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A Medical Anthropological Study on the Use of Medicinal Porridges in Traditional Medicine for Epidemic Prevention and Control

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ABSTRACT

Porridge, a well-known meal and medication among Asians, has been used in traditional medicine for centuries to promote human health. Porridge that is famous among Sri Lankans is rich in variation, with the region and purpose villagers make different types of porridge. Even though porridge has become a regular meal or breakfast among Sri Lankans, its specifically used as a medicine. By examining the historical, cultural, and socio-economic contexts surrounding the consumption of these porridges, this research aims to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of their significance in maintaining community health during times of epidemics. Do traditional healers prescribe any porridges for the prevention and control of epidemics? If so, what are they? And what is porridge's contribution to the prevention and control of epidemics? were the research problems of this research. The research aimed to study how porridges, considered medicine and food, are used in traditional medicine for the prevention and control of epidemiological diseases. This research belongs to the field of descriptive research that exists between social science and anthropology research. Primary data was collected through interviews conducted with purposively selected 10 traditional practitioners living in Colombo District and 10 traditional practitioners living in Monaragala District. In addition, observation method and secondary data sources were used to gather more information. According to the data of the research, porridge has been used as a medicine and immune herb in the traditional medicine of Sri Lanka for diseases such as malaria, dengue, jaundice, and anorexia in epidemic conditions. Most of these porridges are used as a medicinal mix food.

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1. Introduction

Food is one of the most essential elements for the survival of the life on earth. This is also mentioned by the Lord Buddha as '*sabbē sattā āhāraṭṭhitikā*'. That is, all animals are dependent on food (Jayasiri, 2008). From the time man stepped from the primates to the human race, until now, culturally, he has been accustomed to a civilized lifestyle compared to other animals. In this way, with man embracing civilization as a cultural animal, his food consumption pattern, which was culturally framed, also evolved and led to many great changes. Man learned to collect his food by cooking it, mixing it with other ingredients or changing the state of the food to satisfy his hunger. At what time and where did porridges get added to the list of human's food prepared by cooking? Although it is difficult to define precisely, if the history of something is analysis, it is possible to uncover the historical facts of the relevant proposition by searching for information based on literary sources written about it or archeological evidence. Accordingly, in looking at the history of the use of porridge, the time of the Buddha extends to India.

Since ancient times, porridge has been used by the ancients as a food and as an herb. Porridge one of the famous food and medicine popular among Asians has been consumed in traditional medicine for human health the ancient times. In the *Vinaya Pithaka* ten benefits of porridge have described as gives life, gives color to the body, gives health to the body, gives wisdom, quenches hunger, quenches acidity, quenches thirst, digests leftovers in the stomach, facilitates defecation and urination (Buddha Jayanthi Tripitaka Series, 2006). Thus, porridge had been used in India during the time of the Buddha to maintain good health, as well as a healthy meal. Porridge that is famous among Sri Lankans is rich in variation, with the region and purpose villagers make different types of porridge. Even though porridge has become a regular meal or breakfast among Sri Lankans, its specifically used as a medicine. For

examples patients who are suffering from indigestion, anorexia porridge is used to comfort the patients. Specially porridges have been used in traditional medicine as a medicine for the prevention of epidemics. During an epidemic, it is important to move away from the regular diet and consume foods that provides immunity, nutrition, and digestion. Among them, porridge is considered as the most important (Dalupotha, 2020).

Traditional medicine has long been an integral part of many societies, serving as a repository of knowledge and practices that address health and well-being. During times of epidemics, traditional medical systems often play a crucial role in preventing and controlling the spread of diseases. This study focuses on the utilization of medicinal porridges within various traditional medical frameworks and their significance in epidemic prevention and control. Do traditional healers prescribe any porridges for the prevention and control of epidemics? If so, what are they? And what is porridge's contribution to the prevention and control of epidemics? were the research problems of this research. The objective of the research was to study how porridges, which are considered as medicine and food, are used in traditional medicine for the prevention and control of epidemiological diseases. By examining the historical, cultural, and socio-economic contexts surrounding the consumption of these porridges, this research aims to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of their significance in maintaining community health during times of epidemics. It is mentioned in the *Mahavansa* that porridge was offered to the monks from the Anuradhapura period (Buddhist Cultural Center, 2004). *Saddharmalankaraya* says that at that time it was also common to drink a special porridge a little before the main meal to increase the appetite. As mentioned in the *Saddharmalankaraya*, it is clear that our ancients who were agriculturally prosperous used different types of rice to make special types of porridge and sweets and served them

as gifts and that porridge was made into a common dietary drink (Buddhist Cultural Center, 2017).

Different names have been used to refer to porridges in the past. One hears about different types of porridge from different parts of Sri Lanka. Their qualities and nutrition are different and these types of porridge have been used for different reasons. Porridges have also been used as food, medicine and as a delicacy. Since ancient times, *Yagu Odana* (Porridge cooked from rice) is given to a person suffering from appetite (Srishan, Abhayasundere & Jayasiri, 2023). This is processed with salt. Then, in

the current common usage, it is known as rice porridge, salt porridge, etc.

The study employs qualitative methods such as ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and document analysis to explore the beliefs, practices, and perceived effectiveness of medicinal porridges in various traditional medical systems. The findings shed light on the complex interplay between traditional knowledge, community dynamics, and public health strategies, ultimately providing insights into the potential integration of traditional practices into modern healthcare approaches.

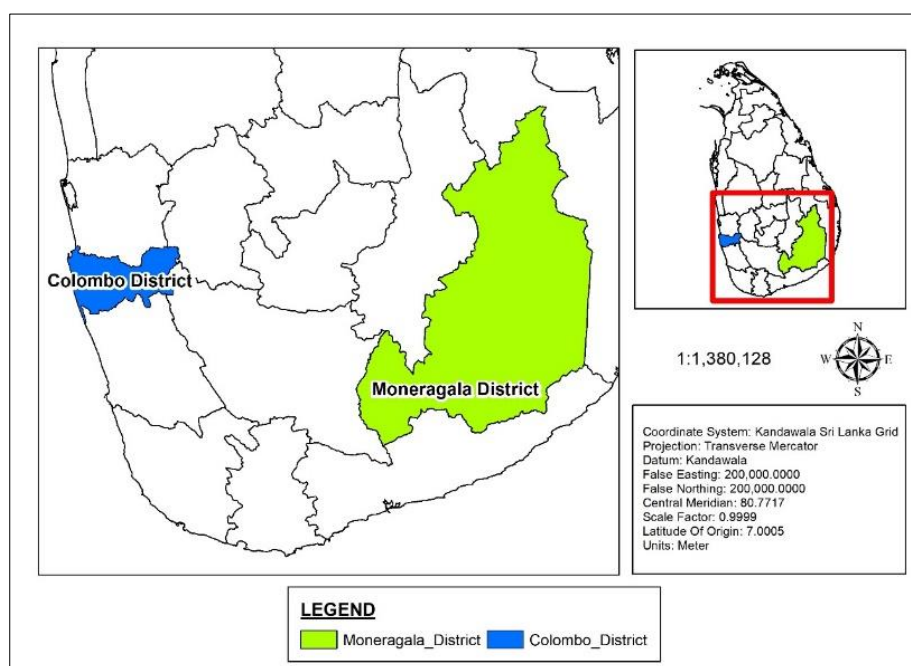


Figure 01: Study area (Colombo District in the Western Province of Sri Lanka and Moneragala District in the Uva Province of Sri Lanka)

2. Materials and Methods

The study employs a medical anthropological approach, utilizing qualitative research methods to gather and analyze data. This research was conducted under one of the medical anthropological approaches, in

which beliefs and folk medicine systems are observed through ethnographical analysis. that come under the cultural approach of medical anthropological studies. This research belongs to the field of descriptive research that exists between social science and anthropology research. Ethnographic

fieldwork is conducted in selected communities with a strong tradition of using medicinal porridges. In-depth interviews are carried out with traditional healers, community members, and individuals who have used medicinal porridges during epidemics. Additionally, written documents, historical records, and relevant literature are reviewed to contextualize the practices within broader cultural and historical narratives. The study area chosen for this research is Colombo District in the Western Province of Sri Lanka and Monaragala District in the Uva Province. Since rural areas and urban areas are represented in these two areas, the data needed for the research can be obtained by representing urban and rural areas. The map showing the study areas is shown in Figure 01. For this research, under purposive sampling, 10 traditional healers from each district were selected to make the total sample 20 traditional healers. An interview schedule was used to collect data for this research.

3.Results and Discussion

Porridge has been used as medicine by our ancestors. Porridges prepared using various herbs for various diseases are found in Hela medicine. Tips for this are found in the book '*Saddharmalankaraya*'. "It mentions a medicinal porridge called '*Ekadakayaku*', which is cooked with eleven types of medicines including cumin-chili to cure a stomach ailment" (*Saddharmalankaraya*, n.d, p.797). This type of porridge is somewhat similar to the *Thembum hodda* that is prepared in various provinces today. Cumin and garlic are also used for *Thembum hodda*. Accordingly, it seems that in the past, a type of porridge called *Ekadakayaku* was used for stomach ache. The Sinhalese used the same food-related ingredients as medicines (Knox, 1681). Thus, it is clear that in Hela medicine, foods have been used as medicines for the prevention of many diseases. In many such cases, giving liquid food to patients is widely seen in *Hela wedakama* (Sri Lankan traditional medicine). In such cases,

porridges take a prominent place. Salt porridge, rice porridge, Porridge prepared using the juice of the leaves (*Kola kæn̄da*), sago porridge (*sav kæn̄da*), *Kurakkan piti* (Kurakkan flour) and *Kitul piti* (Kithul flour), etc.

During an epidemic season, the meal patterns get differ from regular. In traditional medicine, foods that are prescribed and avoided are separately mentioned. Among them, porridge occupies a prominent place. During communicable illness, the body needs energy and should be provided with easily digestible food. Porridge has a special place among them because of its liquidity. The body needs energy to destroy pathogens in the body. It is customary to give '*bædi hāl kæn̄da*' (fried rice porridge) to quench anorexia caused by an epidemic. It helps body to absorb nutrients without much effort and gives vitality to the body as well. It also helps digest undigested food. The ingredients required to prepare this type of porridge are, Red or white raw rice, Water, and Salt. After getting these ingredients, the rice is thoroughly washed and fried. Then add water and cook it well, add some salt and give it to the patient to drink. In any epidemic situation, a porridge which is prepared using Little Ironweed plants (*Cyanthillium cinereum*) '*Monarakudumbiya*', leaves of Dhobi tree (*Mussaenda frondosa*) '*Mussaenda*', and Pipewort plants (*Eriocaulon ceylanicum*) '*kokmota*' is prescribed by traditional practitioners. In addition, they stated that these porridges provide better immunity to prevent malaria, dengue, and other types of jungle fevers (*kele uṇa*). Dengue patients are also given Little Ironweed plant ('*monarakudumbiya*') porridge to increase blood platelets.

Wood apple (*Limonia acidissima*) leaves porridge ('*Divul koḷa kæn̄da*') Purple Fruited Pea Egg Plant's (*Solanum Trilobatum*) leaves porridge ('*wel tibbaṭu koḷa kæn̄da*') and yellow cheese wood (*Nauclea orientalis*) leaves porridge ('*bakiṇi koḷa kæn̄da*') are also given to destroy toxins in the body for the

prevention and control of many epidemic diseases like jaundice. These porridges have an astringent taste that is very difficult to drink. For that reason, traditional doctors said that these porridges are used only to cure these epidemics. porridges made of Niruri plant (*Phyllanthus niruri*) ('*Pitawakka kæn̄da*'), porridges made of Marsh Barbel (*Hygrophila auriculata*) ('*Neeramulliya kæn̄da*'), and porridges made of dhobi tree leaves '*Mussaenda kæn̄da*' have been prescribed for jaundice. Patients are given porridges made of Curry Leaves (*Murraya koenigii*) '*Karapinchā kæn̄da*', Porridge made from the tubers of the Indian shot plant (*Canna indica* L.) '*Buthsarana Ala kæn̄da*', porridges made of Mountain Knotgrass plants (*Aerva lanata*) '*Polpala kæn̄da*', porridges made of Indian sarsaparilla (*Hemidesmus indicus* (L.) R.Br.) '*Iramusu kæn̄da*', porridges made of Asparagus (*Asparagus gonocladus* Baker) '*hātāvāriya kæn̄da*', porridges made of Styptic weed (*Senna auriculata* (L.) Roxb.) '*Ranawara kæn̄da*', porridges made of Solanum incanum leaves '*Elabatu koḷa kæn̄da*', etc. to detoxify the body and enhance immunity. Depending on the epidemic condition, the climate, and the nature of the patient's body, the traditional healer decides what porridge to give and what not to give. Preliminary findings suggest that medicinal porridges hold deep cultural and symbolic significance within the communities studied. These porridges often incorporate a blend of locally available ingredients known for their therapeutic properties, such as herbs, grains, and spices. The preparation and consumption of these porridges are embedded in rituals and practices that go beyond their perceived medicinal benefits. They serve as a means of fostering communal solidarity, reinforcing cultural identity, and invoking a sense of control during times of crisis.

In traditional medicine, giving porridge to patients has been associated with several positive results and potential benefits. It's important to note that traditional medicine practices can vary widely across cultures and regions, so the perceived benefits might differ

based on local beliefs and practices. This research was able to identify some of the positive effects often attributed to giving porridge to patients in traditional medicine. They are, Porridge is often made from grains such as rice, sago (*saw*), *Kurakkan*, and millet. These grains are rich in complex carbohydrates, fiber, vitamins, and minerals, providing essential nutrients for the body. Traditional medicine practitioners believe that providing easily digestible, nutrient-rich porridge can help nourish patients, especially when they have a weakened immune system or are recovering from an illness. similarly, many types of porridge are easily digestible, which can be particularly beneficial for patients with digestive issues. The gentle nature of porridge is thought to help soothe an upset stomach, reduce discomfort, and promote regular bowel movements.

Furthermore, Porridge often contains a significant amount of water due to the cooking process, making it a hydrating option for patients who may have difficulty consuming large amounts of plain water. Staying hydrated is essential for overall health and recovery. Also, In Sri Lankan traditional medicine, warm foods are considered beneficial for health, especially during times of illness. Porridge is often served warm, which can help patients feel more comfortable, ease congestion, and promote relaxation. In addition, traditional medicine often incorporates herbs, spices, and other natural ingredients into porridge recipes. These additions can be chosen based on their specific therapeutic properties, such as anti-inflammatory, immune-boosting, or calming effects, further enhancing the potential benefits of the porridge.

Some types of porridge, especially those made with certain herbs or spices, are believed to stimulate the appetite. This can be particularly helpful for patients who have a reduced desire to eat due to illness. As well as, when patients are recovering from an epidemic or illness, their bodies may need easily digestible foods that provide essential

nutrients without putting too much stress on the digestive system. Porridge fits this description, potentially aiding in the recovery process.

Furthermore, the study reveals that the effectiveness of these porridges is not solely attributed to their physical properties, but also to the psychosocial comfort they provide. Traditional healers play a pivotal role in prescribing and preparing these porridges, imbuing them with spiritual and healing energy. The communal act of consuming these porridges fosters a shared sense of responsibility for health, encouraging collective efforts to combat epidemics.

Thus, in the traditional medicine system of Sri Lanka, several basic needs of providing medicated porridges to the patients to cure epidemic diseases and other various diseases could be identified. Medicinal porridges are a type of food used in traditional medicine, combining nourishing ingredients with therapeutic properties. They are often used to promote health, boost immunity, and treat specific ailments. One of the main requirements for providing these medicated porridges is their nutrient-rich base. It is especially important to use grains and have a liquid diet. Another major requirement is the use of therapeutic ingredients. There, healing herbs (herbs and spices) such as ginger, turmeric, cinnamon and cloves are added for their anti-inflammatory, antioxidant and digestive benefits. Another major requirement was the health benefits of these medicated porridges. In particular, it has the ability to maintain digestive health, increase immunity, anti-inflammatory properties, purify toxins, help maintain energy and vitality, etc. Thus, Medicinal porridges are often seen as a holistic approach to maintaining well-being, combining the benefits of nutrition with traditional healing methods.

The findings of this study underscore the intricate relationship between traditional medical practices and public health strategies. The utilization of medicinal

porridges exemplifies how cultural practices can be harnessed to enhance community resilience during epidemics. Integrating traditional knowledge into modern healthcare approaches could offer a holistic and culturally sensitive response to disease outbreaks.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Thus, it can be concluded that indigenous medicine uses many types of porridge for the prevention and control of epidemics. Most of these porridges are used as a medicinal mix food. This suggests that porridge is used to boost the immune system. It can be concluded that the use of these types of porridge to cure patients by traditional medicine is more helpful as a strategy used to maintain the patient's body strength and provide the body with the necessary energy to heal the disease. That is, in epidemic situations, due to the weakening of the body's strength, people are easily infected with the disease. It is clear that these types of porridge have helped to prevent this and increase body strength. The researcher suggests that this valuable traditional knowledge pertaining to the foods and eating habits should be taken in to the community level in order to maintain healthiness and prevent from contemporary epidemics.

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