of fire plays a central role in the sustenance and regeneration of the body, as the overall thermal or metabolic process gives: “a long life, good complexion, vitality, glow, lustre, heat and sustains the life breaths”. The importance of this fire is highlighted by the death of the person whose fire is extinguished (Chisth15:3-4). The gastric fire is a crucial aspect of the overall metabolic process and thus needs to be cared for. The treatise states: “Strength, health, longevity and the vital breath are dependent on the state of the gastric fire, and the gastric fire burns, fed by the fuel of food and drink, or dwindles when deprived of them” (Susth 27:342).
The gastric fire also plays a central role in the digestion. The food is drawn into the stomach by the *Prana vata* (the life breath) and is mixed with the digestive fluid. The food becomes soft and is cooked by the gastric fire into the essential nutrient fluid (Chisth 15:6-8). Just after this ingestion and initial cooking, the nutrient fluid becomes marked by the sweet flavour and forms *kapha* (both are predominant in the water element). Thereafter, it turns acidic while exiting the stomach and reaching the intestines. Being further dehydrated by body heat, it transforms into excrement, which is of the pungent flavour that increases *vata*. Thereafter, the *bhūtagnis* (elemental fires), or latent heat, present in each of the proto-elements of the body—earth, water, fire, wind, and ether—cook, digest, and feed their own corresponding proto-element extracted from the digested food. As such, the earth element of the body is nourished by the corresponding earth element in the food, which goes for the four other elements as well. Similarly, the body elements or *dhātus* are nourished by the cooking (by the *dhātagnis*) of their sustaining elements in the food. This occurs according in the following order. First, the nutrient fluid of the body is nourished by the cooking and extraction of the nutrient fluid in the food. This extracted nutrient fluid then transforms into blood, which cooks the corresponding blood from the food to feed itself. This procedure is repeated after blood is transformed into flesh and subsequently fat, bone, marrow, and semen, the most refined and powerful essence as discussed in relation to pregnancy. Hence, each of these *dhātus* thus nourishes the corresponding body element in this order.

The actual process of transformation from one body element into the other, of nutrient fluid into blood, blood into flesh, and so forth, remains to be explained. Blood gets combined with the elements of water and air, and in combination with the heat, it becomes solid and converts into flesh. The flesh which ripens in its own heat and which gets stirred up by it, in combination with water and unctuous substances, transforms into the fat body element (that can cook the corresponding fat element in the food). Combined with its heat and the other proto-elements, the bone element emerges. The air makes pores into the bones and fills them with fat, which becomes the marrow, from which derive the semen (Chisth 15:29-32). The gastric fire is the “king fire” that regulates the workings of the *dhātagnis* that heat and enable these transformations and also the elemental fires or the *bhūtagnis*. If this “king fire” waxes and wanes the *bhūtagnis* and *dhātagnis* increase and decrease respectively. Hence, the gastric fire has to be well-maintained to obtain health and longevity (Chisth 15:39-40). By eating wholesome food, both the nutrient and waste fluids retain their proportions and: “keep up the balance of the elements in the normally constituted body which is their resort” (Seneviratne...
Likewise, as the body is the result of nourishment and multiple transformations into fluids and elements as catalysed by the gastric fire, so are diseases the result of food (Susth 28:5).

These sourcing dhātus feed other components of the body as well. For instance, breast milk, menstrual blood, and the excretory matter mucus are formed from the nutrient-fluid, whereas the blood shapes tendon and vessels as well as the excretory bile. The flesh gives rise to muscular fat and the six layers of the skin, and from the adipose tissue emerges sinews and sweat. This complex process of the combustion of the body elements continues to form numerous other vital and excretory substances, too long to reproduce here (Chisth 15:9-19.5; Seneviratne 1992:181).

The following quote from the text concludes this chapter on food and eating by summarising the centrality of food in Ayurveda as a holistic science of life: “The life of all living things is food and all the world seeks food. Complexion, clarity, good voice, long life, understanding, happiness, satisfaction, growth, strength and intelligence are all established in food. Whatever is beneficial for worldly happiness, whatever pertains to the vedic sacrifices leading to heaven and whatever action leads to spiritual salvation is said to be established in food (Susth., 27:349-350).

After our discussion of the various heterogeneous components, principles, and balances, and the ways these are incorporated into food and eating that lie at the heart of Ayurveda, I will further stress the holistic character of this science of life by briefly exploring some other aspects of wholesome action and behaviour. Many of these prescribed proposals of healthy behaviour recur in the everyday practices of villagers. I do not wish to imply that they enact the text, but rather wish to point at the repetitions of practices that the authors of the Charaka Samhita may have historically observed in their own lifetime and which the authors have deemed healthy. The continuity between the textual prescriptions and current practices may thus involve a continuity in practice overall.
General Conduct

In this section, I will first illustrate the wide range of practical advice that corroborates the notion of Ayurveda being a holistic science and then move on to discuss its approaches to women, natural urges, and sleep.

General Practical Advice

In Sri Lanka, men and women tend to take great care of their personal hygiene and orderly appearance by way of taking regular baths (recall the account about the daily evening bustle around the *wewa*) and by dealing carefully with the “finer wastes” or *prasāda* of the *dhātus* produced by the gastric fire or more specifically the fires of the body essences or *dhātagnis*. For instance, the matter of the bones burned by the ‘bone fire’ produces the finer waste of hair and nails, which are carefully and regularly combed and trimmed (Seneviratne 1986:181). This personal care is one of the many prescriptions in the Charaka Samhita that are intended to promote clear senses and mind, longevity, virility, auspiciousness, and attractiveness. These prescriptions moreover include: revering gods, cows, and teachers; trimming hair and nails thrice a fortnight; wearing clean apparel; keeping a cheerful disposition and being pleasant faced; sacrificing and engaging in charitableness; exhibiting auspicious behaviour; exerting brotherhood to all creatures; removing causes of passion and aversion; not indulging in “audible release of wind”; not yawning, sneezing, or laughing without covering the mouth; not gazing at undesirable, unclean, or inauspicious sights (recall the care for the senses); not indulging in rash acts or excesses of sleeping, waking, bathing, drinking, or eating; not tending “the sacrificial fire inattentively or in a state of pollution”; not keeping holy and auspicious objects on your left while walking (seen as the inferior side) and things of a dissimilar nature on the right (Susth 8:18-19).

We should thus note from this list that wearing clean apparel, taking baths, using fragrant articles, and trimming hair and nails also serve the purpose of having a clean appearance and being pleasant in interaction (Susth 5:94-99). Personal care and beauty are highly regarded, and we can understand the crucial role of food in all this from the earlier discussions on the connections between food and the aim of achieving plumpness and complexion as signs of beauty and health. This concern with complexion, for instance, returns in the Vinaya Pitaka where a pleasant interaction between monks and lay people is one of the goals, and the monk’s beauty and body shape are part of this. Moreover, these monastic bodies have to be shaped in such a way that they articulate the moderate middle way of Buddhism by avoiding
both excessive plumpness and emaciation. In line with an earlier argument I made, the beauty ideals reflected in both texts may represent the values of the class to which the composers belonged to.

In addition to these practical guidelines of personal care and behaviour, the text also elicits detailed prescriptions on the relations with women\textsuperscript{36}, natural urges, and the regulation of sleep, which I found to be of a crucial nature during my fieldwork and in the rhythms of everyday life as described in the previous chapter.

**Relating to Women**

The prescribed code of conduct vis à vis women entails the following: “do not divulge a secret to her nor place her in power; do not indulge in the sex-act with a woman who is in her courses, diseased, unclean [menstruation is seen as a source of pollution], of undesirable appearance, or with a female of another species of animal, without having made up your mind beforehand, without having achieved the necessary erotic urge, without having partaken of nourishment, in an over-eaten condition, etc.; do not contract friendship with the very young, the very old, the greedy, the diseased and the impotent; take not your pleasures alone; do not be a slave to your sense appetites [relating to the incitement of desire, a core concern in Buddhism as well]; do not over burden the senses and understanding; do not give way to anger and joy” (Susth 8:22-27).

**Dealing with Natural Urges**

With regard to the so-called natural urges, chapter 7 of the Sutrasthana states the following general rule: “A wise person should not suppress the natural urges for urine, feces, semen, flatus, vomiting, sneezing, eructation, yawning, hunger, thirst, tears, sleep and deep breath after exertion” (Susth 7:3-4). Suppression of these urges can lead to various diseases (Susth 25:40/4). For instance, the suppression of seminal discharge can lead to pain in the phallus and testes, cardiac pain, and retention of urine. The solution is inunction, immersion-bath, milk, and sexual intercourse (Susth 7:10-11). Milk is productive of semen and as such it is interesting to note that the female reproductive secretion is closely linked to the male reproductive fluid. Milk in rituals seems to encompass both fluids that resemble each other in their reproductive capacity, and as such it becomes a core articulator of regeneration as we shall see in the ritual chapter. To return to the suppression of natural urges, the person

\[\text{36} \text{ The fact that there is no such chapter on the relation with men corroborates the sense that this treatise is written by men for a male audience.}\]
neglecting hunger can be exposed to emaciation, weakness, discoloration (emphasis on complexion), body ache, and anorexia. In this case an unctuous, hot, and light diet is recommended (Susth 7:20). Suppressed thirst leads to deafness, fatigue, depression, and cardiac pain. Cooling and demulcent drinks are then recommended to alleviate such symptoms (Susth 7:21). Given these examples, the text concludes it is not good to quell these urges, but it makes an exception for those who are desirous of welfare in this life and the afterlife (concern of a good rebirth). They are required to curb rash and evil impulses of the mind, speech, and body (a more repressive approach that resonates with the Protestant Buddhism discussed earlier), such as greed, grief, fear, anger, vanity, impudence, jealousy, excessive attachment, and malice. The forms of speech to be controlled entail those that are harsh, extravagant, insinuating, untrue, and untimely. The injurious actions of the body that harm others, such as adultery, theft, and inflicting pain should also be restrained (Susth 7:26-29). It is thus clear that Ayurveda is not only concerned about curative pharmaceuticals, but entails also a much wider approach to the person in its relationships. The next states: “Being free from the sins relating to the activities of the mind, speech and body, the happy man of righteous nature enjoys and acquires spiritual merit, wealth and sense-pleasures” (Susth 7:30). It is indeed a true global approach to well-being.

Regulating Sleep

The Sutrasthana views sleep as important to keep fatness in check\(^{37}\), as well as maintaining good health. It defines sleep as a retreat from the mind and the senses from their objects, when contact has thus come to an end (Susth 21:35). Sleep is the basis for happiness and sorrow, growth and decay, strength and weakness, virility and impotence, knowledge and ignorance, as well as life and its cessation (Susth 21:36). Hence, we see the bivalence of sleep emerging in the attempt to avoid a detrimental amount of sleep. For instance, the *kapha* nourished by day-sleep will secure the concord of the body elements for those who are worn out, suffer from thirst, and are insane (Susth 21:37-42). Yet, for others, an excess of day-sleep can be harmful. Moreover, whether day-sleep is beneficial or not also depends on the season. For instance, in the summer, when the *vata* is increased by the dryness, a nap in the day is recommended to re-balance the *vata* as the day-sleep spurs an increase of *kapha* (and also *pitta*). So, *kapha* people are exempt from this and should avoid day sleep under all circumstances (Susth 21:43-44).

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\(^{37}\) Something which is confirmed in recent medical research as well. See for instance http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/4073897.stm

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Hence, moderation in sleep leads to the right humoral balances conducive to well-being and longevity, whereas their imbalances caused by excessive sleep could lead to corpulence and a lack of sleep to emaciation. The many doubts raised here in relation to day-sleep confirm the ambiguous attitude towards having a nap that I discussed in the previous chapter. It may also be related to the untimely releases of semen, which is deemed unhealthy. “The highest stage which food in digestion attains is the semen. Hence one should conserve one’s semen. Its dissipation results in either manifold disorders or death” (Nisth 6:9). Yet, sleep is not the main cause for this ‘untimely release’. Rather, excessive eroticism leading to sex at a high frequency is of more concern in this regard as it depletes seminal secretion. If a person in this case continues to engage in sex, the *vata* enters into the channels and he will then ejaculate blood driven by the *vata*. This weakens the body as the *vata* is provoked, arouses the *pitta* and *kapha*, and gives rise to headaches, anorexia, and indigestion. Troubled by these wasting disorders, the person gets emaciated (Nisth 6:8/2-8), bringing us to how diseases get explained through the effects of the humours that in their turn respond to actions and substances.

To recapitulate, we have been discussing the general principles, components, and nourishing dynamics of food in relation to the surrounding world. We have also seen illustrations of some of the practical procedures to keep people healthy along with some cases of ill-health that occur if these prescriptions are not respected. This brings us to a detailed exploration of the explanations, conceptualisations, and categorisation of illness as expounded in the Charaka Samhita.
Disease

Causes

In a very general manner the text formulates the cause of disease as follows: “It is the very elements whose wholesome combination gives rise to the well-being of man and that bring about, in their unwholesome combination, various kinds of diseases” (Susth 25:29). The crucial role of food in all this is acknowledged a little further: “The use of a wholesome diet is the only factor that promotes the healthy growth of man; and the factor that makes for disease is the indulgence in unwholesome diet” (Susth 25:31).

In chapter 11 of the Sutrasthana, it is stated that there are three causative or rather enabling factors of disease, which entail overuse, disuse, and misuse pertaining to sense-objects, activity, and season. For instance, with regard to the sense-object of smell: “It is overuse to smell inordinately keen, rank and deliquescent odours; it is disuse not to smell at all; while it is misuse to smell odours that are putrid, hateful, unclean, poisonous and cadaverous” (Susth 11:37/4). Similarly, excessive use of touch entails exposing oneself to extreme heat or cold, disuse when refraining from all tactile stimuli, and misuse when letting the body suffer contact with trauma, unclean things, and evil spirits (Susth 11:37). The latter is interesting as it implies a wide definition of touch or contact that: “has the mind inherent to it; for the field of the mind is co-extensive with the tactile sense” (Susth 11:38/1). Regarding activity, a similar distinction is made between overuse, misuse, and disuse of speech, mind, and body. Examples include: forced suppression or excitation of natural urges, unpleasant speech, or giving way to grief, greed, envy, and infatuation. This threefold activity is regarded as volitional transgression (Susth 11:39/1-41). With regard to the seasons, we have earlier seen that they have to be taken into account to reach beneficial bodily balances, particularly with respect to the homology or correspondence of the flavours in the sense-objects and senses. Indeed, this is what right use of the seasons entails: a homologatory contact that is calming and pleasant. The combination of the non-homologatory contact of the senses and their objects, volitional transgression, and changes in relation to the balances required at particular seasons can cause disease whereas the right co-ordination of the three leads to well-being (Susth 11:42-43). Hence, this overall imbalance is considered to establish the enabling conditions in which specific diseases and their immediate causes can flourish.
Classifications

The Charaka Samhita discerns three types of diseases according to where the immediate causes have their source: the endogenous, exogenous, and psychic illnesses. The endogenous disease arises from the discordance of the bodily humours, for instance caused by the non-homology of a certain action unsuitable to a certain sense-organ during a particular season. The discordance is the immediate cause, whereas the non-homology provides the enabling condition and context in which the direct causes can emerge. Exogenous diseases arise from spirit-possession, poisonous winds, and fire injuries, whereas psychic disorders emerge as a consequence of the gain or loss of undesirable or desirable things (Susth 11:45). The psychic disorders are of two kinds. One is marked by rajas or passion, leading to manic disturbances. Note that this relates to the raja guna that is connected with desire and passion, inciting movement and action. The other kind of psychic disturbance is marked and caused by tamas or ignorance. Note also that this relates to the inactivity of the mass guna explaining phenomena such as depression (Nisth 1:4).

The distinction between endogenous and exogenous diseases is predominant in the textual classification and aetiology. Endogenous diseases come forth from an imbalance in humours (even though these imbalances sometimes ensue from indirect environmental causes) whereas exogenous diseases proceed from evil spirits, air, fire, poison, trauma, and other elements that are enabled by volitional transgression, as discussed in the previous section (Susth 7:50-51). This form of transgression also leads to certain psychic disorders, such as jealousy, grief, fear, anger, vanity, and hatred, and as such make one prone to imbalances in well-being. The volitional transgression can be avoided by a control of the senses, knowledge of climate, season, and oneself, and by observing the rules of good conduct (Susth 7:52-53). Moreover, these exogenous diseases can be prevented by taking care of one’s social environment as well, such as by avoiding those who are deemed sinful of conduct, speech and disposition, and those that are quarrelsome, sarcastic, envious, and fickle-minded (Susth 7:56-57). Health can thus be enhanced by seeking the company of those who are endowed with insight, courage, free of all ailments, well-disposed towards all creatures, and those who are meritorious (Susth 7:58-59). Here, we see thus a thoroughly socio-environmental relational notion of health emerging in these texts. Moreover, this holism is well-captured in the following: “The wise man who seeks happiness both here and hereafter, should exercise the highest care in selecting what is wholesome in the matter of food, conduct, and behaviour” (Susth 7:60). Let
us after this brief discussion of the exogenous class turn to the endogenous category of diseases.

In chapter 20 of the Sutras, the group of endogenous diseases is subdivided among the vata, pitta, and kapha illnesses. Here, the causes are not as generally defined in terms of overuse, misuse, and disuse, but rather in more specific ways in terms of externally and internally caused discordances of pitta, vata, and kapha, which remain the direct endogenous cause in both cases. Hence, the direct cause is the discordance of the humours, no matter if excited by internal or external factors, whereas in the exogenous disease the immediate causative factor lies outside and impinges directly on the well-being of the body, bringing about ensuing disturbances of the humours. Both internal and external forms of illness can be enabled by wider preconditions. The main difference between these is that the exogenous form starts first to inflict damage, leading to a subsequent discordance of vata, pitta, and kapha, whereas in endogenous disease, the discordance of the three humours occurs first and gives rise to afflictions as a result (Susth 20:7). When they function well, the vata, pitta, and kapha move through the whole body and produce good effects, such as plumpness, vitality, complexion and cheerfulness. When discordant, they produce disorders (Susth 20:9).

There are 80 specific disorders of vata, including a stiff back, waist, ankle, and neck; astringent taste and dryness in the mouth; cardiac irregularity; mental restlessness (here we see an example of how a mental state is explained through the action of a humour), and insomnia (Susth 20:11). The qualities of vata are dryness, coldness, lightness, clearness, motion, invisibility, and instability. The effects on the body include contraction, dislocation, excitation, motion, coarseness, clearness, dehydration, rigidity, and others. Cures to vata disorders include the intake of sweet, acidic, salty, unctuous, and warm medications (Susth 20:11-13/1).

The treatise mentions also 40 disorders of pitta, including heating, acid eructation, local sweating, herpes, faintness, and bitter, and metallic taste. The qualities of pitta include amongst others heat, acuteness, fluidity, fleshy smell, pungent, and acidic flavour, and increased mobility. The symptoms of aroused pitta include burning, heat, perspiration, itching, emanation of bad smell, and discharge, which should be treated by sweet, bitter, astringent, and cooling remedies (Susth 20:14-16/1). Here we see the importance and role of the hot-cool distinction transpiring. To treat this pitta disorder, one needs first to subdue it in
its main seat in the lower part of the stomach such that the *pitta* disorders in other parts of the body get allayed. This principle works for the other humours as well, taking of course their respective seats into account (Susth 20:16).

Finally, the text lists 20 *kapha* disorders, including Anorexia Nervosa, torpor, stiffness, sweet taste in the mouth, salivation, loss of digestion, increased secretion of mucus in the stomach, and excessive corpulence. The qualities of *kapha* are unctuousness, coldness, whiteness, heaviness, sweetness, firmness, sliminess, and viscosity, and the symptoms of a *kapha* disorder include thus similar qualities and moreover, numbness, humidity, and excretory secretion and obstruction. Bitter, pungent, astringent, acute, hot, and dry remedies can treat such disorder.

**Location of Diseases**

Diseases, as we have seen, are generally provoked by excited *vata, pitta, or kapha*, or their combination. Additionally, the kind of disease depends also on *where* these humours get provoked and more specifically in which of the body elements. When they become excited in the body fluid, it becomes morbid and leads to disinclination for food, loss of gastric fire, and greying of hair. In the case of a disturbance in the blood, it brings about pimples, inflammation of the rectum, phallus, and mouth. If aroused in the flesh, it gives piles and warts. In fat, it leads to emaciation or corpulence, and in bones it causes pain in teeth and bones. If aroused in marrow the morbid humour leads to pain in joints, whereas in seminal secretion it makes one impotent and having short-lived offspring. The humours can also be provoked in the seats of the sense-organs and can so cause impairment of the respective senses. When humours are vitiated in the excretory substances, they can cause excessive retention or discharge (Susth, 28:7-22).

Let us now, after this brief overview of enabling and direct causes, and the classifications and locations of diseases, move toward the case of insanity to grasp the Ayurvedic aetiology of disorder in greater depth. The case of insanity is particularly interesting given that it challenges a clear-cut boundary between body and mind in what is a somato-psychic approach of mental illness and as it shows the central role of food in overall well-being (Obeyesekere 1977).
Insanity

The mental disorders caused by provoked humours are termed *unmāda* in Sinhalese. Besides these endogenous humoural causes, the treatise recognises extraneous ones as well. Our text of discussion defines insanity as: “the unsettled condition of the mind, understanding, consciousness, perception, memory, inclination, character, behaviour, and conduct” (Nisth 7:5). In the case of the causes being endogenous and related to morbid humours, insanity emerges when those humours reach the heart (the seat of consciousness) and block the channels of sensory communication. This can occur among people whose mind and understanding has been already impaired by: “attacks of lust, anger, greed, excitement, fear, infatuation, fatigue, grief, anxiety, and the like”, so we see desire and anxiety as two of our transversal themes returning in this description. Insanity also emerges among people who make use of improper dietary articles and who disrespect the healthy rules of living (Nisth 7:4). The symptoms diverge according to the type of disorder. The illness of the *vata* type includes symptoms, such as talking incoherently; continuous and inopportune smiling, laughing, singing, and playing instruments; contempt for those who really are in a state of possession; and giving loud imitations of flutes and conches (Nisth 7:7/1). In the Sinhalese rendering and practice that Gananath Obeyesekere describes, there is a clear link with the basic Sanskrit text we are discussing here. The Sinhalese notion of *vata-unmāda* likewise denotes the patient becoming hyperactive due to aroused *vata* (being the principle of wind and movement). This occurs from the consumption of bad, repulsive, and indigestible foods (Obeyesekere 1977:162-163). The *pitta* type of insanity is characterised by cravings for shade, cold water and food, and attacks of anguish and irritability (Nisth 7:7/2). Such symptoms can be brought about by the excessive consumption of hot and sour foods, lack of sleep, and irregular eating (Obeyesekere 1977:163). The *kapha* type, or in Sinhalese the *sem-unmāda*, involves little disposition for movement, disinclination for food, love of solitude, and aversion to cleanliness (Nisth 7:7/3). This is brought about by the excessive consumption of heavy, nutritious, cooling, and sweet foods. Yet, given that such foods increase semen, they can also spur an excessive sex drive among afflicted people (Obeyesekere 1977:163-164). Finally, there is also the possible state in which all three humours are excited. Such form of insanity is reckoned incurable, as one cannot counteract or calm down an excited humour as this necessarily involves administering substances that would aggravate the arousal of one of the other humours (to counterbalance, but here this is impossible), thereby maintaining the imbalance of all three humours or *tri-discordance*. When observing the local articulation of
these classifications and principles in Sri Lanka, Gananath Obeyeseker (1977:164-166) has noted that the basic Ayurvedic theory has been further refined and that psychological disorders are moreover classified according to unmādas, which either entail a combination of two excited humours or which emerge from excited body elements (e.g. blood-induced insanity). These additional disorders, of which the symptoms are summed up, are in the classical text not regarded as a distinct class. Yet, the treatise acknowledges that the five varieties of insanity can overlap and sometimes create hybrid symptoms (Nisth 7:18).

Among the exogenous factors causing mental illness, the predominant factor is volitional transgression in which a person disregards gods, yakshas, demons, goblins, seers, and seniors by engaging in acts which are undesirable. This person is then punished and made insane by the gods and other beings (Nisth 7:10). “The gods send down madness by a look [these looks or bālme are extremely powerful], the teachers, elders, adepts and the great sages by a curse, ...the yakshas by taking possession, ...and lastly, the goblins by mounting their victims and riding them” (Nisth 7:12). Hence the symptoms of this exogenous type of insanity include superhuman strength, energy, capacity, memory, understanding, speech, and knowledge (Nisth 7:13). The list of the specific moments during which one becomes more easily susceptible to such malign influences is long, but suffices to present a selection here: while commencing an evil act; while residing alone in a deserted house [recall that I noted a kind of fear for being alone in the explanation for the collectivity of the rhythm]; during sexual congress on the full and new moon days [The avoidance of sex as part of observing Buddhist morality on these days thus resonates with this prescription]; while cohabiting with a menstruating woman [The idea of the polluting nature or kili of menstrual blood is the basis for this]; during a wrong execution of auspicious rites and sacrifice; at the contact of various kinds of inauspicious and unclean objects; while vomiting, purging or bleeding; while traversing at night [The night is indeed a moment which villagers and particularly women fear being alone] through a town, city, crossroads, park, cremation ground [as ashes are very inauspicious and as they attract malicious beings, as discussed in our key event in the introduction] or a place of slaughter; and during any misconduct (Nisth 7:14). The motives for these agents inducing madness are threefold: cruelty, lust, and inappropriate worship. The latter two are curable by charms, auspicious rites, magical stones, offerings, vows, fasting and pilgrimage (Nisth 7:15-16).

In sum, it is clear that in the Ayurvedic aetiology of illness, food consumption and other actions can lead to insanity by way of their effects on mediating agents, whether humours or
other entities that in their turn constitute the direct cause of the disorder. Having a clear picture of this aetiology of illness, the curative procedures follow logically from this exposé.

Restoration of health

To remedy these diseases, the text distinguishes three therapies; divine therapy, scientific therapy, and mental control. The divine therapy consists of incantations, gems, propitiatory rites, sacrifices, vows, ceremonial penitence, fasting, auspicious rites, and pilgrimages. The prescription of dietary regimen and medication constitutes the scientific therapy, whereas the mental control consists of restraining the mind from the desire for unwholesome objects (Susth 11:54).

Let us look at an example of how the scientific therapeutics works by returning to our case of insanity. In the endogenous cases where one or more of the humours are excited or angered, the pharmacology or scientific therapy plays a larger role in providing a cure. Medicine in general works in two ways. On the one hand, it seeks to promote well-being, and on the other hand, it attempts to destroy the disease (Chisth 1:4). This happens by increasing the elements or humours, which are lacking in strength and by decreasing or calming the vitiated humours or excessive elements. Restoring and maintaining these balances are crucial to staying healthy. In insanity induced by vata, an unctuous potion has to be administered to counterbalance the vata, but in cases where the body channels are blocked by vata, a purification process needs to precede the potion. In the pitta and kapha cases, vomition and purgation are required in combination with oleation and sudation. When purified, the person can become rehabilitated (Chisth 9:25-26). In the exogenous illnesses, divine therapies can provide a solution, except in the case of someone being possessed by a spirit seeking to punish itself. In this case, there is no possible cure (Chisth 9:22-23).

The text concludes in a general mode: “The man of strong mind, who abstains from flesh and alcohol, observes a wholesome diet and is always dutiful and pure, will never fall a victim to insanity, whether exogenous or endogenous” (Chisth 9:96). Hence, well-being is related to behaviour, diet, and moreover, the purity of the senses. This path of a pure and healthy life does not only lead to well-being in this life but also in the afterlife, because of the control of mind and desire involved. This brings us to the final and more general philosophical question that we will discuss in relation to Ayurveda and which is crucial to our overall frame: the
cycle of becoming, the relation of human beings and the world, and the role of desire, bringing us gradually to concerns that recur in Buddhism with greater emphasis.

Desiring and Being

In Ayurveda, human beings, non-human entities, and the world are permeated by the same kind of proto-elements that in their combinations and interactions create an endless amount of unique assemblages and individuating entities. Given that the diversity of elements in the human person is as great as the diversity in the world, the treatise states: “Man is the epitome of the universe” (Sasth 5:3/1). Indeed, while being an assemblage, the person also condenses the variety of the world in a holographic way into itself. This way of thinking, in which a small entity is the miniature of a larger entity to which it belongs, is common in South Asian systems of thought. My conceptualisation of food as an assemblage and holographic condensation clearly draws inspiration from this thought. And moreover, and as in our frame as well, desire in Ayurveda plays a crucial, if not metaphysical and foundational role, and in Buddhism alike. Let us take a closer look at the way desire animates life, the cycles of death and rebirth, and the various components, turning the assemblages into desiring machines (Deleuze and Guattari 2011), in which desire is the permeating creative and animating force of life.

The composition of human beings and the world from the same elements renders the drawing of analogies between them easier, but allows furthermore a zooming in or out in what is a process of scale-making of phenomena and allows for their holographic condensation without analogical reasoning. Indeed, the oscillation between the human person and the world is facilitated by the similarity of the founding components, which is crucial in Ayurvedic understanding of the unity of the whole world. Besides the proto-elements, just like human beings, the world is co-composed of components of causation (what brings about), birth (germination), growth (increase), affliction (influx of pain), and disruption (dispersal of the five basic elements and the spirit). The latter entails the dissolution, the end of life, and the departure of spirit. Here, the source of all suffering is action, while quietness and release comes from inaction. Hence, the causes of action and inaction need to be known (Sasth 5:6-9). Note that all this resonates with Buddhism (except for the permanence and immutability of spirit) where action is translated into the terminology of attachment, and inaction into nirvana. Yet, the similarity of action and attachment is larger when we see that both refer to desire in
some ways. “Action springs from behaviour impelled by delusion, desire and hate” (Sasth 5:10/1). When these overpower a person, it is impossible to release oneself from action. The care for the senses is crucial to having an understanding and harness oneself against becoming overpowered by action or attachment. Theravada Buddhism likewise stresses the importance of knowledge to escape delusion, attachment, and craving, and to reach liberation from life, action, and becoming in samsara. The resonance with Buddhism strengthens further: “Whatever action, mental, vocal or bodily, is not conducive to final emancipation, is called attachment” (Sasth 5:10/2). The person without the “right understanding” is prone to believe in the ego and get attached to it, and to become by way of a distorted vision a basket of afflictions, of which the root-causes are defects of the body and mind. This type of person is: “unable to transcend the vicious chain of causation” (Sasth 5:10). Just as Buddhism seeks to escape this cycle of death and rebirth or the chain of causation, the text states that its dissolution is the highest goal, but instead of nirvana, this state of liberation is called Brahma (Sasth 5:11). To reach this liberation, one must first see the vanity of the world and approach a teacher to follow his teachings in practice. Also the text states: “He should avoid all reminiscence, desire, questing and discourse with women. For the sake of cleanliness he may carry a water-pot and as a mark of his order a mendicant’s staff and a bowl for collecting alms; He may substitute alms by such natural food as is easily available in the woods and just enough to maintain life. He should check desire. He should be unmoved by grief, depression, ..., arrogance, greed, attachment, envy, fear, anger, ...” (Sasth 5:12).

To recapitulate, disease and health are part of a person’s relational becoming and fluctuation of the ‘cooking’ of life as it transpires around food that enmeshes the person with the seasons, the elements, and the world as a whole. A right balance in these relationalities with the non-human world is conducive to obtaining healthy balances of humours and elements within the person, integrated into an overall and holistic well-being, where the separation of mind and body is not made in terms of the causes and aetiology of ill-health. Hence, we have thus discussed the basic principles and elements that compose the world, that transform in their interaction (from which our frame is derived in further dialogue with assemblage theory and quantum physics), and that explain well-being, disease, and cure\(^\text{38}\). In this account, it has thus become clear that food plays a pivotal role in negotiating the enmeshment and inextricable relationalities of the human person and the surrounding world in a way to achieve well-being

\(^{38}\) We did not spend much time on the latter as the basic principles should already have been clear by the time we arrived at the sections on therapeutics, pharmacology, and success in treatment.
that is moreover related to the overall law of *samsara*. As such, food becomes the borderlinker between the exterior and interior of the human person, negotiating the internal balances in intimate relationships with the outside influences. The Charaka Samhita thus approaches well-being in a holistic and integrated way and we will now turn to an exploration of the currency that these core principles of Ayurveda hold in everyday village life to date.
Resonating Dynamics of Ayurveda in Village Life

The reason for discussing the Charaka Samhita at length lies in the fact that this text and object is part of the ethnographic world or rather pluriverse—plural universes that intermingle in the integrated experience of life that is subject to heterogeneous influences—that I seek to analyse and as such it merits attention. Even though villagers may have a fragmentary notion of the principles and classifications of Ayurveda, they still refer to the core principles as elicited in the core Ayurvedic treatise. Given that most villagers seem aware of their fragmentary or partial knowledge they often suggested me to interview local health specialists, who can provide more information and who derive their knowledge from the very text I have been discussing.

The reference to a specialist illustrates a clear division of tasks, labour, and knowledge in village society, just as in the urban and industrial society of Colombo. Likewise, just as the majority of Westerners derive some of the everyday practical medical knowledge and perspective (viewing the world through microbes and viruses) from their visits to a doctor, villagers obtain some knowledge of Ayurvedic principles through their consultation with a local health specialist. Additionally, they go to another specialist, a näkkatrale, someone who calculates the auspicious times and directions for certain events, undertakings, or rituals that may be part of the healing process. Through these encounters, ordinary villagers get a fragmentary access to these complex bodies of knowledge, which do shape their life at least partially.

The discussion of the treatise has also lifted the veil from some of the basic ontological dynamics of beings in the world and their classifications for the purpose of human health. In my ethnographic fieldwork, I also inquired inextensively into the villagers’ ways of classifying plants and animals, but I ended up with very fragmentary and sometimes conflicting classifications, such that it would have required a more enduring and extensive focus than my fieldwork could allow. Yet, I obtained sufficient information of the various principles that underpin these classifications to observe that these principles are very similar to those expounded in the Ayurvedic text, even though the actual classifications themselves may differ. It is fascinating to observe that many of these principles are based on practical observations of plants and animals, complementing the often cognitivist and structuralist approaches to classifications. Many of these categories, classifications, and underlying principles also show that there is, just as in our discussion of the Charaka Samhita, a human-
centred and balanced utilitarian approach to the world by grounding the classifications in the concern for human health.

Let us now take a brief look into some of the village categories, classifications, and particularly the principles and dynamics that shape these. I started these specific interviews by writing the names of animals, plants, and foodstuffs on separate slips, and asked the interviewee to add some names. Then I asked for particulars, properties, behaviours, or whatever these entities have in common, and for the interviewee to divide these slips into certain groups on the basis of a particular common property in order to discern the specific principle of classification. This form of interviewing was too abstract for many, but the information I was looking for often emerged during the discussion of the specific examples.

Just as the Charaka Samhita makes a distinction between animate and inanimate sources of food, so do Sinhalese Buddhists distinguish entities on the basis of some form of intentionality, being a core principle for classifying entities with regard to their interior life (Phillippe Descola 2005). The Sinhalese express this intentionality as a marker of animate beings in terms of mole or ‘brain’, denoting intelligence, denīme or feeling, kalpenāva or thinking capacity, buddhi or intellect, and in more doctrinal Buddhist terms viññane or consciousness. A twenty-five year-old guy explained: “You can see that sattu or animals have mole because if they feel heat and they dislike it, they go away, and if they like something, they go after it.” Hence, the desire to avoid uncomfortable situations and to go after something that is desired is what defines consciousness and distinguishes animals from plants. When mentioning that plants also go after something desired, such as light, only few shifted their opinion and said that that could indeed indicate that plants also have some form of desire and intelligence. But, when giving the example of the Nidi-kumba (Mimosa pudica39), a plant originating from Brazil, more interviewees came to doubt if indeed a clear distinction could be made between animals and plants on the basis of a desiring consciousness. The Nidi-kumba is a plant that closes its leaves and shrinks when being touched. In English it is called “Touch-me-not” and the Sinhalese name denotes that it goes to sleep when being hit, in both ways expressing a dislike and maybe fear for being touched. Indeed, the movement of the plant at these occasions seemed to express some form of intentionality on part of this plant and brought confusion among the respondents whether intentionality is indeed an exclusive property of animals, human beings, deities and the like. Lambert Schmithausen (1991a) notes

that in Vedic religions, Hinduism, Jainism, and earliest Buddhism, plants were regarded as sentient beings, something rejected in later Buddhism. Given the Buddhist precept to abstain from killing any living and animate being, the question regarding plants being animate or not is an important one for the moral self-fashioning. Plants still occupy an ambiguous position in relation to being animate or not, as became clear in my interviews. A further example of this is found in the retreat of monks into their temples during the rainy season; a practice justified on the grounds that they have to avoid injuring plants or small animals that dwell in those. The animate–inanimate distinction is important for Buddhists where taking life is regarded as pau, bad for karma and well-being. The consumption of meat is no particular issue as long as the animate being is not killed by the consumer or specifically for the consumer. Hence, this classificatory principle of intentionality and desire as a way of discerning whether an entity is animate, even though the actual classification groups may evolve over time, thus remains important with respect to present-day Buddhist and Hindu practice. Yet, Ayurveda seems to have a more practical health-based and less moral approach (as in the case of alcohol consumption as well), given that the Charaka Samhita elicits some beneficial properties of certain types of meat.

Moreover, with regard to the interiority of animals, hunters gave extensive, detailed, and careful accounts of the characters of these animals and mimicked them during the interviews. Knowing these personality traits is important to partially become like their prey in order to hunt in a personalised and thus successful way. The hunters also had a category of animals that were off-limits given their special status. These included peacocks, eagles, leopards, and elephants, which are the respective vehicles of the Kataragamma, Vishnu, Kali, and Ayanayake deities. Also pregnant animals were taboo in general. Farmers have from their specific perspective another distinction between innocent and trouble-making animals on the basis of whether they compete for their crops.

With regard to the exteriority of animals, on the metaphysical level, they are similar to human beings as they consist of the same proto-elements albeit in different compositions. Most of the classifications that respondents made, however, involved principles based on direct observations of physical properties, dwelling places, and certain behaviours. The latter two principles of distinction are closely related to their interior personality, but I treat these under the rubric of exteriority because of their expressive and observable qualities.
A first well-known principle of distinction involves the number of legs, a principle that recurs in the Vinaya Pitaka or Buddhist monastic code as well. The respondents referred to birds and human beings as being *depa* (two-footed), elephants and deer as *siupa* (four-footed), and centipedes as *bahupa* (of the class of more than four ‘legs’).

Another principle entails the location of where animals dwell, and this is a clear recurrence of the way some meats are classified in the Charaka Samhita. For instance, *wature inne sattu* are animals that live in water and include water snakes, crocodiles, and fish. Other classes are: *gas ude inne sattu* or animals living in treetops, such as monkeys and giant squirrels; *bimme inne sattu* or animals that live on the ground, such as dogs and cows; *polove yate inne sattu*, animals that dwell under the ground, such as worms and some snakes; *kālē inne sattu* referring to wild and jungle animals, such as wildboar and porcupine; *geval inne sattu* or animals living in domestic locations, such as cats, dogs, and birds that nest inside. Hence, the categories of *bimme inne sattu* and *wature inne sattu* are reminiscent of the *jangala* (dry-land) and *anupa* (wetland) animals as discerned in the Charaka Samhita, but this Ayurvedic distinction recurs more clearly in the respective Sinhalese division between *goda mas* and *diye mas* denoting meats from dry lands and wetlands, having their respective effects on *vata*, *pitta*, and *semme* or *kapha*.

The ways in which animals move establishes another mode of classifying animals. This articulates following groups: *pīnenne sattu* or swimming animals, such as fish; *pānepāne sattu* or jumping animals, such as rabbits; *kuregana sattu* or walking animals, such as deer, dogs, and goats; and *badeganne sattu* that move on their belly, such as worms and snakes. Recall that the lists I am presenting here are by no means exhaustive but aim to elicit some of the principles of classification.

A final one regarding animals is their eating habits, such as in the Charaka Samhita that distinguishes between the tearers and the peckers. In the Sinhalese mode of distinction, this principle actualises in a different way and underpins the specific distinction between *goviyam kanne sattu*, *tannekola kanne sattu*, and *mas kanne sattu*, denoting respectively animals eating farmers’ crops, grass-eaters, and meat-eaters.

With regard to the exteriority of plants, people distinguish between those that have thorns, those that are high or low, and so forth, thus focussing on observable properties. The most crucial distinction however, is that between *paleturu* (fruit) and *ellevalu* (vegetables). The class of fruits includes banana, mango, avocado, woodapple, and pineapple. Coconut is
categorised neither as fruit nor vegetable, probably denoting its almost staple-food like utilisation. In the class of vegetables, we find pumpkin, brinjal, tomato, manioc, and potato. Rice, wheat, and maize are part of daneye or grains.

It is important to note that in the transformative process of cooking some of the classifications alter. For instance, when fruits or vegetables are cooked to join the rice as a side dish, they no longer are seen as fruit or vegetable, but instead as mālu or side dish. But the labelling alters even before the cooking process. It is interesting to note that the Ayurvedically-based hot-cool distinction does not apply to plants and animals as such. A mango hanging in a tree is not classifiable into one of these categories. It is only after it has been picked with the purpose of eating it, that it becomes possible to render it as a hot food. Indeed, the item first has to become perceived as a food for this classification to be applied and this involves the physical process of picking, collecting, hunting, and harvesting. Intentional human effort turns these items into foodstuffs subject to the hot-cool classification. More specifically, the hot category includes for instance: tomato, pineapple, jackfruit, mango, ambarella or hog plum, breadfruit, lime, manioc, cabbage, guava fruit, oil, maize, wheat flour, bread, leeks, millet, and so forth. The cool category includes: bitter gourd, most leaf varieties, brinjal, coconut milk, cow milk, okra, cucumber, pepper, sponge gourd, carrot, pumpkin, avocado, and so forth. Several items are placed in the same respective category as in the Charaka Samhita, such as milk, cucumber, gourd, and oil, whereas wheat is categorised as hot in contrast to this text.

The interviewees also noted that in blending ingredients the hot-cool property of one item may be stronger than that of another, and that in their mixture becomes subsumed to the dominating component’s hot or cool property. In other words, an ingredient can alter from being hot to being cool depending on the strength of such property in the other ingredient when they get mixed. For instance, frying cool okras in hot coconut oil renders the resulting dish hot; whereas hot ambarella boiled in cooling coconut milk becomes a cooling dish. Hence, the hot-cool balance is not only negotiated between several (side) dishes, but to do so, it also requires combining ingredients in such a way to make a particular dish emerge as hot or cool. If one fries all cool ingredients of all the dishes in heating oil, the overall meal will become utterly unbalanced and excessively hot. To avoid such imbalance, the meals often consist of fried and cooked side dishes, for instance one dish of fried fish or vegetable and another of a vegetable cooked in cooling coconut milk.
Yet, finding this balance is not always easy, as there is a lot of doubt regarding the hot-cool properties of ingredients which are not outspokenly hot or cool. In these cases, interviewees tended to differ quite often, but regarding the ingredients situated at the outer ends of the hot-cool continuum, the respondents grouped these consistently in either category. For instance, coconut milk is consistently located in the cool category and tomato and pineapple in the hot class.

The difficulty of discerning whether something is cool or hot is further complicated by the arrival of new or foreign ingredients of which their properties and flavours have yet to be determined by Ayurvedic institutes and specialists. Once these are determined they can be communicated nationwide into the domestic kitchens to become incorporated in the daily cooking practices. Ice cream is one such ambiguous item, as people often deem it to be heating. But, given that its main component of milk is cooling, there was a wide disagreement among the respondents on whether to classify ice cream as hot or cool, which is moreover related to an increasing confusion between hot-cool as temperature or as Ayurvedic property to which I return soon regarding the influence of fridges.

The balancing act inherent in selecting ingredients and anticipating their interactional transformations is even more complicated as their properties and actions actualise further in relation to the season and climate, just as is expounded in the Charaka Samhita. For instance, the coolest period of the year in my fieldwork site is towards the end of the rainy season in December or early January, and it is then that the villagers prepare the heating käkulu hāl more often than the cooler tambapu hāl. Even more, in this period they do not prepare cooling foods in the evening as that would create in combination with the cool night an excess in coldness, arousing kapha or semme as well as vata at times. Hence, to counterbalance the cold weather, they prepare and devour more heating foods. This is also the case when farmers work with their feet in the cooling water of the irrigated paddy field. In other cases, they eat more cooling foods during lunch-time to counterbalance the heat. An excess of heat is bad for pitta and sometimes for vata, but recall that all these influences are subject to variation depending on the humoural predisposition of the individual.

To complicate matters even more, some women elders argued that the hot-cool properties are moreover affected by the ways in which a meal is cooked. This is logical in mutual permeability and interpenetration inherent in the eco-medical approach that Ayurveda is and where properties between ingredients, items, people, and environment are easily exchanged,
affecting and altering their overall composition in the process of mutual becoming. This South Asian view on circulating properties between persons is reminiscent of the apprehension of Melanesians interacting as composite beings and exchanging some of their detached parts, properties, and relationships, leading Marilyn Strathern to coin their personhood in terms of *dividual* or partible person (Osella & Osella 1996:38, Mosko 2010:215). In Sinhalese cooking, food is likewise part of an economy of exchange of properties with its surrounding objects, beings, and environment with which it continues to enmesh in its wayfaring lines. For instance, during the cooking of food, the hot-cool balance alters according to the type of fire that is used. Some interviewees noted that, as voiced by one elder woman: “gas-fire is no good. There is no harm to the vegetables when cooked on log-fire.” Gas-fire is deemed to add extra heat to the food. Likewise, the type of pot in which the food is cooked affects the properties and healthiness of the food. Elder people generally prefer to cook in earthen pots instead of metal pots, as they deem the former more cooling and healthy, but also more tasty. Among higher urban classes there is likewise a preference for eating food that is cooked in earthen pots, as evidenced from the recurrent visibility of earthen pots in the presentation of food in more expensive restaurants and take-away venues. For ritual preparations, *new* earthen pots also tend to be used to secure the purity and good taste of the offerings.

The arrival of the fridge in the living rooms of Kiribathgama was not widespread at the time of my stay, let alone a widespread access to steady electricity. This situation was nevertheless rapidly evolving and more people have become connected to the electricity net and some of them have probably acquired fridges by now. At the time in 2009, I interviewed those households who had bought a fridge about the effects of this device on their consumption pattern. It became clear that they (and this includes my host family) rarely used the fridge to keep leftovers for the next day and to save time in that way. Rather, they gained time by being able to buy more fresh food items from the market, thereby having to go less often, and by being able to stock these vegetables longer in the fridge. Most of all, they utilised the fridge to store food ingredients that were newly added to their food palate, such as butter, cheese, jam, ice cream, and soft drinks. Given this particular usage, the fridge has become perceived as something that keeps foods and drinks that are mostly regarded as hot items. Some therefore claimed that the fridge in general renders foodstuffs hot and as such it is sometimes regarded as being unhealthy. These claims were then justified by Ayurveda in noting that cool things have the effect of the body warming itself afterwards, as the definition of hot food implies. Others did re-define the Ayurvedic notion of cool in terms of cold temperature and maintained
the Ayurvedic consequence of the fridge being cooling and thus potentially bad for *kapha* illnesses. Hence, even though the latter argument is opposite to the former claim, both groups of respondents agreed that fridges are generally unhealthy. Be it as it may, the fridge is a new element that villagers find hard to locate in terms of its effects on the hot-cool properties of foods, and this confusion is compounded by the often novel foodstuffs that the fridge hosts and brings along. Yet, even in their different and opposed categorisations, most respondents agreed that the fridge is potentially harmful for health and did so from a predominantly Ayurvedic-inspired perspective. In the view of these respondents, the impact on the human person is potentially great, and this concern is evident, given the exchangeability of properties between fridge and food, and food and human beings.

Within this context of inter-exchangeability of properties and differential becomings in mutual enmeshments, it is clear that an alteration of the food production technologies has a potentially great impact on the way of being of people. The green revolution that modified rice varieties into types of rice with higher yields and with a dependence on chemical fertilisers, is evidently not without impact on the balances internal to people in the context of an eco-health approach that Ayurveda is. Several elder respondents noted that rice is becoming hotter due to the effect of chemical inputs, illustrating the remnants of a humoural agriculture in which the health of a plant is likewise dependent on right humoural balances.

Yet, unlike Akhil Gupta (1998:155), I was not able to derive an extensive and consistent humoural theory of agriculture from my interviews with farmers, suggesting in combination with former humoural evaluation of green revolution varieties, that agriculture in Sri Lanka may have been influenced by humoural theory in the past. They also noted that the soil gets burnt (*bimme te säray*) and exhausted by the application of these fertilisers, a notion that Akhil Gupta (1998:2-3) also came across in his fieldwork in North India. The exchange of properties of chemicals, soils, plants, and human beings as kind of *dividuals* has in the words of a farmer led to the following situation: “These aggressive chemicals we eat modify our way of being into more aggressiveness. The poison in our food, I believe, is one of the causes of aggression in our society these days.” The intermingling of the green revolution in the mutual becoming of food and human being has thus in the eyes of some led to drastic changes in the ways of being human. Aninhalli R. Vasavi (2004) noted that this impact has been experienced as deeply influential to the extent that some in South India make a drastic division between the days before and the days after the introduction of these ‘new’ varieties, calling themselves “hybrid people” today living in “hybrid times”.

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Another interesting evolution and complex phenomenon of superposition and intermingling entails an apparent and possibly emerging association between Ayurvedic categories and more recent nutritional standards. This interplay, however, requires more research to make better substantiated claims than I do here, but I wish to illustrate some of the doubts and novel articulations that may be involved in the various changes in food while simultaneously stressing that these changes remain very often evaluated from the Ayurvedic perspective. More specifically, we can observe that people obtain knowledge on nutritional standards, vitamins, proteins, carbohydrates, bacteria, and so forth from television cooking shows, food commercials, and in school education. They mix this knowledge with the cooking practices that they learned at home and which embody Ayurvedic sources of inspiration. This gives interesting resonating notions of health combining the Ayurvedic rendering of healthy being cooling and balanced with the nutritional standards of vitamins, proteins, starch, and so forth. In this way, a cucumber salad is healthy because it is both cooling and it contains a lot of vitamins and little fat. So, during my interviews, I discerned an emergent and embryonic form of articulation of healthy-cooling-vitamin components in opposition to hot-unhealthy-un-nutritious composite, but as noted, this requires more research to find out whether there is a discernible trend emerging where one notion of health is approached through another and is subsequently linked. This potential process of diffraction and superposition, as elicited in our theoretical chapter, could indeed shed light on both differentiations and repeated continuities in the interactions between Ayurveda and nutritional science.

Finally, we have so far only skirted desire as a crucial principle of distinction between those closer to Brahma and nirvana, and those who will require several rebirths before they will be able to reach that sublime state. In what follows and in the following chapter we will explore this cosmogenic role that food plays in shaping this hierarchy in the positions in samsara. The ways in which people engage with their food is crucial in fashioning oneself as a morally good person ready for a higher rebirth or even Brahma or nirvana. Greed was not encouraged in the Charaka Samhita and is also not in daily life among Sinhalese villagers. In Buddhism, this concern of greed and attachment takes a central place in its texts and even though food is not treated at length in those, food nevertheless plays a crucial role in learning and training oneself to deal with craving and excessive desire, as we will see now, moving from Ayurveda to the Theravada Buddhist corpus that evolved in the environment of Vedic traditions.
Theravada Buddhism, Desire, and Food

The Location of Desire in Life

In our discussion of the Charaka Samhita, we have seen that desire plays a role in overall well-being, both in this life and the afterlife following death, but this concern with desire is more pronounced and systematically elaborated in Theravada Buddhism. Similarly, we can see the link between desire and food transpiring explicitly even though food is only treated sparsely. We will now turn to a deeper discussion of desire in general and to the ways in which food strongly collaborates with it, as evidenced in the pursuit of achieving release from samsara and of reaching nirvana. Indeed, food’s seductive capacity has to be carefully negotiated to not get struck by desire and craving on this path to liberation. Again, lay villagers do not necessarily know what exactly these texts state, but the concerns elicited in them are very similar to what they are occupied with in practice. Particularly the practical monastic prescriptions of eating are very similar to what I have observed. Even though lay people do not need to live up to these monastic rules, they attempt to follow the same ideal behaviour to not become greedy like a hungry ghost, and to refashion themselves as human beings able to control the seductive and desire-inducing capacity of food. Before turning to these specific renderings and rules regarding food, I will refresh our discussion from chapter 2 and add elements to grasp some of the ways in which Ayurveda and Buddhism account for desire in the world and human life to later turn specifically to desire in relation to food.

David Webster (2005:51) notes that desire in the Vedic texts (of which the Ayurveda is part) has only partially been referred to and often in ritual and sacrificial contexts. Yet he states that desire is central to all activity in the world and the differentiation of its entities. As such: “Desire forms part of the fabric of the universe” (Webster 2005:53). Desire is thus immanent and everywhere, permeating and animating life. In the Ayurvedic views on the mind and ego-consciousness more specifically, desire becomes partially and explicitly treated in theories of mental health and healing, as we have seen in our previous discussion on insanity. For instance, sweet cooling foods that increase the phlegm humour in combination with little exercise can cause an excessive desire for sex (Obeyesekere 1977:163-164). Hence, counterbalancing foods or a diminution of the intake of these nutritious foods is then required to ease this excessive desire. In the somato-psychic approach of Ayurveda, psychological

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40 They do know their existence as I came to know some of these texts through interviews.
states and problems can indeed be treated through an adjustment of the diet\footnote{See again Hippocrates and Galen, from whom we derived the humour-based concepts of melancholy, colère, etc.}. Moreover, given that flavours are used to reference states in moods or appreciations of situations, such as sweetness articulating positive things, as enacted in ritual boiling of milk-rice, it is clear that also the rasa can play a role in negotiating moods and mental states, either directly or indirectly via the humours. The universal and increasing preference for sweetness (Mintz 1985) may be a globally shared acknowledgement of this power of tastes.

Desire and fire are closely linked and food is the fuel for the gastric fire that ‘cooks’ the food in its digestion. This burning fire creates the feeling of hunger as well as of desire. People with a lot of fire are deemed to be always hungry, intemperate (badegini kareya: gastric fire person), and full of emotional heat. Excessive desire can either be fuelled or tempered by way of certain cooling or heating foods that impact the humours. When those humours (excited or calm) reach the heart, where the mind and self-consciousness are located, the effects of the foods start taking place. So, in Ayurveda we see a symptomatic, curative, and practical approach to well-being and desire, whereas in Buddhism, desire is dealt with in more existential and systematic terms, even though there is a clear acknowledgement of the powerful influence of food on mental well-being and desire in Ayurveda. In this way, both systems of thought are very complementary. Moreover, inheriting this view on the powerful capacity of food to incite desire from Ayurveda, Buddhism views food with suspicion and formulates ways to deal with it carefully. It thus follows from our brief description of Ayurveda that food clearly affects the human person (by way of humours and its body elements) as a whole, including the consciousness with which desire is often associated.

Returning to Theravada Buddhism, I reiterate that David Webster (2005:158) states that desire arises within the complex of the five aggregates or khandhas of materiality, feeling, perception, formation, and consciousness. The processes of arising are not a matter of a single cause and result (as in mechanic approaches), but instead entail the complex interplay of conditions (as in our machinic approach) that allow the emergence of multiple effects. The Buddhist teaching on the twelve-fold Dependent Origination or Paticca-Samuppāda should thus not be read as a mere chain of singular causalities but rather as a multiple interaction of the following elements: ignorance – formations – consciousness - mind-and-body – six sense-bases – contact – feeling - craving (tanha) – grasping – becoming – birth – ageing, suffering, and death (Webster 2005:148-149). Contact or being affected while affecting is thus
considered here as the source of consciousness and subjectivity, from which a complex interplay of feeling, desire, and becoming emerges. Desire in the form of tanha emerges from the plurality of preceding conditions, while desire simultaneously becomes an enabling condition (among others) for both suffering and creation of life. Because of its arising and conditioning, desire almost acquires a metaphysical quality or cosmogenic principle in its generativity of life while being operative within the five aggregates. David Webster (2005:137) opposes the foregrounding of desire in the form of craving or greed (tanha) as the sole creative principle, as it arises as one aspect among others. Viewed in the broad reductionist singular sense of tanha, desire would seem to have only a negative value in Buddhism, as it could then easily be viewed as the one metaphysical cause of existence and suffering. However, such a view is one-sided, as Buddhism has a much more varied approach to desire. David Webster (2005:98-140) discusses 24 of the manifold desire-related terms that unfold throughout the Buddhist Canon. Some forms of desire are viewed positively, particularly those of effort and compassion that are required in reaching nirvana, where the flame of desire is extinguished at last.

Given both the Vedic notion of desire as distributed action in the differentiated world and the Buddhist concern with multiple powerful desires, we can well understand how food can become an active assemblage of which the desire- and sense-components work in the seduction of human beings as well as in the incitement of their desire. In the Buddhist rendering, food strikes people through the senses, as its sense-objects (touch, smell, odour, etc) enter through the sense “doors” (eyes, ears, nose, tongue) and thereby activate each of the sense-consciousnesses, brought together by the mind into an integrated experience permeated by desire (Buddhaghosa 1976). Moreover, as we shall see later, the Buddhist story of the Fall into humanity (the Agañña Sutta) foregrounds food as having a powerful agency and nearly a cosmogenic power by way of its intricate relation to desire that cause the degeneration of human beings. Given that food plays such a pivotal role in inciting desires, it must be handled carefully in everyday practice, both by monks in observation of the monastic code and by lay Buddhist followers.

Hence, we can now refresh and rephrase our definition of food as a machinic assemblage that, in conjunction with human action and distributed desire, co-(re)produces various entities, arrangements, and entanglements that make up the human lifeworld. It should be noted that creation in our inter-cultural and inter-philosophical sense is not necessarily considered positively or negatively, but rather apprehended as more ambiguous as it encompasses the
ambivalence of food, desire, and human life in general. This ambivalence of life as materialised in its blossoming and withering, lack and enjoyment, and emptiness and fulfilment is clearly highlighted in combination with Buddhism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Sartre’s existentialism. The radical relationality is immanent to our concept of mutual transformability, differential becomings, and co-(re)production, and establishes entities, such as food and human beings, as individuated nodal points in these networks of distributed elements, aggregates, and desiring agency, in which relationality is the necessary precondition for individuation to emerge. The human person and its specific subjectivity, intentionality, and desire arise as an individuation out of the inter-action and trans-action of heterogeneous components in encountering assemblages that establish (temporary) relationships or interassemblages. Our approach to human and non-human entities thus emphasises simultaneously the radical relationality and interpenetration of components between entities, on the one hand, and the emergence in those inter-actions and inter-relations of (human) nodal specificities, without separating them drastically into ontologically separate spheres, on the other.

With this refreshed sensitivity, we are better equipped to grasp the context of the more concrete expressions of food-related dynamics of mutual becoming affected by desire as rendered in the Buddhist Suttas and texts.

Theravada Buddhist Engagements with Food and Desire

In this section, I will discuss two Buddhist texts that are highly evocative of the Buddhist ambivalent attitude to food and food-related desires: the Agañña Sutta\(^\text{42}\) and the Āhāra Patikūlasaññā\(^\text{43}\). Thereafter, I will relate some of the emergent themes from the previous texts with the more practical rules on how monks should deal with the powerful agency of food as stipulated in the monastic code of the Vinaya Pitaka. Finally, we will look at the way the monastic prescriptions resonate with lay practices of eating that have not yet been discussed.

\(^{42}\) The Agañña Sutta, NO 27 of the Dīga Nikaya is translated by Steven Collins (1993) as “The Discourse on What is Primary”.

\(^{43}\) Pe Maung Tin (1975) translated this text as “The Development of the Perception of the Revulsion from Food”, which is part of the Visuddhimagga or “The Path of Purity”, written by the influential Buddhist scholar Buddhaghosa in the fifth century C.E.
The Agañña Sutta (Collins 1993:341-348) evokes a Buddhist notion of the “Fall into Humanity” (Collins 1993:328) as related to food and desire. I will now summarise this Buddhist text, which starts as follows. Undefined beings entered the world as it came into being. They were made of mind, produced their own light, fed on rapture, and moved through the air. At that time, there was only darkness making it impossible to discern any differentiation and individuation into moon, sun, light, man or woman. There was only primordial water, but at some point, an earth essence started covering the water like “the spreading out (of skin) on the top of boiled milk-ri ce as it cools down. It had colour, smell and taste” (Collins 1993:342). A certain being tasted this sweet essence, became pleased, and this experience incited in all fellow beings the desire and lust for more (evoking the orientation towards ‘sweetness’ in life). By eating ever more of this earth-essence, these beings’ appearance differentiated while simultaneously losing their self-luminosity. So, here we can already see the formative power of food expressed in the text alongside its seductive force initiating the first steps of the Fall into differentiation. The productive force of food and desire is thus viewed highly ambivalent. Moreover, desire produces clinging and the Agañña Sutta corroborates this by stating that due to the pride these beings took in their individuation and differentiation, the earth-essence (represented by the skin of boiling milk-ri ce) disappeared, and a fragrant earth emerged with colour, smell, and taste (note the emergence of the sense-objects). The beings started to eat this earth as their food and as such, their looks became more visible and they increasingly turned arrogant (mobilised by greed), leading to the depletion of the fragrant earth. Later in the story, rice emerges as the first food as we know it. Reminiscent of the situation in the Garden of Eden prior to the Fall, the beings did not have to toil their food. Rice grew without cultivation and without husks. No processing was required to eat the sweet-smelling rice. Then, by its consumption: “The female parts appeared in a woman, and the male parts in a man. The woman looked at the man with intensive, excessive longing, as did the man at the woman. As they were looking at each other with intense longing passion arose in them, and burning came upon their bodies; because of this burning, they had sex” (Collins 1993:343-344). So, here we see food as constitutive of differentiated humankind as well as desire in terms of fire (animating life and fed by food). The craving for food is repeated later in the Sutta when it describes how the ‘immoral’ beings increasingly became greedy in collecting the rice and storing it. As a consequence, husk covered the grain and rice had to be harvested, and so these beings started lamenting their state of existence as
degenerated human beings. Later on as the story narrates, people grew ever more greedy, and started accumulating possessions in a selfish manner; in order to quell these desires unleashed, socio-political structures emerged. Hence, desire and food coalesce into a productive machine from which emerge the intimate themes of sexuality, lust, and lack, as well as the various societal arrangements.

By way of attractive food and their own desire, undefined beings have thus been drawn and seduced into existence as human beings and into the undesirable cycle of death and rebirth, indicating the ambivalent productive capacity of food. The theme of degenerative becoming, resonates with the Judeo-Christian version of the Fall, in which the “hunger and toil” requirement arose in order to obtain one’s food and to endure the hardships associated with it, due to weeds, pests, and animal-competitors (Sahlins 1996:328). In both Buddhist and Judeo-Christian versions, the Fall is induced by an inappropriate burning desire for food, causing the loss of abilities necessary in obtaining it without suffering and lack. This excessive desire links up with sex, passion, regeneration, arrogance, and impurity. Thus, on the one hand, food is related to the emergence of the world, differentiated life, and creative desire, and on the other hand, food and desire are linked to decay, loss of capacities, and a fundamental sense of lack. So, in this story we see both Western philosophical approaches as spearheaded by Lacan and Sartre, on the one hand, and Deleuze and Guattari, on the other hand, combined in a concern with the ambiguous creative and degenerative capacity of food. Finally, from this story it is difficult to discern one single causal factor for the Fall, as the becoming of the world, food, desire, and human beings gradually co-evolve, while being influenced by a previous cycle of evolution, differentiation, and degeneration (slightly differentiated beings, fragrant earth, etc), hence, their co-(re)production.

Āhāra Patikūlasaññā

The ambivalence to food in Buddhism is further compounded by the Āhāra Patikūlasaññā or “The Development of the Perception of Revulsion from Food” that we turn to now. This text is part of Buddhaghosa’s commentaries and exhibits an explicitly negative view of food. It should be cautioned that the development of such a negative view is intended to aid monks in cultivating an emotional detachment from food, even though Buddhist doctrine accepts the need for healthy food. Webster (2005:200) notes that Buddhism is indeed not annihilistic and its middle path avoids extreme deprivation—expressed in the beauty ideal of slimness, but not emaciation, combined with a good complexion to enhance positive interaction. In such approach of moderation, food remains functional to sustain life and personhood. Conversely,
gluttony, indulgence, and sensuous enjoyment of food are not perceived as a necessity, but instead as detrimental because of the involved cultivation, arising, and strengthening of desire, clinging, becoming, rebirth, and suffering. Hence, the requirement to develop a non-attached attitude towards the dangerously attractive and seductive food thus serves to cultivate an overall non-attachment. It is in this light that we should read the summary of the Āhāra Patikūlasaññā (Tin 1975:395-402), which starts off with an endorsement of our previous statement: “in material food there is the danger of desire (for taste); in contact there is the danger of approach (or attraction to the object); in purpose [I would modify “purpose” into “will” along with Kate Crossby (conversation with author, October, 20, 2010)] the danger of coming to be; in consciousness the danger of re-conception [or rebirth]” (Li 1975:395). Hence, food is closely linked to rebirth in this statement. Because of this danger of food in relation to desire, the text views it as favourable for monks to develop a revulsion from food by meditating on its abominableness, which manifest itself in ten ways: “(1) From the necessity of having to go for it; (2) of seeking for it; (3) of eating it; (4) because of ingredients; (5) of the receptacle; (6) of its undigested state; (7) of its digested state; (8) of its fruit; (9) of its oozing; (10) of its being smeared” (Li 1975:396). In what follows, I summarise the explanation of each point, foregrounding the most striking elements for our purposes.

1) Because of the necessity of food, the monk has to disrupt his duties to go through the filth on the road to the village, where he has to go for the sake of food. “He arrives near the village gate where he must behold corpses of elephants, of horses, of cattle, of buffaloes, of men, of snakes and dogs…he must also suffer their smell to strike his nose” (Li 1975:397). The section concludes in a formula repeated throughout the text, but mentioned only once here: “thus he should consider its abominableness [of food] from the necessity of having to go for it” (Li 1975:397).

2) In the necessity to search for food, the monk has to suffer filth again as well as harsh speech from the villagers. “Reaching every door he must behold and step into dirty pools and pools of mud mixed with the washings of fish, of meat, of rice, with saliva, mucus, dog’s dung, pig’s dung, and so on, and full of worms and black flies” (Li 1975:397-398).

So, in these two considerations we see that the attitude of revulsion should be cultivated towards the situations and arrangements that emerge around food in order to procure it, rather than to food itself, which is more the case in the next section.
3) The villager who sees the food-begging monk is presumed to offer him food provided that the host has not yet eaten, given that monks should receive the first [best] part “that is not spoiled by the man’s hand” [as in South Asia people eat with their right hand and this refers also to the hierarchical sequence of eating discussed earlier where the guest receives the first untouched share]. The text further accounts for the repulsiveness of this man dipping his hand in the food: “And as he kneads the food …, the perspiration that flows along his five fingers wets the dry, hard food and makes it soft. When making lumps of the food which has lost its beauty through kneading, he puts it in his mouth, the lower teeth fulfil the functions of a mortar, the upper teeth those of a pestle, the tongue those of the hand [note the striking resonance with the “mouth machine” of Noëlle Châtelet (1998)]. There in the mouth it is ground like dog’s food … and is besmeared with the thin, clear saliva on the blade of the tongue; with the thick saliva from the middle of the tongue; with the impurities from between the teeth in places where the teeth-bones cannot get at it. And so the food being at that moment a special preparation devoid of beauty and odour, reaches a highly loathsome state like dog’s vomit in a dog’s food dish” (Li 1975:398).

4) The food eaten furthermore becomes loathsome because of the ingredients of bile, phlegm, pus, and blood that are added to the food in digestion.

5) The food that is smeared with these four ingredients then enters the receptacle or stomach, adding to food’s revoltingness, as the stomach “resembles an excrement-pit unwashed for ten years” (Li 1975:399).

6) Undigested food also finds itself in a loathsome state as it finds itself in the stomach where it is “excessively foul-smelling, of pitch darkness, a passage for the winds carrying the smell of various corpses, all the food swallowed today, yesterday, and the day before, being gathered up in a lump in a membrane of phlegm, boiled by the heat of the body’s fire [drawing upon the gastric fire in Ayurveda], giving rise to foam and bubble, …” (Li 1975:399).

7) In the digested state food is obnoxious as it turns into excrement and urine.

8) Considering the fruits of food, the text urges us to look at the hair, nails, and teeth, what in Ayurveda is called prasāda or the finer wastes (Seneviratne 1992:181), in the
cases when the food is well digested, on the one hand, and to hundreds of diseases if not well digested, on the other hand.

9) The situation gets worse when we look at the ways in which food oozes from the body through the various openings. Consumption and oozing out is summarised as follows: “Lustful, greedy, giddy, infatuated, he eats it the first day, and ejects it on the second day, when after it has abided one night he has lost all passion for it, is vexed with it, ashamed with it, disgusted with it” (Li 1975:400).

10) Finally, food becomes abominable when it sticks to the hands, lips, tongue, and palate, which then needs to be washed to remove the smell.

The purpose of the text, as mentioned earlier, is to allow for the consumer to eat without inciting desire for food, hence to develop an attitude of non-attachment in contrast to the cultivation of excited, passionate, and gratifying desire which leads to clinging and becoming. It thus exhibits a strong concern with the seductive potential of food, and proposes a way to overcome this danger by divesting food from its attractive qualities and replacing them with the flip-side of food’s ambiguity: its disgusting properties throughout its transformation in the digestive tract with which food interacts and exchanges components. Considering those properties helps to reduce the sense-pleasures with which food is embroiled.

After this description of the repulsiveness of food as a means to subdue its powerful incitement of desire, passion, and craving, through the mutual transformation and becomings of food and human beings, we can now locate the purpose of the specific rules of eating as laid out in the Buddhist monastic code, the Vinaya Pitaka.

Vinaya Pitaka Rules on Eating

The Vinaya Pitaka or “Book (or Basket) of Discipline” is one of the three parts that make up the tripitaka, the collection of primary texts upon which the Buddhist doctrine is based. This is thus different from the paracanonical texts, such as those of Budhhaghosa’s commentaries. Both include, however, the complete body of Theravada teachings. The Vinaya Pitaka is a collection of monastic rules and related sanctions for monks and nuns. These rules aim at shaping the monks’ and nuns’ behaviours to render the interactions between lay-people and monks pleasant, and to avoid desire flaring up in their self-fashioning as beings nearing nirvana. Here, I draw upon the translations of I.B. Horner from the Pali Text Society who divided the content over six volumes. Prescriptions for receiving alms, sharing food, and
eating when and how are also included in this collection of books, but in a scattered way. One example of how food-related rules are meant to make the interaction between monks and laypeople pleasant is the prescription in the Cūlavagga (“The Lesser Division” that elaborates the monastic etiquette, Horner 1952:195) that monks should not eat garlic, as a monk spreading a bad smell while conveying the Buddhist teachings would be a nuisance to the audience. The importance of developing pleasant relations with lay people derives from the fact that monks are deemed to set the example in embodying Buddhist precepts, but also for more practical reasons, because they depend on the generosity and goodwill of lay people to give them food. The acknowledgment of the necessity of food and the moderate approach to it in Buddhism reverberates in the other Vinaya texts as well. For instance, the Mahāvagga or “The Great Division” (Horner 1962:270), which includes an account of the period after the nirvana or awakening of the Buddha, allows for some exceptions to the general rules of eating, such as when particular foods are used as medicine for ill monks, and thus exhibits the general moderate and functional approach to food in Buddhism.

The general rules which we turn to now serve to exercise restraint in order to not become struck by the powerful capacity of food to incite desire, and again make interactions with lay people pleasant. These rules are elicited in the Suttavibhanga or the section containing the basic monastic rules of conduct and more specifically in the section on training (Horner 1942:126-140). I will concisely quote the rules in what follows, however, without all the exemptions, such as for instance for the ill. The rules are presented in a particular fashion. The text first gives an example of unsuitable behaviour that led to the rule, then it presents the rule itself, and finally it gives the explanation and qualification of the breaching of the rule. Generally, I will only list the actual rule with the single brackets to distinguish it clearly from the sometimes added information to the rule that is quoted as well.

1) ‘Attentively will I accept almsfood’… Whoever out of disrespect accepts almsfood inattentively, as though desirous of throwing it away, there is an offence of wrong-doing.

2) … monks accepted almsfood looking about here and there; they did not know that they were piled up and overflowing… ‘Thinking of the bowl will I accept almsfood’.

3) ‘I will accept almsfood with equal curry’. (curry to be in measure one fourth of the rice)

4) … monks accepted heaped-up almsfood. ‘I will accept almsfood at an even level’.

5) ‘Attentively will I eat almsfood’
The list of rules with regard to almsfood contains five more rules that I will not list here, as they are variations of the five former prescriptions.

11) … monks having asked for curry and conjee for themselves, ate it. People looked down upon … Who does not like well-cooked things? Who does not like sweet things? [Again we see sweetness as a basic and almost universal orientation to food and life] ‘I will not eat curry or conjee, having asked for it for myself’.

12) ‘Not captious-mindedly will I look at others’ bowls [Reminiscent of the concern with the evil-eye as explained in the previous chapter].

13) ‘I will not make up too large a mouthful.’

14) … monks made up long pieces (of food) … ‘I will make up the pieces (of food) into a round.’

15) ‘I will not open the door of the face when the mouthful is not brought close.’

16) ‘I will not put the whole hand into the mouth while eating.’

17) ‘I will not talk with a mouthful in the mouth.’

18) ‘I will not eat tossing up balls (of food).’

19) ‘I will not eat breaking up the mouthfuls.’

20) ‘I will not eat stuffing the cheeks.’

21) ‘I will not eat shaking the hands about [getting rid of the remains].’

22) ‘I will not eat scattering lumps of boiled rice.’

23) ‘I will not eat putting out the tongue.’

24) ‘I will not eat smacking the lips.’

25) ‘I will not eat making a hissing sound.’

26) ‘I will not eat licking the fingers.’

27) ‘I will not eat licking the bowl.’

28) ‘I will not accept a drinking cup, my hands (soiled) with food.’
29) ‘I will not throw out amidst the houses rinsings of the bowl with lumps of boiled rice.’

We can see in our selection (as there are many more rules throughout the books of the Vinaya Pitaka) the concerns with a restraint from gluttony, excessive appetite, and indulgence emerging in this prescriptive articulation concerning the relations with food. Indeed, through the act of eating, it becomes possible to refashion oneself as a morally virtuous person, something which became clear to me when learning to eat decently with my hands and by remarks made during some interviews, an experience that brings us back to lay people and everyday eating.

**Everyday Food Life**

During my first meals in Sri Lanka, I was unaccustomed to eating rice and curry with my right hand. Even though, I had observed the skills and I had been explained how to eat, it took a while before I myself became skilled and could embody the moral codes in my praxis. Moreover, by my observation, I could already understand some of the boundaries of decent eating that have been listed above, but sometimes, unaware, I breached some and then I would be made conscious of the moral codes of eating. For instance, having grains and gravy as sticky leftovers on my fingers, I became bothered and did not know what to do with it, so one time I licked my fingers. Then my host-brother very clearly indicated that this is not done. Neither could I shake my hand to remove the remainder of the rice. Even more out of question, would be the use of my left hand to remove the leftovers on my right hand, as the left hand is used to wipe the bum and as the boundary and distance between the stool and food has to be strictly maintained. The only thing to do was to tolerate the drying mess on my fingers until I could wash my hands (recall that this little cumbersome feeling is mentioned earlier as part of the repulsiveness of food). These are only two examples of the fact that lay people in their daily practice live up to the rules as set out in the Vinaya Pitaka. They may not have read these texts, but the rules of everyday eating coincide remarkably well with the Vinaya rules quoted above.

The everyday implicit rules of how to eat decently, that turn explicit when transgressed, likewise deal with the concern of avoiding excessive desire and its display. When asking an interviewee how he would look at me if I would eat with the food touching the palm of my hand (excessive amount), licking my fingers, smacking, and so on, he answered that I would be like a hungry ghost (*preta wages*), thus viewing me with disgust and linking me by way of his gut feelings to hunger and greed (Roberson 2001:14). So, by way of eating, the human
person can fashion himself as morally human and distinguish from ‘morally lower’ people or non-human beings. *Pretas* are hungry ghosts that are indeed defined by their excessive and insatiable greed, and are the antipole of the aspiration for liberation among Buddhists. Indulging in the food-related sense-pleasures in a *jouissance*-like (Braunstein 2003) mode, a notion developed by Lacan and denoting enjoyment at an often bodily and sensorial level, resembles in its self-destructive aspects the unlimited and degenerate behaviour of *pretas*. Even more, such behaviour could spark and feed desire to such an extent that it becomes impossible to let go of it upon death, clinging to the home where the deceased person used to eat his or her food, and thus *becoming a preta*. I will return to the funerary rites in the next chapter and discuss these phenomena in greater detail, but suffice to note that as one can never be sure that the deceased is turning into a *preta*, people will cook his favourite food at the place where the body has rested a few days. Then, after burial, they place the food outside of the homestead to facilitate the departure and detachment of the deceased person’s consciousness as his desire attaches itself to the food. Given these widespread funerary practices and the remark made above by the interviewee on food eating, people do share with the monks a concern for the powerful seductiveness of food as well as the potential of food to transform people into morally higher or lesser beings. This general concern may account for the fact noted earlier that, unlike in France or many other European countries, in Sri Lanka there is no extended ‘dining or restaurant culture’ in which people gather around the table for hours to enjoy the conviviality of indulging in tasteful and large amounts of food presented in different courses as a form of leisure. This is not to say that in Sri Lanka, people do not enjoy good food. On the contrary, people do go at length to ensure that guests are pleased with the food at parties, but the food is eaten at a faster pace. Going to restaurants in Sri Lanka, I generally got struck by the speed of the process of serving and eating [recall also the Ayurvedic prescription of not eating too slowly nor too hastily]. Yet, at high-end restaurants, this temporal disposition in eating seemed less prevalent. Indeed, particularly in the bigger cities, such as Colombo, we can witness the emergence of an embryonic restaurant culture, but then it is often in the bosom of an expat community or of exquisite hotels with cooks that have been trained abroad.

To sum up, we can see that food’s powerfully seductive agency and transformative capabilities, as discussed in relation to the Buddhist texts, is dealt with at a very practical everyday level as well. Indeed, food and human beings mutually transform each other as assemblages or aggregations and so food serves as a powerful means to refashion oneself as
well as to appease or incite the forces of desire – clinging – becoming and – rebirth (referring to the theory of Dependent Origination).
General Conclusion

In this chapter we have strolled through the complex world of food as crystallised in some of the ancient texts (of Ayurveda and Theravada Buddhism) that maintain their currency to date as evidenced in the implicit repetition and recurrence of the prescribed practices and modes of explanation in everyday life among lay villagers. First, we have extensively explored the composition of the world, person, and food in their interrelations and mutual becomings. Particularly its crucial role in shaping healthy balances of proto-elements, body elements, and humours in relation to outside environments, illustrates food as being a negotiator of the world ‘outside in’ as to sustain life. Healthy regeneration and sustenance of life form together a core aspiration, but also a cause of anxiety; both are negotiated throughout everyday cooking. Moreover, it emerged that our third transversal theme of desire plays a crucial role in maintain a good health in Ayurveda, a concern that has been more systematically elaborated in Theravada Buddhist philosophy and practice. This practice is explicitly geared towards keeping the life-generating and craving forces of desire at bay through the practical negotiation of the personal relationship with food. This chapter thus clearly elicited the textual intimate entanglement of anxiety, desire, and regeneration as it revolves around food, an entanglement that will come more explicitly to the foreground in our next chapter on rituals.
Chapter 5: Food in Ritual Cosmogenesis and Ontogenetics

Ritual events constitute the rhythms of everyday village life and play a crucial role in tuning the music of life’s ‘cooking’. It is possible to participate almost each day at a life-transition event, healing rite, or cultivation-related ceremony somewhere in the wider area. In all these rites it is clear that food is a centripetal force around which the rites revolve and as such, food becomes the machinic producer of the music of life through its centrality in ritual action. It should be stressed here that food is not approached as a substance, but as a transforming or stabilising assemblage and so it is more than merely a substance being consumed. As such, the former and latter becomings are part of the overall assemblage of food, including its becomings as animals, plants, or other aspects of food’s life (Alberti et al 2011). Hence, the coconut flowers, coconut leaves, rice pods, and plants become part of the coconut and rice assemblages that I will predominantly focus on throughout this chapter. I will explore the ways in which these foods connect with the core concerns of anxiety, desire, and regeneration and how this network of food condenses into an assemblage. Moreover, I explore how the assemblage of food holographically condenses the various heterogeneous components and as such becomes a powerful collaborator (Janeja 2010) of human beings in dealing with the core concerns and in bringing about aspired transformations. In this way, we will get a sense of the oscillating intensities, bubbles, and rhythms of the transformation and ‘cooking’ of life that rituals enhance. As such, it becomes clear that rites not only work because of the metaphoric generation of meanings (Turner 1974) or the action of the body as the primal source in ritual transformation (Devisch 1993:37), but also because rituals enable regeneration in the interplay of multiple human and non-human agencies that act on each other in the regeneration and becomings of cosmos and (human) life in what I have respectively termed cosmogenesis and ontogenetics. I will discuss the generative process of ritual in relation to the machinic productivity of food as evidenced in its multiple rhythms throughout various rites with their specific intensities. The rites discussed in more and less detail are: the pre-birth *Angulimāla Pirith, Kiriamma Dāne*, Big-Girl Ceremony, the wedding, funeral and post-funerary dānes, harvest rites and the *Aluth Sahāḷ Mangalaya*, Sinhalese New Year, *Vesak Poya*, and concluding with the reprise of the *Sātuwe* we discussed in the introduction. Yet, before continuing, let me first elicit my approach to ritual and the particular action of food in this.
Approaches to Ritual

In the Cambridge Dictionaries online, ritual is defined as: “a set of fixed actions and sometimes words performed regularly, especially as part of a ceremony”\(^{44}\). Wikipedia describes rites in terms of stylised actions that are performed because they have symbolic value\(^{45}\). From these definitions it is clear that ritual is a fuzzy commonsense category with countless formations, including for some the daily drinking of tea in the mornings as described in our chapter of everyday life. As such, the boundary between what is a ritual process or a mere standardised process in personal or collective action is hard to make. The category of ritual depends on which constitutive elements it consists of or not and thus on the boundary work performed in academic endeavours to delineate what belongs to this category or not. Given this fuzziness, some scholars, such as Don Handelman (1998) suggest abandoning “ritual” altogether. Often the category of the religious is a crucial substantive element in performing this boundary work, but this distinction of society and (theistic) religion is problematic when taken as a looking glass through which to approach societies in which the magic forces permeate everyday life and do not constitute a separate realm of existence. Moreover, the two definitions above entail a very rigid and static order and are not able to account for innovations, generative energies, and transformations that occur in the ritual process, even though rituals in my observations often precisely entailed a standardised recurrence of properties, sequences, and concerns. Indeed, ritual combines both forces of transformation, generation, deterritorialisation, and destabilisation, on the one hand, and of repetition, crystallisation, territorialisation, and stabilisation, on the other.

These two elements—boundaries and relations to wider surroundings, on the one hand, and the transformative action of ritual, on the other—recur as crucial points of reflection in the work of Don Handelman (1998, 2004) in how to describe several approaches to ritual. He proposes to distinguish between perspectives that approach ritual in terms of its role, function, and location in wider society and perspectives that look at what ritual is about in its own respect. The former, he labels as the mirror model, given that it approaches ritual in terms of the wider roles or dynamics that it reflects, re-presents, symbolises, or expresses. The latter, he labels as the model model in terms of the ways in which rituals shape and model transformations. In the former, rituals derive their meaning from outside ritual, mirroring another order, whereas in the latter it generates transformative experience in a fairly

\(^{44}\) http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/ritual?q=ritual
\(^{45}\) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ritual
autonomic way (Handelman 1998:xii-xv). The functionalist approaches look at rituals for their role in wider society and thus not in their own right, whether it is part of maintaining social orders by the reproduction of social and gendered identities, the self-narration in symbolic ways, or as a function of resistance or outlet (Handelman 2004:2,16, Comaroff & Comaroff 1999). In the model approach, ritual is studied in its own right, at least for a moment, as to learn what ritual does in itself and for itself, only to return later to its connections with wider sociocultural orders (Handelman 2004:2). He gives the example of Victor Turner who at least temporarily focuses on the ritual dynamic itself by drawing upon the seminal work of Arnold Van Gennep to discern three ritual stages in which he discusses the liminal or threshold phase that accounts for the transformative potential of rites. In this phase between the entry and the exit of the ritual, symbols are recombined and reforged, and these symbolic explorations, subversions and conversions allow the ritual participant to pass a chaotic stage of intense engagements with new meanings. The liminal phase is thus the space of transformations in meaning and in social life before the entry into a new category (of the grown-up group in case of the rites of passage, for instance). Hence, it is only after a separation that the rite and the participant torques back into the sociocultural order. In our language, the liminal stage and space is one of creative productions, transformations, and becomings, and the other two phases entail stabilisations. Yet the overall threefold structure exhibits a rather stable structure in this sequenced approach to rites.

René Devisch (1993:5) has elaborated further on Turner’s frame by elaborating a semantic-praxiological approach to foreground the body that is: “a genuine source of transformational symbolic creativity, of true praxis or action capable of intervening effectively on the world.” And as such, he views the ritual as a: “transformational, hence self-generative process” (Devisch 1993:37). He argues that Turner’s approach does not sufficiently account for the autoprodutivity that inheres in the liminal capacities of the body. Hence, he advocates a kind of somatic-transformative approach in which he seeks to foreground the deterritorialising capacity of ritual as a corrective to the territorial script-like structural-processual and symbolic approach of Turner and of our two initial definitions. In the views of René Devisch and Bruce Kapferer, ritual is effective as it allows the condensation of life and the mobilisation of psychic and bodily energies in the bringing about of desired transformations. This condensation and folding upon itself is a potential dynamic of ritual that Don Handelman (2004) seeks to foreground in the study of ritual. Hence, ritual is effective not only because of the new symbolic connections that are forged, and its twisting back into society, but also, and
maybe even more so, because of the performativity of the ritual events and the embodied experience of concerns it somatically engages and works with. Yet, the substantive aspect of ritual in terms of the concerns and aspirations it engages should not be forgotten either. Bruce Kapferer (1997:1-3) points out in his work on the *Suniyama* antisorcery rite that ritual engages the core concern of the contingency, fragility, and existential uncertainty in human life in relation to its surroundings. The effectivity of rites are enhanced by the mobilisation of the senses and affects in the aesthetics of the rite that helps drawing often hitherto disinterested spectators into the rite and its transformative energies (Schieffelin 1985). Indeed, the colourful images, particular smells, and sounds entail a powerful performative dynamic that turn the body as the site and instrument of the ritual negotiation of existential concerns (Kapferer 1997:176-177).

So, just as mentioned regarding food studies, I agree with Don Handelman (1998, 2004) that ritual has to be studied in itself and for itself, but stress that the both individuation and twisting back onto the social surroundings should be taken into account as well to get a more comprehensive approach to ritual. Indeed, as I argue for food and human beings as well, ritual is an event-assemblage that through its interconnections temporarily individuates only to dissipate again. The complex relationships offer the ingredients for the ritual concoction and transformation of concerns, beings, and their interrelations, and to understand these processes, contexts that offer these ingredients have to be included at some point in the analysis as well. Let us now turn to food as it enables a further ritual condensation for the purpose of the rite itself.
The Collaborative Life of Food in Ritual

We now have a glimpse of what ritual is and what it does, but it does more as it engages particular concerns such as desire, health, anxieties, and regeneration, and negotiates these in collaboration with food. The former approaches are very instructive in highlighting the transformative, destabilising, and creative powers that inhere in the body and bodily performance, and serve as a corrective to the often rigid, static, and stabilised scripts of meaning, prevalent in many mirror approaches to ritual. Yet, I wish to add to their rich approach by focusing on the core role of food in these ritual transformations and regenerations of the worlds and interrelations as well as the conjoining stabilisations involved, from which emerges a specific location of the human person.

We could argue that food plays a mere aesthetic role in the offerings and sacrifices to mobilise the senses as to create an atmosphere that draws everyone into the seething and transformative ritual event, as Aida Kanafani (1983) so eloquently describes with regard to everyday rituals in pertaining to social visits among women in the United Arab Emirates. Yet, I deem food’s role to be more fundamental and even centripetal in most Sinhalese rites. I argue that food is in fact the enabling factor in ritual to: “condense life from the edges of the social order” (Devisch 1993:38) and thus to enclose itself and become a complex assemblage, self-generative system, and a modelling model for a while (Handelman 2004). Food connects with and thereby condenses concerns of health, anxieties, desire, and regeneration of aspired well-being and prosperity. As such, it turns into a holographic materialisation (a three-dimensional miniature) with which people can actually work in order to achieve ritual transformation of life, society, and the cosmos. Subsequently does food’s own transformation in ritual cooking and offerings presence (in the sense of rendering present), materialise, and bring about transformations among other entities of the ritual assemblage as well. Indeed, ritual is an event in which multi-species entities act on each other in the complex transformations and becomings of these entities. People, deities, and food offerings co-produce transformative effects in what is the effective rite intervening in the affairs of life and in the world. So, we can invite Bruno Latour (2010) into the laboratory of ritual where multi-species entities are fabricated and regenerated, including those factish entities that merge fact and fetish/belief and exert real effects among human beings and their societies. In this multi-species event we need to foreground food’s action besides that of other entities, including deities, human beings, and mental objects (in the Buddhist and Ayurvedic sense where ideas
are objects of the mind, which itself is a matter of materiality as it is derived from primordial matter, *prakrti*, and is located in the heart).

Throughout the following discussion of the diverse rites, we shall see that rituals enable people to negotiate particular existential insecurities inherent in the specific stages in the crafting of lives. These ritual negotiations and interventions in the world enable transformations that occur in relation to the surrounding world and cosmos through which human regeneration becomes constituted as part of cosmic regeneration, turning people and non-human entities mutually dependent and entangled in relations of becoming. Hence, our approach to what ritual does, entails a clear focus on entangled and multi-species transformations revolving around the basic existential concerns of anxiety, desire, and regeneration of life in the model form of rituals.

Food is crucial in effective transformative action in rituals, given that I have not (yet) witnessed a rite without food (in whatever form) being part of it. As noted earlier, food offerings in their ritual cooking become the items around which concerns of an existential nature revolve and are dealt with. Food condenses these concerns and presences these through which food becomes a ritual instrument with which people can intervene in their situation to re-negotiate insecurities, but also to transform the situation for the better in order to get closer to the desired state (health, prosperity, and fertility). Simultaneously, food and its physical transformation in cooking and offering not only condense these existential concerns, but also the world and the cosmos, and their regeneration of which the aspired human regeneration is part. The ritual transformation is thus not just performative and symbolic, but entails moreover physical processes of transformation. This is where the novelty of our approach to ritual comes in: food playing a co-(re)productive role in the ritual event of the regeneration of the cosmos, multi-species entities (or heterogeneous components), and human life as thoroughly interrelational and entangled.

In what follows, I will particularly highlight the role of rice and coconut recalling our earlier remark regarding their multiple transformations and shapes as part of their assemblages. Their recurrence is highly striking and is very instructive about the dynamics of repetition and difference in the ritual presencing and articulation of existential concerns of anxiety, desire, and regeneration. These two foodstuffs, in their recurring combination, become the prime ritual articulator of these concerns and the related processes of remaking the world and ones place in it as a renewed being. Here, I utilise the term of articulation in a specific sense and
this is related to the observation that food is an assemblage that connects heterogeneous components that affect each other and that together create the resulting assemblage entity, which we call food. When entering into novel relationships, new aspects get connected to the food assemblage and then its whole composition and expression change. Hence, throughout this chapter, we will explore in a detailed way all the connections between mythical elements, physical processes, and existential concerns that are condensed in the food assemblage, which is being ritually articulated in a process of context-driven actualisation. Articulation is not just about enunciation, but entails also a form of translation and remaking, in short, the forging of new connections between heterogeneous aspects and issues, whether physical or meaningful (Latour 2005:108). This particular utilisation of “articulation”—as the forging of connections, translation and expression—derives from its linguistic signification, on the one hand, and its physical meaning of “joints that connect human bones”, on the other.

We will now turn to the emergence of life and to the discussion of the pre-birth Angulimāla Pirith rite, seeking to facilitate a good birth, after which we will turn to other life-cycle rites, harvest ceremony and the Sātuwe to conclude. However, we need first to refresh our observation, made in the chapter on everyday village life, that rice and coconut recur throughout daily life and often in combination, such as evidenced in the everyday dish of pol sambol. Moreover, rice takes the central stage in the meals as well as in the geo-spatial ordering of the village situated along its paddy fields and the irrigation reservoir. The village populated with human beings comprises also many coconut trees that shape the green lush landscapes amidst the cultivated fields and the bushes. The centrality of rice has been explored in the chapter of everyday life, but here I will foreground the role of the coconut as nearly equally central in everyday life before actually turning to the ritual events.
The Coconut in Everyday Practice

Looking at the manifold utilisations of the coconut assemblage, we could almost get the impression that it may be even more important than rice in terms of the multiplicity of applications to which it lends itself. The coconut tree or *cocos nucifera* (Chan & Elevitch 2006) is designated by Sinhalese as the *kapruka* and similarly in Sanskrit as the *kalpa vriksha*, both of which denote something that 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). In other words, from a villagers’ point of view, this tree with all its parts sustains life in many aspects (and thus connected with these) and this is likewise the case in many other parts of Southeast Asia (Parvanta 2003). I contend that its recurrence throughout everyday life turns the coconut, just like rice, into a powerful articulator of life sustenance and regeneration. Let us now turn to some of the applications of the different components of the coconut assemblage visualised below.

Figure 2: Some components of the coconut assemblage visualised by Thomas Schoepke


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The coconut tree has pinnate leaves with fingers or pinnae between 60-90 cm long. These leaves are used to weave mats and thatched roofs, which have become rare nowadays. Nevertheless, these roofs are widely used to make watch huts (pâle) with the purpose of guarding the fields from wild animals and elephants, as described earlier. Also the few remaining mud houses in the area and houses of poorer families are shielded by thatched roofs. Some villagers told me that thatched roofs have the advantage of being cooler than tiles or sheets of corrugated material, which are also utilised in the construction of roofs. The disadvantages however, are that such roofs may leak during heavy rains and attract shelter-seeking creatures, such as poisonous spiders, which are less welcome as they pose a health hazard.

Turning to the fruit, as shown in the picture of the tree, I observed that the thick husk, or mesocarp is often dried and used as firewood to keep the hearth-fire going. This fire, seen as the external digestive gastric fire, being sustained by the coconut in this way, connects the coconut to the sustenance of life on an everyday basis. The husk is composed of fibres, called coir, of which ropes, brooms, mattresses, and sponges are made. It is furthermore used to make oils for various purposes (cooking, massage, and hair care). The hard inner stone, or endocarp, is the shell to which the white coconut meat, or endosperm, is attached. This shell is employed as firewood or is assembled into different kinds of spoons. Inside the hardened and matured endosperm there is air and water, not to be confused with the jelly-like substance in the young coconut or the coconut milk that is made from squeezing scraped coconut dipped in water. The often used coconut oil is derived from the pulp leftovers, which are also used to sweep the floor as they absorb dirty fluids and facilitate their removal. Finally, there are the flowers that mainly play a role in ritual decorations. There are both male and female flowers in one inflorescence enabling the self-reproduction of the coconut plant (Chan & Levitch 2006:3). Hence, by way of biological resonance and motivation (Gell 1975:154), it becomes easy to articulate (in the sense of connecting with) these flowers with the union of a man and woman in sexual reproduction. Thus, these flowers at rites articulate and presence (in the sense of rendering present) the hope for good fertility and related to this, although in a wider sense, to prosperity and happiness. Moreover, in their resemblance to rice pods, which likewise are articulated with the same concerns, these coconut flowers strongly articulate prosperity and sustenance of life and serve as telling decorations in rites of passage, harvest and numerous other rituals. They also decorate meetings attended by high profile religious and political personalities.
After this brief account of everyday utilisation of the coconut assemblage and the gradual transition to the ritual sphere, we are now ready to turn to the pre-birth *Angulimāla Pirith* rite, which I observed.
The Angulimāla Pirith

Precariousness of Giving Birth

Given the stories of miscarriages and other accidents, the first birth is an ambiguous event that appears to be both joyful and daunting. Bad karma, namely the negative balance of good and bad deeds from previous lives, may be at play in those sad cases either on the side of the mother or the baby. Additionally, it is mentioned that as the pregnant woman is in a polluting state (*kiliḍōsa*), 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 *Pirit* to be chanted for protection at the sixth month of the first pregnancy, when the baby “has come to the belly” (*babā badete āwā*). This expression denotes the entry of consciousness into the formation of elements (ether, wind, water, earth, and fire) that compose the baby and the human person. The 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 good or bad karma. During later pregnancies, protection is also asked for, but in a less eloquent manner, for instance by making a vow to the local deity.

The Principle of Pirith

*Pirit* entails the chanting of Buddhist canonical texts by monks or virtuous lay men in order to transfer merit and ask for protection from the Buddha. Generally, only gods are invoked for protection with regard to thisworldly matters, however the Buddha, who is seen as having exhibited an enormous human psychic power by his waning, presides over all the guardian deities of Sri Lanka, regional deities, lesser gods, ancestral deities, demons, pretas (spirits of departed family members), goblins, and ghosts. Therefore the Buddha is often indirectly invoked in practice (Obeyesekere 1963:142-144) to take on the role of providing protection generally assigned to gods. I use “indirectly” in the sense that he is involved in the transfer of merit, and thereby protecting against possible adverse situations, and thus extending his role into protection. Furthermore, it is believed that the recitation of his teachings, the Dhamma, exert a positive influence on such sensitive matters by the power of truth (Langer 2007:19-22). Through this ritual the task-division between the Buddha and gods gets blurred, and the acts of merit-transfer and the provision of protection get entangled.
**Pirith Set-Up**

During the day preceding the *Pirith* in the night, the event gets prepared by cooking sweets, such as *kävung*, a mix of rice and coconut powder, and by preparing the trays of bananas, betel leaves, areca nuts, biscuits and so forth. The men go to the jungle or the bushes to cut and collect the stems, leaves and flowers for the decorations made inside and outside the parental house of the pregnant woman. In the garden in front of the entry door, they erect a small *malpäle* (flower shrine) in which they place oil lamps and burning incense that brings the people entering in the proper solemn mood. The men weave the tender pinnate leaves of the coconut tree into a small hut or shrine, which is placed on a stick as shown in the two pictures below, taken at different occasions.

![Picture of Pirith setup](image)

Inside the house, the virtuous lay men chant within a *pirith* cage, called *mandapa*, which is made from banana tree stems and young and old coconut leaves, and which is erected inside the front room of the house. The pregnant woman lies down on a mat in this cage while her relatives and friends are outside the *mandapa*. The decorations surrounding and inside the construct are of interest here.
At the basis of the mandapa are plantain stems cut vertically in two. The walls are composed of a combination of tender and older coconut pinnate leaves carefully tied together. At the top of the entry there is an arch made from pinnate leaves tied together in decorative shapes. Such arches (ārukku) denote the entry into a sacred space where a ceremony or ritual takes place. At each pillar, below both sides of the entry, there is a round earthen pot that is supported by a banana stem and older coconut pinnate leaves. These two pots are termed punkalase, referring to the “full pot” or to the full womb (Tillakaratne 1986:43). Likewise, Masakazu Tanaka (1997:107) states that: “the pot of water suggests the very idea of fertile womb”. Moreover, the full pot is a microcosmic or holographic condensation and articulation of the recurring origin of the world system or era (kalpa) that is 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 pirithe cage, which is called the pirithe pän kale (the pirithe water pot), and which sometimes additionally contains a whole coconut. I will return to this subject later.

The full pot and its decorations at the entry of the ceremonial arch are combined in a physical and specific way, and as such articulate (in the Latourian sense of establishing connections) concerns of the precariousness of life-transmission and sustenance that are dealt with in this rite. As pointed out earlier, the coconut flowers in the punkalase are hermaphroditic and are well-connected to the concern of the male and female union 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 render present or, more firmly, presence 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 as part of the ‘cooking’ of life.

Another argument in favour of this reading is that these coconut flowers resemble rice pods (as in their evocative use in the harvest ritual on top of the tower, to be discussed 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) which the full pot structure enacts, the structure of which resembles the regeneration of a new world system in a new world cycle.

The canopy or viyana of the mandapa consists of white and red pieces of cloth with seven types of auspicious flowers, young coconut pinnate leaves and other leaves of auspicious trees (e.g. Bo Tree or banyan tree). The white colour of the cloth evokes purity and the red one refers to transformative heat, blood, and fertility (hence the polluting state of the pregnant woman) similar to the evocations of colours in South India as described by Brenda Beck (1969). There is also a pure, thin, white thread hanging over the table where the lay men chant the beneficial and protective verses of the pirithe book (or paritta in Pali translated as “The Book of Protection”). One of the verses refers to Angulimala after which the whole rite is
named. In the *Angulimala Sutta*[^47], a bandit who killed human beings was confronted by the Buddha who taught him the Dhamma (the Buddhist teachings). Angulimala became the attendant monk and likewise went for alms. Once, he saw a woman giving birth and thought about the suffering and torment of living beings. He conveyed the truth of the Dhamma to the mother and wished both her and the foetus well-being; the truth itself having a positive and protective effect on the well-being of both in the end. Hence, the *Angulimāla Pirith* to date draws on this ancient text and continues to exist in its numerous repetitions across the numerous households and instances where it is held to obtain similar effects of protection and truth alongside the transfer of merit. As this *sutta* is crystallised in textual form, the space for novel and drastic differences to emerge in the reproduction of the rites is quite small. These verses and words are enunciated in a monotonous tone and vibrate in the *mandapa* and extend into the room. The thread transmits the beneficial verses and their influence to the mother-to-be as the rope is tied to her little left finger.

*The Pirith Pān Kale*

The other end of the rope is connected an interesting assemblage on the table: the *pirith pān kale* (enchanted *pirith* water in the pot), as depicted on the pictures below.

![Pirith Pān Kale](image1.jpg)

This *pirith pān kale* is placed in front of an image of the Buddha during the event. The new earthen pot is occasionally covered by placing a full coconut on top of the opening of the pot.

[^47]: [http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.086.than.html](http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.086.than.html)
and is covered by young coconut leaves and flowers. The rope which transmits the beneficial verses to the pregnant woman has its other end here, where it is bundled amidst the flowers or on top of the “female” side of the coconut, i.e. the side with the three germination holes (we will later understand more of the importance of this articulation). The pot itself 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. Villagers in Kiribathgama collect this water from a small tank, as it is believed to be cooling and healthy, just like the *pirith* water and the water from Anavatapta. Moreover, in some cases they purify the water by adding Sandalwood to give it healing powers.

Only few ritual participants explicitly linked this pot with water to a full womb as Tillakeratne (1986) does, and as Dahmen-Dallapiccola (2002) and Tanaka (1997:107) do in relation to Hindus in South India or among Sri Lankan Tamils in Sri Lanka respectively. Both Masakazu Tanaka (1997:136) and Rohan Bastin (2002:138) further assert that the pot also represents the body, and the coconut on top of it the human head. However, most Sinhalese villagers explicitly see this pot more as a materialisation of purity, health, and prosperity, which is indeed implicitly related to good fertility. Hence the physical articulation of the pot and its adjoining elements with the pregnant woman may be read differently among people, but the more implicit connection is similar, as they say having many offspring is a sign of good fortune. The articulations of the various components with the pot, evoking water of Lake Anavatapta with its life-sustaining and healing effects while pointing at the historical emergence of the world, re-enact the regeneration of life throughout the world-cycles and present us with a good indication that this pot is linked to the womb.

*The Articulation of the Coconut as a Human Head, Consciousness, and Life Altogether*

The inference that the pot is connected to the life-giving womb is further supported by the fact that the coconut, its inner hard shell, presences the baby and its newly arrived consciousness or “thinking ability” (*mole*) inside it. As mentioned earlier, this ability arrives after six 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* and that thus corroborate the suggestion that the coconut on the pot materialises the baby and the consciousness that has arrived in it. In a Sri Lankan story, the coconut emerged out of an astrologers’ head that was 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 nowadays continue to offer coconuts to this particular deity. Moreover, these coconut offerings suggest human sacrifice in a direct way (Tanaka 1997:97, Bastin 2002:68). This explicit link is explained by the connection that people make between the three germination holes and Shiva’s three eyes, and as Shiva chose the coconut as a substitute for his own self-sacrifice (Tanaka 1997:97). We will return to the notion of the coconut offering being a surrogate sacrifice in more detail later. To sum up, the clear mythical articulation of the coconut with the head of human beings and as substantiating the entering of consciousness into the baby, only then becoming a full-fledged person, establishes a link between coconut and the human person; a link further materialised by the rope connecting the pregnant mother with the coconut (flowers) on the pot.

However, as we can see in the construct on the table, the baby-person has yet to be born and therefore remains only a potential of new life in this world. This phase in human life is articulated by placing coconut flowers (as the potential of human life) or a coconut covered by young coconut leaves (as the life present in the womb) on top of the full pot. Indeed, the baby in the womb is not yet a full-fledged person with a fully developed consciousness that is otherwise presenced by a bare coconut, but instead holds the potential for becoming this, just as the flowers and the covered coconut do. The articulation of the phases of human life by way of elaborating combinations of parts of the coconut assemblage or the utilisation of stages in the life of the coconut connects the stages of human growth with those of the coconut. We will see this articulation of human and coconut life recurring in several of the rites that I discuss later; I expand on this more during the analysis of the harvest rite.

The Coconut and Cosmic Life and Regeneration

The contention that the coconut articulates and physically connects with human life is further strengthened by the repetition of the myth of Anavatapta in the pot-construct on the table, as mentioned before. 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 seven 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 paddy and money, referring to the wider well-known notion of
prosperity, but also the lesser mentioned fertility. Her depiction is placed at various other life-
transition rituals as well. There is another related story that adds to this cosmic link with
fertility and reproduction. As told by an informant, God Shiva, who represents the sun,
fertilises Parvati, the earth goddess, bearing fruit in the form of paddy growing on top of
mount Meru. This paddy is evoked in the construct on the table by coconut flowers on top of
the pot. Interestingly, Ganesh, to whom the coconut is dedicated, is likewise the son of Parvati
and Shiva (Fuller 1992). Therefore, through these stories we start seeing a close link between
life and coconut and rice as the fruit of cosmic reproduction. As 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 or holographic condensation 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. As mentioned earlier, 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 closely resemble the
coconut flowers. Through this nourishment, the potential of human life (as articulated by
these coconut flowers of covered coconut) is sustained.

The water with magical powers also brings forth actual human life as condensed by the
coco
nut in the pirith pān kalase, referring to the becoming of a person from the time the
thinking ability or mole enters. Via the dedication of the coconut to Ganesh, the god of
wisdom, and the other mythical stories narrated earlier, the link between human thinking
ability and human life, on the one hand, and the coconut, on the other, gets established. The
coco
nut on top of the pot holographically condenses the result (=baby) of the microcosmic
regeneration of the punkalase as womb, and links as such human reproduction to the larger
world cycles in cosmic regeneration and sustenance of life.

We can see here a complex articulation of myths, Buddhist ideas, physical connections,
biological processes, and existential experiences condensed into the constructs and the
activities around it. Through the emphasis on fertility, prosperity, and health, all related to the
regeneration and sustenance of life, this pre-birth ceremony recognises, negotiates, and reproduces the experience that life-transmission and sustenance are precarious events. The coconut flowers and the coconut evoke and condense the terms of life, help ponder its delicacy, and turn this precariousness into enhancement and protection. Even more, this regeneration of life in the womb becomes situated within a cosmic regeneration, which are both repeatedly articulated through attributes of the coconut and new earthen pots.

All of the ritual components—the coconut, leaves, flowers, water, pots, ropes, chanting, books, virtuous men—gather in the ritual event to ponder the existential delicacy of life, and turn this precariousness into enhancement and protection. This happens with the help of coconut assemblages that turn into holograms with which ritual participants work with to achieve aspired security and prosperity. Life’s reproduction and sustenance can indeed easily flip into death, as in miscarriage. Life and death are both internal to life and this is central to its respective ambiguity and bivalence. Awareness of this fragility motivates the person to seek help from relatives, friends, and the Buddha to mitigate these possible dangers inherent in birth giving. In chanting the Buddhist stanzas, merit is acquired and transferred to the baby, and the power of truth exerts its beneficial influence. The sharing of merit forges bonds, and constitutes the baby as a relational being from which it 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 coconut and myths help to intervene in life in order to secure the full blossoming of the tender and fragile life in the womb into a full family member and physical person with mole. Moreover, the coconut assemblage articulates and condenses both the reproduction of human life in the womb, on the one hand, and the cosmic regeneration of the world, on the other hand.

To sum up for now, we can see that in the practice of this ritual the coconut in its capacity as collaborator in the crafting of life and death has been co-(re)produced: ‘co’ because life is enhanced in the combined efforts of words, thread, coconuts, pots, the Buddha, and friends and relatives; ‘re’ as it draws upon standardised myths, ideas of merit, and practical experiences; ‘production’ as it takes place through the activities and experiences that are invoked from those present.
Destabilisations Inciting Bubbles of Intensities in the Rite

The ritual participants and the variety of their actions have not yet been part of the sketch of the rite. So far, I have been focusing predominantly on the centre stage in the mandapa and the more territorialised, stabilised, and recurring structures, formations, and forces. Yet, as mentioned earlier, there are also more chaotic forces that shape the rite and that sometimes allow for more or less drastic modifications to seep in. When elements of the fringes of the rite enter the centre, they can become catalysts of transformation or subversion and temporarily turn the rite inside out and outside in, and take the centre stage. Take a small example of human disturbances of the crystallised procedure: a sore throat among the chanting men causes a false tone or stuttering in the flow of the life-enhancing rhythms and tonality of the music of life. To prevent this from occurring, they drink water with ginger and sweet sugar cubes (sūkiri) during some of their 15-minute breaks. In this way, they clear their throat from phlegm that hinders the chanting during the rite, which lasts about eight hours, starting from 10 p.m. and ending around 6 a.m.

While the virtuous men (who observe ten Buddhist prescriptions of moral behaviour instead of five precepts the lay people generally observe) chant the verses as written down in the pirith book, some of the family members, friends, and neighbours sit outside the mandapa in the room listening to the monotonous vibrations while supporting the pregnant woman in their thoughts. Meanwhile some other male relatives and friends serve the guests outside in the garden first with sweets, bananas, and biscuits, and later with tea.

The chanting that vibrates into the garden makes up the background for the barking dogs and the chatting men, who are laughing, chewing areca nut and betel, playing cards, and having a ‘secret’ alcoholic drink. Generally and ‘officially’ (at the level of explicit and public discourse) the drinking of alcohol at rites and particularly those with a Buddhist flavour is frowned upon by most women and men of the village. Yet, it is also pervasive in village life and particularly at social gatherings, including ritual events. As mentioned earlier, alcohol is predominantly a male affair, even though in cities and among higher classes it is more common to see women drinking alcohol, but still remains far less common than men who drink mostly in all-male gatherings. As explained earlier in relation to everyday life, the drinking of alcohol has always got a tinge of secrecy, but at Buddhist rites an air of pulling a

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48 For a very nuanced and detailed account on alcohol consumption I refer to the work of Michele Gamburd (2008) on South Sri Lanka and that of Ranil Abeyasinghe (2002).
prank is more pronounced. To return to the Pirith event, while the people sit and chat in the garden it occurs sometimes that some men take a little walk to a neighbouring house or to a dark corner in a backyard where the arrack, soft drink, and bites are displayed on a wobbly table; gathering around the table, some men light a cigarette, and a few glasses of alcohol are quickly swallowed as not to be absent from the rite too long. With loosened tongues and increased volume, they chew areca nut and betel leaf and chat with a high degree of banter. The social lubricant aids in bonding the men while simultaneously setting them apart from the rest. As the night unfolds further, the men’s volume and pitch increase in heated discussions. Some get irritated and enter the house to shift the sonosphere and atmosphere. The contrast between the solemn atmosphere inside and the banter outside is stark. Yet, the volume increases and the drunken vibes from the laughing and sometimes quarrelling men enter the room and the ritual space. The fringes from the rite enter and disturb the ritual vibrations inside. Some men sitting at the entry exit the room to try to calm the men down. The alcohol is doing its work and renders the atmosphere volatile. A quarrel erupts and the situation gets tense. Everybody inside notices what is going on, but they attempt to maintain the stability of the rite. That is the precise purpose of those men who left the room to quiet and cool things down. After a small scuffle the core troublemakers acknowledge their disturbance, and leave quickly and zealously on their motorcycles. Calm has returned and the remaining crowd enter the room and submit themselves to the soothing effects of the sounds affecting their ears and consciousness. While the alcohol was binding the drinking men together and separating them from the sober participants, the break up within the drinking group and the expelling of one faction has enabled the re-stabilisation.

Conclusion

This fragment illustrates how the components that co-constitute the ritual event or assemblage do not necessarily harmoniously act together. The stable linkages as described in minute and exegetical detail earlier, and as condensed in the decorations and ‘coconut constructions’ shape the overall expression and experience of the rite as much as the events at the ‘fringes’ do. For some participants, the happenings at the corners are core to the multi-purpose and multi-species event that the ritual is. Indeed, the ritual brings together the heterogeneous components of the Buddha, coconuts, water, rope, women, men, children, barking dogs, and

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49 A distilled alcoholic drink made in Sri Lanka mostly from coconut flower or sugarcane.
alcohol that co-regenerate village life and individual lives (including that of the baby) in many ways. Sometimes, the destruction of certain bonds is internal to this ritual multi-regeneration. Our account has shown that food, in the wide solid and fluid sense, does not only shape the centre stage but also the fringes that sometimes shift location for some people in the bubbling of the ‘cooking’ of life with its oscillating intensities, stabilisations, and destabilisations.

This rite and its various interlinking components have been described in great detail as it powerfully articulates the coconut with regeneration of human life by way of intimate connections between physical processes, biological isomorphology, mythological stories, sounds, conscious motivations, and so forth. Yet, it is the ongoing recurrence of these connections so meticulously described that strengthens the coconut and rice assemblages (rice will gradually come more to the foreground) as the combined prime articulator of the regeneration of life and the world as interrelational. This ongoing recurrence and repetition of these two is indeed core to my whole account as this terminology of repetition provides a way to discuss continuities in non-essentialist terms in the analysis of assemblages and becomings that stabilise in terms of repetition or destabilise in terms of transformation. Put differently, both dynamics of deterritorialisation and territorialisation are part of life and integral to my approach. By stressing both dynamics, my account seeks to draw upon the rich and fascinating ‘affect approaches’ and attempts simultaneously to bring historicity back into their emphasis on generativity, as discussed in chapter 2.

Hence, the strength of my contention that coconut and rice are core articulators of life and its regeneration can only be corroborated by many examples. To do so, I will continue to focus predominantly on these two food assemblages throughout the discussion of various other rites during the life-cycle of both human beings and foods (e.g. harvest festival). Some of these rites are discussed in less detail to merely illustrate my point about rice and coconut, whereas others are explored in more detail to substantiate the argument that rituals are multi-species events with foods playing a particular role in these. Moreover, as Sinhalese life is replete with numerous rites of various sorts, I am unable to discuss them all in similar detail (as in our account of the Angulimāla Pirith).

In what follows, I will briefly describe the Kiriamma Dāne and the ‘Big-Girl Ceremony’ before moving on to a more detailed discussion of the wedding celebration. There are other life-cycle rites that take place between birth and marriage, which I leave out due to limitations of space. First are the rites concerning birth itself, including the bathing in medicinal leaves,
the making of a horoscope (the importance of which is very clear during weddings) by the astrologer who also determines the first letter of the name, and the offering of a young coconut sapling as a surrogate sacrifice that we will discuss during the account of the harvest ritual. Six months after birth we have the *Kiriamma Dāne* that we will turn to after further enlisting the numerous life-cycle rites here. The first time that a child eats rice, the ‘real’ food, there is a feeding ritual that introduces this adult food to the nine or ten month old child. A lucky person is selected to feed the child with milk-rice, prepared from newly harvested rice and boiled in coconut milk, hence, we see the clear recurrence of these two foodstuffs at this life-transition moment (de Silva 2002:92-93). The combination of rice and coconut in the form of *kiribath* or milk-rice returns repeatedly in smaller and larger rites, which I will discuss in more detail when examining the harvest ceremony. Further rites include the first cutting of hair and the first reading of the alphabet in the presence of a school teacher or other respected person. Again, milk-rice and *kāvung* (the mixture of coconut and rice powder) are part of the festive meal, which is often served as breakfast (de Silva 2002: 94-98).

Let us now first turn to the *Kiriamma Dāne* and thereafter the coming of age rite for girls (there is no specific rite for boys), before turning to a more extensive discussion of the wedding ceremony.
**Kiriamma Dāne**

After three months, another rite is held to avert misfortune and ensure prosperity for the family and the recent-born child. It is called the *Kiriamma Dāne* and thus is part of the general class of *dāne*, which I will discuss separately later. It suffices here to state that *dāne* revolves in general around the offering of foods and other items to acquire merit and transfer it to a deceased person or deities in order to obtain the latters’ protection in exchange. In this particular *dāne*, the relatives of the young nuclear family prepare milk-rice and other foods to offer to the seven *kiri-amṃālā* (*lā* is a suffix to denote plural in Sinhalese) or the “milk-mothers” of the village. These are women who have experience in giving birth and breastfeeding and who are considered virtuous (*upāsikā*), observing eight or ten Buddhist prescriptions of moral behaviour or precepts. Often these *kiriammālā* are grandmothers, but in my observations young respected women who volunteered are likewise welcome, provided they have child-rearing experience. *Kiriamma Dāne* is known and performed among villagers in Kiribathgama, although I did not observe it there. I did observe it in South Sri Lanka, where this rite is more prevalent, when I was visiting relatives of my host family.

*Non-Human Connections*

Richard Gombrich (1971:6) claims that the seven mothers render present the seven female attendants of the Pattini, sometimes termed as the Ammā Deviyo (mother god) and by some villagers equated with Mother Mary in Christianity. Pattini is of South Indian origin and is the most known mother goddess in Sri Lanka, most popular in the southern and western areas. Its cult is institutionalised in the Low-Country (south and west) collective *gambaruva* rite often performed as a harvest rite. Pattini has ascended in the Buddhist pantheon as she is fundamentally benevolent, yet, she remains known as a character with outbursts of anger and heat, but with a morally just intent. Indeed, the Pattini corpus deals with many aspects of this goddess, such as her aspiration to Buddhahood (evoking her goodness), her birth from a blue lotus stem, and her fight to end a famine by destroying (indicating her fierceness) a city with fire (Obeyesekere 1987:1-35). Because of her heat, she occasionally has outbursts of anger due to bad actions of human beings and then needs to be ritually propitiated to cool down. Indeed, the pulsation between acceleration and deceleration as explained in our theoretical introduction is materialised in terms of the oscillation between hot and cool, in other words by the respective dominant opposition between fire and water. If one fails to cool her down, her
excess of heat causes an imbalance (indeed balance, whether internally or externally is a core value) that is detrimental to the sustenance of life (causing smallpox epidemics or famine by way of scorching droughts) and can be countered by offering her the cooling rice cooked in milk (Obeyesekere 1987:42-43). “... her cult, like that of other gods, was related to the achievement of this worldly goals—fertility, welfare of man and beast, prevention and care of infectious diseases, etc. Thus, in the Sinhala Low Country infectious diseases and children’s illnesses were cured by Pattini. In other areas this role was taken over by the Kiri Ammā; sometimes the Kiri Ammā were viewed as servants of Pattini, sometimes (though more rarely) as manifestations of her” (Gombrich & Obeyesekere1988:159).

Hence, most important for our discussion is that Pattini is regarded as a mother goddess protecting children and having bestowed the same tasks on her retinue, the seven milk-mothers. As there is popular recognition that Pattini is benevolent and has reached a higher stage in the Buddhist pantheon, as discussed earlier, the ceremony draws upon wider Buddhist themes such as transferring merit to both the gods and the child and its family members. As such, misfortune, bad luck, or ill-health can be averted in order to have a prosperous and healthy life, hence engaging again the existential concerns of regeneration, anxiety, and the desire for the good life.

The Ritual

The night before the actual rite, the parental house where the rite is to be held the following dawn is filled with a bustling activity. The women prepare the sweets, pounding rice and coconut to powder for the ever-recurring kävung: a combination of rice and coconut. They grate coconuts to prepare the coconut milk in which the käkulū or unsteamed rice will be boiled to make the likewise recurring milk-rice. Some work almost throughout the night to get everything nicely prepared and decorated by 5 a.m. when the first visitors start to arrive. Some others have enjoyed a secret drink during the evening and wake up a little later. Nevertheless, all are present when the seven kiriammāḷā enter dressed in white clothes as suited to their upāsikā reputation. It is the same dress that women wear when they observe the eight or ten precepts during the poya days, as will be discussed later. The dress evokes purity, which is enhanced when the women’s feet are washed upon entry of the house. The three-month old child sits in the middle of the room with its parents facing a small shrine in front of an image of Pattini, beset oil lamps and incense burning between the flowers. The seven
mothers sit to the side of the room and receive their breakfast doled out by members of the extended family. The family members lay a banana leaf in front of each mother as well as give each a share of bananas, milk-rice, kāvung, and other sweets in addition to the obligatory betel leaves and areca nuts, as depicted in the pictures below.

When the food is doled out, the kiriammālā recite the homage or Vandanā to the Buddha: “Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhasa [Honour to the Blessed One, The Exalted One, The Fully-Enlightened One]”. This homage is also recited in everyday evening pūjas, as mentioned in the chapter on everyday life, and is followed by the Tisarana or The Three Refuges repeated three times as follows: “Buddham saranam gacchāmi [I go to the Buddha as my Refuge], Dhammam saranam gacchāmi [I go to the Dhamma (teachings) as my Refuge], Sangham saranam gacchāmi [I go to the Sangha (monastic order) as my Refuge].” Thereafter follows the recitation of the Panca Sīla or The Five precepts to be virtuous at lay level (recall the virtuous men of the Angulimāla Pirith that observe ten such rules). They include the precepts to abstain from killing, taking that which is not given, sexual misconduct, false speech, and intoxicants. When the upāsaka (men), upāsikā (women), or other people at poya days observe eight precepts, they moreover completely ban sexual activity, take no solid food after the noon, and avoid luxurious behaviour (e.g. not sleeping on a bed). If they observe the ten precepts, they also refrain from engaging with silver and gold (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988:24-25). To return to the rite, one mother expresses the hope for a good and virtuous life for the child and its family and then they conclude by praising the triple gem of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, and also the nine qualities of the Buddha or the Nava Guna Gāthā. With oil lamps in their hands they encircle the young family seven times and then they exit the house after which all present at the rite follow. Upon their exit the seven mothers pour water on the feet of the participants in an act of blessing and purification.
Unlike in Richard Gombrich’s (1971:10) observations, there is no overflowing of milk rite or kiriutereme, as we will discuss later, that I could observe at this particular rite. At the end of the rite, which takes about one hour, we eat our sweet breakfast and relax, enjoying each other’s company. The intensity of the night and the rite decreases into a mellow chat before rising again into a cleaning frenzy.

We see that coconut and rice take a central stage in the food offerings given to the seven mothers, the merit acquired, and the blessings returned. The protection obtained serves to ward off diseases and enhance the sustenance of life, which the coconut milk and rice in the milk-rice articulate together and render present by way of its coloured and substantiated connection with lactating mothers (milk-mothers). I argue that the “kiriamma” in the Kiriammālā Ğāne and its evocation of lactating mothers combines the protective and fertility (life-sustaining) aspects of this rite. Moreover, these concerns are articulated and condensed in the union of coconut and rice, in the forms of both kiribath and kävung, conducive to health and continuation of a ‘good’ life. The link between milk and fertility and thus life-sustenance is present in the rite just described, but becomes much more clearly articulated in the female rite of passage or the Vādiviyata Pat Vīme, sometimes also called Big-Girl Ceremony.
Vādiviyata Pat Vīme

The Vādiviyata Pat Vīme or the coming of age rite is celebrated when the girl has her first menses. For boys, there is no such specific and institutionalised life-cycle rite and so the following account pertains only to girls.

When the girl has her first menstruation, she is secluded in her room and is subjected to various alimentary and behavioural rules during the few days of her separation until she takes a bath during the actual rite. The separation, her leaving the room, and the ritual bathing take place according to auspicious times that are calculated by a nākat mahataya (astrologer) who is consulted by her uncle. In addition to that, her family prepares a party to show off their grown-up girl to her other relatives, friends, and fellow villagers, and thereby implicitly announce that she soon becomes a potential marriage partner. The fact that everyone knows her fertile state entails a shift in her freedom to move around in the village. To protect her chastity and virginity, her whereabouts are more subject to scrutiny and control. Hence, triggered by the biological process of growth, she enters the rite as a girl, passes through a liminal stage of seclusion and re-enters society after some rites and the party.

During her seclusion, which lasts somewhere between three to seven days, depending on the auspicious times determined by the astrologer, her life changes radically. She stays in a separate room where she is constrained in her activities. There is no mirror and she cannot comb her hair. She is not allowed to be seen by men, not even her relatives, and she has to be covered by a veil if she comes out of her room. Most interviewees explained these procedures by stating that the girl is in a polluted state (some saying kili, which is more powerful than the other word used, pili, which denotes less pollution, but rather repulsive and impure) and thus she is very fragile and susceptible to attacks from demons and other malicious forces. Deborah Winslow (1980) notes an additional concern, not mentioned during my interviews: that these protective measures are rather oriented towards the men who can be hurt by her pollution. Be it as it may, her best female friend joins her to keep her company the whole time of seclusion and ensure she is all right. The diet of the secluded girl changes quite drastically during the seclusion period and the food taboos indicate that the girl’s protection is a core concern during the rite. She can no longer eat any kind of hot foods, fish, meat (white and red), egg, fried foods, and sour fruits, such as pineapple.

I contend that there are three main reasons for these dietary rules. First, as interviewees mentioned, the girl is in a polluted state (kili) during her menses. Pollution is defined
according to the Hindu concept of purity, which is highly moral in nature and powerful in shaping interactions among people and with deities. Being in a polluted state renders a girl prone to attracting *yakkhas* (devils), *pretas* (hungry ghosts), and *dōsa* (misfortune). Recall that *dōsa* in our Ayurvedic account pointed at the imbalance of the three humours, often brought about by foods, which constitutes the class of natural *dōsa* and also by supernatural powers that constitute the group of *dōsa* caused by nonhumans. Yet, the detrimental influence of the malicious devils or goblins does not always pass via their effect on the three humours, but can be passed on directly towards a person. Hence, the concept of *dōsa* is wider than mere illness and can include famine or family discontent caused by these lesser beings or bad planetary constellations that have astrological impacts on people’s lives (Obeyesekere 1987:44-45). Fried foods, meats, and fish that are offered to the *yakkhas* and *pretas* should not be eaten by the secluded girl, as their consumption can easily attract the attention or look (*bälma*) of these nonhuman beings who can easily enter into the girl in her polluted and fragile state. Indeed, as any moment of transformation entails fragility and uncertainty, people try to make sure that everything goes well. The ritual observance of different food patterns is a technique to ensure such a beneficial transition in life.

A second reason for the observance of these food prescriptions is situated in the ideas of heat and balance. Most hot foods (in the Ayurvedic sense) have to be avoided as the girl is deemed to be in a very hot state already when she is discharging blood. An excess of heat (or the fire element) could make her loose too much blood, which in turn could make her even more vulnerable to demon attacks (Winslow 1980:613). Moreover, these hot foods are also themselves attractive to demons (*yakkhas*), which relates to our previous point of avoiding foods longed after by these lesser beings. Interestingly, Deborah Winslow (1980:607, 613) mentions in this regard that coconut should be avoided, whereas later she writes that milk-rice (mostly made with coconut milk) is seen as a good cooling food that can bring the heat down and provide some protection.

Finally, and related to the previous point, I suggest that the avoidance of foods such as pineapple are also related to safeguarding the girl’s fertility. During many interviews, people mentioned that pineapple is very sour and hot and a few mentioned the attempt of some pregnant women to abort their foetus by consuming lots of pineapple. The excessive heat generated in the body and womb destroys the fragile life (engaging the core idea of a right balance as being vital to life sustenance and regeneration) and as such, the aforementioned concern with excessive heat and blood ties in very clearly with the concern of fertility. The
latter becomes more explicit when viewed in light of the rites that occur when the girl comes out of her room.

At an auspicious time, the girl who has been secluded for several days is covered by a white cloth, denoting the death of the girl and the birth of a ‘purified’ woman. Indeed, transitions in life are often modelled after the transition between lives as it occurs in the cycles of death and rebirth. In this overall view on rebirth, death is then inextricably related to life and vice versa. What happens after she exits the room of seclusion apparently varies greatly across Sri Lanka. In my area of research, interviewees have told me the story I am narrating here. I did not observe these phases of seclusion, the coming out of the room, and the ritual bathing, as seeing these events is considered taboo for men. Yet, my host sister told me about her own experience and I participated upon invitation at the feast afterwards in another case. The rite is not very common anymore; the widely announced party afterwards is often particularly criticised by many villagers for turning the girl into free game.

To return to the actual rite, the girl is led to the backyard by two aunts who place her in front of a milk tree (kiri gaha), a tree that yields a milky substance, often a jackfruit tree. The aunts pour water over her and then lift her veil. The first thing she sees is this milk tree, which is deemed auspicious. It also articulates the girl with the tree and unites them in their milk-giving and life-giving capacities. Sometimes a small cut is made into the tree so that the milk oozes from its stem, and then the connection with a lactating mother and the overarching theme of procreation and fertility is not hard to find. Seeing this tree is deemed to affect the girl in her luck and fertility as a mother-to-be (recall the link made earlier between prosperity and fertility). Still the men are not allowed see the newborn fertile woman. She is taken into another room where she bathes and sees herself anew in the mirror when she combs her hair. After about an hour or so, she jumps over a stick acting as a hurdle at an auspicious time and this is the end of the actual transformative phase of the rite. Deborah Winslow (1980:613-614) notes at rites of transitions that: “the new behaviour that the child is to assume routinely from then on is this first time acted out in an auspicious and almost exaggerated manner.” This enactment enables to set precedents under the most auspicious circumstances. In this seclusion she learns to deal with her pollution and her relation with men in a very clear way. When she comes among the people she starts worshipping or showing her respects to her parents and all those present. She has made her entry into the society as a woman with all the rules of comportment it entails in everyday and ritual life. The clothes that the girl wore during her seclusion used to be given to a woman from the dōbi or laundry caste, but these
days an aunt takes and washes these clothes that are seen as impure. The party in the evening entails rice and curry with various drinks (including the ‘secret’ alcoholic ones). The exhausted girl meets everyone, but hangs around mostly with her female friends.

As usual, the breakfast of such a day of transformation entails kävung (oil cake that is a mixture of coconut and rice flour) and kiribath (cooling mixture of rice and coconut). Other food items include sweets that are made of treacle, coconut, and rice powder, and of course bananas. In fact, bananas recur almost as often as rice and coconut in ritual meals. The various physical and mythical articulations of bananas would require more research as it seems that the ritual ‘trinity’ of banana, coconut, and rice articulate and enhance life sustenance and regeneration in a way that the recurrence of the particular combination of coconut and rice does in a pervasive and striking way.

In another account, a villager told me that instead of jumping over a hurdle, the girl walks around the back of the house and enters the front door again, but this time as a menstruating woman. When she has entered and reaches an altar, her mother or aunt lifts the veil and she is then presented to her community. Just as she has faced the milk tree in our main account, in this case she faces an altar with milk-rice and kävung, articulating her fertility and female capacity of reproduction with these food items that recur over and over again at such transition moments related to life regeneration (with respect to health, sustenance, fertility, and overall prosperity). Deborah Winslow (1980:608) mentions an additional act where the girl, upon re-entry into the house, breaks the coconut in two halves. First it removes the poisons and pollutions from herself and the house (recall that this entails the surrogate self-sacrifice that I mentioned earlier and that will be discussed in more detail during the harvest rites). Yet, there is also a divinatory aspect to this act: the prediction of the girl’s future. If both halves of the coconut fall outside of the house, she will marry soon; if both are inside, she will wed late; and if one is in and the other out, she will get a husband in a normal range of time. Also the size of the halves tells something. The female half with the three germination holes should not be much larger or smaller than the male half with the tuft so that one of the future partners does not become dominant in the marriage.

Deema de Siva (2002) has also observed another rite as part of the whole coming of age process in which the milk tree also plays a role. She writes: “Before the bath, the girl is escorted by the mother to look at a tree that exudes a milky sap when cut. The milk signifies richness of the occasion as well as a symbol of fertility and purity. The girl then walks into the
bathroom, accompanied by her mother. She stands on a mat woven out of dry coconut leaves on which has been sprinkled unhusked rice. Unhusked rice, having the potential life for sprouting, is a symbol of fertility for the Sinhalese” (de Silva 2002:112). The washing of the girl purifies her and eradicates her state of kili.

In the latter account we see that a phase in the life of rice (unhusked paddy) is articulated with the life-cycle of a female human being who from the rite onwards likewise possesses the potential of life to sprout. This articulation of stages in life-cycles of plants and human beings also occurs in relation to the coconut as described earlier in relation to the Angulimāla Pirith and to be discussed in greater detail in the harvest ritual later. In this articulation, the rice or coconut and the human being get entangled as to mutually articulate each other in the becoming-specific in relation to each other in what I have termed a relational or mutual becoming.

Let us now turn to a discussion of the wedding, the hallmark of social and sexual reproduction and fertility.
The Wedding or Magul Pōruwa

The wedding process as a whole includes many phases, ceremonial activities, and rites, starting from the selection of a spouse. People make a distinction between a love marriage and a proposed marriage. In the former case, the lovers select each other with parental approval, followed by more formal visits between the two extended families. In the other case, a spouse is proposed by the parents of one of the potential partners or by a matchmaker who is hired to spot suitable wedding partners. What is important in the parental selection is the measure in which the horoscopes of both potential partners match. At birth, such horoscopes are written down on a palm leaf and kept aside as a source of information in important life events and particularly to aid in the selection of a wedding partner. A mismatch of horoscopes is sufficient to stop the whole procedure, as this is believed to be a bad sign for the future happiness of the couple. When the initial and often informal and hidden inquiries about the caste and status of the future partners and their relatives bring positive news, the parents of the future partners and the parents’ brothers and sisters meet up. In the account on everyday life, I discussed such a meeting event in more detail. The first one generally takes place at the girl’s home and the second at the house of the boy. When a second meeting is planned, it becomes nearly the point of no return where it is impossible to withdraw.

If the plan is still on, they select an auspicious day for the official registration, a day replete with auspicious timings and rhythms and a festive atmosphere. In some cases the registration precedes the wedding ceremony on the same day, whereas in other cases it is held at another time. It would take us far too long to describe such a separate registration day in detail, but suffices to note that on that day the two extended families are united by way of the feeding of milk-rice to everyone by the married couple, something which is repeated during the actual rite that I will describe. Indeed, in this section I will focus on the wedding day and more specifically on the activities and decorations that come into play when the couple stand on the platform or pōruwa after which the wedding is named. I will soon return to a discussion of this platform and what happens on it, but the overview of the wedding procedure is not complete without mentioning the homecoming party in the end. A few days after the couple is wed they return from the honeymoon and the girl usually moves in with the boy’s family. It is an emotional moment as from that time onwards the girl is no longer a full family member of the relatives who ‘give’ her away, sometimes with a dowry or presents that she can use. During the homecoming rite, she becomes a part of her family-in-law. Hence, both joy and sadness are very much part of this day and the party at the end. I witnessed frantic dancing,
singing and drinking among the men in particular, and outbursts of tears among the family members of the new wife being separated upon leaving at the end of the party. As such, the ambivalence of the wedding as a transformation of the relationalities is quite explicit.

Let us now turn to the *Magul Pōruwa*, named after the platform on which the couple is standing as shown in the picture below.

![Platform at a wedding](image)

I will briefly describe the wedding events and will discuss the platform decorations and actions that occur on top of it in greater detail. I have attended several weddings and of course there are variations in their procedures and elaborations, often related to the financial means. In my account, I will base myself on a particular wedding I attended (that brought two relatively middle-class families together) in order to tease out the connections established between various foods and fertility, purity, and prosperity. Even though the procedures may vary across weddings, the foods seem to be a stable recurring factor or establish continuity.

*The Entry of the Groom*

In marriage, it is generally the boy who collects the girl at her house to come and live with his family until they establish their own domestic unit. This movement is repeated on the wedding day. The young man weds the young woman in a hotel in her area and takes her with him afterwards. When the groom and his relatives and friends arrive, they are preceded by dancers that clear the path from evils. The dancers re-create the atmosphere of the old Kandyan kingdoms and the royalty. Indeed, the couple is treated like a prince and princess on their wedding day and particularly on the platform that mimetically transforms into a throne during some of the phases. The procession moves slowly towards the entry where the girl’s
parents and other relatives are receiving the guests. The groom receives a bunch of betel leaves from the girl’s father’s elder brother, who plays a crucial role in the ceremony, and returns it to him. The maternal uncle then passes the betel leaves back to the groom’s father who likewise returns it again. This is a respectful act of invitation and is repeated a few times. This sharing of betel leaves forges relationships between the two families and could be moreover considered an element in fostering sexual relationships between bride and groom (Rooney 1993:34). The bride’s mother sprinkles water on the feet of the groom. The jasmine in the water is a purifying agent and again articulates respect for the groom and his extended family. Thereafter they move on to the registration in which the signing of the official documents occurs at auspicious times. Let us now turn to the actual pōruwa rite and start with a description of the physical set-up of the platform and the crystallised articulations that the decorations entail.

*The Set-Up of the Pōruwa*
In the picture above and the previous picture of the platform we can see the coconut flowers and the oil lamp on top of the punkalasa or full pot at both sides of the platform. As discussed earlier in relation to the Angulimāla Pīrith, these pots articulate the coconut flowers, the water inside, and the oil lamp with fertility and prosperity, engaging two core concerns for the wedding couple. Other items used during the rite, such as the white cloths, the teapot with white thread around it and a plate with kiribath, two pieces of kävung, and two bananas are placed on the platform. Their utilisations and articulations will be explored during our further account of the rite. In one of the pictures below we see a close up of the plate with the three main ingredients of life regeneration: rice and coconut as combined in kävung and kiribath, and plantain. In the other picture, we can see another ‘construct’ that will be analysed in greater detail during the discussion of the harvest rite as it recurs there as well. It suffices to state for now that this threefold structure connects the lotus leaf with a mountain of rice on top of which a coconut emerges between betel leaves and some coins. As pointed out earlier, this network of items in their connection articulate the becoming of the world as described earlier in relation to the mythical lotus emerging from the primordial waters and mount Meru upon which Ganesh and other deities dwell. Hence, the regeneration of life enhanced by marriage is connected to the cosmic regeneration by way of this physical ordering of these food and plant items.

The fact that a kapurāla or spirit priest is the master of ceremony and invokes the deities and the Buddha in asking their protection gives a cosmological tinge to the wedding, something which stands in contrast to the claim made by Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere (1988:260) that marriage ceremonies have no religious significance. Yet, they acknowledge an increasing ritualisation and ‘sacralisation’ (in terms of marriage as a kind of sacrament in Protestant Buddhism) that I have observed in terms of the royalistic air that surrounds the
couple (prince and princess) and brings them closer to the deities who are the kings and queens of mount Meru. The by now popular format of the ritualised wedding ceremony is indeed derived from the historical and royal weddings as performed by the Kandyan kings. To return to the platform, we find several betel leaves with a small heap of paddy and a coin on top, articulating in their combination the hope for prosperity. On the white cloth, there are some straw parts and unhusked paddy that presence the wish for fertility and the potential of life, as likewise argued in relation to the Big-Girl Ceremony.

*Mounting the Pōruwa*

At a designated auspicious time, the bride and groom simultaneously step onto the platform encouraged by the kapurāla who utters the phrase: “step your fertile foot on the pōruwa” in which he alludes to a step into the married and fertile life. The connection of the word pōruwa with fertility, articulating the fertility of the fields with the marital procreation, becomes clearer when looking at the evolution of this rite. As I have been told by various informants and by Gananath Obeyesekere (conversation with author May 23, 2009), the pōruwa rite used to be very different, whereas the link between fertility in agriculture and fertility in sexual reproduction has always been clearly articulated. Gananath Obeyesekere observed around 60 years ago that in Lagalla, east of Matale, the wedding took place around a pōruwa instrument. Indeed, the pōruwa also signifies the flat board used to level and smooth the paddy fields before the paddy seeds are strewn on them.

In this rite, the pōruwa was put on the floor and the stick attached to the board divides the left and right side of the floor. As on the stage, the bride stood on the left side and the groom on the right. In the transition to the platform, the board is set horizontally and the stick is
removed, so the flat board used to level the fields is turned into the platform on which the couple stands. This could explain the same name being used for both the instrument and the platform, preparing the regeneration of life, whether it is the preparation of the beds in the paddy fields for the seeds to germinate or the marriage that prepares the generation of offspring. These associations between fertility, agriculture, and the couple are ‘apparent’ to most present at the marriage ceremony (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988:262). Thus by way of the linguistic connection and the physical ordering of the couple, we can clearly derive the articulation of the agricultural bed with the marital bed of reproduction in terms of an emphasis on fertility and prosperity.

**Softly Throwing Betel Leaves**

The kapurāla explains that his performance of the rite preserves Sinhalese culture and that it occurs according to the religious doctrine and the ancient customs handed down by the gods. In this he grounds his practice in a religious source and in history that serve as sources of justification for how he performs, whereas historical research seems to show that the rite has thoroughly been altered and that what the kapurāla does is rather part of a recent evolution (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988:255-260). It is an example of the way in which invented tradition works and grounds itself (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1992). The kapurāla states that he works in the traditional ways of ancient gods and kings in weddings, and talks about the Kailasa palace on mount Meru where the deities (mentioning Ganesh, Vishnu, Chandra, Saman, Pattini...) that he is worshipping live as kings and queens, bringing about a more royalist atmosphere. Then he gives the groom and bride a betel leaf topped with a coin. Both take hold of it and softly throw it on the pōruwa and this is repeated seven times. An informant explained that this act honours the ancestors and so I contend that it involves the former generations in the regeneration of life and prosperity. This suggestion is corroborated by the fact that, while they are doing so, the kapurāla blesses the couple and mentions avanta, a Sanskrit word for a life-force with endless power (over the seven generations), generating life and continuing it by its healing power.
The Kili Kade Hälla

Following this stage, the kapurāla takes a white cloth and gives it to the groom to tie around the waist of the bride. This white cloth is called the kili kada hälla (white pollution cloth). The white colour is ambiguous in Sinhalese culture, as it denotes purity in moral and Buddhist terms and evokes death in terms of both transitions to the afterlife in funerary rites and in thisworldly life-cycles. Both the tying of this white cloth and the subsequent lifting of a similar white cloth as a veil over both the bride and groom’s head mark the death of their being a single person and their renewal as a married unity. Moreover, this renewal requires the purity of the woman (we return to this later). Occasions of transformation (the death of a phase and the birth of another) are fragile and prone to pollution that can endanger a beneficial transition. As such, the purity and health of the couple and particularly the virginity of the woman is stressed and effectively enhanced by the power of this colour. The purity is further stressed by the words of the kapurāla who refers to the observation of the Buddhist precepts and the collection of merits, thereby associating the white pollution cloth with the clothes that people wear when they observe the eight or ten precepts on full moon days or the virtuous people mentioned earlier.

The Bändīma

The bride and groom take off the white veil or canopy and the kapurāla tells the story of how the Buddha defeated Māra who by her attractive appearance tried to disrupt the Buddha’s search for the ultimate Truth. The kapurāla wishes the couple good fortune with that very power of the Buddha and states that the power of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha is conferred upon the white thread that will play its role in the coming phase. The maternal uncle of the bride covers his head with a white cloth and binds the little fingers of the couple’s right hands. Given the colloquial Sinhalese word, bändīma, for this specific act and for the wedding in general, the act of binding (bandineva) the two people is a highlight of the rite. The binding of the rope thus materialises and holographically condenses the core ideas of what the wedding entails and of which it is part. Additionally, the power of the triple gem is conferred onto the thread and is supposed to have a positive impact on the couple, just as in the case of the white thread in the Angulimāla Pirit. After the binding, the maternal uncle pours water over the knot to seal and bless the union. While he pours the water, the kapurāla wishes the couple all good things and protection from the gods by the power of the Buddha, Dhamma,
and Sangha. I suggest moreover that this pouring of water, in its evocation of the pouring of water at funerals (as a materialisation of the transfer of merit to the deceased as Gombrich [1971] explained) and in the kapurāla’s enunciation of wishes, may involve a transfer of merit to the couple to enhance their well-being, luck, protection, fertility, and prosperity.

The Jayamangala Gāthā

The Buddhist connection is further strengthened by the four girls who come next. The young girls are dressed in white and sing the Jayamangala Gāthā, which is a Pāli text that refers to Buddha’s power and victory over evil and passion. Such power is bestowed onto the couple by the uttering of these words.
It is interesting to note that the ideal of ascetic renunciation is articulated together with the hope for fertility by way of the foods on the platform. As Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere (1988:265) note: “To have those Buddhist verses sung by prepubertal (i.e., infertile) girls dressed in sterile white is a symbolic proceeding that from the standpoint of the traditional culture annuls the sexual and procreative aspect of marriage.” The ambiguity of this phase may have to do with the increasing Buddhicisation of nearly all spheres of life among Sinhalese. Indeed, the Buddhist references become more often prevalent and further consolidate the wedding as a Buddhist-inspired event by recasting the event as emerging from ancient history and being blessed by the triple gem (Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha).

Feeding Rite and the Fertile Union

Interestingly, this ascetic and ‘sterile’ phase is followed by the hallmark of fertility in the subsequent phase, in which the peasant origination of the rite punctures the increasingly Buddhist imaginary of the wedding. Indeed, the wedding is an ambiguous mix and assemblage of various (Buddhist and mundane) elements that alternate during the several phases. The kapurāla takes the plate with the kiribath, two pieces of kävung, and two bananas, and starts stating that the overflowing of milk rite, which we shall discuss later, and to eat kiribath are part of Sinhalese culture (in fact it is much more widespread all over South Asia). He explains that this mixture of coconut milk and rice, and this is core to my argument, embodies sasrika (fertility) and savubhāgya (prosperity). Thus, the articulation that I have discussed in relation to the physical combination and mixture of food items becomes explicitly articulated in the words of the kapurāla. He further states that fertility in our life comes from cultivation (linking the agricultural and marital bed explicitly) and that according to the custom they eat kiribath and drink milk on the pōruwa as depicted in the pictures below.
During this feeding, the kapurāla wishes them a future with the power of the Buddha conferred to them, and he states that they are having food (both the *kiribath* and the milk) together for the first time. The feeding of each other is a materialisation of their intimate binding as a newly established fertile unity.

*Honouring the Parents*

After the feeding comes the final stage of the *pōruwa* when the four parents receive a gift and are worshipped with respect. Particularly, the mother of the bride receives a lot of attention as she gives her daughter away. The role of milk is again striking in this short section of the rite. The *kapurāla* tells the story of a prince (to stay in the royal atmosphere and denotation) who invites the mother of the princess to the *pōruwa* to ask how he can repay her effort and breast milk that she gave endlessly to her daughter. First, she answers that she needs sufficient cloth to make a *sāri* (female dress), but then she remarks that it is impossible to measure the amount of breast milk that she fed her daughter in terms of measurable fabric. The mother of the princess recalls how she bathed her little girl by taking small amounts of water in the coconut shell and pouring it over her. She cannot bear the memories and the idea of having to let her go. Seeing her mother ponder this and become sad, the princess understands that even as gold becomes worthless over time, the value of her mother never fades. In the actual rite, she does receive a *sāri* from the bride and groom while the immense value of the mother and her breast milk is reaffirmed. Indeed, the intense mother-child relation that has substantiated by way of the feeding of breast milk is now partly severed as the girl moves on to live in the husband’s family.
The Descent from the Pōruwa

Before descending the pōruwa, the kapurāla recites a poem that blesses patients in a tovil antisorcery and healing rite to confer good health to the newlywed couple under the sound of drums. Simultaneously, he lights a camphor flame that he puts on top of the coconut and waves in front of the couple. This is a Hindu rite that stands for the whole ritual, a synecdochal condensation as it were (Fuller 1992:68). In this pūja, respect is shown to the gods in the hope that they confer their blessings to the couple to obtain protection before descending from the pōruwa into their new life as earthly mortals living the fragile life. The maternal uncle helps the couple descend at an auspicious time while the kapurāla confers the Buddha’s blessings and then the pōruwa rite as such is over. In some instances, the uncle breaks a coconut when the couple’s feet touch the ground, a recurring act of surrogate sacrifice, renewal, and purification, as I shall discuss later.

The Magul Kāma

Even after all these happenings on the platform (or throne), the wedding is not finished. One other element of interest is something which is called magul kāma or wedding meal that brings not only the bride and groom together (as articulated in the feeding of kiribath and milk), but also the two kin groups as a whole. Yet, my observations have been quite different from the following description of observations made in the late 1950s by Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere (1988:261): “At the magul kāma relations (generally male) of the two groups sit at the same table. A representative of the bride’s party [recall the role of the maternal uncle that I highlighted] known as dāna muttā (“master of ceremonies”) picks up a banana and later an oil cake (kāvung) (both phallic symbols), takes a bite from each, and
passes them around the table. All the relations eat of the same fruit and kävung, thus symbolizing their new unity as a single group of kinsmen brought together by the marriage [and I would add sexual union] of the young couple.” Eating and sharing the same substance connects the people into a common body that encompasses them. Indeed, the “I–You” distinction becomes blurred and turns into “Us” by the common food eaten (Curtin 1992). Moreover, Gananath Obeyesekere told me that this dāna muttā exclaimed at the end: “now we are one.” In my own observations, I did not see this very practice, but witnessed something similar where the newlywed couple cuts the sticky kiribath into pieces and starts feeding each other first. Thereafter, they hold the pieces of kiribath together while feeding members of both kin groups that thus turn into one. Yet, in my personal experience, I often noticed that during the large meal afterwards, the two kin groups intermingle only partially, which may point at the rather pragmatic and contractual nature of the binding together of two groups. This contractual nature is being supplanted and strengthened by very powerful articulations, sequences, orderings, and enunciations that we have just been discussing and that make up the totality of the event.

Concluding the Wedding

When the couple leaves they are sprinkled with water purified by jasmine flowers and they spend the first night together, often in a hotel. Several interviewees mentioned a practice that they said is being on the demise. On the first night the couple sleeps on a white cloth and have their first sexual intercourse. The pure cloth should then absorb physically and figuratively the pollution that is involved in the rupture of the hymen. But, in some cases this white cloth is also part of the virginity test, as this cloth with the blood has to be shown to the relatives as proof that she remained a virgin until the wedding. A woman commented on the necessity of this test by explaining metaphorically that a broken glass is of no use. The cloth used to be washed by a dōbi. The interviewees mentioned that in the case of there being reason to believe that the bride was not chaste, they make a large kävung, turn it upside down, and serve it like that to the other relatives present. In this situation, everybody knows that the groom has acquired a useless ‘broken glass’, which is a powerful way of publicly shaming the bride and her family. The hologram of the sexual union between the bride and groom and between two kin groups is turned upside down and so enacts the anomaly, causing a row instead of unification. This rite of looking at the cloth is called salu bālīme (de Silva 2002:140). Yet,
some couples who have had ‘secret’ sex before their wedding have found ways to circumvent the test, i.e. pricking a finger to mimic the rupture of the hymen as to avoid the scandal. Given the unanimous remarks that this rite is disappearing, it is striking that Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988:262) implied that it is a recent modification to the wedding procedure while many respondents felt it was an old custom. It may have waxed and waned rapidly, but more research would be required to substantiate this suggestion.

Finally, when the couple has celebrated the bride’s homecoming to the groom’s family, the whole range of marriage rites is over and the girl enters into a family relationship with her in-laws. At first, the couple tend to live together in the parental house of the groom’s parents, which is known to create several tensions (seems one of the universal themes). After the birth of the first child and in case of sufficient economic means, the newly expanded family moves into their own home.

**Conclusion**

We have seen how the various decorations and stages of the wedding ceremony and the pōruwa rite entail a transformation of separate entities (bride and groom and their respective kin groups) into a unity. The transformation is enacted and effectuated by way of various activities of which the sharing of food is particularly powerful. Simultaneously, this feeding in combination with the various decorations articulate the expected fertility that is hoped to materialise into a large offspring. Moreover, the potential pollution, inherent in such transformation into a sexual procreation unit involving delicate body fluids, is negotiated by purity and goodness invoked in the white colour of the cloth and milk, and of course by the invocation of the Buddha and the higher deities. The event exhibits a core tension and oscillation between the sterile asceticism in the Buddhist approach to purity and the ‘peasant’ concern with fertility and prosperity. As such, the wedding event that in earlier times seemed to have been more modest, among lower and middle classes at least, has added various (royal and Buddhist) components that do not stand in a necessarily harmonious or homogenous relationship to the other (peasant) elements as discussed. Hence, the wedding is an assemblage that is powerfully condensed in the presentation and sharing of the iconic life-giving foods, rice and coconut, whether in the form of *kiribath* or *kāvung*, and bananas. These food items thus articulate the basic concerns (purity, fertility, protection, and prosperity) that the wedding event engages and seeks to help bring about in positive ways.
After having spoken of life-transitions extensively and highlighting the role of the trinity of life-generating foods in this, let us now turn to the issue of death and which role these foods play or do not play in this event.
Funerary Rites

So far, I have been discussing the concerns and food assemblages that are engaged in enhancing a smooth transition into the next phase in life. Now, we have arrived at death, which causes suffering among the bereaved, but potentially also for the deceased, as death is not necessarily the end of the cycles of death and rebirth or cycles of becoming (*samsara*). There is a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ death possible regarding the ways of dying (softly during one’s sleep or being killed) and regarding the transition in the afterlife (towards a lower or higher level). Here, I will focus on post-funerary rites that seek to ensure a good transition and diminish the suffering of the deceased. Depending on the karmic state (a balance of the good deeds [*pin*] and bad deeds [*pau*]) of the deceased, one gets reborn in a higher or lower state, i.e. closer or further from nirvana, which is the release of the cycle of death and rebirth. As it is impossible to know the karmic state of the deceased and thus whether this person will have a ‘good’ death (I am thus referring here to the state after death), people perform funerary rites to transfer merit to the deceased in order to enhance his karmic state and afterlife. It is within this overall approach to death as being a transition that the post-funerary rites need to be understood.

*Holding a Wake*

When somebody dies, the funeral association (*maranādhāra samitiya*) in which the person was enrolled comes into action to organise the funerary rites (recall the discussion about the political split in the village and the effect this had on dividing this association into two groups along these political lines as well). As such the organisation seeks to alleviate part of the already heavy burden resting on the shoulders of the mourning relatives. The body is dressed up (often in pure white clothes and sometimes in a suit) and laid on a coffin that can be opened and closed, and which is placed under a white canopy surrounded by burning oil lamps at four sides, two lamps, two (fake) elephant tusks at each side of the dead body, and a sign of the Buddhist wheel of the teachings of the eightfold path.
From the moment of death, the house is in a polluted state and the other inhabitants can no longer cook any food, as the food carries this pollution across and brings it into the devouring person. Hence, the funeral association builds temporary facilities to cook outside or uses the kitchen(s) of the neighbours to prepare tea and meals for the grieving family members and visitors. The deceased body is exposed in the front-room of the house and stays home on the bier for about three days. During this period, there is a lot of activity in the domestic compound and those of the neighbours. Many visitors arrive to pay their respects and to sit up with the body. Some only stay for a little while whereas others stay there continuously until a few days after the actual burial. When the visitors have seen the body and greeted some of the mourning relatives and friends, they go outside and chat with others who are having a conversation, chewing betel and areca nut, and smoking a bīdi (tobacco filled leaves) or cigarette. Some leave the place to have a secret drink intermittently while others stick to drinking tea or juice and eating some biscuits. Around the meal times, those present partake in the food that has been prepared in the neighbouring house by friends and volunteers of the funeral association. The drinks are prepared in the make-shift kitchen in the garden. All kitchen utensils and plates are rinsed outside in the garden. While the people chat and morally support the bereaved, they also play cards or Carrom as a means to spend time with each other and pass the time in a relatively cosy way. There is a lot of activity in and around the house during this period even though some fall asleep at times. The atmosphere alternates and oscillates between intense emotional moments of weeping and moments of waiting, sleeping, and even boredom. People keep vigil as the dead body is in a very fragile state and should never be left alone. Its polluting state can attract unwanted invisible visitors that may render a smooth transition to the afterlife more difficult for the deceased. People also explained that when more people are present, the easier it becomes for the deceased to let go, as he can see that his relatives are being supported. The vigil is part of enabling a good death, as it not only
entails not being alone at the moment of death, but also entails being surrounded by many people after death and during the transition period.

Preparing the Funeral

The day of the actual burial is again very in-tense and entails many stages in the rite. In the morning, while the members of the funeral association are preparing the scene and the route towards the cemetery, the women are cooking lunch for an anticipated large crowd. The men hang white flags and papers on sticks along the route that the coffin will pass in the afternoon and they prepare the coconut arch at the entry of the domestic compound. They also prepare the seats for the monks and the visitors and make sure that the loudspeaker functions for those who will make their speeches. The nearby kitchen flows over with frantic activity and heated efforts. The bereaved sit inside the room with their beloved one. Gradually, the visitors arrive and they come in quickly to pay their very last respects and take a sit somewhere in the garden or under the tin roof that is set up for the occasion (as protection against either the rain or the scorching heat of the sun).

The Funeral Meal

People chat, children play and some wait for lunch. Like at any social gathering, various motivations for participating in the rite come into play. I have often been struck, for instance, by the banter, laughter, and sometimes festive sideways of funerals. Moreover, while they submerge in the crowd and chaos, boys and girls find themselves with a possibility to play the game of seduction. They exchange looks and smiles and the resonance in behaviours makes boys and girls coalesce into two plural singular or composite bodies of one boy and girl on the love path. Indeed, even a funeral becomes a space for the regeneration of relationships and the possibility of new sexual reproductions in the long run. My host sister first met her wedding partner during such a funerary occasion. Some other visitors may be professional ‘party crashers’ who seemingly come to the party just to obtain good food. Someone, who at the time had no wife to cook for him, admitted during a conversation that he often went to funerals and other ritual events with the predominant aim to feed himself decently for free. There is often a large amount of varied and healthy curries served with rice at such events. Moreover, he argued, he is still helping the family of the deceased as they want to have as
many people as possible to share their food with, so they can acquire more merit that is transferred to the deceased. In this sense, we have a situation in which both parties have their own personal motivations while mutually benefitting each other.

**The First Journey**

After lunch (at least this has been the case at all the funerals I fully attended), the close relatives and friends gather in the room where the body has been exposed for about three days. Some men of the association close the coffin and start taking it outside. This is the start of the journey away from the home. The bereaved understand this and so this moment is highly emotional. The sounds of the weeping and screaming vibrate into the garden where people sit down quietly, look dejected, and wait. The men carry the coffin to a place under the tin roof in the garden in front of the house. The coffin stands closed in front of seats covered by white cloth on which the monks sit down. The funeral is the only life-cycle rite in which monks actively participate (even though with the Buddhicisation of the wedding it occurs that monks give their blessings before the wedding partners leave their home). This is because the funeral is not only about worldly and material concerns of regeneration, but also about the core business of the transitions between lives and the extinction of suffering in nirvana.

**Offering the Purifying Cloth of the Dead**

The monks sit in front of the closed coffin and some of them chew betel and areca nut while listening to speeches of friends and relatives praising the personality and social achievements of the deceased. Thereafter, following the recitation of the salutation to the Buddha, the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts, the monks preach about the impermanence of life and the aim of reaching nirvana. Following this, both the monks and relatives hold a white cloth, which can negotiate the pollution of death. The cloth hangs over the coffin as depicted below.
The relatives offer this ‘cloth of the dead’ to the monks and in return receive merit that they transfer to the deceased. This cloth is then folded away to be used again later.

*Overflowing of Water*

Next comes a crucial highlight. The monks chant the following as translated by Rita Langer (2007:64): “Impermanent are conditioned things; it is their nature to arise and fall; having arisen they cease; their complete stilling is happiness.” This refers to the teaching of the Dependent Origination or the *Paticca-Samuppāda*, as discussed in the second chapter regarding the location of desire in this twelvelfold chain of becoming. Thereafter, the close relatives start pouring water into a cup or glass until it overflows into the tray or bucket in which it stands.
Meanwhile, the monks chant the following verses that may be translated into the following:

- “Yathā vārivahā pūrā paripūrenti sāgaram, evam eva itō dinnam petānam upakappati [Just as the rivers are filling with water and flowing to the sea, may you get our merit and complete your life without having a birth as a preta.]”
- “Unname udaka vattam yathā ninnam pavattati, evam eva itō dinnam petānam upakapati [Just as the water flows from higher ground to the lower land, may you get our merit and complete your life without having a birth as a preta.]”

As the cup fills, the monks continue to chant for the fulfilment of all desires, such as good harvests and prosperity, “like a radiant gem and like the moon on full moon day”, concluding with: “By the force of this merit may the next rebirths be good ones! May nirvana be attained!” (Langer 2007:65).

This section of the funeral solicits closer scrutiny. The cup that fills with water renders present and enacts the rivers in the upper area that flow to the tray where the water feeds the soil in the valley that prepares a good harvest, articulating the good merit as a foundation for the next life, and subsequently overflowing into the sea of nirvana in the tray. This physical set up and flow repeats the kiriutereme (overflowing of milk rite) in which coconut milk boils over in all directions in the renewal of the world, which I will discuss in greater detail later. Here, the water clearly materialises merit (Gombrich 1971:13) that the close relatives transfer, so the deceased will not be reborn as a preta. Moreover, the milk in the life-transition rites evoke the primordial sea, just as the water here, in which the world era ends and from which a new cycle emerges, hence, connecting the milk with the water. The deceased fizzles out in a
‘watery way’ out into the sea from which in a more ‘milky way’ emerges a new life cycle. Hence, the rite articulates the death of the person with life cycle transitions (in terms of fertility and prosperity in the overflowing milk) and the regeneration of the world in general (recall the milky layer on top of the primordial water that ignited life-creating desire in the Agañña Sutta).

While the overflowing of water resembles the overflowing of (coconut) milk or kiriutereme, and articulates similar concerns regarding cycles and transformations, they do so in relation to a different temporality. Milk articulates, in this physical movement of overflowing, the transformation between phases in this life and the concern with the fragility implied in such transformation that may go wrong. The milk becomes an agent in enhancing the success of the new phase of becoming. The kiriutereme is performed at many occasions of prosperity: the New Year, harvest rituals, and at offerings to various deities for vows regarding thisworldly matters. Yet, as mentioned earlier, the kiriutereme performance during life-transition rituals, such as the reading ceremony, first cutting of hair, and the Big-Girl Ceremony’ articulates these transitions in life during growth (negotiating the bivalence with regard to blossoming and withering of life). By drawing upon this life-enhancing rite during the funeral, people negotiate, in the overflowing of water, the important and precarious transition from one life to another that death mediates, hoping that the dead person reaches nirvana. Hence, this transformation is of a different temporality spanning several lives. The milk that articulates and attempts to enhance joyful transitions in this life then becomes insufficient to articulate the fundamental existentiality and extended temporality of death. The life-force of water (in the formation of merit and good rebirth that it aids to materialise) is operating in both thisworldly and otherworldly life (or at least at the transformative borderlinking phase between both spheres of life), whereas the milk is predominantly recognised as the origin of this life and in its life-giving and sustaining capacity in this world. Indeed, the transformations within this life and between lives cannot be confused. When I inquired during my interviews as to why the water is not replaced by milk in this funerary rite, my respondents were flabbergasted and could not explain why, merely stating that “it is impossible” or “it is only done at joyful occasions”. This question seemed to cause an incommensurable link, which caused a deep shock to my respondents. However, Rita Langer (2007:65) mentions that after the burial she observed a kiriutereme at the place where the dead body had been exposed. Given that I never saw this practice, I checked her description with my respondents and informants. They reacted in disbelief, but they did mention the
practice, which nowadays has largely disappeared in my area of study, of sprinkling thick coconut milk and lime to purify the whole house where the body of the deceased had been placed on the bier and where all cooking activity was stopped from the point of death. It is only after this purification with this mixture, that the hearth-fire could be lit again. As Rita Langer (2007:78) links this boiling over of milk to the ending of impurity, this old purificatory practice may have evolved into the kiriutereme in the area where she did her fieldwork. Anyway, through the purificatory power of the white coconut milk, the cooking process, which was stopped after death, can be started up again bringing the house back to life, further consolidating the coconut as a life-affirming substance in the thisworldly life. In other words, it is the machinic producer of life and life-regenerating activities, and the conductor of the rhythms of life brought back into the house.

*The Final Journey*

To return to the actual funeral, we observe that after this rite of the ‘overflowing of water’ many make speeches about the deceased. When these are finished, the monks leave and the coffin is opened again. Generally, this is the last time the women can see their beloved one, as they not very often join the coffin to the (very polluted) cemetery. It is a highly intense and eruptive moment filled with deep emotions running free. The men close the coffin and carry it from the house to the cemetery which is situated at the west side of the village where the sun sets, just as life does. As they quickly walk, someone throws puffed rice at the coffin, which is covered by the white cloth that was blessed earlier. Deema de Silva (2002:149) writes about this practice: “Popped rice and sand is strewn on the white cloth. The popped rice, in contrast to the seed with the husk, is unable to give rise to a new plant. It is not a source of potential life and is symbolic of death.”
The Burial

When they arrive at the cemetery, the grave has already been dug with a ‘fence’ of white cloth pieces around it. The men enter the area through an arch of coconut leaves and carry the coffin around the grave pit three times, following the movement of the sun, and then put it down with the head of the deceased person oriented towards the west.

They open the coffin and those who joined the trip pay their last respects at this time.

Thereafter, they close the coffin and everybody throws a morsel of earth on top of it, as the grave diggers start to fill the grave and add the finishing touches on top of the mount that remains. In some cases, these finishing touches include plants and flowers, but in other cases, I have observed coconut stems placed around the burial ground. These stems are stripped of any leaves, flowers, and nuts, hence of its life-bearing and generating capacity. As such, the coconut assemblage without a crown is articulated with the deceased person who has no more life-potency in this life. In a similar way of materialising death, there is the practice of cutting
off the head at the germination pole side of a maturing coconut and placing it on top of the earth covering the coffin and next to the four candles placed in a cut banana stem.

The latter practice is another articulation and formation of the end of growth in this life as well. Uchiyamada (2001:178) 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 (both in physical and figurative way) the deceased family member beneath it and the absence of life-force.

Māla Bath

During the burial, some male relatives that remained home have started preparing the māla bath. They fill a new earthenware pot with rice and other ingredients (in contrast to the normal procedure where rice and curries are prepared in separate pots) and place it on a small log-fire on the floor where the body was kept. They cook ingredients of which the deceased was especially fond and carry the māla bath outside the compound as to help the deceased depart. To explain the way food collaborates in achieving this goal, I need to first explain in more detail the transition to death and the fears involved.

The interviewees I discussed this rite with mentioned the necessity of doing it in every case, since one can never be sure which way the deceased is departing. There is always the possibility that the dying person has a craving upon death (mostly for the home, land, beloved ones, and their preferred home food). In this case, the deceased can get stuck in-between death and rebirth and become a preta (the Buddhist epitome of excessive desire and craving) hovering: “between one birth and the next because of their overriding attachment to the
material needs and wants of existence and to the emotional and social bonds of human life. They are forms of human existence in extreme suffering” (Kapferer 1997:109). Gananath Obeyesekere (1987:46) eloquently describes their highly lamentable state: “They are ugly creatures with distended stomachs, immensely greedy yet unable to eat owing to their needle-thin throats.” Hence, this formation of desire is the antipole of the core Buddhist concern with the annihilation of desire and attachment on the path to nirvana. This state is feared and most funerary rites revolve precisely around this concern. One way of dealing with this concern is, at the moment of death, letting go of any attachments and thinking of a meritorious act. This final action helps making inoperative minor mistakes that count in the final karmic balance of pau and pin that determines ones rebirth and thus helps in achieving a higher rebirth (de Silva 2002:146). Hence, as one can never be entirely sure whether the deceased still has a craving upon death and the related karmic state, one transfers merit in order to aid the person in becoming reborn in a higher state towards nirvana. The feared possibility of the deceased becoming a preta is compounded by the fact that these lesser beings are not able to perform deeds themselves to acquire more merit and escape that situation. They depend entirely on others to do so. Hence, this state of being is the worst spectre for these Sinhalese villagers. The merit transfer enacted by the pouring of water is one such way of dealing with this core concern for the well-being of the deceased friend or relative. Moreover, if the relatives do not depart well, the departed can stick with the household as pretas and bring suffering on their kin by way of their incessant demands. This is especially the case when these ghosts are mobilised by sorcerers in the preta bandana, as I will discuss towards the end of this ritual chapter. Hence, these merit transfers also have a self-protective effect.

Cooking the deceased’s favourite food is another way of bringing about a good departure. The food works in the following way. In case the deceased has difficulties departing, the food seduces and attracts the departing being to the food. Because of its potential excessive craving it remains tied to the food. Someone carries this māla bath outside the compound away from the land in the hope that the departed then can detach later from the favourite food. In fact, the food becomes a crucial agent in helping the deceased find a better rebirth; the departing person is carried away from the various objects of desire that could inflame craving and thus hinder a smooth transition. In this way the food also serves to prevent the departed from attaching himself to his relatives and inflicting troubles on their health, well-being, and desires.
Post-Burial Activities

After the burial, the ones who actually dug the grave along with others who went to the cemetery take a bath in the tank to clean and purify themselves. Being there and engaging with death is potentially polluting and is sometimes negotiated by wearing white clothes. Yet, the diggers who engage with the earth wear their working rags and change clothes after the bath to join the funeral at the house. Some people continue to keep the bereaved ones company until the seventh day, whereas other villagers periodically stop in. The funeral association continues to prepare food and tea to keep as many people as possible at the now ‘empty’ house. The binding capacity of food is not only collaborated with in the case of pretas but definitely also in relation to living people. The better and more abundant the food, the more people stick to house of the deceased and attracting party crashers as well. The atmosphere immediately after the burial is quite relaxed despite the very intense moment when the coffin was leaving. People chat, drink tea, play cards or Carrom, chew betel, compare mobile phones, and even forge love relationships (recall the earlier remark on the ritual assemblage and side motivations). Sometimes emotions do erupt, particularly in the evenings and in some cases where the consumed alcohol takes the inhibitions away. In other cases, elephants disturb the gathering at times, which causes greater distress if the attack materialises in a broken house, as happened in a particular instance.

The Cremation of a Chief Monk (Nayake Thero)

It should be noted that in some areas, it is more common to cremate the corpse, but I have never witnessed this in the event of a lay person’s death. Monks, on the other hand, always receive a cremation rite, but I have so far not yet obtained convincing popular explanations for why there is this difference. Yet, given fire’s crucial role in the regeneration of life as well as in (purificatory) sacrifice, we can guess that this way of dealing with death is crucial for someone closer to nirvana, as monks are deemed to be. The fire leaves nothing behind and as such visibly enacts the disintegration of the elements constituting the human person and thus the impermanence. It facilitates the letting go of earthly life, but I admit that this suggestion is speculation and requires more research. For our purposes it is important to note that here as well, we see the puffed rice and empty rice husks strewn over the area surrounded by eight poles that encircle the tower in which the monk’s coffin is laid. The pictures below are taken
at a funeral of a chief incumbent (hence, the large crowds) in a forest monk monastery close to my fieldwork site.

Around the tower, there are also eight pots turned upside down suggesting the reversal of the full pot or *punkalase* discussed earlier. Hence, I surmise that this reversal articulates the end of the potential of life just as the puffed rice does when it is thrown over the coffin. Rita Langer (2002:198) suggests that these reversed pots are reminiscent of Hindu funeral rites where they entail a substitute for the enactment of the breaking of pots (as in the case of coconuts as we shall see later), which constitute surrogate self-sacrifices that help to release the soul or *ātman*. I contend that the (sacrificial) fire in combination with the surrogate self-sacrifice enacted by these pots allow for a further release from attachments and purification of consciousness enhancing the reach to nirvana. Moreover, we also see empty paddy husks on the floor surrounding the tower, just as strewn around the funeral pit at lay funerals. I contend that the combination of reversed pots, empty husks, and puffed rice are strongly articulated with death in their recurring presence at funerals, particularly of the rice in its two non-life giving forms. It should be noted that this articulation occurs at the level of a practical
epistemology, but not so much at the level of explicit discourse. When asking people why the empty husks are there, they replied that it means nothing and only serves to avoid the ground becoming muddy. However, when I asked if they could use sawdust there, they laughed and objected to the idea.

Now let us turn towards the ensuing almsgiving rites or dāne in relation to death.

*Post-Funerary Dāne*

The sixth night after the death of a lay person, a monk comes to the house to preach about impermanence, suffering, merit, and nirvana. Many come again to attend this banna sermon and have a cup of tea and biscuits. The seventh day of death, the first dāne takes place. Dāne or almsgiving revolves around the giving of food and gifts to obtain merit and transfer it to the departed one so as to avoid him or her turning into a preta or entering into a low rebirth. Dāne takes on a variety of shapes. First, it is often elaborated according to financial means. Hence, one could wonder whether the lavish gifts of rich and powerful people in this life, as in contrast to the more sober lower caste and class gifts, may or may not reproduce class distinctions among beings in the afterlife, with those of a better rebirth being the ones with higher class relationships and those of a lower rebirth coming from a low class background. It is easy to see how karmic theory and the practice of merit transfers through almsgiving, if calculated in absolute amounts and not in relation to the means one has, could reinforce and reproduce such inequalities in the law of samsara. Secondly, these almsgiving rites vary in form with respect to whom the gifts are given to. In my observations, most tend to give dāne to the monks and the Sangha (the Buddhist institution), but in other cases, these gifts, while being blessed by monks in some way, can be given to schoolchildren or homeless people. Finally, the rites vary according to the type of dāne given. There are the elaborated ones at specially designated times in relation to a particular dead person, such as I discuss here: the seventh day dāne, one month dāne, three month dāne, and the one year dāne which is repeated every year. However, there are also smaller and more regular almsgiving rites that can be dedicated to anyone.

One such small rite involves the daily food gifts from villagers to the village monk and the Buddha, tying him into a web of relationships through which he can provide moral support to the villagers. The organisation of this food provision and offering runs according to a
particular system. The temple association organises food supply in which every family gives \textit{dāne} to the monk once a month, sometimes during the morning around 6 a.m. or at lunch time around 10.30 a.m. (monks do not eat after the sun has passed its highest point). People do not prepare a special or separate meal but rather make extra food (including meat), from which they bring the first portion to the temple where another small section is separated and put into small bowls as an offering to the Buddha. The remainder is for the monk who eats it after the offering or \textit{Buddhi pūja}. In contrast to offerings to deities, these food offerings are not shared among human beings afterwards. Any of the monk’s leftovers goes to the numerous dogs and monkeys at the temple ground. This gift of food and also of the basic necessities for the monk, such as Ayurvedic oil, toothpaste, soap, and rope, entail a meritorious deed of which the merits can be transferred. In my host family, this monthly \textit{dāne} has so far often been dedicated to the deceased host-mother.

The seventh-day, one month, three month, and yearly almsgiving rites are generally more elaborated. Again these rites acquire many different shapes, but always involve monks in at least some part of the gift-event. The seventh day \textit{dāne} takes place at the house of the deceased as part of the long range of funerary activities, such as depicted in the picture below.

The almsgiving events again attract many people for whom food needs to be prepared. The three-month \textit{dāne} is generally a very elaborate one, as it marks the transition from the mourning period toward normality in the sense that from then onwards more festive rites
(mangalaya) can take place again in the extended family. For instance, my host mother died in the beginning of April. This is a few days before the New Year in April, a month before Vesak Poya, and two months before Poson Poya (events I will discuss later) and so my host family did not participate in those events in that year.

When I returned for my fieldwork after her death, we had the first one year dāne in which we started cooking at 10 p.m. to get breakfast and lunch ready for the next morning. For this dāne we took food to the people who spend their time at the temple on the full moon poya days. They dress in white and spend the whole day and night meditating, reciting stanzas from books, observing the eight or ten precepts (observing sil or morality), and listening to the monk’s preaching. In that year, we made kiribath for breakfast and prepared an extensive lunch, after which we provided the afternoon tea and biscuits for a meeting of the temple society. Those observing sil were served only with fluids (tea and fruit juice), called gilam pasa, as they follow the food prescriptions for monks that day and thus also refrain from eating solid foods in the afternoon.

The offerings were also shared with the 28 Buddha statues (representing the various Buddha’s of the different eras), where the worship took place at several moments throughout the day. Towards the evening the virtuous women (and two men) blessed us all before going home to enjoy the rest of the food and each other’s company before going to sleep exhausted.
Conclusion

It is clear that death is crucial to human life and takes a central place in ritual life. The basic concern is with having a good death and particularly a good transformation to the afterlife. The acquisition of a good karmic balance, the letting go of desire, and the being generous in almsgiving are crucial in negotiating and bringing about a death beneficial to future lives. As we have seen, food in its solid and fluid forms plays a powerful role in this negotiation of the most core transformation in and between (human) lives, whether in the act of transferring merit by pouring water, in the act of preparing the māla bath, or in the sharing of dāne. Death is in fact not separated from life, as these reborn beings, or in a worse case pretas, live amongst the living. Death and life, future and past, all coexist in the here and now. It is therefore not surprising to see that a core funerary rite repeats a thisworldly life-affirming ritual, kiriutereme, which is performed in relation to prosperity, fertility, and avoidance of misfortune, but using water instead to enhance a good rebirth. Milk regenerates life in this world, whereas water is selected to negotiate both life and death.

We will now turn to a case where food negotiates the regeneration of food and thus human life in a more indirect way; we turn to harvest rites and in particular the Aluth Sahāl Mangalaya (new rice festival).
Harvest Rites

The harvest is one of the most important events of the year for subsistence farmers bringing sorrow if the season was bad or becoming festive if the food is plenty (Saltveit 2003). This insecurity of the outcome spurs farmers to hold various harvest rites in which they articulate the hope for and seek to ensure future plentiful harvests. They do so by sharing part of the new harvest with villagers and peasants, and also deities to express gratitude for their protection during the season. These rites exhibit an enormous variety across Sri Lanka, depending largely on the particular deities and areas under their supervision.

Before accounting for the particular harvest in my research area, I will describe a rite that my research collaborator and I came across in the central hill area of Sri Lanka, about 50 km east of Kandy. The reason for elaborating on this rite that takes place just before the actual harvest and the ensuing harvest festival, is that many elder (above 50 years old) interviewees in Kiribathgama recalled a similar pre-harvest rite in “the old days”. This old pre-harvest rite has largely disappeared in the area of research, although some farmers perform a modified version before they start their actual harvesting process. In this, some farmers select an auspicious time to reap the first bundle of paddy to hang it on a stick together with a coconut that was hung at the start of the cultivation cycle to make a vow to the local deity. This coconut is then used for the boiling of coconut milk and the offering of milk-rice to the deity in the rite after the harvest and this first paddy is also offered to the Buddha. Let us now explore the old pre-harvest rite that is related to the harvest practice, which also has changed drastically.

Pre-Harvest Rite

Preparing the Harvest

In this mountain village, rice is farmed in terraces built up in mud. They select one terrace and reap the first paddy to clear the ground. The timing is quite flexible, but some days are deemed astrologically better than others. Yet, the main factor in deciding when to start the harvest procedure and the rite is whether the rains come. The rain is a potential catalyser in altering the ritual event and assemblage because it could ruin at least part of the harvest. Hence, farmers have to navigate and balance the various components in their decision-making process to achieve a successful harvest also on this particular day of the harvest itself. In the particular instance that my research collaborator and I witnessed, farmers started work in the
early morning to avoid potential rain the next night. Normally, we were told, they prefer to thresh at night, as it is less hot for both the farmers and the buffaloes that do the actual work. When the harvest ground is cleared they turn it into mud and apply a mixture of cow dung and mud on top of it, making a “safe” and “protected” higher centre stage (arak pole). The whole threshing area including the stage is called kamete. In the area of Kiribathgama, kametes are made by making a small bund around an area designated for threshing the paddy with a tractor or with a powerful threshing machine called “the tsunami”, which can easily thresh a harvest of 2.5 acres in only two hours.

The denotation “tsunami” emerged after the tsunami struck Sri Lanka on December 26 of 2004. Farmers named it as such, because it devours a lot of money for rent, destroying one’s financial means, it has a similar shape (with some imagination), and it is a devil for work threshing large amounts very quickly. In my area of research, women are never allowed into the threshing ground, whereas in this mountainous village, women can enter, provided they do not stand on the centre and are not menstruating. This provision is related to the vas dos or misfortunes in relation to pollution or kili that should be avoided to protect the harvest. Yakkhas, bhūtas, and evil eyes could be attracted by this kili and have to be kept out of the kamete for their detrimental effects on the harvests and because the centre part is instead dedicated to the beneficial local ancestral deity or Muttā. In fact, the centre stage is also called devāle (deity shrine) on that day of threshing. Hence, similar rules regarding purity apply to the kamete as well as the devāle, for instance no admission to menstruating women. We can see in my area of research that the process of kamete preparation and the harvest method have changed. Additionally, along with the technological evolutions, the rules for women have become more restrictive than in this Kandyan village. Interestingly, in contrast to my area of research where the threshing area is shared among several farmers and fields, these kametes in
the hilly village are not shared among villagers and remain each tied to a lineage. The individuality of the kamete articulates a personal relationship to the ancestor and by way of this generational reproduction also to the marital bed.

Offering in the Kamete

Before the actual harvest starts, farmers prepare the centre of the kamete with offerings and ash drawings or yantere. The eldest farmer wraps seven types of plants, which are used in local Tovil healing rites and weddings, into a large leaf ring from tholebo (Crinum Asiaticum) articulating it with health, prosperity, and fertility. This ring is placed on the arak pole together with, on its inside, a conch, a piece of neem wood or kohombe pōruwe (literally neem stage which is inherited through the male lineage), a wildboar tooth to ward off the Huniyam50 devil, and a yakede (an iron nail)51.

Following this, the eldest farmer draws seven ash rings around the leaf ring, together making a total of eight rings, evoking the Noble Eightfold path in Buddhism. He does so while chatting with the other farmers that watch him do the ritual work. The event takes place in a relaxed atmosphere and this ritual does not require the kind of solemn behaviour, which would be required in a Catholic service in Belgium, for instance. The ash rings, they explained, serve to keep the Bahirawa, the earth deity, away and to avoid its evil looks that can destroy the harvest. Indeed, protection is a core theme repeatedly articulated in the physical orderings, actions, and drawings. Interestingly, the ash for the drawing has to be taken from their personal domestic hearth, physically connecting their land and the familial and generational domestic sphere where life is ‘cooked’ and regenerated. At the four sides, the eldest farmer draws a full pot, articulating the four gates from where the rivers flow away from Lake Anavatapta. These ash drawings presence the prosperity and fertility of the

50 See the extensive work on the Huniyam antisorcery rite by Bruce Kapferer (1997).
51 A different combination of seven things, of which some are the same (the neem stage, tholabo, and a piece of iron), are used in the rite today in comparison to what has been described as part of a very similar harvest procedure described by Hugh Nevill (1886:95-96), indicating a remarkable continuity over time.
punkalase as explained earlier. He also draws four Sinhalese letters and some of the tools used in the harvest procedure.

The instruments drawn are the bäte pōruwe (the harvest leveller bearing resemblance to the field leveller used to prepare the beds for the seed sowing), the dākkätte (implement to reap the paddy plants), the bolatte (broom to sweep the kamete and to separate the chaff from the grains), and the dātti goviya (a single-pin on a stick used to take up the straw which has been threshed by the buffalo).

The four Sinhalese letters (combining consonant with vowel) are the first of four Pali verses linked to Buddhism:

“Sabha pābassa akaranan, Kuselasa upa sampadaba, Sachitta pariyo dapanan, Atan buddhana sāsana.”

Roughly translated these verses mean: “to abstain from all evil deeds, to do what is good, to cleanse one’s mind, this is the advice of all Buddha’s.”

Following these ash drawings, the eldest farmer takes the first bunch of paddy and walks clockwise or ‘sun-wise’ (with the right hand towards the centre, as the right is seen as the good side as we have seen in the previous chapter) around this decorated elevation where he lays the bunch on the centre and pays his respect by greeting his ancestral Muttā.
Inside this kamete, people walk barefoot as it is turned into a devāle (deity shrine) during the day it is used for threshing. Unlike in the Anuradhapura area where respondents mentioned the utilisation of a particular kamete language in the old days, there is no such thing in this area—with the exception of rice acquiring the special name bäte denoting something which gives rice.

Reaping the Harvest

The reaping and threshing begins according to the attam system. Attam was often mentioned by the interviewees in Kiribathgama as something of the past. Generally, it is defined as a system of sharing labour in which a group of fellow villagers harvests one person’s field and then moves to another person’s plot. As such, labour is exchanged at no cost. Many lamented the loss of this system and said it is no longer possible because “everything is about money these days”. In Kiribathgama, small groups of four or five friends continue to help each other on a similar and small-scale basis, but in many cases paid labour is necessary to finish the job in time (before the arrival of potential rain). Hence, the costs have increased. In the Kandyian village, there is a group of 20 people joining the harvest in such an exchange arrangement. Even more, the utilisation of the buffaloes is part of this attam arrangement. These animals move from kamete to kamete to thresh paddy.
Buffaloes Threshing

Before the threshing starts, both men and women reap the paddy and bring it onto the *arak pole*, where women in particular have to avoid stepping on the centre. When a sufficient amount is collected, they put the male buffalo (hence, gender division of tasks cross-cuts species) at the centre stepping in circles on the heap of reaped paddy. Two or three female buffaloes follow him, but remain on the outskirts of the *arak pole*.

While the women continue to reap the paddy and bring it towards the threshing ground, the buffaloes thresh the men pick up the straw to help the seeds sink to the bottom. This division of tasks is similar in my area of research except that women have to drop the reaped plants outside the entry of the *kamete*. The buffaloes that are threshing must be cared for and treated with respect. This became clear when young man who had left the army and returned to help his family was hitting the animals with a stick and shouting at them. The rest blamed him for not knowing how to deal with animals in a friendly way. The fact that he had returned to farm was the subject of mockery as the others said jokingly that this was because of his bad karma, indicating the currently low status of being a farmer. After about four hours and some tea breaks and lunch in the field (in this particular case and surrounding lunch acquires a different name: *muttetu*), the straw and the chaff is removed by using the broom, and what remains is a heap of paddy.
The first of this paddy is used to make milk-rice for an offering to the local deity in what is called the *Aluth Sahāl Mangalaya*. I was not able to attend this “new rice festival” in this Kandyan village, but have attended it several other places, including in my own village of research.

Again, this post-harvest rite exhibits an enormous variety even across neighbouring villages. In what follows, I will discuss the *kiriutereme* that is performed in kiribathgama, an extensive *Aluth Sahāl Mangalaya* in a neighbouring village, and a smaller one that I witnessed in the village where my host-aunt moved to live with her husband.

**Post-Harvest Rites**

**In General**

*Kiribath* is a central food item in these rites and, as we have already seen, it is prepared to celebrate prosperity, happiness and renewal during life-transitions. At harvest rites, men first conduct a *kiriutereme* rite (ritual cooking of coconut milk until it overflows), after which they add un-steamed rice to make milk-rice. This is done to articulate and bring about prosperity and happiness through life’s renewal, which is now pregnant with new life (Tanaka 1997: 118).

As elsewhere in this work, I argue here that prosperity and regeneration of life are at the core of understanding the ritual cooking of coconut milk and milk-rice. Because of their regular recurrence throughout different rituals and their engagement of core existential concerns with
insecurity, hope for future prosperity, and regeneration of life, I focus on these ritual preparations of coconut milk and milk-rice in greater detail and theoretical depth, as these rites have in fact catalysed the development of my overall theoretical frame. The boiling of coconut milk until it overflows throughout various rites is indeed repetitive and paradigmatic in engaging similar dynamics and concerns. The very kiriutereme materialises dynamics of heat, bubbling over, and the subsequent easing down and cooling, hence engaging processes of destabilisation and stabilisation. Regeneration and the pulsation of life, rebirth, and world renewal, as well as the re-origination of generative capacity constitute core concerns in this and other rituals; issues that are likewise noted in the works of Bruce Kapferer (1997), Rohan Bastin (2002) and Masakazu Tanaka (1997). The boiling of coconut milk acts as a holographic condensation of the concoction of human life in and of the world.

Here, I thus specifically explore the kiriutereme and its connections to the harvest inasmuch as it acts as Aluth Sahāl Mangalaya (new rice ceremony). Core to the rite is the boiling of coconut milk until it overflows as a ritual act that precedes the making of milk-rice. The overall rite includes other acts as well, such as the offering of young coconut saplings as surrogate human sacrifices. Farmers make these offerings to summon the local ancestral deity to share the meal and to renew bonds as well as to solicit the deities’ protection for the following cultivation cycle. Finally, in this overall ritual, both deity and devotees acquire merit for the exchange of offerings and protection, hence, altering their position in the cosmos. In a ritual centred on food and its cooking, participants thus blend and ‘cook’ foods, human and non-human entities, as well as their interrelations. All acts and substances in the harvest ritual collaborate in addressing concerns of regeneration and renewal, and life-sustenance.

My contention that the cooking of food extends into the ‘cooking of life and world’ is something that resonates well with the Sanskrit term lokapakti, which Charles Malamoud (1996:1, 23) translates literally as “cooking the world”. He (1996:1–2) states that: “this expression epitomises all of the myriad ways in which ritual practice, and especially the performance of the sacrifice, is capable of transforming both the humans who engage in such practices and the world around them”. He arrives at this conclusion by analysing ancient Vedic texts, which further link this cooking to processes of fire, sacrifice, and the (physical and moral) maturation and perfection of people; the latter being highlighted in terms of “ripening” of food (ripening entails the ‘cooking’ of plants by the sun) by Anand Pandian (2011). I will further extend Malamoud’s structural and textual approach of “cooking the
world” to encompass the actual cooking of food, which affectively and sensorially materialises the renewal and ‘cooking’ of life as particularly condensed in the ritual boiling of milk. The relation between cooking food and ‘cooking’ life is not reducible to a diluted relation of analogy. Rather, cooking food both actually and holographically substantiates ‘cooking’ of life through blending, seething, and transforming material and expressive components of food and life.

This section focuses on the centripetal role of the overflowing milk rite and the offerings of food-related entities in the revitalising renewal of the world and the interrelations between human and non-human beings.

Making a Vow

The cultivation of food is prone to many setbacks. Pests, droughts, floods or animal attacks can rapidly destroy the extensive effort invested in growing food. Farmers appeal to divine forces to increase the chances of a bountiful harvest. At the start of each growing cycle, as mentioned earlier, nearly all farmers hang a coconut in a tree or on a stick close to their field. The coconut is a reminder to the deity that he will be offered the first portion of the harvest in exchange for his protection. Peasants make this promise every year, so the force and effectiveness of the barter lies in the repetition of these offerings and in the outcome. If the harvest fails, the farmer can only guess that something went wrong during previous offerings that may have upset the deity. He may also impute the failure to his own faulty actions, to bad planetary influences, bad luck or to sorcery, though all these could have been mitigated by deities if pleased by previous offerings.

Kiriutereme and Kiribath

Offering the first portion of the paddy harvest takes on many shapes. Farmers perform either a short “overflowing of milk rite”, or a more extended “new rice ceremony” that encompasses the former. Both include the overflowing of milk or the kiriutereme as well as the ritual boiling of milk-rice or kiribath. The difference in the harvest rites and offerings across Sri Lanka is related to the type and karmic state of the deity who have each their particular area of ‘jurisdiction’ and demands for offerings. I will discuss this a little further in terms of the Sinhalese Buddhist cosmography, but here I emphasise that in all cases, it is the first (best) part of the harvest that needs to be offered to the deity and in many cases also to the Buddha. This became clear in an instance when I was biting on a grain of my own-grown paddy to feel if the grains were no longer milkish and sufficiently solid to start harvesting. Two farmers
gesticulated and made it clear that I should not do this, as the first portion is always dedicated to the gods. My act could upset the local deity and bring misfortune to the next cultivation.

In both harvest rites, villagers prepare milk-rice from the first portion of the paddy and the coconut that they had hung at the start of cultivation. In the first stage of both ceremonies, they heat milk in a new earthen pot on a log-fire until it overflows, preferably in all four cardinal directions. If this does not work, as I observed several times, it incites some uncertainty among the farmers. They may then re-stabilise the situation by arguing that the pot was too big and that if it had been a smaller one, the amount of milk would have been sufficient to obtain a good overflowing. Indeed, one has to balance the various components (firewood, amount of milk, size of the pot, and the stirring) in order to achieve this ideal overflowing in the four directions. One mistake or material mishap can potentially ruin everything, but certain justifications can buffer such an accident and keep the overall happening from completely deterritorialising, destabilising, and failing (from the perspective of keeping the deity happy).

Thereafter, the farmers add rice to prepare milk-rice, a thick paste of coconut milk and raw rice. They then cut this sticky whole into cubes and give the first bit to the deity. The overflowing of milk, sometimes combined with the diamond-shaped milk-rice, emerge as articulators of abundance and prosperity in their recurrence throughout rituals that take place in the contexts of (usually) happy events. This articulation is enhanced by the tension that builds among the spectators as they get carried away with excitement while the milk overflows out of the pot (cf. physical and passionate deterritorialisation). The relief and ease afterwards are in contrast to the tension of the ‘eruption’ of the heated milk. Milk-rice is prepared on nearly every joyful and transitional occasion, whereas the overflowing of milk or kiriutereme is performed in only some of these occasions, such as during New Year
celebrations and in harvest ceremonies. This ritual cooking of coconut milk evokes similar connotations among Hindus in South India (Beck 1969:571) and Tamil fishermen in northern Sri Lanka for whom the boiling milk resembles an abundant catch with fish struggling in the water to escape the net (Tanaka 1997:118).

I wish to suggest an additional articulation here, as by exploring as many connections as possible, we can understand the assemblage of food in its full complexity and relationships. In some stories of origin, milk and milk-rice refer to the primordial sea and earth essence respectively. Recall for instance, the Buddhist Agañña Sutta (discussed in chapter 5) that describes the first earth essence in terms of having the qualities of milk-rice (Collins 1993:342). Hence, boiling of milk and milk-rice repeats the happenings in preterit times. In combination with the spatial deterritorialisation of the milk, as it overflows in the four cardinal directions, the milk embodies time-space during its heated destabilisation. Thus, overflowing milk refers to renewal and re-origination of the world by materialising the primeval earth essence and sea at the start of this world cycle. When the milk gradually restabilises and remains within the confines of the pot, rice is added and milk-rice becomes the more solid and re-territorialised result. The bubbling over, excitation, and acceleration give way to easing down, relaxation, and deceleration. The originary movement from sea to earth becomes embodied in the milk and milk-rice that enact a kind of ‘primordial pulse of life and becoming’. However, it does not refer to the flipside of this pulse—the destruction, waning, and withering of life—as milk-rice is never prepared for funerals. The cooking of milk and milk-rice becomes an allegorical materialisation and holographic condensation of the ‘cooking’ of the world and its regeneration, and materialises and effectuates this renewal.

Finally, the ‘primordial pulse of life’ enacted in the milk-assemblage is evocative of the oscillating universe as rendered in Siddhanta cosmology, upon which some rituals in Sri Lanka draw. Rohan Bastin (2002:104–05) states that in Siddhanta cosmogony, the universe oscillates between emission and re-absorption, that is between unfolding and differentiating consciousness (world-becoming), and void. Oscillation is embodied in the overflowing, erupting annual Munnesvaram temple festival that encompasses the world, and its subsequent re-territorialisation in the temple (Bastin 2002:202–03). This movement is reminiscent of the pulse of life embodied in the overflowing milk and subsequent boiling of milk-rice, also offered in this festival. Hence, we could designate the processes of kiriutereme and kiribath as paradigmatic and as repeating themselves with regard to many life-enhancing rituals in Sri Lanka, and by extension, in South India. Indeed, by way of its repeated recurrence, it becomes
crystallised as an articulator of prosperity, fertility, and joy, but also of the uncertainty that joins in with these moments of transformation pregnant with hopes and aspirations of abundance.

The overflowing of milk and preparation of milk-rice hint at these core concerns as well as the overall regeneration and re-origination of the world. For the local ancestral deity in the village where my research took place, this recurring and therefore paradigmatic rite of the kiriutereme is sufficient to please him. In a neighbouring village, people perform a more extended new rice ceremony to which both the overflowing of milk and preparation of milk-rice are likewise centripetal, but embedded in a wider range of activities. In this village, inhabitants add other offerings as well, such as coconuts in various shapes and presentations. As pointed out during the discussion of the Angulimāla Piritih, on top of the articulations between the various stages of lives of coconuts and human beings, the coconut offerings also engage sacrificial aspects as emergent in ritual practice (Bastin 2002, Kapferer 1997, Tanaka 1997). These aspects entail the purification of human beings, and more importantly, the surrogate self-sacrifice of people. The latter bears on the theme of self-renewal (Tanaka 1997:97), thus linking up with the regeneration of the world in the overflowing of coconut milk.

**Cosmogenic Variations**

To further discuss the sacrificial aspect and the large difference in the rites between the two neighbouring villages, let me introduce some additional aspects of cosmography that account for the variation in offerings. Gananath Obeyesekere (1963:142–47, 1987:50–70) has extensively discussed the particular traits of what he labels the Buddhist pantheon. All deities, whether high or low in their position in this cosmography, are under supervision of the Buddha, as explained earlier. Moreover, most of these deities have both beneficial and destructive sides (Kapferer 1997:32), and their exercise of these potentials has an effect on their karmic position. These gods, like human and other non-human beings, are caught in the cosmic law of *samsara*, the cycle of death and rebirth. They can improve their position by performing good deeds and by receiving merit from human beings. Food has the capacity to carry this merit-component across by way of its sharing and offering. Hence, through the exchange of food for protection, human beings and deities acquire merit, get a little closer to nirvana and Buddhahood, and thus reconfigure the cosmos. For higher deities, meat is not a ‘suitable’ offering, as accepting animals specifically killed for them would lower them within
the pantheon and as foods from animals are impure (*pili*), so pure food offerings like milk-rice are made instead (Kapferer 1997:145). Thus, food collaborates in the regeneration of cosmos within which relative positions of both human and non-human beings are re-negotiated and distinguished. Hence, Bourdieu’s (2008) “Distinction”, in which tastes shape social hierarchies, operates in the cosmos as well. The creative variation among food offerings to deities and across villages under their respective protection underscores the variability with which life and relations can be reconfigured or ‘cooked’.

**The Start of the Aluth Sahāl Mangalaya**

At the start of the harvest festival, the organising team collects from the participants the new rice and the coconuts that were hung at the start of the cultivation cycle. Additionally, the society gathers home-made milk-rice (prepared with all regards as discussed earlier) and *kāvung* (the oil cakes made from a mix of coconut and rice powder) for the offerings later in the evening. The organisers also prepare milk-rice from the donated portions of rice and coconuts, and cook the evening meal, rice and curries to be shared with the villagers. From all these donations and preparations, the first portion is set aside for the local deity, but is offered after the crowd has partaken of the large meal. In this way, the deity still receives the first portion without the people participating hungrily. The village members, women and men, old and young, and also Muslims later take part in this large commensal event with the ancestral deity. The bustling affair of cooking takes place in the local school building while many lend their hands to assist. The joint undertaking forges bonds between villagers that are extended by sharing food with the deity and the 200 participants.

On some occasions, the heat of the moment leads to small conflicts about which cooking procedure to follow. When a drunken man starts joking about the team members’ effort, he is guided away to prevent more quarrelling. The removal of the troublemaker points again to the ambiguous nature of alcohol as a consumption item. It simultaneously binds him into one group of drinkers and distinguishes him from the organisers. However, the consumption of this ambiguous social lubricant does not prevent such men from getting closer to the spirit medium later in the night. Gradually, these drinking men enter the festival and participate with loosened tongues providing some additional entertainment.
The Cosmic Tower

When all cooking is finished and the team is almost ready to dole out portions for the meal, some go to the devāle (shrine) to help the kapurāla (deity priest) prepare the place and offering table, whereas others carry the adukku kūnama (tower construction) to the centre of the school ground where everyone is gathered. A man purifies the construct by going around it with a burning incense bowl. After showing their respect by uttering “sādhū, sādhū, sādhū”, all those present sit down, encircling this tower. On top of the tower, there are coconut flowers that evoke rice pods that in their turn articulate prosperity and life-sustenance. I have already shown that rice is articulated with human life in many ways throughout various rites, as elicited by Deema de Silva (2002), and notes Rohan Bastin (2002:84), coconut flowers render present rebirth and renewal, in particular the blossoming consciousness in emerging life as discussed in relation to the Angulimāla Pirit. An informant told me that the tower itself renders present the cosmic mount Meru, being the axis mundi and the abode of Parvati (the earth goddess) and Shiva (the sun-god) (Bastin 2002:135). In some stories, Shiva fertilised Parvati which resulted in the emergence of rice pods. In other stories, they brought forth a son, Ganesh. He is the god of wisdom and the coconut is dedicated to him. As explained earlier, we see a link established between coconut flowers and rice pods throughout these associations. The tower articulates and so connects a main life-sustaining essence (rice) with the emergence of consciousness and life (coconut flowers) as the fruit of cosmic regeneration. Coconut flowers are indeed widely used as part of decorations in this and other rituals of renewal, reproduction, and prosperity. The combination of the initial purification of the tower and the latter’s evocations of cosmic regeneration turn the interior of this tower into a divine space. Hence, the foods placed inside this space acquire a new respectful nomination, adukku. The multiple expressive and physical components thus co-produce a new emergent identity of the food assemblage within the tower and the ritual context. After paying their respects to the tower, the team doles out each one’s share.
As shown in the pictures above, the participants receive their food on lotus leaves, enhancing the ritual atmosphere. These leaves are associated with Buddhism and purity. The meal also exhibits an anomalous structure, given that it combines the consumption of milk-rice and kävung with regular rice and curry afterwards; items that are generally consumed at different intervals. The tower worship and special meal co-(re)produce the build-up of the ritual climax of communication with the ancestral deity.

Building up Ritual Heat

After everybody finishes eating, they go in perehāra (procession) towards the decorated shrine. Men hurriedly carry the tower construction followed by excited and chatting village members. Young men and boys throwing fire crackers to chase away malicious spirits spearhead the procession, and the increasing noise and speed heat up the event. The priest increasingly shows outbursts of intemperate behaviour, such as suddenly running fiercely towards the arriving tower. People present at the shrine are struck and can guess by now that he has become possessed by the divine power of the ancestral deity. I was told that he is sāray (presently in a very hot state), a point noted also by Masakazu Tanaka (1997:111). The outbursts of his licentious dancing, explosive utterances, and running around intemperately cause a shift in the initially indifferent attitude of many spectators. Rohan Bastin (2002:93) and Bruce Kapferer (1991:10–11) note the importance of the aesthetics of ritual action in drawing hitherto disinterested spectators into the event. The boiling over of the spirit priest gradually draws everybody towards and into this event (physical, spatial, and emotive deterritorialisation of people towards the ritual centre). More and more elements (acts, offerings, utterances) get added, and the concoction of the ritual gradually expands while

Bruce Kapferer (1997:140) mentions the story of the Buddha taking his first seven steps where at each step the earth bursts open and a lotus bloom appears.
encompassing more and more people. The seething event overflows in conjunction with the outbursts of the priest who occasionally runs outside the ritual area (outward deterritorialisation). He guides the tower with the offerings towards the shrine and they go around the Bo Tree three times before putting the additional offerings on the offering table.

The deity is rendered present through the intemperate priest, and via him, people re-negotiate their relation with the deity by way of collective offerings. They ask whether the deity is pleased and if they can do anything else, such as offering him a new statue. They also express their gratitude for the harvest.

To discuss the offerings at the shrine, where I shall focus on both rice and coconut, I need to further explain the various connections that have emerged between the coconut and human life and consciousness in relation to the Angulimāla Pirith. This articulation of components is an enabling factor in regarding the coconut as a means to effectuate a surrogate self sacrifice. Indeed, coconut sacrifice substantiates human self-sacrifice (Bastin 2002:68; Tanaka 1997:97). Many rituals and offerings entail a sacrificial logic and in this repeated logic various food offerings and particularly coconut are considered as substitutes and are ‘destroyed’ as sacrificial victims instead of the offerer.

Coconut and Human Life

Between the regular eruptions of spirit priest and collective offerings, there is also space for individual sacrifices that link individual concerns with collective ones. Among these individual offerings is the paranayata parana (“life-to-life rite”). In this short ritual, mothers line up to offer a young coconut sapling to the village deity who has offered his protection during the birth of their baby in the preceding year.
The exchange of a coconut sapling in return for the life of the baby underscores the argument of Masakazu Tanaka (1997:97) cited earlier, that coconut sacrifice is a substitute for human sacrifice. The life-to-life rite denotes the ideal that one should give a human life to the deity in return for his facilitation of the birth of the baby. So here again, the coconut in its various stages of life becomes co-evocative of the stages of human life and consciousness. Whereas the young sapling materialises the newly born in this life-to-life rite, the covered coconut and coconut shoots condense the blossoming of consciousness and life in the pre-birth ritual.

The coconut, however, not only articulates consciousness that is nearly equated with life, but also with fertility. People designate the three germination holes as the female side of the coconut, linking it more explicitly to reproduction. In many villages, people play a ritual game, porapol, in which they throw porapol (unfertilised nuts) and break them open by hitting the female side of the coconut. These nuts are deemed to be full of menacing heat, like virgins. Breaking them releases the (sexual) heat with the aim of increasing the next harvest (Bastin 2002:155–57). Therefore, in the porapol game, the coconut articulates both human fertility and good harvests, and as such connects again the marital and agricultural bed. We can thus see that there are a multitude of evocations invested in the coconut, however, a
particular interpretation only emerges when it is specifically related to the context in which it acts.

Co-Evocative Coconuts

Coconuts do not only articulate consciousness and life in a general sense. Additionally, their various stages articulate with corresponding developmental stages of human consciousness and life, which has already been mentioned in relation to the orchestration and decoration of the observed pre-birth Angulimāla Pirith. Having thus explored various recurring and stabilised components articulated with the coconut assemblage in different ritual contexts, we are now equipped to render the offering table ingredients intelligible in connection to the articulation of life stages with coconuts in different forms. With these ingredients, it is possible to regenerate not only individual human beings, but also the generations of human beings, and again, the world. The mixture presented by the offering table encompasses generational time and space as well as the renewal and re-origination of the world and the beings within it. Let me now turn towards these offerings as shown in the picture below.
On the elevated part, we see coconut shoots, a whole husked coconut, a halved coconut serving as an oil lamp, and a covered coconut on a heap of paddy on top of a banana leaf. This last coconut is covered in betel leaves, which are often utilised to increase the solemnity of gifts. All these offerings are placed in front of the image of the local ancestral deity (Ratne Bandāra Muttā) and some of his attributes.

I suggest that the three life stages of the coconut (flowers, wrapped coconut, and mature coconut) presented on this table substantiate the sacrifices of the various generations of people in the village. Coconut flowers evoke the future-born and their potential of life and blossoming consciousness, the wrapped coconut renders present the nearly-born in the womb, and the full coconut articulates the present generation. The offered young saplings (recent-born) stand beside the altar. Hence, these offerings blend generations of the village on the table in their collective sacrifice. Moreover, all villagers join in the transfer of merit by way of their offerings, enhanced by their surrogate self-sacrifice. Villagers and the deity are joined together in the re-negotiation of their positions within samsara, and so regenerate the cosmos. Additionally, the threefold offering (wrapped coconut on paddy on top of banana) again articulates re-origination of the world by its reference to mount Meru (heap of paddy). As noted earlier, Parvati and Shiva dwell on this mythical mountain and have brought forth paddy and Ganesh, evoked by the coconut. Moreover, the coconut as a human being is supported by the heap of unhusked paddy, which sustains life and articulates the potential for life as well (de Silva 2002:136). Hence, human life and harvests become articulated (as intrinsically connected) in this physical arrangement of offerings. Moreover, the presentation of various life-stages of the coconut co-evokes human generations as well as generations of harvests. The offering table actualises the cycles of offering and protection that secure life-sustenance and generations of people in the cycles of past, present, and future. In this sense we can understand that these coconuts substantiate the renewal and regeneration of life and the world. As in the overflowing of coconut milk, we observe another form of deterritorialisation of the coconut, albeit of a more temporal kind encompassing primordial becoming. Offering coconuts in various life-stages thus further actualises the themes of regeneration and re-origination as present in the paradigmatic cooking of rice and coconut milk.
Destruction and Renewal

Issues of renewal and rebirth are further elaborated by another sacrificial evocation on the offering table. The halved coconut, with its white flesh still attached to the shell, functions as an oil lamp and is reminiscent of another form of self-sacrifice. As Masakazu Tanaka (1997:97) explains with regard to coconut sacrifice: “When the coconut is bisected, its milk flows out, and white inside flesh can be seen. The former symbolises...arrogance, vanity and lust. By contrast, the white flesh is the pure and innocent nature of the soul. The offerer destroys his own evil aspects and attains a purer ritual status...”

To articulate this self-purification, the white flesh remains attached to the shell of the oil lamp. Moreover, the fire of the lamp also destroys, devours, and regenerates the offerer (Tanaka 1997:141–42). Thus, villagers not only reconfigure the cosmos by way of merit transfer, but also by attaining a higher status through their initial self-destruction, self-purification, and regeneration. Hence, the fire of the oil lamp and the heat of affect accelerate and ‘cook’ the renewal of participants’ positions in the cosmos. Towards the end of this ritual concoction, the assemblages of food, human beings, the deity, and the world re-territorialise as the event cools down.

Blending in Ritual Sideways

As mentioned earlier, the collective concern of this event is to engage with the precariousness of life and cultivation. In the harvest ceremony, rice and coconut are offered in various forms, articulating and holographically condensing the various stages and generations of human life. The ritual ‘cooking’ further heats and blends these foods and evocations, and spills over to encompass the world and generations into a joint concoction. The regeneration of the world and the reconfiguration of inter-relationalities serve to enhance the continuation of cultivation and life-sustenance. We can see this fundamental concern as the cosmological and collective orientation of the ritual. Moreover, individual concerns are tied into this collective rite, highlighted in the offerings of young coconut saplings. In addition to this and as in other events diverging desires and aspirations come into play as components acting together in this event-assemblage in a not necessarily harmonious way.

During the time when many gather for an individual ‘session’ with the deity to present their individual offerings, some men discuss various political and personal issues while smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol. Simultaneously, young guys and girls try to seize the chaotic
moment to seduce each other in dark corners. In this ritual event, parental control of girls is less rigid because many are drawn towards the possessed priest. Boys and girls take advantage of this lapse in social control to concoct passionate relations. When the girls go home and control over them is re-established, some of the guys go as well (indicating their motivation), but others stay with the spirit priest to consult him. One young man, who was performing the art of seduction earlier, turns to the kapurāla later that night for advice. He is building a house and faces some difficulties in the construction work. The kapurāla tells this man, who works in the IT-sector, that his house is blocking the pathways of pretas, so they get stuck there, increasing their influence. He would have to perform many different rites to solve this issue if he wishes to avoid more bad luck. He thanks the kapurāla and walks away upset and worried.

As this interlude illustrates, much happens at the fringes of the harvest ceremony, which ties in, not necessarily harmoniously, with collective, cosmological and other personal motivations. The way many young people participate in such rituals (seducing, checking out mobile phones, etc.) could tempt us to mistakenly perceive their participation as being driven only by motivations other than the overt ones that lead to the organisation of this event. Their fascination, skepsis, and initial disinterest would support such rendering, but it is not sufficient to account for the strong reactions the medium’s utterances produce in some of these same youngsters.

**Conclusion**

The harvest festival thus re-assembles a multitude of expectations, aspirations, and desires connected through the offerings. Besides the cosmological concoction, we see a re-negotiation of relations among people on the fringes as well. Such mundane regeneration of social relationships is no less important than the centre of the ritual, yet less heuristic for introducing my approach of ‘cooking’ life through the food assemblages. The offerings become the axis mundi around which these motivations, significations, actions, myths, people, and deity gravitate. In the renewal of the world, all these components get re-fashioned, though not as radically as it would in an absolute deterritorialisation. Indeed, the recurrent overflowing of milk and milk-rice render present the primordial earth essence and the re-origination of the world. The kiriutereme enacts a spatial and temporal deterritorialisation by encompassing originary earth essences and the process of world-becoming. The whole movement of overflowing milk and the overflowing of ritual re-enact the oscillation between emergence
and absorption in Siddhanta cosmogony (Bastin 2002:183). On top of that, the tower construction links with the theme of world re-origination by embodying the originary axis mundi, mount Meru, as well as the origination and cosmic regeneration of paddy. Finally, through the exchange of food offerings in return for the protection of the ancestral deity, both human beings and deity acquire merit and ascend a little closer to nirvana, hence renegotiating their relations and again reconfiguring the cosmography in a minor way. Hence, we see that in the paddy harvest ceremony, the movement and origination of the world as well as the cosmic law of samsara are invoked and reconfigured in the heat of the event. Multiple ingredients, such as mythological references, merit, mobilisation of affects, and transformation of food items get mixed and heated up in the emerging ritual food assemblage, which temporarily encompasses the whole world and its inhabiting entities in their regeneration. In the overflowing of the ritual, the world and its relations are re-negotiated, refashioned, and regenerated. The role of heat in this sacrificial rite, in which the cooking of milk and milk-rice is pivotal, forms a crucial theme in Vedic texts as well (Malamoud 1996:34), but emerges here not only in a cognitive, but rather enacted, affective, and allegorical way.

**A Different Aluth Sahāl Mangalaya**

Finally, in the class of harvest ceremonies that revolve around the existential nature of food security, I now turn to a brief account of another Aluth Sahāl Mangalaya in the area near Kurunegala where my host-aunt is living. The account of this rite will show how the repeated boiling of milk constitutes a continuity amidst the large variety of rites.

In this rite, two female kapurālas start the rite by dipping first coconut flowers and afterwards neem leaves into boiling coconut milk (but not overflowing as in the kiriutereme), and alternatingly sprinkle this hot milk over their own bodies. In this way, the offerings and all present get the blessing from the gods.
The milk is purifying both women and allows them to get closer to the deities. The rite takes place at the local school building, and inside the villagers have prepared four shrines made out of coconut leaves to place the offering for four deities: Vishnu, Kateragamma, Pattini, and a powerful regional god, the Galēbandāra. Outside, they made a malpāle for offering flowers to the Buddha, something which I had not yet observed before, and also four gotuva (sticks with a banana leaf on top in which the offerings for lesser beings are placed) near the tank.

The offerings for the deities entail seven fruits, seven sweets including kāvung and kiribath, seven colours of flowers, an oil lamp, incense, and a panduru (in which a coin is wrapped in a white cloth). Just as the kapurālas are purified by the boiling coconut milk, these items are purified by sprinkles of purifying saffron water. Some additional items included arecanut flowers and bracelets.
These offerings to the deities are pure and cater to their taste and cosmological ‘class’, distinguished from the yakkhas and the pretas that receive different items that are polluted (pili hudu) and offered in gotuva made from banana leaves.

After the offerings, some farmers give a portion of the food from the gotuva to the dogs and crows and throw another portion in the tank as a way to give back what they received from the water. The rite ends by sharing the rest of the food with all who are present.

I discussed this rite very briefly, only to show how a similar rite can be different across various areas of Sri Lanka. This strategy helps us tease out some of the repeated aspects or continuities amidst the differences. It should be clear that kävung, kiribath, and coconut milk are the core recurring items that tie these various rites together in their likewise shared concern with good harvests as a means to regenerate life.

These items and the related existential themes recur in another rite that revolves around an annual regeneration of human life and relationships in relation to the domestic hearth: the New Year.
Sinhalese New Year

The New Year or *Aluth Avurudda* takes place around April 13 or 14 according to the lunar calendar. It is an astrological event that takes place when the sun is for a period of 10 days upright above Sri Lanka. Being related to the planetary movements that impinge on the weather patterns, this event also relates to the cultivation cycle and more specifically the harvest period. However, the timing of harvesting depends on many components, such as the geographical area, the timing of the start of the cultivation (recall the discussion about whether the tank was sufficiently filled to start), and the weather during the entire season as well as around the harvest. Still, the New Year is also related to the prosperity and fertility that are connected with the harvest—a festive season altogether. As the New Year moreover emphasises the celebration of the family, it actually links the agricultural bed with the domestic marital bed. In fact, the regeneration of familial and intergenerational relations takes centre stage throughout the various activities that take place according to auspicious times. The careful timing is calculated by astrologers and announced nationally, for instance, through the distribution of a calendar. The New Year then turns into a refined collective rhythmic event that tunes the individual lives of millions to resonate into a singular plural body for a little while.

In the run up to the event, nearly everybody returns home to the parental house or *māha gedere* where they spend a few days, if not a whole week, with their nuclear family. Buses are even fuller than usual enabling a veritable mass movement of people excited about their holiday, being with family and friends, and enjoying the commensality, at least if the family is not split over a divisive issue. The villages get replenished with youthful energy from youngsters returning from their work elsewhere. Indeed, as most young people seek their opportunities for education and work in larger towns, cities, and in foreign countries, villages generally tend to become fairly void of young people. The New Year festive season provides an annual opportunity for families to be reunited and for old village friends to enjoy each other’s company. The village fills with movements and festive rhythms. This time is intense and replete with the consumption of specific New Year sweets and the impressive exchange of sweets for several days. I will render the event sensorially present and bring the detail to the foreground by narrating the vibration of the event as if it were only one particular occasion.
New Year Preparations

When my host brothers and sisters arrive a few days before the actual New Year, they immediately start the preparatory work. This entails a thorough cleanup of the house and the garden. Bhuddika paints some chairs whereas Nihinsa cuts the hedge in the garden. I sweep the floor and take away the spider webs. We also take some of the bags of rice to the mill to polish both our tambapu hāl and the kākulu hāl and pound part of it to obtain rice flour for our sweets. Kavith and I go to the coconut picker to mobilise him to pick the coconuts from the trees and that we collect and bring home. These food items are again crucial in this transformative period. Meanwhile, many friends and relatives who have returned to the village and who revive it in this way, pass by to greet us. We stop the work, offer some biscuits and tea, and then continue what we are doing.

The days before the New Year, the food rhapsody takes hold of the individual bodies and moves us and the house into an intensified collective rhythm. While Vidusahani sieves the dirt and lumps out of the rice flour, my host brothers and I are engaged in a coconut scraping competition. Laughter and excitement fill the kitchen. Again, we are united around food and its lengthy preparations. We start making dodol, which is a typical New Year cake. We take some of the grated coconut and add water to squeeze it the first time. This milk we set aside to use later. This happens two more times and as such we have obtained three types of milk with a different composition, the latter having a greater share of water than the first. Nihinsa mixes the sieved rice flour, the second and third extractions of coconut milk, jaggery, and plain sugar in a pan. We continuously fry and stir it for two hours and scrape the hardening substance from the sides of the pan. While hardening, we add the first milk extraction. The whole mixture becomes heavy to stir and we shift turns during a few hours. Meanwhile, others prepare the kokis, another famous New Year cookie. We use newly prepared coconut milk and sieved rice flour to mix these with curry powder and egg. We dip an iron form or kokis ahua in this mixture and then dip this kokis mould into a deep frying pan. Shaking the mould, the kokis slips off and fries until it becomes gold in colour, as depicted below.
We use the same kokis mixture to make a coating for some of the kävung we have made. Additionally, we make athirase and aluwa, both of which are boiled and fried mixtures of treacle and rice flour in different quantities and made according to different timings. Sometimes, when one component is out of balance, the whole thing fails and then we have to start anew. Indeed, cooking is the crafting of a right balance of multiple components, and as we are not very experienced in making these annual sweets, it becomes an experimentation of the right balances (of ingredients, timing, fire, etc.) and in becoming experienced with it, hence a veritable experimenter in the French multiple sense of the word. Throughout this process, everybody contributes individually in what is becoming a collective event, combining the specific rhythms into an intense rhapsody of negotiating balances and experimentation. After this, we are ready in making the foods that we bring to family and friends and share with the many visitors that drop in during this festive season.

While we finish our frantic work, somebody tells me that in another branch of the village, a day earlier or two days before the New Year, a group of 25 people performed a collective kiriutereme at the Shrine of the local village guardian deity or Bandāra Muttā. My host family and I did not hear about this as we, like many neighbouring domestic units, were drawn into the collective family rhythm centred around the preparation of food, and as such became separated from another collective village-level rhythm and ritual cooking. Food has the simultaneous capacity to unite people as well as to separate them such as what happened here. While our cooking reforged and regenerated our domestic relationships, we were standing apart from the village level relations that were being ‘cooked’ in the collective offering to the common ancestor in gratitude for his protection the last year. Many villagers who were not present therefore planned, just like us, to perform a domestic kiriutereme in their garden or at the shrine at another time. On the last day before the New Year, the uncle from the adjoining
house on our compound performed this rite and we joined in. After this rite, we had *kiribath* as breakfast. The day before the actual New Year is the time of transformation that is coming and is pregnant with hopes.

*The New Year Transition and Liminal Idleness*

There is still a lot to do. We need to make more sweets to share during the morning of the New Year. Every stage of the transition is determined by auspicious times as distributed in the calendar and as announced on television. The time the fire at the hearth has to be extinguished is determined at 6:23 p.m., which means that we should normally finish our tasks before then. Yet, we still have to go to the town nearby to buy presents and more ingredients. I recall the familiar stress during the Christmas period in Belgium. We return too late and are unable to finish everything in time and have to find another solution. We restabilise the situation by making a fire outside the house to still finish our food preparations and our tasks while simultaneously respecting the required rest of the hearth-fire. Indeed, from this auspicious time, all the fire in the house should be extinguished. No cooking inside and no digestive cooking (no eating or drinking) is allowed. This period of the first *näkkat* or auspicious time until the next in the morning is called *nōnegathaya*. It is a time that not only food-related work needs to stop, but also where other work and visiting come to an end. It is a liminal time of transition to remain idle and to contemplate. We try to finish the cooking outside as quickly as possible as not to breach the prescription of non-activity not too much. This time, the *nōnegathaya* takes place largely during the night. The fact that nobody can eat after 18:23 p.m. makes everybody go to sleep hungry, which is in stark contrast with the habit of eating late, so some have difficulties to fall asleep (for me it was initially difficult to fall asleep immediately after such a heavy meal). Their recurring and habitual rhythm of eating and sleeping were thus disturbed and affected.
The Renewal of Domestic Life

After a liminal period of idleness and retreat, there comes a whole range of auspicious times to adhere to. To make sure that we do not miss anything, Vidusahani puts on the television at 4.30 a.m. We prepare everything for the boiling of the first milk and the preparation of kiribath. Then, we dress up in the determined auspicious colour, and prepare the hearth. The pots with the coconut milk are ready and we wait. Meanwhile, we watch the Rūpavāhinī national television channel as they show the indication of the clock and the manner in which the army in North Sri Lanka (this was in 2010 during the end offensive to conquer the LTTE-held areas) and the president’s family celebrate New Year. The presenter of the show recounts how all these New Year rites are part of the national culture. The broadcasting of the way in which the president, as the father of the nation, celebrates the event helps bring the nationalist ideology of a unified country into numerous domestic spaces and allows a mass resonance of timed behaviours and practices, enabled by the television technology. The resonance across the country enables furthermore a national uniformisation in these practices. Simultaneously, this broadcasting of the domestic presidential sphere into numerous houses enables the president to strike a chord and resonate with ‘the people’ and become one of them. His televised solemn, respectful, and modest attitude falls well among his extensive electorate. In this praxiological resonance, many Sinhalese villagers can identify with the president and his family. The massive collective vibration brings this rite in part from the intimate domestic towards a larger national level and enables the president to use it to his political advantage by uniting the people in an act of nation-making by way of ritual cooking and regeneration. Politics and ritual merge here in an attempt to mobilise bodily and psychological energies in the cooking of milk as part of the concoction of a national culture with which ‘the people’ can identify from their intimate experience. Indeed, the state molecularises into the inner depths of ways of beings in domestic spaces and makes them resonate into a collective body, of which we became part in our bodily movements and temporalities centred around food. Food binds people together indeed...

At 5:05 a.m., I am given the honour of lighting the hearth-fire and re-igniting the life in the house and in our family. On TV, there is a split screen of the president’s wife playing the same role, as well as one of the higher officers of the army. This first act of igniting the hearth-fire is called the lipa gini dālvīme. We have to hurry because we need to perform several things before the next näkkat moment at 5:55 a.m. It is now time to put the pot of milk on the fire to make it overflow. This is also broadcasted live from two locations and
everywhere it goes smoothly. It would be interesting to observe what would happen if a broadcasted overflowing would fail...

Thereafter, the rice is added and the *kiribath* is made for the first meal of the year at 5:55 a.m. An oil lamp and incense is lit on the food table and we watch the sumptuous collection of New Year foods on the president’s table on TV.

The eldest, in our case Nihinsa (recall that both parents have died), takes a lump of milk-rice, mixes it with some *kävung*, banana, and *dodol*, and feeds us. The flow of life passes through the food from the elder to the younger within the nuclear family unit. The gastric fire is started up as well. The combinations of coconut and rice along with banana announce the start of a new phase in life pregnant with hopes and expectations. To set everyone on the way to happiness and material prosperity we exchange presents and money. Laughter and excitement mark the occasion. We worship each other and bow deeply as a sign of respect.
Renewing Relationalities

Afterwards, we visit the domestic unit headed by the neighbouring uncle to worship each other and again exchange presents. We then start engaging in the first financial transaction by receiving and giving back banknotes wrapped in a betel leaf to wish each other prosperity in the coming year (the *ganu denu*). Both our nuclear families exchange *kiribath* and sweets. By sharing this food, we become regenerated first as a domestic unit and later as the compound unit. In the week that follows, the exchange of food, sweets, and drinks refresh the relationships with the extended family relations, friends, and fellow villagers. For several days, there is an intense flow of people wandering around and visiting several homes a day. Kavith and I are sent out with bags of sweets to deliver to several people in the village. We chat and have tea, and move on to the next house. Several people drop in at our place and present us with similar sweets such as the ones we prepared.

Elsewhere in the village, there is a committee that organises *avuruddak utseve* or games that are played around the New Year. For me, it is striking how similar the games are to those I played when I was a member of Scouts. One of the games involves hitting a pot to break it while being blindfolded. Another one consists of two groups pulling a rope. The climbing of a grease pole is very popular and is new to me. The village is together and there is clear enthusiasm and enjoyment abound.

The excitement brings people together and the New Year allows them to catch up. Young men who have returned from work or the army take the opportunity with both hands to gather and have alcoholic drinks. Girls also gather and catch up as well. The atmosphere in the village is full of energy, intensity, and the celebration of life and the renewal of relationships. However, in a moment’s time, the excitement flips into anger and anguish. Two motorcycles
collide and the clash can be heard in a wide surrounding. The intensity has become excessive and destructive. We run to the scene. It looks deadly serious, and we fear for the lives of the four young men involved. Mothers and relatives arrive in anguish, and seeing the state of the two unconscious men and the other two bleeding, two of them faint. Emotions are running high. Someone goes to collect his van to carry the injured to the hospital 10 km away, but in the meantime the drinking mates of two of the injured young men have heard about the accident. They arrive with bamboo sticks, to give a beating to the ‘culprits’. The alcohol involved renders difficult the attempts to ease things down. For many, an infuriating aspect of the accident is that two men from ‘our’ village are hit by two guys from another village. The outsiders are dark-skinned and soon speculation mounts on whether they are Tamils or low-caste, further increasing tensions. Amidst the shouting, crying, and panic, a small group achieve in keeping the drunk group away until the police arrive after two hours to investigate the accident. The atmosphere is dejected and the intensity of joy and play has fizzled out. However, after the shock of the accident, the visits gradually take on a similar pace to that preceding the accident. And, as we find out later that all the young men are alive in hospital, the mood is steady but not as excited as before.

One day later, there is another rite that has become extinct in Kiribathgama: the anointing of villagers by the monk or the local healer. Buddhika’s grandfather used to be a väde mahattea, a local health practitioner inspired by Ayurvedic medicine, and my host brother recounts melancholically how this rite attracted many villagers to their home. After the death of the grandfather this anointing, which used oil derived from auspicious trees, such as the neem tree, was performed by the village monk until he got too old. Today, this rite is broadcasted on television where not only people but also elephants get anointed by two monks.

The New Year celebrations finish when people take on the habitual routine of work. Many interviewees recalled that in earlier days, the start of work commenced at determined auspicious times, but I did not observe a specific timing in this regard. By the end, relationships are regenerated and as a corollary of this, there is an increase in bodies that gained weight and stomachs that have become upset due to the massive consumption of the greasy New Year sweets. Yet, there is not so much time to recover, as the next big festive days arrive in a few short weeks in relation to the Vesak Poya in May.
**Vesak Poya**

The *poya* days mark the quarter days of the lunar calendar. Of these quarter days, the full moon *poya* days are the most important. There are twelve full moon *poya* days that each have been articulated with a happening pertaining to Buddhism. January comprises the day of *Duruttu*, which is related to the first visit of the Buddha to Sri Lanka. February hosts the *Navan Poya* where Sariputra and Moggalana became the two first disciples of the Buddha. *Medin Poya* takes place in March and recalls the bringing of the tooth relic to Sri Lanka. *Bak Poya* in April commemorates the Buddha’s second visit to Sri Lanka. *Vesak Poya* takes place in May, which I will discuss in detail after the remaining *poya* days. Then we have the *Poson Poya* that celebrates the arrival of Mahinda (a monk and son of King Asoka in India) who brought Buddhism to Sri Lanka. At *Āsala Poya* in July people recall Queen Maya’s dream of the white elephant announcing of the birth of the coming Buddha. This *poya* is moreover associated with four other events: the renunciation of the world by Siddharta before he became the Buddha, his first sermon after enlightenment, the monks taking residence in their monasteries during the first rainy month and the enshrining of the relics. During this *poya*, the tooth relic of the Buddha is carried around in the Kandy procession or *perehāra*, an event that attracts large crowds every year. *Nikini Poya* in August recalls the monks taking residences in the second month of the rainy season. *Binara Poya* in September announces the end of the retreat of monks and the start of their wanderings (ideally they stay inside during the rainy season out of concern for not trampling plants or killing hard-to-see small animals in the lush grass). In October, there is the *Wap Poya* in which people recall the moment that those monks who had not yet left the monastery to wander, did so. This *poya* day also commemorates the day that Buddha sent out his first disciples to preach. It moreover celebrates the moment that the Thera Mahinda sent the minister Arritha to India to get the Bodhi Tree branch (under which the Buddha attained enlightenment) and had Mahinda’s sister, Sanghamitta, bring the branch to Sri Lanka. *Il Poya* in November reminds people of the sending of the first relics to Sri Lanka, whereas finally *Undu Wap Poya* commemorates the arrival of the Bodhi Tree in Sri Lanka (Higgins 1999).

Some full moon *poya* days are celebrated with more rigour than others. Of all these, *Vesak Poya* in May is regarded as the most important as it is a tri-fold celebration commemorating the birth of prince Siddharta who achieved Buddhahood on that full moon, his third visit to Sri Lanka, and his attainment of nirvana. It is thus a thoroughly Buddhist event that is related to the lunar cycle. Interestingly, it only became a holiday under the influence of Colonel Olcott,
who established, together with Madame Blavatsky, the Theosophical Society of New York and who came to Sri Lanka in 1880 to found the Buddhist Theosophical Society. He felt the need for Buddhists to come together around important symbols and as such he invented the colourful Buddhist flag (which is depicted in one of the pictures below and which is widely used to date) derived from the aura of the Buddha. He also persuaded the government to recognise Vesak as a public holiday (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988:204-205, Spencer 1990:20, 58).

Offering and Sharing Food

On this day there are more people than on other poya days that observe sil. The observance of sil entails people following three or five additional prescriptions of moral behaviour on top of the five precepts that are presumed to be observed by all Buddhists. These entail no killing, lying, being unchaste, stealing, and taking intoxicants. Recall that when people follow the eight precepts on poya days, they moreover refrain from any sexual activity, take no solid food in the afternoon, and avoid indulgence in ‘luxurious’ behaviour (e.g. not watching entertainment and wearing no ornaments). The two additional precepts entail not engaging with gold and silver. Normally, those who follow these ten rules are novice monks who have not yet been ordained, or the upāsaka (male) and upāsikā (female) (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988:24-25), who are often virtuous elderly men and women who wear white clothes and who regularly engage in temple-related activities and meditation by way of reciting verses. Some of the upāsaka in Kiribathgama used to be hunters and they explained that they have a lot of pau (bad karma points) and in this way they try to obtain as much pin (good points) as possible before they die. It was for these people that we prepared food for the one-year dāne for my deceased host-mother. As there are more people than usual observing sil on a Vesak Poya, there is no possibility for one family to organise the food supply, so, people join into a collaborative effort to provide food for these people spending the day at the temple. Additionally, there are many others who come to pay a short visit to the village temple to make their offerings or Budhi Pūja. On this occasion, these offerings are of a small quantity placed in numerous new small earthen pots. As likewise described by Jonathan Spencer (1990:60), the offerings are first collected at the table near the gathering hall of the temple and at around 10.30 a.m., everybody queues and passes them to the Buddha statue in the temple.
under the sounding bell and with loud voices saying “Sādhu! Sādhu! Sādhu! Sā!”; which is an exclamation of respect and creates an exalting atmosphere.

The food is placed in front of the Buddha by some *upāsaka*, and is not shared with human beings afterwards, as in the case with food offerings to deities. Meanwhile the 28 Buddhas in the temple ground also receive their share of the offerings. The monk arrives to preach and recite some verses.

When this offering is finished many return home; the team who prepared the food for the *upāsaka* and *upāsikā* and the others observing *sil*, get ready to dole out lunch.
Many others hang around the temple to socialise. Kavith and I were selected by the uncle to bring the offerings of our family to the temple and we stay there a little longer as well. Meanwhile, the rest of the family continues to prepare the meal and work on the *Vesak* decorations in the garden. The family, united again for the first time since the New Year festivities, enjoys the company of each other and various visitors.

*Kodi Gaha*

By 4 o’clock p.m., some of us go to the neighbouring village where they are getting ready to carry the *kodi gaha* (flag tree) towards the temple. This flagpole has altogether eight rings of which seven surround the pole and get larger from top to bottom. On top of the pole, there is the Buddhist wheel, which is the eighth circle, and the Buddhist flag. Some villagers told me that the eight rings articulate the Noble Eightfold Path that enables one to escape suffering. The Noble Eightfold Path has three divisions of virtue, concentration, and wisdom. The first division entails right speech, right action, and right livelihood and seeks to improve the actions. The training of concentration comprises right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration aiming to eliminate defilements in the process of thinking. The last division, wisdom, focuses on right view and right intention to remove ignorance and to fulfil the knowledge in the pursuit of nirvana (Bhikkhu Bodhi 1999:51). Given that this pole is brought towards the temple and planted on *Vesak Poya* commemorating Buddha’s nirvana corroborates the suggested connection of the pole with the eightfold path to nirvana. While men carry this pole and pass through the two villages, the crowd swells in its wake to follow it to the temple, preceded by children throwing fire crackers and carrying Buddhist flags.
When the pole is planted at the temple, several monks arrive to recite verses and preach. When finished, most of the people go home, but the people observing sil stay in the temple to meditate and recite verses until the next morning.

Vesak Decorations

My host brothers and I return home and see that the various typical Vesak decorations are lit up at the houses we pass. It gives a special atmosphere of hope and light in the darkness of the night. It is not without reason that it is sometimes called the festival of lights (de Silva 2002:13). Indeed, the Buddha has arrived and has reached nirvana... We enter the garden in a sea of light and marvellous decorations.

One of the omnipresent decorations only recurring during Vesak is called the attepatteme referring to eight sides and the Noble Eightfold Path that it articulates. These are shown in the pictures above, one taken from TV to illustrate that, as is similar to the televised New Year, Vesak also enters the ‘nationalised’ domestic space as well. Whatever form these lanterns
possess, they have strings of paper that swing in the wind and materialise movement, which I suggest is movement in terms of the positive desire and energy required to thread the Noble Eightfold Path (Webster 2005). During conversations several villagers claimed that there is a link between Vesak and the element of wind, which these specific decorative items clearly visualise in the swinging papers. I also recall that wind is an element of effort and action in Ayurveda, and it is an important factor in the pursuit of nirvana where the flame of life is blown out upon entry. Yet, this connection between wind and the movement to nirvana was articulated very vaguely in this particular event, and so this link should be explored in greater detail. In South Sri Lanka and Colombo, they erect large elaborate archways and towers called thorana that depict aspects of the life of the Buddha or the jātaka tales about his previous lives. Sometimes, there are theatre plays that enact stories on a platform near such thorana. Some of these constructs are more modest whereas others are full of flashing lights and sounds. Certain streets in Colombo are sealed off for traffic to allow people to stroll around and enjoy the lights and intricate constructs.

Festive Moods

A final component of the Vesak Poya entails the numerous dansāla at numerous road-sides. Some groups of villagers and friends erect a temporary shelter from where they dole out free meals or (non-alcoholic) drinks to any passers-by interested in receiving this gift. Again, this is joined by joy and exaltation among the fellow organisers. The dansāla draws upon dāne in terms of the generosity displayed in the sharing of food to as many people as possible and is likewise believed to be meritorious. Yet, unlike at dāne, monks are not participating at the dansāla. Deema de Silva (2002:15) writes: “Those who receive alms, help the donors to accumulate good karma... The receivers of this hospitality also accumulate good karma by the positive thought process of appreciation. According to Buddhism, good or bad karma can be accumulated by thought, word and deed.” It is an illustration again of how the afterlife thoroughly shapes ritual life in this world.

The intermingling of previous, current, and future lives in terms of several species of beings shaping thisworldly life comes clearly to the foreground in the following Sātuwe rite, where people seek to affect non-human beings in order to intervene in their life and world.
Sātuwe

In the introduction of this monograph, I have derived from a healing rite, the Sātuwe, our core concerns and transversal themes of desire, existential anxiety, regeneration, and food. I have furthermore discussed some of the more theoretical implications and its connections with regard to activist concerns, linkages that will be further explored in the following chapter. Yet, I have only briefly sketched aspects of the rite, so need to perform a reprise in more detail here to prepare our next chapter.

Context and Diagnosis

As I have described in the chapter on everyday life, the village faces a lot of hardships. Young men and women leave the area in search for better job opportunities and to chase the ghosts of unbridled desire embodied in the millennial dreams of consumerism. Farming is no longer seen as viable and parents do not aspire for their children to become farmers, even though the farming profession in its capacity as an abstract category or as an additional mode of income still remains respected. The youngest subsistence farmer in the village of research is older than 30 years and this age is likely to increase as youngsters do not acquire the necessary skills, which have to be trained according to my interviewees at the puberty age, a time that most spend being in school. Moreover, elephants complicate farming even more by their raids. Hence, many lament that the village has no future, which reinforces in turn the fact that the young go elsewhere while the elderly remain behind in a village that disintegrates into a jungle. Hence, the village fills with joy when everybody returns for the New Year and other large holidays. It is as if such occasion reminds people of how life could be if the situation were different. The village also faces additional issues: the malfunctioning of the irrigation system and the political cleavage that splits the inhabitants in two. I have described all these issues earlier, but it is interesting to note that the inhabitants explicitly recognise these problems and have a sense that Kiribathgama is hit particularly hard. At a rite to honour the elder people of the village, the decay and disintegration of the community was a main topic for the speakers. Most seem to agree that this is a fairly recent evolution, happening for the last 20 years.

A few people realise that the situation is getting worse and feel that something needs to be done. Yet, how can these problems, which result from complex and sometimes distant causes,
be resolved by simple villagers? The situation and the ways to solve the situation seem so opaque that, in contrast with the activists, the villagers sense an overall inability to intervene in their lifeworld and alter it according to their aspirations. Resignation indeed permeates my interviews about changes in village life and in cultivation that so far used to constitute the economic basis. “What can we do?” is an often-heard response to my inquiries about their valuation of societal changes. Given this increasing distance to and opaqueness of the world in change, which turns abstract for most of the elder villagers, some join their effort and try to find a way out. They invite someone to detect whether there is a malicious spell cast on the village. Hence, we see an attempt to render the quandaries in more familiar terms and in ways that enable them to intervene and get matters back into their hands. This approach entails thus a pragmatic approach to rites involving non-human agencies and the everyday practically grounded knowledge and experience of dealing with misfortunes in village life and personal situations.

The kapurāla invited is a young man of about 30 years old who is sixth in line of a family of kapurālas or spirit priests. He comes and finds no spell or curse (vas kavi) directed towards the village as a whole. He does, however, detect some malicious and powerful forces at the compound of a neighbouring family. It is a domestic unit plagued by numerous hardships. Both parents died several years ago and the siblings that live in the house face several health issues such as gastritis and leg pains. Moreover, all three are working and earning money, but feel they have lost control over their spending drives. They fail in setting money aside for larger investments in the house or for possible mishaps. The kapurāla suspects a preta bandana (a sorcery act that ties the house and its inhabitants to the influence of pretas) and proposes to hold a Sātuwe to “untie” and heal the afflicted family members. The kapurāla suggests moreover that the curse is so strong that its influence may affect the village as a whole even in a minor way. This suggestion is not that surprising given the thoroughly relational way of being and permeability of persons in the South Asian context. When someone suffers, his whole network is affected and this may radiate onto the village where many relatives live. This relationality of well-being is a theme that runs throughout Bruce Kapferer’s work (1997) on the Huniyama sorcery in South Sri Lanka as well.

We can remember from the introduction, that the story behind the preta bandana revolves around the jealousy of another branch of the extended family for the inheritance of the land of the domestic compound where the afflicted family lives. They have allegedly thrown ashes of a deceased person on the compound to attract pretas. The presence of these beings disturbs
the afflicted family members and causes ill-health and the loss of control over their own (spending and consuming) desires. Hence, this is a story of desire turned destructive, as an excess of it normally tends to do, according to basic Buddhist teachings. Desire requires to be balanced if one wishes to achieve positive energies and effects. The untying of these afflicted relatives from the pretas envisages a liberation from compulsive and excessive desire as a way to regain control over this basic human force and thus over their own lives.

Preparing for the Rite

People discern three classes of pretas: gal pretas (those that are attached to stones), gas pretas (those that reside in trees), and gevala pretas (those that exert their influence in houses over the inhabitants). It is the latter class of pretas with which this particular rite deals. The kapurāla has advised those who will participate in the rite to take a bath to purify oneself and so we go to the irrigation lake to bathe. Additionally, we avoid the consumption of eggs, fish, or any kind of meat as these foods are considered pili and could attract the preta’s influence towards us. For those afflicted by the preta bandana, this avoidance helps to decrease the strength of this binding and the pretas. They have to observe these dietary precautions for another 21 days. On top of that, they are not allowed to eat jungle meat for a whole year to ward off possible returns of these malicious ghosts. We arrive in the evening just after sunset, and have a cup of tea and chat with the kapurāla. Thereafter, some of the men help set out the various offerings that the women have prepared earlier.
Obtaining Varam

The best part of the food offering is reserved for the deities and is placed on the table, as in the picture shown below, and the less attractive food for the *pretas* is paced elsewhere to be offered at a later stage.

In the back there is an ash pumpkin behind a tray of five types of sweets and fruit pieces, three colours of flowers, 31 betel leaves, areca nuts and limes, and five types of oil. Additionally, there is burning incense, two oil lamps, three king coconuts, and sand. Rice and boiled (not fried) vegetables are also prepared for the deities. Most of these offerings are placed on the table in front of the *kapurāla*.

The *kapurāla* starts by asking *varam* from the deities and the Buddha. This *varam* entails a kind of permission and authority from which the priest derives power from the deities and ultimately from the Buddha; power which he needs to deal with the lesser beings and to perform the rite. He seeks their blessing, and the good-looking and seductive food offerings help effectuate a voluntary mood in the deities. If the offerings were unsuitable for the deities (such as using the offerings for *pretas* with the less fresh fruit and fried meat), they would be
upset and cause upheaval as this would disrespect the cosmic hierarchy that is shaped through food (recall their Buddhist aspiration and abstinence from meat). Indeed, food is the producer of cosmological distinctions and transformations. Hence, to avoid such mishap, the trays are kept separate at all times, even though some ingredients are the same for both. Throughout this rite, food is one of the main agents that collaborate with the human and non-human efforts to restore the well-being and health of the afflicted family, and is thus carefully handled.

Dehi Kāpīme

When the varam and blessing have been obtained, the kapurāla takes a fried lime that his helper has been frying outside and while chanting against the ill-health and for protection, he moves the lime back and forth over the limb of one of the afflicted people. Coming towards the feet, he cuts the lime. This is the dehi kāpīme rite and the lime, which in itself is mythologically connected with poison, has a poison-destroying power as well (Kapferer 1997:148). The lime absorbs the “poison” of the preta dōsa and the binding with the preta is undone when the kapurāla uses the areca nut cutter to cut the lime. He immediately puts the cut lime in a box, as they are full of danger. If somebody steps on it, the dōsa could be transferred onto him or her (Bastin 2002:68). Hence, the lime adsorbing the poison turns the lime assemblage into a dangerous agent. The kapurāla repeats this act several times; then his aide reads the halves to see how successful this cutting was and puts them in the pot again. When this is finished, he fries the limes in the mixture of five beneficial oils to transform them and their sap into a healing, cleansing, and protective agent in which the poison is destroyed (Kapferer 1997:171).
The *kapurāla* rubs the legs of the afflicted with this oil and wishes them good health. The physical bond with the *pretas* is now undone, but their influence is still palpable in the house and stopping the rite here would mean that the living kinsmen would easily be affected again. Therefore, the house still has to be purified.

**Generating Heat**

Combined with mantras and protective charms that actively intervene in the situation, the *kapurāla* throws powdered resin (*dummele*) into the fire of the torch he is holding. This creates spectacular outbursts of flames. A destructive heat is created to burn any remaining bonds with *pretas* and turns as such into a regenerative heat enabling a life free of the intruding detrimental influences of the *preta bandana*.

![Image of a ritual scene]

**Puhul Kāpīme**

Meanwhile, four men get ready at the four corners of the house. They dig a little hole and hold each a small new earthen pot filled with sand (preferably sea sand, but sand from place where people do not walk is also fine given that the main concern is that this sand should not be polluted). They are ready to place it in the respective hole when the *kapurāla* exits the house. The sand helps purify and protect the house as it articulates the cover-up of the ashes thrown and the diminishing of the latter’s attractive power towards *pretas*.

Just before the exit of the *kapurāla*, someone takes the food offerings for the *pretas* outside while one man of the afflicted kin group gets ready at the exit/entry of the house. He holds an
ash pumpkin that he cuts upon the signal of the kapurāla and the simultaneous burial of the four pots of sand at each corner of the house.

The cutting of the ash pumpkin or the puhul käpīme enacts the cutting of the tie from the house and its inhabitants to the sorcery and the pretas. The victims of the house then become regenerated and reborn as new liberated beings having regained control over their own desires and intentionalities. The käpīme that takes place is less elaborate than in a similar rite that Bruce Kapferer (1997:174-175) describes as part of the overall Huniyam ritual. Yet, the sacrificial component seems to be present as well. The victim becomes an active agent of transformation by sacrificing the bond with pretas by way of cutting the ash pumpkin, serving as the surrogate sacrifice. The pumpkin gets connected with, and as an assemblage holographically condenses, these components, relationships, and existential concerns with precariousness of life, desire, and well-being in this ritual context. As such, it becomes a collaborating agent of the victim, enabling him to transform into a being in control over his own life and in giving it the aspired direction. After the cutting of the ash pumpkin or puhul, the kapurāla and other male participants circle around the house, throwing resin to the flame of the torch and creating heat to chase away the pretas. Someone else scatters sand to minimise the power of the ashes so that the pretas are not attracted back again.
Securing the Compound

The house is secured and now the attention turns to the compound land, as it is not yet liberated from the preta dōsa. First, we carry the basket with food offerings for the pretas outside and place it on the other side of the road, opposite the gate to the compound. The food is attractive to the pretas and by way of their immense greed and craving, which can never be satisfied owing to their tiny throats, they get anchored to the food outside until the moment they catch something more attractive. To avoid the pretas returning, the food precautions need to be sustained to not to attract them back inside the compound and the people inhabiting that space. Thereafter, we walk around the compound while strewing sand and digging four other holes in its four corners to bury another pot of sand in each. As such, Bruce Kapferer (1997:123) notes: “the removal of the basket re-establishes the boundaries of the house and household and externalises the malevolence of social relations (their death-dealing possibility), opening the way for their more positive redefinition.” The family intern to the compound purifies itself by expelling destructive forces to the external territory, thereby re-establishing also the boundary between the internal and external forces of the personhood. Indeed, a preta bandana destabilises one’s being at its intimate core. We noted earlier a similar process of internal purification taking place by way of the externalisation of disturbing thoughts or feelings onto the figure of the Guruma Muttā. Likewise, a boundary became re-established between the Buddhist and non-Buddhist coinciding with that of the ‘civilised’ village and the ‘wild’ jungle.

After three hours the whole rite is over and we share a meal of rice and boiled (not fried) vegetable curries. We chat about recent happenings in the village and express some doubt and poke fun of the kapurāla and his young helper, but still have hope that it might work. At least it improved the situation for the family. They turned from objects of sorcery into agents taking life into their hands. They became subjects again, able to deal with chaotic forces and energies, and channel and mould them into an overall restorative regeneration with the help of the gifts of food.
Conclusion

We have seen that rites take a central place in Sinhalese village life and acquire numerous forms. We have explored only some of these selected on the basis of the particular temporal cycle with which they engaged. The harvest rites deal with the agricultural life-cycle and temporality whereas poya days take place on a monthly basis. Personal life-cycle rites are of a different temporal order and take place only once in one’s own lifetime even though one participates at many. Given all these differences, it is striking to see how these revolve around recurring concerns. The fragility of life and particularly life-transitions spur people to attempt to intervene in the course of life to prevent a transformation for the worse and to enhance a positive and joyful outcome. Furthermore, the role of (particular) foods is crucial in all this.

The Angulimāla Pirith, Kiriamma Dāne, Big-Girl Ceremony, and marriage clearly revolve around the effort to mobilise human and non-human forces in an attempt to achieve a fertile and prosperous transformation in the wider concern of the sustenance and regeneration of life. The death rites (funerals and dānes) likewise seek to effectuate a good transformation, not in this life, but rather from this life to the afterlife. This difference is articulated by the utilisation of water instead of milk in these rites. The harvest ceremonies seek to mobilise non-human forces for the mundane concern of obtaining good harvests. New Year rites are then concerned with prosperous transitions to the next year and the associated regeneration of social relationships, whereas Vesak Poya is part of the poya class of events that help to contemplate transitions in the life and lives of the Buddha. Finally, we have discussed a healing rite that seeks a transformation of a situation of abjection into a state of well-being.

All these rites thus revolve around the desire for the good life. Such desire is a powerful and creative force that enables these ritual regenerations and re-orientation of psychic, bodily, and non-human potencies in what is an intervening in life in response to its fragility. Hence, on top of desire (in both its creative and destructive forms), ritual engages existential anxieties and regeneration as core concerns that are articulated into different formations according to different contexts (e.g. harvest or birth). These three core concerns of desire, anxiety, and regeneration thus recur throughout these rites and repeat themselves in different themes (e.g. human or plant fertility, prosperity, purity, pretas) and different rites.

I argue that this repetition in difference not only occurs in relation to the core concerns across different rites, but also in relation to the rites themselves. Some of the particular rites exhibit a striking repetition in their practical execution across time and space. Yet, small differences
gradually seep in and enable small transformations throughout history and across geographical areas. For instance, we have mentioned the increasing Buddhicisation of various rites that Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere (1988) describe so well, but also the alteration in relation to both technological innovations and memorisations of the past combined in the harvest procedures. The repetition of specific rites is furthermore enhanced by the crystallisation into written words in texts that are used as agents in the ritual transformations, whether it is Pāli Buddhist texts or mantras written down on Ola leaves used by kapurālas. Taken together, each ritual is composed of repetitions and differences, but each difference entails some repetition (as in the recurring concerns across different rites) and each repetition entails some difference (as in similar rites that are more or less elaborated or that are more or less Buddhicised).

The repetition and thus continuity across the differences among various rites not only articulates itself throughout the recurring concerns, but also, and crucially, in relation to the foods that people work with to materialise and bring about the envisaged transformations. The core food items that recur in relation to transitions in human and non-human life-cycles involve coconut milk and milk-rice. In contrast, the transition after death to the otherworldly realm that still impinges on thisworldly life draws upon a particular life-transition rite—overflowing of milk—and repeats this with water instead. Only the healing rite last discussed did not involve coconut milk and milk-rice (not even as cooling foods or pure offerings to deities), but this may be related to the seeming emphasis on generating a lot of heat to destroy the preta bandana and transforming it into a regenerative heat of renewal in the ‘cooking’ of life as healthy and as interrelational again.

By way of its recurrence throughout a variety of rites as demonstrated here, it becomes clear that coconut and rice in whatever form and often in their combination (kiribath, dodol, alua etc) become articulated with the concerns that recur in these same ritual contexts. The repetition of this articulation between these two foodstuffs discussed and the concerns of fertility, prosperity, desire, regeneration, and anxiety can only be convincingly analysed by comparing a sufficient variety of rites. Through these repetitions and differences across various rites, these recurring food items become crystallised as very powerful articulators of the good life and the hope for it. As such, these food items become strongly articulated with these concerns and the other components that make up these ritual events. The food gets connected with and acquires a particular expression as a resultant of the interplay of heterogeneous components, such as these concerns, but also non-human agents with their
particular tastes (recall the cosmological distinction between Buddha, deities, and lower beings through food), intensity of fire and heat, size and shape of the pot, sufficient wood, human intentionality to life, and so forth. By connecting with these components, the food becomes not a substance, but rather an assemblage of these components that have become part of it. As such, the food item holographically condenses these connections and becomes dense and intense, while materialising the concerns and the entities of the world with which it is connected. In this connected and condensed capacity, food becomes a powerful tool with which to bring about transformations of the world, and the entities within, while keeping focus on the improvement of the human life in question (see also Bruce Kapferer [1997:85] who writes about something similar in relation to the gift as a total prestation). The food in the offering and the commensal event are part of the rite that has thus a productive or regenerative effect in relation to the cosmos and the human beings within it, hence the reason for introducing the ontogenetic (including cosmogenetic) approach to food in the second chapter.

The repeated form in which the coconut and rice recur throughout rites in order to articulate core concerns in life and to bring about transformations and mutual becomings (as in entangled ontogenetics) materialises in specific physical transformations, such as in the overflowing and deterritorialising milk and the reterritorialising milk-rice. As such, they actualise in a way driven by the ritual context in which they transform and articulate with concerns and various human and non-human entities. However, these same foodstuffs can articulate similar concerns while actualising in a different form and expression within the political economic context of food activism. Even though the foodstuffs are the same and connect with similar existential concerns, they then become assemblages that acquire more abstract and large-scale expressions as they become articulated with higher levels, larger scales, and abstract principles of justification. Let us now turn to this fantastic and spectral transformation of the food assemblage in Sri Lankan food activism.
Chapter 6: The Political Economic Articulation and Expression of Food in Activism

Life in Sri Lanka and elsewhere is filled with numerous forms of uncertainty, fragility, and anxiety, on the one hand, and joy and prosperity, on the other, together entailing the waxing and waning of life. This pulse or oscillation of life is related to both destructive and creative forms of desire, such as respectively embodied in pretas or in ritual efforts to reach the good life. The three core existential concerns—insecurity, desire, and regeneration—that run as transversal themes throughout this monograph are intimately entangled with food in a relation of mutual implication and becoming. So far, we have examined how people negotiate these concerns in the everyday sustenance of life by way of their dealings with food during the processes of cultivation, harvest, procurement, cooking, and consumption. Moreover, as our account on Ayurveda and Buddhist textual sources illustrates, food is a catalyst in determining our health and in dealing with our desires that help or hinder our path to well-being and nirvana. Particularly, the balancing of numerous components (flavours, humours, fire, and desire) is a fragile process and requires extensive care. In our chapter on ritual action, we have seen how these three core existential themes are articulated with and condensed into the ritual food assemblage in its cooking and offering as means to effectuate a transformation for the pursuit of the good life.

In what follows, I will argue that these same existential concerns with the precariousness of life, desire (especially in its excessive formations), and the aspiration for a dignified life and its regeneration inform the work of food activists in Sri Lanka. Here, the term “food activists” is defined broadly to include people who promote peasant rights, consumers’ access to food, food safety, organic food, or food sovereignty. In this chapter, I will predominantly focus on a group of activists that concentrate on peasant issues while linking these to a wide range of themes and concerns, often in relation to economic globalisation and liberalisation. The organisation of focus is the Colombo-based Movement for National Land and Agricultural Reform (MONLAR), which is a network organisation that connects between 100 and 200 member organisations, depending on the alliances it (often temporarily) establishes. MONLAR predominantly focuses on advocacy to influence policy-making at higher levels that affect small-scale farmers. The activists denounce the insecurity that farmers experience due to policies that are inspired by the “drive to accumulate capital”, a particular formation of
excessive desire or greed epitomised in their apprehension by agro-industry. As an alternative, they advocate a non-industrial mode of agriculture in which to rebalance desire in the form of a balanced give and take relationship with nature in what they call a regenerative agriculture. Hence, we see our three core existential concerns recurring and continuing to be enmeshed with the food assemblage that alters in this activist articulation into a more political economic expression.

In what follows, I will explore the ways in which these shared concerns are connected with food and are articulated differently in the activist context as juxtaposed to the ritual articulation of the food assemblage, and elicit which dynamics underpin this differentiation. Overall, I will argue that whereas ritual action condenses these concerns into food and works with food to achieve transformations, often by way of appealing to higher and invisible non-human forces, activism articulates (and connects) food with themes at larger national and international scales and levels whereby it performs a generalised abstraction on food, at least from the perspective of ritual condensation. From the large-scale perspective, the ritual holographic condensation is likewise an abstraction from the wider general political economic context. As we will see, abstraction entails a combination of dis-articulating certain components of food to re-articulate with other elements, altering the composition of the food assemblage. Yet, the activist abstraction is specific and different from the ritual condensation in that this overall dynamic of abstraction exists in several sub-dynamics, including those of scale-making, reductionism, and generalisation, entailing an emptying out of food that recurs in the activist articulation and translation of food even though it continues to be entangled with concerns of precariousness, desire, and regeneration of life.

The aspect of scale is crucial in our approach to activism, which according to Sidney Tarrow (2006:120-121) revolves very much around bringing local issues of contention to higher levels, whether regional, national, or global, or in diffusing new practices downwards in what he terms as “scale shift”. He notes that in such a shift between scales the scope and object of the contention or claim may alter in this process, creating altered meanings. Indeed, it is a shift from the micro to the macro scale that entails not only a difference of scale, but also a difference in kind (Patton 2000:43). It is a process of translation and articulation that may create gaps between the initial story and its framing at a higher level (Keck & Sikkink 1998:19). Indeed, by turning to activism, we now move from the minutiae of (molecular) everyday and ritual life towards different (molar) scales or levels where policy-making takes place. This scale shift is in large part related to the political work of such activists, but also to
their economic focus. Yet, I view scale not as something fixed and between which one oscillates, but instead as something created and co-(re)produced in the dynamics of articulation, as I will demonstrate with respect to the political economic articulation of food at national and international scale by MONLAR.

To begin, we need first to examine the national scale and molar categories of food to which MONLAR orients itself and which it thereby helps reproducing, after which we turn to the analysis of MONLAR as a network organisation and its activist articulation of food. I will introduce the particulars of the national scale of food by turning to a historical account from a political economic perspective. I should stress that I will reproduce this account and political economic approach without critically analysing it from the perspective of my frame for three reasons. First, I base myself on secondary literature to recount the history of Sri Lanka and particularly on a very detailed work by K.M. de Silva (2005). I have not carried out historical research myself to possess the necessary detailed information to be able to critically assess and modify the account I am reproducing here through our frame. Second, by reproducing this account in the language of this approach, I hope to further foreground the contrast with our approach, and will elicit the dynamics that underpin this contrast towards the final sections of this chapter. Third, I reproduce this political economic language and mode of thinking given that it is clearly prevalent among politicians, economists, and activists that engage with national and international scales, and related molar categories. Following our ascent in scale through the historical political economy of food, in which it becomes clear how food has forcefully shaped the fate of Sri Lanka and its politicians, I will introduce MONLAR as an organisation. We will discuss its general analysis of socio-economic changes and its alternative vision of society. We will also look at the ways it organises itself and the repertoire of action that it selects (in other words, its utilisation of certain activist methods in achieving its goals [Tilly 1978, Della Porta & Diani 1999]). Hence, I will predominantly focus on its explicit and cognitivised discourses and practices in its capacity as an organisation trying to influence the public policy domain. Subsequently, I will turn to the personal life histories of Sarath Fernando, the director, and of some other activists which allows us to understand the historical emergence of MONLAR from a more personal point of view. Given the historical perspective on food and the emergence of MONLAR, we are then equipped to grasp MONLAR’s discourse and critique on industrial agriculture in more detail with respect to the green revolution and the causes of the food (price) crisis of 2008. For MONLAR, the green revolution epitomises an agri-business model of agriculture that
embodies institutionalised greed, which in its turn leads to different insecurities, such as a food (price) crisis. In a subsequent phase I turn to the everyday life at the office as a means to explore the more molecular micro-elements of the personal food-engagements of activists. This account foregrounds the people behind the activism and allows for a more sensuous understanding. Following this, I will turn to a more detailed discussion of the general trends and dynamics in the activist articulation of food in political economic terms as performed by MONLAR, while contrasting these dynamics with those explored in everyday and ritual life (precariousness, desire, regeneration as well as the overall abstraction), as to discern differences and repetitions in food’s actualisation across these spheres of life.

Let us now turn to our political economic account of how food has been shaping Sri Lanka’s history and first discuss the notion of political economy of food that makes us ascend from the personal and village-level concerns as discussed earlier towards the national and international scales.
Political Economy of Food in the History of Sri Lanka

*Introducing the Political Economy of Food*

When reading political economic accounts of food, we tend to move away from the (generally female) domestic sphere of cooking and eating towards the (generally male) sphere of food production and wider food markets. Hence, with a focus on the activist (and thus political economic) articulation of food, we will sense a large shift and contrast with previous chapters, even though we are still talking about food. This radical change illustrates the diversity and multiplicity of the components of the overall assemblage of food and stresses the need for rendering food in these terms of heterogeneous components that make it an assemblage actualising differently according to the various contexts into which food moves, such as from the domestic hearth to the policy and economy levels or from the molecular to the molar levels.

The political economic assemblage of food contains a large multiplicity of components that are assemblages themselves. The World Bank 2008 World Development Report (WDR2008), dedicated to the issue of agriculture (2007:29) mentions as relevant categories of the food chain: inputs and outputs of prices, markets, technology, and value along with the demand and supply factors, of which the production factors as part of the supply side include land, labour, and capital. The latter three components—land, labour, and capital—feature as core categories around which opponents of the World Bank policies mobilise and articulate their discontent. Note that these three components do engage concerns of anxiety, regeneration, and desire in everyday and ritual life in for instance the *Sātuwe* and labour sharing arrangements of *attam*. Moreover, these recur as central and more abstract factors of Marxist analyses of the food system at large. Henry Bernstein and several co-editors (1990:2) define the overall political economy as the interrelations between political ideas and actions, and economic ideas and processes. The political economy of food examines: “aspects of the social organization, or social relations, of the production, exchange, distribution and consumption of food” (Bernstein et al. 1990:2-3). The agrarian political economy then entails the investigation of: “the social relations and dynamics of production and reproduction, property and power in agrarian formations and their processes of change, both historical and contemporary” (Bernstein 2010:1). Such investigation centres on the analysis of capitalism, which entails: “a system of production and reproduction based in a fundamental social relation between capital and labour” (Bernstein 2010:1). In the development of capitalism, the
peasant, as the subsistence producer for household consumption, becomes a petty commodity producer who has to maintain his subsistence: “through integration into wider social divisions of labour and markets” entailing the “commodification of subsistence” (Bernstein 2010:4). Hence, we see labour, capital and market emerging as core determinants of social life, in almost an automated mechanical way.

At the input and supply side of the food chain, we find the assemblage of productivity, which entails the measured output, and is thus distinct from, but related to, the process of production. Henry Bernstein (2010:13) defines production as: “the process in which labour is applied in changing nature to satisfy the conditions of human life.” In this rendering, nature is then composed of various relatively inert (in contrast to the new Latourian-inspired materiality studies) inputs upon which human labour exerts its transformative force for the intentional purpose of achieving human well-being. Such inputs include land (and its soil qualities), water, sunshine, temperature, and other environmental qualities, but also extend to include capital, technology, labour, knowledge, and energy (e.g. oil). The basic land-labour-capital trinity forms the material basis of the input and supply side in achieving productivity, but also features in the distribution or marketing aspect. Productivity is then measured in terms of input-output ratios and can variably include: yield or land output (amount of crop harvested from a specific area of land) as well as labour output (amount of crop produced with given effort and time) (Bernstein 2010:13-14). Here, agrochemical inputs or technological tools, such as tractors, can aid in sharply increasing land and labour output. As we shall see later, the green revolution package in Sri Lanka joined in with a large-scale irrigation and resettlement scheme, subsidised fertiliser schemes, and agricultural extension services to provide the farmers with technical knowledge, all geared towards increasing productivity to become self-sufficient in rice. The technical inputs of the green revolution generally did enable a massive increase in the global production of food by way of increasing the land and labour productivity. Yet, productivity can also be measured according to energy efficiency, and as such we can see that ‘high-input’ farming may be much less efficient than ‘low-input’ farming in terms of the units of energy required to produce a certain quantity of crops (Bernstein 2010:15). MONLAR argues for a reciprocal kind of farming that allows to take from the earth but also to give back organic manure in what they call a regenerative agriculture where inputs become nearly redundant. This alternative model of farming stands in stark contrast with the dominant model of exploitative or extractive farming where chemical inputs are given to the earth not for it to regenerate but to be able to extract more of
its resources. Some of the generally required input entails human energy (energised by food used to produce food) in the form of labour that includes the social conditions under which labour productivity is being achieved. As such, we enter into the discussions of the division of labour and classes, and in more updated political economic accounts, such as those of Bernstein et al (1990) and Bernstein (2010), as well as gender. This in turn brings us to the reproduction: “of the means of production (land, tools, seeds, livestock), of current and future producers, and of the social relations between producers and between producers and others” (Bernstein 2010:18). The money required for the inputs and their maintenance (e.g. tractors) derives from the output and the prices at the farmgates. The money that is left over turns into surplus value and is used for rent in agrarian class societies. Rent can also include payment in kind or in labour. Here we arrive at the issue of extraction of surpluses and we have gradually arrived at the output side of the supply part of food. The creation of surplus value constituted an important incentive for the World Bank to dedicate its 2008 World Development Report (WDR2008) to agriculture as it can generate the means for development (to be understood as the means to produce and extract surplus value that can be invested in different sectors of the economy providing a diversified division of labour).

At the demand side, we arrive at consumption, with which agrarian political economy engages much less. Yet, there are some nuanced approaches that take consumption seriously and take it out of the sensuous domestic, intimate, and existential sphere and bring it to the political economic level to understand the role of consumption in the social reproduction of classes and related distinctions of taste, including of food (Bourdieu 2008). Such consumption analysis becomes more pressing in light of the increasing influence of professional taste producers (marketeers) that can only emerge in the consumerist context where the consumer has become the privileged economic subject (Best & Paterson 2010:15-16). Consumption analyses tend to centre around the economic indicators of consumption (class, income, poverty) and such kind of analysis, if carried out, could shed an interesting light on the ways in which shopping for food in Sri Lanka (e.g. going to Keells, Arpico, local grocery story, weekly markets etc.) refashions a person as a member of a certain class, caste, and social group (based on less economic indicators), thereby reconfiguring the social structures in society. Particularly, the social reproduction of class by way of consumption acquires more weight in sociological and more Marxist-oriented analyses of economies that shift emphasis from production to consumption in the definition of one’s social relations and status. Yet, the class divisions of consumption cannot be dissociated from class divisions of labour and neither from the rural-
urban distinctions. Moreover, the study of the demand side of the food chain is crucial to understand some of the supply responses that co-emerge with changes in demand. For instance, analyses of the 2008 food price crisis have shown that among the various causes, the increasing demand for meat among Indian and Chinese urban middle classes has added to the pressure on arable land for feedstock, which competes with and aids in the decline of the production of other foods. Indeed, to produce food in the form of meat, 7.5 to 8 times more land is required than in the production of the same amount of food for direct human consumption (Food and Agricultural Organisation, FAO\textsuperscript{53}).

With the increasing importance and enlarging size of the economies of scale and markets, the trade and distribution aspect takes on more prominence in political economic analyses. As traders connect supply and demand, they occupy a powerful bargaining position and as such are likely to become a powerful class leaving its deep imprint on the food system. The 2008 food (price) crisis has illustrated the rise of food empires that in their monopolistic control were able to push down spot prices at the farmgates while increasing food prices for the consumers, thereby enabling a powerful increase in profits (van der Ploeg 2010). The liberalisation of trade that enabled key players to emerge has always been the core concern for the World Bank and World Trade Organisation (WTO), as they argue that supply and demand regulate each other in the most efficient way. However, in its World Development Report of 2008, the World Bank acknowledges more explicitly the need for various regulatory institutions and state support for creating the necessary conditions for an open and free trade. Yet, in their reaction to the food (price) crisis of 2008, these international institutions did not admit the monopolisation of trading corporations as part of the sudden rise in food prices, but rather blamed distorting trade measures, such as the implementation of export restrictions, import tariffs, and export subsidies, as the main causes of this particular crisis.

Hence, in this brief overview of a political economy of food it is clear that we have rapidly ascended in scale compared to our earlier descriptions of foods as agents in the rhythms of everyday life and in the ritual condensation and transformation of existential concerns. In this section, I have so far elicited several large, general, broad, and molar components to which an overall political economic approach orients itself to, starting from the supply side (land, labour, capital, and other productive inputs, such as technologies), involving distribution (trade, institutions, markets, transnational companies, and retailers), and arriving at the

\textsuperscript{53} \url{http://www.fao.org/es/esc/common/ecg/538/en/RisingPricesIFAD.pdf}
demand side of consumption, which in turn shapes supply chains. In approaching food in these general categories and at these global levels, it becomes reinforced as a large-scale entity and so both capitalist and critical political economic approaches reproduce the process of scale-making performed on food. The composition of the food assemblage alters as it gets connected with bigger, more general, and larger-scale components elicited above, thereby acquiring a large-scale and higher-level composition and expression. As such, food becomes shaped as a matter of concern into general trends and a few abstract categories, such as inputs and outputs, encompassing large populations and spanning wider geographical areas. Food is then not approached in its singularity or individuality (e.g. the particular coconut that is used in surrogate self-sacrifice) but is rather combined into bulks and populations and approached as such (e.g. coconuts in export cargo and statistics), and this enables the assemblage of food to transform into an inflated and expanded state. Hence, in such grand political economic accounts, there is little place for an approach to food that exhibits sensitivity to local-level variations and phenomena which shape people’s engagements with food in local and intimate ways, as the related conceptual arrangements are part of the production of a global scale of food (we only need to look at its classification of the world into three blocs according to the countries’ relation to agriculture in their economies [WDR2008]). The political economy of food that performs such scale-making has become quite dominant in food studies, affecting the ways in which societies, consumers, activists, and policy-makers deal with, shape, and render food as a large-scale commodity, obfuscating its potential status as a condensed entity that regenerates life, deals with existential concerns, and nourishes human beings in all their psychological, emotional, spiritual, and social aspects. As this scale-making and abstract enlargement of food is repeated all over the world, such an approach to food has become powerful, crystallised, and reproduced. Not denying the importance of such global overviews, the question remains whether a political economy can sufficiently account for the multiplicity of experiences of people that are grounded in their local lifeworlds (and not only in relations of land, labour, and capital). More importantly, many of these high-level analyses tend to obfuscate the less tangible cultural and intimate aspects (joy, desire, religious experience, conviviality, etc.) of food, which are not less important.

It will become clear that MONLAR operates at this very same national and international scale when it formulates its critiques on similar political economic components of food, thereby reinforcing by its critique the large-scale abstraction of food, extracted from its cultural and intimate entanglements. It is an excellent example of the Foucaultian notion of impersonal
power embodied in a phenomenon that resistance to this phenomenon reinforces (by way of repeating the basic premises of) (Prado 1995). Indeed, as we shall see, it is a core challenge of a movement like MONLAR to redefine the approach to food in a radically different way without reinforcing the dominant and powerful premises of the food system that the organisation opposes, including the globalising scale of food production and trade. It has to attempt this creative revisioning while not losing touch with those policy-makers the organisation wishes to influence as well as the people the movement claims to represent who engage with food in its political economic expression in only a partial way. We will return to these concerns and quandaries involved when later turning to our discussion of MONLAR and the dynamics of the activist articulation of food.

Whereas we have demonstrated the political economic scale of food to which MONLAR orients itself, we still must sketch certain components of food that have shaped the political economic history of Sri Lanka, components that continue to affect present-day life and the work of MONLAR.

A Historical Account of Sri Lanka’s Political Economy of Food

As an agriculture-based society, Sri Lanka’s history could be narrated through its relation with food production and consumption, even from a perspective reduced to political economy as I will reproduce here. Some of these elements of the food-based history continue to shape present-day life and politics, including the ancient irrigation systems with which nationalists and politicians mirror current agricultural projects, the colonial transformations from subsistence to commercial plantation and export-oriented agriculture, which MONLAR critiques, and the welfare policies of the decolonising state that are under pressure of the liberalising and globalising economy. It is important to start with the ancient age and the Anuradhapura period of our historical overview.

Early Beginnings and the Anuradhapura Period (161 B.C.E.-1017 C.E.)

Most historical accounts of Sri Lanka start with the earliest written Buddhist Pali chronicles, such as the Mahavamsa, Dipavamsa, and Cūlavamsa, as these are some of the few historical records at hand. Yet, using these documents as the starting point for narrating the history of Sri Lanka is often informed by a nationalist agenda on part of the Sinhalese Buddhist historical scientists as the chronicles validate the primary presence of the Sinhalese on the
island (if one ‘forgets’ the indigenous Väddas). These sources mention a mythical prince Vijaya, as a member of the Indo-Aryan tribes and who colonised Sri Lanka in the fifth century B.C.E. (Brohier 2006:14-15). He is seen as the founding father of the Sinhalese, and given the fact that his arrival is synchronised with the passing away of the Buddha, the chronicles have brought to life the myth that the Sinhalese are the chosen guardians of Buddhism, an idea that still holds currency today. Buddhism got a stronghold in Sri Lanka when Mahinda, the emissary of the emperor Asoka, converted the Sinhalese king Devānampiya Tissa (ruling between 250-210 B.C.E.) to Buddhism (de Silva 2005:5-9, Spencer 1990:21). The Väddas became the wild uncivilised Other to the civilisation brought by prince Vijaya in which the notion of civilisation is equated with Buddhism. The animosity between the ‘wild’ and ‘civilised’ categories persists to date in the common held view that Väddas as hunters kill animals and thus are not as good as Buddhists. Hence, their specific engagement with food defines them as lesser human beings and as such some are still trying to ‘civilise’ and refashion them as ‘better’ people by turning them into rice cultivators (for instance, the Movement for the Protection of Indigenous Seeds [MPIS] has handed over seeds to other activists that were engaged in this ‘conversion’). Indeed food fashions the hierarchy among human beings and their higher or lesser level of being human (Mintz 1985:3, Remotti 1999:111-118). We will see how the notion of civilisation has become tightly knit to rice and Buddhism to the extent that rice is becoming defined as a Buddhist crop.

The threefold iconography of the Sinhalese, which depict a common and nationalist way of being Sinhalese, consists of the dāgoba (the Buddhist stupa), wewa (irrigation reservoir or ‘tank’), and paddy (Hennayake 2006:109). This articulation finds its roots in the earliest historical accounts and has crystallised ever since. Historic accounts often start with the narration of the works that the Buddhist kings have performed in agriculture and irrigation, of which it is important to note that in the fourth century B.C.E., the first construction of a reservoir is made by prince Anuradha, and it was there where Anuradhapama was established (note gama = village). During the reign of king Dutugämunu (161-137 B.C.E.), the village evolved into Anuradhapura (note pura = city) that became the capital for more than one thousand years. Given that this area is situated in the Dry Zone of Sri Lanka, many kings worked on improving irrigation facilities and as such this area turned into the heartland of the irrigation civilisation, also called Rājarate or “kings’ country” to date (de Silva 2005:12-17).

54 A clear example of the established unity of cultivation and Buddhism in the ‘traditional’ Sinhalese village can be found in the work of Disanayaka (1993).
These technological projects and inputs enabled a better adaptation to the local climatic and environmental conditions (note the material determinism in this formulation common to historical materialism and political economy), and so increased the productivity and generated large surpluses that provided further capital for investments in the hydraulic civilisation during the early Anuradhapura period. Even while these state-led initiatives were pivotal in the large-scale projects (and they form the bulk of the nostalgic historical imagination), K.M. de Silva (2005:40-41) remarks that local regional and local initiatives were equally important in the flourishing of agricultural production, yet, such small-scale activities remain out of the purview of most historical accounts as well as the one I am reconstituting here. Some of these irrigation reservoirs (also called tanks, derived from the Portuguese *tanque*, meaning lakelet), including the Minneriya tank and the Kala Wewa remain widely known for their grandeur (Brohier 2006:18, 21). Up until now, we have thus discussed the supply and input side of the food chain along with its environmental, climatological, and technological (irrigation) factors in the context of historical kingdoms. These historical elements continue to be practically used in cultivation to date, just as they continue to animate political, nationalist, and postcolonial imagination and more specifically the development projects in the 1960s and 1970s.

The establishment of large-scale irrigation systems is engraved in the collective memory of the Anuradhapura period. However, the hydraulic and Buddhist civilisation in Anuradhapura also involved other elements of a political economy of food. In fact, Anuradhapura was a ‘hub’ in the global trade of spices, luxury goods, and cotton, as it was connected with the Arabian peninsula, the Roman empire, India, Southeast Asia, and China by two main ports (present-day Trincomalee and one near Mannar). Anuradhapura started losing its advantaged trade position during the seventh century when the kingdom faced increased competition from the trade empire Sri Vijaya in Sumatra (which may explain the emergence of various similar recipes, such as the *sambol* dishes, in current Sri Lankan cuisine), the Pallavas in East India, and the Muslim traders who became the dominant traders on the maritime route from the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf to Canton in China. By the ninth century, Muslim traders established themselves at the ports of Sri Lanka, forming the nucleus of the present day Muslim community. Meanwhile, the internal trade in Sri Lanka was predominantly in the hands of Sinhalese merchants until the advent of the South Indian Chola invasions of the tenth century (de Silva 2005:46-48). With regard to the economic life of “the mass of the people”, K.M. de Silva (2005:49) states that trade: “was of a humbler kind, principally the exchange by barter,
or by a limited use of currency, of the surplus grain at their disposal, of services and of manufactured goods.” People also had to perform services to the king (rājakāriya), which varied according to caste background, but often involved service in militia or participation in large public works, such as the construction of large-scale reservoirs. They also had to pay rent for the land by returning some of the harvest to the king. Hence, we already see international trade, taxes, competition, and extraction of surpluses emerging in this historical picture of economic and political life in Anuradhapura.

The Polonnaruwa Period (1070 C.E.-1255 C.E.)

The Anuradhapura period ended with the invasion of the Indian Cholas, during which the capital was relocated to Polonnaruwa when King Vijayabāhu restored power there in 1070. King Parākramabāhu I (1153-1186) is remembered as an important king because of his capture of the Tooth and Bowl relics of the Buddha, which have been important in gaining and consolidating political authority in Sri Lanka (recall the power of these dhātu discussed in chapter 4, here converting into political power). Moreover, he politically unified the island and initiated large irrigation works, such as the Parākrama Samudra (Sea of Parākrama), the largest irrigation tank constructed in ancient Sri Lanka entailing an embankment of about 12 meters high and 13.7 kilometres long (de Silva 2005:82-84, 93, Brohier 2006:28). He thus further developed Polonnaruwa as a hydraulic civilisation and agricultural society and economy. The financial means for such large-scale projects were again derived from taxes on paddy, land tax, and levies on irrigation water. Moreover, revenue was extracted from items traded internationally, such as gems, pearls, elephants, and cinnamon (a spice which collaborated powerfully in the determination of Sri Lanka’s fate). At an international level, religious, cultural, political, and mercantile ties between Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia were at their heyday. Additionally, the Moors came to play an increasingly important role in the trade across the Indian Ocean, a trade dominated by the Arabs at that time (de Silva 2005:90-99).

1250s – 1500s

From 1250 to the end of the 15th century, the hydraulic civilisation and political unity were in decay due to various attacks from the Indian mainland. The location of power shifted several times, first from Polonnaruwa to Dambadeniya, then to Yapahuwa, to remain in Kurunegala for some time, after which it moved further south to Gampola and then to modern Kandy or

55 From hereafter, I omit these indications unless we are talking about something occurring during the time covered by “B.C.E.”
Mahanuvara (de Silva 2005:110-111). Later, the capital moved to the west coast, near Colombo, to Jayawardhanapura Kotte where the Kotte kingdom was based. The Jaffna kingdom also emerged in this same period. Hence, the escape from the invasions in the north led to a migration towards the Wet Zone of Sri Lanka and led to a change in the economy and society (note again the traditional materialist mode of explanation at large scale, which is not able to explain why within the Wet Zone, there is so much variation). In the Wet Zone, cultivation methods altered and rain-fed agriculture became the norm. The large irrigated swathes of paddy land in the Dry Zone were abandoned, so the overall production declined. Malaria emerged as a serious collateral factor because the tanks, reservoirs, and canals became abandoned, providing ideal breeding places for the anopheles mosquito (de Silva 2005:109-115). Simultaneously the economy further transformed as trade in cinnamon, areca nuts, elephants, and gems gained importance. In a real political economic vein we can state that the transformation from the hydraulic agricultural society towards a society combining subsistence farming and trade involved an increased social diversification. Indeed, three new caste groups—the Salāgama (cinnamon peelers), the Durāva (toddy tappers), and the Karāva (fishermen)—emerged; groups that would vie for the dominant position of the farmers’ caste (the Goyigama) (de Silva 2005:120-121, Roberts 1982, Jayawardana 2007). Hence, this period is deeply marked by a migration that led to a change in agricultural cultivation techniques, the economy, and caste structure.

It is clear that this political economic account focuses on the large-scale trends and the ways in which a changing economic base alters society, as a Marxian materialist analysis does. The story would become more complicated and diverse if we looked at more local scales as well, but as argued earlier I do not have this detailed information and I do not have the space for such a detailed historiography. Above all, my point here is to reproduce a political economic account of the history of Sri Lanka to explore these important components of food at the higher national and international levels to which MONLAR connects in its activist articulation of food.

The event of colonisation likewise continues to leave its imprint on present-day society, economy, and politics, and does so maybe even more than some activists acknowledge in their critique on recent governments and postcolonial developments. Overall colonisation lasted about 440 years, starting with the Portuguese in 1505, shifting to the Dutch, and ending with the British in 1948. It should be noted that the transitions between the periods that I am discerning here are not always clearly distinguishable. The transition is often more gradual
than such general time indications suggest, as these foreground a particular timing of an event that epitomises the change of period or era. Let us now turn to the first European colonisers.

The Portuguese (1505-1658)

By the 16th century, the majority of the people inhabiting the island lived in an area of Sri Lanka comprising the central mountainous zone to the west coast. Trade and (mostly rain-fed) agriculture flourished, and land revenue provided most of the royal income in Kotte. The general mode of exchange consisted in barter, yet monetisation was already underway, as areca nuts and coconuts had become cash crops. Particularly, the Salāgamas reaped the bulk of the benefits of cinnamon trade and became more influential in the caste structure, but the Portuguese were successful in securing the control over the cinnamon trade by 1505. When the Kandyan kingdom separated from the Kotte kingdom in 1521, they started to gain more political control as well (de Silva 2005:142-147). It is evident here that food in collaboration with human beings indeed can become the machinic producer to spur even large-scale societal changes. When the Sītāvaka kingdom, bordering the remains of the Kotte kingdom, collapsed after its king, Rājasimha, died in 1593 due to a wound caused by a bamboo splinter (a small item can indeed cause large political consequences and foregrounding this kind of materiality more would enable to differ from the general historical material approach), the Portuguese established, consolidated, and stabilised their control over the south-west littoral region to obtain more cinnamon. Howbeit, soon after this a new threat to the Portuguese trade would emerge. In 1602, the Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC) or Dutch East India Company formed and became the first multinational corporation with quasi-governmental powers. The VOC deliberately aimed at challenging the Portuguese in Asia, as just like the Portuguese, the Dutch were tempted to gain control over the cinnamon trade (de Silva 2005: 159-163, Mendis 2002:161). Still, it would take until 1658 for the Dutch to take over control over Sri Lanka. K.M. de Silva (2005:180) concludes: “The coming of the Portuguese to Sri Lanka thus certainly led to greater commercial activity, increasing monetization of the economy and higher prices for its products.” Moreover, the Portuguese introduction of Roman Catholicism is important in its imprint on the littoral culture and the social structure of Sri Lanka, as the conversion to Catholicism enabled some to ascend in social status (de Silva 2005:181).
The Dutch (1658-1796)

In competition with the Portuguese, the Dutch sought to gain full control over the spice-producing areas and to obtain a monopoly over the spice trade, particularly cinnamon. The Dutch were never able to conquer the central Kandyan kingdom, but they controlled the surrounding territory that they subsumed under the logic of extraction of profits from the land and cinnamon. During the period 1665-1670, the Dutch established control over the whole coastline, encircling and in this way consolidating their power over independent Kandy, but also vis à vis the English East India Company, which had likewise become interested in the Sri Lankan cinnamon trade in 1659-1660. On top of the cinnamon trade, the VOC took control over the export of elephants, areca and the import of cotton, pepper and minerals. The VOC’s control over the Kandyan trade contributed to a decline of the latter’s economy, as prices of tradable goods were fixed under their market value (de Silva 2005:184-205, Mendis 2002). At a different level, the relations proved more cooperative, as the Dutch aided the Kandyan royal family in providing boats to look for spouses in South India and to maintain contact with Southeast Asia—particularly Burma and Thailand—for the revitalisation of Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka (de Silva 2005:209). Yet, discontent about economic policies led the Kandyan ruler to seek friendship with the British to get rid of the Dutch, but it would take until 1796 for the British to take over.

During the Dutch occupation of the littoral, various important changes in agriculture and trade took place. As mentioned earlier, the taste for (and thus profitable trade of) cinnamon drove the Dutch to obtain the monopoly over this spice. At times when cinnamon profits decreased for various reasons, the VOC also showed interest in other cash crops, such as coconuts (for arrack), coffee, pepper, and cardamom (Mendis 2002). In the last decades of the VOC’s administration the cultivation on a plantation basis was experimented with, first with regard to cinnamon and later expanded to coffee, cotton, and indigo (de Silva 2005:222). Yet, the idea of plantation agriculture in which large groups of similar species are brought together over a larger terrain as in monocultures, may not have been so new, as Nevill (1886) documents how king Agrabodi initiated the first coconut plantation around the 6th century. However, the large scale and the logic of capital and profit extraction were novel, or at least more outspoken in the initiation of the new plantation economy by the Dutch. Moreover, the Salāgamas who were cultivating cinnamon were accorded more advantages, leading to their rise in social and economic status as a caste group and motivating people to get registered as a Salāgama. In contrast to cinnamon, the profits of coffee, pepper, and cardamom entered into the local
economy, spurring a further monetisation (and abstraction) of the economy leading to a: “greater familiarity of the Sinhalese with cash transactions” (de Silva 2005:226). The VOC’s stringent focus on export crops and cinnamon in particular increased the country’s dependency on imports of rice—the staple food—as the lands allocated for cinnamon competed with land for paddy cultivation. The Kandyans became dependent on the Dutch, as the former were surrounded by the latter, for international trade and in particular for the import of textiles, rice, salt, and salted fish. In their turn, the Dutch were reliant on the Kandyans for areca nuts, pepper, and cardamom, as these spices only grow in the central mountainous region (de Silva 2005:229-233).

The Dutch had been ruling over Sri Lanka much longer than the Portuguese, but at first sight, the impact of the Dutch on Sri Lankan society would seem less drastic than that of the Portuguese who were fairly successful in spreading their language and religion (contrastingly, the Dutch even aided in the resuscitation of Buddhism). Yet, the Dutch impact should not be underestimated, as they introduced the full-blown concept of plantation agriculture and the Roman-Dutch law (monogamy, sanctity of marriage, and the concept of private property and land registers named Thombos, which enabled extraction and alienation of land). Yet, they also encouraged rice cultivation by way of an edict in 1666 in which it was stipulated that leaving fields uncultivated could lead to the government taking those lands (Brohier 2006:64, de Silva 2005:249, 256). Moreover, the Dutch Reformed church attempted to proselytise (often by way of providing education and schooling) the Sinhalese and Tamils in the littoral areas, yet for the VOC, religion remained of secondary importance (de Silva 2005:257-260).

The British Conquest (1796-1948)

The British Crown took over control from the Dutch in 1796 and in 1818 it absorbed Kandy, establishing foreign rule over the whole Sri Lankan territory for the first time. The English East India Company continued to control the external trade, in particular the cinnamon trade, which again was crucial to the colonial economy, especially during the first 30 years. The English East India Company, moreover, took hold over the production and trade of both arrack and tobacco. Yet, the colonial government did gradually increase its control over the trade of the English East India Company (de Silva 2005:298-308).

Just before the takeover of Kandy and Sri Lanka as a whole, the British made several concessions in the Kandyan Convention to preserve the laws, customs, and powers of the chiefs, and the Buddhist religion, entailing the establishment of a separate administrative
structure incorporating these specific cultural features and institutions. This was not the case in the littoral areas and so this differentiated colonial policy contributed in establishing a sense of distinctiveness among Kandyans that persists to date in the form of “Up-country Sinhalese”. The colonial government also introduced in 1833 various radical reforms worked out by the Colebrooke-Cameron commission. These reforms included the establishment of the laissez-faire state and free trade, the encouragement of foreign capital to invest in cinnamon plantation agriculture, the commercialisation of rice production, the abolishment of the rājakāriya in favour of free labour movement, the creation of a free land market, and a unified administrative structure with five provincial units. Even though many aspects of the trade and bureaucratic frameworks changed, the Kandyan law survived with regard to inheritance, caste, marriage and land tenure (de Silva 2005:300-337).

In an attempt to involve the level of experiences of ordinary people during the 1802-1832 period, K.M. de Silva (2005:314-315) remains general and notes:

“Money and markets were of little significance in the Kandyan provinces. The economy of the maritime regions was also largely based on subsistence agriculture, although trade was of greater significance there. Most villages could obtain many essential food items—especially salt—and textiles only from outside, while many were not self-sufficient in rice. A fair proportion of the population was dependent for rice on ‘imports’ (that is from outside the village boundaries); indeed the whole country was not self-sufficient in rice.”

The British attributed the stagnation in agriculture to lack of capital, technology (irrigation and agricultural techniques), and knowledge. These three concerns also recur in discourses of global development institutions and the World Bank to date (see its 2008 report on agriculture for instance). To solve this issue of stagnation, the British turned to an invigoration of the plantation economy, starting with coffee in the 1830s.

The expansion of coffee cultivation was driven by the increased consumer demand in Britain and Western Europe. The combination of coffee or tea with sugar, shipped from the Caribbean plantations, became the fuel of European capitalist development and served as an energiser during work breaks. As such, it moreover turned into a marker of time in the capitalist mode of production (Mintz 1985) directing the clock-rhythm of the industrial work life. The attempt to cultivate sugarcane in Sri Lanka was initiated by the Dutch (Mendis
2002:175), as simultaneously occurred in the West Indies, and failed by the mid-1840s. In the meantime, the cinnamon industry declined, but survived as a minor crop, whereas coconut became more prominent in the plantation economy by the 1860s (de Silva 2005:345-346). Coffee remained the most important plantation crop until the beginning of the 1880s, until a crop disease—*Hemileia vastatrix* or leaf blight—disabled coffee cultivation. In 1867, James Taylor initiated tea cultivation in Kandy and this signalled the entry of tea into the plantation economy and its take-over from coffee as the dominant plantation crop (Survey Department Sri Lanka 2007:126).

The plantation sector further diversified and experienced a sustained growth during the decades between 1880-1910, with three plantation crops becoming primary: tea, rubber, and coconut in descending order. Much of the coconut expansion occurred already before the downturn of coffee cultivation. The area under coconut cultivation increased from 37% of the total area under cultivation in 1871 to 41% in 1900 when tea occupied 20% and paddy 32%. Coconut was predominantly cultivated in what is still known as the coconut triangle spanning the area between Colombo, Kurunegala, and Chilaw. There are several aspects of coconut plantation agriculture that are noteworthy in their contrast with the coffee and tea plantations. First, there is the dominance of local Sinhalese capitalists in coconut plantations even though the processing and shipment were controlled by British commercial houses. Secondly, the holdings were smaller and thus required less capital input, which may explain the local ownership. Finally, coconut cultivation required less labour, and when needed it was predominantly indigenous in contrast to the Indian labour that was attracted to the larger coffee and tea estates\(^{56}\). Tea cultivation would become the bedrock of the Sri Lankan economy, as it is to date. The cultivation of tea, however, required heavy capital investment, so the plantations were mainly in the hands of the British (of course taste and cultural reasons for Sinhalese disinterest should not be forgotten to avoid oversimplifying determinist accounts), just as the coffee plantations initially were. Hence, we see that the economy became even more geared towards capitalist plantation agriculture where which the local population participated more than in most other tropical colonies (but did so mostly with regard to foods of the local taste palate), which explains the emergence of a local capitalist elite that was mostly influential in coconut (de Silva 2005:366-373).

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\(^{56}\) For extensive information on the coconut industry and local economy, I refer to a special issue of Logos in 1979, entitled: “Liberation and Coconut”.
The colonial emphasis on capitalist and export-oriented agriculture led to a neglect of peasant agriculture (food became abstracted as capital instead of being promoted as nourishment and regeneration). Yet certain attempts were made to restore the ancient irrigation facilities (tanks and canals) and this would not miss its effect. The Governor Henry Ward was the first to initiate the idea of a revival of the Dry Zone irrigation system and passed the Irrigation Ordinance in 1856 entitled “An Ordinance to facilitate the revival and enforcement of Ancient Customs regarding Irrigation and Cultivation of Paddy Lands” (Brohier 2006:74) Hence, it was a British Governor who planted the seed for the return to the Rājarate or Sinhalese heartland, which as we shall see later became the cornerstone of Sinhalese nationalist pride. Given the restoration of these irrigation reservoirs and lakes, the area under paddy cultivation increased by 80,920 hectares between 1850 and 1900, while keeping pace with the increasing population (de Silva 2005:387). This increase in production of paddy as a subsistence crop did not occur because of any commercialisation, even though there was a failed attempt near Minneriya by a company that gave up two years after it started in 1920 (Brohier 2006:95-96). The fact that paddy cultivation did not increase more could be attributed to the absence of investments of commercial enterprises, its hard competition with cash crops in the populated Wet Zone, and the consumer tastes of the local elite in Colombo preferring imported rice. Yet, more importantly, it could have been that the local peasantry did not feel much for a modernisation (in plantation style) of the rice production (de Silva 2005:388-389).

I would argue that this is precisely because of the intimate embroilment between rice as a subsistence crop and its intimate complex embroilment with local ways of being and living as described so far. Turning a food, which ties in with regeneration of life and relationships, into a mere commodity is indeed not evident, which also hints at why the activists passionately and vehemently oppose the patenting and privatisation of seeds.

Even though the British encouraged paddy farming, they were less sympathetic to the chēna-cultivation on the drier grounds. This slash-and-burn-cultivation (mostly important in the Dry Zone and used for the cultivation of grains other than paddy) was viewed as primitive and destructive by the colonisers and led to a whole negative discourse that persists to date (Hettiarachchy 1989:31).

The development of the plantation economy had an effect on the caste hierarchy and the formation of the local elite. The plantation economy provided ample opportunities to segments of the local population to improve their status and become part of the elite. The
participation of local capitalists in rubber, cinnamon, and especially coconut enabled Karāva (fishermen’s caste) from Moratuwa to gradually invest and obtain a monopoly over the lucrative arrack trade on the island. The Karāva then soon challenged the economic dominance of the highest caste (Goyigama) and spearheaded the acquisition of land, another avenue of upward mobility. By the mid 19th century, the de Soysas from Moratuwa became the most affluent family, and remained in that position for the decades to follow (de Silva 2005:423-424, Jayawardena 2007:37-65). Not only did the Karāva challenge the traditional Goyigama elite by their economic success in the plantation agriculture throughout the 18th and 19th century, but so did the Salāgama and Durāva. Hence, caste rivalry became very much part of the struggle for the elite position (de Silva 2005:424).

The anti-arrack or temperance movement initiated by Goyigama traditionalists could be seen as one expression of this struggle. In fact, the temperance movement was part of a wider incipient emergence of a broader resistance to colonialism. In the littoral areas, the resistance took the form of religious revival, incipient nationalism and traditionalism, and embryonic formations of political association and union activity. Recall the role of the Theosophical Society, discussed in the previous chapter on ritual, in promoting Buddhism and in providing powerful symbols around which to mobilise (e.g. Buddhist flag and Vesak Poya) nationalist and cultural resistance (Spencer 1990:20). The Theosophical Society spurred the establishment of Buddhist schools as a way to break the power of missionary and Christian education (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988:204-205). Interestingly, this Buddhist revival is thus linked to the caste friction and mobility. The revival was predominantly a Low-Country (western and southern provinces) movement and its leadership was composed of laymen, mostly from the Karāva, Salāgama, and Durāva castes (de Silva 2005:432-433). With increasing self-confidence, the Buddhist movement focused on arrack and toddy, which they explained as an evil associated with Westernisation. Hence, the link between Buddhism and anti-British or anti-Western sentiments occurred in this movement and as such Buddhism and nationalism conjoined in their opposition to alcohol and all its associated components. Given the recurrent blame on Westerners for having introduced the social evils of alcohol, it is interesting to note that Christian missionaries orchestrated the first attacks on alcohol policy. However, within a decade, the Buddhists had succeeded in taking over leadership of the movement and in giving it a distinct Buddhist identity. Yet, the temperance movement would not become a full-fledged political movement with mass support in part due to lack of support among the elites and their internal differences (de Silva 2005:440-469). Still, the negative
attitude towards alcohol remains connected to the Buddhist self-fashioning of morality in village life, such as I conveyed earlier in accounts of the ‘secrecy’ surrounding alcohol consumption.

More political forms of resistance emerged as well and these also shaped caste friction. The increasing economic and social influence of the Karāva motivated them to attempt to gain more political influence by challenging the Goyigama traditional elite and their power in various ways. C.H de Soysa, a wealthy Karāva entrepreneur, founded the Ceylon Agricultural Association in 1882 to safeguard the interests of the local planters, which was later transformed into the Ceylon National Association. This association would not get involved in legislative politics, but it was successful in agitating against the grain taxes. During the early 20th century, there was an overall growth in political associations, trade unions, and an increasing assertion of Buddhist values in association with the sustained temperance movement and nationalist sentiments that mobilised people from different caste backgrounds (de Silva 2005:455-457).

In 1915, communal riots broke out in an upsurge of nationalism and the British authorities quelled the disturbances. Thereafter, the Buddhist movement was taken charge of by the constitutionalists (the reformers that would leave the colonial structures intact) instead of the nationalists (who wanted transformations in line with Sinhalese cultural patterns) (de Silva 2005:470-478). Mirroring Indian events, the Ceylon National Congress was established in 1919 as part of the constitutional reforms to give more representation to the local people. However, the Congress was divided almost from the start. It united both Tamils and Sinhalese until 1922, when rifts between these ethnic groups started to emerge. Additionally, within the Congress, there were the constitutionalists or reformists, on the one hand, and the more radical nationalists, who wanted to mimic the fierce Indian opposition to the British, on the other hand. Finally, the Congress also split according to caste lines and an opposition between the Kandyans (who came to see themselves as a minority and a distinct culture) and Low-Country Sinhalese (who reaped the economic benefits of transformations and included many Karāva). The Ceylon National Congress, however, united and mobilised the rural peasantry, and established the Sinhala Mahājana Sabbhā in 1919. It soon became a powerful political force that was a precursor to the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna in the 1950s. The Mahājana Sabhās turned into a sort of collection of farmers’ associations, organising social, cultural, and political activities and thereby revitalising the rural population. Simultaneously, the Young Lanka League was formed to unite the urban workers in their interest in trade unionism and
nationalism (linking leftism and nationalism). A.E. Goonesinha, the leader of Young Lanka League, later established the more militant Ceylon Labour Union in 1922 as an alternative to the less radical Ceylon Workers Federation (de Silva 2005:479-495).

In combination with these political and nationalist evolutions, World War I and the Great Depression badly affected the overall plantation economy and spurred a resurgence of interest in peasant agriculture. This renewed interest expressed itself in the establishment of the Irrigation Department in 1900 and of the Department of Agriculture in 1912. This interest also linked up with the overall wish to develop the Dry Zone, an interest earlier raised by Governor Ward. At first, British officials sought to model the cultivation of rice after capitalist plantation agriculture to boost domestic supply, but this attempt to commercialise paddy production failed again (recall the Minneriya project mentioned earlier). Yet, the idea to make Sri Lanka self-sufficient in its food took hold this time and continued to germinate. The government understood there was a need to assess the land resources and in 1927 it appointed a Land Commission in which Don Stephen (D.S.) Senanayake would play a prominent role. Even though there was an increasing recognition of the growing population pressure in the south-west littoral, the Commission did not prioritise colonisation of the Dry Zone as a solution to the pressure, something which would become the cornerstone of later policies (de Silva 2005:502-505). Instead the Commission focussed on rendering crown land available in the Wet Zone to solve the issue of landlessness there (Moore 2008:44). The Dry Zone colonisation was constrained because the area was infested with malaria. With the growing population pressure, the scarcity of land resources for subsistence agriculture became ever more pressing, particularly because of the increasing competition with plantation land for rubber, coconut (particularly in the coconut triangle), and tea. For those squeezed out of peasant or plantation agriculture, there were no other options than to become part of the growing Sinhalese working class in and around Colombo, which was still much smaller than the Indian immigrant proletariat on the plantations; two groups fairly hostile to each other (de Silva 2005:506-509). The conclusions of the Land Commission would be codified in the Land Development Ordinance of 1935 by the first elected government in 1931, a consequence of the constitutional reform of the Donoughmore Commission (Moore 2008:39, de Silva 2005:517-518). Indeed, the proposal of the commission included universal suffrage for both men and women over 21 years of age, and was accepted by the National Congress. Prominent elected ministers who thereafter set the tone between 1931 and 1942 were D.B. Jayatilaka and D.S Senanayake, sharing the leadership in the State Council. During this period, Goonesinha
and his party and Union were losing ground to the increasingly powerful Marxists. In the general election of 1936, where Jayatilaka and Senanayake remained in power, Dr. N.M. Perera of the Marxist Lanka Sama Samajı Party (LSSP) was elected as well.

Mick Moore (2008:20-21) views this suffrage as a crucial watershed in Sri Lankan history, as it enabled radical changes such as the introduction of mass politics, but also the introduction of a state-financed welfare program, subsidised food rations, alienation of state land (via the Land Development Ordinance in 1935), and the inception of the large-scale colonisation and irrigation projects in the Dry Zone. These transitions have often morally equated the peasantry with the Sinhalese Buddhists (Moore 2008:27). Indeed, another result of this universal suffrage was the linkage of nationalism with Buddhism, as the religion of the majority, which would materialise in full force in 1956. The leadership of the revival of religious nationalism (that had waned after the reformists came into control over the Buddhist movement) was taken by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike’s Sinhala Mahā Sabha. This would later form the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) that obtained a sweeping victory under S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike in 1956, “announcing a victory for Sinhala communal populism over the old Western-oriented political elite” (Spencer 1990:22). The universal suffrage moreover enabled a strong impulse to welfarism where social and economic aspects of the state and nationalism were accounted for. Additionally, the Sinhala Mahā Sabha wanted to show that it was not less anti-imperialist and Marxist than the LSSP. In 1940 there was an ideological split in the LSSP, where Stalinists were expelled and when the LSSP proclaimed itself as a Trotskyist party. In March 1942, the LSSP was declared an illegal organisation. Their unresponsiveness to the religious and linguistic nationalism of the rural peasantry left them lagging behind the Sinhala Mahā Sabha which surfed on the nationalist upsurge. This increasingly influential current represented by Bandaranaike and his party viewed Sri Lanka as essentially Buddhist and so rejected the concepts of a secular state and a multiracial polity, such as D.S. Senanayake was proposing (de Silva 2005:538-555).

Meanwhile, the Great Depression badly affected the plantation economy and employment, pressing the first elected government in 1931 to continue dealing with these problems that were also part of the wider issue of the population pressure in the Wet Zone. Hence, British officials and local leaders again toiled over the strategy to open up the Dry Zone to solve three problems at once: import dependency for rice, the economic crisis, and urban unemployment. D.S. Senanayake continued and accelerated initiatives for the peasant colonisation and overall regeneration of the Dry Zone as a ‘return’ to the heartland of the ancient irrigation civilisation
of the Sinhalese (Moore 2008:45, de Silva 2005:578). The Land Development Ordinance was part of these initiatives and envisaged giving land to groups of landless households under certain conditions (Moore 2008:39). As such, the Dry Zone resettlement took more prominence than initially expected, as the Land Commission had focused predominantly on the Wet Zone itself. As part of the solution to import dependency, the envisaged recovery of cultivation in the Dry Zone was enhanced by several initiatives, such as: village expansion schemes, additional protection against land claims of the crown, and access to some services to facilitate settlement. As pointed out earlier, the Dry Zone and its archaeological sites from the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa periods evoke a combination of: “the sentiments of Buddhist religiosity, Sinhalese nationalism and historical pride, in which rurality, rice and irrigation works also feature prominently” (Moore 2008:45). Indeed, the Sinhalese are perceived to have a particular affinity with peasant agriculture and village life, as exemplified in the tone of the work of J.B. Disanayaka (1993). Even more, agriculture is often understood in a reductionist way to be merely cultivation of rice and not other foods, just as “having a meal” implicitly denotes having rice. Overall, rice is identified as the Buddhabhoga (foremost offering to the Buddha) and the Buddhist Sinhalese crop. As such, the pride in resettlement in the ancient Buddhist and irrigated heartland of the Sinhalese is indeed crucial in establishing the Sinhalese Buddhist type of state that came into effect in 1956, which we turn to later (Moore 2008:28-29, 87). Perhaps it is thus not so surprising that the predominance given to the Sinhalese peasant in the overall colonisation scheme shifted and sharpened the boundary between Tamil- and Sinhalese-held areas. This Sinhalese bias of the Dry Zone development, with Tamils exempted from the benefits, would return as a political issue later and would be one of the contributing causes to the ethnic conflict (Meyer 2003:35). Yet, the full re-colonisation of the Dry Zone that had been abandoned since the 1250s was hindered by rampant malaria and it would take until 1939 when new attempts of colonisation would be undertaken (note again the ecological-materialist mode of explanation, common among the authors cited here, singling out one main tangible determining factor).

During World War II, the overall economy boomed because of a re-invigorated plantation economy and heavy military expenditure by the Allied powers on the strategic island. The wartime prosperity enabled D.S. Senanayake to initiate a state welfare program of which the regeneration of both the peasantry and the Dry Zone (entailing land and irrigation policies) formed the cornerstone (de Silva 2005:580-582). When malaria retreated from the Dry Zone, nothing prevented an increase of investment in peasant colonisation schemes to enhance food
production as a way to decrease dependence on food imports. Additionally, an Internal Purchase Scheme was set up in 1942 in which the government paid a guaranteed price for rice purchased from farmers (strongly buffering their security, but at high financial cost for the state). Such guaranteed price schemes still remain a feature of policy and contention. In 1942 a rice-ration scheme was also introduced to ensure equitable distribution access to food through consumer co-operative societies. The rice for this scheme was obtained through domestic procurement and by way of imports (Weerahewa 2004: viii). Even though self-sufficiency still remained a distant dream at that time, the element of state support for peasant agriculture has become a steady feature of politics and policies ever since. It is in this period that the idea of self-sufficiency in rice took hold and laid the foundation for the ambitious Mahaweli development scheme in the post-independence years. There was, however, a flipside to the wartime increase of spending, as domestic prices increased drastically. The inflation created discontent particularly among urban working classes. To prevent potential hartals, the government froze prices of essential food items in 1943 while subsidising others. The state took control over the distribution of rice, wheat flour, and sugar in order to make the former measures more effective. The food subsidies continued until after the war as part of the state’s welfare system (de Silva 2005:586-587).

Post-Independence Years

Immediately after independence, Sri Lanka was—in contrast to India—characterised by a peaceful atmosphere. The Tamil-Sinhalese issues were heading towards a negotiated settlement when G.G. Ponnambalam, who led the Tamil campaigns, joined Senanayake’s government (Hennayake 2006:78). During the general elections in 1947, left-wing parties, who criticised the “fake independence” granted by the colonisers57, made significant gains by surfing on nationalist sentiments, however, they did not win the elections. D.S. Senanayake, who formed the United National Party (UNP), was more moderate than the left on national issues and minority politics. He won the general elections in 1947 and again in 1952. Given the volatile world market and the balance of payments having gone negative in 1947, the achievement of self-sufficiency in food became pressing again. Again, the government sought inspiration in the ancient heartland and resuscitated an earlier attempt to develop the Dry Zone to increase paddy production (de Silva 2005:600-619). In the years 1950-1955, two economic booms materialised as paddy production increased by the successful execution of

57 Sri Lanka was granted dominion status as an autonomous part of the Commonwealth of Nations.
some irrigation projects (such as the Gal Oya scheme\textsuperscript{58} in the east that started in 1949 [Brohier 2006:14]), land colonisation schemes, market incentives (such as guaranteed purchase schemes at high prices), and ration schemes (de Silva 2004:620-621, Moore 2008:99).

The UNP’s state nationalism or Sri Lankan nationalism, in which all ethnic and religious groups were included (in contrast to the popular single ethnic Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism), seemed not able to continue galvanising popular support. The type of nationalism (inclusive state or Sinhalese) became a matter of contention, especially when S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike left the government and became the leader of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), established in September 1951. After the elections in 1952 and the death of D.S Senanayake, his son, Dudley Senanayake headed the government, which soon had to face an emerging economic crisis as a consequence of changing terms in the world trade. The food subsidies were becoming too costly and the World Bank mission advised the reduction of rice subsidies. Prices rose 25\% sparking protests, and Marxist unions and The Trotskyist LSSP staged a one-day hartal that contributed to the resignation of Dudley Senanayake in October 1953 (de Silva 2005:609-612, Hennayake 2006:78). Food has the power to topple governments indeed... Simultaneously, religion, language, and culture became ignited as central issues by the 2500\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the Enlightenment of the Buddha in 1956, providing an opportunity for nationalist groups to mobilise a wider support. Bandaranaike capitalised on those forces and went to the elections with the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP or PUF, derived from its English name, the People’s United Front), which united the SLFP, a section of the LSSP and two smaller Sinhalese parties. All were connected through their shared concerns about socio-economic change and in making Sinhalese the official language. The MEP crushed the UNP in the elections that followed the anniversary celebrations in 1956 (de Silva 2005:613-616)

With Bandaranaike’s triumph, Sinhalese linguistic nationalism presided over Senanayake’s Sri Lankan state nationalism, a situation generating ethnic riots in 1958. The victory of linguistic and soon also religious nationalism (Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism) caused a setback to the Marxist and leftist movement. Both the LSSP and Communist Party understood that this nationalism appealed to the various classes, and gradually started incorporating nationalist ideas into their programs. Simultaneously, the Buddhist movement was hostile to

\textsuperscript{58} For more information on the working of this scheme, see Uphoff (1992).
Marxism but still did adopt a socialist and welfarist program. The SLFP was able to conjoin anti-imperialism, socialism, and nationalism, an attractive mixture for a large section of the predominantly Sinhalese population (de Silva 2005:630-635). Indeed, Nalani Hennayake (2006:84) states: “The main campaign issues for the 1956 election was to provide the due place for Buddhism, to make Sinhalese the official language, and make economic development more equitable.” The authors goes on: “The forces behind the 1956 election was expressed as “Pancha Maha Balawegaya” of “Sangha, Govi, Weda, Guru, Kamkaru” (the five great forces of monks, peasants, indigenous doctors, teachers, and labourers)“.

Mick Moore (2008:217) states that since the MEP-led victory in 1956, Sri Lanka has become a Sinhalese Buddhist state, a change having a wide backing from predominantly rural classes. Bandaranaike became more popular as he introduced more state control on the economy and guided the Paddy Lands Act through parliament in 1958. The Act offered more security to tenant cultivators and reduced rents in tenancies, but also had an injunction to cultivate paddy (as part of the increasing political and dietary importance of paddy during this period) and abolished the Vel-Vidanes or irrigation headmen to enhance the local-level cultivation committees (Moore 2008:54-60), such as the one I described regarding the decision-making process of cultivation in the village. The results of the welfarist redistribution of wealth and the state-driven economic planning and development did not satisfy all members of the MEP and so this coalition disintegrated in 1959. The disarray culminated with the assassination of Bandaranaike in September of that same year. Joined by the emotional wave that surrounded his death, the SLFP, headed by his wife Sirimavo Bandaranaike, secured sufficient votes to win the general elections in 1960. With her insistence on making Sinhalese the national language and by opening up the possibility for an increasing Buddhist influence on education (in opposition to Christian schools), she soon lost support among minorities. Hence in the election of 1965, the great majority of the minorities voted convincingly for the UNP that then galvanised sufficient support to return to power again, together with the Federal Party (representing Tamil interests) and under the leadership of Dudley Senanayake (de Silva 2005:639-649).

During the 1960s, an economic crisis started to materialise, as the tea price—providing two thirds of the foreign exchange—continued to decline. Hence, the balance of payments grew ever more negative, except for the year 1965. To control the expenses, the imports of luxury goods and later also more essential goods were abandoned, but this did not assuage the shortage of foreign exchange. The state extended its control over the wholesale and retail
distribution on top of the already established control over rice, wheat, and sugar since the 1940s. The government understood that the redistribution of welfare could not take place as long as there was no increase in resources. Hence, it launched a Sri Lankan green revolution, based on an agricultural revival as envisaged by Dudley Senanayake who in turn was inspired by his father, D.S. Senanayake, to increase output. By May 1970, rice production reached 75% of self-sufficiency (de Silva 2005:655-657). The agricultural revitalisation program additionally sought to absorb the increasing population into employment by way of promoting smallholder agriculture; concerns and solutions that are dear to MONLAR and its director, Sarath Fernando.

The Opposition, the United Front (UF) or MEP, gathered pace in criticising the UNP government and proposed more radical socialist alternatives, including a program of industrialisation. The cut in rice subsidies in 1966 provided fuel for the opposition’s campaign in the elections of May 1970, and helped the UF achieve a strong victory and immediately eliminate the cuts. However, the UF seemed unable to reduce unemployment, costs of living, and scarcities of essential items. This situation became a fertile breeding ground for the emergence of a more militant organisation, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which was founded by mostly unemployed but educated male youth (de Silva 2005:659-662, Obeyesekere 1974). The JVP was a movement of the new and radical left that agitated against the more traditional left of the SLFP, LSSP, and the Communist Party (de Silva 2005:663). In April 1971, the JVP led an insurrection in which some of the key figures of MONLAR participated—thus illustrating the connection between the political and historical elements and the emergence of MONLAR. The insurrection was quelled forcefully and remains a scar in Sri Lanka’s collective memory. However, it aided in speeding up some reforms, such as the Land Reform Law in 1972 where a private ownership ceiling of 25 acres of paddy land was introduced and its Amendment in 1975 where all land held by plantations and public companies was nationalised (Moore 2008:65).

During the early 1970s, the economic situation worsened. The insurrection had a hand in this, but also the export prices of tea, rubber, and coconut did not rise sufficiently to compensate for the rising import costs. Both the import bill and the food subsidies had an increasingly detrimental effect on the balance of payments, spurring the reduction of food subsidies and cuts in welfare expenditure during the early 1970s. Also the imports of certain agricultural products were banned (de Silva 2005:664-666, Moore & Wickramasinghe 1980:9). Production had decreased significantly during the early 1970s, so to further invigorate
cultivation the UF government increased the guaranteed purchase price. The enhanced production, however, did not match the high level of the year 1970, as the costs of inputs (fertilisers and other chemicals) had increased in the meantime, adding a disincentive for farmers to cultivate. Moreover, the farmers remained tied to the state’s monopoly for the purchase of locally produced rice and thus could not try to negotiate higher prices. Indeed, the government established a Paddy Marketing Board in 1971 that acquired monopolistic capacities to purchase and distribute domestic paddy. The Board continued to exist ever since, but had later most of its functions taken over by the Co-operative Wholesale Establishment in 1996-1997 (Weerahewa 2004:14, 92). Moreover, a maximum on the import of wheat was also imposed, giving rise to bread-queues in Colombo (where wheat is eaten more often than in rural areas). In a desperate attempt for a solution, the government appealed to cut down on the consumption of rice in favour of indigenous grains and yams, hence asking for an immediate and not evident adaptation of food habits of the longue durée (Weerahewa 2004:8 de Silva 2005:666-668).

The elder interviewees recalled this period as being marked by hunger because of the lack of access to their habitual food—particularly rice. This situation emerged as in 1974 all private transport of paddy was prohibited, local stocks were depleted, and government procurement was compulsory (Moore 2008:118, 190). Yet, the fact that this period with a diminished access to rice is remembered as being a time of hunger may also be related to the re-interpretation of the past from the perspective of the currently increased importance and centrality of rice in the diet. Indeed, nowadays people in Sri Lanka feel hungry if they have a meal without rice, even after having eaten a good amount of food. The importance of rice has always been there\(^{59}\), but its core position has been enhanced since the increased emphasis on domestic rice production. In light of the current centrality of rice, the time when rice had to be rationed may therefore be more easily re-interpreted according to current standards and seen more as period of hunger today than in earlier times. This suggestion of historic re-interpretation is supported by one of the eldest interviewees who said that earlier rice was not so important, but rather millet. So, for him, a meal without rice, can still be a real filling meal if it has millet.

Mick Moore (2008) presents us with some convincing arguments to corroborate this thesis of an increased importance and centrality of rice in the diet. First, rice became nationalistically

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\(^{59}\) See the importance of irrigation and the references to rice being synonymous to food in Brohier (2006:33), drawing upon the Mahavamsa.
defined as a Sinhalese crop, as the Sinhalese became equated with rural smallholders and village life and as their ancient grandeur became redefined in terms of the old irrigation and colonisation of the heart of Sri Lanka. Second, most rituals of cultivation revolve around paddy cultivation. Third, the Goyigama, translated as farmers’ caste, is not necessarily referred to as an occupational category, but rather to a honorific status. Finally, most policies such as the Guaranteed Price Scheme and other credits and subsidies have been mostly geared towards paddy cultivation and have enhanced its output and the associated social recognition, thereby affecting the consumption pattern gradually (Moore 2008:28, 88-89, 106-107). The association between rice and Sinhalese Buddhism is still very much alive today when observing the nationalist discourse of the government aiming for a decrease in the utilisation of wheat, sometimes coined in terms of a fight against “wheat terrorism” as noted in chapter 4, and also in the Buddhist reinterpretation of organic agriculture among some of the nationalist elements of the organic and indigenous food movement.

The death of Dudley Senanayake and his widely attended funeral (as a mass event that highlights the powerful agency of human bones) compounded the recognition and fear among the government that it was losing support. It reacted by turning more authoritarian and crushing any possible forms of dissent. The government started organising compulsory rallies (of which some of my interviewees recalled horrendous events in retaliation for those who resisted) to demonstrate its strength and institutionalised preferential treatment of government supporters, a practice which continues to date among the different political parties (Spencer 1990:11, de Silva 2005:670-672). The communal ties became more strained when, in 1972, the government laid down in the Republican constitution that: “The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the state to protect and foster Buddhism” (de Silva 2005:673). In October 1975, the United Front broke down when the LSSP was expelled by the SLFP, which restored the free market in paddy and rice while reducing the role of the government from a monopoly holder to a competitor with private traders. Eighteen months later, the remaining coalition between SLFP and the Communist Party broke up, further diminishing the stability of the regime. At the beginning of 1977, the government crushed the strikes staged by the LSSP, but paid a high price for it. The United Front government was in disarray when the general elections in July 1977 were victoriously won by the UNP (de Silva 2005:678-681).
Post-1977 Liberalisation Reforms

J.R. Jayewardene headed the new UNP government that already from the first year in office in 1977 initiated an overhaul of economic policies and opened up the economy after two decades of extended government control. On 4 February 1978 Jayewardene became also the first executive president of Sri Lanka. The shift of policy is still regarded by some as so fundamental that they label it as the start of a new era of modern development in Sri Lanka although many foundations of the open economy were laid during colonisation (Winslow 2003). Many critics of the open economy, such as MONLAR, trace all evils of the current commercialisation back to the year 1977, whereas it would make more sense to trace the commodification of food and its associated effects back to the introduction of the plantation economy, and even then as our account has shown, there was already a global trade in foodstuffs much earlier.

With those cautionary remarks in mind, 1977 did index a profound shift in economic policies because the free and open economy has remained part of the political programs and policies ever since (Sarvananthan 2005). Some of these shifts entailed the removal of import controls on luxury goods and various foodstuffs, leading to a sharp fall in the local production of minor food crops, such as potatoes and chillies (Moore 2008:107). Moreover, the rice-rationing scheme was supplanted by the food-stamp scheme, which was geared towards enabling poor people to buy kerosene and basic food items. In 1994, this scheme was transformed into the Janasaviya program to be later expanded into the Samurdhi (prosperity) national program for poverty alleviation that was broader in scope (Weerahahewa 2004:1, 28). Encouraged by increasing export prices, favourable balance of trade, and increase in Gross National Product (GNP), the government continued to adhere to private enterprise and it established a free trade and industrial processing zone north of Colombo. Indeed, export manufacturing (of predominantly garments) became a central feature for the new economic policy. Moreover, the UNP-led regime again sought to remedy high unemployment by way of the reinvigoration of small-scale agriculture, building further on what the UNP government of 1965-1970 had already initiated. The further expansion of the irrigation and peasant colonisation of the Dry Zone took shape in the form of the large-scale Mahaweli project, which additionally served to generate more electricity (de Silva 2005:686-688). The scale of this project evokes the ancient grandeur of the work of the kings and the return to the Sinhalese heartland (see its extent on map 9, page 120). Initially planned to take 20 years, the Mahaweli scheme was successfully accelerated to be completed within five-six years
Simultaneously, the government eased import controls and many enjoyed the return of consumer goods and increased availability of food. The availability was compounded by successful harvests in the late 1970s and food prices became relatively low. This situation helped keep the opposition at bay despite the reduction of food subsidies and the rise of overall inflation.

The economic growth, however, did not reduce unemployment for many groups in the country. Particularly, Tamils and educated youth were badly affected. The former’s unemployment contributed to the rise of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) (in combination with the increasing amount of laws and ordinances that relegated Tamils as second-class citizens). This emergence of the LTTE and wider unemployment led to the resurgence of a renewed and transformed JVP, at the time being both radically left and nationalist (we will discuss this in more detail as part of Sarath Fernando’s life narrative). The ethnic conflict blossomed and a new JVP rebellion materialised in the years 1986 to 1989 (de Silva 2005:688-692). Despite these serious conflicts, J.R. Jayawardene was able to complete the Accelerated Mahaweli scheme and initiated an important transformation in the economy, shifting dependency on exports of plantation goods to an increased export of textiles and garments, a change that continues to shape the economy to date. He also allowed private companies to start importing rice in 1988, but under a quota system that would be abolished in 1995; another issue which MONLAR mobilised against.

After his violent crackdown on the JVP rebels, Jayawardene transferred power to Ranasinghe Premadasa in 1989, who won the elections the same year. In 1994, Chandrika Kumaratunga Bandaranaike, the second daughter of S.W.R.D. and Sirimavo Bandaranaike, brought the SLFP back into power under her leadership. Premadasa had failed to keep his party united and some of the important UNP politicians were assassinated by the LTTE up to the elections, including Premadasa himself in 1993. The ethnic conflict continued to rage and when Ranil Wickremesinghe brought the UNP into power there was some optimism for a negotiated settlement under Norwegian mediation, but the situation worsened again after the tsunami in December 2004 and the election in April of the same year in which president Mahinda Rajapakshe from the SLFP (in coalition with the now acceptable JVP) won and took a hard stance against the LTTE (de Silva 2005:695-707) After his victory over the LTTE in 2009, Rajapakshe was re-elected in 2010 and remains in power to date.
Conclusion

The sketch of more than 2000 years of the history of Sri Lanka focused on the role of food in the economy and politics that impinge on the lives of Sinhalese. Hence, it is rather a history that I have engaged with on the basis of secondary resources to flesh out some of the ingredients with which I will work further in my analysis of MONLAR. Indeed, these elements are crucial to understand the work of MONLAR and particularly the historical context in which the organisation emerged in 1990. It has also brought us to the level of generality, the large-scale, and a common political economic mode of reasoning, which establishes the ground where MONLAR operates in its food activism. We will soon discuss further food-related issues of the recent history in the examination of MONLAR’s discourses, concerns, and actions.

However, before entering a discussion of MONLAR, we need to summarise an important point made by Mick Moore (2008) in his fascinating book on peasant politics. Moore seeks to explain why, given that Sri Lanka is an agriculture based society, there are no agrarian movements such as in India. This situation is all the more surprising as the rural population participates in electoral politics (even toppling and replacing governments), as several problems continue to haunt the services catering to them, and as the attitude of the state and its elite towards the smallholders remains flawed. The fact that smallholders do not make demands as an occupational group explains why they do not make a case for higher output prices, better performances of these public services, and land policies that would benefit them better (Moore 2008:1-4).

The absence of a wider mobilisation of farmers around their occupational identity relates to a complex set of factors. First, the farming population receives numerous forms of support, such as the guaranteed price scheme, fertiliser subsidies, agricultural credit, irrigation resettlement schemes where they receive plots of land and so forth. Generally, smallholders have been more concerned with the personal politics of acquiring such resources or benefits on an individual basis, often by allying oneself with local powerful MPs in patron-client relationships (Moore 2008:5, 41) MONLAR attempts to counter this trend to aggregate demands at a national level and on the basis of a shared identity as smallholders, but it remains very small compared to the large-scale mobilisation of the Indian agrarian movements.
Second, the smallholders are very much differentiated. Even though there is a so-called farmers’ or Goyigama caste, all castes engage in farming and thus caste does not coincide with the profession of farming as a potential means of forging an occupation interest group, such as in India (Moore 2008:169-173, 181-182). Moreover, some are surplus producers who would gain a better living from higher output prices, whereas others merely have a home garden in which they work after their office hours. Indeed, the category of who is a peasant is not clearly delineated and needs to be carefully scrutinised (Kearney 1996). Additionally, some of the differentiations are crop-specific. There are those who see their plantation and export crops (tea and rubber) being taxed and those who receive money diverted from these taxes, for instance, subsidising those engaged in rice cultivation. Some also alternately engage in several types of farming, for instance by combining their work in a plantation with their own cultivation of paddy and vegetables. Indeed, the diversity of the so-called peasantry is great and so are the related and the particular “interests” (the economic formulation of desire [Robertson 2001:52-53]). This diversity is further enhanced by the crop-and sector-specific services offered and policies made by the government (Moore 2008:6-7, 13, 159-164).

Third, many are both producers and consumers and this may hinder an organised demand for higher output prices, particularly given the fact that the elite in Colombo are more often engaged in consumption than in production. Indeed, the focus of policy-making and farmer demands (including of MONLAR) tends to be geared towards the negotiation of benefits at the input side, such as subsidised inputs (fertilisers, irrigation, and tractors), without making demands for higher output prices. Likewise, the guaranteed price scheme where farmers received a fixed price was introduced to keep output prices low for the consumers. Particularly the inhabitants of the Colombo area—where the political elite are concentrated—are as consumers dependent on the food market, just as the food activists located in Colombo, which explains the “urban bias” of low output pricing policies that squeeze farmers’ budgets and keep consumer prices low (Moore 2008:2, 119). These urban political elites in Sri Lanka occupy positions in all parties, whether UNP, SLFP, or Marxist, and so there is no alignment between political parties and occupational, caste, or regional group (Moore 2008:22).

Fourth, the internal divisions in the political and economic elite in Sri Lanka enabled certain policies to materialise, even against some of the elite’s own interests, thus avoiding a stark opposition between a so-called oppressive elite and a peasant proletariat. The elite are not of a single caste, but consist predominantly of Goyigama, Karāva, and Salāgama castes. These castes are not so much based on moral purity as in India, but rather have emerged in terms of
the specific services that were performed by groups of people to the king and to the colonial powers that made use of this caste system. As Kandy was only conquered in 1815 and received different treatment from the British, as mentioned earlier, the Kandyan elite of the Goyigama caste, and many others, see themselves as the preservers of the pure Sinhalese culture. They are distinguished as the Up-country Sinhalese, distinct from the Low-country Sinhalese, who come from the littoral areas that had already been colonised for over 200 years. Indeed, all that is Kandyan is perceived as traditionally Sinhalese and Buddhist (Moore & Wickramasinghe 1980:14). The Kandyans remain even subject to a distinct civil law to date (Obeyesekere 2008:6). The Low-country elite mostly comprise of traders and plantation owners of domestic plantation crops, such as coconuts (also used for alcohol), and form the nationalist Sinhalese vanguard, composed of Karāva and salāgama. The Kandyan elite held to the ideology of the small-scale farmer in opposition to the plantation owners whom were either colonisers or Low-country entrepreneurs threatening the power of the conservative Kandyan elite. Be it as it may, the Sri Lankan elite are diverse and there is thus an internal antagonism that inhibits a clear naming of the enemy by smallholders. Indeed, there are no consistent winners or losers that would spur a solid dissenting group formation (Moore 2008:160, 128-129, 172), and that could articulate the desires and concerns of local farmers at the national level (that explains in part the difficulty of activists of connecting to these desires and articulating them in Colombo).

Fifth, there are also no clear class conflicts between tenants and owners, labourers and employers, or small and large farmers. These categories sometimes alter for instance because of the flexibility of labour status in seasonal labour activity, where an owner may turn into a labourer for a while (Moore 2008:182-188). Indeed, the flexibility of the farming system in Sri Lanka seems to prevent crystallised oppositions and relations of exploitation, thereby preventing the emergence of a clear dissenting farmers’ movement that is well-connected to the local concerns and that enables a resonance of these onto the large-scale politics.

Sixth, there is no clear agrarian party in the political party system. Neither is there a crucial difference in agricultural policies among the two main parties UNP and SLFP. Both have supported the development of the Sinhalese crop—rice. Hence, the politics offered no clear opportunity for movements to mobilise against. Hence, as Mick Moore (2008:190) states of factors preventing mass mobilisation of farmers: “Neither Sinhalese cultural traditions, caste divisions, intra-rural class conflicts nor public policy have provided the kind of stimulus to the political mobilisation of large categories of the farming population which they have in
comparable Asian countries.” The aspiration of MONLAR to become a mass movement clearly seeks to fill this void and seeks to grapple with achieving a wide resonance of farmers’ desires and concerns to bring these at the macro-level of national and international politics.

It is clear that politics are shaped at the centre stage in Colombo according to a steady top-down dynamic towards the lower-level periphery of villages that are distant from Colombo. It seems that food activism follows a similar top-down dynamic, in contrast to the resonating bottom-up approach advocated by these same activists; a situation which is reinforced by the absence of powerful local movements that can resist the proselytising tendencies of urban elites, whether capitalist, nationalist, or Marxist.

We also have now become familiar with the levels and scales to which MONLAR orients itself and structures its discourse. The categories of land, labour, capital, input, output, markets, and policies bundle a whole range of these specific events and components into broad and large-scale categories, trends, and issues, such as I will discuss in more detail in the overall conclusion of this chapter (see also the analyses to food framed as an agrarian question in Abeysekera [1985] and De Vroey & Shanmugaratnam [1984]). This political economic approach at the broader and higher scale stands in contrast with the detailed account of the local-level I have made up until this chapter on food activism. Bruno Latour (2005) critiques such broad categorisations as they tell everything and nothing, and facilitate tautological reasoning of the form that capital determines capital, allowing for obfuscation of the more refined dynamics, connections, and complex causalities that are involved. Indeed, we have now ascended across several scales, starting from very intimate domestic spheres towards national and international levels. We did so, both in our orientation and the adoption and mimicry of the general, molar, and large-scale conceptual categories. In what follows we will continue to dwell in this political economic scale, but make an attempt later to reconnect to the more intimate level. As such, we prepare our overall conclusion that an oscillation across scale and the reproduction of these different scales is crucial to understanding the multiple components of the food assemblage, as it connects with all spheres of life, thereby potentially serving as a fruitful methodology of research.

In what follows, I discuss the organisation of MONLAR as a network-organisation and discuss its analysis, vision, and methodologies before turning towards the life narratives of some of the activists, which sheds more personal light on how MONLAR came into being.
The Movement for National and Agricultural Reform, MONLAR

The Organisation

MONLAR is an organisation that was formed in 1990 to establish a network of farmers’ organisations, Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and other grassroots movements. As a network organisation, it brings together a varying range of about 100 to 200 member organisations depending on the temporary alliances it establishes, such as with trade unions, women’s organisations, and NGOs from different sectors. Some of these alliances last as long as specific campaigns, whereas others crystallise for several years. MONLAR is one of the very few Sri Lankan members of Via Campesina—a global peasant network of organisations working for food sovereignty—although others are in the process of seeking a membership as well, including MPIS, which I mentioned earlier. MONLAR itself has about thirty people working in the office, which may be less today as it is also hit by the financial crisis that strains the budgets of its donors. Interestingly, most donors are Christian organisations, including Christian Aid, Bread for the World, and the Primate’s World Relief and Development Fund, but MONLAR links up with other organisations as well, such as War on Want.

Diagnosis of the National and Global Situation

Given the variety of partners, alliances, and member organisations, MONLAR takes on a wide variety of issues, ranging from malnutrition, land titles, post-tsunami reconstruction, Coca Cola, the green revolution, human rights to environmental issues. The publication list on its website is alphabetically ordered according to specific categories: Agriculture, Economic, Energy, Gender, Health, Land, Plantation, Poverty & Hunger, Tsunami, Water, and Other. MONLAR connects these issues by framing them in relation to Capital (predominantly in the form of free market and neoliberal policies). For MONLAR the drive of Capital to accumulate capital is seen as the root cause of all evils in what is an arborescent or singularising model (Deleuze & Guattari 2009:3-25) of explanation that unites these widely varying topics. Sarath Fernando, who is the director of MONLAR and who mainly develops the vision of the organisation, writes elsewhere: “The plans pushed by global capital to capture, take control over world’s natural resources and enslave the whole of human kind for the purpose of unceasing and limitless accumulation of capital obviously threaten the very survival of

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60 http://www.oocities.org/monlarslk/publications/publications.htm
Hence, he singles out the endless drive for the accumulation of capital or profit, linked to excessive desire, as a core concern. In this vein, MONLAR focuses heavily on the neoliberal policies that were introduced in 1977 where imports became liberalised and where the export industry was promoted, thereby emphasising it as a rupture. The website (an older copy is the only one available as currently, it is slowly being revised and has not been accessible for over a year) proclaims in English:

“Efforts made in integrating Sri Lanka’s economy into the globalization process resulted into an unprecedented increase in rural poverty, breakdown in rural small farmer agriculture, malnutrition among children, high rate of anaemia among mothers, low birth weight babies, large increase in income disparities, and loss of livelihoods. Political unrest and suppression resulted in Sri Lanka becoming the country with highest number of political killings. These contributed to the intensification of the internal war.”

Yet, it should be clear that this liberalisation of the economy and commercialisation of agriculture has not come about since 1977, but as should be clear from our historical overview and as Deborah Winslow (2003) likewise notes, this shift in approach to food has found its way into Sri Lanka much earlier by way of the colonial introduction of a plantation agriculture, in which the food assemblage acquires its expression as a commercial commodity. This shift from subsistence to plantation agriculture is apparent in the physical ordering of populations of plants in a calculated fashion into monocultures on larger plots of lands to increase the bulk of output. This commercial and quantitative approach to food (ordered in nearly mathematical figures of straight lines, diamonds, or squares) to increase output and profit is, according to Sarath, also embodied in the green revolution, which was introduced during the 1960s and 70s. It involved the development of new seeds that could respond to chemical inputs as to increase harvests as a way to meet increasing demand attributed to the rapid growth of the world population (I will discuss MONLAR’s discourse on the green revolution and the 2008 food price crisis in greater detail after the section on life narratives). Sri Lanka introduced these varieties in the rice sector to cut down on food imports that were having detrimental effects on the balance of payments, as discussed in the previous section. Moreover, the post-colonial aspiration to become self-sufficient in rice could be met

61 http://www.oocities.org/monlarslk/publications/Agriculture/View_on_Sustainable_Development_in_Agriculture_2006.pdf
62 http://www.oocities.org/monlarslk/about_us/about_us.htm
by the introduction of the green revolution in combination with the World Bank-funded large-scale irrigation and resettlement schemes in the “Sinhalese heartland” (Tennekoon 1988). The state actively promoted this shift to green revolution or high yielding varieties by providing subsidised inputs (seeds, fertilisers, and insecticides), tractors, credit, guaranteed prices offered by the Paddy Marketing Board buying and redistributing the produce, and by providing extension services that offer advice. For instance, in my village of research, the extension officer helped the farmers in deciding when to start cultivation and which seeds to use. By way of this active support, many were tempted to shift their way of cultivation and to learn new techniques while becoming deskilled in the non-chemical and indigenous ways of cultivating. Moreover, when the farmers had become used to this high-input farming, many of these supportive incentives were dismantled, according to MONLAR, under pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, at the advantage of transnational agri-businesses. For Sarath and MONLAR, the green revolution epitomises an industrialised and commercialised agriculture under control of agri-businesses, such as Monsanto, that operate according to the logic of accumulation and extraction of profit, labour, and resources.

In another internal document on human rights, MONLAR states:

“The crisis in rural agriculture resulted from the introduction of ‘Green Revolution’ methods of farming was further aggravated after 1977 with the introduction of neo-liberal economic policies and the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) of the World Bank and IMF introduced in Sri Lanka in 1977. These policies of SAP led to a drastic reduction in social welfare and in supportive policies towards small farmers. The SAPs gave much emphasis to export orientation in industries and agriculture”.

A paper presented in Malaysia at the Via Campesina training in 2005 blames again the post-1977 policies of liberalisation in agriculture and industry, which MONLAR claims to be carried out under the guidance of the World Bank and IMF, for the breakdown of domestic agriculture and the loss of livelihoods of farmers who make up about half the population. MONLAR goes on to argue that:

“The farmers became heavily indebted as cost of production became very high (increasing more than ten times within about a decade) and the cost of living too increased in a similar manner, while the services provided by the state in all areas were cut down and handed over to the private sector. As the
private traders became the only agency for buying domestic agricultural products and also importation. The prices obtained by the domestic producers dropped to very low levels, particularly during the harvest times, although the consumers continued to pay very high and increasing prices.”

The text then moves on to connect these state and capital-induced evolutions to some detrimental consequences in the following ways:

“Rural poverty increase in Sri Lanka became very sharp. Malnutrition and anemia among children and mothers increased reaching very damaging levels. Hunger, poverty and indebtedness finally led to a sharp increase in the rates of suicide, particularly among rural population who suffered only disadvantages and losses and had no other avenues to meet the adverse conditions created by the new policies and the way they were implemented. Youth displaced from their rural livelihoods did not find sufficient opportunities outside, resulting in severe outbreaks of social and political unrest and violence.”

Here, the document refers to the JVP uprising that was led by unemployed and educated youth and in which some MONLAR proponents have participated. The issue of farmer suicides has been receiving a lot of attention, but the question whether it is related to the introduction of the green revolution remains a point of debate and contention. For organisations such as MONLAR, this is evident and it took up a case of several farmer suicides in Polonnaruwa to organise a hunger strike in August 2000 to expose the plight of small-scale farmers and to ask for a renewed attention to it. It is interesting to note that two-thirds of the suicides in Sri Lanka involve pesticide self-poisoning; pesticides that became available along with the green revolution (Gunnell et al. 2007:1-2), whereas other less painful and free means are readily available and known to be around in village flora. The fact that these chemicals are associated with the green revolution and the reported sudden increase of farmer suicides at the moment of its introduction suggests a significant, but not necessarily

64 According to the World Health Organization, the suicide rates increased significantly since the middle of the 1960s from 12 per 100000 to the current level of 37 per 100000 by the early 1980s. This rate further increased to reach the peak at 1995, after which it declined a little given the ban on certain extremely poisonous pesticides (Gunnell et al. 2007).
http://www.searo.who.int/LinkFiles/Disability__Injury_Prevention__Rehabilitation_directed.pdf
Direct link between suicide and green revolution—a cultivation that is extractive, destructive, and not regenerative and sustaining of life and livelihoods in the experience of many farmers. They were lured by promised benefits to adopt the green revolution and now feel it is impossible to return to the cultivation of pre-green revolution varieties. This diffuse sense of being forced to continue cultivating green revolution varieties corroborates the pressure people feel in having to adopt it and some even feel it is a form of violence performed on the farmers and natural environment (Shiva 1991). The related combination of increased input prices and decreasing output prices renders agriculture no more worthwhile pursuing. People then abandon it mostly by way of seeking other job opportunities and in some ways by committing suicide. For MONLAR, it is global Capital, which is helped by the neoliberal state and its serving agents to effect its plans, that is the overarching cause of all this. In this analysis, MONLAR seems to be on a similar line of thinking with Jude Fernando (2011), who cautions NGOs to not lose track of the fundamentality of this combination of state and Capital.

Alternative Vision

For MONLAR, the destructive nature of extractive greed is obviously embodied in industrial agriculture and green revolution as it accelerates the breakdown of small-scale agriculture and the society and economy associated with it, as well as the environmental and related health problems that emerge along with it. The one-way extraction and abstraction of natural resources and labour marks the exploitative commercial values inherent in this so-called technological fix to the world’s food problems, which obscures and elides its own ideological underpinnings in what James Ferguson (1990) labels the “anti-politics machine”. To MONLAR, the creation of a particular type of agriculture is not a mere technological solution, but entails a choice for the kind of world that humanity seeks to pursue. “Another world is possible”, the slogan of the alternative globalisation movement of which MONLAR feels part, exactly brings to the fore such fundamental questioning regarding the ways we are being in the world. Hence, in his critique on biotechnological agriculture, Sarath seeks to bring political and other more existential aspects back into the picture by for instance looking at the implicit dynamics of excessive desire and the precariousness it creates. In a way, MONLAR

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65 Direct links entail alcohol abuse, economic stress, hopelessness and so forth (Konradsen et al 2006)
confronts us with the rampant millennial fate in anti-political techno-solutions that makes us aspire for Heaven at the expense of the procreative or regenerative capacity of Earth.

Just as Capital seems to be the overarching root of all evil, the restoration of the regenerative capacity of the soil is MONLAR’s core solution, assuming that will solve a great deal of the wide range of environmental, social, and economic problems associated with capital accumulation. To begin with, Sarath and MONLAR, in their comments on a draft national land use policy in 2002, draw upon Vandana Shiva to redefine the concept of resource that in current techno-commercial approaches is seen as something inert waiting to be extracted\(^66\). He refers to Vandana Shiva (1992:206) who introduces and seeks to revive the lost notion of resources:

“Resource originally implied life. Its root is the Latin verb, surgere, which evoked the image of a spring that continually rises from the ground. Like a spring, a ‘re-source’ rises again and again, even if it has repeatedly been used and consumed. The concept thus highlighted nature’s power of self-regeneration and called attention to her prodigious creativity. Moreover, it implied an ancient idea about the relationship between humans and nature—that the earth bestows gifts on humans who, in turn, are well advised to show diligence in order not to suffocate her generosity. In early modern times, ‘resource’ therefore suggested reciprocity along with regeneration.”

The latter fits very clearly with the villagers concern with formations of excessive desire (e.g. pretas), which they perceive to be very destructive and for whom balance (whether in desire, flavours in Ayurveda\(^67\), or in terms of non-vampire give and take relationships) are crucial in order to enable the ongoing regeneration of life. Indeed, regeneration is one of our core transversal themes and MONLAR connects with this basic existential concern in what Sarath calls regenerative agriculture in line with Jules Pretty’s book on “Regenerating Agriculture” (1995). It is a form of cultivation that can heal the earth, which heating chemicals have burnt (polove te säray), and restore its capacity to regenerate itself by providing the soil with organic manure or compost. Regenerative agriculture then allows the earth and nature to become an “eternal spring of gifts”. It is thus a system based on a balanced and reciprocal

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\(^66\) Current lively materiality studies also question this premise of inert matter and exclusive human intentional action, based on clear human–nature separation, and as such these studies exhibit a potentially greater sensitivity for a different view that puts human beings more on equal footing.

\(^67\) Sarath in an interview makes explicit the link between the Ayurvedic way of thinking about balances of flavours and humours to achieve health with the necessity of balances in desire and in social relationships.
give and take relationship with the soil, which contrasts clearly with the one-way extraction of resources in agri-business, aided by chemical fertilisers that force and compel nature to give its gifts.

Sarath justifies his enthusiasm for regenerative agriculture by grounding his argument in the science of agro-forestry and by referring to his own multilayered home garden in which various plants, ranging from creepers to trees, provide both manure and food “at no cost”. In fact, as a synonym of regenerative agriculture, he uses the term *no-input agriculture* in which he alludes that this form of agriculture does not need financial inputs in the way commercial agriculture requires. He also argues that by restoring and regenerating ecological relations, farming becomes viable again and accessible to anyone. This shift to no-input and organic farming moreover promotes better health and respects the Buddhist precept of non-killing, and liberates people from *preta*-like extractors of resources and capital that burn and destroy balances vital to the regeneration of life. Indeed, Sarath explicitly states: “Religious attitudes and beliefs provided a useful background for sustaining the regenerative potential. Eg: Greed and accumulation were seen as negative values”68, in which he alludes to the Buddhist requirement of non-attachment that relates to villagers’ preoccupations with *pretas*, as destructive formations of greed.

Let us now turn to Sarath’s model of the home garden as a way out of the human incarceration in the system of institutionalised greed shaped by capital. Sarath indeed offers not only large-scale solutions in terms of political advocacy and campaigns at national and international levels, but also suggests that a better world can be achieved by starting in one’s garden. During a three-hour interview, he explains the way his own home garden functions as a way of demonstrating that what he preaches can work. On his small plot of land of ten perches (about 250 square meters) he has plants that give fruit and vegetables and that grow to different heights. The large jackfruit tree gives shade and manure from the falling leaves whereas the middle-level and ground-level plants predominantly provide food, reminiscent of the agro-forestry principle of working in different layers to make the most of a particular piece of land. Indeed, the WDR2008 report affirms that smallholders are the most efficient producers as they engage in multi-cropping and harvest more food per square meter than large-scale monoculture farms do. Even underground, Sarath is cultivating yams. More

68 http://www.oocities.org/monlarslk/publications/Agriculture/View_on_Sustainable_Development_in_Agriculture_2006.pdf
specifically, he has three papaya, two mango, and additional orange, lime, and guava trees. Lower to the ground, he has some leaf varieties that can be used as vegetables and spices. He explains that he does not need to be a good farmer and also does not need chemical fertilisers. The leaves that fall and the organic waste are mixed with cow dung, which is returned to the soil (the give and take relation). Insecticides are also not needed, he continues, as all kinds of animals are allowed to exist and keep each other in check. It is moreover meritorious to share one’s food with other living species as well (he refers to the ancient practice of leaving one bed or liyadde of paddy to the birds, a share which is called kurulupālu [Brohier 2006:44]). Also the earthworms do not die and are able to render the soil fertile and soft. Hence, the home garden becomes a self-sufficient and regenerative system, which even allows exchanging some surplus with neighbours. It could also be possible to sell some fruit at the roadside and gain some additional income without input costs. On top of that, a fair share of the food requirements can be met, reducing domestic spending and increasing access to food for poorer families.

According to Sarath, if this practice was repeated by numerous rural families across Sri Lanka, people could start farming without needing starting capital and becoming indebted. Destitution would decrease and they would become healthier by eating a more diversified diet. This would in turn improve nutrition and prevent diseases at nearly no cost, which is significant since medicines are often out of reach for these people. A home garden could also contain plants with beneficial qualities providing support in maintaining health. Sarath refers in this regard to Ayurveda as a system that has this knowledge and that can bring health to everybody’s doorstep (see also Raju & Hariramamurthy 2004).

Moreover, by applying this agro-forestry at home, the fertility and water-retaining capacity of the humus layer and the soil of Sri Lanka (as well as the overall ecological situation) could recover and further facilitate a steady flow of water. He claims that due to excessive and extractive logging, the forests in the central hills and the humus layer have depleted (indeed excessive desire is destructive in contrast with more reciprocally balanced give and take relationships). Hence, the supply of water has turned more irregular as the fertile humus soil in the central hills has vanished, thus no longer retaining water and slowly and regularly releasing it. Moreover, the traditional irrigation systems have become neglected and no longer function as they used to in ancient times (indeed he evokes the grandeur of the kings’ period) They are replaced by a centrally organised bureaucratic system, such as the Mahaweli scheme that functions in top-down fashion (Muller & Hettige 1995). Moreover, Sarath argues that if
the World Bank had its wish, water would be privatised and this would to rising input prices, pushing more people out of farming and into unemployment and urban destitution. Regaining the capacity of the soil to retain water would make farmers less dependent on such costly privatised water. The economic sector in Sri Lanka is fit to absorb large numbers of people being pushed out of farming. With this, Sarath is reminded of the dangers attached to such a large pool of excluded people that unviable farming can create. The large unemployment of educated youth was in his view the main cause of the JVP uprisings in the early 1970s and late 1980s. Regenerating the earth enables a viable farming and secures a source of income, potentially absorbing the unemployed. In this case, they at least have a choice between farming or staying unemployed and dwelling urban slums. It would decrease urban destitution, political tensions, and unemployment while increasing the food sovereignty, security, and safety, and health among the people in Sri Lanka. Indeed, an economy has to be based on the richness of a nation and Sri Lanka does not have many other resources but its amazing biodiversity. Executing this alternative vision would also decrease the overall costs of living and budget strains, as it would render people healthy, better nourished, and would provide them medicinal plants for free, as well as would avoid the rise of agricultural input costs. Indeed, because of soil depletion from these chemicals, farmers are required to put ever more fertilisers on their lands entering a cycle of increasing indebtedness and destruction. Given that the prices of these inputs continue to increase, as they require oil for their production (and this while oil prices continue to rise as we shall see in our discussion of the food price crisis later), farmers would be liberated in a non-chemical agriculture, being released from this incarcerating trend of indebtedness and hopelessness. The agro-forestry model of regenerative agriculture at home provides the sovereignty needed for an alternative to the current way the world is evolving. Indeed, development should not be modelled after the extractive logic of the capitalist West, but should rather be geared towards the regeneration of the soil and nature as “the eternal spring of gifts”.

Hence, Sarath and MONLAR’s alternative vision is radical, in the sense of the Latin word radix as going to the root of things, and propose a society based on a regenerative give and take relationship among human beings and between human beings and their environment. This entails a re-balancing of desire to neutralise the detrimental and destructive effects (e.g. depleted soil) of being caught in the accumulative and extractive logic of greed or excessive desire (e.g. indebted farmers and thriving agri-businesses). MONLAR thus operates in a similar way as a kapurāla that seeks to cut the bonds with excessive desire in order to think
and act freely again in balanced way (e.g. regenerative agriculture); in other words, where desire becomes a more creative force in relationships of sharing. We will return to this resonance and repetition in difference between MONLAR and the kapurāla when we analyse MONLAR’s position vis à vis everyday and ritual village life. Let us now explore in short MONLAR’s strategies and repertoire of action or modus operandi to achieve its vision above (Tilly 1978, Della Porta & Diani 1999).

Strategy and Action

We have seen that MONLAR offers a possibility to start achieving a better world in one’s home garden. Indeed, one of the two main strategies employed by MONLAR is to educate people in the art of regenerative farming, whether it is oriented towards women doing their home gardening or farmers cultivating larger plots of land for their paddy or chena. The second strategy involves advocacy (vocacy as calling) to try to ‘convert’ or rather influence policy-makers. The sensitisation and education of rural communities, and the advocacy at national and international policy levels together aim for a strengthened influence to mobilise a radical change in society.

Currently MONLAR is revisiting its own role and is moving towards an increased focus on policy level while diverting awareness building, education, and actions more to its member organisations at grassroots levels. Additionally, MONLAR sees its role increasingly as supporting these member organisations in their resource mobilisation by providing rooms for meetings, information sessions, and by channelling funding towards those who require it. The increased focus on advocacy reduces MONLAR’s repertoire of actions (means of activism) to predominantly carrying out study work, preparing documents, and organising awareness building among its member organisations that then spread the message further. Hence, this shift increases distance to the lifeworlds of those farmers and destitute people they claim to represent.

To gain additional leverage over national policies, MONLAR not only connects with member organisations or other members of Sri Lankan civil society, but also allies itself with forces at higher levels, as kapurālas do when they draw upon the force of higher deities to deal with the lesser ghosts and goblins. Hence, MONLAR also makes use of the boomerang pattern and effect, as described by Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1998), by linking up with
particular funders, by taking part in global events, such as the World Social Forum, and by connecting with global movements, such as Via Campesina and the Pesticide Action Network. I will return to Via Campesina in more detail when discussing the scale shifts (Tarrow 2006:32) and scale-making processes involved by tilling food from the intimate and local level and articulating it at the global level.

After this general introduction of MONLAR, its diagnosis, alternative vision, and work, let us now turn to some of the life narratives of activists and particularly that of Sarath Fernando, as a way to narrate the history of MONLAR from a more intimate and personal perspective.
Life Narratives

The individual life paths of MONLAR’s activists have clearly shaped the political passions, the diagnosis, and envisaged alternative. In this section, I will contextualise some of these life wanderings in the historical account I presented earlier. More particularly, I will give an account of the life narrative of Sarath Fernando as the leading figure and visionary of MONLAR, and then relate it to narratives of others who have been with MONLAR from the start and who I label as the old guard, following Wendy Espeland (1998). We will also look into the narratives of some of the young guard, comprising young adults including the son of Sarath.

Sarath Fernando

In 1942, Sarath Fernando was born in Kegalle in the Sabaragamuwa province. His mother came from a devout Catholic family in Moratuwa, on the west coast just south of Colombo. His father likewise came from Moratuwa and later moved with his family to Kegalle to work as an Ayurvedic physician. At that time, he was a member of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, a communist and later Trotskyite party that emerged in the bosom of the urban labour movement activity amidst the increasing demand for self-rule in the 1920s and 1930s (Jayawardena 2004). Hence, in his young days, Sarath learned both about Christianity and the simplicity of Jesus, who engaged in self-sacrifice “for the good of the people”, and about Ayurveda and socialism, which could help make a buffer against Western imperialism. It is most likely because of this background that Sarath is so interested in Latin American Liberation Theology, which combines the Christian teachings with a social agenda against the oppression of the poor. In his conversations he often refers to Paulo Freire’s “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” from 1970. Marxism and Christianity are not necessarily contradictory; on the contrary, they mutually enrich each other. This he has learnt from his father and later from canon François Houtart who has been coining the concept of “religious socialism” since the start of his academic career while putting it into practice in his work with social movements all over the world. The mix of Christian, socialist, and Buddhist sources of inspiration recur quite strikingly in a mixed form among almost all of the activists of MONLAR. Sarath spent five years in a Buddhist school in Moratuwa to return to his basic schooling in Kegalle and to go to Kurunegala at grade 10 to study biology in a Christian college. A mathematics teacher motivated Sarath to switch, and study maths at advanced level. Later he was selected to go to
Sarath went to university to study engineering, starting in Colombo and moving to Peradeniya after one year to terminate his study around 1968-69.

While at the university, Sarath got involved with the catholic student organisation as well as with the leftist movement, participating at the student organisations of the LSSP (Trotskyite) and the Communist Party (Stalinist). Yet, because of the alliance between LSSP and the Communist Party (CP), on the one hand, and the SLFP, on the other (recall the United Front that won several elections since 1956, except between 1965-1970), many felt discontent with the compromises taken. The watering down of radical ideas particularly disturbed the so-called China wing of the left movement, oriented towards Maoism and the Chinese revolution, to be distinguished from the pro-Soviet wing, oriented towards the Soviet Union and deemed too moderate by the former. Sarath became inspired and joined the Chinese wing. Still, within this wing, there were several factions that broke away to found their revolutionary organisations of which one was formed by Nandasiri Wijeweera, also known as Rohana Wijeweera; the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). In Sarath’s view, Rohana’s analysis on class, colonial rule, and the shift from a subsistence to an export and plantation agriculture was very correct and attractive. Rohana Wijeweera developed five classes in which he gave his analysis of the history of Sri Lanka including the economy, the left movement, Indian expansionism (seeing India as a powerful threat and entailing a germ for the more nationalistic emphasis that the JVP would take later), full independence, and the path to revolution. Sarath participated in a five-day political camp to learn about these five classes and left university before his final exams to conduct his own classes among Christian groups in Colombo to mobilise for the 1971 uprising. He met an ordained priest through whom he got access to catholic youth. This priest is still with MONLAR today as well as another person who joined in these classes. Sarath’s two brothers also participated in this proselytism of the JVP. One by one, he was secretly converting Christians to the JVP doctrine. During this work, Sarath met Alex who today heads the Movement for the Protection of Indigenous Seeds (MPIS) with which MONLAR collaborates. Indeed, this JVP uprising held the seed for the emergence of MONLAR and various organisations, movements and NGOs. The political energies and passions have indeed become articulated in different forms.

Sarath explains how the mobilisation progressed: “It was organised completely secretly, never in public. All classes, lessons, and so on, were conducted in closed houses, very often in the nights, never done in public. Therefore, it was a movement building up underground. Then, in
that whole process something happened. Wijeweera got arrested.” It was after that arrest that his name became publicly known and as the JVP campaign turned public after the release of Rohana Wijeweera. He then started organising public talks and rallies. This was still at the time (1965-1970) when the UNP was in power, after which the United Left Front, the coalition of the SLFP, LSSP, and CP took over. Given that the radical left parties had to compromise to make this alliance work, the revolutionary left was not convinced that the overall policies would change much, and so they continued their preparations for the uprising anyway. In addition to attending the five classes the revolutionary men learned how to make bombs and work with guns, whereas women learned to provide first aid and food under these circumstances. One of the secretaries in MONLAR took on this role from her house, which was later burnt as a reprisal. Indeed, the uprising that started on the 5th of April soon failed and the backlash ensued. Several people had to flee to the jungle for about two years. My previous host father was one of them and worked at MPIS. He told stories of how he used his Ayurvedic knowledge to stay alive while hiding in the jungle for about two years. Sarath also went in hiding but surrendered shortly after, given that his family members were under threat, and he was imprisoned with several of his friends for five years.

Sarath explains the large following of this uprising by the lack of absorption of young marginal and excluded people into the economic, social, and political structures. A lot of students who passed their Advanced Level (higher secondary education) and obtained their university degree were not being absorbed (and still are not) into meaningful jobs, rendering their study effort useless and frustrating these talented young people as they got slowly expelled from society. Hence, Sarath argues that as long as the economy is not sufficiently and sustainably diversified to include all these people, organic agriculture provides a good and cheap alternative livelihood, as discussed with regard to the agro-forestry applied in Sarath’s home garden. Currently, the economy seems to be geared towards expelling people from agriculture by making it no longer worthwhile. These people then move to cities where they are not absorbed into meaningful jobs and thus become part of the increasing pool of destitute available yet unused labour. The fact that these young people were not absorbed led to their radicalising repertoire of action, as they as unemployed could not even stage a strike to have an impact and have their grievances voiced, nor could they work through a political party, as they had no influence. Their only means as excluded people, Sarath says, was to set up a secret organisation and revolution. Hence, to prevent this from occurring again, regenerative agriculture can play an important role in developing an equitable economy that
absorbs all these people and does not destroy livelihood possibilities for others by poisoning each other’s lands with input chemicals.

When Sarath left prison in 1976, he had had five years to discuss with his friends what had happened, analyse it, and plan what to do next. They concluded that a broader movement should be developed and that this would require long-term alliance building. Sarath decided to find a place from which he could gradually work on this. François Houtart, who was an advisor at the Social and Economic Development Centre (SEDEC), now Caritas Sri Lanka, asked Sarath if he wanted to participate in an evaluation study of the past ten years that SEDEC had existed since its foundation by Father Joe Fernando. The Father was content with Sarath’s work and asked him help expand SEDEC among the non-Christians to further enhance SEDEC’s mission to disseminate: “the social teaching of the church” as to achieve a situation in which all people of Sri Lanka have access to an integral development as a human being. Sarath gradually became a member of staff and got interested in developing a rural-level social leadership in which farmers could take their fate into their own hands. Hence, when SEDEC provided disaster relief after a cyclone had hit Sri Lanka badly in the early 1980s, Sarath took has chance: “I was allowed to go to villages and do all this. So, when I went around these villages, I went to see how I could provide relief, but also organise people to form their own organisations.” He also tried to establish independent farmers’ collectives that were free from any dependencies on traders or mudalalis, and he helped to make agreements directly with banks, but the repay failed due to crop-losses due to diseases. The relation between Sarath and SEDEC turned difficult, but nevertheless he was still selected to undertake a study of the Free Trade Zones (FTZs) in Sri Lanka that were being established to attract foreign investment at very beneficial fiscal regimes. François Houtart was in charge of the study and brought a batch of eight people, including Sarath, to his Tricontinental Centre in Louvain-la-Neuve in Belgium for a three-month training on capitalism, the global economy, export-oriented development strategies, and so forth. Upon his return, Sarath conducted the study on the Free Trade Zones, but the SEDEC committee did not agree with his analysis and their collaboration was terminated.

Thereafter, Sarath joined Devasaranaramaya, which was founded by an Anglican priest, Yohan Devananda. In 1984, Sarath became the head of Devasaranaramaya, a kind of ashram in which a new world liturgy was practiced on the basis of multi-religious dialogue and

69 http://www.caritaslk.org/index.php/about-us.html
openness to progressive thinking, including Marxism. It was an open space where people could work and exchange ideas. Strikers, peasant activists, ex-JVP’ers, and other campaigners got together there, and as such it became a centre that hosted different groups and organisations. The All Lanka Peasant Congress (ALPC) became associated with Devasaranaramaya in 1978, which is how Sarath got involved with them. Later he established the Peasant Information Centre (PIC) in 1987 to gather more information and allow for awareness building among farmers about their position in society. He intended in this way to broaden the ALPC and the overall farmers’ movement. Some people of Devasaranaramaya and ALPC agreed that the work of ALPC was too issue-based to become a broad movement. For instance, they agitated against inviting foreign sugar cane companies to Moneragala in 1981-83 and against a proposed water tax during the years 1984-85. The general view was that such issue-based movements can mobilise widely until the issue is solved, but thereafter the momentum fizzles out. Instead, what was required was an analysis to bring these varying issues together into what David Snow (2001) calls an activist frame to enable a more continuous and wider mobilisation by way of frame alignment, i.e. connecting these different topics by crafting a shared analysis. The framing by the PIC would be developed on the basis of additional studies of the peasant economy in Sri Lanka and the peasantry in general, framed in a Marxist analysis based on land, capital, and labour through which these varying issues can be explained and connected in a discourse.

When the second JVP uprising was organised by Rohana Wijeweera in 1988, Sarath and many of his friends who had left the JVP were regarded as traitors. They disagreed with the JVP-stance towards the ethnic conflict that had taken a grip since the anti-Tamil riots in July 1983. Additionally, they were seen as contenders in activism as according to Sarath the JVP did want to be the only ‘alternative power’ (fierce competition among alternative groups is a recurrent theme among farmers’ organisations and NGOs today as well). Sarath was living on the premises of Devasaranaramaya with several of his fellow 1971-uprising colleagues as the JVP surrounded the ashram to hunt them down. They survived only by receiving the support of provincial council members and their guards. The second uprising was triggered when the Indian peacekeeping force was sent to Sri Lanka as part of the Indo-Lanka Accord or peace agreement in 1987, but was enabled by the growing emphasis of the JVP on the nationalism and anti-Indian expansionism—a topic which was treated in one of the five classes of the previous uprising. The entry of the Indian force offered the JVP the opportunity to start a new revolution. Moreover, the JVP was also vehemently opposing the president’s attempt to
devolve power by establishing a provincial council system, which in the eyes of the JVP would further weaken the state. Sarath and his fellows were in favour of this devolution and this was another reason for the JVP to brand them as traitors. The issue of nationalism and a unitary state as an answer to the ethnic tension between Tamils and Singhalese is a cleavage that recurs throughout several issues and alliances later again, not in the least during the final stages of the war when this issue of devolution became divisive among proponents and members of MONLAR as well.

When the uprising was quelled in 1989 by President Ranasinghe Premadasa, Sarath and his fellows compiled their analysis of the situation in which they made clear that the society had a large responsibility in the youth uprising and submitted it to a commission that Premadasa had appointed. They argued that a redistribution of land, such as was carried out in the Mahaweli resettlement scheme, would solve the problem. Instead, the crisis of agriculture, having become too costly and dependent on external inputs, should be solved to make it attractive again to absorb the unemployed. As Sarath says in his interview: “The problem of young people has to be solved, and can only be solved by solving the problems of agriculture in the rural economy.” They submitted this document arguing for land and agricultural reforms and started travelling to share their analysis with people around Sri Lanka. The precursor to the Movement for National Land and Agricultural Reform (MONLAR) was set up in 1991 following a national assembly and was named the Committee for National Land and Agricultural Reform (CONLAR). It included some members who have a position in the current government, such as Chamal Rajapakse—the president’s speaker, and Linus Salinda Dissanayake—the present deputy minister for plantations. Currently, MONLAR has fairly good relationships with the current government who promotes organic farming, even though it also continues to support chemical inputs and other industrial projects which MONLAR opposes. The fact that MONLAR is not profiling itself as a peace organisation renders the organisation still acceptable in the eyes of the government who has a very tense relationship with peace NGOs since the end-phase of the civil war. In 1993, a second assembly was held at the agricultural research centre where 150 organisations participated and endorsed a document entitled “Towards a Genuine Land and Agricultural reform”, focussing on the green revolution, export-oriented agriculture, colonisation schemes, and peasant poverty. This moment was the inception of the Movement for National Land and Agricultural Reform.

When president Premadase was killed on May 1, 1993 and after another key political figure was assassinated by the LTTE in October 1994, the UNP was in disarray which paved the
way for Chandrika Kumaratunga Bandaranaike to become president. MONLAR started opposing the liberal policies of the UNP while it was still in power, and made a critique of their policies to launch its campaign for a different approach to agriculture. A document called “People’s Memorandum” was launched and a summary of it was distributed widely at rallies and talks. It included 29 proposals to support the peasantry including the restriction of imports and a reinforcement of pro-farmer policies. Meanwhile, the election campaign of SLFP’s Chandrika Bandaranaike took off and she stated her support for MONLAR’s proposals. The petition collected around 15 thousand signatures and was very successful. It was clearly one of the heydays of MONLAR’s activism, as it remains mentioned as a success in many of its documents. The last rally that served as a culmination point gathered around seven thousand people and triggered the invitation from president Bandaranaike to come to a meeting on January 13, 1995. It was suggested there that they could be part of an advisory committee, but since the momentum had ceased, this promise did not materialise in the end.

MONLAR conducted another campaign in 1995 where it galvanised support and gained momentum again. The organisation was campaigning to revive the defunct Paddy Marketing Board (PMB) that purchased paddy at determined prices—giving income security to farmers—and redistributing it to the Food Commissioner’s Department to distribute the rice to consumers under the rice rationing scheme. The PMB act was liberalised in 1978 and the marketing of rice came into the hands of private traders (Weerahewa 2004:9). As a consequence, the PMB procurement fell to 1.3 % of the total production from 1993-1995 (Weerahewa 2004:x). By the year 1996 the PMB no longer participated in the purchase of paddy, and its role was taken over by the government intervening in the procurement of paddy through several other bodies, such as farmers’ organisations, the Co-operative Wholesale Establishment (CWE) and the Multipurpose Co-operative Societies (MPCS). Also from 1998 the Sri Lanka Co-operative Marketing Federation Ltd (MARKFED) started purchasing paddy while the share of the above government-based organisations remained small. (Weerahewa 2004:14). The private involvement still accounted for around 80% of the total paddy purchase. Hence, several initiatives were taken, but these remained insufficient for MONLAR, particularly as they felt that the situation for farmers grew worse by the ongoing liberalisation of the imports of rice under pressure of the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and of the World Bank and IMF (Weerahewa 2004).
Another event that brought MONLAR out of the limelight was a hunger strike in Polonnaruwa in the year 2000. Three Buddhist monks and six farmers fasted for six days to pressure the government into providing solutions for domestic agriculture problems and in particular the low purchasing or farmgate prices of farmers, since the PMB became defunct and still no satisfactory alternative was established. Given the fact that this hunger strike received wide media attention just before the general elections, the Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremesinghe promised to start buying the paddy at a reasonable price to replace the role of the PMB. However, to date the negotiation of the purchasing price of paddy remains a source of contention and negotiation, and this will remain so until a functioning solution is found to replace the PMB.

After several of these campaigns, Sarath and MONLAR turned their focus gradually more towards developing the educational aspect, as discussed earlier, to promote regenerative agriculture among farmers. This would provide a way to change the society by way of a Do It Yourself or DIY style of activism by transforming agriculture from the bottom-up and providing examples that the proposed policy alternatives do work. During the last decade, MONLAR has emphasised this practical transformation of agriculture by way of its sensitisation programs and various exchanges, trials, and trainings of farmers. Yet, they feel they may have lost too much of their political focus. Hence, they are planning to reorient MONLAR more towards advocacy and the channelling of funds towards their member organisations who continue to closely engage with the local-level protests and the on the ground promotion of organic, no-input, and regenerative farming. Sarath continues to exert a large influence on MONLAR to date. He still writes most of the vision papers and documents and remains the predominant contact between MONLAR and its international networks of activists. The tsunami provided an extra momentum for MONLAR as funding increased and the organisation surfed the wave of international interest in the rebuilding process. MONLAR showed Naomi Klein and Walden Bello around and discussed their ideas about the post-tsunami reconstruction, some of which is reflected in Naomi Klein’s (2007) “Sock Doctrine”. Sarath was later invited to the European Parliament in Brussels for a hearing on the overall reconstruction process. MONLAR has a voice on the international political and activist stage and Sarath indeed plays a crucial role in this. Yet, as he is growing older his energy to travel has somewhat waned, but not his inspiration in writing which continues to be published on websites of local and international organisations and in newspapers.

70 http://www.oocities.org/monlarslk/publications/Agriculture/Struggle_for_Peasant_Rights.pdf
By way of Sarath’s life story we have also gained better insight into the way MONLAR emerged and evolved. It will become even clearer in the next section when we look at some of the other life stories, and focus on the converging points where MONLAR activists got together, concentrating thus more on events than life narratives as such.

Converging Life Paths

We could, as mentioned earlier, distinguish between an old guard to which Sarath belongs and a young guard being of the generation of his son, who also works at MONLAR and who I name Sisitha. On top of numerous ethnographic conversations, I have extensively interviewed five members of the old guard and five of the young crowd as well as two outsiders who regularly engage with MONLAR. It is interesting to note that four people of the old group actively participated in the 1971 JVP uprising and some of them even worked together. In fact, it was in this event-induced encounter and historical convergence that MONLAR germinated to blossom only 20 years later. The secretary whose house was set ablaze in the backlash of the revolution did not meet any of this group until much later, when she met and started working for Sarath’s brother who was a secretary at the All Lanka Peasant Congress. After working for him, they got married and she came to live at Devasaranaramaya. This is the second location of convergence where people of the old guard joined the group that would soon thereafter establish CONLAR and then MONLAR. Also Ranjith, who has a leading role in MONLAR as well, had come to that gathering place. Here, many creative interactions happened, and as a result other organisations emerged as well. Similar to Sarath, several members of the old guard had multiple sources of inspiration, such as their Christian parents or schooling, Marxist teachers and books, and an upbringing in Buddhist society. I am here taking stock of the sources of inspiration to prepare our coming discussion on the justifications and “economies of worth”, coined by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (2006), that come to play their role in founding the argumentation of MONLAR of its views in confrontation with its opponents. We will later see that these religious inspirations are sometimes mobilised in crafting an argument with the aim of convincing people. Several members of the young guard have these similar sources of inspiration. The son of Sarath and a friend of his, Somnath, went to a Christian school, learned Buddhism from their devout mothers, and became inspired by Marxism under the impulse from either their father or a teacher. Somnath and Sisitha went to the same school and came to Colombo to do their higher
studies. As they did not have a place to live, they stayed at the MONLAR office, just as some people do today. After the next section, I will get back to this homey aspect of MONLAR that is quite unique and plays a role in its self-distinction from more ‘professional’ NGOs. They studied IT in Colombo and gradually became involved with the IT-related aspects of MONLAR’s work. Sisitha takes (or rather took, as he shifted organisation) care of the communication with funders and helps in English administrative tasks, whereas Somnath heads the IT-section to solve Internet and computer troubles and works with the media unit where other young men are involved in making films and activist documentaries. Hence, like many of the young guard, they first came there because of the hospitality of MONLAR and the family connection in Sisitha’s case, and became gradually passionate by the ideas of Sarath and MONLAR’s work.

To conclude, it is clear that the JVP-uprising of 1971 brought together people who later—while in prison and participating in other organisations—developed the idea of establishing a farmers’ movement. This embryonic idea germinated further in the multitude of interactions and convergences that took place in the ashram of Devasaranaramaya. Through the narration of a personal life experience we have obtained a better grasp of how MONLAR actually emerged, shedding light on the ways in which the analysis and discourses of MONLAR are not isolated, but sustained by actual people and passions all too often left out of view in activist analyses. Yet, still I have focused predominantly on these people in their public capacity as (MONLAR) activists and not in their personal and intimate being. I will return to this latter aspect after further eliciting MONLAR’s vision and analysis of food by exploring in greater detail its diagnosis of the emergence of the food (price) crisis in connection with aspects of the green revolution model of agriculture. This critical analysis sheds additional light from a more global perspective on MONLAR’s conviction that regenerative agriculture is the solution for a country with so many resources and people living in destitution.
The Food Price Crisis and the Green Revolution

In this section I will first introduce the global event of the food (price) crisis that affected Sri Lanka as well in 2008. Subsequently, I will turn to some of the explanations that MONLAR discerns for the emergence of the crisis and show how MONLAR’s explanations resonate with and repeat the diagnosis of global organisations. On top of that, I will show how MONLAR links this crisis to the earlier event of the green revolution and general transformation in the food system. The green revolution initially provided a solution to earlier food crises, but has now become a partial cause of the food crisis inasmuch as it is the epitome of agriculture based on the relentless drive to accumulate capital by way of intensified resource extraction. It is this emphasis of MONLAR on the extractive and accumulative logic that I articulate here with the basic concerns of balanced desire, appeasement of anxiety, and sustained regeneration of life that are being threatened by a model thriving on voraciousness, greed, and excessive desire. After this analysis, I will return to everyday office life in MONLAR to show the activists in their private and intimate engagements with food, such as I did with respect to village everyday life. Then we will be fully equipped to turn to the analysis of the specificity of the political economic articulation of food in MONLAR’s activism and the dynamics that underpin this specific alteration of the food assemblage.

The 2008 Food (price) Crisis

Since the world food crisis of the early 1970’s, food prices have gradually and steadily been declining (Shaw 2009:42). This has often been explained by the rapid increase in food production that outpaced population growth. The green revolution of the 1960s and 1970s drastically increased the output of rice and wheat. In South Asia alone, the cereal yields more than tripled from 215.646.626 metric tonnes (MT) in 1961 to 684.779.898 MT in 2009. In Sri Lanka, paddy production increased over the same period from 923.024 MT to 3.652.000 MT (FAO statistics). In the words of the World Bank, the global gross domestic product (GDP) of agriculture expanded from 1980 to 2004 by: “an average of 2.0 percent a year, more than the population growth of 1.6 percent a year. This growth, driven by increasing productivity, pushed down the real price of grains in world markets by about 1.8 percent a year over the same period” (WDR2008:50).
Since 2005, the rise in price of basic foodstuffs started setting in, reaching their peak in mid-2008 and then falling back significantly, however, this reduction occurring only predominantly in the richer ‘developed’ nations (Johnston 2010:69, Shaw 2009:42). Jayati Ghosh (2010:76-77) notes that the very sharp increases became evident from late 2006, early 2007, and particularly with respect to maize and wheat. The price of rice increased sharply at the beginning of 2008, entailing an increase of two and half times at the peak. In Sri Lanka, retail prices of rice more than doubled between May 2007 and May 2009, which is much less than the global increase in rice prices, yet the subsequent decline of the world market prices did not reflect itself in real declines in local retail and wholesale rice prices (Ghosh 2010:83).

For the people in poor countries who spend more than half of their family budgets on food (Ghosh 2010:79), such price increases are detrimental. Sarath Fernando\textsuperscript{71} notes that the price of rice reached between 80-95 rupees/kg (1 dollar was equivalent to around 130 rupees) in the second week of April 2008, whereas during my stays in 2009-2011 the price revolved around 35-40 rupees/kg. He estimates that a family requires around 40kg per month, and so the monthly expense of rice amounted during the crisis to around 3000 rupees, which is already the monthly income of the tea pickers for instance and more than the income of two million families who receive support from the state’s Samurdhi poverty alleviation program\textsuperscript{72}. Hence, for the low-income families the food price crisis was and continues to be dire. Their access to food turned critical due to the excessive prices rather than because of a lack of food availability. Yet, for these families it amounts to the same, hence the utilisation of the brackets in the “food (price) crisis”. In rich countries, such as the US, price increases are less drastic for the majority of the population. Even though the real expenditure per capita on food in the US increased 23 percent between 1970 and 1997, the proportion of expenditure on food decreased from 13.8% in 1970 to 10.7% in 1997. The Economic Research Service of the US Department of Agriculture (ERS/USDA) in its report\textsuperscript{73} concludes that: “as income rises, the proportion spent for food declines.”

Jan Douwe van der Ploeg (2010:104) notes that the figure of 850 million people that were suffering from malnutrition has risen to more than 1000 million during the crisis and its immediate aftermath, providing a setback for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) endorsed at the United Nations (UN) Millennium Summit in the year 2000. The MDGs include eight broad goals that serve as a development framework with

\textsuperscript{71} http://www.sundaytimes.lk/080420/FinancialTimes/ft307.html
\textsuperscript{73} http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/sb965/sb965e.pdf
quantifiable targets to be achieved by 2015 and to which various multilateral and non-governmental organisations orient themselves. The first goal is to halve extreme poverty (less than 1 dollar a day) and hunger (defined according to ‘universal’ standards of calories\textsuperscript{74}). About one billion people survive on less than a dollar a day and 2.5 billion people on less than two dollars a day. (Shaw 2009:8). Financial poverty is indeed intimately related to hunger and access to food. Of the widely cited pre-2008-crisis figure of 850 million of undernourished people, 675 million live in rural areas where food is produced. Hence, 75% of the hungry poor live in rural areas where food is produced (peculiar contradiction...), yet, as more people move to cities, poverty becomes more urbanised (Saw 2009:11). Sarath puts heavy emphasis on this aspect and blames high-input farming and the green revolution for being too expensive, pushing people out of farming into poverty, and creating urban unemployment and destitution. Small-scale organic farming could then provide the solution to this potential source of social unrest by absorbing these poor people at nearly no cost. Despite the urbanisation of poverty, projections estimate that by 2025, 60% of the hungry poor will remain located in rural areas (Shaw 2009:11). Malnutrition leads to stunted growth among a third of the children in developing countries and causes a lack in the full deployment of human potentials. Sarath\textsuperscript{75} has calculated that only half of the population of Sri Lanka receive the minimum daily calorie intake of 2100 Kcal mentioned by the US government and the World Food Programme\textsuperscript{76}. The World Bank and World Health Organisation have quantified the impact of malnutrition in disability-adjusted lifeyears (DALYs)—the loss of years as a result of premature deaths and disabilities, amounting to overall 220 million DALYs in developing countries (Shaw 2009:12). While hundreds of millions are suffering malnutrition there are 1.3 billion people that are obese, having a body mass index higher than 30 (Shaw 2009:17), but it should be cautioned that obesity is not necessarily a sign of richness or abundance, as it is can also emerge among poor people that seek to suppress their hunger by cheap low-quality and high-fat foods. Indeed, obesity is increasingly an issue in developing countries as well.

So, it is clear that the food price crisis of 2008 interplays with a wider global problem of the organisation of the food system, including the production, distribution, and access to food. Indeed, many of the components of the food crisis have already emerged in the ongoing

\textsuperscript{74} According to the US government, an adult person requires a minimum caloric need of around 2100 calories to avoid hunger (http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/GFA17/GFA17.pdf)

\textsuperscript{75} http://www.island.lk/2008/05/26/features2.html

restructuring of the global food system, but at that historical conjunction in 2008, they have combined themselves into a particular expression (crisis) by linking up with other (newly) emergent components, such as bad harvests, weather patterns, and so forth, that we will soon discuss further. In the novel combinations and interactions among new and recurrent components of the food system emerged the particular expression of food in 2008 as a food (price) crisis. In Sarath’s view, these components of the global food system can all be connected to one dominating component, capital accumulation (in the form of agri-business), serving as the overarching frame of analysis to which the various other aspects are subsumed.

The Various Components of the Crisis

Sarath argues that the food (price) crisis is a consequence of the introduction of agri-business and the associated green revolution that have drastically transformed the food economy. He expands⁷⁷:

“The present global system of market expansion is also threatening the very survival of people and of the earth itself. The process of intensified extraction from nature and from human beings (the poor) in the interests of growth and accumulation of capital is excluding more and more people from survival, while destroying the ability of nature to survive and regenerate itself. Food prices relate to ways in which fast economic growth is approached,...”

This economic system based on the drive for profit is for him the overarching cause of the food crisis to which he relates several of the following components: changing weather patterns and climate change, increasing oil prices, increased demand for meat, biofuel for vehicles, and a structural neglect of agriculture leading to a reduction in food producers. Elsewhere, he further points at the issues of speculation, monopolisation, reduction of food buffer stocks, and certain trade measures.

Let us now turn to how Sarath articulates these component-causes and particularly how he links up with discourses of numerous international bodies in his search for justification or for an antipole to desist (particularly when it concerns discourses of the World Bank and WTO).

Changing Weather Patterns and Climate Change

Adverse weather conditions in Australia and in some other regions were blamed as one among other components leading to a decreased output and food supply. Yet, this bad weather could no longer be viewed as isolated when various reports related it to the more enduring event of climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warned in its report (2007)\(^78\) that global warming will increase the occurrence of extreme weather patterns and the spread of invasive pests. Moreover, droughts are forecasted to increase in Southern Africa, South Asia, and around the Mediterranean. Also the World Bank in its World Development Report of 2008 (WDR2008), focusing only after 25 years again on agriculture, acknowledges the importance of keeping climate change in check for the safeguard of agricultural livelihoods. This includes making agriculture more sustainable, which is necessary as developing-country deforestation and agriculture contribute between 22-30% of greenhouse gas emissions (WDR2008:15-17). Moreover, Sarath\(^79\) states that the proposed regenerative agriculture could restore the humus layer, increase the water-retaining capacity of the soil, and thus even provide a buffer against the predicted shifting weather patterns in Sri Lanka (Survey Department Sri Lanka 2007:54-55). Hence, framing a particular cause of the food (price) crisis in this way, the specific weather conditions of 2008 became articulated (and connected) with climate change, and as such acquired a more structural expression (by way of increased repetition of such weather events related to climate change).

Rising Oil Prices

Just as during the 1970s, both food and oil prices rose sharply in 2008. Oil is a main component in the industrialised agriculture as it is used in several respects: to transport food throughout ever-extending food-chains, as a component in fertilisers and pesticides, and to feed the farms’ machinery (pumps, tractors, greenhouses) (Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy or IATP 2008)\(^80\). Sarath concludes that the green revolution with its dependence on chemical inputs and as part of the industrial agricultural system is thus making farmers more vulnerable to such oil price fluctuations. Worse, such increases in oil prices also affect the overall food prices in an exponential way because of the chain effect in which each part of the chain (e.g. production and transport) further adds to the end price. In his critique on the green

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\(^79\) http://www.sundaytimes.lk/080420/FinancialTimes/ft307.html
\(^80\) http://www.iatp.org/files/451_2_102867.pdf
revolution and industrial agriculture, Sarath\(^{81}\) refers to a panel of 400 scientists that argued in a report (2008) of the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD)\(^{82}\) that progress in agriculture had indeed been achieved, but at high social and environmental costs. In making agriculture more sustainable, they argue, we should change the dependency on oil, particularly as we find ourselves in the “peak-oil” stage, meaning that we are utilising the maximum possible while the reserves are shrinking. Freeing ourselves from our oil dependency could stabilise prices and would have less detrimental environmental and social effects. Some have opted therefore for replacing our “addiction to oil”, as George Bush Junior once said, by investing in biofuels, yet this shift has been blamed as another ingredient in the concoction of the crisis.

Biofuels

Biofuels comprise the production of biodiesel and ethanol from agricultural feedstocks. Hence, it comes as no surprise, when maize (30% of its total production in US in 2007) and sugarcane (50% in Brazil in 2006) are used for the production of biofuels, that a competition emerges for arable land and food production (Ghosh 2010:73, WDR2008:70). Sarath\(^{83}\) summarises his concern with the competition between food and fuel in this way: “More fuel is produced using food and food-producing land to feed cars than [food is produced] to feed the poor.” Also The World Bank acknowledges in its development report that biofuels have to be considered carefully, as competition between food and fuel is real (240 kilograms of maize could feed one person for one year, or would fill a 100 litre tank of a sport utility vehicle). Moreover, the World Bank report raises doubts about the energy efficiency, as the production and the related clearing of forests for biofuel cancel years of CO2 savings (WDR2008:71). The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)\(^{84}\) estimated that biofuels accounted for a 30% share of the global food price hike, whereas Robert Zoellick, the then president of the World Bank in 2008, estimated this even to be up to 75%\(^{85}\).

\(^{81}\) http://www.island.lk/2008/05/26/features2.html


\(^{83}\) http://www.island.lk/2008/05/26/features2.html

\(^{84}\) http://www.ifpri.org/sites/default/files/publications/vonbraun20080612.pdf

\(^{85}\) http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/07/04/us-energy-biofuels-idUSL0340750020080704?sp=true
Increased Demand for Meat, Fish, and Other High-Value Agricultural Products

The competition for food-producing land becomes more pressing in face of changing food preferences. More specifically, the changing diets of the growing middle classes in China, India, Russia and Brazil are also pointed at as demand factors that enabled the global food-price hike. The increased meat, fish, dairy, fruits, and vegetable consumption of these middle classes requires more land to be satisfactorily supplied (WDR2008:58, IATP 200886). Whereas this diversifying consumer demand is seen as an economic opportunity to diverge part of the agriculture in developing countries to more high-value products (in economic rather than cultural terms) (WDR2008:58), FAO87 notes that 7 to 8.5 kg of grain is needed to produce 1 kg of beef, so the diversifying consumer demand increases pressure on the already scarce land resources. Moreover, as the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) noted in its report on the “State of the World Population” (2007)88, it is the first time in history that more than half of the world population lives in cities since 2008, which potentially alters the production/consumption ratio for the first time in history in favour of the consumers. Recall that Sarath blames industrial agriculture for this evolution and that he warns for the unrest that stems from it.

On top of the increased consumption of foods that require more energy and land acreage to be produced, the rising world population becomes an additional pressing matter of concern. In 1804 the world reached its first billion of inhabitants, mounting to 2 billion in 1927, 3 billion in 1960, 4 billion in 1974, 5 billion in 1987, 6 billion in 1999, and 7 billion in 2011 (Shaw 2009:18, UNFPA89). Hence, the changing diets in combination with different forms of work, urbanised life-styles, and increasing population growth do outgrow and in some occasions even strain the supply of food. In a blunt mechanic economic approach, an increased demand should lead automatically to an increased supply, but the relation is more complicated in its own entanglement with multiple other components. Increased pollution, depletion of soils, decrease in smallholder agriculture that entail the most effective producers (WDR2008:8), climate change, pressure on arable land by biofuels, increased preference for meat, and so forth, further complicate the matter of the demand-supply relationship. The complexity of the global food assemblage becomes more complicated as we continue to trace more factors that

contributed to the particular expression of the global food assemblage in 2008, labelled as the food (price) crisis.

The Increasing Attraction of Food for Financial Markets and Speculation

Jayati Ghosh (2010) states that the claim of increasing consumption in China and India has led to increasing food grain prices is invalid, as per capita consumption of grain has fallen in both countries. Yet, we could question whether this decrease could not soon be outwitted by the increased meat consumption. She states that supply factors, such as biofuel competition, rising input-costs, neglect of investment in agriculture, and climate changes, are likely more significant in causing rising prices, as well as the aspect of speculation. She also argues that the commoditisation and market orientation of agriculture has led to shifts from ‘traditional’ food crops to cash crops. In this shift, farmers became more reliant on private input provision and credit, providing a fertile ground for increased financial speculation in commodities markets. Often, speculation is deemed to play a stabilising function, which would allow speculators to predict future market patterns and to ease the volatility of changing prices by buying up stocks when prices are low and releasing them when prices are high. Hence, such soothsaying and ‘clearvoyant’ capacities of speculators play a similar stabilising role in the spectral futures markets in commodities, in which they hedge against the risk of sudden future price changes. Yet in the crisis of 2008, with its sharp and sudden price increases and decreases, speculation instead aggravated such volatility, as new financial players entered into the commodity markets because of a new US regulation in 2000. The legislative change included a deregulation of commodity trading in the US, which allowed all investors, including those from other hedge funds, pension funds, and investment banks, to trade commodity futures contracts without limits or regulatory oversight. Unlike producers and consumers, who sometimes use future selling as a buffer against the volatility of the market, these other players enter in this commodity market for short term profit-making, capitalising on quick changes in prices, agreement swapping (forward positions without physical ownerships of the commodities), and short selling (in which these assets forwarded from a third party are borrowed and sold before they are purchased, and later returned by buying identical assets later in order to return them to the third party [Wikipedia90]). Since the global financial system became nervous by the implosion of the US housing market, investors searched for other sources of profit and, food and commodity speculation provided such an avenue for anxious capital to stabilise itself amidst the financial storm, creating a spill-over of

90 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Short_(finance)
the US credit crisis into the agricultural sector (Ghosh 2010:72-78). Note how food turned from something sensorial in our account of daily life into an abstract deterritorialised assemblage articulated with global flows of capital. Whereas the often declared purpose of forward or future trading and of future markets is to hedge price fluctuations, in which the sale of future contracts would exceed their demands and futures prices would be lower than real on the spot prices, in the crisis of 2008 the futures prices were actually higher, thereby driving up the spot prices. When, by June 2008 the profits had to be booked to provide liquidity for other activities, the futures and consequently spot prices fell. The financialisation of commodity markets increased the volatility of prices at the detrimental effect on both producers and consumers and to the profit of a small number of influential traders (Ghosh 2010:78-79). The decoupling of the markets, by way of speculating on future prices and expectations, from the materials was a move that enabled the emergence of a spectral and obscure market affecting the material life of people. The possibility of extracting profit from food was further enhanced by the concentration of the food chain in the hands of a few large commodity traders, wholesalers, and retailers, which brings us to the next issue of monopolisation.

**Monopolisation**

The liberalisation of food and agricultural markets (both in production and marketing) has not only led to an increased financialisation of the markets, but also enabled the rise of food empires that exert monopolistic powers over the entire food supply chain (van der Ploeg 2010). The increasing monopolisation is moreover a resultant of the inter-action with the overall industrialisation of agriculture (which we turn to later) (van der Ploeg 2010:99). The liberalised world market has become the arena in which large companies, such as Nestlé, Unilever, Monsanto, and Cargill operate. At the BBC World Debate on Food On March 29, 2008 and in which Sarath Fernando participated, Raj Patel argued that there are about 1.3 billion producers at the top of the food system and now 7 billion consumers, but that only four companies or bottleneck corporations control 75% of the distribution market, and so they can easily control prices. GRAIN\(^9\) (an international organisation supporting small-scale farming) notes that Cargill announced that its profits from commodity trading during the first quarter of 2008 were 86% higher than for the same period in 2007. Van der Ploeg (2010:101) states succinctly: “These food empires exert considerable monopoly power. It is becoming difficult, if not impossible, for farmers to sell food ingredients or for consumers to buy food outside of [9](http://www.grain.org/article/entries/178-making-a-killing-from-hunger)
the circuits that they control.” He goes on to note that: “these structures that link the production and consumption of food have a strong inbuilt need to ‘squeeze out’ as much value as possible” (van der Ploeg 2010:102). There is thus a downward pressure on the farmgate prices and an upward pressure on the prices of consumption goods. Hence, farmers that have become linked to the market are more prone to such price controls by large companies than the subsistence farmers who are not dependent on them for the sale of their produce even though they are not isolated from such markets (by way of their dependence on inputs). Hence, the monopolisation of the food distribution in wholesale and retail markets did contribute to the fluctuation of the prices in the crisis of 2008, but simultaneously exposes that the food (price) crisis is a specific excrescence of the wider food system, as pointed at earlier. For instance, in Sri Lanka, the liberalisation and privatisation of the agricultural market has specifically led to an oligopoly of private millers who have as such obtained a lot of financial negotiation power in face of which small farmers have difficulties in bargaining good prices (Weerahewa 2004:xii-xiii). To conclude, the transformation of subsistence small-scale agriculture into a commercial and export-oriented agriculture turns farmers dependent on the market and its actors, and as such makes the food system more prone to the monopolising tendencies of competitive markets in which some players gain influence in their success over waning others. MONLAR has always vehemently opposed such commercialisation and privatisation of the production and trade of food, a trend that it predominantly traces back to the changes in policies in 1977 that took place under influence and pressure of the IFIs. As shown in our account, it may be that plantation and export agriculture may not have been that widespread among Sinhalese cultivators, but it heralded a crucial shift in approach to agriculture that became commercialised as part of the overall policy approach since 1977.

Reduced Food Stocks

Another measure that Sri Lanka executed was the run-down of its buffer stocks in rice during the dismantlement of the Paddy Marketing Board. This was promoted as part of a program to “bring agriculture to the market” (World Bank 1997), in which so-called trade-distorting measures had to be eliminated. The creation of buffer stocks proved problematic for the World Bank, as that involved too much state control and monopoly over food prices (World Bank 1997:71) (even though for oil stocks and financial hedging in futures markets, the World Bank did not seem to have a problem with buffering). As these buffers had been reduced over time as part of the neoliberal project, reserves were at extremely low levels during 2008 (van der Ploeg 2010:99). For instance, rice stocks had shrunk by almost half
since 2000 (IATP 2008). So, little reserves could be brought into the market to buffer the volatility of prices.

**Protective and Distorting Measures**

As a result of the soaring prices, some big export countries, such as Vietnam and India, have started limiting their exports, whereas others, such as Sri Lanka have imposed domestic price controls. The overall decrease in exports has further limited the availability of food on the global market and has had an adverse impact on net-importers of food. Hence, Pascal Lamy, Director General of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) on February 8, 2012 reiterated that such export restrictions, as they entail in his words “starve-thy-neighbour” policies, were at the heart of the 2008 crisis. Stated bluntly, the ‘starve-thy-self’ policies are preferable to Pascal Lamy in the name of free marketing of food (export-oriented agriculture competes easily with domestic food supply in favour of the wealthy consumers in rich countries and at the detriment of the local population living in poverty). Already in June 2008, Pascal Lamy attacked import tariffs and export restrictions imposed among poorer countries as well as the high subsidies given by richer countries. His comments were also part of a more general plea to revive and conclude the Doha Round of negotiations within the WTO. The Doha Round envisages further liberalisation and was endorsed by the World Bank and Ban Ki-Moon as a solution to the food crisis at the official declaration at the High-Level Conference in Rome in 2008. Hence, they argued for a solution to the crisis that, what critics (e.g. Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy [IATP] and MONLAR) say, caused the crisis.

**Structural Neglect of Agriculture in Policies**

Both the World Bank and its opponents recognise that agriculture has suffered from structural neglect, which allowed the 2008 crisis to happen. Indeed, investments in agriculture have declined steadily between 1980 and 2004 (WDR2008:7). In the same report, the World Bank

93 http://article.wn.com/view/2008/06/30/Food_crisis_deepens_as_countries_restrict_exports/
94 http://www.wto.org/english/news_e/sppl_e/sppl216_e.htm
95 http://www.wto.org/english/news_e/sppl_e/sppl216_e.htm
96 http://www.wto.org/english/news_e/news08_e/ge_chair_tnc_7may08_e.htm and http://www.wto.org/english/press_e/sppl_e/sppl92_e.htm
97 For an introduction in this round of negotiations with regard to the so-called three main pillars: agriculture, Non-agricultural market access and GATS, see http://www.eldis.org/go/topics/dossiers/wto-doha-round
100 See our other IATP-related references.
acknowledges that agriculture is a driver of development and economic growth, deserves renewed attention, and requires a productivity revolution by way of a new ‘green revolution’, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Critics claim that the deregulation of agricultural policy under the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) has exactly decreased the governments’ interest to invest in agriculture. In the WDR2008 the World Bank reluctantly acknowledges the need for more government intervention, but only insofar as it enhances the operation of the free market and its players through certain incentives, training, and research. Yet, the United Nations Conference in Trade and Development (UNCTAD)\textsuperscript{101} has noted that the yearlong push for deregulation and liberalisation, advocated by World Bank and IMF, have reduced the policy space of governments, reducing their capacity to intervene in food crises, such as the one in 2008, and in agricultural development in general.

**Political Participation**

The WDR2008 report acknowledges Amartya Sen’s (1981) observation that hunger and poverty are linked with entitlements and democratic capabilities of citizens to organise themselves and make demands. Hence, the report brings politics back into its political economy by emphasising the importance of including civil society in agricultural development programs. It claims that hunger and poverty tend to be affected positively when various interest groups gain recognition at national and international levels. The factor of entitlement is a component that plays throughout various food crises and may not be so directly linked to the specific price crisis in 2008, although, if farmers’ associations had more influence and if the ‘urban consumer bias’ was less pronounced, some of the policies that led to the price hike and low incomes of farmers could have been modified or prevented.

To conclude for now, in our overview we have sketched some ingredients of the global food system that have interacted in creating a particular emergent whole, the food price (crisis) in 2008. As we have shown, some components, such as SAPs, deregulation, increasing importance of finance, liberal markets, unequal entitlements, and so forth, have been operating in the global food assemblage, since long before this particular crisis. The credit crisis in the US, specific weather patterns, altering tastes of the Chinese and Indian peoples, and rising oil prices became more recently added components interacting with the older ones and thereby creating a particular excrescence in the form of the food (price) crisis in 2008.

For MONLAR, the green revolution is part of an industrial-commercial complex that has taken over agriculture at a global scale. The overarching drive for the accumulation of capital and unbridled greed destroys the balances that are vital for a sustainable agriculture and the equitable access to food. The green revolution was actively promoted alongside the Mahaweli resettlement and irrigation scheme, and the post-1977 economic liberalisation policies. For MONLAR these go together and are detrimental to the balanced approach practiced in the ‘traditional’ and regenerative agriculture.

In their critique, Sarath and MONLAR clearly bring out that a capitalist logic of increased extraction of resources and labour underpins the green revolution as well as the global food system. Hence, they foreground the fact that the green revolution is not a mere technological fix to objective problems as most proponents would have it. Sarath agrees that the green revolution has at least temporally increased output to feed the increasing world population. A technological fix was thus born as a solution to problems which it solved partly and others which it simultaneously obscured, such as socio-economic issues of access to land and means of production, and the unequal distribution of food at the local and global scale. Indeed, we see the anti-politics machine (Ferguson 1990) at work, a process in which the authority over the definition of problems is transferred to ‘experts’ that in this case take control over the food supply by translating social and political components of food into mere technical matters, objectify politics and eliding the ideological underpinnings of the green revolution. It is clear that the analysis of Sarath Fernando and MONLAR precisely foreground the social, political, and economic aspects of such technological solutions as well as of technical policies that claim that “There Is No Alternative” (TINA, a famous exclamation of Margaret Thatcher to objectify even political decision-making and render neo-liberalism as the natural condition of mankind [George 1999]). MONLAR, moreover, connects the various fixes and policies to an overarching frame of capital accumulation and thereby elicits recurring processes that may take different shapes while coming down to one thing in the end: the drive for ever-increasing profits, which I further link explicitly to desire as an immanent force expressing itself in different formations.

This objectification of policies takes away the agency of people to model the food system in the way they want and according to democratic principles. If there is no alternative (TINA), there is no way to have an open democratic debate in which various approaches can have an
equal voice. Hence, to democratise the food system, it should be de-objectified and that is indeed what many food activists are doing by highlighting the political economy of food and its social aspects and health-related issues, such as I have shown in the discussion of the food (price) crisis of 2008. An additional step exists for some in developing the notion of food sovereignty in which people can, after having it dismissed as a mere technical matter for experts only, take the discussion back into their hands and redefine food in local ways. Food sovereignty is indeed a highly political argument to democratise food and root it in localised food systems in opposition to the international trade framework and industrial agriculture monopolised by Transnational Corporations (TNCs). A common definition used by actors such as Via Campesina is the following

“Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. It defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation. It offers a strategy to resist and dismantle the current corporate trade and food regime, and directions for food, farming, pastoral and fisheries systems determined by local producers and users. Food sovereignty prioritises local and national economies and markets and empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal - fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability. Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that guarantees just incomes to all peoples as well as the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition. It ensures that the rights to use and manage lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food. Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social and economic classes and generations.”

102 http://www.foodsovereignty.org/FOOTER/Highlights.aspx
So, we can clearly see that food sovereignty continues to focus on the national and international levels to bring food back into the hands of local producers and consumers. The human right to food (defined as an economic and social right in the UN) is an important legal reference instrument to justify the envisioned transformation of the food system supported by additional concerns about health, gender, access to land, and sustainable agriculture. MONLAR is a member of Via Campesina, which was established in Mons in Belgium in 1993 and which unites 150 member organisations in 70 countries, in its own words representing 200 million people\textsuperscript{103}. Its office shifts from country to country and continent to continent after several terms of four years. It is currently based in Jakarta where people of the SPI (Serikat Petani Indonesia or Indonesian Peasant Union) take over the tasks of Via Campesina for the time being until the head office of Via Campesina is relocated. I was struck by the amount of young people working there in contrast to many of the peasant organisations (and partly also in MONLAR) in Sri Lanka where the elder and educated people from Colombo occupy the dominant positions and often tend to engage in a top-down form of activism by ‘proselytising’ in the villages.

I had a clear example of this when visiting a farmers’ organisation nearby my fieldwork site. The head of the association was a retired teacher who had come from Colombo to promote organic modes of farming and indigenous seeds from the pre-green revolution period. He did so, not because of any personal experience in farming, but because of a nationalist inspiration. He started our interview by explaining how rice and Buddhism have gone together since the ancient times and explained that it had always been a non-killing and non-destructive form of agriculture that did not resort to spraying pesticides and insecticides. He argued for organic agriculture on the grounds that it fits a Buddhist lifestyle and argued for the reintroduction of indigenous seeds that belong to the “Sinhalese race”. He was indeed an example of the Colombo-based and urban-based proselytism of nationalists\textsuperscript{104} who have also started mobilising around organic agriculture and food, for which there is an increasing demand among urban higher classes as evidenced in the availability of such rice in high-end Arpico stores in cities. Some people of MONLAR work together with reputedly nationalist organisations, including the Jathika Hela Urumaya, JHU, or the National Heritage Party led

\textsuperscript{103} http://viacampesina.org/en/index.php/organisation-mainmenu-44
\textsuperscript{104} This was noted at other levels as well in the Workshop on “Conflict, Community and Faith” that I attended early February 2009 and that was organised by the University of Edinburgh, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of Zurich, and University of Peradeniya.
by Buddhist monks, to be able to further their ideas on organic agriculture as a means to achieve food sovereignty.

Via Campesina closely follows up on this top-down or centre-periphery form of activism implicit in some of the work of MONLAR and other membership-aspiring organisations. Top-down activism is prone to serve the agendas of the proselytising elite, rather than the interests of farmers. MONLAR agrees that it is not a mass movement such as one has in India, which we have already discussed some of the reasons for based on the analysis of Mick Moore (2008). Via Campesina indeed favours the grassroots mobilisation model in which farmers organise themselves and then go to the cities to voice their grievances in a bottom-up movement. Moreover, I argue that we see a potential danger of the concept of food sovereignty easily corrupting or flipping into a narrow nationalist instrument of action and interpretation. Protecting the local small-scale against transnational markets does not need to go together with a singularising majoritarian and nationalistic formation of organic agriculture. MONLAR tries to navigate and balance this fragile equilibrium of remaining pluralistic while collaborating with more nationalist organic food movements, of which in my impression there are many. In our historical overview, we noted how nationalism was articulated with an extensive welfarism (SLFP) and even socialism (JVP) and as such the alterglobalisation movement in Sri Lanka is largely composed by predominantly left-wing nationalists. Hence, for MONLAR it is understandable to interact with these movements in order to mobilise more resources and pressuring power to advance the agenda of an organic agriculture against the globalising industrial food system. It is all the more understandable given the general nationalist context and the historical sentiments attached to paddy cultivation, as our historical account has elicited.

To conclude for now, I have presented a general history of Sri Lanka through a political economy of food. I have presented MONLAR and its various discourses, and have contextualised its historical emergence by way of narrating a personal account of its director and some of the other activists. Finally, I illustrated how MONLAR connects to global themes and networks as well as to nationalist trends in Sri Lanka. We have thus concentrated on MONLAR in its public capacity operating at national and international scales or levels, quite in contrast with our intimate account of everyday village life, health and well-being, and rituals. As such there is a seeming gap that remains to be accounted for, which we will remedy by turning to the personal practical everyday engagements with food by these activists and thereby turning to their ‘human being’ and moving temporarily away from their ‘public
being-activist’. As such, I will tease out some of the repetitions that occur in their practical and commonsense engagements with food and that connect these activists at an intimate level to the domestic life of the villagers I discussed earlier. To do so, I will not move to their actual domestic life at home, but rather to the office life, where they live, eat, and sleep during a lot of their time. In this way, I hope to foreground the ‘activist human being’, who is all too often obfuscated in so many accounts on activism focussing on the public lives and personalities.
Everyday Life at the MONLAR Office

In what follows, I will give a description of the everyday activist life in MONLAR by way of accounting for an ‘average day’ at the office in which I employ the narrative technique of bringing together several conversations and events together into the format of a single day to render a more sensuous and human account possible.

I get off the packed bus at Rajagiriya, a suburb of Colombo, and walk down an alley where children play on the small street. The doors of the shacks are open, allowing the television sounds to escape into the alley. Women are chatting, cleaning, and washing clothes, whereas some of the men are repairing motorcycles. It is around 9 a.m. and the heat is already sweltering. I go through the iron gate and enter the premises where the offices are located, and see Ranjith reading the daily newspaper while smoking a cigarette and drinking a cup of tea. He is responsible for the management of the office and I have known him since the first time I came to MONLAR in 2004. Like several others, he sleeps in one of the two office buildings during the week in busy periods and returns to his family at quieter moments (he lives a ten-hour drive away). I sit down and talk with him. He tells me he is writing about the effects of global warming on the small-scale farmers. As I am not able to read Sinhalese, we discuss the structure of his argument and I share my opinion and suggestions. Our conversation is stopped when he is called to the phone by one of the female secretaries hired for the administrative work.

I take off my shoes and go inside to greet the secretaries in one room and then enter the IT-room where the young crowd is surfing the World Wide Web. The son of the director of MONLAR, Sisitha who speaks English very well is emailing with some of the funders (since recently he has shifted work to become the food justice coordinator at the Sri Lankan office of OXFAM Australia). He sits beside his friend, Somnath, who is editing a video on the effects of the green revolution on farmers. As recounted in the section of life stories, they entered MONLAR together and came to work for it gradually. I ask Sisitha where I could meet his father, and he brings me to the office of his father who is on the phone. I wait until he, Sarath Fernando, is finished and we warmly greet each other.

We have known each other since 2004 when he organised my MA dissertation stay upon suggestion of François Houtart whom Sarath deeply respects. François Houtart is one of the co-founders of the World Social Forum that started taking place in Porto Alegre in Brazil in 2001 as an antidote to the neoliberal focus of the World Economic Forum held every January.
in Davos. He has also set up the Tricontinental Centre at Louvain-La-Neuve in Belgium where Sarath stayed in the early 1980s. It is a centre that conducts studies and that reports on the state of North-South relations and currently includes a focus on global resistance movements. Given that François Houtart recommended me, Sarath immediately treated me with great care and respect. When introduced as an acquaintance of François Houtart to the members of Sarath’s network of political activists, I was always warmly welcomed. Indeed, the work of François Houtart is widely admired and known by many of the activists and academics as he worked in the 1970s in Sri Lanka on the relation between socialism and religion (Houtart 1974). Hence, I came into contact with a whole network of activists and academics in 2004 through François Houtart and Sarath Fernando. For my MA dissertation, he then organised my stay at the Movement for the Protection of Indigenous seeds (MPIS) where his friend, Alex, established a testing farm to re-introduce the old and indigenous varieties of paddy (parana and deshīye vī) from before the advent of the green revolution.

To return to the everyday life at the office, everybody greatly respects Sarath who is the only one who has a personal office. There, we start a long discussion on my research at the village and what I have learned so far. The fan cools me down and its wobbly movement produces the background noise to our exchange of words and sounds, which is compounded by bird sounds that reach us through the open windows. Sarath discusses the role of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) on Sri Lankan policies, such as discussed before, whereas I talk about the concerns with sorcery as related to financial greed, water supply issues, human-elephant conflicts, and the collectivity of the decision-making process in the village complicating the re-introduction of indigenous seeds varieties. Hence, in the conversation we are oscillating between several levels to which we orient ourselves. Yet, our conversation exposes the difficulty of integrating the multiple and heterogeneous aspects of these various levels and scales into a single frame of analysis, such as I am attempting throughout this monograph. Sarath asks someone of the office to prepare tea for us while we are continuing our long and interesting chat.

Meanwhile, Ranjith and a young man, who lives at the office during his studies, start preparing lunch for part of the 20 people present at the office. The members of the consumption unit cook in turns and entail most often those who make the office as their secondary home. The boundary of this unit is flexible and shifts according to the amount of people staying over and according to the intensity of campaigns. Moreover, some people cook better and they tend to cook most often and for more people as their food is generally liked.
This time it is quiet and the two moderate cooks prepare rice and a few simple curries in the way I learned from Kavith, my younger host-brother in Kiribathgama. Another person makes a whole list of the orders for those who want a take-away parcel for lunch and Sarath orders one for me as well. In Colombo, it is common to see people lining up during their lunch break to buy lunch packets, where rice and three or four curries are wrapped in plastic and in newspaper. The timing of the collection of lunch packets starts at noon and lasts until the street seller or the food stall has no more. To make sure that they still have something, many go in time to buy the packet and eat it later. When they buy their parcel at a larger restaurant, there is of course less of a time pressure than when one buys it from a regular street seller who has less stock.

The timing of the lunch also depends on the company or organisation one works for. Having worked for Practical Action, formerly Intermediate Technology Development Group (ITDG, founded by Ernst Friedrich Schumacher), I recall the lunch periods being structured at designated times. Indeed, at transnational enterprises and NGOs, work is much more determined by the notion of a separate working and leisure time, structured on the basis of the clock-time. This temporal disposition stands in stark contrast with the flexible time of farmers that is nonetheless (at least partially) structured by the weather elements and the celestial bodies. MONLAR seems to be somewhere in-between these two types of rhythms that in their specific way both determine the rhythms of food consumption, and are reinforced by it. Lunch time at MONLAR is more determinate for those who work according to fixed office hours, which includes the employees and those who do the administrative jobs. Those living at the office are more flexible in their timing and generally cook and eat their food at the office according to the more everyday and domestic rhythms as produced by food in the ‘cooking’ of life.

This food-centred rhythm moreover enables some activists to make a distinction between those that cook and those that get a parcel, to coincide with those who are respectively full-time passionate activists sacrificing and enjoying their time and those that are merely “doing a job”. Hence, again, the powerful binding and simultaneously separating dynamic of food clearly emerges in this setting. This distinction between the ‘real activists’ and the ‘job performers’ runs throughout MONLAR and also distinguishes MONLAR from more ‘professional’ NGOs, where people are alleged not to work out of passion, but rather for obtaining a good income. The tension between selfless giving and sacrifice (drawing upon the Buddhist notion of generosity as a way to escape the illusion of self), on the one hand, and the
self-interested earning of an income, on the other hand, gets articulated on the line that divides those who view MONLAR as a nine to five job or those for whom MONLAR is a second home and where they cook, share, and eat food.

The tension between MONLAR as an office and as a home is striking, as both spheres intermingle and as one sphere expands or diminishes in reach vis à vis the other throughout the day. This is in fact what this account on everyday life at the office comes down to in the end: highlighting the personal factors, engagements, orientations, and intentionalities that shape MONLAR as a specific movement-organisation while discerning to which extent it is connected and dis-connected from everyday domestic and ritual life. Of course this boundary of how much MONLAR connects itself with the village habitus is ever shifting and is produced in everyday practice. Nowadays the cooking at the office has become more important than it used to be during my visits in previous years. Observing this change, I ask Sarath why it has occurred and he gives me two main reasons. First, he mentions the financial crisis. The funding partners or donors in Europe have decreased their funding as the crisis strains their own budgets as well. As a consequence the funding of MONLAR and the wages it pays have gone down, so the employees save on their expenses, including by preparing food themselves instead of buying ready-made parcels. The second reason he mentions is that they feel that preparing and consuming home-cooked food is healthier, tastier, and fits better with their political economic convictions. Health is indeed an important element in MONLAR’s arguments against the agro-industry and the extended food chain that goes along with it leading to malnutrition among the excluded and health hazards among farmers exposed to chemical inputs. MONLAR supports direct marketing of fresh and healthy food to ensure access for all consumers. An additional reason to promote such marketing is to support the small farmers and to circumvent the middlemen who extract profit from the hard labour of these peasants. The fact that they have always promoted healthy organic food and supported the small farmers while buying food packets for lunch did feel inconsequent. Hence, to refashion themselves as morally good and consistent in both their personal and public or collective capacity, they feel it is worth it to spend time on buying fresh food and cooking it at the office in order to practice what they preach. The consequence is that the office has turned partially into a kind of Sri Lankan domestic space, even though the cooks are men, as MONLAR consists of predominantly male activists. The office cooking makes the bodies, practices, and general atmosphere of the office and its people resonate with the homey rhythms across the country. Hence, whereas the private mode of being seemed a bit
disconnected from their publicly articulated activist convictions, they now feel more comfortable with bringing that mode in resonance with their activist-being by way of a practical refashioning of the personal relationship to food. Yet, the activists still remain far off from the aspired ideal of self-sufficiency in terms of subsistence farming, with which almost none of the activists have experience with, except from a little home gardening. Instead, they remain dependent on “exploitative” market relations to obtain their food, however, preparing their own food already decreases their dependence on various other components of the food chain of processed and ready-made foods.

After lunch and our discussion, Sarath goes to a meeting with farmers’ representatives to explain the way in which national policies are determined by the International Financial Institutions (IFIs). I then go to the air-conditioned IT room where more friends have gathered to download some films from YouTube, while Sisitha and Somnath work on the international communication of MONLAR. Sisitha works on a general English pamphlet to present MONLAR to potential funders and Somnath edits a film to post on YouTube about the situation of people who are being pressured and seduced by money to leave their land for sugarcane plantations. Sisitha and I discuss the relations inside MONLAR. I posit my observation that there seem to be several cleavages running throughout the organisation. One that I have already mentioned is that between employees and fully dedicated activists, but another one seems to distinguish between a so-called young guard and an old guard, a distinction I made earlier following Wendy Espeland (1998). The significance of this distinction should be clear from the narration of the life narratives in relation to that of Sarath Fernando. Sisitha agreed that it is possible to discern these two groups, although some activists do blur this boundary. The old guard consists of Sarath, Ranjith, and a few other elder men who have been activists for decades and who seem to passionately defend (and sometimes romanticise) the subsistence-farming model as the solution to many of the present-day quandaries of pollution, destitution, and alienation. The old guard draws upon Christian, Buddhist, and Marxist ideas to criticise capitalism and its inciting drive to accumulate capital disguised under the form of economic globalisation and liberalisation. The young guard includes the people gathering in the IT room who are embracing the new technologies enabling them to have a window to the global world and multitude of activism. They deeply respect what the old guard has achieved and stick to the core of their ideas, but think it is time for a more contemporary articulation with the current alternative globalisation movement. They are for instance inspired by the Reclaim the Streets (RTS) in Great Britain and its, what
they called, “post-Marxist” or rather anarchist inspiration. At its heyday the movement of Reclaim the Streets has mobilised thousands of people to occupy streets and to turn these into Temporary Autonomous Zones (TAZs), a term coined by Hakim Bey (2002), where privatised space in the form of cars are no longer welcome. The temporary occupation of streets could then allow people to create a liminal space to enact alternative utilisations of public space and envision different societies (Jordan 2002). The young guard seems to be more oriented towards the diverse global activist world and are eager to experiment with new ideas and forms of action, whereas the old guard seems to be drawn more towards Marxist politics and a farmer-based society, which has a tinge of conservatism to it. Given that age hierarchy goes together with deferent respect for the elder in Sinhalese society, it infuses the young guard with the hesitation to openly discuss these matters. Instead, they have started their post-Marxist group, reading other works than those of Marx and Engels. Yet, this difference is not played out sharply, as both guards stand behind the ideas that mainly Sarath develops. Sarath is also less dogmatic than some of the others in his Marxism and is aware of other frames of critique, and so he plays a unifying ideological role, giving him a lot and maybe too much influence in the organisation.

Our fascinating discussion draws to a close when Lasantha, with whom I have worked at Practical Action for some time, arrives with his friends to drop by for a chat after their work. The visitors receive tea and we sit outside in the garden chatting about poems and music. Lasantha is a kind of joker who makes fun of everything in a critical way and who is the first to argue not to take oneself too seriously. He does not withhold his criticisms on MONLAR and an animated discussion ensues about the effectiveness of MONLAR and whether it is turning into an NGO in its way of being. He thus exposes two core issues that return often in the internal discussions that recurred often in my interviews as well. To summarise concisely, the first concern regarding effectiveness alludes to whether MONLAR should not be more focused on a few campaigns instead of trying to work on such wide range of topics. MONLAR indeed takes on a large variety of concerns, such as water privatisation, indigenous seeds, land policies, energy projects, post-tsunami reconstruction, environmental and health policies, and the IFIs and international trade agreements. Some within and outside the organisation claim that this weakens the ability to direct the effort and energies towards specific goals and to achieve results (e.g. stopping the sale of the phosphate deposit near Eppawela earlier where activists of MONLAR participated in the campaign). Contrastingly, others argue that, given the interlinkages of these separate issues (by way of the overarching
power of Capital), such directed focus would weaken the envisioned overall transformation of society for which the establishment of a mass movement is required. To create such wide mobilisation for change, there need to be various campaigns which are backed by different groups of people that so unite in their struggle against exploitation in the form of capital accumulation (recall the earlier comment of Sarath that issue-based movements are difficult to sustain over longer periods). However, and this brings us to the second point, to unite and mobilise people the organisation must retain a grassroots character and have a good sense of the lifeworlds of those MONLAR claims to represent and behave in a way that does not alienate the organisation from its base. This includes the leading of a noble and simple life, in which the implicit point of selfless sacrifice re-emerges, and the avoidance of becoming and behaving like an NGO. Indeed, NGOs in Sri Lanka often serve as the antipole in relation to which an organisation fashions itself as better than the other, given that people view NGOs and their employees as being self-interested and enjoying luxury. Recall in this regard the distinction made earlier between the dedicated activist and the employees that indeed resonates fairly neatly with this distinction between movement and NGO respectively.

Moreover, NGOs are also viewed with suspicion because of their dependence on foreign funding and the implicit agendas the funders may have (see for instance Goonatilake [2006], as a clear expression of this wider sentiment). The nationalist anti-NGO attitude surged since numerous cases of corruption and stories of conversion to Christianity emerged in the reconstruction aftermath of the tsunami that struck large parts of the Sri Lankan coastline on December 26, 2004. Hence, acquiring even a mere tinge of the NGO-assemblage (office workers, good wages, air-conditioning, fancy cars, foreign funding, etc.) can make one suspect, and is potentially detrimental to retaining a solid support at the grassroots level. It is a tension that many in MONLAR are aware of and seek to balance in order to have the best of two worlds. Yet, this balancing act between the selfless grassroots movement and the more professional (but ‘self-interested’) NGO is an ongoing source of self-reflection in MONLAR, a reflection in which friends from outside participate when they enter the distinctively homey atmosphere of MONLAR.

The point whether MONLAR is becoming an NGO is made with the necessary degree of joking and sharp criticisms, but the atmosphere remains friendly, jovial and kind-hearted. In fact, we all feel at ease and decide to have a little party. The employees of MONLAR have returned home and some of the other remaining employees and activists have to sleep over anyway. During our discussion, some of them have taken a shower and have changed clothes.
to wear more comfortable domestic attire. There is a clear distinction between the clothes people wear during office hours and at home. During the day, the men at the MONLAR office wear pairs of trousers or denims and long- or short-sleeved shirts even though in some official occasions they may wear an exclusive *sarong* (a skirt-like cloth wrapped around the waist), whereas the women wear *sāris* or a skirt and blouse (particularly men working at offices seem to wear the colonially introduced clothes that gender the bodies even more clearly). Given the stringent control on female sexuality, no women sleep overnight at the office and those who work at the office return home. Yet, someone who calls herself “a free woman” as a way to define her feminist allegiance joins the party with her friend until later in the night. At home, women wear a simple gown whereas men tend to wear a sarong as they do in the evening at the office as well. Hence, the changed attire is part of the co-(re)production of the domestic and leisurely atmosphere at MONLAR in the evening. Some men go to collect arrack and beer at particular shops designated for buying legal alcohol for home consumption. They buy bites to go with the drinks, as explained in the chapter on everyday life, as well as cigarettes and the fried rice to conclude the party with. When they arrive, everything is arranged and most join in drinking and talking with increasing volume edging towards the excess that bursts out in singing. Everyone has to initiate a song alternately and then gradually everybody joins in with the expanding vibration and affective resonance of voices.

It strikes me how passionate, sensitive, and often melancholic these songs sound. It is as if the singing in the evening explores the range of human emotions and potential states of being of the partygoers. The singing opens up a safe space to express one’s feelings without embarrassing other people present or emotionally straining the overall atmosphere. The personal expressions are formatted in the existing songs that are sung, and as such they buffer a direct exposure to one’s emotional life. Indeed, in my perception it is very hard and unusual in Sri Lanka to openly and explicitly express one’s emotions or feelings in front of a group. Hence, the emotional import of the singing seems to provide an outlet for personal feelings bubbling up under influence of alcohol and as such being institutionalised as part of the drinking event. The loosening of personal energies thus remains structured in its recurrent musical form throughout nearly all the parties I have attended. It is as if the unsaid can be expressed without being outspoken through the medium of tonal vibrations and music. The alcoholic event is a space of excess and for the expression of forces that escape verbalisation and cognitive rendering of life and the world in the dominant Buddhist-informed culture as well as in the political discourses of activists. The release and the escape during the moment
of excess gradually reterritorialises in eating the fried rice that concludes the evening. Some return home and everybody goes to sleep.

I have sketched a so-called average day in a narrative technique that I find heuristic to introduce the atmosphere at the office of MONLAR in Colombo. It should be clear that this drinking and party atmosphere does not happen every evening, and that sometimes the office is busier when many attend meetings than other times when the activists and employees return home to, for instance, participate in life-cycle rites. The intensity of the activists’ resonating energies in the office waxes and wanes, both in the political and personal registers that merge in office-life. Hospitality and domesticity are indeed entwined with activism, selfless sacrifice and effort, and office work. Indeed, when asked about the specificity of MONLAR in contrast to many other organisations where Lasantha has worked, he immediately mentioned MONLAR’s homey feeling where everybody is welcome at all times. Somnath agreed and specified: “It is not an office, it is a home. The people are like a family. Also visitors come at anytime and from everywhere. When they stay here, we learn from them as they bring their ideas with them.” MONLAR itself becomes an assemblage of these heterogeneous components that shape the organisation, although not always in a harmonious way, such as clarified in the cleavages or tensions between NGO-components and aspects of activist practices that run through the movement-organisation.

It should be clear from this everyday account that we have moved away from the general focus on discourses and activist practices in MONLAR’s capacity as an activist organisation in the public and political sphere and that we have focused on the ways of being inasmuch these activists are ordinary people like any other Sri Lankan. This account shows that in their personal being, they share aspects in their modes of being or habitus with the ways in which people lead and craft their lives in villages and at home. As such, the activists are connected at the personal level with the people they claim to represent. Examples include: the hospitality to any passers-by, taking off one’s shoes upon entry, flexible timings, cooking lunch at the office kitchen, and eating and sharing it in similar orders as described earlier, sleeping over, and at times having a party with (generally) male friends involving the habitual making of music and singing. In some occasions people who have no place to stay for a while can find temporary shelter at MONLAR without necessarily having to work for the organisation. In fact, that is how some of the very active activists have gradually become involved in MONLAR. This organisation of office life is quite different from the professionalised and more ‘office-ial’ atmosphere prevalent at larger NGOs such as Practical Action, where there
is a reception and where office hours are respected, even though people work overtime. Yet, in MONLAR, this is not viewed as being overtime, but rather part of their ongoing selfless effort to change the world. Being evaluated positively, some note, however, that this relaxed attitude sometimes hinders concentration and effective effort in getting a lot of work done in the time span of a day. Hence, the question of domesticity of the office life enters in a tension with professionalism as exemplified by NGOs and revolving around the issue of effectiveness that I have touched upon earlier.

I have included this discussion of the very day-to-day personal office life to try to integrate this intimate level into our account of the activist articulation of food, as their personal engagement with food makes the activists as human as everybody else. I have furthermore shown how their everyday procurement and preparation shapes their being and becomes an important point around which they refashion themselves as morally consistent with their convictions and ideals. Moreover, as part of the conclusion of this section, I also argue that these personal engagements are not only a consequence of their ideals, but that these also shape their activist being and convictions that are thus grounded in their personal experiences and lifeworlds. The practical and personal level of engagements with food and domestic life, which shapes and shows the activists as they are, is something that is often left out of the purview in the analysis of activism where frames (Snow 2004), repertoires of action (Della Porta & Diani 1999, Tilly 1978), resource mobilisation (Goodwin & Jasper 2003), and organisational dynamics (Edelman 2005) tend to take precedence. It moreover shows the tensions that activists grapple with in trying to do what they advocate, as in our earlier example of cooking at the office. It is a tension that recurs in other forms as well, such as in the case of Sarath travelling around the world to campaign about the detrimental effects of climate change on small-scale farmers. Hence, this personal level is a politically and morally pressing issue in the everyday lives of activists, but often left out of scrutiny. Moreover, these personal aspects, such as charisma, ways of behaving in a culturally familiar mode, and hospitality are factors that can make or break the success of public figures such as MONLAR as an organisation or of Sarath as its public director.

Now that we are ready in our taking stock of the components that inter-act in the food assemblage and that create its activist articulation in mostly political economic terms, we can start analysing the various dynamics that underpin this articulation.
The Analysis of the Dynamics of the Activist Articulation of Food by MONLAR

Taking stock of the ingredients of the activist articulation of food, in which certain components are connected in specific ways, we have seen that food is related to national and international levels and is bundled into large-scale molar categories, such as markets and statistics of populations. Indeed, MONLAR explicitly talks about the increased food prices, national policies, IFIs, nutritional statistics, and the global human right to food. Hence, it articulates food not in terms of a specific meal in a domestic or ritual context but about bulks or populations of food bundled in these figures and concepts of markets and policies that operate at a more abstract level than does the sensorial regeneration of life by cooking food. Nonetheless, this differentiated articulation of the food assemblage does exhibit resonances or repetitions of the core concerns that people engage with through food in everyday, medical, and ritual life. Indeed food is a “matter of concern” (Latour 2005:114-120, italics mine) that combines concerns of insecurity (access to food), desire (capital accumulation), and regeneration (regenerative agriculture) around which MONLAR mobilises member organisations and peasants to articulate (and connect) food with national and international levels of economic and political justice and sovereignty. Let us now explore in a comparative way the food-revolving concerns that are shared, by looking at the resonances and repetitions between ritual action and activism. We will also discuss the differentiation in the articulations of food to tease out what is specific about the dynamics of the activist articulation of food.

Resonances Between MONLAR’s Activism and the Work of a Kapurāla

Recall the Sātuwe rite in which the kapurāla cut the bonds between an afflicted family and pretas following a malicious spell cast by a jealous family member performing a preta bandana. It was a story that clearly revolved around forms of excessive desire, such as envy, and in which the factishised formations of greed, the pretas, came to take the lead. By performing this rite, the afflicted family members took the situation and capacity to act with intentionality back into their hands so that they would no longer be captivated by a craving and needy desire but instead be enlivened by a more balanced and creative desire as part of their regained agency and well-being. The kapurāla played the important role of diagnosing the situation and in working out the solution and executing it. We could see the work of MONLAR entailing a repetition of what the kapurāla does, but to explore this connection
MONLAR critiques the predominant drive to accumulate capital, spurred by excessive desire (imbued in a Foucaultian way into the subjectivities of Hobbesian competing individuals). This desire does not acquire the factishised formation of pretas, but rather of the profit-maximising entrepreneurs and craving consumers who find a fertile breeding ground in the many neoliberal development reforms. In Sri Lanka this entailed the introduction of the green revolution allowing for more profits and outputs, the acceleration of the Mahaweli development scheme funded by the World Bank, and the opening of the post-1977 economy. Neoliberal development spurs in the eyes of several kapurālas and MONLAR the cultivation of excessive desire, often by way of the extravagant and salvational promises inherent in it.

By drawing attention to desire that motivates both development of the neoliberal economy and critiques against it, we can further eliciting the Weberian religious underpinnings of neoliberal capitalism as a dominant development model. Indeed, Max Weber (1989) showed us long ago that scientific-industrial progress, economic development, and its so-called rational premises are entangled with religious notions of “Piety, Calling, and Salvation”. The notion of “millennial capitalism” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2001) is thus not as new as it may seem, but its full force has come to the foreground with the increased pull of neoliberalism. The salvationism is closely connected with the issue of desire that is predominantly defined in terms of lack at personal and collective levels. For instance, it is this lack of fulfilment and deficiency that allows the category of “Third World” to emerge as the West’s Other (Escobar 1995:2-8). The West then emerges as the pinnacle of human evolution to which the Third World mirrors itself and models its desires and aspirations, imbuing itself with lack, often expressed in the objectifying terminology of “need”. Marshall Sahlins (1972, 1996) has meticulously explored the role of the notion of human need in shaping an economy that is founded on the assumptions of scarcity and continuous growth. He (1996) traces this Judeo-Christian approach to humanity as being in a state of lack back to the Fall of Man. This engrained feeling of lack translates itself into the manufacturing of the economic subject with its accumulative drives, as entrepreneurs or as consumers, and related at larger scale, the salvational urge to ‘rescue’ the so-called needy and underdeveloped people of the Third World through development. As seen earlier, Buddhism likewise has an account of the Fall, wherein beings have regressed into the degenerated state of humanity due to their desire, cravings, and greed that continue to impregnate the human state of lack (Collins 1993).
have even seen that elephants are not free from this either. In our theoretical discussion, I have shown that Buddhism is very concerned with numerous forms of desire of which tanha (greed) is a crucial element in the Dependent Origination or Conditioned Arising of life and suffering (paticca-samuppāda or the Buddhist version of a theory of becoming). It turns desire into an almost metaphysical principle of existence. The centrality of desire also clearly emerged from our discussion of funerary rites that attempt to avoid the dead turning into these hungry and greedy pretas. Hence, both Christian and Buddhist ontologies provide in their shared view on human beings as prone to greed and their degenerate state, a ground (as in the Hobbesian view on human beings as competitive) for transforming desire into economic laws of human need and competition epitomised in the accumulation of capital. Hence, the salvational and millennial nature of current neoliberal economies holds no surprise, as such economics entail the promise of the fulfilment of our existential lack through magical formulae, such as those apparent in pyramid schemes, hedge funds, amulet sale for success, and the belief that capital can reproduce itself (like plants it ‘grows’) in stock markets without a material base (Comaroff & Comaroff 2001:19-24). In Sri Lanka, the investment in large-scale projects seems to hold the promise of a solution to all its problems (including the ethnic conflict) in a similar millennial style. Indeed, the spectral economy bears in its excessive promises, aspirations, dreams, and virtuality similar properties as pretas: invisible but having real effects in the lives of people.

Yet, even though everybody seems enraptured by the salvational promise that will solve the feeling of existential and economic lack, Sarath Fernando notes that half of the world population is excluded from this dream. The current mode of farming pushes people out of farming because of the increasing debts and decreasing fertility of lands. This destitution combined with the exaggerated promises of great earnings and consumerist heavens in cities like Dubai clearly incarcerates many people into a dream, which only a few can achieve. Many housemaids, labourers, migrant workers, or unemployed people are kept mesmerised by fairy tales of pending wealth, and so remain incarcerated to these dreams while they experience the harsh realities of making ends meet in the shanty houses they live in. Just as the afflicted family was tied to the preta’s influence, these entrepreneurs or consumers-to-be are bound by spectral aspirations and desires that divest them of their ability to deal with desire in a balanced way and to lead a fulfilling life. Hence, we see the recurring dynamics of desire unravelling between the preta-bound person and the manufactured and incarcerated economic subject (entrepreneur or consumer).
Within this gap between inflated aspirations and dire realities, magical practices aimed at the achievement of success and well-being thrive. As stated by Jean and John Comaroff (2001:27):

“As the connections between means and ends become more opaque, more distended, more mysterious, the occult becomes an ever more appropriate, semantically saturated metaphor for our times ... But, we insist, occult economies are not reducible to the symbolic, the figurative, or the allegorical. Magic is, everywhere, the science of the concrete, aimed at making sense and acting upon the world."

It is within this context and multiple connections that we can understand the recurring comments of kapurālas in my interviews of perceiving an increase of pretas and preta-related afflictions. They linked this increase to the liberalisation of the economy in 1977 and its corresponding increased cultivation of want. The perceived rise of pretas is thus a culturally familiar way of making sense of rapid changing economy of desire that incites desire by extravagant promises of millennial capitalism. Indeed, the socially engaged Buddhist reading or interpretation of the neoliberal economic system as based on the cultivation of want and as being institutionalised in consumerism and corporate capitalism (Loy 1999) has thus been reiterated by these kapurālas. By becoming profit makers and consumers, people learn to desire and crave ever more, thereby inciting and spreading envy in the social relationships between people, such as in the case of the afflicted family. An additional danger of this ongoing inculcation of these desiring dispositions in the manufacturing of the economic subject entails the increased risk of people becoming insatiable ghosts themselves after death. Hence, the changing economy is evaluated through the idioms of pretas to elicit its widespread cultivation of desire that gets out of balance, causing suffering for many and endangering the fragile regeneration of life. Many of the rituals that seek to heal such desire-related afflictions seem to take on additional importance throughout various socio-economic classes, both in villages and in Colombo, as people experience anxieties in face of these numerous changes in society (Kapferer 1997:27-30, Gombrich & Obeyeskere 1988). Rituals that seek to appease the malicious effects are on the rise in the attempt to regain agency amidst this unsettling and unheimlich transformation that destabilises the balances in desire conducive to a continuation and regeneration of life for all and not the happy few.
So, the factishisation of desire, in which it is fabricated and emerging from social relations while exerting real effects (Taussig 2010:5, Latour 2010), acquires different shapes, whether desire forms into *pretas* or the economic law of human need and capital accumulation. Hence, the repetition of desire in its articulated differences connects ritual action and social activism in several ways and particularly in their shared aspiration for a life-sustaining and life-regenerating balance of desire to avoid precariousness in life. In this way, we can understand how the work of MONLAR is not all too different from that of *kapurāla* even though the expressions of their work may seem radically different.

We can now, after this general detour to economic change and neoliberal developments from the perspective of desire, turn to MONLAR itself. As said earlier, MONLAR criticises the accumulation of capital and the unbridled drive for profit making that is embodied in the current neoliberal economy and acquires different expressions and formations in terms of the green revolution, liberalisation of the food market, and the industrial innovations that bring the natural resources into the hands of a few monopolies. The excessive desire expresses itself in a one-way aggressive and selfish extraction and abstraction of natural resources, labour, and capital, in which the consumer and entrepreneur remain captured. MONLAR and Sarath view all this as being related to the overarching profit logic that I further link to the issue of desire (and thus also the *pretas* and work of *kapurālas*) here. In critiquing this logic, MONLAR seeks to destroy its incarcerating power, in order to liberate people to regain their creative agency. Hence, MONLAR seeks to influence policies in such a way that the free space for alternatives to the neoliberal economy and development is made accessible again, just as the path to nirvana is opened to those liberated from the *preta bandana*. This is done by way of proposing a balanced approach (Sarath explicitly refers to the importance of maintaining balances in Ayurveda) to desire in which one-way extraction is bent towards a reciprocal relationship of give and take that encompasses not only human beings but also the environment and non-human beings (such is evident in regular engagements with deities, animals, the earth). In MONLAR’s concern for the environment to become an eternal spring of life again, desire has to be re-balanced and human beings have to be liberated from the extractive logic. This is done by training people in the art of regenerative agriculture and as such the notion of food sovereignty gets an added value on top of the political in the sense of liberating oneself from the *preta*-like bounds of a profit- and extraction-oriented economy. Regenerative agriculture indeed draws upon agro-forestry in which forests maintain their ‘sovereign’ or independent sustenance by feeding the humus top soil with their falling leaves,
which in turn feed the trees in a cycle of endless reciprocity (recall our discussion of “resource”). Hence, the promotion of regenerative agriculture draws heavily on a give and take relationship in which the earth is not fed with ‘burning’ aggressive fertilisers but instead with organic manure such that balance and regeneration is enabled. Hence both MONLAR’s activism and the ritual action share the aspiration to restore the balance of desire as an antidote to insatiable hunger and ever-increasing want. Indeed, the actions against industrial agriculture and agri-businesses and the proposition of a regenerative agriculture are by way of a rebalancing of desire connected to the work of a kapurāla that seeks to free afflicted people from the bonds spun by pretas.

MONLAR and kapurālas also envisage similar results and transformations for the better by way of appeasing excessive formations of desire. MONLAR seeks to decrease economic insecurity by redistributing riches. It moreover seeks to improve the health conditions by divesting agriculture from poisonous chemical substances (see for instance the discussion on whether pesticides are responsible for the large incidence of renal failure among farmers living in the Dry Zone of the North-Central Province [Bandara 2007, Van Der Hoek et al. 1998]) and by securing equitable access to food so as to combat malnutrition. The Sātuwe rite as discussed also had the aim of restoring the afflicted peoples’ control over their spending drives to improve their economic situation as well as to heal the health problems inflicted by the pretas. We have not focused on food in this description, but it is necessary to recall that food is the centripetal force in this ritual, the force through which this transformative action is undertaken. Likewise does MONLAR’s critique of accumulation of capital and greed operate by offering a critique of the global food system and a practical alternative that involves cultivating food according to the balanced approach of regenerative agriculture.

To conclude, we see the concern recurring in both ritual and activism that excessive desire creates precariousness and insecurity among many, and that it hinders the continuation and regeneration of a good life. The re-balancing of desire by both tropes of action combined decreases insecurity and allows people to sustain life in a fulfilling and creative way to achieve well-being and even nirvana. Hence, we see how the concerns are recurrent and often condensed in the matter of food (which I will discuss more soon) in collaboration with which transformative action is performed. Yet, as our taking stock of the elements of the activist articulation of food has shown, there is a clear differentiation in the ways in which food and its entangled concerns are talked about and approached. Let us now turn to this differentiation in which the large-scale approach and abstraction are central.
An Analysis of Scale and Abstractions

I have shown earlier how the activists of MONLAR talk about the impact of IFIs on national agricultural policies, food prices, and nutritional statistics. Throughout this chapter, I have approached food through the categories of political economy (e.g. inputs, outputs, land, labour, and capital) as these are the type of categories with which MONLAR often engages in its discourses. These concepts are of course not neutral and imply an orientation to particular higher levels and larger scales that such approach reinforces at the cost of the more intimate and local aspects that I have foregrounded in the previous chapters. In what follows, I will flesh out the aspect of scale and analyse it in more detail, as it is of crucial importance in the common political and activist articulation of food.

When describing the ritual boiling of coconut milk, I am actually referring to one or a few coconuts that people break to make milk to perform the rite. When MONLAR discusses coconuts (which, oddly it rarely does), it discusses village-plantation relationships, the national and international coconut markets, and the relationships with local elites. As such, MONLAR does not talk of the actual coconut in personal experience, but rather of the coconut as bulks or populations dwelling in larger regional, national, and international levels or scales. In general parlance, a population refers to a collection of people united by way of a shared property. For instance, the population of Sri Lanka collects around 20 million people that are united by way of their citizenship of the state Sri Lanka. Hence, a population entails a bulk of human beings with some common and different properties, which then can be grouped accordingly and of which averages or trends can be measured statistically in order to make governance possible at larger levels. Yet, these broad categorisations do not only measure an external reality, but also shape it (recall our theoretical discussion about the measuring apparatus according to Karen Barad [2007]). For instance, the categorisation of people according to race, caste, or classes do further shape the composition of society, as people will make efforts to belong to a certain category to obtain benefits or for other reasons. Thereby they bring these categories into being more forcefully. Moreover, such categorisations shape subjectivities and practices in a Foucaultian way as people internalise and embody the comportments related to these categories, thus making these large-scale categories even more powerful, rigid, and molar. The establishment of broad trends and categories enables governmentality over large groups of peoples and larger territories, facilitating policy-making pertaining to these groups and territories at such grand scales. Hence, we move from the intimate scale or level to an extended scale to which policy-making orients itself, and thus
also shapes and reinforces. In the act of large-scale categorisation, the notion of population becomes a powerful tool for policies that make and reinforce such large and general scale at the level of which populations make sense. Hence, by bundling people into groups (e.g. states), policies are making the particular scales to which these policies are oriented, in a process that I term as scale-making. Yet, in noting the utilisation of “population” as an element of scale-making, I do not only refer to a collection of human beings, but following Manuel DeLanda (2006:16-17), I rather refer to the collection of multi-species entities with their heterogeneous recurring aspects and processes. To return to the population of coconuts, this population involves large bulks of coconuts transported by trucks and noted down in national and international statistics and customs, thereby reinforcing these national and international levels in the policy-making that bases itself on this particular-level of information. In such large-scale macro-approach, the trucks, containers, capitalist logic, plantations, national and international policy documents, and trade relations then become part of the coconut assemblage that turns into a population.

In its activist articulation critiquing national and transnational food systems and policies, MONLAR likewise enacts a movement of food from the intimate towards the collective, public, political, and economic levels at national and international scales, thereby performing a scale-making dynamic that transforms the assemblage of food. Indeed, the matter of food becomes articulated with and bundled into populations and bulks, general statistics, prices, trends, and indexes as well as with more generalising concepts, such as capital accumulation, the human right to food, poverty eradication and so forth. MONLAR’s articulation of food thus entails a process of extraction and abstraction similar to the process conducted by the actors it critiques, and oriented to the same levels in which these actors operate. This abstraction takes place in the sense that food is divested from its intimate and specific connections to human beings and connected to abstract entities such as markets, consumers, producers, and commodities such that food turns abstract and becomes moveable across different settings. For instance, the coconut can be extracted from Sri Lanka and traded with Germany, becoming divested of its world-regenerating capacity that it has in Sri Lankan ritual. In fact, MONLAR does something similar by articulating food with such general abstract indexes and price evolutions (which are not abstract to the person having to pay for a specific coconut of course—but then what is occurring is a re-articulation with concrete, personal, and local experiences). The statistical mean, for instance, tells something of the population of an entity, but tells nothing about the complexity of lived realities. So,
MONLAR performs a similar abstraction on food by likewise articulating it with national tendencies, policies, and power relations as well as by relating it to global political trends and organisations (UN, IMF, WTO), as they impinge through to the boomerang dynamic on national policies. The concept of food sovereignty could potentially launch another process of scale-making, bringing back food to a more local level of small-scale agriculture. Yet, being proposed at international forums and oriented towards this transnational scale, it remains caught up in that level through arguments for “the people’s right to define their food and agriculture” (note that a notion of territorial integrity is implicitly present in this formulation). To sum up, by articulating food in these broad political economic terms in relation to larger geographical areas, MONLAR’s formulation of food sovereignty gets caught up in a similar political language that focuses on a corresponding large scale that is abstract for many villagers.

The *scale-making* that bundles food into such a large-scale population is the first sub-dynamic I discern as part of the overall dynamic of abstraction that MONLAR performs in its activist articulation of food and entwined concerns of anxiety or insecurity, desire, and regeneration. There are two additional sub-dynamics of this abstraction that go together with scale-making: generalisation and reductionism. Let us now turn to the aspect of generalisation.

Bundling the various experiences, components, and populations of food into broad categories, MONLAR also performs a generalisation on food and speaks about it in rather vague terms. The basic categories of MONLAR’s political economic approach to agriculture involve concepts such as inputs, outputs, land, labour, and capital. In fact MONLAR singles out Capital as the ‘father’ in its Marxist analysis, such as was clear in a quote I already presented earlier: “The plans pushed by global capital to capture, take control over world’s natural resources and enslave the whole of human kind for the purpose of unceasing and limitless accumulation of capital obviously threaten the very survival of both.”

Capital is in this way a very broad and general category, constructed as a population of several enterprises, CEO’s, buildings, particular power relations, draft documents, and so forth. Latour (2005) and DeLanda (2006) critique such general entities in that they can entail anything and nothing, and so allow for tautological reasoning, in which the social explains the social, recurrent in social sciences as well. A generalised approach to food is handy as a shortcut, but the detailed

105 http://www.oocities.org/monlarslk/publications/Agriculture/View_on_Sustainable_Development_in_Agriculture_2006.pdf
account of the components remains ever necessary as there is seems to be a relentless tendency to become attracted to the higher levels of abstraction and generalisation in political, economic, and scientific thinking. It is exactly the potential strength of anthropology and the assemblage or ANT-approach to keep emphasising the importance of remaining sensitive to the molecular minutiae of the crafting of lives by ordinary people in a multi-species world. Likewise, I have explained the diversity of desire as a population of various recurring components, feelings, and dynamics (e.g. creative and destructive), while using the generic term as a shortcut as to be able to make more generalising and comparative statements about desire in everyday, ritual, and political life in Sri Lanka—statements that of course lose out on the multiplicity that I have tried to tease out in the detailed descriptions of the rites, the life around the hearth, and at the MONLAR office. So, I am not as allergic to broad categorisations as Latour sometimes seems to be, however with the caveat that such concepts are always heterogeneous populations that generalise and render abstract the lived realities of people that I also render present in my discourse. To return to MONLAR’s generalisation, it performs this second sub-dynamic of abstraction (after scale-making) by predominantly critiquing agri-business that extracts resources and capital from labour and nature, thereby destroying its regenerative capacity, and does so driven by profit. MONLAR indeed focuses predominantly on the abstract and general notion of capital accumulation in which capital in its formation into entrepreneurs and consumers are like pretas craving endlessly. As we have seen, MONLAR connects this general trend of profit-making and its critique with the aspects of extraction, the higher principles of human rights, and dignity, health, and care for the environment. It also connects capital with other trends and concepts that are equally general, such as globalisation, neoliberalism, development, and oppression. Indeed, food becomes articulated with these generalising categories and trends, and as such food becomes expressed in these same terms, such as in prices, legal frameworks, the food market, or the human right to food. I will later return to the issue of what this generalisation does, but suffice to state for now that as these concepts are vague, they mean different things to different people and as such allow people from a different background to align their frame and context from which they potentially mobilise in their common identification (Snow 2001). It is a process in which a population is established and brought together by this orienting conceptual frame that abstracts a recurring aspect and brings it to a higher level of generality to which a widening population looks up to position themselves vis à vis this one particular property. The higher this trait is brought to a level of generality, the wider its potential is to reach and include a wider range of people in their identification as a group. In this way, MONLAR attempts mass
mobilisation of farmers that suffer relations of exploitation by Capital. Of course, if the concept or frame of mobilisation gets too abstract or emptied out, the mobilisation may fail when too many people no longer feel any resonance with some of the abstracted and generalised properties they otherwise would recognise within themselves. To conclude for now, it is clear that the sub-dynamic of generalisation is entangled with the scale-making as part of the overall abstraction that occurs in the activist articulation of food in mostly political economic terms.

The final and closely related sub-dynamic of the abstraction performed in the activist articulation of food is that of reductionism. The multiplicity of the ways in which people craft their everyday lives, along with the diverse experiences it generates, is bundled into more general themes and trends at higher levels. As such, the multiplicity of local practices gets reduced in order to become manageable for higher-level discussions and policy-making that span large geographical areas and populations of whatever kind. For instance, the local-level variations of destitution and hunger are impossible to discuss in all detail at a UN meeting. The creation of poverty lines and nutritional standards forges populations that facilitates such scale-lifting and -making of food on the global level, enabling global governmentality. Indeed, such standardisation enables communication across large populations and spaces, but easily loses touch with the basic and grounded realities and experiences that are equally important in the lives of human beings. In MONLAR’s work we see that the multiplicity of food likewise gets reduced to the general categories of nutrition, human rights, inputs, outputs, land, labour, capital, and markets in which food is stripped from its intimate and sensorial components. This is of course related to political economic nature of the work of MONLAR and its raison d’être as a mobilising organisation that orients itself to the political level to influence policy-making.

We will soon embark on explanations as to why MONLAR performs this work of abstraction on food in its activist articulation, but I need to first highlight a seemingly contradictory aspect in my account. I state that MONLAR performs an abstraction on food by bringing it to higher scales, bundling it into populations, and so generalising and reducing its multiplicity and complexity. Yet, its focus on nutrition at times would seem to be going into another direction; that of extreme detail. The focus on the amount of calories, proteins, and vitamins descends into a very small-scale level within food. From the perspective of these medically-discerned components, the food entity of banana or rice is already situated at a larger level. Hence, food becomes divided into these nutritional components and so food gets also
abstracted from its immediate sensorial experience, but by seemingly moving towards a smaller scale. But, in fact this level of detail enables precisely new populations to be made from these bulks of proteins, calories, and vitamins that are brought to national and international policy levels. In this way a varied food intake across the world can be standardised, reduced, and compared across human populations for reasons of governing populations and their health, in what Foucault (Senellart 2010) termed biopolitics. Hence, this descent into the detail of food counter-intuitively enables a higher-scale approach to food at a global level while likewise obfuscating the diversity of food practices around the world.

Let us now examine reasons as to why MONLAR performs this dynamic of abstraction and its three sub-dynamics: scale-making, generalisation, and reductionism, and discern additional processes that are involved in creating the specific activist articulation of food in political economic terms.

_Dynamics Involved in the Differentiated Activist Articulation of Food_

We have seen that MONLAR works at two ‘fronts’. First, it aims at the policy level that it seeks to influence by its advocacy work. Second, it tries to build awareness among people affected by these policies and trains them in the alternative of regenerative agriculture as a way of liberation. Let us start with the latter issue of mobilisation as I have already touched upon this.

By formulating food and related concerns in more abstract and general terms, people with variegated experiences coming from different lifeworlds can vaguely recognise some of their own personal concerns, which they project onto these general categories or explanations, and with which they can identify. In this resonance, certain people who are targeted by MONLAR can articulate their experience with its discourse, and become mobilised and triggered into action. By formulating the concerns of the ‘target people’ or constituency, MONLAR allows a wider mobilisation of people that it claims to represent and the establishment of diversified activist alliances. All these actors become united in their positioning towards these general trends and analyses that MONLAR formulates. Hence, in order not to lose out on people and to avoid a breakaway faction from emerging, the generalisation should not become of a too abstract and high-level generality, as the possibilities of positioning may widen to the extent that it can no longer hold people together, motivated, and mobilised. Moreover, in a
generalising discourse, MONLAR may lose touch or resonance with the properties of the population the activists seek to mobilise in bringing about the constituency’s allegiance and identification with the cause, and in that case more people would divest their energies from the campaign and drop out. Indeed, MONLAR and many activists face a constant challenge of oscillating between the general and the specific level of articulation as well as between the intimate, local, national, and international scales while trying to avoid losing touch with either those they claim to represent or with the large-scale phenomena that impinge on the former’s lives. Yet these IFIs are as invisible as deities to many villagers, but unlike deities to which they appeal directly, these global agencies seem even more distant and abstract. Both, however, exert real effects in the lived experience of villagers. Whereas spirit priests are specialised in mediating relationships between villagers and deities, MONLAR faces the task of explaining the effects of the invisible global bodies on the lives of farming villagers in simple terms. MONLAR has already done considerable work in making the effects of these IFIs visible and in bringing these onto the agenda of other organisations, but faces a great difficulty in articulating these bodies with the personal lives of farmers. The re-connection of the abstract large scale of food with the local and intimate levels seems difficult. I recall one instance where Sarath was having a two-hour talk about the green revolution, which he connected with the role of IFIs by way of their funding programs. When he stopped, the first question from the public came from a woman who wanted to know whether MONLAR could help her in obtaining a well. It is reminiscent of a general attitude towards NGO-like organisations as donors, but also illustrates the practical level of concerns that these farmers are engaged with as well. Indeed, abstraction can forge connections or articulate phenomena in larger trends and with actors at higher levels and across larger distances, but can simultaneously alienate activists from their constituency they claim. MONLAR faces on ongoing oscillation between scales so as to integrate these into their work, but as mentioned earlier, the pull factor of the higher scale is big and lures MONLAR, like many others, into an orientation towards the national and international scale. The more people articulate food with these levels, the more impersonal Foucaultian power this articulation acquires and as such gradually sucks activists, scientists, and politicians towards this higher and larger scale of food. It is here that anthropologists can play the crucial role of highlighting food’s intimate, sensorial, and relational fundamentality at both local and global levels.

The upward alienating pull is further reinforced by way of the boomerang dynamic with which MONLAR engages in its advocacy work. MONLAR forges links with international
organisations and funders, and participates at global events such as the World Social Forum to gain leverage to influence both international and national policies. Indeed, national policy-making can be influenced by pressing changes at higher levels as an international activist coalition—for instance, to renegotiate the role of IFIs or by influencing UN policy-making that impinge on the policies of the national scale. To forge such alliances, it is required not to speak in very specific and localised categories, but indeed in terms of broader trends, statistics, and averages in a standardised (reductionist) language (mostly in English) so that the cross-country and cross-cultural differences can be made commensurate at global level so as to craft agreements. Hence, local-level and variable concerns have to be translated into the more abstract, general, reductionist language that serves as a standard metric to commensurate the multiplicity into a specific language where vague concepts such as sustainability, globalisation, human rights, poverty eradication, and neoliberalism prosper. This language comes to shape the way in which MONLAR approaches and articulates food in such popular political economic terms at these forums and levels, thereby reinforcing this particular articulation of food, abstracting it from its sensorial, experiential, and intimate aspects.

This translation of food onto the higher levels is moreover related to the aesthetics of the network in which MONLAR finds itself and according to which MONLAR translates its concerns towards the language and categories of the funders or the organisations with which it links up. With regard to its membership of Via Campesina, MONLAR frames its own discourse in the concept of food sovereignty that unites other organisations under Via Campesina as well. In the case of funding relations, the translation is more based on the premises and metric established by the actor in the powerful position, generally the donors. Their logical frameworks and documents already have their categories ready on the basis of which the application for funding by MONLAR is evaluated, including focal points of attention, such as sustainability, gender, and empowerment. MONLAR knows this standard and international donor language and translates and moulds the diversity of experiences of the people it works with into these pre-given categories that serve as the metric of evaluation. Indeed, Annelise Riles (2001) has powerfully shown the power of such ‘objective’ aesthetics that in fact aid in turning development work into an anti-politics and anti-multiplicity machine, hence the machine of the mechanic type and not of the creative type such as I use it in my conceptualisation of the neologism of the “machinic assemblage”.

To sum up for now, we see that MONLAR oscillates between local-level farmers that it seeks to mobilise, on the one hand, and the international and national levels of campaigns, alliance-
building, and policy advocacy, on the other. The upward pull of the higher scales, where power is concentrated, as most people try to merge their approaches and comportments to the ways that have currency at that level, explains why MONLAR performs this abstraction on food in its activist articulation. The translation it performs towards the levels to which its discourses and arguments are oriented, is necessary as the actors dwelling these higher levels should be able to understand the locally-emerging concerns of the activists. Moreover, the re-translation to the local level involves gaps that occur in the flows of information that translations necessarily entail and that form a challenge for MONLAR as it seeks to explain these higher levels to the people it seeks to sensitize. While oscillating among these different scales, it is difficult to remain in touch with the ground level the activists seek to represent given the pull force of the higher levels, particularly as political and funding power are situated there and awarded to them. Indeed, the oscillation is very complex given that, just as the translation to lower levels is not evident, the local sensibilities of food are not easily translated at even national and international levels. For instance, the way to deal with the excessive desires of hungry ghosts by way of locally embedded and connected foods (and not pizzas for instance, as they are still mobile abstract foods circulating over the globe) in the face of economic globalisation would not make sense as a concern to many politicians at a UN meeting nor at the World Social Forum. Indeed, the activists face an ongoing tension between translation and alienation that can be part of the abstraction of food or its local re-articulation, but it is a task they face if they wish to make true the claim of giving a voice to those they claim to represent.

On top of the dynamics involved in the mobilisation of farmers and in political advocacy work, the abstract articulation of food in mostly familiar political economic terms, categories, and trends is also related to the raison d’être of MONLAR as an organisation that seeks access to the political field in order to influence policy transformations. Hence, MONLAR does not only have to translate and articulate its concerns in a language commensurate to a higher level, but even more, it has to articulate its food- and agriculture-related concerns into a political economic language and craft its arguments according to the rules by which the political field functions. Thereby, when voicing its concerns and arguing for a change, it has to draw upon certain sources of justification grounded in certain orders of worth (Boltanski & Thévenot 2006) that have currency in the political field and so must adopt the modes of argumentation that are recurrent there. Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot discern six orders of worth that gain predominance in particular sectors of society or worlds: the inspired world,
the domestic world, the world of fame, the civic world, the market world, and the industrial world.

In an argument, the parties can draw upon a combination of these related orders of worth or sources of inspiration or justification. The religious sources are of the inspired world, whereas the argument of age-old experience derives from the domestic world of hierarchical relations (e.g. saying that someone should accept somebody’s argument given his authority or age). The civic world establishes procedures common to all and involves the common good (e.g. food policies have to change given that it is a human right to all), whereas fame refers to personal attributes and reputation. The market world refers to the market relations of supply and demand, and qualification of objects that get desired. And, finally, the industrial worth bases itself in scientific methods and technological objects. Later, Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello (2007) added a seventh world or city, that of the projective city, permeated by the spirit of capitalism in which authenticity and personal reputation allows one to proceed from one project to another (e.g. his past success and derived reputation) makes his argument weigh more in the discussion).

We find traces of these seven in the various elements of MONLAR’s discourse discussed so far, and we will encounter more in what follows. The centrality of Sarath in MONLAR derives from his age and experience (domestic city), he draws upon science to justify his arguments regarding agro-forestry (industrial city), the Buddhist and Christian sources of inspiration are there (inspired city), and finally, the funding success of MONLAR depends on its reputation and successful rounding up of previous projects (projective city). The market city is clearly permeating MONLAR’s discourse and focus albeit in different ways from its opponents, and the city of fame is less relevant, although an argument can be strengthened by for instance referring to people that have great currency in the alterglobalisation movement, such as when referring to Naomi Klein. They also draw their worth from the civic order given that they ‘represent’ people and engage with the legal frameworks. I will now focus on the political field, where some of these orders have more currency than others.

Attempting to influence the political field, MONLAR must adopt the civic mode of argumentation and structure its justifications according to the habitual procedure of argumentative reasoning (Povinelli 2002:8-15), in which rational arguments are preferred and have more weight than emotional ones or those that come from a divine source, as in the inspirational order of worth. Indeed, a kapurāla relating the increase of pretas to a liberal
economy and seeking to reverse this trend by way of healing rites would not be invited at a legislative meeting for the next five-year budget in Colombo. The inspirational and civic sources of justification are deemed incommensurable in the political field today, at least that is the general idea. Whereas the kapurāla is directly inspired by a divine or non-human source, the political actors derive their arguments (at least officially) from ‘rational’ and ‘scientific’ sources of justification (industrial worth). If these sources of justification invoked by the various parties are radically different, it indeed becomes difficult to even start disagreeing, let alone reaching an agreement. Hence, prior to entering the political field, MONLAR already has to redefine its concerns in these more familiar political economic sources of justification to be accepted as a partner of discussion. It is only by way of the commensuration of these sources of justification that one can know whether one disagrees or agrees, and then start to come to an agreement. A disagreement thus already involves agreement on the commensurate principles, orders of worth, and topics one disagrees on. For instance, both proponents and opponents of the free market may invoke the shared principle of the market as a common good (a combination of the market and civic worth), and agree that they disagree on how the common good has to be shaped. They can then use this common principle to justify their diverging approaches, such as liberalisation or state-intervention. In this case there is already a shared ground to which the discussing partners orient themselves in different ways to start arguing and come to a negotiated agreement in the end. Thus, by articulating food and its concerns in familiar terms, such as inputs, labour, and capital (categories that World Bank and capitalist opponents of MONLAR also use), and by drawing the justifications for its Marxist and regenerative alternatives from valorised scientific knowledge (industrial order), economic laws (market order), and the reputation of international bodies (United Nations declarations of human rights and the right to food, thus of the orders of fame and civic world), MONLAR becomes an accepted partner in disagreement.

After this pre-translation to gain access to the political field and become a partner, MONLAR then has to start the argumentations and negotiations in order to reach an agreement, sometimes aided by mobilisations of peoples’ power. During these negotiations, certain arguments get judged less worthy than others, and as such one comes closer to an agreement by reducing the amount of arguments over which there is a potential disagreement. But, if this work of establishing an accepted order of worth among the arguments does not function, one often turns to the search for principles at a higher level of generality (hence the increasing
abstraction). For instance, MONLAR appeals to a common human dignity in opposing a full liberalisation of the food market, arguing for state support in food distribution to provide a guarantee to the human right to food. The liberalising government may be opposed to full state control over the food market, arguing that the market is the best means to achieve equitable access to food and to protect human integrity. Hence, while they disagree on the shape the guarantee should take, they both agree on the more abstract and general principle of human dignity (which takes us in fact to inspired and religious sources that politics tends to elide, just as technical experts tend to obfuscate the political aspects of technological solutions). So, after negotiations they may conclude that the state will give a monthly allowance to the poorest so that they have at least a minimum of secure access to food on the free market.

Even though the emotional, personal, and spiritual arguments, obligations, and concerns are often explicitly relegated to the class of less worthy sources of justification in the political economic ordering of what constitutes a real and worthy argument, there are contexts in which these ‘lesser’ sources can seep back into this political sphere. For instance, in the current victorious Buddhist nationalist atmosphere in post-war Sri Lanka, MONLAR not only works together with some nationalist organisations to promote organic agriculture, but also uses some of the similar religious and sentimental justifications (employing predominantly the domestic and inspirational orders of worth) to make a case for regenerative agriculture. It invokes in some arguments the grandeur that went together during the kings’ periods with the ancient agriculture that was Buddhist in the sense that it did not involve any killing of life and that even shared food with the birds. This resonates well with the general trend of cultivating the pride in the ancient heritage (also by politicians who are eager to compare themselves with some of these ancient kings that have been ‘fathers’ to the nation), in which agriculture, irrigation and Buddhism are closely entangled in the national imaginary.

To sum up, we see that MONLAR has to adapt to the rules of argumentation prior to its entry into the political field and that it thus has to pre-translate its concerns accordingly to become accepted as a partner of (dis)agreement, after which the hierarchical ordering of argumentations and their sources of justification takes place during the process of brokering a deal. In this process, food gets articulated in political economic terms by way of which it gets abstracted from the intimate affectivity and reduced to abstract means, trends, indices, and concepts pertaining to populations.
There is still a final reason as to why MONLAR foregrounds the large-scale market component of food being embedded in relations of capital, thereby articulating food with the higher level. This abstraction is also related to the lifeworld of the activists that is at least partially different from those that they claim to represent. This can be inferred from my description of the life narratives and the everyday life at the office. From this account and from my other interviews it first became clear that MONLAR is not a peasant organisation in the strict sense of mobilising from below. It is rather an organisation of non-peasants that seeks to mobilise farmers for political action. François Houtart notes in an interview that this is often the case in farmers’ movements and that this is thus not exceptional, but rather the rule, if one excludes the rapid outbursts of anger during hartals and peasant uprisings that are less controlled and not guided by an intellectual or educated elite. In MONLAR, the members of the old guard have more experience in education and activist politics than in the practice of farming, although some posses quite a lot of theoretical knowledge. Most members of the young guard are not trained in the art of farming either and only posses some abstract knowledge of it. The passion for farming and agricultural policies does not come from personal hardships in farming, but may in part derive from their (mostly male) passion for public influence; a passion that moves activists, but directs them to a different kind of politics—giving voice to those they deem misrepresented. This passion for a power to change society is compounded by the Marxist convictions and old experiences with the youth uprisings. Moreover, MONLAR is attractive for it provides an income security that many farmers do not have and it is of course evident that some try to seek an income security in MONLAR, which for the young guard’s fascination for computers works perfect in the IT-section, where they can live out this fascination for a politically good cause. Hence, while several of the paid activists are not living the insecurities of farming as a livelihood, they are in a more comfortable position than those whom they try to persuade to ‘experiment’ with regenerative farming, the practice in which they have become deskilled since the introduction of the green revolution. So, as their income depends on successful harvests, many farmers are reluctant to take the risk of changing their habitual ways and view these ‘urbanites’ as dreamers and unpractical. Finally, even though they have started cooking more often at the office, most activists and employees of MONLAR have a personal relationship with food that is market-based, and thus depend on the market to get access to food. None are subsistence farmers that produce their own food, with the exception of some items being cultivated in a home garden. I surmise that this personal experience and lifeworld, involving an intensified relationship with the market, explains in part the emphasis on the market component of food.
in MONLAR’s activist articulation of food with capital, profit, input and output prices, and the overall political economy of food. Indeed, the experiential ground of knowledge of the activists is already different, in a sense abstract from, the people they claim to represent.

These dynamics—mobilisation and advocacy, gaining access to the political sphere and submitting itself to its rules of argumentation and justification, and having a lifeworld different from those they claim to represent—account for the abstract articulation of food in MONLAR’s activism.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described some of the national, historical, and global components of the food assemblage with which MONLAR connects when articulating food in political economic terms in its activism. The historical grandeur of the irrigation schemes established by the kings 2000 years ago, the colonial advent of a plantation or commercial export-oriented agriculture, and the Marxist youth uprisings, all served as marks of an increasing scale of events and have shaped MONLAR’s approach to the food system and their alternative: food sovereignty. This concept seeks to effectuate a release from an incarcerating system of capital accumulation and open up the space to engage in a regenerative agriculture that can restore ecological and social balances. This chapter has carried out a seemingly odd comparison between the activist articulation of food and the ritual-driven actualisation of food as a condensed articulator of existential concerns. But, this comparison teases out more clearly some of the specific properties of these differential articulations and some of the dynamics that underpin this differentiation. We have seen that, even though MONLAR shares with villagers an overall concern with formations of excessive desire causing precariousness and hindering the regeneration of life, MONLAR articulates these concerns in more abstract terms. This abstract activist articulation of concerns as entangled with food is a dynamic that consists of three closely related sub-dynamics: scale-making, generalisation, and reductionism. As to why MONLAR articulates food in this way, I have pointed to their orientation towards the political economic level that is geared to bundling populations (of human beings as well as foods) at larger geographical scales. This orientation of MONLAR as an organisation that seeks to influence and transform policy-making makes it adopt similar forms of argument and similar procedures for justifying these by talking in a language that utilises similar broad and general categories, principles, and trends of the higher level. Finally, I have argued that this abstraction is also related to the difference between the lifeworld in which these activists dwell and the lifeworld inhabited by the farmers they claim to represent, just as is the case with the politicians they seek to influence in Colombo.
Chapter 7: General Conclusion

Food is central to human life and shapes it in numerous ways. From our wayfaring along food’s tentacles into our deep intimacy and into different spheres of life we have clearly illustrated that food is constitutive of life in Sri Lanka as well. The four topical themes that I have discerned coincide with four spheres that in reality overlap and intermingle in their borderspaces. Yet, for heuristic purposes, I have enacted a cut between the spheres of everyday village life at the hearth and in the fields, ancient Ayurvedic and Buddhist textual sources of inspiration for achieving well-being, ritual regenerative action, and social activism articulating food with wider political economic changes. I have moreover discerned four transversal themes of existential insecurity, desire, regeneration (alternatively referred to as ‘cooking’, becomings, and co-(re)production), and of course food, around which the former themes transpire; all four which help in establishing connections and overlaps between the different spheres of articulation. These four transversal themes indeed entangle and articulate in specific ways according to the process of context- or sphere-driven actualisation accounting for both differences and continuities that emerge across these four spheres of life.

With respect to everyday village life, we have observed that food powerfully shapes varying domestic and village rhythms and movements. These different temporalities and ‘spatialities’ of the heterogeneous aspects of food sometimes affect and alter each other, such as when visitors arrive and alter the domestic timing of eating, and at other times they resonate and reverberate into large collective rhythms, such as at the start of the cultivation when the water of the tank is released. The rhythms and movements that transpire around food also establish or disturb relationships, such as in sharing labour and adopting a collective work rhythm or as in having sleep disturbed by elephants. Human and non-human relationships are fragile and if they turn bad, they hinder a healthy and balanced regeneration of life that turns destructive, such as when elephants raid the fields, deities no longer offer protection, and people get subsumed under the pressure of excessive formations of desire. The emphasis on (the timings of) sharing and hospitality with both human and non-human entities serve exactly to maintain such fragile balances with the aim of sustaining human life. In exploring multiple components of food and their specific rhythms we have touched upon several specific issues, including the preparation of ingredients and meals, domestic relationships, recurrent modes of sequenced consumption, human-animal relationships, weather cycles, collective decision-
making processes, and the role of the tank. Some of these components led us, by way of their connections and tentacles, to components of other spheres, such as the party politics and elections that affected village decision-making regarding cultivation, or the influence of Ayurvedic notions of balances in daily practices of cooking.

Indeed, from our description of everyday life, we have travelled along the tentacles of food towards the more formal analyses and prescriptions as written down in the ancient texts of Ayurveda, more specifically the Charaka Samhita, and also some of the few important food references of Theravada Buddhism. In this way we have arrived not only at mere food prescriptions and ‘cook-books’ in ancient textual forms, but rather at a complex world of balances of humours, proto-elements, flavours, and body elements of which a healthy balance is generated through food that has to be adjusted according to the environment and season in which it is consumed. This emphasis on balance exhibits the notion of relational and contextual entities that, in their mutual interpenetration, inter-exchange, and becoming, find themselves in a constant flux that is continuously negotiated by way of food. Moreover, desire is part of this radical relationality as well, and is even immanent to it. Buddhism takes food less central as Ayurveda, but treats desire more systematically and almost metaphysically. Given food’s agency to arouse desire, it still maintains an important, yet less elaborate place in the Theravada Buddhist doctrine. Hence, food ties in with the fragility of health, the aspect of desire, and the concern for the regeneration of health and well-being, both in this life and the afterlife.

In the trope of ritual action, the three transversal concerns of anxiety, desire, and regeneration are holographically condensed into food that as such turns into a tangible means with which to effectuate the desired transformation of a situation of ill-health into one of well-being. In the pre-birth Angulimāla Pīrith, Kiriamma Dāne, harvest rites, wedding ceremonies, New Year, Vesak Poya, and post-funerary rites we have seen that ritual participants acknowledge the fragility inherent in any kind of transition. Therefore, they ritually prepare and offer food to ensure a smooth transition and future prosperity, fertility, and well-being, often embedded within the wider regeneration of life, world, and interrelations. More specifically, the recurrent combination of rice and coconut in different forms in ritual has stabilised these foods as core articulators of ritual concerns and aspirations, and as powerful holographic agents of ritual transformations.
In the sphere of food activism we have observed a rather different articulation of food: one of abstract scale-making instead of condensed materialisation. In ritual, medical, and everyday life, food is a small but powerful and practical material means to negotiate health, desire, and the avoidance of decay and death. These similar concerns recur in social activism and likewise transpire around food, but do so in political economic terms that disconnect food from the intimate, sensorial, and tangible level and connect it with abstract molar categories, large scales, and higher levels. In the political economy to which activism tends to orient itself, food turns into populations or bulks, markets, input prices, outputs, capital, labour, and so forth, while still being articulated with the concern for the good life and improvement for the conditions of existence, such as in ritual and daily events as well. Yet, by articulating food in terms of populations that move across the globe, activists of MONLAR partake in and reinforce the process of scale-making that is initiated by the national and international actors they critique.

In sum, by following the productive wayfaring assembly lines of food, with an added focus on rice and coconut, we have entered into numerous aspects of Sinhalese life. Having illustrated that food ties in directly and indirectly with nearly all aspects of life in individual and collective formations, I surmise that food can be developed into a methodology of interdisciplinary and cross-scale research if conceptualised in such a way that it incorporates such dynamic heterogeneity. Hence, I have focussed on the wider applicability of my conceptualisation to show that it can work in entirely different settings, such as ancient scriptures, daily life, ritual action, and political activism, and further adjusted it according to the tests and contexts it was subjected to. Indeed, focussing only the applicability of this frame in the case of ritual action would not sufficiently demonstrate how and why food as a methodology of research actually works, a statement which is actually the crux of the argument of this monograph.

To be able to conceptually integrate this vast heterogeneity of aspects of life with which food is connected and establishes a network, I have defined food as an assemblage and even in a pleonasm-like way as a machinic assemblage, inspired by DeLanda (2006), Bennett (2010), Barad (2007), and most of all Deleuze and Guattari (2009, 2011). Food is thus not so much conceived of as a substance and topic of research, but rather as an assemblage of heterogeneous interacting and entangling components, creating food’s overall specific context-driven articulation in both physical and meaningful aspects. When entering a milieu, context, or sphere, food transacts several components with surrounding entities and
environments, temporarily creating an interassemblage in which both assemblages enmesh and mutually transform, given the exchange of components that alter in their novel connections and interactions. Indeed, when components of the network or assemblage of food get exchanged or articulated with another assemblage or milieu, the components, assemblages, and contexts transform in their interactions in what has been termed a process of mutual or differential becomings. Hence, emerges the differential physical and meaningful articulation of food in ritual and activism that both seek to transform contexts of ill-ease into ones of well-being. An assemblage of food can moreover destabilise in intense interactions, such as in the actual cooking process where the mutual becoming accelerates, or can stabilise and decelerate into texts and fixed recipes. Hence, I alchemically modified assemblage theory by introducing the allegorical notion of ‘cooking’ to further emphasise the processes of radical and heated transformation (recall that food transforms into energy and even ideas), destabilisation, deterritorialisation, and acceleration, on the one hand, and the cooling stabilisation, territorialisation, repetition, and deceleration, on the other. An additional aim of this ‘alchemisation’ of assemblage-inspired theory of food entails the evocation of the notion of bubbles that refer to inflation and deflation as part of different processes of scale-making implied in becomings, whether it involves ritual condensation or political economic enlargement of scale by bundling food in statistical populations. Finally, the notion of actual cooking and food holographically condensing the ‘cooking’ of life seeks to prepare this frame to resonate more closely with South Asian systems of thought, such as I have illustrated by reference to Ayurveda and Buddhism, and to have a more tangible and sensuous rendering of a frame that indeed sounds too abstract.

With this frame of food, we have thus a vehicle that can be adjusted and articulated with particular contexts (hence the different emphasis on certain aspects and adapted language according to the chapters), and with which we can explore the heterogeneity of components and articulations across scales that are not pre-given but made in the process of becoming. In fact, conceptualised in our way, food offers us with a cross-scale methodology highlighting the actual dynamic production of micro-, meso-, and macro-levels. This vehicle moreover enables accounting for the simultaneous co-existence of phenomena and scales that stabilise and repeat themselves as a kind of structure and those that differ and destabilise in its dissipation into the ‘post-structure’. Another goal of elaborating this food-based methodology of research has been to develop a refined frame that answers to our concerns voiced in chapter 2 with regard to the mind–body, meaning–matter, and culture–nature divides that can hinder
an emphatic understanding of multiple ways of being. A final aim for coining this particular conceptualisation of food involves the development of a frame that facilitates interdisciplinary and comparative research. Let me illustrate this further by suggesting briefly some additional points of research to show in which uncharted terrain such food-based research could take us.

For instance, exploring several hierarchies at the societal level of Sri Lanka by way of the general rice-coconut hierarchy could shed new light on these hierarchies in Sri Lanka and may further corroborate the notion of food as a hologram of society. Rice is the staple food that occupies a central position in the three daily meals around which the side dishes orbit, except in larger towns where wheat in the form of bread nibbles at this dominant position of rice. Coconut is likewise an everyday food as it constitutes a core ingredient in most side dishes to the extent that we could almost label coconut as a secondary staple food. This daily hierarchy and combination recurs in most ritual foods and the ritual cooking of the iconic milk-rice that follows from the chaotic overflowing of coconut milk that subsequently eases down when rice is added. Milk-rice as the purest food offering is offered to both the Buddha and the higher deities below him. Yet, the offering of only a coconut is not deemed suitable for the Buddha, but is right as an offering to higher deities, such as Ganesh, whereas Sinhalese view rice as the most suitable offering for the Buddha. Hence, in their entanglement, these foodstuffs, non-human entities, and human beings articulate and reinforce a hierarchy between rice and coconut that resonates with the respective hierarchy between the Buddha at the apex and the higher deities below him in the Sinhalese Buddhist cosmology. This hierarchy further repeats itself differently in the hierarchy of castes where the Goyigama, imagined as rice farmers, are at the top of the caste system, and the Durāva, those that tap toddy and pick coconuts, are located at a lower echelon. This may be further reinforced by the Buddhist condemnation of alcohol since the temperance movement during which coconut has become associated with alcoholic drinks, unlike rice, from which no alcoholic beverages are produced in Sri Lanka in contrast to Japan. Additionally, the Buddha and rice are both articulated and equated with Sinhalese civilisation, whereas coconuts are more closely linked to offerings to deities of an often Indian and Hindu background. Hence, the rice-coconut hierarchy can become potentially be articulated with a nationalist division of the Buddhist Sinhalese and the Hindu Tamils. Yet, this recurrent hierarchy plays at other less explicit levels as well, for instance, revolving around the ordered and the more chaotic forces in life. Particularly the lower echelons of demons and pretas seem to articulate these chaotic,
desiring, and unruly forces that are put under control of the ordered higher deities that have shown allegiance to Buddhism, which is the ordering religion of the day and the dominant structure in the Sri Lankan context. It is as if the Buddha coincides with the super-conscious and the realm of the lesser beings with the forces of the sub-conscious. Indeed, the perceived rise of pretas or the recent grease-devil scares in 2011 in Eastern Sri Lanka can be viewed as instances of the chaotic forces erupting in a post-war situation where the control of Buddhism is being re-established; the religion protected and supported by the structure of the state and its president. In Freudian terms, the super ego tries to re-establish control over the subconscious that resists in this territorialisation by the Buddhist state. The overflowing of coconut is another example of chaotic and liminal transformation that is however kept in check by the rice that reterritorialises the whole process and by its regenerative and less destructive orientation. We could even go further in a more speculative way. We know that cities are the centres of state and Buddhist power, order, and civilisation, and that most nationalist proselytisation radiates from Colombo to the rest of the country. Given that rice is equated with this Sinhalese Buddhist civilisation, nationalists try to promote organic (Buddhist) agriculture with indigenous seeds (of the Sinhalese race) among farmers and also the Väddas as a way of reinforcing the Buddhist nationalism across the whole island. The city becomes no longer the city of gods as referred to in rituals, but it becomes the space where the Buddha has taken the throne, from whom the president derives his power by paying his allegiance to Buddhism and organic rice farming. During election campaigns the president is depicted on the poster standing behind and above the politicians for whom the campaign is conducted, as if they reproduce the Sinhalese cosmology where the ministers receive their varam or permission to act from the president. The president as the guardian of Buddhist civilisation at the apex of the nation and his ministers and lower politicians below him, of which some get involved in fights such as the one I mentioned earlier, indeed resembles the Buddha-(Hindu)deities-lower beings hierarchy that is corroborated by his active support for organic rice agriculture civilising the ‘wild’ and going against the terrorism of not only the LTTE, but also of wheat and chemicals. In this way, the president resonates and establish connections with activist movements, such as MONLAR, that focus on organic rice more than on coconut cultivation. When asked why this is the case, the MONLAR activists argued that this is because of the economic importance of rice and the poverty of rice farmers. Indeed, given its centrality in the diet, rice production and trade is economically or quantitatively more prevalent than coconut. Hence, we see the rice-coconut hierarchy recurring throughout religious, domestic, ritual, political, ethnic, caste, and economic realms, as these mutually
entangle and create this recurrent powerful hierarchy. Yet, if one catalysing component gets added to this, a complex chain of interactions may take place and this ‘structure’ may become destabilised and alter, or restabilise after a while. In this example we thus can see how the relation between two foodstuffs brings us by way of my food-based frame towards their connecting components and relations as well as to the differentiations and repetitions involved in these relations that cut across sectors and spheres of the society. This exploration thus allows for a comparative approach within the society of Sri Lanka across different political, religious, economic, social, and cultural realms that are the field of academic specialists and that by way of food can collaborate in an interdisciplinary way.

This interdisciplinarity does not have to be contained to the realm of human sciences, as my embryonic excursions to quantum physics have illustrated. For instance, this frame emphasising the process of context-driven actualisation would be very apt to be further developed in a collaboration between anthropologists and those who study epigenetics in what could be a promising attempt to deal with the nature–nurture debate in a balanced way. Epigenetics studies the ways in which the environment (often mediated by food and the womb) alters the behaviour of genes without changing the genetic code (Francis 2011). Interestingly, these altered behaviours and chemical regulations of genes get inherited as well, such that one can talk of social inheritance. This could be an interesting way to resolve the tension between studies that would, for instance, link the obesity epidemic to class, on the one hand, and those who would look for the explanation in traditional genetics, on the other. Indeed, epigenetics studied through the role of food could resolve this tension between nurture and nature in suggesting that both are mutually transforming in that the class eating habits may be inscribed into the genetic behaviours inherited over one or two generations and that shape food desires.

Another way to put my frame to an interdisciplinary test would involve an inter- or cross-scale research on food migration in a big city, say London, in which the anthropologist studies the negotiation of existential insecurities of migrants by way of food practices in the domestic and ritual realm, the social geographer studies the ways in which peoples shape neighbourhoods around their home foods, and the economist and complexity specialists look at the global scales of food flows that touchdown in London. As such, we could get a contextual, global, and very intimate understanding of food as it transpires in the increasingly important phenomenon of migration and thereby increase our understanding of migration as well.
I could go on suggesting several other tests for this frame to enhance its interdisciplinary nature and its comparative strength (for instance by carrying out a similar research in the Arctic), but this would lead us too far. I can only hope that this initiation of my conceptual methodology of food as an assemblage that holographically condenses the core concerns of desire, anxiety, and regeneration in their differentiating articulations and relations across different scales may lead to a further creative and passionate fractalisation of studies that take food seriously.
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The transcription of Sinhalese in English exhibits a large diversity, but I have tried to stay as consistent as possible.

It should be noted that short vowels of “a” and “e” at the end of words are in the middle between these vowels and sound like the last vowel in the word “sofa”.

The vowel “ä” is pronounced like the vowel in “hat”.

The long vowels are marked in following ways: ē, ī, ū, ā, ē, ō, involving a stress on the respective vowel.

The consonant “j” is pronounced like the first consonant in “jam” and “ng” like in “sing”.

Some of the other marks, I have left out, as it would make our transliteration to detailed for most readers.

The plural is indicated simply by attaching “s” to the word.

adukku: respectful term for food that will be offered to deities

adukku kūnama: a tower construct in which the offerings are placed and carried to the shrine

Agni: God of fire

ahamkāra: ego-consciousness or pride

aliya: elephant

Aluth Avurudda: lunar New Year celebrated by both Tamils and Sinhalese

Aluth Sahāl Mangalaya: New rice or harvest festival

aluwa: delicacy made with rice flour, and sugar or jaggery

amma: mother

Angulimāla Pirith: pre-birth chanting of protective Buddhist verses

anupa: wet or marshland type (of animal)

āppe: riceflour pancake in the form of a bowl
arak pole: protected higher stage in the centre of the threshing ground
ārukku: arches marking entry to ritual space
athirase: a kind of sweet made especially in the New Year season
ātman: soul or self
attam: indigenous system of sharing labour at village level during cultivation
attpatteme: specific decorations of Vesak Poya, referring to eight sides of most decorations that evoke the Noble Eightfold Path
avanta: endless life-force
babā badete āwā: literally, the baby came to the belly, referring to becoming pregnant
badeganne sattu: animals moving on their belly (on the ground)
badegini: literally: gastric fire is burning, as a way of saying hungry
badegini kareya: gastric fire person, denoting someone who is always hungry and has an intemperate character
Bahirawa: earth deity guarding hidden treasures underground and a member in the retinue of Kuvera, the Lord of Wealth
bahupa: animals of more than four legs
bālma: the attention or look of spirits or other non-human beings
Bandāra Muttā or Deviyo: deity of the Bandara class which is generally beneficial and operates at village level
bāndīma: the binding rite during the wedding, tying the nuptial knot
bandineva: to bind, to tie, or to marry
banna: sermon
bāte: rice in the threshing ground
bāte pōruwa: leveller used to level threshed seeds at the harvest

bath: cooked rice

bhūta: demon, non-human spirit

bhūtagnis: elemental fires of earth, water, fire, air, and ether

bīdi: a rolled leaf filled with tobacco

bimme inne sattu: animals living on the ground

bittere vī: literally, egg paddy, referring to the paddy seeds

bolatte: broom to swipe threshing ground and to separate the grains from the chaff

Buddhabhoga: share allocated to the Buddha, mostly referring to rice

buddhi: intellect

Buddhi pūja: offering to the Buddha

citta: mind, consciousness

dāgoba: Buddhist stupa, referring to relic chamber

dākätte: implement to reap paddy plants

dāne: almsgiving

dāne muttā: master of ceremony at the wedding

daney: grains

dansāla: almshall where food is shared with a wider public during Buddhist festivals

dātti goviya: a single-pin stick to pick up the straw while threshing

dawal kāme: lunch

dehi käpīme: lime cutting

denīme: feeling

depa: two-footed animals
deshīye vī: indigenous paddy

devāle: deity shrine

Dhamma/Dharma: Buddhist doctrine and teachings

dhātagnis: elemental fires of the body

dhātu: bodily element or essence in Ayurvedic medicine, and corporeal relics

dig-gajas: elephants of the directions of space

diye mas: meat from wetland animals

dōbi: laundry caste

dodol: sweet particularly popular around New Year

dole dukkha: specific cravings during pregnancy

dōsa: affliction, humour as in tri-dōsa entailing the three Ayurvedic humours, or imbalance of humours causing disease

dummele: powdered resin

Durāva: toddy tapper caste

ellevalu: vegetables

gaha: tree, plural: gas

gal: stones

gama: village

Gambāra Deviyo: Village guardian deity

gammaduva: collective village rite

gana denu: exchanging banknotes wrapped in betel leaf to wish each other prosperity

gas ude inne sattu: animals dwelling in trees

ge/gedere/geval: house/houses
geval inne sattu: animals dwelling in the house and domestic locations

gihing ennang: literally, I go and come back, referring to saying bye while implying that they

will see each other again

gilam pase: fluids taken in the afternoon by people observing sil on poya days

goda bimme: dryland or ‘highland’, referring to non-irrigated soil

gotuva: small packets for food offerings to lesser beings

goviyam kanne satty: animals eating farmers’ crops

Goyigama: farmers’ caste at the apex of the Sinhalese caste system

guna: beneficial quality and fundamental property

hāl: rice that is not cooked, tambapu hāl is rice steamed before milling and kākulu hāl is raw

rice

hena/chena: slash-and-burn cultivation

Hiranyagarbha: Cosmic Egg

hittenewa: thinking

indiāppe: riceflour strings

inneva/inne: being, staying, existing

jangala: dry land type (of animal)

Jātaka: the stories of the previous lives of the Buddha

kadaneva: breaking and destroying

kadē: small shop, boutique

kalpa: world era, aeon

kamete: threshing ground
kapruka/kalpa vriksha: literally, tree that provides all necessities in life, referring to the coconut tree

kapurāla: spirit priest or lay priest operating in deity shrines

Karāva: fishermen’s caste

kassipu: illegally brewed alcohol

kāvung: oil cake made with mixture of coconut and rice powder, and treacle

kālē: literally jungle, but includes spaces full of wild plants as well, referring particularly the ‘wild’ taking over

kālē inne sattu: wild animals

kalpenāva: thinking ability

khandha: aggregate

kili: polluting/pollutant

kilidōsa: malicious effects of getting polluted

kili kade hālla: white pollution cloth

Kiriamma Dāne: literally milkmother’s almsgiving, referring to the almsgiving for the new-born to seven experienced and virtuous women

kiribath: milk-rice

kiri gaha: literally, milk tree, referring to tree that yields a milky substance when cut

kiriutereme: overflowing of milk rite

kodi gaha: flag pole

kohombe: neem tree

kokis: crispy delicacy made for New Year celebrations

kokis ahua: the iron dip with which to shape and fry the kokis
kole varga: leaf types often used as edibles in raw side dishes
kottu: fried and chopped kind of pasta, better word
kumbure: paddy field
kurakkan: millet
kurugana sattu: walking animals
kurulu: birds
kurulupālu: a bed of paddy to be shared with the birds
kuse: stomach
kuşiyeh: kitchen
lipa gini dālvīme: the first lighting of log-fire at the hearth during New Year
liyadde: one agricultural bed between the irrigation channels within one paddy field
Lokapakti: Sanskrit term for ‘cooking the world’
loku māma: literally, big uncle, referring to father’s or mother’s elder brother
made bimme: irrigated soil and muddy wetland
Magul Pōruwa: literally meaning wedding board, referring to the platform on which the
marrying couple stands and also the wedding ceremony as a whole.
magul kǟme: wedding meal
māha gedere: literally, big house, referring to the parental house
māha kanne: the season where most fields are irrigated and harvests are big
mal: flower
māla bath: last funerary meal for the deceased
mällum: side dish of shredded green leaves, often manioc and lotus leaves.
malpäle: literally, flower shrine, referring to offering basket woven of tender palm leaves.
mālu: side dish to rice
māma: mother’s brother
mandapa: pirith cage
mangalaya: festive rite
manas: mind or consciousness
mano: mind
maranādhāra samitiya: funeral association at village level
mas kanne sattu: meat-eating animals
mole: thinking ability, brain
mudalali: trader or shopkeeper
muttā: ancestor, grandfather, or ancestral deity
muttetu: lunch in the field, also *ambula*
nākkatrale or näkat mahataya: astrologer
nānde: aunt
Nava Guna Gāthā: nine qualities of the Buddha
Nayake Thero: Chief monk
Nidi-kumba: alien plant species originating from Brazil
niyere: ridges in paddy fields
nōnegathaya: the time of non-action prior to the ritual lighting of the hearth during New Year
paleturu: fruit
panduru: coin offering
pānepāne sattu: jumping animals
parana: old
Paranayata parana: life-to-life rite

parippu: dahl or lentil curry

Paticca-Samuppāda: Buddhist theory of the twelvefold chain of Dependent Origination

pau: non-meritorious

pālē: watch-hut

perehāra: religious procession

pili: impurity, softer than kili

pili hudu: polluted offerings, mostly for the lesser beings

pīnenne sattu: swimming animals

ping: meritorious

pirith: protective chanting of Buddhist verses

pirith pān kale: a ‘full pot’ filled with healing pirith water

pissu: crazy

pit(ta): bile humour

pol: coconut

pol sambol: side dish combining basically grated coconut, lime, and chilli

polove: earth

polove yate inne sattu: animals living underground

Ponkal: ritual boiling of milk-rice among Hindus

porapol: unfertile nuts, also referring to the game in which these nuts are broken as a rite to

    enhance the harvest

pōruwa: levelling instrument, agricultural bed, and marriage platform

Poya: quarter moon day, full moon poyas are more widely celebrated
prakrti: primordial matter
prana: life-breath
prasāda: finer wastes from the body elements
preta: Hungry ghost driven by greed (there are gal pretas attached to stones, gas pretas that reside in trees, and gevala pretas that exert influence on domestic life and the house)
preta bandana: sorcery binding ghosts to house
preta wagē: being like a preta
puhul: ash pumpkin
puhul käpīme: cutting of ash pumpkin rite
pūja: offering, almsgiving
punchi amma: literally, little mother, referring to the little sister of mother or father
punkalase: ‘full pot’ filled with water and with coconut flowers and candle light on top of it, often used in rituals
pura: city
Purusa: primordial spirit, Cosmic man
puta: son
rā: palm wine, toddy
rājakāriya: compulsory services to the king
Rājarate: literally, the kings’ country, referring to the irrigated Dry Zone of the ancient kingdoms of Anuradhapura and Pollonaruwa
rajas: energy stuff or active principle as one of the three gunas of primordial matter
rasa: flavour that is more than taste as it is conceived of as a nourishing essence
sādhu: respectful exclamation
Salāgama: cinnamon peeler’s caste

sālu bālīme: ritual checking of the virginity cloth after the first wedding night

samādhi: meditative state of concentration

samas: mass stuff as one of the three gunas of primordial matter, also ignorance

samsara: cycle of death and rebirth

sāray: hot, spicy

sāri: local female dress

sarong: local skirt-like cloth wrapped around the waist as part of male attire

sasrika: fertility

sattu: animals

sattva: mind or intelligence stuff as one of the three basic gunas of primordial matter

Sātuwe: antisorcery rite

savubhāgya: prosperity

sem(me)/kapha: wind humour

shramadane: sharing of labour to perform collective tasks

sil: morality, observing precepts

sītelay: cool and Ayurvedically cooling

siupa: four-footed animals

sudu: literally, white, but is also used as a nickname referring to innocence, such as in sudu māma

sūkiri: sugar cubes

Suniyama: sorcery demon, act of sorcery

sutta/sutra: ritual or Buddhist verse found it the tripitaka
suwende balande: literally, seeing the smell, smelling

tanha: greed

tanmatras: the five subtle elements or sense-objects

tannekola kanne sattu: grass-eating animals

thale: sesame

thale vässe: soft rain, drizzle

tholebo: a certain leaf of a wild plant, *Crinum Asiaticum*

Thombos: Roman-Dutch land registers

thorana: large decorations erected at *Vesak Poya* depicting aspects of the lives of the Buddha

Tovil: antisorcery healing rite

unmāda: mental disorder caused by excitation of (a) humour(s)

upāsaka: virtuous men

upāsikā: virtuous women

usnay: hot in Ayurvedic sense of having heating effects on body

utseve: games

Vādiviyata Pat Vīme: coming of age rite for girls

Vandanā: homage to the Buddha

varam: permission from Buddha and higher deities to control ghosts

vas kavi: verses that cast a malicious spell

va(ta): air humour

Vāddas: aboriginal people in Sri Lanka

veddemahattea: local physician

Vel-Vidane: irrigation headman
viññana: consciousness

viyana: canopy

wadē: a snack made of mashed and fried chickpeas

wal päle: literally, wild plants, referring to weeds

wature: water

wature inne sattu: water animals

wature nateneva: literally, water is dancing, referring to boiling water

wewa: man-made irrigation reservoir or lakelet

yakede: iron nail

yaksha/yakkha: demon

yale kanne: the season where harvests are smaller as less fields are irrigated

yantere: beneficial ash drawings, a charmed amulet
List of Acronyms

ALPC: All Lanka Peasant Congress

ANT: Actor-Network-Theory

AoA: Agreement on Agriculture (in the WTO)

CONLAR: Committee for National Land and Agricultural Reform

CP: Communist Party

CWE: Co-operative Wholesale Establishment

DALYs: disability-adjusted lifeyears

DIY: Do It Yourself

ERS: Economic Research Service (of USDA)

FAO: Food and Agriculture Organisation

FTZ: Free Trade Zone

GDP: Gross Domestic Product

GNP: Gross National Product

IAASTD: International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development

IATP: Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy

IFI: International Financial Institution

IFPRI: International Food Policy Research Institute

IMF: International Monetary Fund

IPCC: International Panel on Climate Change

ITDG: Intermediate Technology Development Group

JHU: Jathika Hela Urumaya (National Heritage Party)
JVP: Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna

LSSP: Lanka Sama Samaja Party

LTTE: Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

MARKFED: Sri Lanka Co-operative Marketing Federation Ltd

MDGs: Millennium Development Goals

MEP or (P)UF: Mahajana Eksath Peramuna or (People’s) United Front

MONLAR: Movement for National Land and Agricultural Reform

MPIS: Movement for the Protection of Indigenous Seeds

MT: Metric Tonnes

NGO: Non Governmental Organisation

PIC: Peasant Information Centre

PMB: Paddy Marketing Board

SAP: Structural Adjustment Programme

SEDEC: Social and Economic Development Centre

SLFP: Sri Lanka Freedom Party

SPI: Serikat Petani Indonesia (Indonesian Peasant Union)

STS: Science and Technology Studies

TAZ: Temporary Autonomous Zone

TINA: There Is No Alternative

TNCs: Transnational Corporations

UN: United Nations

UNCTAD: United Nations Conference in Trade and Development

UNFPA: United Nations Population Fund
UNP: United National Party

USDA: US Department of Agriculture

VOC: Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie or ‘Dutch East India Company’


WTO: World Trade Organisation
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