





# KANDYAN MĀLĒ

## *Jewellery from fruits, seeds and flowers*

by Ellen Dissanayake

*A liking for ornament and a closeness to nature — two marked traits in the Sri Lankan temperament — come together in certain forms of Kandyan jewellery, particularly in the necklaces called mālē (mālaya in the singular, meaning “garland”). They are of unique interest as products translated into silver and gold by an agricultural society, which instinctively turned to the world about it for emblems of beauty.*

“Kandyan” refers to provinces of the hill country and adjacent areas in present-day Sri Lanka, a part of the country that resisted foreign domination until 1815. It is in Kandyan arts and crafts that one can find authentically pre-colonial designs and motifs that pre-date a European presence which gradually influenced coastal areas or “Low Country” starting from 1500 and following successive conquests by Portuguese, Dutch and British.

European influence is absent from traditional Kandyan jewellery, but not

PHOTOS BY DOMINIC SANSONI







that of South India or the Near and Middle East. Dravidian craftsmen worked and settled in Sinhalese villages from at least the 14th century, and the wares of Arab traders found their way into even the remotest Kandyan areas. Prototypes of most Kandyan jewellery can be traced to Hindu and Arabic sources.

Fashioning chains of "petals" (*pethi-mālē*) and "fruits" (*gedi-mālē*) Kandyan craftsmen also invented forms found nowhere else in the world, which even depart in spirit and detail from that of the mother civilization in India.

*Mālayas* are of two general types: flat, usually perforated and relatively small links that suggest petals (*pethi*); and chains made up of one or two different types of beads, with shapes inspired by common local fruits (*gedi*), flowers, or seeds.

There are of course intermediate forms like, *vii* (paddy grain), where the plant form modelled is tiny and not strictly speaking either a rounded fruit form or a petal.

Sri Lankan ladies usually wear a *mālaya* of some type when they dress for an occasion. The modern Kandyan bride wears several *gedi-mālē* and a *pethi-mālaya* that hangs well below her waist as part of her wedding costume. *Pethi-mālē* may also be fashioned into three, five, or seven strands that rest on the chest above the breasts. Fruit-*mālē* are, by reason of their size and shape, usually shorter. The 86-piece *babila-seed mālaya* in the Kandy Museum is a notable exception, and is testimony to the exceeding light weight of Kandyan metal beads. Al-



though giving a sumptuous effect, individual pieces of a Kandyan necklace are hollow, requiring little metal and being light in weight. The metal might also be beaten round a solid wax core, achieving a *repoussé* design.

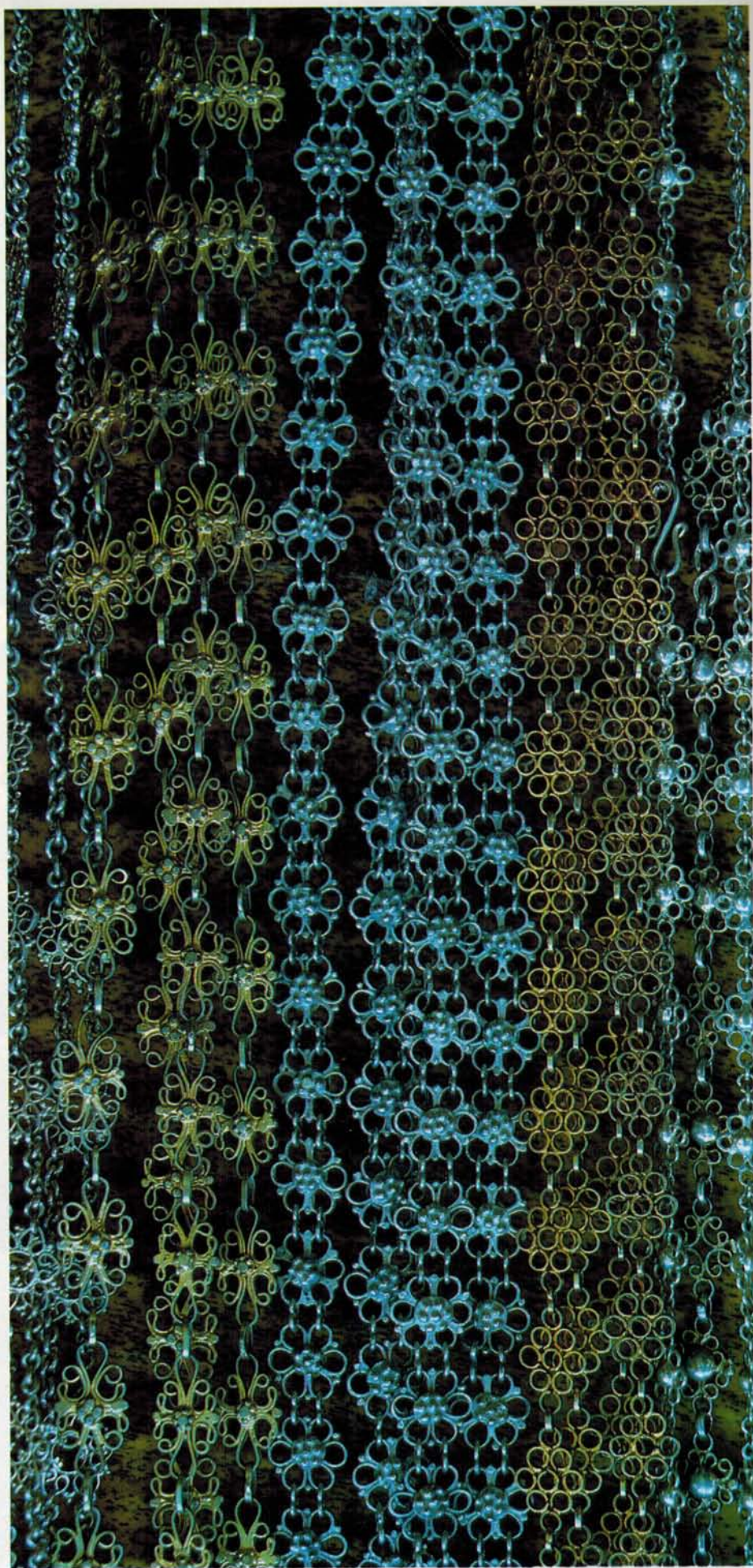
Typical beads are the elongated *aralu* (the ink nut or gall nut) and the round *nelli* (fruit). The *aralu*, like its prototype, is usually ridged. The *nelli* is an all-purpose bead, either a large or small spheroid. It can be deeply or lightly ridged, incised, faceted, slightly tapered, flattened or elaborated at the ends, or left smoothly round. *Nelli* beads are also found in bracelets. They need not be of metal, but can be made of coral, cornelian or natural glass, in which form they are sometimes attached to one another by filigree caps.

Both *aralu* and *nelli* are common shapes for beads in Indian jewellery, and can be seen depicted in sculpture and paintings from antiquity. The Pali word for the *nelli*, "*amala*" or "*amalaka*", refers to a bulb-shaped architectural detail that surmounts North Indian temples, and the *nelli* or *amala* tree is sacred in North India.

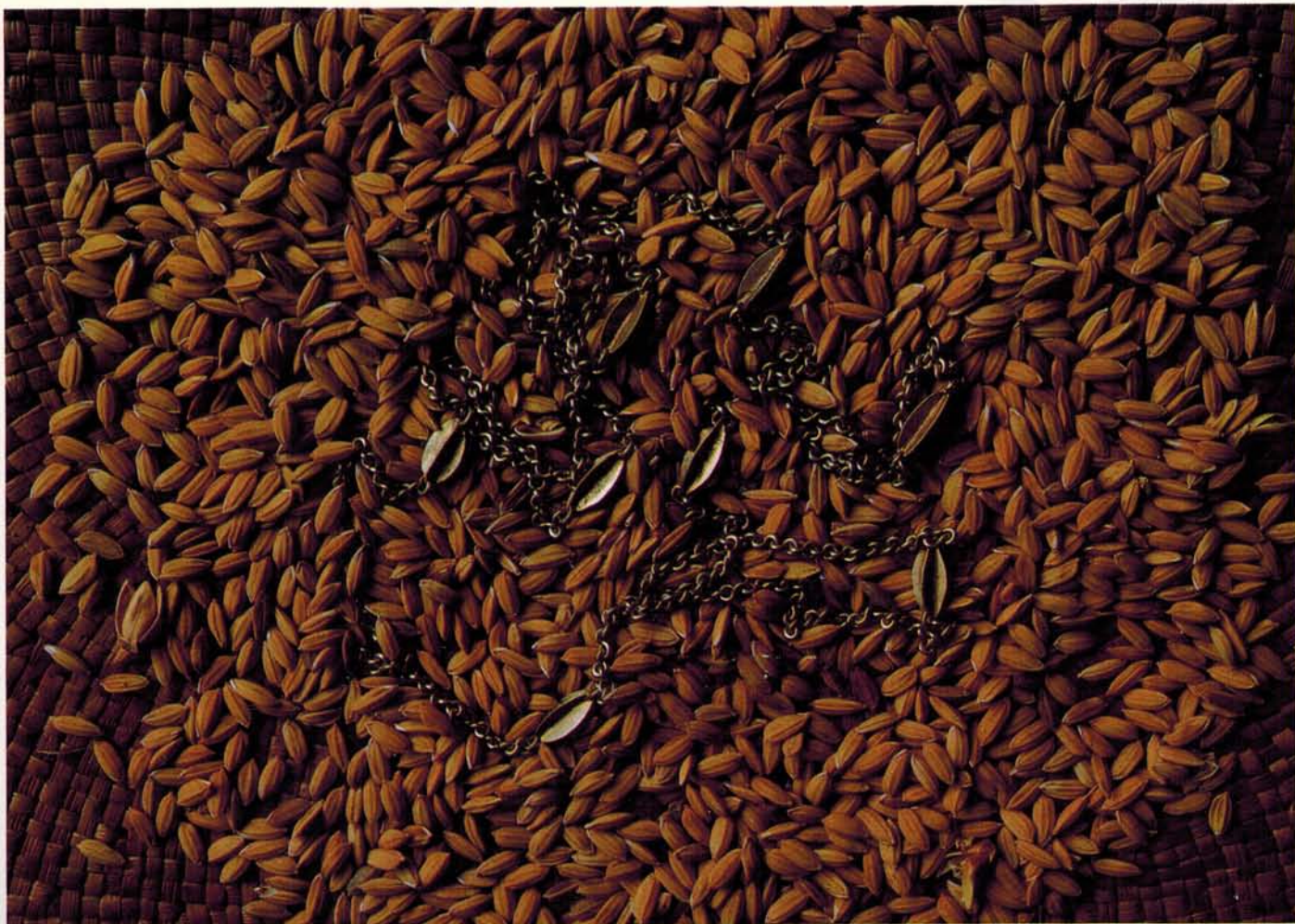
Other fruits and seeds seem to be peculiarly Kandyan in their adaptation to jewellery. One of the most popular and striking is the *pol mal* (coconut flower) *mālaya*. The small, individual flowers in a spray of the large inflorescence of the coconut tree are rendered in brass or gold at the stage when they have just opened. The slightly-curved petals are joined as if they were loosely clasping each other. This gives an intricate, convoluted effect that goes beyond the inspiration of simply copying a real coconut flower in metal. It becomes itself an independent prototype for further elaboration and stylization.

The same is true of the *babila*-seed *mālaya*, adapted from the seed-pod of an insignificant common weed, and the different "petal" forms in petal *mālē*, that no longer imitate petals from nature but manifest craftsmen's visions of an ideal petal. Like snowflakes, all are recognizably alike in kind though individually different.

Kandyan smiths and their patrons were content with jewellery designed from familiar and unpretentious models like paddy seeds, Ceylon olives, bitter gourds, or the







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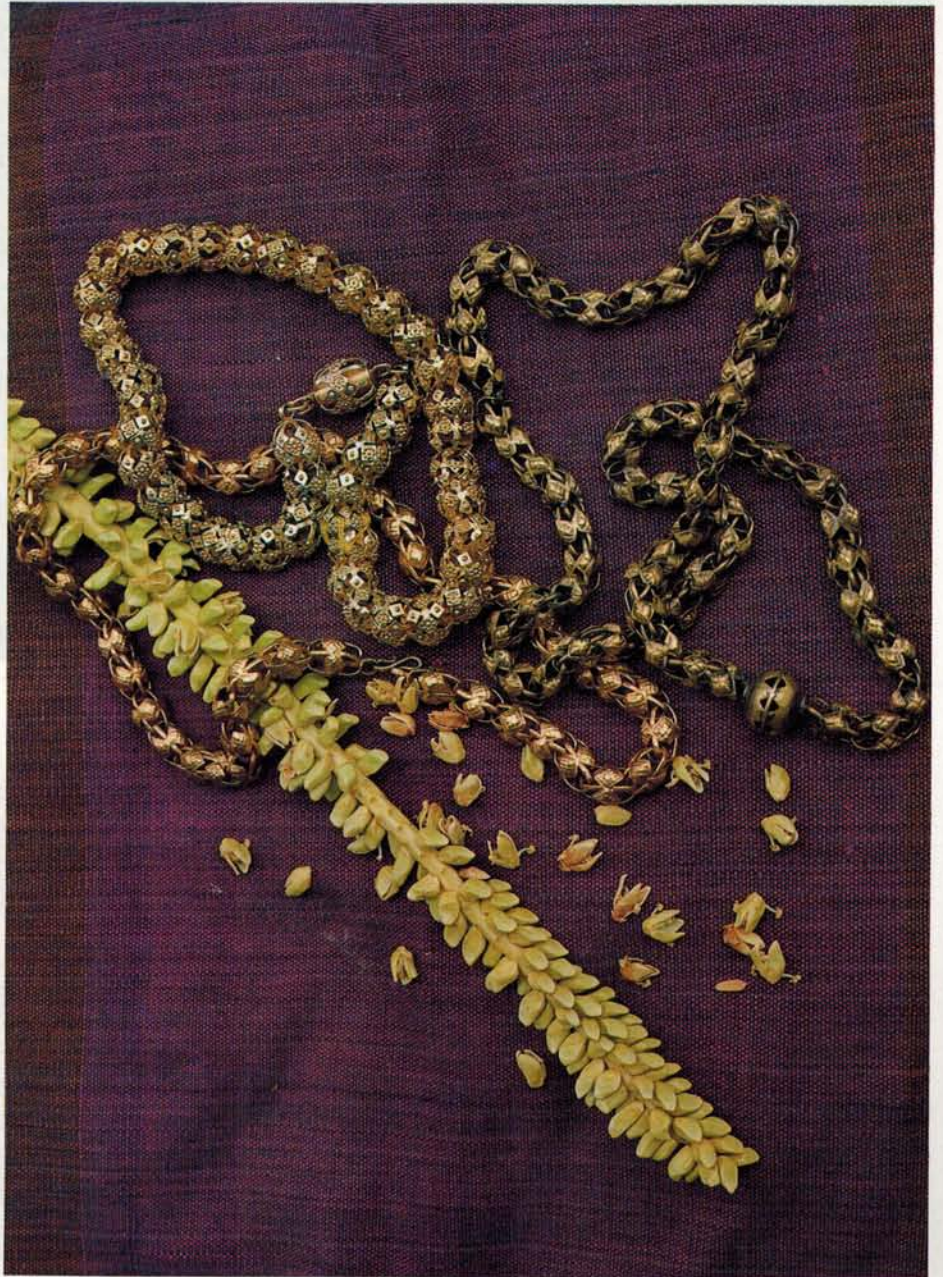


carambola fruit. This disdain for lofty prototypes extended to materials as well. The same care and attention was given to silver and brass as to gold, which was reserved for the exclusive use of the king during the Kandyan period. Beauty found in familiar plants was translated into metals and stones that were far from precious. Silicates, such as a characteristic dark blue natural glass or dull red cornelian, were often used in Kandyan jewellery. The value of an old Kandyan *mālāya*, is as much in its workmanship as in materials used.

It was never the practice in Sri Lanka, as it was in much of India, for women's jewellery to represent their entire worldly wealth. Nor, except for the king, did people advertise their wealth by displays of personal splendour. We know that even the noblest Kandyan families lived and dressed simply, saving their finery for special occasions.

Items of Kandyan jewellery were traditionally passed on as heirlooms and most families today have some old treasures in their possession, still worn for weddings and other social occasions. Occasionally old pieces may be found in antique jewellery shops, but most commonly they are modern replicas made of "German silver" (an alloy of nickel, zinc and copper).

Lacking symbolic significance, great economic value, magical power, or impressive ostentation — the usual appeals of jewellery — Kandyan *mālē* celebrate simple beauty, and a transformation of the commonplace into art. ■



Above: Coconut flowers and coconut flower necklace Overleaf left: Pethi-mālē ("petal" necklaces) Overleaf right: Paddy grains and paddy seed necklace