

# Food and Culture: An Anthropological Analysis

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52403/ijrr.20230860>

## ABSTRACT

Food is considered as one of the most important foundations of life for all living organisms along with water and air. It satisfies the physiological need of the body and also act as a major component in maintaining the health and well-being of an individual. Apart from its nutritional value, food is said to be one of the significant cultural traits that reflects the identity and the nature of people in a society. To provide evidence to the previous claim, this article intends to shed light on the relationship between food and culture by exploring the role of food in a society and its interaction with other socio-cultural institutions. In addition to that, this article also tried to describe, how the changes in food preferences can in turn affect the socio-cultural institutions in longer-run.

**KEY WORDS:** Culture, Food, Institutions, Taboo.

## INTRODUCTION

“Anthropology is less a subject matter than a bond between the subject matters. It is in part history, part literature; in part natural science; part social science; it strives to study men both from within and without; it represents both a manner of looking at man and a vision of man – the most scientific of the humanities, the most humanist of sciences.” (Wolf)

Anthropology studies human beings, their interests and creations from different dimensions and perspectives. Among them, Society and Culture are considered as notable creations of humankind, and the subject matter of Anthropology tries to understand how humans, their society and culture are formed, developed and

influenced each other throughout time and space. In the beginning of the discipline, these two creations were taken as the centre of the study and gave rise to two different schools of thought in USA and Britain, namely – Culture Anthropology focusing on Culture and Social Anthropology focusing on Society. Many anthropologists and other notable researchers from other disciplines tried to define the meaning of these two notable creations and formulated various definitions and theories to study and analyse about it.

Society and Culture have been defined in various ways. For instance, by the words of Talcott Parsons (1977), “Society may be defined as the total complex of human relationships in so far as they grow out of action in terms of means and relationship, intrinsic or symbolic”. In layman words, Society can be defined as the social organisation of human life, including the patterns of interactions and power relationships (Ericksen).

For Culture, one of the earliest definitions was given by Tylor (1871). According to him, “Culture is a complex system of knowledge, beliefs, customs, and other habits that are acquired by the man who is a member of the society”. Many anthropologists reflect that culture is shared traits that are unique to a particular society, which will be reflected through their beliefs, morals and behaviour and are passed down through oral tradition rather than written.

Society and Culture are two different concepts but is often used interchangeably in recent times as it is widely acknowledged that without the former the latter cannot exist and vice versa. To study about culture

or society, it is essential to analyse the traits or institutions that are present and followed by the individuals living in a particular geographical area. One good way of finding about what is culture is to consider how the basic needs of every member of the society is satisfied as it forms the basis of the society which we live now and lived before (Ember; Malinowski).

### **Place of Food in Anthropology**

Food, Water, Shelter and Air are the basic needs of life without which no living organisms especially humans cannot survive. According to Malinowski's (1944) theory of needs, Food is both a biological and a social need and is vital to be satisfied on everyday basis. The need for food shapes the society through the activities related to food production, consumption and distribution. Likewise, the food ways i.e., social, cultural and economic practices related to food production, consumption and distribution are defined by the society, its cultural values, customs and beliefs (Mallery). This can prove the importance of food in anthropological studies and the need for study on food ways and patterns to analyse and understand about the evolution of humans and their culture (Levi-Strauss; Levi-Strauss *et al.*).

In Anthropology, first seed of studies on food was thrown by Tylor (1865), who worked to establish that cooking can be qualified as a human universal by accounting various tribes and people as examples and food ways are acquired characters that are encultured within a society. Many researchers like Firth (1973), Appadurai (1981) and Harris (1985), believed that food and food practices like exchange, sharing, aversion and the preferences carries distinct meaning in different cultural domains and also have greater roles in expressing the inner thoughts and feelings of the members of a society. Sometimes, food practices can express about the community status, power and identity of the people or group of people (Akmal and Vuppu).

This paper, hence, will discuss about how food, food customs, eating practices and cooking methods serves as a symbol to express their values, emotions, status, thoughts and their community beliefs based on the study done in a sample population. In addition to this, the paper will discuss about the interaction of food with socio-cultural institutions and the effect of change in food preferences on the culture of a society.

### **OBJECTIVES**

The present study has the following objectives:

1. To describe the food practices, cooking methods and eating behaviour of the people.
2. To find out the factors influencing the food practices of the community.
3. To explore the role of food in social-cultural institutions.
4. To find out the effect of change in food preferences on the culture of the community as a whole.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The present study is descriptive in nature as it intends to explore the facts of food ways of the people and find out how it relates to culture. The study adopted the symbolic perspective in which the food and food practices were seen as a vehicle to convey the emotions, thoughts and culture of the people. The study was carried out in Keeranur village in Karur district of Tamil Nadu for a period of 30 days from mid-Dec 2019 to mid-Jan 2020. The data for the present study were collected directly from the people of Keeranur village through the methods of Observation, Survey, Questionnaire and Focus Group Discussion.

### **FOOD PRACTICES OF PEOPLE IN KEERANUR VILLAGE**

#### **Sources of Food procurement**

The raw ingredients required for the food preparation and consumption are procured or produced from farming agricultural lands, shandies (weakly, daily and farmers'), Home stead gardens, Public Distribution

System (PDS), Grocery shops in and around the village and for meat consumption, they procure from meat shops in weakly markets or their own poultry they rear are consumed. The Week-end Farmers' Shandy is held in the nearby villages of Pudevadi (2kms) on Saturdays and Tharagampatti (12kms) on Sundays. They also rear cows and buffalo for dairy products like milk, curd, butter milk, cheese and ghee.

### **Cooking Behaviour**

In olden days, the people of this village would mostly consume the foods made up of minor millets such as *Cumbu*, *Ragi*, *Nari payir* and *Saamai*. They would first hull the husk and break them manually then they would use that broken grains to boil it and make food for them. In today's situation the people here mostly used the methods of boiling, frying and roasting. Vegetables are either boiled or fried before consumption. They make use of spices such as Mustard, Ginger, Garlic, Coriander powder for flavouring their food. They would also use a pinch of Turmeric powder in mostly of curries and fries of vegetables as they believe that it would act as antibiotic and cleanse the food if any microbes are present. In case of cooking meat, they would use spices like Cinnamon, Red dry Chilli, Garlic, Ginger, Clove to enhance the taste and flavour of their food. From the observation it is known that they mostly prefer spicy flavours rather than sour and sweet.

### **Eating Behaviour**

Eating behaviour of the people will reflect their inner thoughts and their cultural values. This is a learned and acquired behaviour that is passed down by the parents to their children. In here, the parents teach their children to wash their hands and the plates before eating to remind the importance of personal hygiene. They would also teach them to eat using their right hand rather than left hand as the right hand represents cleanliness as according to Hindu beliefs while left hand is used to

clean ourselves. During every meal, the parents would insist the children to sit together to eat with other family members regularly. They would sit on the ground rather than on a chair while eating a meal to give respect to the food and also to maintain a healthy body.

### **Sharing Behaviour**

The people here share their cultivated produce like Chilli, Brinjal, Tomato that are grown in their field and also vegetables that are grown in their home stead gardens with their kin relatives. They also share their cooked foods like *Rice*, *Sambar*, etc... with their kins. Outside their community, they have rules to regulate on to whom they should and should not give or take food from others. For instance, for the people of castes such as *Paraiyyar* and *Pallar*, the rule of this community strictly forbids them for taking food but not on giving the food and on the other hand, to *Vellala*, *Mudaliyar* and other castes, they either give or take food. These rules are strictly adhered and are ingrained deeply even among the children.

### **Temporal cycle of Food consumption**

The temporal cycle of food consumption refers to the foods consumed by the people of Keeranur throughout the day. The people in Keeranur village usually have three meals a day i.e., in morning, noon and night or sometimes have two meals a day in mid-day and night if they were engaged in work. The meals would be of variety of dishes such as *idly*, *dosa* or *satham* (cooked rice), *sambar* or *pulikulambu* (vegetable curry) and *rasam* or sometimes both *sambar* and *rasam* with a cooked vegetable as the side dish. Most people in the village prefer cooked rice with curries like *sambar*, *rasam* for all the three meals while some prefer to have cooked rice in the noon and tiffin like *idly* and *dosa* during their breakfast and dinner. In the weekends, most preferably on Sundays, people would purchase meat like chicken, mutton, pork and beef from the nearby markets to cook *Briyani* and meat curries.

During summer, the people of village would mostly go for millet and small grain diet.

### **Taboo or Aversion of Food**

The people of Keeranur are very particular about their food avoidance and aversions especially during special occasions and conditions. During the early and late stages of Pregnancy, for example, the pregnant female is advised by the older people to avoid consuming papaya and mustard in large quantities as it will affect the growth and development of foetus and sometimes in severe cases, leads to abortion or miscarriage. During normal times, the people of Keeranur will refrain from eating the meat of snake, dog, peacock and beef due to their religious belief. Other than these, they observe fast and follow the avoidance of meat before their ritual performance in their *Oor thiruvizha*.

### **Social or ceremonial Food**

Feasts giving are important in any ceremonies and rituals. The people would provide feast giving especially in almost all rituals they follow such as Death ceremony, Marriage ceremony, Pre-Natal ceremony and also in their *Oor thiruvizha* (Village Festival). On the occasion of marriage and on funeral, the custom of giving meat feast made of poultry (especially cock) and goat, respectively, is of prominent.

### **Food And Socio-Cultural Institutions: An Analysis**

Food is one of the basic physiological needs that are necessary for the sustenance of humans according to Maslow's theory. From medicinal perspective, food is important repair material that is taken into the body to replace the continuous loss of the substance from the body and for the maintenance of the body, making it a prime factor in human life. Though food is a physiological need, the practice of what we eat, how we eat, with whom we eat are determined by the culture (Shipman and Durmus) and are believed to be a component of culture. Based on the study

done in Keeranur village, the food practices are influenced by the social-cultural institutions like family, kin relation, beliefs and status in various ways.

### **Improve Socialisation within Family**

Food practices followed by the people play a major role in the socialisation of members within the family. Their behaviour of eating together with all the members of the family will provide a chance for different generations of the family such as Grandparents, Parents and Children to gather in one place to talk about their day's experience and promote the intimacy between the generations when they share the food. By doing this it will give a sense of belonging to the members and improve their love and care towards each other. This, in turn, will help the family to maintain their cohesiveness and harmony.

### **Maintenance of Kin Relations**

Food practices also play crucial role in cementing their kin relation between the people through food sharing and Feast giving behaviours. Those sharing behaviour reflects their care, affection and the willingness to communicate between their kins. Another method of being solicitous to others is through the Feast giving behaviour which helps in enhancing the harmony within their village or within their neighbours. The feasts provided in the ceremonies like Marriage, Death and other life cycle ceremonies reflect how the specified family place importance to their relation with other people in their neighbourhood as a whole and not restricted to their kins alone.

### **Expression of Belief**

The type of food consumed in daily meal and ritual – ceremonial feast is mainly based on the belief any community have. The people here avoid the consumption of meat of Dog because the animal is considered as the companion of their three major deities *Karuppasamy, Santhana Karuppsamy and Sangili Karuppu* during their hunting. Their

aversion for the consumption of Snake is due to their belief on the deity, *Pambalayamman* and snake is considered as her symbolic animal. The aversion of Peacock and Beef is due to their growing trend on worshipping the Lord Murugan during the month of *Thai* (mid-January – mid-February) as Peacock is the Vehicle for the Lord according to Hindu Mythology.

### **Differentiating Social Hierarchy**

Food sharing and acceptance reflects the status that one holds in the community. The people of Keeranur follow strict customs on non-acceptance of food from the people of lower caste such as Paraiyar and Chakkiliyar, who are living in the same village of Keeranur. They also pass this custom to their children and are asked to abide strictly so as differentiate their status from other caste they considered as lower.

### **Food, Culture And Change**

When the preferences of older generation of 60 years above and younger generation of 10-25 years are compared, there are apparent difference between the two categories. In comparison with older generation, the adolescent and young adults hold different preference in food whether in the flavour, taste, colour or in the preparation method. In contrast to former, the latter prefer highly coloured and flavoured foods mixed in Western sauces like tomato and chilli, mayonnaise than the traditionally flavoured or spiced foods. In terms of taste and preparation, they are more inclined and are attracted to the baked goods such as western foods like breads, burgers, sandwich, noodles and momos. The changes observed have occurred due to the influence of television, social media and attraction of colourful posters, packaging of goods and advertisements. From outside, it may be seen only in regards with the change in preferences of foods that are ingested but in deeper sense, it affects much more. This change in preferences affects the both old and young, among the younger generation it affects the perspective on their traditional

food as old, dragging and boring foods while the older generation considered the recent foods as greasy, too unhealthy and too artificial which leads to disagreements and dissatisfaction among the two and other family members. Apart from this, it also affects the children's eating behaviour like usage of Tissue instead of washing hands before and after, usage of spoons instead of hands, individual eating habits instead of being able to sitting together as family. This change creates no opportunity for sharing among friends, siblings and relatives and almost has no regards for their traditional beliefs and taboos. This will result in the total change of their cultural values and behaviour in longer run due to the intervention of different food ways and cultures.

### **CONCLUSION**

From the above discussion, it is confirmed that the behaviours such as food selection, acceptance, sharing and consumption are acquired through enculturation from the previous generations. Through the findings of study, we can easily understand that the culture and its institutions such as Family, Kinship, Economy and Belief have larger amount of influence on the food practices of the people and vice versa. Additionally, any changes in the food ways will affect and alter the traditional values and concepts that are held dear by our ancestors. Thus, it can be proved that the consumption of food is not only a response to the physiological need hunger, but also have equal affluence from and to the culture of the people too.

### ***Declaration by Authors***

**Acknowledgement:** The authors wish to acknowledge the village elders and participants for their willingness to participate and for their contribution to the data for this study. Last but not least, the immense gratitude to our friends and Department of Anthropology, University of Madras for their support in writing this paper.

**Source of Funding:** The authors wish to state that there was no funding received for the study.

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Consent to participate:** Obtained from the participants at the beginning of the study.

**Consent for publication:** Obtained from the participants and the co-author.

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How to cite this article: Rajam Mohan. Food and culture: an anthropological analysis. *International Journal of Research and Review*. 2023; 10(8): 479-484.  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52403/ijrr.20230860>

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