

## Traditional/Folk Practices of Kerala - Case Studies - Part 2

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### Abstract

Traditional and folk practices in Kerala is directly linked with the Traditional Knowledge system prevailed in the coastal area known as *Kadalarivu*, knowledge from the plains known as *Nattarivu*, and the knowledge from the hilly and forest areas especially from the tribal communities known as *Kattarivu*. These knowledge systems are directly or indirectly associated with ecology, biodiversity, agriculture, food, medicine, biotechniques and cultural expressions. In this communication, the authors highlights three case studies related to Food and Medicine exclusively consumed by the *Theyyam* (Traditional ritualistic art form) performers of Kerala and about healing practices of two traditional healers belonging to the Kurichyar Tribal community of Wayanad district.

**Keywords:** *Food and Medicine, Theyyam, Kurichyar tribe*

### Introduction

The history of the traditional and folk practices in Kerala goes back to the history of the origin of Kerala. According to mythology, Parasurama an incarnation of Lord Vishnu descended from Heaven and threw his axe into the sea. The areas where the axe landed from shaft to blade rose from the sea and came to be known as Kerala. A land of prosperity, its geographical position has contributed immeasurably to its economic, social and cultural development. Historians further reveal that, Kerala was once under the sea, and was possibly thrown up by volcanic or seismological eruptions. This historic event can be very well connected with the legend. Kerala is one among the states of India, which stood in the forefront to systematically document traditional and folk practices. The best practice prevalent on health care among the different communities including tribal communities of Kerala preserved unique healing art to a certain extent. The foremost classical work in botany/ medicinal flora in the world 'Hortus Malabaricus' by

Hendrik Adriaan Van Rheedee was written in Kerala. It was published between 1686 and 1703 in 12 volumes (with illustrations of 794 plant species, out which 539 are identified as medicinal plants). It is also said that, this text book formed a main reference work for Carl Linneus. The book was published with the help of Itty Achuthan, a great scholar of traditional and folk practices of Kerala. In Kerala, the healers of folk/tribal medicine developed methods of indigenous diagnostic procedures to detect diseases and various types of treatment protocols. Treatment is mainly based on the utilization of locally available bioresources especially the plants used for food and medicine including animal products. Apart from this, they also effectively utilized abiotic components like minerals, metals and other natural products. Ancient healers also evolved an indigenous taxonomy of flora and fauna and documented the habit, habitat and distribution of different species especially used for food and medicine. Traditional and folk practices in Kerala is directly linked with the Traditional Knowledge

system prevailing in the coastal area known as *Kadalarivu*, knowledge from the plains known as *Nattarivu*, and the knowledge from the hilly and forest areas especially from the tribal communities known as *Kattarivu*. These knowledge systems are directly or indirectly associated with ecology, biodiversity, agriculture, food, medicine, biotechniques and cultural expressions. (Rajasekharan, 2013).

In this communication, the authors highlights three case studies which include studies on Food and Medicine exclusively consumed by the *Theyyam* performers of Kerala and about healing practices of two traditional healers belonging to the Kurichyar tribal community of Wayanad district.

#### CASE STUDY 7\*

##### **Studies on Food and Medicine exclusively consumed by the *Theyyam* performers of Kerala**

*Theyyam* is one of the most colourful and ritualistic art forms of Kerala. The word '*Theyyam*' is etymologically derived from the term '*Thaivam/ Daivam*', meaning 'God'. North Malabar region of Kerala is considered as the land of *Theyyam*. The history of *Theyyam* is directly linked with sage Parasurama who is considered to be the creator of the land of Kerala according to mythology. As per oral tradition, this art form was performed for the first time in north Malabar area of Kerala especially in the old Kolathunadu. The districts of Kasaragod and Kannur, Mananthavady taluk of Wayanad and Vadakara and Koyilandy taluks of Kozhikode were the areas which came under Kolathunadu.

*Theyyam* is a form of worship where man dons the semblance of God and propitiates the Gods through the traditional *Theyyam* performance. *Kaliyaattom* is considered as one of the important *Theyyams*, which is directly linked with the Goddess Kali.

\*Case studies 1-6 (Rajasekharan et al., 2013)

It is estimated that, there are about 450 *Theyyam* forms performed in Kerala. This includes *Muchilottu Bhagavati*, *Vishnumoorthy*, *Puthiya-bhagawathi*, *Pottan*, *Kathivanoor Veeran*, *Gulikan*, *Raktha-chaamunndi*, *Madayilchaamunndi*, *Vayanaattu Kulavan*, etc.

*Theyyam* performance is directly linked with the harvest festival of Kerala. It is conducted between the tenth day of *Thulam* (Malayalam month corresponding to mid-October /mid-November) and middle of *Idavam* (Malayalam month corresponding to mid-May/mid-June). This is the period in between the completion of the year's harvest and preparation for the next year's harvest. The ultimate aim of performing the *Theyyam* is to create an occasion for worshipping God and Goddesses for a good harvest, wealth, prosperity and good health of the people of different communities.

In the ancient time, *Theyyam* festival was celebrated in each village of north Malabar area under the supervision of aged and knowledgeable persons of each *Tharavadu* (family) with the help of young assistants known as *Kudakkaran* (umbrella holders), *Thalikkaran* (cleaners), *Thiyyan* (representative from *thiyya* community), *Anthithiriyen* (who is responsible for lighting the lamp) and *Vaalyakkar* (young helpers). Structure of this organizational group also acts as advocates to sort out legal issues of the respective villages.

The *Theyyam* artists belong to particular class of community mainly *Thiyyas* and they played an important role for conserving the age old art form and still preserves the knowledge to a certain extent. Most of the knowledge are still in the oral tradition and not systematically documented. During our interaction with selected *Theyyam* artists, it is observed that systematic documentation of plant material used for adornments and consumed as food and medicine by various *Theyyam* performers from different communities have not been carried out so far. Therefore, the authors have carried out a systematic

documentation on this subject.

The following information were documented from Dr. R. C. Karipath, aged 58, residing at Payyannur, Kannur district, Kerala. He is a well-known scholar on Folklore of Kasaragod and Kannur districts. He is the Director of 'Nattarivu Samskrithi' and presently working as teacher in the Teacher's Training Institute, Thaliparamba, Kannur.

According to Karipath, during *Theyyam* performance, every *Theyyam* performer is believed to be representing various forms of Gods and Goddesses. Some of the *Theyyams* represented as Lord Dhanwanthari, God of Medicine, speaks to the devotees through a human

medium like the oracle. Based on the question asked by the devotees, especially the problems related to their health, the *Theyyam* representing Lord Dhanwanthari will prescribe remedial measures for 96 major diseases by using location specific 108 medicinal preparations. During the interaction, *Theyyam* disperses *Mannhal* (*Curcuma longa* L.) powder to the devotees as *prasadam* and all of them have apply the same over the tip of their tongue and it is believed, this will act as an anti-microbial agent to prevent infection. This powder is also applied by *Theyyam* performers to control bleeding when they hit their forehead with the sword.

**Table 1:** Given below shows list of some of the important medicinal and food plants and animal products used by the *Theyyam* performers of northern part of Kerala.

Sl. No.	Local Name	Botanical Name	Parts used	Uses / Indication
*1.	Thengu	<i>Cocos nucifera</i> L.	Midrib of leaflet	Prepared in the form of brush and used for natural painting over the face and body of the <i>Theyyam</i> performers.
			Coconut water obtained from the dried fruit	The quantity available in the dried coconut will be less. Add ayamodakam ( <i>Trachyspermum ammi</i> (L.) Sprague), jeerakam ( <i>Cuminum cyminum</i> L.) and honey into the coconut water present in the dried coconut and cover it with coconut husk for 30 minutes. This is the medicine recommended for the <i>Theyyam</i> artist in the dressing room to check the tendency of urination and faecal discharge. This will give strength to sphincter muscle to control the urination.
			Tender coconut water	Tender coconut water is recommended daily for the <i>Theyyam</i> performers to prevent the formation of kidney stone.
			Golden coloured tender leaves	Exclusively used for dressing <i>Vishnumoorthi Theyyam</i>
			Toddy obtained from coconut	This is the drink exclusively consumed by one of the <i>Theyyam</i> performers called 'Kathivannoor Veeran' to enhance his physical and mental performance.
2.	Munthiri	<i>Vitis vinifera</i> L.	Dried fruit	This is a combination of food item prepared with munthiri ( <i>Vitis vinifera</i> L.) + malar (puffed rice) + coconut kernel + jaggery. This food is recommended for <i>Theyyam</i> artist during the performance.
3.	Hunted Wild animals	<i>Vettayirachi</i>	Meat (fresh)	Wild meat is prepared and offered to 'Wayanadan Kulavan' one of the Chief Tribal <i>Theyyams</i> , about 4 months back before the commencement of <i>Theyyam</i> performance to get his blessing. The same preparation is also consumed by the <i>Theyyam</i> artist during the performance. According to their custom, hunting of wild animals and preparation of wild meat is a part of <i>Theyyam</i> performance by one of the <i>Theyyams</i> called 'Kandanal Kozhan'.

4.	Thechipoovu	<i>Ixora coccinea</i> L.	Flower (fresh)	Used as garland by the <i>Theyyam</i> performed in fire to prevent excess heat
5.	Vazha	<i>Musa paradisiaca</i> L.	Leaf sheath (fresh)	Used as a pad covering the back side of the <i>Theyyam</i> performed in fire to prevent excess heat
6.	Thumba	<i>Leucas aspera</i> (Willd. ) Link	Flower (fresh)	Flowers are decorated over the <i>Thirumudi</i> , fish shaped headgear studded with wooden embellishments, mirror chips and tinsel of <i>Muthappan Daivam</i>
7.	Vaikkol	<i>Oryza sativa</i> L.	Hay	Used for the preparation of the skeleton of <i>Muthappan Daivam</i>
8.	Kaitha	<i>Pandanus unipapillatus</i> Dennst. <i>Pandanus furcatus</i> Roxb. <i>unipapillatus</i> (Forssk.) Kuntze	Fiber	Used for dressing the <i>Muthappan Daivam</i>
9.	Mulmurikku	<i>Erythrina variegata</i> L.	Wood	Neck ring is prepared from the wood. This is one of the highly essential material for the preparation of 'Mudi' of all kinds of <i>Theyyam</i> .
10.	Puli Kattarvazha	<i>Tamarindus indica</i> L. <i>Aloe vera</i> (L.) Burm. f.	Fruit pulp Leaf pulp(fresh)	Expressed juice obtained from the pulp of Tamarind by adding water mixed with camphor and pulp of <i>Aloe vera</i> (L. ) Burm. f. solution prepared is applied over the body number of times using a cotton cloth to prevent excessive heat.
11.	Puli	<i>Tamarindus indica</i> L.	Fruit pulp	Fruit pulp of Tamarind prepared in the form of 'Panakom' (diluted with water and jaggery) is a main drink given to the <i>Theyyam</i> performers. It acts as an anti-oxidant and also prevents the formation of kidney stones.
			Fruit pulp	Expressed juice obtained from the fruit pulp of five Tamarinds by adding 125 ml water and kept in an earthen pot and boiled it, reduced to 50 ml. Add sufficient quantity of jaggery and administered orally, once daily, to get stamina, prevents the formation of kidney stone and also acts as a good anti-oxidant.
*12.	Manhal	<i>Curcuma longa</i> L.	Rhizome (dried)	Received as prasadam from <i>Theyyam</i> and applied over the tip of the tongue by the devotees as anti-microbial agent to prevent any kind infection. This powder is also applied on <i>Theyyam</i> performers to control bleeding when they hit their forehead with sword. Powder of turmeric (Mannhal) is mixed with Calcium carbonate (Chunnambu) to prepare a red coloured paste called 'Chokka'. Before the application of 'Chokka' to the face or body of the <i>Theyyam</i> , coconut oil is applied to prevent burn.
13.	Thina	<i>Setaria italic</i> (L. ) P. Beauv.	Seed	Medicated gruel prepared from 'Thina' (150 gm) is administered orally once/twice in a day for 7 days along with salt and grated coconut (200 gm) to control the tendency of urination and faecal discharge. <i>Theyyam</i> performers are not allowed to go for urination and faecal discharge during the performance.

14.	Nellu	<i>Oryza sativa</i> L.	Rice	Prepared in the form of rice soup (kanji vellam) and administered along with cow's ghee (Clarified butter) once in day for a period of 7 days. Before the <i>Theyyam</i> performance, artist has to take 'vriatham' (restricted life style as per the traditional guidelines) for 7 days. This is recommended to get more strength and vitality.
15.	Mula	<i>Bambusa bambos</i> (L.) Voss	Young shoot	Sap extracted from the young shoot of Bamboo mixed with medicinal plants (undisclosed) and prepared in the form of toddy called 'Neera'. This is consumed to get more vigour and vitality. (Source: Mavilan tribal community)
16.	Unakkalari	<i>Oryza sativa</i> L.	Raw rice	This is a combination of raw rice (200 gm), Avil (rice flake), tender coconut (1), Adakkapoovan (banana)- 300gm Vettilla ( <i>Piper and betle</i> ) (5 no.) are put together and offered as 'Nivedyam' during the <i>Theyyam</i> performance. Raw rice (200 gm), coconut kernel juice (750 ml), jaggery (250 gm), dried ginger (10 gm), cuminum (10 gm) and banana - small variety (200 gm) are put together, ground well and the mass is poured into a <i>karapathram</i> (specially designed plate for the preparation of 'Karappam') and fried with ghee (clarified butter). This is distributed to the devotees as <i>prasadam</i> during <i>Theyyam</i> festival. (Source: Kunhambu Anthithiriyam, Pilicode, Kasaragod)
17.	Mannhal	<i>Curcuma longa</i> L.	Rhizome (dried)	One pinch of turmeric powder + one pinch of Calcium carbonate + 10 ml juice of fresh ginger along with one glass of water is given to the <i>Theyyam</i> performer just before the performance. (Source: Vijayan Panikkar, Chendara, Kasaragod)



Ravi Manakkadan  
*Theyyam* performer and Informant



Kunhambu Anthithiriyam  
Informant holding the traditional umbrella

### Adornments of *Theyyam* performers



Skelton of Mudi (Head gear) and other ornaments of *Theyyam* performers



*Chilambu* - An ornament worn leg to make sound in *Theyyam*



Body decoration



Breast plates (female deity)



Mularu (Wooden Breast (female deity)



Bangles (Katakam)



Head gear Mulmurikku (*Erythrina variegata* L.)



Light weight wooden collar made from Mulmurikku (*Erythrina variegata* L.)



Eye covering



*Bhagavathy Theyyam*



*Muthappan Theyyam* in the dressing room



Flowers of Thumpu (*Leucas aspera*) are adorned over the *Thirumudi*, head gear of *Muthappan*

## CASE STUDY 8

**Sri. K. Jayan (Kurichiyar tribe)**

K. Jayan aged 29, is a young tribal healer from the Kurichiyar tribal community, residing at Thondernad Gramapanchayath of Wayanad district. He started his practice about 9 years back and studied the tribal healing techniques from his father and grandfather. He usually visited the forest areas along with his father and grandfather for the collection of number of medicinal plants for the treatment of cancer, diabetes, hypertension, infertility, urinary calculi, rheumatic disorders, etc. He prepares the medicine in the form of powder, pills and medicated oils. Sri. Jayan established

his practice at his residence. It is interesting to note that, he is one among the young Kurichiyar tribal healers, who is very keen to preserve their age old traditional healing art. At present, most of the individuals and families of the Kurichiyar tribal communities are not showing interest to preserve their traditional healing art because of their changing life style. He is treating on an average 20-25 patients per day and patients from far away places including other parts of Kerala are approaching him to get tribal medicine for various diseases especially chronic disorders.

**Table 2:** Some of the information documented from him are given below.

Sl. No.	Tribal Name	Botanical Name	Parts used	Uses / Indication
1	Vellila	<i>Mussaenda bellila</i> Buch. Ham.	Leaf (fresh)	Expressed juice obtained from the green leaves of <i>Mussaenda bellila</i> Buch. -Ham. (30-60 ml) is taken orally in the early morning in empty stomach. Dose: Once daily for three weeks to cure jaundice.
2	Panniparuppan	<i>Lepianthes umbellata</i> (L.) Raf.	Whole leaf (fresh)	Decoction prepared from the whole plant <i>Lepianthes umbellata</i> (L.) Raf. (25 gm + 250ml water, boiled and reduced to 60 ml). Dose: 30 ml twice daily for 7-8 days. Paste prepared from the fresh leaves of <i>Lepianthes umbellata</i> (L.) Raf. applied externally over the affected part (anus) and tied with a clean cloth to cure piles.
3	Panchi Chukku Kurumulaku Idinjil/Kilimaram	<i>Glycosmis pentaphylla</i> (Retz.) DC. <i>Zingiber officinale</i> Roscoe <i>Piper nigrum</i> L. <i>Commiphora caudata</i> (Wight & Arn.) Engl.	Root Rhi- zome Fruit Bark	<i>Glycosmis pentaphylla</i> (Retz.) DC. (20gm) + 5 gm of <i>Zingiber officinale</i> Roscoe. + 5 gm of <i>Piper nigrum</i> L. + 20 gm of <i>Commiphora caudata</i> (Wight & Arn.) Engl. Prepared in the form of decoction (add 1L water into the pounded mass of the ingredients, boiled and reduced to 125 ml). Dose: 30 ml (1 tea spoon for children), 4 times a day for 4 days.



Mr. K. Jayan -  
Informant (Kurichya tribe)



*Commiphora caudata*  
(Wight & Arn.) Engl.



*Lepianthes*  
*umbellata* (L.) Raf. Ham



*Mussaenda bellila* Buch. Ham



*Glycosmis pentaphylla* (Retz.) DC

## CASE STUDY 9

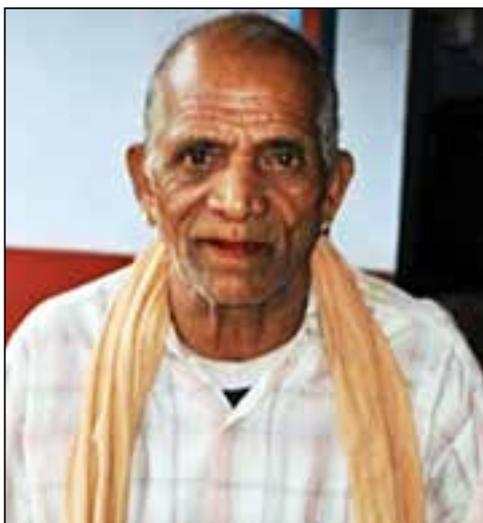
### **Kolichalil Achappan Vaidyar, Wayanad**

Kolichalil Achappan Vaidyar, aged 80, a famous Kurichiyar tribal healer residing at Valad, Thavinjal Gramapanchayth, Wayanad, is practising for the last 30 years. The local health tradition of the Kurichiyar tribe in the gramapanchayath is very rich, diverse and has strong knowledge base in tribal medicine. Majority of the plants used for different ailments by Shri. Achappan Vaidyar are location specific and effective. He cures ailments through their traditional healing art, which consists of their own diagnostic methods including pulse reading and application of various

herbal drugs. Sometimes he applies customary ritual practices along with drug administration. Healers like Achappan Vaidyar are still preserving their traditional wisdom to a certain extent and are willing to impart the knowledge to the next generation. He started a school of tribal healing at his residence with the support of Government of Kerala and extended training to selected tribal individuals. It was also observed that majority of the youngsters did not show much interest to preserve their traditional healing art because of the changing socio-economic status and life style of the people.

**Table 3:** Some of the very valuable information documented from Shri. Kolichalil Achapan Vaidyar are given below.

Sl. No.	Tribal name	Botanical Name	Parts used	Uses / indication
1.	Urithooki Amalpori Velutha Chandanam Mannhjal	<i>Aristolochia indica</i> L. <i>Rauvolfia serpentina</i> (L.) Benth. ex Kurz <i>Santalum album</i> L. <i>Curcuma longa</i> L.	Root(fresh) Root(dried) Heartwood (dried) Rhizome (fresh)	<i>Aristolochia indica</i> L. (10gm) + <i>Santalum album</i> L. (10gm) + <i>Rauvolfia serpentina</i> (L.) Benth. ex Kurz (10gm), & <i>Curcuma longa</i> L. (10gm). Prepared in the form of paste and applied externally over the bitten part, 6 times a day. Decoction prepared with the above ingredients (add 1 Litre water, boiled and reduced to 125 ml) is also recommended orally (30 ml) 3-4 times a day as an antidote for Snake bite.
2.	Avanakku Keezharnelli Jeerakam	<i>Ricinus communis</i> L. <i>Phyllanthus amarus</i> Schum. & Thonn. <i>Cumminum cymminum</i> L.	Tender leaves Whole(fresh) Fruit(dried)	Avanakku(5gm)+ (Keezharnelli(5gm)+Jeerakam(2gm) prepared in the form of paste and administered orally in the morning in empty stomach along with cow's milk to cure Jaundice.
3.	Nilamulla	<i>Naragamia alata</i> Wight & Arn.	Whole(fresh)	Prepared in the form of medicated oil and used as nasal drops to cure chronic headache.



Kolichalil Achappan Vaidyar (Kurichyar tribe)

*Aristolochia indica* L. .



*Naragamia alata* Wight & Arn. .



*Ricinus communis* L.



*Phyllanthus amarus* Schum. & Thonn.



*Santalum album* L.

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