

Kurinji Landscape Cultural Ecology and Food Anthropology in Sangam Literature: An Indigenous Mountain Food System

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Abstract— This paper looks at the Kurinji landscape of Sangam literature, which is the mountainous area of ancient Tamilakam. It examines how this region served as an indigenous food system shaped by the interactions between ecology, culture, and hospitality. Using Kurinji poems from the Pattuppāṭṭu and Eṭṭuttokai collections, the study moves away from earlier research that treated food inventories, ecological descriptions, and hospitality ethics as separate topics. Instead, it uses a combined approach that includes Cultural Ecology, Food Anthropology, and hospitality studies to portray Kurinji foodways as a connected socio-ecological system.

The analysis shows that mountain biodiversity including honey from cliffs, hill millet, bamboo rice, forest tubers, wild fruits, medicinal plants, hunted game, and stream fish was central to life in Kurinji. This biodiversity resulted from generations of accumulated ecological knowledge that shaped sustainable living practices. The paper also suggests that hospitality, known as virundhombal, served not just as a moral value but also as an ecological institution. It transformed available mountain resources into tools for building trust, kinship, and social bonds. By interpreting Kurinji poetry through these various perspectives, the study provides a fresh ecological view of Tamil literary sources. It adds to Food Anthropology by documenting an early Indigenous Mountain food system and expands Environmental Humanities by showing how classical Tamil literature reflects complex, sustainable relationships between humans and the environment.

Index Terms—Ainthinai, Environmental Humanities, Classical Tamil Society, Sustainable Food Systems.

I. INTRODUCTION

Few literary traditions have expressed the connection between humanity, nature, and society as deeply as Sangam literature. Written around two thousand years ago, the poems offer detailed insights into landscapes, occupations, food practices, trade, emotions, governance, and daily life in ancient Tamilakam. Unlike many early literary works where nature primarily serves as inspiration, Sangam literature presents landscapes as an active force that influences human life. Food, livelihood, emotions, and hospitality are not separate cultural practices but ecological responses to the environments where people lived. This close bond between humans and nature is clearly reflected in the concept of Ainthinai, which includes the five ecological landscapes forming the basis of Sangam thought [1], [2].

Of these landscapes, Kurinji, representing the mountainous areas of ancient Tamilakam, stands out due to its ecological diversity and complexity. The Kurinji poems depict rugged hills, rocky cliffs, year-round streams, thick forests, blooming shrubs, bamboo groves, medicinal plants, and various wildlife with striking observational detail. These depictions are more than mere literary decoration. They reveal a society that relied on understanding seasonal changes, animal behavior, edible plants, water sources, and forest ecology. Thus, the Kurinji landscape gives one of the earliest literary accounts of an indigenous

mountain food system developed through ongoing interaction with nature [3].

Food plays a vital role in this ecological setting. Sangam poets frequently mention honey from mountain cliffs, millet grown on hill slopes, bamboo rice collected in flowering seasons, edible tubers dug from forest soil, wild fruits, medicinal herbs, hunted animals, and freshwater fish. These foods were not chosen just because they were available; they represent a survival strategy created through generations of accumulated ecological wisdom. The repeated links between certain food resources and the Kurinji landscape indicate that dietary practices were influenced more by environmental factors, seasonal changes, and cultural memory than by individual choices [4], [5].

However, the role of food in Sangam literature goes beyond mere survival. It often appears in contexts of generosity, kinship, rituals, and hospitality. Travelers are welcomed, poets are honored, strangers are received, and alliances are built through shared meals. Such portrayals show that food served as nourishment, cultural identity, and social communication all at once. Hospitality turned ecological resources into symbols of trust, mutual support, and ethical duty. In this way, food became the means through which environmental adaptation gained social significance.

Recent scholarship on Sangam literature has advanced our understanding of its landscapes, food systems, and hospitality practices considerably, though largely as separate strands of inquiry, as the following review of literature outlines.

This paper investigates food, ecology, and hospitality as sustainable connections. Earlier studies focused mainly on identifying dietary items and cooking methods. Ecological research detailed landscapes and biodiversity. Hospitality studies examined ethical values, royal sponsorship, and literary symbolism. However, few studies have looked at how these aspects interacted within a single socio-ecological system. As a result, the ways mountain ecology influenced food gathering, indigenous knowledge shaped cooking practices, and hospitality turned food into a tool for social bonding remain underexplored.

This study aims to address this gap by looking at the Kurinji landscape through the combined lenses of Cultural Ecology, Food Anthropology, and hospitality practices. Rather than treating food as merely a collection of edible items, this paper views it as the

convergence point of ecology, culture, and society. It argues that mountain biodiversity dictated available resources, indigenous ecological wisdom turned those resources into sustainable food systems, and hospitality transformed food practices into a framework that maintained mutual support and shared identity. By taking this integrated approach, the study reconstructs the Kurinji landscape as a unified socio-ecological food system evident in Sangam literature.

The objectives of this study are twofold. First, to identify the indigenous food resources linked to the Kurinji landscape, society, and hospitality using evidence from the Sangam texts. Second, to discuss the relevance of Kurinji foodways in relation to indigenous knowledge, biodiversity conservation, and sustainable food systems.

By connecting literary evidence with anthropological and ecological theories, this paper examines multiple fields at once. It offers a new perspective on Tamil literary studies through an ecological reading of Sangam texts, advances Food Anthropology by showing the potential for documenting an early indigenous mountain food system, contributes to Hospitality Studies by framing hospitality as an ecological institution rather than just a moral quality, and strengthens Environmental Humanities by illustrating how classical Tamil literature preserves sophisticated insights about sustainable human–environment relationships.

Food has become a key interdisciplinary area of research, linking anthropology, history, archaeology, environmental studies, and literary scholarship. Within Tamil Studies, Sangam literature is increasingly recognized not just as poetry but as an important historical source detailing the ecological, economic, and cultural life of ancient Tamilakam. As a result, scholars have explored Sangam texts from various perspectives, including landscape studies, food culture, hospitality, subsistence, indigenous knowledge, and environmental history. Despite this growing body of research, the links between ecology, food systems, and hospitality have usually been considered separately rather than as interconnected elements of a single socio-ecological framework. This section critically reviews past research to identify current knowledge, methodological shortcomings, and the research gap that this study addresses.

II. DEVELOPMENT OF SANGAM LITERARY STUDIES

Modern Sangam scholarship has its roots in U. V. Swaminatha Iyer, whose recovery and publication of palm-leaf manuscripts transformed the study of classical Tamil literature. His editions made texts like the *Pathuppāṭṭu*, *Ēṭuttokai*, and *Pattinappālai* available for systematic academic inquiry. While his work was primarily focused on textual analysis, it laid the groundwork for subsequent historical and cultural research [6]. Building on these editions, M. Rajamanickanar took a historical approach in *Pathuppāṭṭu Ārāycci* [3]. Instead of treating Sangam poems merely as literary works, he showed that they contain valuable evidence about geography, occupations, trade, political structures, flora, fauna, food habits, and daily life. His research is among the first attempts to reconstruct ancient Tamil society using literary evidence and continues to influence interdisciplinary Sangam studies [3].

International scholars have further broadened Sangam studies beyond regional literary criticism. George L. Hart [1] claimed that the *Ainthinai* system represents an integrated cultural model linking landscape, occupation, emotion, and social life. Meanwhile, Kamil Zvevibel [2] emphasized the historical realism of Sangam poetry and its significance for reconstructing South India's cultural history. These studies shifted the scholarly focus from simply appreciating texts to understanding Sangam literature as a record of an ecologically integrated civilization.

While these foundational studies highlighted the historical value of Sangam literature, they paid relatively little attention to food systems as a subject of analysis. Food appears as only one part of daily life rather than the main focus of study. Therefore, the connections between ecology, subsistence, and hospitality have largely gone unexplored.

III. STUDIES ON HOSPITALITY IN SANGAM LITERATURE

Hospitality (*Virundhombal*) has been recognized as a key ethical principle in classical Tamil society. Sangam poems consistently highlight generosity toward travelers, guests, poets, and strangers as an essential social duty. Food plays a vital role in these interactions, showing that hospitality was

demonstrated through sharing locally available resources rather than through ceremonial rituals alone. Vijaya Saratha [7] studied hospitality and food habits in the *Ārūppaṭai* poems, arguing that food was the main way generosity was shown. The research indicates that each ecological landscape provided guests with foods typical of the environment, such as rice in farming areas, seafood in coastal regions, dairy products in pastoral communities, and honey, millet, and hunted meat in mountainous areas. Therefore, hospitality maintained cultural consistency despite ecological differences.

While this study offers important insights into hospitality's ethics, it mainly interprets generosity as a moral virtue. It gives relatively little attention to the ecological bases that allowed for food sharing or to the connection between local food systems and hospitality practices in the Kurinji landscape.

IV. FOOD ANTHROPOLOGY AND INDIGENOUS FOOD SYSTEMS

Food Anthropology has grown into a significant interdisciplinary field that looks at food as a cultural system rather than just a biological need. Anthropologists argue that food reflects the interaction of the environment, technology, economy, identity, rituals, and social organization. Thus, understanding what people eat requires studying how food is produced, processed, exchanged, and consumed within specific ecological and cultural contexts [8], [10].

In one of the earliest anthropological studies of food, Jack Goody [8] showed that cuisine develops through the interaction of production systems, technology, and social organization instead of just individual taste. His comparative analysis demonstrated that cooking methods, food preparation, and meal structures are closely linked to economic organization and environmental conditions. Similarly, Sidney Mintz [9] argued that food acts as a historical and cultural document, revealing broader political, economic, and social changes. Together, these studies shifted food research from nutritional analysis toward exploring food as a cultural institution.

Later scholars expanded this view. Mintz and Du Bois [10] suggested that food studies should mix history, anthropology, sociology, ecology, and economics to understand how food systems change within societies.

They maintained that dietary habits cannot be viewed separately from environmental adaptation, technological changes, and cultural identity. This cross-disciplinary view has greatly influenced current research on indigenous food systems, where food is seen increasingly as an expression of ecological knowledge passed down over generations.

However, within Tamil studies, Food Anthropology remains underdeveloped. Existing research identifies food resources mentioned in Sangam literature but seldom analyzes them using anthropological approaches. Foods like honey, millet, bamboo rice, edible tubers, hunted animals, and forest fruits are often presented merely as dietary items instead of elements of a cohesive indigenous food system. This limits the exploration of the broader connections between biodiversity, subsistence strategies, cultural identity, and food sharing.

This issue is particularly relevant for the Kurinji landscape. The mountain food economy included hunting, gathering, seasonal farming, honey collection, and forest resource use, representing a complex mix of subsistence strategies rather than just a simple hunter-gatherer system. Viewing these practices through the lens of Food Anthropology allows for a reconstruction of food as a cultural institution shaped by ecology, technology, and social relationships rather than just a list of edible resources.

V. CULTURAL ECOLOGY AND LANDSCAPE STUDIES

The relationship between human societies and their environments has always been a major focus in anthropology and environmental history. One of the most influential concepts is Julian Steward's Cultural Ecology, which states that cultural practices develop through continuous adjustments to ecological conditions. Steward rejected the idea of environmental determinism, suggesting instead that societies creatively respond to environmental opportunities and challenges through technological innovation, subsistence strategies, and social organization^[11].

Cultural Ecology serves as a fitting framework for understanding Sangam literature since the Ainthinai classification links each landscape with specific occupations, food resources, plants, animals, and cultural practices. Sangam poets depict landscapes not as passive settings but as active forces shaping daily

life. This ecological view closely aligns with Steward's claim that subsistence systems arise through local ecological adaptations.

Later scholars built on Steward's ideas. Roy Rappaport [12] showed that ecological adaptation must also incorporate ritual, social organization, and cultural knowledge, not just economic activities. Additionally, Tim Ingold [13] argued that indigenous ecological knowledge develops through ongoing interaction with landscapes, not merely from abstract scientific observation. According to Ingold, communities learn about their environments through practical experiences and accumulated ecological knowledge over time.

These theoretical perspectives offer useful tools for examining the Kurinji landscape. The Sangam literature's depictions of flowering cycles, wildlife behavior, medicinal plants, edible tubers, bamboo forests, honey collection, and mountain streams point to detailed environmental knowledge gained through generations of lived experience. These descriptions should be seen not just as poetic imagery but also as evidence of indigenous ecological understanding.

Despite the relevance of Cultural Ecology, few Tamil literary studies have thoroughly applied ecological theory to Sangam food culture. Most research describes ecological attributes without clarifying how biodiversity affected food gathering, preparation, or hospitality. This leaves the ecological foundations of Kurinji food systems only partially understood.

IV. CRITICAL SYNTHESSES OF PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The literature reviewed shows significant advances in understanding Sangam literature from literary, historical, ecological, and anthropological viewpoints. Philological research produced reliable textual editions, historical studies reconstructed aspects of ancient Tamil civilization, food studies captured dietary variety, and hospitality research highlighted ethical values in classical Tamil society. More recent interdisciplinary studies have acknowledged the role of ecology in shaping occupations and livelihoods.

However, these contributions are still disjointed. Food studies often focus on identifying ingredients without delving into ecological adaptation. Ecological investigations describe landscapes without linking them to culinary practices. Hospitality studies

emphasize ethical ideals without examining the environmental processes that enabled hospitality. International anthropological theories offer sophisticated analytical frameworks, but they have rarely been integrated with Sangam literary evidence. Another challenge rests in methodology. Much existing research relies on descriptive methods that list literary references without conducting thematic or interdisciplinary analysis. As a result, the dynamic interplay between biodiversity, indigenous knowledge, subsistence strategies, food preparation, and hospitality has not been systematically reconstructed. The lack of a unified analytical framework limits our understanding of the Kurinji landscape as an active socio-ecological system rather than simply a literary concept. Furthermore, relatively few studies engage at once with primary Sangam texts, classical Tamil scholarship, and modern international theory. This separation has hindered the development of a thorough interpretation of Kurinji food culture that can connect literary findings with broader discussions in Food Anthropology, Environmental Humanities, and Indigenous Knowledge Studies.

VII. RESEARCH GAP

The review of prior scholarship identifies five main research gaps.

First, while Sangam literary scholarship has documented the ecological features of the Kurinji landscape, few studies have interpreted these descriptions as evidence of a unified indigenous food system.

Second, research on Sangam food culture has primarily aimed at identifying food items and cooking methods without explaining how mountain ecology influenced food gathering, seasonal adjustments, and dietary variety.

Third, hospitality studies often view generosity as an ethical value but seldom explore its ecological roots. The connection between food availability, resource sharing, and hospitality in mountain communities is still under-studied.

Fourth, even though international theories such as Cultural Ecology and Food Anthropology provide useful analytical frameworks, they have rarely been systematically applied to Sangam literature.

Finally, no comprehensive study has yet combined literary analysis, Food Anthropology, Cultural Ecology, and Hospitality Studies to reconstruct the Kurinji landscape as a socio-ecological food system. This absence represents the main research gap that this investigation aims to address.

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