

**SRI LANKA NATIONAL INVENTORY
OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE ELEMENTS**

NIICH-SL/Index no 2025-01

***Kithul Madeema*, also known as *Kithul Kapeema*, is an ancient indigenous technology for tapping Kithul in Sri Lanka**

**Prepared by
National Library and Documentation Services Board**

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Name and Identification of the element:

1. Name of the Element

Kithul Madeema, also known as *Kithul Kapeema*, is an ancient indigenous technology for tapping Kithul in Sri Lanka

1.1 Name of the elements, as used by community or group concerned;

කිතුක් මැදීම: කිතුල් කපීම

The element is identified as representing an important element of the corpus of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Sri Lanka as it manifests the following three domains of ICH as specified in the 2003 UNESCO Convention:

- Traditional craftsmanship
- Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe
- Oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle

1.2 Community(ies) concerned:

The tradition of Kithul Madeema is primarily practiced by rural communities in the wet and intermediate zones of Sri Lanka, especially in the Southern, Central, Sabaragamuwa, and Uva Provinces. These communities possess generations of knowledge in Kithul tapping and value it as a source of livelihood, identity, and cultural pride, making them central to the preservation of this heritage.

1.3 Physical location(s) of the elements:

Caryota urens, commonly known as Kithul tree, is distributed across 18 districts in Sri Lanka, with industry hubs primarily in 13 districts such as Galle, Matara, Rathnapura, Matale, Nuwa-eliya and Kandy, situated in rural mountainous, Buffer zones and forested areas.

1.4 Short description

Kithul Madeema, also known as Kithul Kapeema, is an ancient indigenous knowledge system practiced in Sri Lanka for extracting sap from the *Caryota urens* palm, locally known as Kithul. This traditional technology, passed down through generations, involves a sophisticated and delicate process of identifying the right stage of palm maturity, climbing tall trees, treating the inflorescence through specific techniques such as smoke exposure and herbal applications, and managing the timing and rhythm of sap collection to ensure quality and yield. Practiced primarily by rural communities in the wet and intermediate zones, especially in the Southern, Central, Sabaragamuwa, and Uva Provinces, Kithul Madeema is deeply embedded in the social, cultural, and economic life of these communities.

The knowledge system reflects a close relationship with nature, sustainability, and respect for ecological balance. The collected sap is used to produce traditional food items such as treacle (pani) and jaggery (hakuru), which are important in Sri Lankan cuisine and rituals. Despite its cultural richness, this heritage faces threats from modernization, declining interest among younger generations, and

environmental changes. Safeguarding Kithul Madeema is vital not only for preserving a unique cultural tradition but also for supporting community livelihoods and ecological wisdom.

2. Characteristics of the element:

3. 2.1 Associated tangible elements:

කිතුල/ කිතුල් ගහ *Kithula/ Kithul gaha*: fishtail palm (*Caryota urens* or "kithul" in Sinhalese)

මල *Mala*: Kithul flowre

හැර *Hara*: A kithul tapper installing a ladder made from a sapling secured to the kithul tree by a bundle of vine

මල් බෙහෙත් *Mal beheth*: indigenous medicine use for preparation kithul flower for getting sap

තෙලිජ්ජ *Thelijja*: A kithul tapper descending a palm with a pot full of kithul sap

මල් පිහිය *Mal Pihiya* : Knife used to cut the kithul flowers and its sheath

වළඳ: Slowly cooking kithul sap almost ready to become trickle

පොල් කටු: Jaggery is cast in a coconut shell

2.2 Associated intangible elements:

Kem practices (Secret Treatment), Folk tales,

2.3 Language(s), register(s), speech level(s) involved:

Sinhala/Tamil

2.4 Perceived origin:

The origin of Kithul Madeema (also known as Kithul Kapeema) is deeply rooted in Sri Lanka's agrarian and forest-based culture. While there are no written records indicating a specific time of origin, oral histories and generational knowledge suggest that this practice dates back several centuries, possibly to pre-Buddhist or early Anuradhapura periods. It is believed that indigenous communities, particularly those inhabiting the wet and intermediate zones of Sri Lanka, were the first to develop this sustainable method of extracting sap from the *Caryota urens* palm, locally known as the Kithul tree. According to local folklore and ancestral narratives, the knowledge of Kithul tapping was gifted by forest-dwelling sages and was passed down through family lineages. These communities perceived the Kithul tree as sacred, often associating it with fertility, abundance, and harmony with nature. The rituals and kem (protective spiritual practices) performed during the tapping process further reflect its deep connection to traditional cosmology and spiritual beliefs.

3. Persons and institutions involved with the element

3.1. Practitioners(s)/performer(s): name(s), age, gender, social status, and/ or professional category, etc.;

- A. M.H. G. Nandatilaka (M)
- B. Walagedara, Warukandeniya, Neluwa
- C. 0712115941

A. H.W Ariyasena (M)
B. Pansal Kanda, Ketagoda, Udugama, Galle
C. 0765489575

A. Kanthi Jagoda (F)
B. Pansal Kanda, Ketagoda, Udugama, Galle
C. 0786101988

A. B.A . Priyanka Kamal Ruwan Budhika (M)
B. Ballavila, Kosmulla, Neluwa
C. 0718537352

A. E.G. Sameera Sampath (M)
B. Pinkanda Hena, Danawala, Neluwa
C. 0715665229

A. G. G. Chaminda (M)
B. Dangaha hena, Pannimulla, Panagoda
C. 0711198850

A. G.G Sujith Kumara (M)
B. Horakanneliya West, Batuwangala
C. 0705200215

A. I.D. Saman Kumara (M)
B. Tambalagama, Neluwa
C. 0712057764

A. W. A. Nilantha Jayathilake (M)
B. Ihala Maddegama,
C. Neluwa
D. 0778148434

A. K. H. M. Vasanthalal (M)
B. Mavita east, Neluwa
C. 0719747238

A. G. S. Sanji Sudat Kamara (M)
B. Ihala Millawa, Morawaka
C. 0774079448

A. O.V.P. Nihal (M)
B. Pahala Lelwala, Neluwa
C. 0715862772

A. K.G. Kasun Chamara Paragahahena, (M)
B. Happitiya, Neluwa
C. 0715281287

A. M. P. G. Nuwan Chamara (M)
B. Na / Maddegama, Neluwa
C. 0713087099

A. T. Sumit Prasanna Sampath (M)
B. Dellawa, Neluwa
C. 0702065954

A. W.G. Bandula Pahala, (M)
B. Gigummaduwa, Neluwa
C. 0713239396

A. B.G. Samanthi Kumari. (F)
B. Pannimulla, Neluwa
C. 0703272438

A. L.G. Kasun Sanjeeva (M)
B. Rathupaswala, kokawala, Vanduramba
C. 0770244548

A. Chamara Kariyavasam (M)
B. Pahala Maddegama, Neluwa
C. 0712026172

A. M.G.G. Nishantha (M)
B. Thiruvanna Katiya, Dellawa, Moravaka
C. 0717245095

A. I.G. Aberuwan (M)
B. Magata, Warukandeniya, Neluwa
C. 0714240863

A. S. S. K. Mandalavatta (M)
B. Varaka Pitikanda, Medakibiya, Poddala
C. 0773065612

A. Priyantha Jagoda (F)
B. Liandola, Talawa, Waduramba
C. 0773255457

A. N.A. Buddhika Sampath (M)
B. 31/B, Gabbalagoda, Kalawa, Wanduramba
C. 0772787491

A. B.G. Jinachandra (M)
B. Pelagaswatiya, Unanwitiya, Baddegama
C. 0775662586

A. P.G. Somapala. (M)
B. 248 Paragaha Udamulla, Mahalapitiya, Baddegama
C. 0771316732

A. P. K. Chandana Padmalal (M)
B. Pala Gaskatiya, Mahilapitiya, Baddegama
C. 0768652526

A. T. T. Isuri Mangala (F)
B. Rath Mehera Waththa, Sahan Pedesa, Wavilagala
C. 0772600146

A. H. G. T. Gunapala (M)
B. No: 177, Nawa Berillawatta, Halpakota
C. 0719438160

A. H. V. Nimal (M)
B. Pala Gaskatiya, Unanvitiya, Baddegama
C. 0761769464

A. P. M. Sirisena (M)
B. 68 B. Andurath Vila, Pauddala
C. 0772000612

A. M.G. Guna Vardhana (M)
B. Enesalwatte, Magedara
C. 0601751771

A. J. R.P .Nimal (M)
B. Enesalwatte, Magedara
C. 0767769078

A. W. H. R. Sandalankara (M)
B. Hiriamal Thudura
C. 0777227243

A. Sama Nilanthi Dil Rukshi (F)
B. Liyangamakanda, Bambarawana, Mattaka
C. 0777962033

A. H.G. Chaturanga Dilshan (M)
B. Vandurawa, Bambarawana, Mattaka
C. 0740501692

A. L.G. Indrani Ashoka (M)
B. Karuwala Thota, Heravagama
C. 0764508071

A. K.W. Chandrawathi (F)
B. Usbimajanpadaya, Bambaravana, Mattaka
C. 0770661896

A. D.D.C. Ananda. (M)
B. Habarakada, Alaihala, Thawalama
C. 0701231915

A. E.G. Shantha Kumara (M)
B. Habarakada, Alaihala, Thawalama
C. 0716666317

A. K. A. Tudor (M)
B. Hinduma West
C. 0711893529

A. D.P. Janith (M)
B. Thawalama , opata
C. 0712065330

A. P.L. Nandani (F)
B. Panagala West
C. 0716316276

A. Rangana Lakmal (M)
B. Lehiwala Kanda, Unapitiya
C. 0772177126

A. Amita Chaturanga (M)
B. Malamura, Mapalagama
C. 0758389139

A. N.K.U. Padmasiri (M)
B. Sanwardana Gammanaya, Nagoda
C. 0770493206

A. A. Gamini Jayaratne (M)
B. Kalugala, Ambana North, Kahadua
C. 0773659298

3.2 Other participants (e.g., holders/custodians)

In the intricate process of traditional kithul tapping and processing, various participants, predominantly men and women, play crucial roles, each contributing to different stages of production. Traditionally, kithul tapping is primarily carried out by men, who are responsible for climbing trees and selecting suitable ones for tapping. The collection of sap and its transportation back home are also tasks assigned to men. Once the sap is brought home, the process of boiling it into treacle or making jaggery

falls under the domain of women or men. Typically, this responsibility is shouldered by the elder members of the family, such as grandmothers or grandfathers, due to the time-intensive nature of the process. Furthermore, both men and women are involved in collecting wood for fueling the fire necessary for the boiling process. Additionally, the selling of kithul products is managed by various individuals, often on a small-scale basis. Temporary shops set up near main roads are usually operated by small-scale sellers, while occasionally, kithul tappers themselves engage in selling their goods. This division of labor among community members underscores the collaborative effort required to sustain traditional kithul tapping, with each participant contributing their expertise to ensure the continuity of this cultural heritage.

3.3 Customary practices governing access to the element or to aspects of it

Traditional communities involved in traditional kithul tapping adhere to a set of customary practices that regulate various aspects of kithul tapping, processing, and distribution. These practices encompass community regulations dictating who can participate in tapping, the allowable quantity of sap collection, and sustainable methods. Moreover, access to kithul trees and tapping techniques is often inherited within specific families or lineages, ensuring the preservation of knowledge across generations. Additionally, collaborative agreements among communities facilitate collective management of kithul resources, including sharing tapping sites and coordinating production. Conservation practices are also integral, focusing on sustainable tapping methods and habitat protection to safeguard kithul palm populations. Furthermore, these communities prioritize respect for elders and tradition, recognizing their expertise in traditional kithul tapping and processing. Access to certain techniques or sites may require approval from respected individuals, fostering continuity of cultural heritage and sustainable kithul practices.

3.4 Modes of Transmission

The transmission of knowledge and skills related to traditional kithul tapping occurs through various modes within traditional communities. Oral tradition plays a significant role, with experienced individuals passing down techniques, folklore, and cultural significance through storytelling and informal teaching. Additionally, practical apprenticeships and hands-on training are common, where novices learn directly from skilled practitioners through observation and imitation. Family networks serve as crucial channels for transmission, with knowledge transferred across generations within households. Furthermore, community gatherings, festivals, and workshops provide platforms for sharing and disseminating kithul-related knowledge among community members. Modern educational initiatives and training programs also contribute to the transmission process, incorporating traditional practices into formal learning environments. Overall, a combination of oral tradition, practical apprenticeships, familial networks, community events, and educational programs ensures the continuity and preservation of kithul-related knowledge and skills for future generations.

3.5. Concerned organizations (NGOs and others)

There are no NGOs that have concerns in the element

4. State of the element: viability

4.1. Threats to the enactment

The viability of traditional kithul tapping faces several threats to its enactment, jeopardizing its sustainability and continuity. Urbanization and land development encroach upon natural habitats of kithul palm trees, reducing available tapping sites and disrupting traditional tapping practices. Climate change poses significant risks, altering precipitation patterns and temperature regimes, which can affect sap production and tree health. Additionally, the introduction of modern agricultural practices and alternative sweeteners diminishes the economic viability of kithul-based products, reducing demand and market opportunities. Moreover, socio-economic factors such as rural outmigration and changing consumer preferences challenge the transmission of traditional knowledge and skills, potentially leading to a loss of cultural heritage associated with traditional kithul tapping. Addressing these threats requires holistic strategies that integrate conservation efforts, climate resilience measures, market diversification, and community empowerment to safeguard the viability of traditional kithul tapping for future generations.

4.3. Availability of associated tangible elements and resources

Kithul Madeema involves several tangible elements essential for its practice. These include traditional tools such as specially crafted knives (*Madina-Pihiya*), *Hara*: A kithul tapper installing a ladder made from a sapling secured to the kithul tree by a bundle of vine, clay pots or containers (*Muttiya* or *kalagediya*) for collecting sap, and firewood for boiling the sap into treacle or jaggery. The *Caryota urens* (Kithul palm) itself is a vital natural resource, found mainly in Sri Lanka's wet and intermediate zones. Additionally, locally sourced plant-based materials are used for tying, filtering, and fermentation. These tools and resources are made using indigenous knowledge, sustaining a close connection between the environment and the cultural practice.

4.5. Safeguarding measures

To ensure the continued viability and prosperity of traditional kithul tapping in Sri Lanka, a comprehensive set of safeguarding measures is proposed. These measures are designed to address various aspects of traditional kithul tapping, ranging from conservation and traditional knowledge transmission to policy advocacy and marketing strategies. Considering the potential impacts of increased visibility and public attention resulting from inscription as a cultural heritage, these measures aim to safeguard the heritage of traditional kithul tapping while promoting its sustainability and resilience.

1. **Raising Awareness:** Efforts will be focused on raising awareness about the significance of traditional kithul tapping and its products. Awareness-raising campaigns, workshops, seminars, and exhibitions will educate individuals involved in tapping kithul and train new tappers entering the industry. Traditional knowledge transmission will be prioritized through education and training programs to preserve and pass on traditional techniques and skills related to kithul production.
2. **Product Promotion:** Awareness programs will highlight the cultural, nutritional, and economic value of kithul, aiming to stimulate demand and create new market opportunities for kithul producers.
3. **Support for Local Communities:** Various means of support will be provided to local communities engaged in traditional kithul tapping, including access to finance,

technical assistance, and marketing support, to empower small-scale kithul producers and sustain their livelihoods.

4. **Product Diversification:** Efforts will be made to develop and diversify kithul products, such as syrup, jaggery, Carbanted Bavarage and vinegar, to expand the market and increase competitiveness and profitability.
5. **Legal Protection:** Reinforced legal protection will safeguard the traditional knowledge and skills associated with kithul production, preventing exploitation and ensuring preservation for future generations.
6. **Environmental Conservation:** Research and development initiatives will address environmental concerns, such as climate change impacts, to ensure the industry's long-term sustainability and resilience.
7. **Establishment of Cooperatives:** Kithul cooperatives at the village level will empower tappers, facilitate access to markets, and enable collective bargaining and marketing.
8. **Marketing Training:** Training programs on modern marketing techniques will equip kithul tappers and businessmen with the skills needed to effectively promote and sell their products.
9. **Kithul Plantations:** Initiatives to establish kithul plantations and provide kithul plants to individuals will contribute to increasing production and rehabilitating degraded land.
10. **Integration with Tourism:** Integrating the kithul industry with the tourism sector will diversify income sources, showcase cultural heritage, and create sustainable livelihoods for tappers.

5. Data gathering and inventorying

- 5.1 Consent from and involvement of the community/group in data gathering and inventorying; Yes
- 5.2. Restrictions, if any, on use of inventoried data;
- 5.3. Resource persons(s): name and status or affiliation; Dr Raveendra Withanchchi, Senior Lecturer, Department of Anthropology, University of Sri Jayewardenpura, Snr. Prof Yasanjalie Jayethilake, Department of Anthropology, University of Sri Jayewardenpura, Mis Tharanga De Silva, Department of Anthropology, University of Sri Jayewardenpura, Prof Sirimal Premakumara, Chirman, Industrial Technology Institute (ITI)
- 5.4. Data and place of data gathering; Southern province Sri Lanka
- 5.5. Date of entering data into an inventory; 16.05.2025
- 5.6. The inventory entry complied by Dr Udaya Cabral

6. Reference to literature, discography, audiovisual materials, archives.

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