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Lalthansangi, Ralte

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Food, Memory and Identity: Tracing Mizo Foodways

Ralte Lalthansangi Author Bio lalthansangi.ralte@gmail.com
Aizawl, Mizoram, India

 [https://orcid.org/0000 - 0002 - 8043 - 7573](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8043-7573)

Abstract: This paper will deal with the development of food practices among the Mizos with the development of their culture and society. The Mizos are a people living in Mizoram, situated in the northeastern region of India, bordered by Myanmar on the east and Bangladesh on the west. Rice is the staple food of the Mizos and the dishes prepared to be eaten with the rice are called *chawhmeh* (side dish). The important role played by memory and time in repeating and recreating various versions of food preparations will also be discussed. The changes in the food practices act as a valid record of the changes brought forth by the socio-economic conditions of the time. This paper will take into account the Mizo customs of food production, preservation, presentation and marketing. This paper will thus take into account how the 'indigenouness' (Dunkel 46) of the Mizos explains their foodways. This paper will study the ways in which food and food practices keep the tradition and memory of a people alive, and the reason for the lack of certain items like salt in the preparations will also be explained. This paper will also study the reversal of gender roles during feast preparation and how age-old customs are still practiced by the Mizos during mealtime.

Keywords: Mizo, Foodways, Custom, Memory, Tradition.

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Introduction

Food is like a system through which social relations can be interpreted. Food, food practices and its representation may be a lesser noticed portrayal of cultural history but is very important nonetheless as it defines one's cultural identity. Culture is the complex everyday world we all encounter and it begins at the point in which humans surpass whatever they get in their natural inheritance. The cultivation of the natural world, in agriculture and horticulture, is thus a fundamental element of a culture (Edgar and Sedgwick 102). This paper will take into account the Mizo customs of food production, preservation, presentation and marketing. Focus will be given on how Mizo foodways go hand-in-hand with Mizo folkways. Dunkel in her book *Incorporating Culture's Role in the Food and Agricultural Sciences*, explains that "Indigeosity is about a special and deep relationship with the land" (Dunkel 45). The Mizos are a people who have a strong feeling towards community, a sense of common identity which is linked to their land. Community has been defined as a state or organized society, in its later uses, relatively small (Williams 65). This paper will thus take into account how the 'indigenouness' (Dunkel 46) of the Mizos explains their foodways.

The two most general elements of culture may be the ability of human beings to construct and to build and the ability to use language. Language of material input becomes the language of real life; agriculture and horticulture arises and develops with the development of society. The earlier Mizos would smoke meat in order to preserve it. In the present day meat is smoked because they prefer the smell and the taste of smoked meat. There is a huge market for smoked meat in Mizoram. Beef jerky (smoke-dried beef) is considered a delicacy and there is even an industry which exports it outside the state.

Mizo Chawhmeh – Understanding indigenous approaches to food

Cultures endure even though the individuals who built them have passed on. At the very least, our understanding of time is transformed, and our understanding of history created (Edgar and Sedgwick 103). Food and food practices is the very thing which keeps the tradition and the culture alive. Since earlier times, the Mizos have planted vegetables and reared animals for their consumption, beside the wild animals which they catch during their frequent hunts. They did not have vegetables like *zikhblum* (cabbage), *sap bawkbawn* (English brinjal), *Kauphek* and *Feren* (two varieties of mustard), *parbawr* (cauliflower), radish, carrot and *vai purun* (imported onion / garlic). Besides these, the Mizos had imported potatoes, pulses (dal) and crushed spices from the plains. Pumpkin, *Tampui* (a species of mustard), *ankasa*, *maipawl* (a species of pumpkin), *bawkbawn* (local brinjal), *hmarchapui* (green chilly), *changkha* (bitter gourd) and different varieties of beans were the local vegetables which the Mizos had in plenty since earlier days. They had different kinds of beans namely, *behlawi*, different varieties of *bepui*, *bekang*, (soya bean), *bête* and *behliang* (a species of pea or lentil). The Mizos even had and still have *vaimim* (maize), *fanghma* (cucumber), *hmazil* (a species of melon), *dawnfawh* (watermelon), *bahra* (yam), *bal* (sweet potato) and *zo purun* (local onion, it has a very exquisite taste quite different from the imported onion). The vegetables, usually green leaves, which they plucked from the forests (the ones not commonly found or planted near their homes) are *thingthupui*, *khanghu* (species of climbing acacia, the shoots of which are eaten), *zawngtah* (*Parkia roxburghii*), *chingit*, *phuihnam* (a cultivated variety of *clerodendron*), *bruizik*, *kawhtebel*, *sihneh*, *telhawng*, *baibing*, *tumbu* and *rawtuai* (bamboo shoot).

Sihneh is considered to be the quintessential ingredient to a Hmar (sub-tribe of Mizo) dish. There is even a saying that when you see a *sihneh* tree, you will see a number of Hmars perched on the branches. These vegetables / greens are all taken from big trees; in some cases only the shoots are eaten and in some cases the shoots as well as the leaves are eaten. Other than the last three, the rest have a very strong odour which may be pleasant only to a Mizo. You need to have an acquired taste for it. It is true when an elder person says that one's age in life defines one's food

preference. These vegetables with pungent smell are usually preferred only by the elder members in a family.

The Mizos prefer their vegetables to be eaten fresh and so they ferment or preserve them only when there is an excess amount and also so that they may be able to eat them even when they are not in season. In general, the Mizos are not too fond of fermented vegetables; they instead pickle them. Pickled *baibing*, *tumbu* and *rawtuai* besides green chilly pickles have a huge market in and outside Mizoram. The Mizos have not consumed too many 'new' things which their ancestors have not had when it comes to greens (*Dokhuma* 362).

'Authentic' Mizo Chawhmeh - The way mother made it

I'd asked thirteen of my friends what they would call to be an authentic *Mizo chawhmeh* (Mizo dish). Seven of them replied saying 'Bai'; some of them merely said any type of *bai*, while some were more precise and said *maian* (pumpkin leaves) *bai*, *bawkbawn* (brinjal) *bai*, *chingit bai* and some merely said *bai* with lots of green chilly. *Maian bai*, *bawkbawn bai*, *behlawi bai* and *chingit bai* may be considered to be the favourite *bai* among the Mizos.

The kitchen has always been considered a space for the women of the household. To emphasise the 'authenticity' of a dish, one often says that the dish is prepared "the way mother made it". Even in the contemporary world, Indian brands like *Mother's Recipe* have proudly mentioned on their website that they have brought "the traditional taste of Indian kitchens to 40 countries across the world" (mothersrecipe.com/about-us/). The term "mother / amma / mama" is uplifted in the food industry stressing on the fact that "mother's recipe" is used. *Amma's Kitchen* is a restaurant chain located in various parts of India and is also found in London and Cincinnati, USA. Most of the *Amma's Kitchen* located in South India serve pure vegetarian food while the ones located in London include pizza, fast food and barbeque beside Indian food (www.ammaskitchen.com). As such, the geographical location of an eating place greatly defines the menu that it serves.

There is a song which my mother would sing while making *bai* and the song, roughly translated, goes like this –

*With the khelauk (wooden spoon) you take
out the saum from the container, And then
you take out the chingal with the fianpui
(big rounded spoon) And mix both in the
pot; When the mixture lathers up and boils
chunnu (mother) is happy.*

The Mizos do not have too many ways of preparing vegetables. Three of the most common preparations are: (i) Bai (ii) Bawl / Sawh (iii) Tlak.

- i. Bai – It is a mixture of boiled vegetables and smoked meat may sometimes be added. When bai is prepared it is a necessity to

add salt. There is also chingal (lye, potash solution) bai. Saum (fermented lard) is usually added only in chingal bai. Since the like / taste preference may differ, some may add only saum and no chingal to make bai. Bekang (fermented or dried soyabean) is often added to make bai; in such preparations, saum is usually not added.

- ii. Bawl / sawh – The primary ingredients for this dish are saum and chingal. It is a tasty Mizo relish made by pounding up meat and some vegetables and mixing it with saum, chingal and salt (Lorrain 408). Sawhthing (ginger), sa rep (smoked meat, preferably beef), nghathu rep (smoked fish), mautuai (tender bamboo shoot), zo purun (local onion), khanghu, behliang and zawngtah are usually prepared in this way. The right mixture of chingal and saum lathers; there is even a saying amongst the Mizos – one need not be highly educated to know the right mixture of chingal and saum. There were four of my friends who considered bawl / sawh to be the epitome of Mizo cuisine; zawngtah bawl, fangra bawl, hmarchapui (green chilly) bawl and zawngtah leh bekang sawh were among their favourite.
- iii. Tlak - It is a preparation of boiled vegetables without adding anything to it, not even salt. This preparation is a must in the modern-day Mizo meal as it balances the diet with healthy vegetables. Tlak may not be the favourite dish as there was only one person who mentioned that tlak, phuihnam tlak to be more precise, was his idea of a Mizo dish.

Salt and sugar– Only for the privileged?

As salt is easily available in the markets now, we often miss its true worth. Salt is a necessity, the amount of which needs to be properly maintained while cooking; the amount of salt added defines the taste of the food prepared. In earlier times, the Mizos made salt on their own; as this process was tedious salt was not found in excess. With the passage of time, it is said that the Mizo chiefs often raided the encampments in the plains to procure salt. The scarcity of salt may be one of the reasons why *Mizo Chawhmeh* was quite salt-less; meat, fish and most vegetables were mostly served boiled (without salt). And after the entry of the missionaries in 1894, the Mizos came in close contact with the outside world and with lesser before known items like salt and sugar. As such, among the Mizos the earlier converts to the new religion became the more “privileged” lot as they were more in contact with the white man. The earlier converts were taught the ways of the white man and they took up not only their mannerisms but also their food habits. The women missionaries and also the wives of the missionaries and British officers also took it upon themselves to teach the native women how to cook, bake and stitch, the necessary skills expected of a woman. Gradually, the “privileged” converts could easily get salt and sugar from the white man and this further changed their food preparations. G.R. Roberts, fondly

called Pi Teii by the Mizos, trained many young girls the necessary skills of cooking and baking among whom was Pi Hmingliani. With her culinary skills, Pi Hmingliani built a bakery named after her. One of the earliest bakers in Mizoram, Pi Hmingliani spread her business far and wide and her children and grandchildren have even opened up restaurants and catering services. This is a simple example of how the missionaries changed the outlook and livelihood of many natives who came in close contact with them. Sugar which has never been a part of the condiment of Mizo cuisine thus gained popularity among the Mizos since the latter half of the twentieth century.

Rice: Staple Food or a Side Dish?

In her retelling of a Mizo folklore, Margaret L. Pachuau narrates the tale of how rice came to be eaten by the Mizos. In this tale, Vanhrikpa tells his people, the Mizos, to start eating rice to become strong. And so, they tried out various kinds of rice. *Buhkirirum* variety of rice was very tasty and if they ate it they were told that they will not want for any other vegetables. When they ate the *buhkirirum* rice, it was so tasty that some even swallowed their tongues. And so, in the end, they chose *buhchangrum* rice which is of ordinary quality and should be eaten with vegetables and other dishes. The mouse after overcoming many difficulties was able to get the saplings of *buhchangrum* rice which was distributed to all the corners of the earth ([Pachuau 33-34](#)).

As mentioned earlier, the Mizos usually boil their food, be it vegetables or meat. They have a way of mixing rice with vegetables or meat, and the dish is called *buhchiar* or *sawhchiar*. *Buhchiar* and *sawhchiar* are economical preparations and are prepared in such a way so that the dish may increase in portion. At the same time, some of the preparations do taste better when prepared this way.

- i. *Buhchiar*: It is a dish which is prepared by boiling cut up meat or vegetables with rice and salt into a kind of stew or pishpash. Antam (mustard leaf) *Buhchiar* and Behlawi (leaf of a certain species of bean) *Buhchiar* are one of the favourite *Buhchiar* preparations. A very fine example of *Buhchiar* is Zo ar *Buhchiar* (country chicken *buhchiar*) which is considered to be the epitome of *Buhchiar* among the Mizos.
- ii. *Sawhchiar*: It is more or less similar to *Buhchiar* but here the rice as well as the meat are grounded. It is a kind of stew made of any kind of meat boiled with rice.

As mentioned earlier, *sawhchiar* and *buhchiar* are considered to be economical preparations. At the same time, they also bring out the essence of Mizoness. The Nepali settler father would warn his daughters not to marry the Mizo men and would even try to discourage them saying, “If you marry the Mizos, you will only eat rice with rice and nothing else.” For people living outside Mizoram, especially students, *Sawhchiar* seems to be the favourite dish as it can be easily prepared for a gathering and moreover,

it tastes great. It is a dish which brings together the people of Mizoram even outside the State, when they are away from home. It is not only in Mizoram, but also in places like Delhi, that *Sawhchiar* is being served on memorial wakes of the deceased where the people who have gathered have to stay awake for the whole night. It provides proper sustenance and can also be easily digested.

Feasts and festivities

The best time to visit Mizoram would be during the festive season of Christmas and New Year as it is the time for the long-awaited great feasts of Christmas and New Year celebrations. In many villages and some of the localities in the cities, they still serve food on plantain leaves to bring out the essence of communal merriment. Christmas and New Year feasts are cherished even more by the people who have come home for Christmas as it is not every day that such a feast happens. Feasts are not just about the food served; it is more about the spirit of joy and fulfillment that one attains when one attends a grand feast where people come together in hundreds and sometimes in thousands.

There is a reversal of gender roles during feast preparation. In a Mizo home, the kitchen is demarcated to be a space for only the women. During feast-time, the men are in charge of the 'kitchen' where the food is prepared. Men and women perform an equally important role; while the men are cooking, the women chop the vegetables and clean the cooking area. The task of slaughtering the cattle and cutting up the meat is taken up by the men. The tough task of cooking for thousands is thus taken up by the able-bodied men. Even the old, who are incapable of doing anything, will sit in the middle of all the action and be part of the festivities by narrating the tales of the many feasts they have attended.

During feasts, especially Christmas and New Year feasts, the elder members of the church above the age of 60 are made to dine separately in a more comfortable seating arrangement. A separate buffet, which includes the meat 'reserved' for the elders, is prepared for them so that they will avoid the long queues. While dining together, Mizos have a custom of not eating the food before the elders have eaten.

As a sign of respect, the young would eat only after the elders have taken their share of the food. Certain food items like eggs, chicken liver and gizzard and entrails of a slaughtered animal are reserved for the elderly; eggs are reserved for the young and the sick.

In the present day, in most of the festivities like weddings, the people in the city have found it more convenient to hire caterers to be in charge of the food. The food is definitely good but at the same time, the spirit of communal merry-making gets lost along the attempt to serve a more 'authentic' Mizo food / feast.

Memory and Time:

Memory plays a very important role when it comes to food practices; they recreate the past with their repeated but at the same time differing versions or ways of preparations. The changes in the food practices, especially the preparations, act as a valid record of the changes brought forth by the socio-economic conditions of the time. As mentioned earlier, *Sawhchiar* and *Buhchiar* were prepared for economic reasons but in the modern day, they are being prepared because the taste is preferred.

The earlier Mizos would hunt wild animals frequently. They mainly hunted *sakhi* (barking deer), *sanghal* (wild boar) and *sazuk* (deer) out of which the meat of *sakhi* (barking deer) was the most relished. Even though there was no rule as to not hunt tigers, the Mizos were against hunting anything of the tiger family until and unless people were facing problems because of the wild animal. It is not at all surprising to find *sakhi sa* (meat of barking deer), *sanghal sa* (meat of wild boar) and *sazuk sa* (meat of deer) in the market infrequently even though hunting is banned by the State Forest Department. The preparation of such meat has not really changed over time. Meat of wild animals is smoked usually because it makes it easier for the hunter to carry home the meat from the forests. The Mizos have imported cows and goats from the plains. When I'd asked a man of 70 years the first Mizo dish that came to his mind which would signify *Mizo chawhmeh*, he said, 'boiled country chicken' and he moreover said that it is a dish which he would proudly offer to his fellow Non-Mizo friends.

The Mizos have a custom to offer food to anybody who comes during meal-time. They even have a saying that in a family where there is a large number of men there is always extra food, enough for one more person. So one should not feel reluctant to accept an invitation from such a family even if it maybe an impromptu invitation. Among the Mizos, inviting a guest or visitor to dine with the family is a sign to show that the guest is welcomed into the family. In the present-day scenario, the best way to try-out *Mizo chawhmeh* is to attend a festive feast or a wedding or better yet, to be invited to a friend's home for a meal, as the big restaurants have become too modernized with their Chinese, Indian and Italian cuisines. At the same time, there are also some restaurants which can serve *Mizo chawhmeh* if a prior order is being placed. And of course, such restaurants hold themselves in a higher esteem as they are able to serve to the likes of everyone. It is the local and small tea stalls and restaurants which serve the best local snacks like *sawhchiar*, *sangpiau* (Burmese version of rice stew), *chow sa tui leih* (chow/noodles with meat broth) and *changban kan* (fried sticky rice dough). Students and people staying outside the state always make it a point to visit these local joints during their vacation breaks and eat the local snacks which are not found in other parts of the country. Over the course of time, the number of Burmese immigrants in Mizoram has greatly increased and so have the number of food stalls run by them.

Packaged food consumption and rise of the fast-food industry

Mizoram has witnessed a fast increase of fast-food chains like KFC, Dominos Pizza, Laziz Pizza, Barista, to name a few. Yan stresses that “the attraction of consuming American fast foods has more to do with their social context and meaning than with their taste” (Counihan and Esterick 23). These fast-food chains are very attractive to both the young and old, alike. In this world of Instagram, eating at these fast-food chains and posting pictures gives a sense of satisfaction to many, especially among the youth. The wave of obsession for Korean pop stars and Asian dramas has led to the obsession for their culture especially their food. Korean restaurants are popping up at various parts of the capital city, Aizawl; many restaurants have also included Korean dishes in their menu. There is a huge market for imported Korean noodles, packaged fish cakes ‘Eoomuk’, packaged tuna, Korean pancake mix and Teokpokki, to name a few. Various Asian cooking sauces like Kung po sauce, Hoisin sauce, Stir fry sauce, Teriyaki sauce, Satay sauce, Peking duck sauce, Black pepper sauce and Lemon sauce have also found their ways into many kitchens.

Scholliers writes that food is a cultural practice through which people participate in rituals of a group and these participations can be socially controlled as well as more automatic. The preparation and organization and the act of consumption of food constructs the identity of a people. The egg, once reserved for children, the sick and the elderly, still holds a special status among the Mizos even though it is now easily available. Taking a couple of eggs while visiting a sick friend and taking sugar and milk while visiting a friend’s new home are still practiced.

People spend lesser time in their kitchens due to changes in lifestyle and work culture. Pre-cooked meals and processed meats are thus gaining a huge market in Mizoram. As the domestic food industry is unable to sustain the demands of the people, a huge amount of processed meats are imported. Katarina Hinnerova writes, “Food is a way of communication – it conveys messages about social relations and social identities through which people construct and maintain social reality” (Hinnerova 35-36). Edible food is classified into acceptable and unacceptable by a cultural understanding. This cultural understanding and categorization thus authenticate the existence of an entire food group referred to as *Mizo Chawhmeh*.

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Notas de autor

Author. Lalthansangi Ralte finished her M. Phil and PhD from the Bio Center for English Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi under the supervision of Prof. GJV Prasad. She has worked extensively on literatures from Northeast India, on themes of identity, representation, culture, memory and indigeneity. She is presently teaching in the Department of English at Govt. J. Thankima College in Aizawl, Mizora