Original Research Article

The Importance of Food in Sri Lankan Cultural, Religious, and Ritual Practices

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the significance of food in Sri Lankan ritual contexts, arguing that certain foods have a unique flexibility and role in ritual ceremonies. Previous research has shown that food in Sri Lankan culture plays an active role in ritual practices. Building on these works, this paper argues that ritual foods exist along a "spectrum of significance", in which their symbolic meaning varies according to their dependence on ritual context: some foods derive meaning primarily through participation in specific rituals, while others retain broader cultural significance across both sacred and secular domains. This study draws on face-to-face interviews with five participants, all born and raised in Sri Lanka, but now living in New Jersey, USA. In their interviews, each participant discussed their relationships with food, rituals, and spiritual influences, particularly regarding kiribath, rice, honey, and milk. The interview data exemplify that a variety of foods are significant and symbolic, but they are positioned on a spectrum of significance, where some hold significance on their own, and others gain importance through involvement in a ritual. This concept adds to current scholarship by offering a more nuanced methodology to interpret differences in ritual food practices.

Keywords: Sri Lanka; Culinary Anthropology; Rituals; Religion; Ontology

INTRODUCTION

As a small island in South Asia, Sri Lanka has a variety of influences, with two main people groups, the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Even though the island was colonized by the Portuguese, Dutch, and British empires, the main religions remain Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism (1). Religion is an important factor in the lives of many living in Sri Lanka, so these religious traditions are reflected in ritual meals and food offerings to gods and deities (1). The country's religious diversity enriches the contexts in which food can take on meaning and demonstrates that food's significance can transcend religious boundaries. Cultural anthropologists have explored the relationship between religious and cultural practices and argue that food is a deeply embedded, meaningful component of ritual practice. It is intertwined with practices that mark moments of celebration, transition, and renewal and is a powerful medium of socio-cultural expression (1).

Among these important ritual foods, rice occupies a central role. Rice is the island's primary staple due to its agricultural landscape and climate, and is involved not only in day-to-day life but also in ritual celebrations and traditions. The focus on rice in this paper illustrates how a staple crop can become a culturally significant object and an active participant in rituals. Its presence in ritual offerings, dishes conveying prosperity, and ceremonies at many points throughout one's life cements it as a symbolic substance important to the lives of all living

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in Sri Lanka. Through an examination of ritual food in Sri Lanka, this paper argues that food is not merely consumed but actively produces symbolic meaning, shaped by knowledge passed down through generations and influenced by both the food itself and its surrounding context. This context can be used to determine how flexible and central certain foods are in ritual practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent scholarship in culinary anthropology has emphasized the importance and significance of food as an active participant in cultural traditions. In their *Introduction to Anthropology,* Jennifer Hasty, David G. Lewis, and Marjorie M. Snipes argue that food is not merely a nutrient that communicates social roles and community values. Instead, it is a vehicle of personal and cultural identity handed down over generations (2). This understanding assumes identity is stable and continuous, an assumption that Jonathan Spencer challenges in his study of an island community, *Anthropology, politics, and place in Sri Lanka: South Asian reflections from an island adrift* (3). He explains that an island culture is an amalgamation of all that has come before it and all that surrounds it. This is significant because it suggests that cultural identity is not bound by limitations of an island, but continually reshaped through social and historical contexts. In turn, food traditions may also function as sites of change rather than static symbols of heritage.

Wim Van Daele is one of the few scholars whose research focuses specifically on Sri Lanka, making his work particularly relevant for this study. His ethnographic accounts of how rice is intertwined with Sri Lankan rituals illustrate its important role in marriage, death, and other life events. Aside from Van Daele's work, there is relatively little scholarship on Sri Lankan foods. Ganga Rājinee Dissanayaka has also examined religious rituals, as she discusses the ritual of Bath Mālāva, which is tied to thanksgiving, harvest rituals, or offerings (4). However, neither Van Daele nor Dissanayaka discusses the implications of changing the symbolic significance of certain foods. This study addresses this gap in the literature.

In his research, Van Daele mentions the concept of "holographic condensation" (5). This concept argues that food does not symbolize rituals; rather, it condenses social, cultural, and spiritual meaning into material form. He explains that "food is enacted by the heterogeneous network of the ritual event, which it is simultaneously taking part in shaping" (5). Their significance emerges from this network of elements, rather than from any single attribute of the food itself (5). This is a slight deviation from others in the field who have not taken such a substantial interpretation of food's involvement in rituals. Applying this concept to this study illustrates that foods like kiribath, honey, and milk function across many contexts, showing how meanings are condensed and reproduced in everyday practices.

While these scholars establish that food is symbolically and ritually important, this study extends their work by examining how ritual foods function in domestic, religious, and diasporic contexts. Building on previous scholarship, this study examines how foods like kiribath operate across religious and secular practices.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study used face-to-face interviews to gather ethnographic data on the relationship between food and ritual practices in Sri Lanka. Each participant was born in Sri Lanka but emigrated to the United States and is therefore well-positioned to provide insight into changing rituals and traditions. Four out of the five participants (TF, RW, CW, and TW) identify as Sinhalese, however SF does not. She grew up in Sri Lanka, but her parents were Portuguese and Dutch, living in Sri Lanka. Because of this, throughout the paper, participants will be referred to as Sri Lankan as opposed to Sinhalese to encompass all participants.

The interviews were semi-structured, allowing participants to share personal memories, experiences, and practices. The questions centered on the significance of rituals, ceremonies, and food in their lives. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for recurring themes in ritual and food participation. As this methodology focuses on personal narratives and firsthand experience, it allows for a deeper understanding of how Sri Lankan individuals practice ritual food traditions daily or throughout their lives.

This study was reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB). Before participation in the interview, all individuals were informed of the purpose of the study and provided informed consent to participate and be recorded. To ensure confidentiality, all participants were de-identified and are referred to by initials throughout the paper. The five participants included in the paper are RW, TF, SF, CW, and TW. Participants were interviewed in a dining room, seated across from me, with the recording device (an iPhone) placed in between us. The interviews were then

transcribed and saved, and will be deleted two months after the submission of the final paper.

In these interviews, I occupied both an emic and an etic positionality. I am half Sri Lankan, and through my grandparents (both born and raised in Sri Lanka, but now emigrants to the United States), I have a cultural understanding of diasporic Sri Lankan traditions. I am able to exist within American culture while also having this background, which provides enough familiarity with common foods, rituals, and practices discussed in the interviews, allowing me to better interpret participants' experiences.

I asked five of my grandparents' friends to participate in interviews regarding their experiences with food and ritual. Three of the five participants were close friends of my grandparents, whom I had met informally previously at events involving my grandparents and, oftentimes, at the Buddhist temple. The other two were new faces to me, but friends of my grandmother through her circle at the Buddhist temple she attends. I reached out through my grandmother, and she organized the meetings after finding participants who were interested in participating and still had a strong tie to their Sri Lankan culture, even in this diasporic setting. This continued connection allows for in-depth descriptions of rituals and ceremonies as they are still a large aspect of participants' lives. This paper limited the number of participants to 5 to allow the study to focus on individual experiences while also analysing patterns/discrepancies across participants' experiences.

After transcription, I analyzed the interviews using a qualitative thematic approach. I initially read all the transcripts and annotated them to identify patterns that were recurring throughout the interviews. The notes were grouped into broader thematic categories, including foods with a strong ritual significance, foods with a symbolic role outside of religion, and foods with primarily supplemental roles in ritual practices. Other themes, including tacit knowledge, emerged in repeated patterns across participants' responses. I compared the themes and commonalities across all five participants to further understand how food-related rituals were significant in participants' lives. These thematic patterns informed the development of the "spectrum of significance" concept used throughout this paper.

In the interviews, many ceremonies and rituals mentioned in other papers, including Van Daele and Dissanayaka, were not discussed. This is to be expected given the focus on domestic and personal experiences rather than community-wide or temple-based rituals. By documenting these personal and familial practices, this study fills a gap in the existing literature, providing insight into the diversity of food-based rituals that generalized accounts may overlook. The absence of these rituals in the interviews does not signal that they are no longer practiced or insignificant; instead, it highlights the variability of ritual engagement across families.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One by one, the participants joined me in the dining room of my grandmother's house to sit down and discuss their personal experiences. Participants were all married to others from Sri Lanka and were ages 65-85. The three women, SF, CW, and RW, and two men, TF and TW, were able to provide valuable insight into their experiences in Sri Lanka and now in their homes in New Jersey. In southern New Jersey, we sat across from each other, with a recording device between us and a list of questions beside me. It is important to note that this study is limited by the composition and recruitment of its participants. All participants are Sri Lankan and a part of a diasporic community in New Jersey, which limits the representativeness of the findings across broader Sri Lankan populations. Additionally, participants were recruited through personal and family connections, which may introduce sampling bias, as individuals within the same social networks may share similar experiences and perspectives. As a result, the patterns identified in this study may reflect shared community practices rather than the full range of variation present across different regions, religions, or generations. However, due to geographical location, this sampling population was conducive to the in-person interview format. Additionally, recruiting participants through established personal and family connections created a level of trust and familiarity that allowed for more open and detailed responses. These connections also meant that all participants shared a common cultural background within the diasporic community, which made it possible to connect themes more effectively.

The questions in the interviews included childhood culinary traditions, food in the context of the Buddhist temple, dishes that still carry important meaning because of their relationship to rituals, and traditions interviewees still participate in as they now live in the United States with their families. By asking these questions, I expected to get clear responses about specific foods used in rituals or made for holidays and traditions each year. I assumed there would be clear foods with special connotations that

vary across different rituals; however, these were not the responses I received. This absence itself is analytically significant, suggesting that ritual meaning is not stored as an explicit cultural list, but instead, emerges through practice and context-dependent experiences.

Many participants did not have an extensive list of foods with clear, direct symbolism. This trend suggests that while certain foods carry symbolic meaning through tacit knowledge embedded in ritual practices, others are included in ceremonies or traditions primarily for practical or contextual reasons, without a deep significance.

Some dishes are prepared simply because of family traditions or habits. While certain foods, such as kiribath (a dish made with coconut milk and rice), hold deep ritual significance, it would be unrealistic to expect participants to produce a definitive list of symbolic foods, as much of this knowledge is tacit and rooted in cultural traditions or familial habits. As such, I will focus on foods that actively participate in ritual practice and occupy a meaningful role in what I term "the spectrum of significance". Table 1 organizes these patterns into four analytically distinct but overlapping domains, which are developed further in the sections below. The spectrum of significance explains that some foods are more flexible and central to ritual practices than others. For example, some foods carry meaning on their own, while others are significant when involved in a ritual, and others carry little to no deeper meaning. Additionally, some foods can serve as highly transitional objects, important in various aspects of people's lives. This scale helps to measure important foods to a culture in terms of significance, both involved in and removed from ritual practices. By analyzing this framework, the study moves beyond descriptive accounts and synthesizes patterns across participants. It allows for a comparative analysis of participant insight into foods such as kiribath, milk, and honey. This framework also helps to illustrate how the meanings of foods are shaped through repetition, tradition, and context.

Across participants, responses consistently converged around a small set of foods (kiribath, milk, honey), suggesting a shared cultural schema in which ritual meaning is organized through a limited set of highly symbolic food objects (Table 1).

Ritual Significance

Across all participants, three foods consistently appeared in discussions of food and ritual: kiribath, milk, and honey. A ritual is defined as "a series of actions done regularly and in the same way, often as part of a religious or solemn ceremony," (Oxford English Dictionary) (6). As seen in Table 1, these foods were

Table 1. *Patterns identified in participant interviews with evidential quotations demonstrating the symbolic, ritual, and everyday significance of kiribath, milk, and honey within Sri Lankan cultural practices.*

Pattern	Interpretation	Evidence
Ritual Significance	Kiribath, milk, and honey are associated with prosperity, blessing, and well-being through ritual actions and symbolic language. Their meanings are reinforced through ceremonial practices and verbal expressions.	"We will put some milk in a pot and then boil it till it overflows from that" (RW). "[...] overflowing, that shows prosperity, and good luck, that is significant" (CW). ""May your life be filled with milk and honey" (TF).
Religious v. Secular Use	Kiribath, milk and honey operate across both religious and secular contexts, demonstrating that their symbolic meanings extend beyond formal religious practice into broader cultural traditions and everyday life.	"And for the first, we did this, even though we were not Buddhists, for the first, she used to boil what was called a pot of milk. And that was kept in the middle of the house, you say, on the floor. And the fire was lit, and the milk was poured into it, and it was allowed to overflow to show prosperity to come, for the new year" (SF). ""[...] offers milk rice first to the Buddha" (TW).

Continued Table 1. *Patterns identified in participant interviews with evidential quotations demonstrating the symbolic, ritual, and everyday significance of kiribath, milk, and honey within Sri Lankan cultural practices.*

Pattern	Interpretation	Evidence
Tacit Knowledge	Participants describe preparation methods, routines, and reactions as assumed cultural knowledge, suggesting that meanings surrounding these foods are learned informally through everyday participation and experience.	""[...] made by cooking rice in coconut milk, but some people, for ease, will cook the rice and pour the coconut milk" (RW). "Honey is not the bees' honey. The honey is from palm trees, from the flowers of the palm tree. They cut a thin incision and collect the sap from there, and from that, they will boil it to get the sweetness of that syrup" (RW). ""We are very anxious to eat that in the morning; when we go, before we go to school, we eat it" (CW) "As a kid, I hated it" (TF)
The Spectrum of Significance	The symbolic importance of these foods exists on a spectrum. Meanings are tied to major rituals and holidays, while others emerge in smaller moments of daily life, luck, or personal practice.	"I remember my mom used to cook kiribath for the first day of the year" (SF). ""[...] used to make the milk rice if they had something like an interview or something like that" (CW). Eaten "[...] for good luck" (TW).

referenced across different contexts and generations, indicating shared cultural patterns in how foods are understood and used in ritual practices. These findings reflect what Wim Van Daele describes as "holographic condensation," where complex cultural meaning is compressed into material objects (5). The interview data follows his explanation that the significance of food emerges from a network of elements, for example, including context and a specific ritual, instead of from a single aspect of the food itself (5).

The interview data therefore reinforces Hasty, Lewis, and Snipes' argument that food functions as a vehicle of cultural expression (2), while also complementing Van Daele's work on holographic condensation. However, as shown in Table 1, the data offers several critical nuances to these existing theoretical frameworks. The gap existing between current scholarship and condensed meanings changing across secular, domestic, and diasporic contexts is a crucial gap which this study attempts to address.

I began each interview the same way: by asking participants about specific foods they remember eating or that have significance to them from their childhood. Surprisingly, all participants initially brought up kiribath (also referred to as "milk rice" by some participants) as their answer. RW describes kiribath preparation as flexible, noting variation in whether coconut milk is cooked with rice or added afterward (RW). (See Table 1 for full quotation.) Participants described preparing kiribath for various occasions, ranging from their children's first day of school to the first of every month, to the Sinhalese New Year on April 14th (CW). Multiple participants noted that kiribath represented prosperity and good luck, specifically TW. As a result, it was prepared frequently for multiple special occasions. It was even prepared so often in TF's life that he said, "As a kid, I hated it" (TF). However, CW had a different experience. She explains that "we are very anxious to eat that in the morning; when we go, before we go to school, we eat it" (CW). It was a large part of all participants' lives, so much so that it is the first thing they think of when they think of foods important in their childhood. Across

participants, kiribath is not experienced uniformly; instead, responses vary depending on frequency of exposure and role kiribath played in their lives.

Additionally, I asked participants whether they prepared kiribath for their children as they grew up. They explained that it was something so important that they made sure to carry on the tradition with their children as well. CW explained, "I used to make the milk rice if they had something like an interview or something like that" (CW). The vague language CW exemplifies the flexible use of kiribath. While it is very symbolically important in this group of diaspora Sri Lankan participants, it is not tied to one event or time in someone's life. People observed and internalized its significance, but then applied it in context-dependent scenarios when they felt it was applicable.

While kiribath is one of the most important foods in Sri Lanka in terms of ritual significance, other foods also hold significant importance. Other foods, such as honey, were also referenced, but with more context-dependent meanings. Participants noted that its sweetness led to its association with happiness, health, and a good life. RW situates honey as derived from palm sap rather than bee honey, emphasizing culturally specific material knowledge embedded in food classification systems (RW). (See Table 1 for full quotation.) She described that older generations think that "it can cure certain illnesses" (RW). CW called this honey "treacle" and said that it was often eaten with kiribath in her family (CW). TW also acknowledged that honey was eaten "for good luck" (TW). TF also noted that when people wanted to bestow a blessing on others, they said, "May your life be filled with milk and honey," and TW spoke this phrase as well (TF, TW). The commonality of honey across multiple participants' experiences exemplifies its supplementary symbolic role: while not as sacred as kiribath, its sweetness reinforces the occasion's auspicious and celebratory nature. Across participants, honey consistently functions as an associative enhancer rather than a primary ritual object (Table 1), reinforcing meaning in conjunction with other foods rather than independently. However, like kiribath, its significance lies in its symbolic role rather than in ritual participation. Honey, therefore, illustrates how certain foods gain meaning through association rather than direct ritual practices.

Participants also identified milk as a food used in specific ritual contexts, particularly during the Sinhalese New Year. RW explained a ritual with milk that takes place every year, on the Sinhalese New Year (April 14th). She stated, "We will put some milk in a pot and then boil it till it overflows from that" (RW). CW also brought up this practice and explained, "overflowing, that shows prosperity, and good luck, that is significant" (CW). The overflowing milk is not only a visual sign of abundance but also a symbolic representation of good fortune for the family in the new year. This illustrates that the meaning of ritual food is context-dependent, a principle that applies not only to milk but to a broader range of foods across different ritual contexts, including both sacred and everyday practices.

Religious vs. Secular Use

Building on this context-dependent understanding of ritual food, this section examines how foods move between religious and secular contexts across participants, illustrating that meaning is shaped by situational use rather than fixed to religious practice. For example, TF stated that in his family, they "offer some [kiribath] in a small saucer to Buddha" (TF). Other participants did not note this in their explanations of kiribath, suggesting that while individual interpretations vary, the overall connotations of kiribath bringing a positive energy remain consistent. As a flexible and transitional food, kiribath carries significance across multiple domains rather than being fixed to a single context. For example, participants described eating kiribath on birthdays or before job interviews: secular uses that illustrate the kiribath's fluid, versatile nature. This fluidity explains the central importance of kiribath, positioning it along a spectrum of ritual foods as one of the most transitional, and reinforcing the broader argument that ritual foods vary in their degree of contextual flexibility.

SF provides a striking example of how ritual foods persist outside the Buddhist religion and the Sinhalese framework. Although she was raised Catholic and explained that "I am not [ethnically] Sinhalese. My mother's side was Portuguese. My father's side was Dutch," kiribath remained an important factor in her life. Despite not being ethnically Sri Lankan, she grew up in Sri Lanka, so she shares many experiences with other participants. For example, she continued the tradition of kiribath after moving to the United States, highlighting how its significance is transmitted through cultural practice rather than religious or ethnic affiliation. She said, "I remember my mom used to cook kiribath for the first day of the year. And for the first [...] she used to boil a pot of milk. It was allowed to overflow to show prosperity to come, for the new year" (SF). SF explained that Buddhism and Catholicism both play an important

role in her life, and now she attends the Buddhist temple often, delivering food to the priests, but in her childhood, her family was strictly Catholic. The continuation of these milk and kiribath rituals within a Catholic household demonstrates how deeply embedded they are in Sri Lankan cultural identity, extending beyond specific religious boundaries. In this case, the preparation and consumption of kiribath occur outside of the Buddhist religion, yet it still carries symbolic importance to the household. This suggests that the kiribath, as a food object, carries meaning and is not tied to any religious doctrine; instead, it operates as a broader cultural symbol, meaning an object through which shared cultural values and practices are expressed and reinforced. Through this example, it is clear that kiribath can transcend religious boundaries and function as a shared cultural symbol as it is seen in everyday, religious, and secular domains. On the other hand, milk functions as a symbol outside of just Buddhist teachings, but it is not as fluid as kiribath in terms of usage across multiple areas. Milk is primarily tied to specific rituals, particularly the Sinhalese New Year, limiting its use across a wider range of everyday contexts. This suggests that ritual foods vary in the degree of flexibility they hold across contexts, with some extending broadly across religious and secular settings while others remain context-specific.

Tacit Knowledge

Across interviews, explanations focused on practice rather than reasoning, which illustrates the concept of "tacit knowledge". Tacit knowledge is defined as "knowledge that cannot be easily expressed through logical reasoning" (7). For example, participants were easily able to explain what happens in each ritual, including how foods are made, plated, and consumed. However, less information was given about why these rituals are performed. This demonstrates how tacit knowledge operates in practice: the symbolic meaning of kiribath is learned through participation and observation from childhood and then applied across life events, rather than at specific times that follow explicit instruction.

For example, TW acknowledged that honey was eaten "for good luck," but never explained where the traditions started or why he believes honey's sweetness associates it with good luck and blessings (TW). However, the reasoning behind this gap of information ties back to how participants were exposed to and practiced these traditions. Participants all gave stories from their childhood of how their mother would make kiribath for every special occasion or practice the milk ritual every year on the 14th of April. No one expressed an experience where their mother sat them down and explained these rituals and meanings. Instead, they observed them throughout their childhood and eventually passed down the traditions to their children, as CW explained when she stated that she "used to make the milk rice if they had something like an interview or something like that" (CW).

Tacit knowledge explains why boundaries between categories are blurred between ritual and everyday meaning. When specific instructions are not explicitly stated, it becomes more common for foods to move beyond a rigid symbolism and significance.

The Spectrum of Significance

As seen in the variation of how kiribath, milk, and honey were used across participants, some foods only gain significance when involved in a ritual or specific practice. However, other foods are so significant that there is no ritual attached to them; they are significant independently. This concept is one I term the "spectrum of significance". This term explains the discrepancy between the importance of some foods that participants discussed, for example, the division between kiribath and milk. Each food varies in how significant it is throughout one's day-to-day life and in what way it is meaningful. This spectrum is in part related to tacit knowledge, as it explains some of the flexibility behind some meanings and rituals because specific details were never explicitly communicated to participants.

The most significant food situated on the spectrum determined from the interview data is kiribath. It was the first food every participant talked about, the one participants had the most to say about, and the food that was said to be eaten the most in the largest variety of situations. In each description of kiribath, participants never mentioned specific rituals for eating the food; its importance derived from nothing except itself as a symbolic object. It was explained by participants to be central, flexible, and carrying a strong symbolic meaning of good luck and prosperity. This meaning allows it to extend to religious and secular domains, and everyday contexts for something like the first day of school.

Moving down the spectrum, the next food is milk. It is context-dependent, as it is normally used in a ritual tied to the Sinhalese New Year, but it is still used semi-broadly, as the ritual was mentioned by multiple participants. The milk itself is not significant on its own, but it gains significance through involvement in a ritual. Overall, when tied to the ritual, it is highly symbolic, but has low flexibility when it comes to applying the

significance to other areas outside of this specific ritual.

Finally, honey gains its meaning from association and the support it adds to other foods. No participant explained that people would eat honey before a nerve-racking event in their lives as a way to offer a sense of good luck. Instead, they explained that it was added to other dishes and added significance to a dish because of its symbolic sweetness.

Together, these distinctions demonstrate that ritual foods are not uniform in meaning, but instead vary in both flexibility and centrality across cultural practices. Within this study, the spectrum of significance serves as a representative framework for interpreting these patterns across the three foods examined and the five participants interviewed. By comparing kiribath, milk, and honey, this spectrum highlights how significance is shaped through context, repetition, and symbolic association rather than fixed definitions. Ultimately, the spectrum of significance provides a structured way to understand how foods function differently within cultural systems, revealing that meaning is not inherent but produced through use, context, and tradition. While developed from a limited set of participants and foods, this framework may also offer a useful lens for analyzing similar processes in other cultural contexts. This framework moves beyond descriptive accounts and instead synthesizes patterns across participants to show how ritual significance operates on multiple levels. Taken together, these patterns suggest that ritual meaning in this community is not fixed within objects but distributed across practices, contexts, and embodied memory.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that food in Sri Lankan ritual contexts functions as an active participant in the production of cultural meaning rather than serving a nutritional role. This idea concurs with the existing literature of Hasty, Lewis, and Snipes, Wim Van Daele, and Ganga Rajinee Dissanayaka. However, information gathered in this study differs in some respects from Van Daele's description of how kiribath is used for New Year celebrations. As demonstrated, kiribath operates in religious contexts, but it is also equally important for secular events, such as birthdays, interviews, and the first day of school. It even persists in Catholic households, and the traditions continue as families move to the United States. This demonstrates that kiribath is not confined to fixed ritual boundaries, but operates as a highly transitional cultural object whose flexibility across contexts illustrates its position within the spectrum of significance. It carries tacit, embodied meaning beyond a doctrine. For example, the continued preparation of kiribath, as all participants noted, demonstrates continuity in symbolic meaning, while the differences in religious context and levels of adherence to auspicious timing illustrate how these traditions adapt over time and generations. As a result, this comparison between participant interviews and existing research demonstrates both continuity and variation within Sri Lankan ritual food practices. Across all participants, consistent patterns emerge in how ritual foods are described: kiribath as central and flexible, milk as ritual-bound and context-specific, and honey as symbolically associative rather than independently ritualized.

This study demonstrates that meaning does not emerge solely from formal spiritual contexts or practices, but is also produced within domestic spaces, particularly the kitchen. Across participant interviews, kiribath consistently emerged as a central and flexible food, milk functioned as a context-dependent ritual food, and honey operated through associated meaning, together demonstrating that ritual significance is not uniform but varies across foods and contexts. As a result, these ritual foods exist along a spectrum of cultural significance, shaped by both context and use.

This meaning transcends religious boundaries and moves between sacred and secular domains, but is also shaped by other elements, such as time and cosmology. Through repetition, these traditions are observed and internalized, becoming tacit knowledge that ensures their survival into the future, even in diasporic communities. In this way, ritual foods in diasporic Sri Lankan culture in the United States do not merely symbolize tradition; through their repeated preparation and consumption, they actively sustain it, shaping cultural identity and allowing meaning to endure across generations, religious differences, and geographic distance. The "spectrum of significance" framework developed in this study contributes to existing scholarship by offering a way to conceptualize symbolic variation in ritual food. It demonstrates that ritual foods should be understood as existing along a continuum of significance shaped by context, repetition, and embodied cultural knowledge rather than fixed symbolic categories.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to this work.

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