

A Brief Introduction to Mizo Ethnic Cuisine

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Abstract: The value of food far outweighs the nutritional or taste aspects that often first come to mind. Food represents the identity and unique culture of people and is a way of communicating one's own identity to others. It serves as a repository of the history and cultural heritage of a people, telling stories and highlighting specificities that otherwise might be missed. Food has been studied from various aspects and is a multi-disciplinary phenomenon. This paper attempts to highlight some characteristics of Mizo food practices, at once similar to food practices of the larger North-east Indian region and yet simultaneously, with particularities that mark its difference from other cuisines.

Introduction:

It is often said that food brings people together. Food represents the identity and unique culture of people. It tells a unique story of the people consuming it and how people cultivate certain crops for consumption depending on their agricultural system and traditions. Food tells us about culture and ethnicity. People from different cultural backgrounds have different food types representing their tastes and preferences. India is a rich and diverse country full of diverse food-related traditions and practices, each representing the ethnic diversity of different regions. The culture and traditions of food are passed down from generation to generation, enabling us to know more about the historical background of that particular group of people. Food is also a way of communicating one's own identity to others, making it a great way of introducing one's culture to people. As a form of communication, food is often a point in cultural translation when one comes in contact with a foreign culture. When we travel to other countries, we want to try their food, which gives us a sense of immersing ourselves in other cultures. When people travel to our place, we want them to try our food as a way of bonding and hopefully as the start of a meaningful relationship with each other.

With a unique historical trajectory, Mizoram wrestles with its indigenous roots and Christian practices. On February 20, 1987, Mizoram became a full-fledged state of the Indian Union. Mizoram translates to "Mizo Land", and most of its inhabitants speak the *Duhlian* language, commonly called Mizo language. Located in the Northeastern part of India, the

majority indigenous population of Mizoram (referred to collectively as Mizos) are classified as scheduled tribes according to the Constitution of India (Ratnamala & Malsawmzuala, 2021). Previously, practitioners of a form of animism, most Mizos are now Christians following decades of work by Welsh and British missionaries from the 1890s onwards. The absence of recorded history makes it difficult to picture the Mizos' past accurately; however, the consensus is that the Mizos made their way into present-day Mizoram sometime in the 17th century (Nunthara, 1996). Mizo food is also a unique identifier of Mizo culture and ethnicity. It introduces us to the history of the people and their cultural background. The eating habits and food culture of the Mizo people speaks volumes about how the Mizo people eat certain types of food and why they eat such food. This paper attempts to highlight some characteristics of Mizo food practices, at once similar to food practices of the larger North-east Indian region and yet simultaneously, with particularities that mark its difference from other cuisines while also foregrounding the possibility and necessity for more scholarly work on Mizo food.

Agricultural practice

Shifting cultivation (called Jhum cultivation among the tribes of North-east India) has always been the centre of the economic life of the Mizos (Ray, 1993). Mizos practised only shifting cultivation until the introduction of wet rice cultivation (WRC) as an alternative, with colonial officials promoting the practice in the valley areas of Champhai and Thenzawl as early as 1898 before extending it to other areas (Dewar, 2019). Today, both forms of cultivation are practised in the state and, as Dewar notes, have become an area of controversy generating much debate. On the one hand, scholars like Lianzela (1997) have detailed Jhum cultivation as a major cause of land degradation, while others like Sati (2019) assert that the yield of WRC is substantially higher than that of shifting cultivation. Controverting this position, scholars like Leblhubel, Kimi and Vanlalhruaia (2012) argue that liberal economic policies followed by Governments have led to a pessimistic view of Jhum cultivation. They contest that Government policies, including the New Land Use Policy and its various iterations (1985, 1987, 1990, 2000, 2008) meant to provide beneficiaries with alternative livelihoods to Jhum cultivation, have been less about empowering rural *Jhumias* and more about extending the paradigm shift in land ownership that began with colonisation. Land that was once communally owned (albeit with chiefs enjoying special privileges) became increasingly state and privately owned, accompanied by a changing perception of land from "commodity" versus "sacred space" on the one hand and "civilised space" versus "primitive bounded space" on the other' (p. 83).

Mizo food preparation methods: A simple affair

Juxtaposed against the complex and varied cuisines of other tribes in the Northeast, Mizo cuisine stands out for its simplicity, which is reflected in the food preparation and cooking methods Mizos employ daily. A primary way of cooking for Mizos to this day is simply boiling (*chhum han* or *tlak*) the ingredients in water, whether meat, grains or vegetables, frequently with no flavouring agents or condiments added, including salt. There

are, of course, variations in the preparation of boiled dishes. While simple boiled vegetables are a staple in daily preparation, it is common practice to add fragrant herbs when boiling meat. A dish made often on celebratory occasions is a boiled meat stew with rice called "*buhchiar*", cooked for special occasions. Another staple Mizo dish, *bai*, is made with seasonal boiled vegetables and *ching al* (ash filtrate) which has now been mainly substituted with cooking soda. Although there are some instances in written literature of frying as a cooking method (see Lorrain, 1889-1936; Dokhuma, 1992), Dr Lalhlimpuii, Head of Mizo Department, Mizo Christian College, Aizawl, explains, "Boiling was and remains the main way that Mizos prepare food. Our *pi and pu* (ancestors) did fry food at times. However, without access to processed oil, they mainly used *sa hriak* (rendered animal fat), a luxury back then." (Lalhlimpuii, personal communication, November 01, 2021).

Mizo cuisine, in essence, reflects the nomadic past of the Mizos. A Mizo history enthusiast asserts, "As we migrated westwards (*thlang tla*), we stayed at a place for maybe 4-5 years. As Mizos continued to migrate West wards, they were constantly escaping or running away from bigger tribes. They had to be prepared for an enemy attack at all times. When they settled in present-day Mizoram, and the Sailo chiefs established themselves, they had their first contact with the British. In this context, there was no time for them to settle in a place for long enough in a solitary and independent manner to develop their cuisine. This is one of the reasons all the cooking and other practices were kept simple with as little fuss as possible." (Vanlalmalsawmtluanga, personal communication, November 03, 2021). An acclaimed Mizo novelist, also affirms this view adding, "Mizos did not have gardens prior to their encounter with colonialism. They mainly ate fruit and vegetables from the jungles. After the advent of Christianity came some domesticated animals (sic) and the beginnings of fruit and vegetable plantations- this introduced the idea of cultivated, permanent gardens. They moved every 4-5 years; it was not possible to cultivate permanent gardens as such." He also adds this to the previously highlighted view of why Mizos migrated so frequently, "Post 1700 A.D., after they entered present-day Mizoram, it was mainly because of their livelihood (shifting cultivation and hunting) that they kept moving and not so much for fear of enemy attacks." (C. Lalnunchanga, personal communication, November 26, 2021). It appears that movement at intervals, whatever the reason, whether in pursuit of livelihood or self-defence, is an essential factor that, over time, influenced the style of Mizo cooking.

Foraging and fresh produce

Another marker of Mizo cuisine that persists today is the widespread preference for direct consumption of fresh produce, even in contemporary times where the manufacture of and access to processed foods in Mizoram is unprecedented. Vanlalmalsawmtluanga says "Mizos Love fresh foods. Our taste buds are mainly accustomed to fresh foods. Even though we now have a lot of canned foods and frozen products such as frozen *chana* (grams), we still prefer the fresh *chana* we get from the market. Even those involved in farming who had to stay overnight or for a few days on their farms would not pack food. Instead, they would gather whatever they could from the gardens and cook fresh produce. It is not that we do not use or eat manufactured products, but we still prefer fresh produce." (Vanlalmalsawmtluanga,

personal communication, November 03, 2021). Along with shifting cultivation, Mizos fished, hunted and foraged nearby forest areas for wild, edible plants (Dewar, 2019). Many of these practices continue today, with numerous stalls selling wild, edible plants in the various bazaars or markets in different parts of the state. In fact, in a notable event that took place during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, residents of *Saipum*, a border village, gathered to forage for wild vegetables and other forest products to send to the state capital of Aizawl, which was the worst affected by the pandemic (Khojol, 2021). This community work was done under the aegis of a village-level task force and shed light on the continued close relationship of the Mizo to land. The incident also underscores an essential Mizo communitarian principle summed up in the phrase *Sem sem dam dam, ei bil thi thi*, which translates to “sharing is living, selfishness is death.” The preference for fresh produce over processed and manufactured foods is not exclusive to the Mizos. However, it is undoubtedly an important marker of Mizo cuisine that translates into their everyday eating habits.

Fermented foods and meat as resistance

While the preference for freshly cooked seasonal produce and rice is an essential characteristic of Mizo eating habits, one must also take into consideration the prevalence of fermentation and drying/ smoking both as preservation methods as well as a means of creating "distinct accounts of community histories including gender relations and social practices" (Kikon, 2021) in Mizo cuisine. Lalthanpui et al. (2015) meticulously elaborate on fermentation, drying and smoking as traditional food processing techniques of the Mizos and give an account of different food items and how they are prepared. Some of these food items are used as seasonings, such as *Sa-um* (fermented pig fats), *ching al* (ash filtrate), *chhium* (fermented sesame), *bekang-um* (fermented soybean) and *anthurrep* (dried/ smoked roselle). Others are consumed directly, such as *tam-um* (fermented mustard), *ai-um* (fermented crab), *dawltawm* (dried leaves of taro), *dawl rep* (dried taro), *behlawi rep* (dried/ smoked cowpea), *telhawng* (dried voodoo lily) and *sa rep* (smoked meat). In Mizo society, food is still considered the domain of women, with their role extending beyond the primary food space of the kitchen. Interviews with several Mizo women affirmed that the processes of fermentation, smoking and drying are gendered in that it is primarily women who are involved in these processes. They also note that this is an essential means of livelihood, with women producing and selling fermented and smoked products all over the state.

In contrast to other parts of the world wherein fermented foods are considered to be a de-homogenising practice of creating unique tastes, Kikon (2021) astutely observes how fermented foods of the Northeast are exoticised and considered marginal to food cultures of other parts of India. In India, the racism and casteism faced by people from the Northeast centre around their food habits, particularly their affinity for fermented foods that tend to have strong smells (Kikon, 2021). Besides this, in large swathes of India, beef has been banned since it is considered offensive by caste Hindus who traditionally consider the cow sacred. However, beef is a staple part of the diet for many communities in India, including Mizos. Sithlou (2020) notes that food practices, especially meat cooking such as pork and beef, are a significant reason many homeowners refuse to take in people from the Northeast

as tenants in big cities like Delhi. There are many instances of Northeastern tenants restricting their diets to vegetarian fare in exchange for rented accommodation. Often, they are forced to cook and eat meat in secret. This aspect of racism and casteism faced by people from the Northeast centred around food has been well captured in the movie *Axone* (Kharkongor, 2019). In this sense, food becomes an important marker of identity and, indeed, of resistance. In Mizoram in 2017, a beef-eating party awaited the visiting Central Home Minister, Rajnath Singh, in protest against the centre's banning of the sale of cattle for slaughter ("Mizoram greets Rajnath Singh with a beef-eating party", 2017). Such instances mark how Mizos use food to assert their identity and, in a sense, resist the cultural and legal imposition of hegemonic ideals. Mizos, like many others from the Northeast, carry their food practices with them wherever they migrate, in many instances, forming a demand and supply chain of fermented foods and smoked meats quite organically. For Mizos, procurement, preparation and consumption of local fermented delicacies become an essential way diasporic Mizos stay connected with their homeland, people and culture.

Conclusion

Food is an important cultural marker. As with other communities, Mizos are passionate about their food practices, even as modern food chains slowly make their presence felt in the once-isolated hills. Food remains a meaningful way to communicate values and traditions, whether at the family table, at a shared community feast or even through the sharing of recipes over the internet. At the same time, it is also a binding agent that transcends boundaries. As highlighted, food has even metamorphosed into a mode of resistance against the marginalising forces of a powerful centre. Research on the food of the Mizos is still new, with many avenues to explore in the context of history, identity and inter-community dynamics and the relation of Mizos to the nation-state.

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