

## RITUALS OF THE SPRING EQUINOX AND THE STOCK MARKET

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It's that month of the year again, when the majority of Sri Lankans make an abrupt visit to their "roots" (a theatrical representation of genealogy), to celebrate what is known as the Sinhala-Tamil New Year. Although we follow the Lunar calendar along with the rest of the world, rendering January 1st as the day when New Year begins, just for these few days in April the Solar calendar is revived to permit a latent observation of the Spring equinox typical of agrarian communities where climatic changes were socio-economically profound.

In a country that holds a privileged position for the most number of public holidays in the world, embracing an agricultural production that constitutes less than 25 percent of GNP, a poverty level of about 30 percent of the population and a submerging stock market along with an atrocious ethnic crisis, one has to wonder how exactly to situate this festive occasion within the present socio-economy.

It's a mythico-ritual social practice, eminently reproduced, spiritualized and glamourized by media and the state, a ceremonial occasion dramatized by various rituals executed at auspicious moments in conjunction with the larger cosmic forces that, during the rest of the working year evaporate into nothingness. The rituals are many - ceasing all secular activity the day before, lighting the firewood fire facing South, wearing something white (according to planetary positions this year), preparing labour intensive sweet-meats and milk-rice, gift exchanges, daubing of herbal-oil on the head, followed by departing for work on the following Monday (wearing something white facing South again) - and are all executed at auspicious times.

But generally, all this naive ethnocentrism is reduced to an yearly visit to the ancestral village for a family reunion, reestablishing "cultural" (patriarchal and paternalist) links. The elders in the family are offered worship and deference, and complying with conventions of hospitality, kinship relations are over-exaggerated. Gifts are exchanged, women labour over the feast coordinating activities, and the males bond over a few alcoholic drinks (highly advertized during the modern Spring Equinox). Naturally, it is a time for additional burdens and maximum stress for women. They have to clean the house, cook the sweet meats and meals, buy presents and entertain relatives and in-laws (the good ones and the horrible ones) and cope with male violence.

The exchanging of gifts, with the interplay of obligation, not only among family members but with the immediate community at large is particularly significant, especially the maintenance of that network of socio-economic allegiances between employer/employee, landowner, moneylender, wage-laborer, peasant, etc. Intentionally legitimizing the established order, it is an occasion for the "haves" to show some token of their success to those deprived "have nots".

As the day comes to a closure, as exertions of reunion escalate, old grievances are resolved while new ones are revealed. It is also a notorious time for aggravated assaults, wife-battering, murders and appalling accidents (caused by drunk driving, lighting fire crackers, etc.) not to mention increased health risks by consuming high-cholesterol food. For the urban dweller, this mass exodus of the working population translates into closed shops (especially, bakeries - which provide sustenance to low-income segments) and increased prices.

Simply, it is an occasion that accentuates the inherent contradictions of remnant pre-capitalist social structures struggling to exist within emerging capitalist ones, the co-presence of antiquated traditions and modernism. While some can afford the luxury of romanticizing "tradition" (in a version of feudal patriarchy), most participate with some apprehension, hoping to extract something pertinent and meaningful for the present (such as solidarity, peace, equality, equity, and general social good faith).

However, it is always the mystified ritual that is highlighted at the expense of the meaning and function behind it. So the media and the state will routinize, ritualize and romanticize the (recreated) remnants of a feudal agrarian economy when the "real" economy, strapped with poverty and unemployment, is geared to achieve "NIC" status. Suddenly, the agrarian crisis (with a recent history of 2% per annum agrarian growth, employing almost half of the labour force) and the high levels of child malnutrition dissolve in ritual stereotyping. So let the economy fade into the background, and turn the spot light on "culture" and "tradition", and in harmony with those omnipresent, omnipotent, cosmic forces, let the show begin.

### Postscript:

Headlines in local newspapers (Monday 17th, April 1995) "Sharp drop in fireworks accidents - Media warning help contain the damage" - *Daily News*; Violent drunken brawls on New Year day - sixteen persons killed, 225 injured" - *The Island*. Tactfully dissolving the violence of the New Year festival, the Sinhalese newspapers *Dinamina* and *Divaina*, both highlighted a bus filled with about 45 pilgrims going off the road killing 15 passengers. Drunken brawls, mini battles, stabbing, hacking and death, (not to mention those unreported incidents of violence against women) "celebrating" two days of the Spring equinox mythico-rituals. Suggested media warning for next year: Active participation in certain New Year cultural rituals, while reproducing oppressive ethnocentric, feudal, patriarchal social structures, might lead to loss of self-conscious, self-emancipating articulation of culture, resulting in loss of limb and life.