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BEYOND THE SPICE: THE EARLY CONSUMPTION OF CINNAMON

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Abstract

Cinnamon is an extraordinary commodity which has come to represent Sri Lankan culture far beyond its economic value. As a plant that is native to the island, cinnamon has a long-standing association with Sri Lankan culture and identity. Its unique aroma and medicinal and edible qualities have for centuries enabled it to capture the imaginations of individuals and empires. Cinnamon has been used as a multi-purpose spice due to its medicinal, preservative and edible qualities. The focus of this paper is an investigation of the early consumption of cinnamon around the world, beyond the shores of Sri Lanka. This study will provide a better understanding of cinnamon that goes beyond the cookery pot, whether as a spice in curries, or a flavour in baking. This discussion of cinnamon as something more than an attractive spice extends to comments about its cultural value and meaning, rather than its commercial value.

Keywords

Cinnamon, Culture, Medicine, Aroma, Commodity, Sri Lanka, Spice

Beloved Odilo, now fair and blushing,

With a steady tread follows in Christ's footsteps.

A flowery, snowy, couch is born forth for him,

Covered with lofty cedar, and adorned with fragrant Cyprus:

Sprinkled with violets, strewn with lilies.

*Behold him adorned with flowery roses,
Looking at the various plants with glad eyes.
Balsams are there, and many aromas are ground,
Nard and Myrrh shine palely, and strong cinnamon burns...
There are a thousand spices, their several odours intermingle,
The savour of nectar fills even to the highest heaven.*
(Turner, 2005, p. 175)

1. Introduction

Cinnamon is a native plant of Sri Lanka and has had a centuries-long connection with the island's culture and the wider world. Cinnamon as a spice - today is most commonly known as a food additive – derives from the inner bark of the cinnamon tree *Cinnamomum zeylanicum* (old botanical name) or *Cinnamomum Verum* (new botanical name). It becomes a useable and saleable product after it has been carefully peeled and processed from the inner bark of the cinnamon tree either as quills (cinnamon sticks) or as a powder. Cinnamon has been used as a popular 'multi-purpose' spice such as a sacred object, scent or aroma, preservative, food additive, material and a symbol of social status. This paper will discuss the early consumption of cinnamon by Europeans and Sri Lankans.

2. Cinnamon as a Multi-Purpose Object

2.1. Cinnamon as a Sacred Object

Cinnamon has been used as a popular 'multi-purpose' spice that extended well beyond the shores of Sri Lanka. It has served as a symbol in religious and social traditions and beliefs. Cinnamon is noted in the Bible, for instance, as an ingredient in Moses' anointing oils and as a symbol of friendship between lovers (Dalby, 2000). These spices were essential in the ointment for the holies, the ark of the testimony. Moses (Dalby, 2000, p. 39.) speaks once: "Take thou also unto thee principal spices, of pure myrrh five hundred shekels, and sweet cinnamon half so much, even two hundred and fifty shekels, and sweet calamus two hundred and fifty shekels. The relationship between spices - cinnamon and the anointing oil - reveals the early usage of cinnamon in religious purposes.

2.2 Cinnamon as a Scent or an Aroma

Cinnamon was used as an extraordinary object specifically in elites' funerals in the ancient world. For example, in Rome, cinnamon was burnt on funeral pyres to cover the scent of burning flesh. One legend suggests that the Roman emperor Nero burnt cinnamon on the

funeral pyre of his second wife, Poppaea Sabina, in 65 CE to atone for his role in her death. Her body was cremated in a colossal pyre of cinnamon. It was believed that “Arabia does not produce as much spice in a year as the emperor Nero burnt in one day along with the body of his beloved Poppaea” (Dalby, 2000, p. 124). Cinnamon used in funerals symbolised wealth and social status where a spiced burial was impossible for non-elites. Roman elites offered expensive funerals for their beloved pets by stuffing spices in dead pets’ bodies which even extended to cinnamon-scented and covered pyres:

*...his ashes redolent of Assyrian cardamom,
His slender feathers exhaling Arabian incense
And Sicanian saffron; he will ascend the perfumed pyre,
A happier Phoenix, unburdened by wearisome age.*
(Turner, 2004, p. 171).

Spiced deaths herein symbolised the social status, grand personage and the power of the emperor. To Romans cinnamon was not merely an aroma of sanctity, but in particular, sanctifies (Turner, 2004). There is a poem that was written by Sidonius (c.430-490) in ‘which the phoenix is captured by Dionysus and brought back to Greece from India, fretting that without cinnamon he will be unable to be reborn in his fiery holocaust’ (Turner, 2004, p. 170). The poet indicates that cinnamon brings him life while dying.

Elsewhere in the ancient world, cinnamon had a long history as a preservative, herb, medicine, and divine scent. The ancient Egyptians used it for embalming mummies because of its pleasant aroma and its preservative qualities. The Israelites on occasions employed it for sacrifice, and the Hindus for burning people’s bodies. Cinnamon with its warm, sensuous aroma has been regarded more than most. For instance, the Queen of Sheba brought cinnamon to King Solomon who sang its praises:

*Spikenard and saffron; calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of
frankincense; myrrh and aloes, with the entire chief spices.
Awake O north wind; and come thou south; blow upon my
garden that the spices thereof may flow out, let my beloved come
into his garden, and eat his pleasant fruits*
(Greenberg and Ortiz, 2007, p. 24)

2.3 Cinnamon as a Preservative

Spices including cinnamon were employed as much as for their preservative effects. According to the lament that was quoted at the beginning of this paper, it is evidence that cinnamon and other spices were employed for embalming and perfuming the bodies of the

dead. It is noted that even in the early medieval period, spices were exceptionally important in preserving and decorating 'elites' burials by around 970 CE. For instance, when Otto 1, the Holy Roman Emperor died at Memleben in 973 he was decorated and covered with various spices and then buried (Turner, 176). Spices such as cinnamon suggest the image of mystery and its lavishness, besides the romance aspects.

2.4 Cinnamon as a Food Additive

Cinnamon was traded along the Indian Ocean trade routes from as early as 2000 BCE. During the period 27 BCE-248 CE, Egyptian and Arab traders linked East and West by bartering commodities like cinnamon, ivory, silk and perfume (Capper, 1846). Egyptian traders took large quantities of spice to exchange with other commodities in Persia, Arabia, Asia, other kingdoms in the east and much of the known world. Not only Egyptian but also Arab traders dominated the Indian Ocean trade until the Europeans arrived, the first being the Portuguese pioneers who sailed from the Cape of Good Hope in 1498 and entered Calicut, on the west coast of India.

Alongside its symbolic and ritual value, cinnamon became primarily an additive to food. Cinnamon proved to be an expensive commodity, consumed by the elites as a symbol of their status: "Cinnamon remained much sought after, very expensive and utterly mysterious in the medieval West" (Dalby, 2000, p. 124). During the Roman Empire cinnamon was a very expensive commodity and became very highly prized by the wealthy (Capper, 1846).

Cinnamon was a valuable ingredient for making wine and ale in medieval times. The basic method was to add a ground variety of spices to red or white wine and then sweeten them with sugar or honey, finally filtered. This spice-mixed wine was known as 'hippocras': "To make powdered hippocras, the method was to take one-quarter of very fine cinnamon selected by tasting it, and half a quarter of fine flour of cinnamon, an ounce of selected string ginger...." (Turner, 2004, p. 129)

Cinnamon also became very popular in medieval European sauces. For instance, one of the most popular sauces was known as *camelyne*, which was rich with spices such as cinnamon, vinegar, and garlic. These spiced and flavoured sauces were one of the most distinctive features of medieval European cuisine. Medieval European dishes were piquant where spices were exceptionally unavoidable and essentially added to foods to make them more palatable. Most of the foods were eaten with a combination of spices such as cinnamon, mace, pepper, nutmeg and other spices. It seems that by medieval times European tastes became more varied and the palate increasingly globalised. The aroma of spices and their

prestige/economic value became all-pervasive due to discoveries of new trading routes in the later centuries of the medieval period.

2.5 Cinnamon and Early Modern Europeans

Europeans became interested in the material value of cinnamon apart from its use as a food. They had even used cinnamon to keep warm in cold weather by putting it under their bedsheets. During the Middle Ages, cinnamon also was known as a medicine that could cure various ailments, including coughs and indigestion. Early modern Europeans began to utilise cinnamon specifically as a food preservative. European society consumed large quantities of spices to cover up the taste and/or odour of cured meats, which typically began to spoil during the winter. The early Tudor cookery book, *Here Begynneth the Boke of Kervynge*, published in 1508, reveals that cinnamon had many uses in English recipes such as potato pies, and desserts like the Cambridge pudding (Albala, 2003, p. 166-175). In 1393, Parisian cooks had used cinnamon in chicken with a crayfish dish.

2.6 Cinnamon as an Elite Food

Food choices such as spices symbolically reinforced comfortable assumptions about one's class and status. Those people who could afford the spice used it in meals for flavour and to impress those around them with their ability to purchase a condiment from the 'exotic' East. It is not surprising that consumption of spices, in general, occurred in the upper classes of society since only the wealthy could afford large quantities of meat. The elites showed off their status by offering a plate with various spices piled upon it as a sign of the wealth at his or her disposal at banquets. To the Romans, spices were more than food but the distinction and wealth. Brillat-Savarin (Turner, 2004, p. 82) wrote "Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are". The 1588 cookbook, *The Good Huswifes Handmade* includes cinnamon as an ingredient in recipes intended for wealthier classes, for example, 'Bake a Red Deer' (Albala, 2003, p. 168). Ken Albala (Albala, 2003, p. 168) asserts that "red deer were associated with the aristocracy class who could maintain forests and had the leisure to hunt". This recipe used cinnamon ('synamon') for seasoning the meat.

3. Cinnamon and Sri Lankan Culture

3.1 Cinnamon and Early Settlement Legends

Not only was cinnamon a very popular and highly in-demand condiment around the world, but also became it deeply embedded in the origin stories of Sri Lanka. The representation of cinnamon in Sri Lankan culture harks back to as early as the story of the arrival of Prince Vijaya. In the *Mahavamsa* (Great Chronicle), the first civilisation in Sri

Lanka begins with the legend of the arrival of Prince Vijaya in the 5th century (c. 483 BCE). It was believed that when the Vijaya first touched the shores of Sri Lanka, it turned their (Vijaya and companions') hands to a red or copper colour and the country started to be known as *Thambapanni*. *Thamba* means copper and *panni* mean beach or hands; but in some stories, *panni* mean leaves, and the copper indicates the young leaves of cinnamon trees. This legend connects with the abundant growth of cinnamon trees in Sri Lanka close to the sea. Whatever the truth is of this legend, it promotes the historical significance of cinnamon, the importance of the south-east coast of Sri Lanka and also the relationship between cinnamon and Sri Lankan culture.

This connection of cinnamon to stories of the early settlement of Prince Vijaya hints at the strong relationship between cinnamon and the local culture (Codrington, 1939). Once cinnamon started to be processed as a useable spice it became culturally significant to Sri Lanka and represented the Sri Lankan people and culture. *Kurundu* is the most commonly used Sinhalese word for cinnamon and it is believed that this word derived from the Sanskrit language, which used the term *Kroradra*. The Sinhala language is believed to be an Indo-Aryan tongue which was brought to Sri Lanka by Prince Vijaya and his people from northern India. It seems that the word *kurundu* became widespread following the arrival of Vijaya on the island.

Kurundu has been widely attached to Sri Lankan culture. It is believed that the Malwathu Oya (Malwathu River) was known as 'Kurundu Oya' (Cinnamon River) after Vijaya and his followers settled there (Knox, 1958). Similarly, there have been several rivers, villages, roads, and temples with names beginning with *kurundu* and documented as early as 543-505 BCE. For example, these include Kurundu Ganga Ela (Cinnamon River, Nuwara Eliya District), Kurundu Oya Alla (Cinnamon Falls, Nuwara Eliya District), and Kurundu Doowa (Cinnamon Island, Balapitiya). This shows how cinnamon embedded itself into Sri Lankan culture since the earliest days of the first kingdom.

3.2 Early Consumption of Cinnamon in Sri Lanka

It is difficult to find evidence of how cinnamon was consumed in pre-colonial Sri Lanka. However, cinnamon had been used more as a medicine than as a spice for cooking. King Buddhadasa's (340-368 CE) medical books document the use of cinnamon in this way (Lankage, 2016). The *Sarasvathi Nigantuwa*, which is a tome about medical herbs and their collection, introduced the cinnamon tree as a medicinal tree or herb (Lankage, 2016). In the traditional *Ayurveda* medicinal system, cinnamon is used for combatting oral diseases, dental

infections, insect poisoning, and improves digestion and absorption, and overcomes colds and flu.

Historical writings confirm that at least by the 10th century ‘Sri Lankan cinnamon’ was well documented. Even though early accounts prove that cinnamon had been popular and consumed, it was not clear that this cinnamon was Sri Lankan cinnamon. I. Siriweera (Siriweera, n.d.) argues that Sri Lankan cinnamon started becoming a significant commodity from the 10th century onwards. He (Siriweera, n.d.) mentions that Sri Lankan cinnamon is first documented in *Aja Ib Alhind* by Buzurg Ibn Shahriyar in the 10th century. Other records suggest activity by Jewish traders in the 12th century and the commodity is noted in a letter written by John, a priest who ventured east on missionary work from Monticchio in Italy and also spoke about Sri Lankan cinnamon (Siriweera, n.d.). However, C. R. de Silva (de Silva, 1973, p. 14) argues that according to the Portuguese historian Diogo do Couto, Sri Lankan cinnamon was popular only from the reign of King Parakramabahu II (1236-1270) onward: “the island began to be famous in the world on account of the much and very fine cinnamon that its jungles yielded”.

4. Conclusion

Cinnamon has never been confined solely to the cookery pot, whether as a spice in curries, or a flavour in baking. Since ancient times, cinnamon has also been used as a medicine, a ritual spice, a condiment, and a food preservative. It is an extraordinary commodity which has come to represent Sri Lankan culture far beyond its economic value. The allure of exotic cinnamon brought travellers and empires to Sri Lanka, where they became fascinated by the island’s beauty.

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