

WHEN WE EAT WHAT WE EAT: CLASSIFYING CRISPY FOODS IN MALAYSIAN TAMIL CUISINE

Malaysia is well known for diversity in its culinary traditions. What people eat provides for significant group boundary markers since foods are eaten or avoided to signify ethnic origin, religious orientation, and caste status, as well as to mark the celebration of a religious festival or observance of a rite of passage. Culinary tradition also dictates the context or situation in which specific foods are eaten. The consumption of crispy foods is an example in Southern Indian cuisine, particularly Tamil foods.

This paper¹ examines the gastronomic rules that determine why and when crispy foods are eaten among the Tamil community of Malaysia. The presence of gastronomic rules suggests that foods are attributed with meanings evoked when specific foods are consumed. The foods analysed here include those considered quintessentially traditional, although Tamils consume foods of other major ethnic groups in their everyday diets². An ethnographic investigation of the diets of twenty-five Tamil Hindu households in Klang Valley³ in Peninsular Malaysia revealed foods that are highly ordered and classified into categories of inclusion and exclusion. 'Crispy' foods, for example, fall within a broader spectrum of dry foods, which, in turn, are contrasted with foods considered 'soft'/'wet.' Contexts for eating crispy foods reveal their unique status. When eaten at main meals, crispy foods are the peripheral food items ; it is only when they are eaten for a snack that they constitute a central food item (cf. Levi-Strauss 1963, as quoted in Goody 1982 : 19). In contrast are soft/wet foods ; there is less of an order

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² The other major ethnic groups are the Malays and Chinese. Hence, it is not unusual for an Indian family to prepare Chinese noodles or a stir-fry vegetable dish for everyday meals.

³ Ethnographic fieldwork, conducted over a period of twelve months from April 1996 to March 1997 for doctoral research, was funded by the Claudia DeLys Dissertation Fund, Department of Anthropology, Syracuse University. Subsequently, two shorter-term research trips were made in April 1998 and October 2001. A Roscoe Martin Award from the Maxwell School of Public Affairs and Citizenship, Syracuse University sponsored the former trip.

associated with them and, thus, may be consumed as central and peripheral food items both at main meals and as snacks. A plausible explanation for this highly ordered pattern may stem from the textural composition of crispy foods.

In his seminal work “Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption,” Barthes (1997 : 23) argues for an opposition between crispy foods (and drinks) and other foods. For him, the crispy encompasses “everything that crunches, crackles, grates, sparkles, from potato chips to certain kinds of beer...crisp may be applied to a product just because it is ice cold, to another because it is sour, to a third because it is brittle” (Barthes, 1997 : 23). The kinds of crispy foods referred to in this article includes foods brittle and crunchy in texture, and when eaten produces a crackling noise.

Structural Oppositions in Tamil Foods

The culinary heritage of Malaysian Indians matches closely to the foods consumed by the inhabitants of the Indian Subcontinent. Specifically, the food culture of India is markedly varied depending on region. In Southern India where the climate is hotter, rice is produced in abundant supply and, thus, is the staple, whereas in the Northern reaches wheat is eaten in fair amounts (see Chakravarty, 1972 : 118 ; Crooke, 1972 : 226). Although pulses may be obtained and eaten both in the South and North, the ways in which they are prepared and served may differ according to culinary tradition. Dishes in Southern Indian cooking tend to use more coconut, peanut and sesame oils⁴, mustard seeds, spices and chili peppers, tamarind, and yoghurt (see Chakravarty, 1972 : 118). This culinary heritage saw very few changes even among the migrants to the Malayan⁵ Peninsula in the 19th and 20th centuries ; their staple continues to be rice, complemented by different meat and fish platters for the non-vegetarian and an array of vegetable entrees for the vegetarian. By and large, the majority of prepared dishes in Tamil cuisine, consumed across class and caste groups, may be described as soft/wet in texture. Present-day Indian cooking is not very different from ancient Indian cookery with soft/wet-textured dishes dominating the cuisine (cf. Basham, 1954 : 214).

The many soft/wet dishes in Tamil cuisine may be prepared in curry-style (the word curry is the Anglicised derivative of the Tamil word *kari*, literally meaning sauce laced with combinations of spices) (DeWitt and Gerlach, 1990 : 204), *varuttal*-style (a cooking method that renders the meat or vegetable to be dry), or *kuttu*-style (a dish prepared with lentils and grated coconut). Curries may be classified further into the dry and wet curry. The dry curry is a thick sauce enveloping the meat, fish or vegetable item. The wet curry is much lighter and the liquid serves to ‘drown’ the meat, fish or vegetable item. Preparing the curry, *paratel* and *kuttu* require different cooking methods : shallow frying usually

⁴ Sesame oil is more commonly called *gingili* oil in Malaysia, as it is in India.

⁵ After gaining independence from the British in 1957, Malaya was renamed Malaysia.

produces the dry curry, *paratel* and *kuttu*, while the wet curry is the result of stewing.

Opposed to this category of soft/wet foods are those completely dry in texture. Here, the pioneering work of Claude Levi-Strauss (1997) may be evoked. His premise is that humans, distinct from animals, cook their foods through culturally-specific means, producing the binary distinctions - 'raw' and 'cooked.' For him, food is a cultural system where the 'cooked' reflects culture whereas the 'raw' reflects nature. His analysis takes on greater complexity when he factors in the dimension of the 'rotten,' as a natural transformation of either the raw or the cooked. Although Levi-Strauss's ideas have received critical reviews, his model is useful as it reveals the contrastive features present in cultural as well as food systems (cf. Levi-Strauss 1963, as quoted in Goody 1982 : 19). The Tamil food system is no exception, as foods are also perceived in binary contrasts when soft/wet foods are juxtaposed against dry foods.

Essentially, there are three cooking techniques that render a dry dish, the most common being deep-frying⁶. Usually the food item is dropped into hot oil, while among the wealthier *ney* or clarified butter (Tamil) may be used, as it produces a richer taste. Dry foods that are deep-fried and eaten for an everyday meal are *appalam* (a deep-fried savoury cracker), fried chicken and fish, vegetable and meat/fish cutlets, *pakora* (a savoury made from seasoned chickpea, onions, ginger and chilies), and *bhaji* (selected seasoned vegetables coated in a thin batter made from gram flour and rice flour)⁷. Foods that are crispy are deep-fried. Adding heated *ney*, for example, to roasted green pea or semolina flour also produces a dry food, although this method is reserved for sweets only. For example, *badushah*, *jangiri*, *laddu*, *barfi* and *mysore paku* are ready to eat after the dough is mixed with *ney*, and then shaped, and left to cool. Alternatively, flour or semolina may be added to boiling *ney* and heated for a short time, after which the mixture is spread on a greased tray and cut into slices.

Among dry foods, once again there emerges two categories -- the crispy/dry and the soft/dry -- both structurally opposed to the other and dependent upon the context in which they are eaten. Crispy foods are bound by one feature -- they are peripheral foods consumed as accompaniments to a main meal or eaten as central foods for a snack. In contrast are soft/dry foods ; they are consumed as central or peripheral food items at a main meal or as primary food items as a snack.

The cooking medium for preparing crispy foods also determines the length of time they can be kept. While soft/wet dishes are boiled, stewed or shallow fried with the use of any amount of water, dry foods are almost always cooked in fat. Ferro-Luzzi (1977 : 359), drawing inspiration from Levi-Strauss's "Culinary Triangle," argues that boiled foods in Indian cuisine are considered imperfect because of the use of water - a polluting agent that renders the foods susceptible to

⁶ When the cooking technique of shallow frying (as in Western foods) (Murcott, 1995 : 222) is used in Tamil cooking, the end-product is invariably a dish that is soft/wet. In contrast is stir-frying (as in Chinese foods) (Anderson, 1988 : 138), a cooking technique that does not exist in traditional Tamil cuisine.

⁷ Fried chicken and fish, cutlets, as well as *pakora* and *bhaji* are crispy to the taste immediately after frying. However, these foods are not classified as crispy since they lose their crispness and turn soft over time when not eaten immediately.

deterioration. In contrast are *kaccha* or fried foods, including crispy foods that can be kept for days. In the past, *ney* may have been used, especially by the upper classes, although nowadays oil is used instead. Since *ney* comes from a sacred animal, its very incorporation into a dish automatically acts as a purifying agent.

From the above analysis, a number of structural oppositions are evident :

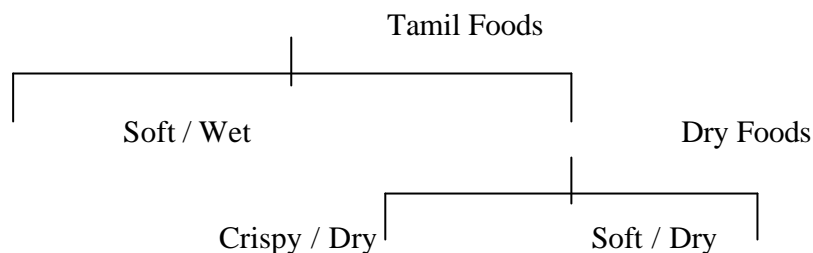


Diagram 1 : Structural Oppositions in Tamil Foods

Meals and Snacks Defined

Meals are quintessentially what make us human. People from different societies, however, have distinct notions of what constitutes a meal (Mintz, 1992 : 15). In most cultures, meals are considered superior to snacks. For example, breakfast, lunch and dinner are considered main meals of a day, while a snack in the late morning or late afternoon is considered an option.

The combined efforts of Mary Douglas and Michael Nicod (1974) have focused on how context prescribes the kinds of foods eaten. They found that in Britain, meals and snacks are clearly differentiated : “if food is eaten as part of an event, then we have a “meal.” A “snack” [in contrast] is an unstructured food event in which one or more self-constrained food items may be served...Snacks may be sweet or savoury ; separable from but capable of accompanying a drink. The meal, by contrast, has no self-contained food items, and is strongly rule-bound as to permitted combinations and sequences” (Douglas and Nicod, 1974 : 744). Elsewhere, Nicod (1979 : 56 - 57, as cited in Marshall, 1995 : 266) remarked that a meal is : “a ‘structured event,’ a social occasion organised by rules prescribing time, place and sequence of actions...(and)...is strictly rule bound as to permit combinations and sequences.” In the same way, meals and snacks are generally fixed by time, meal patterns are equally significant in conveying what foods are appropriate for which occasions (see also Marshall, 1995 : 265) and, as such, the kinds of foods eaten are bound by gastronomic rules. In Britain, a number of cooking techniques and not just one provides for different dishes, defining the “cooked dinner” and, therefore, the “proper meal” (Murcott, 1995 : 229). Thus, foods eaten at meals are structurally differentiated from foods eaten as snacks as it is inappropriate for foods eaten in each situation to be eaten outside that context.

For Barthes (1997), food is a signifier of the situation : “they [meaning food] refer not only to display, but to a much larger set of themes and situations. One could say that an entire “world” (social environment) is present in and signified by food...[as such] food is becoming incorporated into an ever-lengthening list of situations...[and, hence, it]...is also charged with signifying the situation in which it is used” (Barthes, 1997 : 23, 25). He goes on to say that people eat to sustain their biological functions. Once these basic needs are met, food takes on the “value of protocol,” when it has “a constant tendency to transform itself into situation” (Barthes, 1997 : 26). Crispy foods in Tamil cuisine do exactly that ; their consumption signals the situation - whether it is “meal time” or “snack time.” Since context or situation influences the kinds of crispy foods deemed appropriate for consumption, it is clear that what is eaten at a meal can never be eaten as a snack and vice-versa.

In the Tamil food system, meals are clearly defined according to time and, more significantly, the kinds of foods eaten. Breakfast is eaten between 7:00 and 8:00 a.m. ; lunch is usually eaten between 1:00 and 2:00 p.m., while dinner is from 8:00 to 9:00 p.m. The variety of foods served, in addition to the staple rice, indicates a meal. In a vegetarian home, there can be three to four dishes served for an everyday meal, although wealthier homes may have more dishes. The key difference in a non-vegetarian home is that a meat or fish dish replaces a vegetable dish. While in wealthier homes, the cook may resort to clarified butter for taste enhancement, this ingredient is confined to Hindu celebrations or festivals in the poorer homes. Katone-Apte (1975 : 316) argues that the presence of the staple rice defines a meal. There is validity in her claim, although it needs qualification. While rice on its own is not eaten for a snack, rice products are always used in the preparation of snacks. In this way, the staple makes its appearance in a non-meal situation. A meal consists of any number of dishes with combinations of the soft/wet, soft/dry and crispy/dry. Although soft/wet foods tend to dominate, dry foods, especially the crispy/dry, become peripheral food items. This combination of foods emerges at festival meals of Brahmin homes in Malaysia.

Like in India, the Brahmin community in Malaysia continues to be the bastion of culinary orthodoxy featuring different kinds of traditional foods when a festival is observed (cf. Appadurai, 1981 : 497). In extended families, particularly when there is an older relative like a grandmother who is active in food matters, every festival in the Hindu calendar is an opportunity to celebrate with offerings and rituals. On the day of *Avani Avittam*⁸, diners, sitting cross-legged on the floor, partake of the meal from banana leaves set before them. Usually for such festivals, three courses of food are served. The first course consists of rice, *sambar* (a *dhal* curry made with different vegetables), and *rasam* (a tomato, tamarind and *dhal* broth) together with the other dishes. Then rice, *sambar*, and *rasam* may be served again followed by a sweet. The last course consists of rice and yoghurt ; the latter is thought to have a cooling effect on the spicy curries that were consumed earlier. Among the various dishes include *boli* (a bread that is

⁸ On *Avani Avittam*, the yellow thread worn by the males of the twice-born castes, like the Brahmins, is changed (Sivananda, 1983 : 50).

fried in *ney* and stuffed with chickpea, coconut, and *jaggery*⁹), *vadai* (a savoury fried pastry made from lentils), *payasam* (a sweet made with rice or maize flour and coconut milk), *paruppu* (a dry dish made with pulses lightly laced with spices), a vegetable *kuttu*, a vegetable curry, *patchadi* (a mushy and soft vegetable dish), and *appalam*, served in a specific sequence, with each dish placed at a particular spot on the leaf (See Diagram 2).

⁹ *Jaggery* is a form of raw lump sugar, generally honey brown in color.

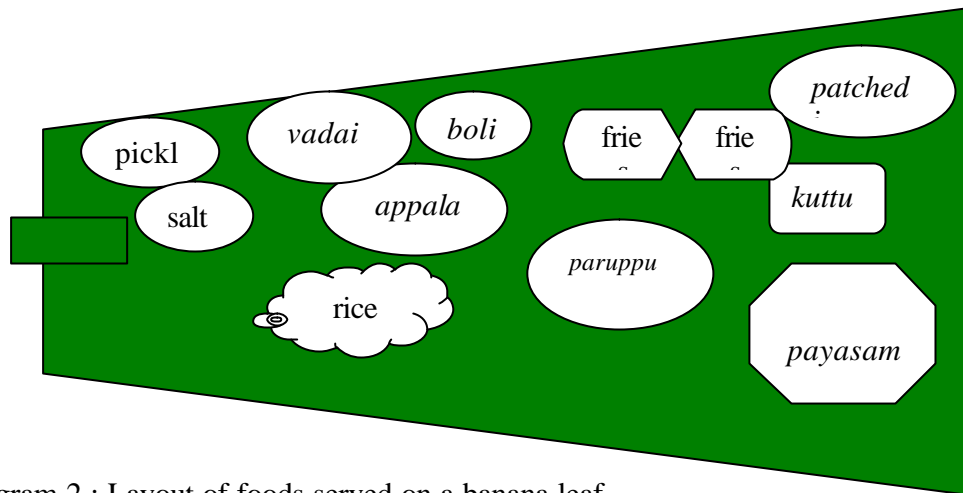


Diagram 2 : Layout of foods served on a banana leaf

Crispy/Dry Foods Eaten at Meals

At any vegetarian meal, typically one crispy food item is served - usually *appalam*. Here, the gastronomic rule is that crispy food items are only served with vegetarian foods, and never as accompaniments to meat or fish dishes. Thus, when a vegetarian meal is served in non-vegetarian homes, such as when the family or an individual is fasting, *appalam* is usually eaten. These crispy, light crackers are made from lentils or split peas (usually *urud dhal*), and salt. With a little oil, the mixture is ground to a paste, and thoroughly flattened and shaped into disks of various sizes. There are various kinds of *appalam* : the basic *appalam* is plain while the more elaborate, called *masala appalam*, are spiced with cumin, black pepper, red pepper or garlic. Women do not prepare *appalam* at home since it is time-consuming ; instead these crackers are purchased partially prepared from Indian grocery stores or select supermarkets in the cities/towns. When these crackers are deep-fried, they expand in the hot oil. *Appalam* is usually crushed and eaten with rice, together with the other prepared dishes. In a vegetarian meal, the texture of this one food item stands out as they are “broken up and sprinkled on top of the food for textural contrast” (Brennan 1992 : 242).

Another accompaniment to a vegetarian meal and, perhaps, less popular than *appalam* is *vadaam*. While *vadaam* is the vernacular term for this crispy accompaniment, in formal Tamil, this accompaniment is called *vadaham*. Similar to *appalam*, *vadaam* can be purchased partially prepared from grocery stores. Commercial versions are made from white or wild rice flour, tapioca flour, sago and cooked rice. The more exotic variants contain onion. Rice *vadaam* (Tamil ; *sutta vattal*) may be prepared in the home as the process is relatively simple. These savoury rice crunchies are made from leftover rice seasoned with cumin or other spices. First, cumin and salt are added to the rice, which is sprinkled with water so that it becomes sticky and holds together in tiny clumps. These are then

sun-dried thoroughly before being deep-fried, which causes them to puff up. Usually these crunchies are stored in an airtight container.

At everyday meals, deep-fried vegetables and chilies¹⁰ may also be served. Collectively called *vattal*¹¹, these constitute accompaniments to a vegetarian meal. Popular vegetables cooked along with turmeric and salt before being sun-dried (Akhileswaran, 1997 : 143) include beans (Tamil ; *kotta varakkay*), miniature eggplant (Tamil ; *sundaikkay vattal*), ladies' fingers (Tamil ; *vendaikkay vattal*), eggplant (Tamil ; *kattarikkay vathal*), and bittergourd (Tamil ; *pavakkay vattal*). As for chilies (Tamil ; *milaku vattal*), these are first soaked in salted yoghurt for a few days, after which they are dried in the sun. Just before the meal, the dried vegetables and chilies are deep-fried in hot oil. In the event a Brahmin housewife has run out of fresh vegetables, *vattal* is a last resort. Although *vattal* is a typical accompaniment in a Brahmin meal, they may be prepared for a vegetarian meal in a non-vegetarian home. *Milaku vattal* and *kotta varaikkay* may be bought packaged from Indian grocery stores in Klang Valley.

Crispy/Dry Foods Eaten as Snacks

In homes, a variety of snack foods are eaten, examples of which are *vadai* or *pokara* -- both lentil-based and deep-fried. These snacks are not very difficult to prepare since the grinding of the lentils can be quickly achieved with the use of a blender. The more time-consuming snacks to prepare are *murukku* and *omapodi*, since different *dhal* have to be ground in advance and the dough needs to be formed using a special press.

In urban areas, Tamil women, especially of the middle classes, have begun to use more convenience foods. In many homes, instant *murukku* mix is used on an ordinary day. The pre-packaged mix is a quick way to have *murukku* without much effort since it bypasses the first step of putting the different flours together. The dough merely needs to be shaped and deep-fried. Babas¹² is the brand used in many households. Only water needs to be added to the mix to form the dough, which is then put through a special press. By turning the press in swirls, the dough, which is forced through a nozzle punched with a number of holes, is made to fall gently onto a little plate. This pretzel-like savoury is then deep-fried in hot oil until golden brown.

When preparing these snacks for a special occasion, fresh ingredients are usually used. At Brahmin weddings, *kai murukku* (Tamil ; lit. 'hand *murukku*') is presented as part of the wedding dowry presented to the groom's family. Rather than force the dough through a press, the dough is picked up with the right palm and is skillfully twisted onto a tiny plate or cloth, using the thumb and index

¹⁰ Chilies may have been introduced into India before 1480, as the eminent South Indian composer Purandavadasa makes mention of its remarkable qualities (Achaya, 1994 : 227).

¹¹ The term *vattal* refers to vegetables and chilies that are sun-dried. Once these sun-dried vegetables and chilies are deep-fried, they are called *poriyal*.

¹² Baba's brand of spices and mixes are a household name in middle-class households. In contrast to other brands of *murukku* mixes that come mainly from India, this mix is produced in Malaysia.

finger. In this case, the instant *murukku* mix is ruled out, as the recipe is too soft to be handled with the hand. For *kai murukku*, stiffer dough is required. This dough is achieved by putting together one part of black gram *dhal* flour to eight parts of rice flour, cumin, asafoetida¹³, salt, and a little water. The trick to getting the *murukku* crunchy is to finish off the dough with a tablespoon of butter. This custom of making this variety of *murukku* is still alive in the Brahmin community of Malaysia. Aside from weddings in which the numbers of *kai murukku* presented will depend on the number requested by the groom's family (usually it is in odd numbers of 11, 51, or 101), these savoury snacks are also prepared for the festival of *Krishna Jeyanthi*¹⁴.

Omapodi is another crispy snack that is time-consuming to prepare from fresh ingredients. The dough is prepared from *besan* flour, a little rice flour, a dash of chili powder, the herb *omam* (Bishop's weed), and a pinch of salt, to which is added a little water to form a dough. Unlike *murukku*, *omapodi* dough is forced through the press, and dropped directly into hot oil. So as to ensure that the *omapodi* is browned completely, the dough is turned over lightly with a ladle. As in other crispy snacks, *omapodi* needs to be stored in an airtight container to prevent warping. Convenience versions of *omapodi* are also available from grocery stores and select supermarkets.

Other crispy foods served in Tamil homes are *chippy*, *pokoda murukku* (otherwise known as ribbon *murukku*), *thenguzhal*, *thattai*, *bhoondi*, and 'mixture'. *Chippy*, prepared mostly in Sri Lankan Tamil homes, is made from *urud dhal* and rice flours; the dough is passed through a special flat nozzle and then cut up into tiny pieces, deep-fried, and later coated with syrup. *Pokoda* is prepared from rice and *besan* flour, chili powder, asafoetida, salt and butter. This snack is also called ribbon *murukku* since it is flat and ribbon-like. *Thenguzhal* or otherwise called thorny *murukku* because of its thorny appearance is made from rice flour, *besan* flour, and *urud dhal*. A typically South Indian Brahmin savoury is *thattai*. The dough, prepared from rice flour, black gram *dhal* flour, and a little bengal gram *dhal*, black pepper, chili powder, asafoetida, curry leaves, and butter, is carved into little balls and flattened before frying. Batter for *bhoondi* is made from *besan* flour and water, sieved through a flat spoon punched with holes and cooked in hot oil. Mixture is a popular snack that includes *bhoondi*, *omapodi*, *avial* (a kind of rice crispy), ground nuts, cashew nuts, and curry leaves, which are tossed in a seasoned mixture.

Contemplating the Crispy : A Note to Conclude

¹³ Believed to dispel wind and gas built up in the system as a result of a diet rich in lentils and pulses, asafoetida (Tamil ; *perungayam*) is an indispensable ingredient in Brahmin cooking as lentils and pulses are prepared everyday. Jaffrey (1981 : 418) describes this ingredient as a "brown, somewhat smelly resin used in small quantities in Indian cooking for its flavour and mostly for digestive properties." Sold in all Indian provision stores, asafoetida comes either in a solid form or in a grainy powder in small plastic shakers.

¹⁴ *Krishna Jeyanthi*, which falls sometime between August and September, is celebrated in remembrance of Lord Krishna's birthday. Since Krishna was born at night, the festival is chiefly celebrated after nightfall (see Arunachalam, 1980 : 131 - 133).

Context and situation always define when crispy foods are eaten. Although crispy foods are eaten at meals, they represent a class of foods that are peripheral in status in relation to other foods. Conversely, that crispy foods dominate snack time reinforces the peripheral nature of these foods since snacking is optional. Whether in the context of everyday or celebratory meals, the dietary pattern of the Tamils, as described throughout this paper, may be said to be fairly stable with very few changes, possibly because many of these foods are considered traditional, which would mean that they appear in celebratory occasions and festivals. As such, the crispy continues to be imbued with peripheral status in spite of the passage of time. It is curious, however, that this pattern has been seen to persist even with the incorporation of convenience foods with Malaysia becoming increasingly absorbed into the global world, as in the case of pre-packaged *murukku* mix. Convenience foods, which possess a crispy texture, are also perceived to be peripheral in a meal and, therefore, are always augmented with foods that are more substantive. The availability of crispy foods recognised as food items common to the other ethnic groups in multi-ethnic Malaysia¹⁵ also proves this same point ; they are always seen to be peripheral.

The cooking technique used to produce these foods may have a bearing on the limited contexts in which such foods are eaten. Oil, the most common ingredient for deep-frying, is relatively expensive especially when used frequently. Additionally, the dimension of health may be yet another reason for why crispy foods are eaten in limited contexts. This is particularly commonplace in homes where family members are older, among whom there tends to be a greater concern over the repercussions of diet on health. As much as diets have implications on age, diets also have a gendered aspect ; many women are more concerned about the intake of fried and, hence, crispy foods because of the link between the consumption of oil and fat accumulation. Furthermore, there is an historical explanation for why fried foods are eaten in specific situations. Although *ney* used for frying was not entirely discouraged, Physician Charaka specifically recommends a variety of fats to be used in the different seasons : *ney* is to be used in the autumn season, animal fats in the Spring, and oil (especially sesame oil) in the rainy season. Sushruta also makes special recommendations when it comes to fried foods since for him, they are difficult to digest (Achaya, 1994 : 37, 79, 83). Could it be that this injunction for not indulging in fried and, in turn, crispy foods has continued to this day, explaining why Tamils eat these foods in limited situations? But this does not explain the continuing presence of other fried foods commonly eaten at meals such as fried fish and chicken, cutlets, and fried vegetable preparations, which leads us to conclude that a materialist argument does not sufficiently explain this gastronomic rule.

Conversely, I argue that the reason for why crispy foods are eaten in limited situations stems from its unique textural composition that usually tends to be light. The crunchy sensation produced when eating crispy foods evokes strong ideas of play, pleasure and delight. A bite into a crispy food arouses a sense of play as it allows for extended mastication and the use of the muscles around the mouth. Due

¹⁵ An example is *keropok*, a crispy deep-fried cracker made from fish, rice flour, spices and salt, eaten by Malays. See also footnote two on the racial spectrum of Malaysia.

to the lightness of the texture of crispy foods, large amounts need to be consumed in order that this food becomes substantially filling. Thus, these foods are never perceived to be 'real' foods as such and, hence, are attributed peripheral status in the Tamil repertoire of foods. It must also be noted that the texture of crispy foods arouses emotions of play, pleasure and delight differently from other foods. These emotions stand in juxtaposition to those aroused when eating soft/wet foods ; the latter, on the contrary, are not associated with play but with meeting a nutritional function, although they may be flavourful and, hence, delightful to the palate. Thus, crispy foods essentially perform the role of a relish at main meals, while they are central food elements only in the context of a snack -- an occasion for eating perceived not to provide nutrition but to appeal to the senses of play, pleasure and delight.

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Abstract :

This paper examines the gastronomic rules that determine when and why “crispy foods” are eaten within the Tamil community of Malaysia. Based on ethnographic fieldwork of twenty-five Tamil Hindu families living in the Klang Valley of Peninsular Malaysia, everyday and festive culinary life reveal foods that are classified into categories of ‘crispy’ and “soft/wet”. Situation and context determine the kind of “crispy” foods consumed. While savoury crispy foods are reserved for meals, a mixture of the savoury and sweet are eaten as snacks. I draw upon the observations of Claude Levi-Strauss, Mary Douglas and Michael Nicod to examine the processes of defining the inclusion and exclusion of particular “crispy” foods at meals and as snacks. My conclusion focuses on the textural composition of these foods, which highlights the “playful” dimension of eating and, hence, what is termed as “crispy” foods are not treated as “real” food.

Key words: Gastronomic rules, tamil food, Malaysia, texture composition, deep-fried foods, snacks, peripheral foods