

Culinary Rituals and Carnival Time: Thiruvathirakali as Ritual Space for Kerala Women

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Abstract— *Thiruvathirakali is the women-centred folklore festival of Kerala's Nair and Namboothiri communities. This paper examines the interconnectedness of ritual, food culture, and women's health. Drawing on interviews with traditional knowledge holders and ethnographic observation, the study maps ritual routines (bathing rites, Pathirapoochoodal, Poothiruvathira), festival performances, and the seasonal dishes prepared for Makairam and Thiruvathira days (Ettangadi, Thiruvathirapuzhuku, special drinks and snacks). Situating these practices within Kerala's agrarian and caste-structured lifeways, the paper argues that festival foodways are both symbolic and functional: they encode social meanings, enable sanctioned transgression during carnival time, and provide nutritive and medicinal benefits tailored to the female body and seasonal exigencies. Reading Thiruvathirakali through Bakhtin's carnivalesque highlights how temporary suspension of everyday taboos creates collective space for embodied solidarity and potential resistance, even as such freedoms remain circumscribed by broader social hierarchies. The paper concludes that Thiruvathira's culinary rituals perform dual roles — preserving communal identity and offering pragmatic health practices — and calls for further comparative and clinical research to assess the long-term health implications of these traditional food regimes*



Keywords— *Thiruvathirakali, Ritual performance, Carnavalesque, Kerala women, Agrarian culture, Kerala folklore*

I. INTRODUCTION

Kerala, often called “God’s Own Country,” is a narrow strip of land on the southwestern coast of India, lying between the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats. From ancient times, the people of Kerala have followed distinct food habits shaped by season, occasion, ritual, and social custom. In every important life event — birth, marriage, death, festivals, and temple observances — food has carried symbolic as well as practical meaning. Kerala’s food culture is therefore inseparable from its ritual traditions and social life.

Among the many ritual performances of Kerala, Thiruvathirakali occupies a special place as a women’s dance associated with Thiruvathira, a festival rooted in myth, devotion, and collective feminine practice. The festival is linked to the legend of Goddess Parvathi’s penance to win Lord Shiva as her husband. According to

popular belief, women observe Thiruvathira with fasting, bathing, devotional songs, and dance in order to pray for marital harmony, the well-being and long life of their husbands, and, for young women, an ideal life partner. The ritual therefore combines religious faith, domestic aspiration, and cultural memory.

Thiruvathira is not only a festival of worship but also a reflection of Kerala’s older tribal and agrarian life. The customs associated with the festival — ritual baths before dawn, night-long wakefulness, flower gathering, lamp worship, and the preparation of special foods — show the deep connection between ritual and livelihood in traditional Kerala society. The foods prepared for Thiruvathira are usually light, seasonal, and nutritious, reflecting the agricultural rhythm of the region as well as the discipline of the ritual observance. In this sense, food

becomes part of the sacred act itself, expressing both bodily restraint and cultural identity.

As modern urban life and industrialization have transformed social habits, many of these beliefs and ritual food practices have lost their earlier depth of meaning for younger generations. This study seeks to recover that cultural knowledge by examining the relationship between Thiruvathira rituals and food traditions, and by showing how the festival preserves the memory of Kerala's agrarian past, mythic imagination, and women-centered ritual life.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study is based on interviews conducted among Brahmin and Nair women in Kerala, the principal participants in the observance of Thiruvathira. Supplementary information was gathered from traditional knowledge holders and community elders with direct familiarity with the ritual and its associated food culture. This approach helped document the festival's customs, ritual practices, and culinary traditions as preserved and transmitted by women within these communities.

III. DISCUSSION

Rituals and Cultural Connectivity

Rituals are indispensable components of social life: they materialize abstract religious beliefs and render visible a community's worldview. The distinctive customs of a people reveal their heritage, value systems, and collective memory. Broadly, such customs can be classified as social customs, household rituals, caste-based practices, and regional or national rites. Caste and religion often crystallize around fixed convictions; to validate and perpetuate these convictions, communities attach particular ritual practices and ritual arts to them. The ritual aesthetics and alimentary codes associated with Thiruvathirakali illustrate how ritual practice encodes and communicates community identity.

Lineage from Margazhi Observance

Thiruvathira is also best understood within the larger season of Danumasam (Margazhi). In Kerala, Thiruvathira functions as a continuation and regional variant of the Margazhi lent observance found in Tamil Nadu, where women keep early-morning rituals, sing devotional songs, and observe special dietary and devotional routines through the month. The underlying belief of Thiruvathira centers on marital welfare: unmarried girls pray for a suitable husband, while married women pray for the long life and well-being of their husbands. The songs of Thiruvathira explicitly recount the ritual acts — bathing in

the river or stream, singing through the morning, refraining from rice, and keeping night vigils — and the culinary preparations begin the evening before Thiruvathira on Makairam day. These practices share the seasonal rhythm and devotional focus of Margazhi, even as local gestures, songs (including regionally specific Thiruvathira songs), and dance-forms like Thiruvathirakali create a distinct Keralan identity for the festival. As a practitioner of Thiruvathirakali, I follow the customs that begin seven days before Thiruvathira with care and devotion. Each morning at dawn we rise early to take raw turmeric (pachamanjal), castor seeds (avanakkinkuru), a garland of ten different leaves (dashapushpamala), and sandalwood with us to the bathing place. When we enter the water, we submerge fully up to the waist so the lower body—especially the pelvis and spine—is immersed; this posture is believed to strengthen the backbone and the uterus. As we stand together in the flowing water, two palms strike and produce a clear, swishing sound called thudi. One singer leads the songs that accompany each beat and everyone else responds and dances to the rhythm.

Thudichukuli : The ritual bath

Ritual bathing is central to Kerala's religious imagination and appears across yajnas, vratas (fasts), Balitharpanam (ancestor rites), and posthumous ceremonies. In the Thiruvathira sequence, observance begins with the Ashwathina nakshatra and culminates on Thiruvathira. Noyambu (fasting) conventionally includes a predawn bath. Women who observe the fast gather at ponds before dawn bearing the Nilavilakku (traditional oil lamp) and the Ashtamangalyam (eight auspicious items), singing hymns that invoke the river goddess Ganga. Thudichukuli denotes the ritual act of dipping both hands into water while producing a resonant hum in time with the chant; after bathing, participants wear freshly washed clothes and visit the Shiva temple, linking personal purification with communal devotion.

Ashtamangalyam : The Eight Auspicious Items

Ashtamangalyam holds great importance in auspicious rituals and rituals. Ashtamangalyam, the arrangement of eight auspicious items, is a recurrent and essential feature of Kerala's auspicious rituals. Ashtamangalyam, include *niranazi* (a measure or receptacle connoting abundance), gold, *Valkannadi* (tail mirror), *deepam*(lamp), *purnakumbha*(water filled pot), washed cloth, *mangalasthri* (married women) and *kurava* (auspicious sounds)with the concept of God. Together they symbolize wealth and prosperity. *Ashtamangalyam* is essential for taking a bath, playing *Thiruvathira*, and *Pathirapoochoodal* (wearing flowers on hair at midnight).

Pathirapoochoodal

Pathirapoochoodal — the midnight adornment with flowers — is among Thiruvathira's most evocative rites. On the night of Thiruvathira Vrita, the women perform Thiruvathirakali after dusk. The women from the circle, clap their hands and sing various songs and dance the Thiruvathira through the night. At midnight they proceed to a nearby pala (*Alstonia scholaris*) tree with arpu and kurava. Clapping and singing with Ashtamangalyam and Talapoli (lamps). After dance and song around the platform, they gather Dasapushpam (ten sacred plants) and adorn their hair with these flowers. A rich corpus of songs is associated with the practice of arranging and wearing flowers.

Dasapushpam: Ethnobotanical and Symbolic Significance

Dasapushpam refers to the ten medicinal or sacred plants used in Pathirapoochoodal. Commonly cited species include Karuka (*Cynodon dactylon*), Kaithonni (*Eclipta alba*), Mukutti (*Biophytum sensitivum*), Thiruthali (*Ipomoea sepiaria*), Poovamkurunthal (*Cyanthillium cinereum*), Nilapana (*Curculigo orchioides*), Uzhinja (*Cardiospermum halicacabum*), Cherula (*Aerva lanata*), Muiyal Chevia (*Emilia sonchifolia*) and Krishnakranti (*Evolvulus alsinoides*). These plants carry both symbolic potency and practical ethnomedical value: they are believed to prevent widowhood, secure blessings for married life, and confer health benefits. Contemporary ethnobotanical studies corroborate that several of these species have antiseptic, anti-inflammatory, or nervine properties, which likely contributed to their ritual prominence.

Poothiruvathira: The First Married Celebration

Poothiruvathira denotes the first Thiruvathira that a woman observes after marriage and signals the blossoming of conjugal life. Celebrated at the husband's household, the rite includes symbolic acts such as chewing a hundred and one betel leaves and performing a swing with the husband, gestures that mark fertility, marital union, and auspicious beginnings.

Thiruvathirakali: Ritual Context and Mythic Foundation

Thiruvathirakali is a ritual dance performed by women in Kerala and is deeply associated with the myth of Parvati's penance to win Shiva as her consort. The festival's ritual complex — including fasting, purificatory bathing, symbolic objects, songs, and food taboos — retains traces of tribal and agrarian seasonal practices. Celebrated on the Thiruvathira nakshatra in the month of Dhanu (roughly December–January), the rites show how earlier rural

lifeways were integrated into the region's orthodox ritual calendar. Thiruvathirakali (kaikottikkali (Figur 1) must learn its intricate movement and rhythmic techniques, which are mostly transmitted orally through elders and community practitioners due to limited formal training; precise footwork and coordinated clapping—often moving laterally and toward or away from the central lamp—maintain rhythm and ensemble harmony, with steps executed across three tempo phases (Vilamba, Madhyama, Dhrutha) that alternate to produce graceful slow patterns or energetic fast passages, sometimes shifting to middle or double beats accompanied by soft singing and percussion; the dance integrates whole-body movement in circular formations around the nilavilakku, uses modest regional costume and call-and-response singing, and carries ritual and social meanings tied to Thiruvathira and community identity, while its survival depends on documenting exponents' oral histories, encouraging intergenerational teaching, and creating pedagogical resources so performers can continue to shape the tradition. Some songs which portrays thiruvathira songs in literature.

Angane ! Njanangu povathengane?

Inganekam manorajyam

enganeyennellam kel nee.

Inganeenmathamennalanganeyennurakka ne

Sankadamundeniykku, sadhayatha venamennil

Mangalagathri! Neeyendingane

tudangunnu?

Mangamarmanimawli! Mahithagunangal ninnil

Thingiyinangiyabhangurabangi vilangi

Pookkal pongi, athu mangi Guna,

angikariyathe pokil

Pankajabananoru pakayay chaminjathennil

Enganeyellamavaneyunnathitenne velvan

Angodingoduzhannangam

niramkedenda,

Shanka tudangukilengu sughangalothungu?

Manamingu, mizhiyangu, iniyengu

Chollopovathu? (Nalacharitham Attakadha)

Ganapathe mam palaya... Gowrithanaya...

Ganapathemam palaya...

Harihara poojitha ambujavilachana

Suramunisevitha sundara Gananadha...

Siddhivinayaka mukthi pradhayaka

Siddhigandarva dheithyasevitha

Gananadha Mushika vahana dhoshavimachana

Sheshabhushitha santhoshitha

Gananadha

Angushadharana Sankadanivarana

Venkidaramanabala vibhavasuraley. (Thiruvathira kalayum anushtanamum)



Figure.1

Dress and ornaments

Thiruvathira is traditionally performed by women in Kerala in a simple yet refined costume that reflects modesty, purity, and regional identity. The customary attire is the **kasavu mundu and neriyathu** or a white saree bordered with gold, usually worn with a red blouse, jasmine flowers in the hair, and traditional ornaments that enhance the ritual elegance of the performance. The ornaments associated with Thiruvathira are generally understated rather than lavish, in keeping with the sacred and restrained character of the observance. Among the commonly worn ornaments are **moonnizhamanimala, talikoottam, palakkamala, kashumala, kuzhalmothiram, pulinagathamala, chandraminni, earrings, bangles, anklets**, and sometimes a waist belt or other traditional decorative pieces.

These ornaments, along with floral adornments and the sacred herbs used in the Thiruvathira context, contribute to the visual and symbolic richness of the dance. Such dress and ornament choices are significant because they connect Thiruvathira to Kerala's Brahminical household tradition, especially the older customs associated with upper-caste Hindu communities such as Namboothiris, Nairs, and Ambalavasis. The coordinated white-and-gold attire creates visual harmony in the group performance and reinforces the values of restraint, auspiciousness,

femininity, and ritual grace that define the cultural aesthetics of Thiruvathira.

Ritual Foodways during Thiruvathira

Dietary practices are central to ritual life, calibrated to seasonal cycles, agricultural availability, and embodied needs. Although rice was historically the staple crop and often eaten three times daily, ritual contexts sometimes required partial or complete abstention from rice. Such dietary restrictions functioned as forms of embodied discipline that preserved bodily health and mental clarity. Preparations for Thiruvathira begin on Makairam day and include a repertoire of ritual foods: Ettangadi, Thiruvathirapuzhuku, Koova payasam, Ethakka chips, Koovakurukiyat, Chama kanji, and Koovarak Kachiyatu. The Poothiruvathira tea ceremony and the Thiruvathira sadya (ritual feast) were once central to the festival; in many locales these menus have been simplified under the pressures of urban life and changing taste.

Makairam Noyambu and Ettangadi

Makairam Noyambu is observed by mothers as a ritual devoted to the welfare and protection of their children. In this context, the Ettangadi nivedya — prepared on the evening of Makairam day — serves as the principal meal of the Thiruvathira observance. Ettangadi is a composite dish made from eight varieties of tubers and yams: these are traditionally roasted over fire, chopped into small pieces, and combined to form the offering. The preparation and sharing of Ettangadi (Figure 2,3,4,5,6,7) take place at dusk.

The offering ritual is carried out with devotional attention: worshippers meditate on Ganesha, Parvati–Parasvara (Parvati and Parameswara), and Chandra (the Moon) while lighting a lamp on a dung-smeared spot in the household courtyard, a practice that invokes auspiciousness and ritual purity in rural Kerala rites. After the consecration, Ettangadi is distributed to all present as prasāda, thereby transforming a domestic meal into a communal sacrament that reaffirms social bonds and maternal concerns for offspring.

Table 1: Ingredients of Ettangadi

Sl.no	Common name	Botanical Name	Part used
1.	<i>Chembu</i>	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> (L.) Schott	Corm
2.	<i>Chena</i>	<i>Amorphophallus paeoniifolius</i> (Dennst.) Nicols. var. <i>campanulatus</i> (Decne.) Sivad.	Corm

3.	<i>Madhura kizhangu</i>	<i>Ipomoea batatas (L.) Lam.</i>	Tuber
4.	<i>Nana kizhangu</i>	<i>Dioscorea Dioscorea esculenta</i>	Tuber
5.	<i>Cheru kizhangu</i>	<i>Dioscorea esculenta (Lour.) Burkill</i>	Tuber
6.	<i>Kavathu</i>	<i>Dioscorea alata L.</i>	Tuber
7.	<i>Koorka</i>	<i>Plectranthus barbatus (Andrews) Benth. ex G. Don</i>	Tuber
8.	<i>Ethen kaya</i>	<i>Musa paradisiaca L.</i>	Fruit

Ettangadi is prepared by washing, peeling, and cutting the required tubers and raw plantain into small pieces, then cooking or roasting them until soft. The cooked ingredients are mixed with cooked cowpeas, grated or chopped tender coconut, scraped jaggery, and sometimes roasted sesame seeds, after which the mixture is gently combined and offered with a lit lamp as nivedya before being shared as prasada.





Thiruvathirapuzhuk

Kerala's ancient agrarian prosperity is clearly reflected in the food and drink traditions connected with Thiruvathira rituals. Among these, **Thiruvathira puzhukku** occupies a central place as the principal festive dish of Thiruvathira day. It is a wholesome (Figure 8) preparation made by combining a variety of locally available tubers and related crops such as yam, sorghum, kachil, cassava, koorka, and sweet potato. These ingredients are cleaned, peeled, chopped into pieces, and cooked together before being mixed with salt, grated coconut, coconut oil, and curry leaves. The simplicity of the preparation, along with the use of seasonal produce, reflects the close relationship between ritual food and Kerala's traditional agricultural economy.

In the older custom, after the observance of the Thiruvathira Noyambu was completed, families would partake in a rich and elaborate feast. This post-fasting meal marked the conclusion of the ritual fast and transformed the day into a celebration of nourishment, togetherness, and domestic auspiciousness. In contemporary practice, however, this feast has in many places been absorbed into temple-centered observances, showing how ritual customs change over time while still retaining their cultural significance.

Table 2 Ingredients of Thiruvathira puzhukku

Sl.no	Ingredients	Botanical Name	Part Used
1.	Kachil	<i>Dioscorea alata</i> L.	Tuber
2.	Chembru	<i>Colocasia esculenta</i> (L.) Schott	Corm
3.	Chena	<i>Amorphophallus paeoniifolius</i> (Dennst.) Nicols. var. <i>campanulatus</i> (Decne.) Sivad.	Corm
4.	Ethen kaya	<i>Musa paradisiaca</i> L.	Fruit
5.	Kappa	<i>Manihot esculenta</i>	Tuber
6.	Koorka	<i>Plectranthus barbatus</i> (Andrews) Benth. ex G. Don	Tuber
7.	Nana kizhangu	<i>Dioscorea esculenta</i>	Tuber
8.	Vanpayar	<i>Vigna unguiculata</i> (L.) Walp.	Seed
9.	Jeerakam	<i>Cuminum cyminum</i> L	Fruit
10.	Thenga	<i>Cocos nucifera</i> L	Endosperm
11.	Manjal podi	<i>Curcuma longa</i> L.	Rhizome
12.	Kariveppu	<i>Murraya koenigii</i> (L.) Spreng.	Leaf
13.	salt		



Poothiruvathira and Kapisalkaram

It is also customary for the relatives to gather at the house where Poothiruvathira (Figure 9) is being celebrated in the evening. The food served as part of Kapisalkaram generally includes kuva kurukiyathu, boiled banana, chips, and dry ginger coffee. After this, Thiruvathirapuzhuku is served on a large banana leaf or wrapped in a plantain leaf, and the relatives usually depart after watching the Thiruvathira performance. This custom reveals the collective and domestic character of the festival, in which food, kinship, and ritual entertainment are closely interwoven.



Special drinks of Thiruvathira

The beverages associated with Thiruvathira are as significant as Ettangadi and Thiruvathirapuzhuku. Before dawn, after taking the ritual bath, ilaneer or tender coconut water is usually consumed first. Tender coconut water is valued for its cooling and restorative qualities; in popular understanding, it purifies the blood and helps regulate body heat. As a seasonal and easily digestible drink, it fits the fasting discipline and bodily demands of the observance.

Kuvanoor Kachiyatu

After visiting the Shiva temple in the morning, devotees commonly eat ripe plantain, boiled banana, and boiled chickpeas. Kuva is prepared by grinding and drying kuva roots, and Kuva noor or Kuvanoor is regarded as a medicinal food with cooling properties. Such preparations show how Thiruvathira ritual food is not limited to

symbolic offering, but also reflects a practical understanding of nutrition and bodily balance.

Chama kanji and Koovarak Kachiyatu

The principal food consumed during Thiruvathira Noyambu is Thiruvathirapuzhuku along with porridge made from chamayari or koovarak. These foods are especially suitable for relieving fatigue and sustaining the body during fasting and night-long observance. Some households also include Ethakka upperi, or banana chips, and papadam kachiyatu as part of the meal. In this way, the food tradition combines simplicity, nourishment, and ritual discipline.

Chukku coffee and betel chewing

Since the Thiruvathira observance requires devotees to remain awake through the night, sleep is discouraged during the ritual period. To reduce tiredness and drowsiness during the night-long Thiruvathirakali, hot chukku coffee is prepared with dry ginger, black pepper, and sometimes other warming ingredients. Betel leaf chewing also forms part of the ritual habit associated with Thiruvathira. These practices serve both a symbolic and functional role, helping participants sustain energy while reinforcing the festive atmosphere.

Agrarian basis of the ritual

If we examine the materials used in Thiruvathira rituals and the food prepared as part of them, we can see that they are closely connected to Kerala's agricultural life. The month of Dhanu coincides with the harvest season for many crops, especially tubers, plantains, and pulses, all of which are used in the observance. By avoiding rice and eating nourishing, lightly cooked, seasonal foods, participants can maintain physical well-being even while following a sleepless ritual schedule. The celebration also strengthens bodily fitness, brings women together in collective participation, and creates a sense of emotional joy and social belonging. In this sense, the food practices of Thiruvathira reveal important aspects of women's social life in earlier Kerala society.

IV. CONCLUSION

Food is one of the most fundamental needs of human life, yet every community develops its own distinctive food culture and daily dietary habits. Indian tradition has often understood food as both sacred and medicinal. The Upanishadic statement "Annamayam hi somya mana:" points to the intimate connection between food and the human mind. This relationship becomes especially visible in Kerala cultural practice, where ritual occasions often functioned as a means of bodily care through the avoidance of fish, meat, and other heavy foods in favor of

natural and locally available ingredients. The foods associated with Thiruvathirakali are rich in fibre and nutritive value, and they also reflect a broader concern with women's health and bodily balance. Thus, although the outward form of the ritual is religious, the inner logic of its food culture reveals a careful and intelligent system of health maintenance, seasonal adaptation, and communal well-being.

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