Chapter 6: *RUAI*: FEAST PRACTICES AND THEIR SOCIO-CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE IN MIZO SOCIETY

As Dietler (1996) posits, feasting is a ritualised social event characterised by communal consumption of food and drink, distinct in specific ways from everyday meals. For the purposes of this study, I define a feast as a special public meal shared by a large group of people. What sets it apart from an ordinary meal is typically the quantity of food involved. In addition to quantity, the quality of the food, the number of participants, and the social purpose of the gathering further distinguish a feast. This shared meal, according to Jones (2007), persists to be a central feature in social lives, a marker of who friends and relations are, and what it means to be human. It can help unite a community, strengthen social bonds, and maintain a common identity. A feast is also universal, and rather than being a special characteristic of a particular community, a feast appears to be a common practice across many societies all over the world and throughout history. While the nature of the feast can reflect a sense of solemnity and be associated with serious events and rituals, it can also embody a celebratory nature that is often linked with merry-making (Jones, 2007). Various occasions, such as wedding celebrations, Christmas and New Year festivities, birthdays, weddings, anniversary celebrations, and rites of passage, commonly involve feasting as a central element, encouraging a feeling of joy and revelry among the attendees. Moreover, there are also funeral feasts or what some may call memorial feasts for the deceased.

In a close-knit Mizo society, feast has played an important role in social life since time immemorial, linking food with cultural identity, social hierarchy, and community cohesion. It is one of the few pre-colonial cultural practices that have been continued to this day, albeit within a framework increasingly shaped by Christian beliefs and values. A comprehensive understanding of food culture that takes into account its cultural, social, economic, and religious aspects can be gained by analysing a communal feast. This chapter focuses on feasting to explore how traditional Mizo feasts have been adapted into Christian celebrations such as Christmas and New Year, with consideration to the role of modern influences like catering services. The Christmas festival is an important occasion in Mizo society, and food is a main feature of the celebration. By exploring the Mizo Christmas feast, this chapter seeks to offer a detailed analysis of a food culture that involves the entire community and acquires widespread participation, thereby capturing the essence of communal dynamics and social practices in the region. Moreover, given the global celebration of Christmas, exploring its cultural significance

in terms of Mizo society provides insights that resonate beyond regional boundaries. In order to comprehend the dynamics of the Christmas feast, it is necessary to examine various factors, including the preparation and organisation, the types of food served, and the social interactions that take place throughout this occasion. By examining the rituals, symbolism, and significance of feasts, this chapter explores the deep connections between food and culture in the Mizo feasting tradition and how feasting practices are integral to the Mizo way of life, shaping and reflecting their collective identity. The previous chapters have set the stage for understanding the essence of Mizo food through history and traditions, paving the way for a deeper appreciation of its role in community feasts and celebrations, which will be explored in this chapter.

6.1 Origins of Traditional Feasts

In the Mizo dialect, the word *ruai* means "feast," and the phrase *ruai ṭheh* can refer to both the act of eating the feast and giving the feast in reference to the feast-giver. In almost every special occasion, the Mizos conclude their event with a grand community feast. Feast has been deeply rooted and internalised into the Mizo culture as it has been part and parcel of their religious and cultural activities since earlier times. In order to understand the socio-cultural meaning of feast in Mizo society, it is important to trace its historical concepts and its implications on Mizo's cultural worldview.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the early Mizo faced significant challenges in surviving the forested and rugged terrain. Their way of life centred on farming and hunting, which in turn shaped their worldview and cultural values. In the village community, affluence was measured by the quantity of crops harvested and wild animals hunted. To attain the highest social status and prestige, a man was required to perform a series of feasts and sacrificial offerings over the course of his lifetime. Each feast in this series represented a step on the ladder of social status. After one has completed all the different stages of feasts, including *Khuangchawi*, he achieves the status of *Thangchhuah*, and he is labelled as *zawhzawzo*, meaning "one who has completed everything" (Sangkima, 1992, p.58). Those who achieve this status are honoured both during their lifetime and in the afterlife. According to Liangkhaia (2015), the period for these practices began during their stay in Burma, between Run and Ṭiau around AD 1000-1500.

The earliest knowledge about a community feast among the Mizos is in the mythical story of *Thlanrawkpa Khuangchawi*. Thlanrawkpa is the name of the great and powerful chief, he was regarded as the first person to domesticate mithun. *Khuangchawi* is a revered ceremony with a

series of community feasts, which can only be performed by a person of great wealth to attain the *Thangchhuah* status, as described in Chapter 2.

The story of *Thlanrawkpa Khuangchawi* is an important myth in Mizo history which depicts the beginning of all things. An account of this myth, as described in the book *The Mizo Folk Tales* by Tribal Research Institute (2006), will now be briefly highlighted. When the great chief Thlanrawkpa decided to host a grand Khuangchawi feast, he invited all the living beings on earth, as during that time, humans and animals could communicate and understand one another. In preparation for the feast, large quantities of rice, meat, and rice beer were prepared. The chief's house was renovated, and the fields were levelled to accommodate the numerous guests who had been invited. However, Sabereka, the god of wind and rain, who was also the father-in-law of Thlanrawkpa, was not invited. Angered by this exclusion, Sabereka unleashed a torrential downpour on the eve of the festival, the very night when the mithun was to be slaughtered. The heavy rain washed away all the soil, leaving the ground as smooth as a large flat rock. This made it impossible for the people to dig a hole to plant the sacrificial post, *Seluphan*, on which the skull of the mithun was to be hung (p. 89). After resolving the matter, they began preparations for the Khuangchawi festival. However, Sabereka imposed a condition for the settlement: all animals and plants must never speak again. From that day forward, no animals or plants could communicate with one another (p. 92). According to the myth, it was at this *Khuangchawi* feast that Thlanrawkpa named all the animals and birds based on their peculiar qualities.

One principle of a traditional feast is the distribution of food, which relies on having a surplus. Achieving this surplus requires years of dedicated effort by both men and women, along with a measure of good fortune. Similar to the Mizo feast of merit performed to attain the status and privilege of *Thangchhuah*, the Naga tribes of Nagaland also have a feast of merit. Among the Zounuo-Keyhonuo[13] of Nagaland, one who gives several expensive feasts of merit during their lifetime is called *Zhodimi* (Das, 1993). These ordered feasts are closely linked to the social structure. According to Das (1993), they function in the economic sphere as a display of social

[13] The Angami Naga region in Nagaland is divided into four ranges: western, northern, southern and the Chakhroma. The southern Angami people prefer to call themselves the Zounuo-Keyhnuo (Pelesano, personal communication, November 19, 2023).

competition among kinsmen and friends. Simultaneously, they serve significant political purposes by helping individuals attain recognised ranks within society. However, the key difference between the Mizo and Naga feasts of merit lies in their ultimate objective. For the Mizo, the primary goal is to secure entry into *Pialral* (paradise) and enjoy abundance in the afterlife – a belief not shared by the Nagas, who do not hold such notions about the afterlife.

In Mizo society, feasts have long been a central element of any significant occasion, particularly in their communal lives. Traditional festivals such as *Chapchar Kut*, *Mim Kut*, *Pawl Kut*, and the revered feasts of merit, along with significant events like marriages, funerals, and the performance of sacrifices and rituals, consistently culminated in the communal sharing of food and drinks among all members of the community, irrespective of their social and economic status. Among the traditional Mizo, a feast is more than just a communal meal; it is a ritual infused with tradition, fostering sentiments of kinship, and community solidarity, a celebration of festivals (*Chapchar Kût* and *Pawl Kût*), a link to ancestors (*Mim Kût*), a social ladder (*Thangchhuah*), and a means of settling disputes and reinforcing political bonds (*Sa-ui tan*).

6.2 Transformation of Traditional Feasts into Christian Celebrations

The mass conversion from the Mizo indigenous religion to Christianity at the beginning of the 20th century undeniably brought about a profound transformation in the region's social, cultural, and religious landscape. Although Christian missionaries strongly discouraged converts from participating in practices such as pagan sacrificial rites, traditional festivals and feasts of merit, ceremonial dances, and the consumption of liquor, the tradition of communal feasting endured and was not abandoned.They instead incorporated feasts into their new religious practices for the commemoration of Christian festivals, expressions of gratitude to God, and worship through prayers and hymns, with church leaders taking on the primary role as organisers. Pachuau and van Schendel (2015) further noted that the Mizos adopted feasting as an integral part of their “Christian moral code” (p. 79). This adoption emphasises their recognition of the communal and festive elements of feasting, which is in line with their religious beliefs and values, particularly their understanding of Christian commensality. The Christian notion of inclusive commensality—defined by the act of sharing a meal prepared at the same hearth, at the same time and place—symbolises unity, connection, and kinship within the community (Zama, n.d., p. 13). This interpretation resonates with broader Mizo ideals of fellowship and communal bonding, emphasising the

importance of shared experiences in fostering a sense of belonging and solidarity among believers.

The possibility for Christian converts to shift from traditional festivals to Christmas celebrations is a noteworthy evolution in cultural practices within the Mizo community. As individuals embrace Christianity, they often undergo a transformative process wherein traditional festivals may be reinterpreted or gradually supplanted by celebrations aligned with Christian beliefs. *Pawl Kût*, the annual harvest festival, shares striking similarities and meaningful linkages with the Christmas festival despite their differing religious origins. One notable similarity is that they both take place towards the end of December, coinciding with the cessation of agricultural activities for the year. *Pawl Kût*, much like the Christmas festival, serves as a time for sharing abundance with all members of the village, regardless of their socio-economic status. With the decline of traditional feasts due to the influence of Christianity, the Christmas feast became a highly anticipated event (Hlawndo, 2011).

Though the converts no longer observed the traditional festivals or any sacrificial offerings, the tradition of community feasting persisted and underwent adaptation to conform to the Christian way of life. The traditional festivals and sacrificial feasts became a celebratory feast for the birth of Jesus Christ (Christmas) as well as for the glorification of God which Mizos called *Pathian Chawimawina*. In such religious feasts, the inclusion of *zu* (rice beer) in traditional feasts has been discarded, as the consumption of alcohol was deemed sinful by Christian missionaries. *Zu* was replaced by tea after it was introduced and encouraged by the missionaries (Dawar, 2019). Tea, particularly milk tea, transitioned from being a rare luxury to a universally consumed beverage in the post-colonial Mizo society, ultimately becoming an indispensable feature of the Christmas celebrations. The foods prepared for the feast undergo sanctification through a prayer, invoking God's blessings. Also, they engage in the singing of hymns and dancing, not merely as a source of enjoyment but as an act of worship and glorification of God. This adaptation underscores the complex process of cultural syncretism and adaptation that occurs when religious beliefs encounter existing social practices.

In modern times, beyond the religious celebrations such as the Christmas feast (*Krismas Ruai*) and the feast of glorification of God (*Pathian Chawimawina*), communal feasting is a significant cultural practice observed in various occasions, including weddings, pre-wedding

ceremonies (*Man hlanna*)[14], death anniversaries (*Lungphun)*[15], birthdays, jubilees, career promotions, appointments, exam result celebrations, and more. These feasts are predominantly organised by individual families and are typically limited to invited attendees, reflecting the familial and relational networks central to such events. In contrast, community-wide feasts, which transcend individual households, are more commonly associated with religious observances or specific occasions such as village or locality anniversaries. In these instances, local NGOs or community organisations often take on the responsibility of hosting, emphasising collective identity and social cohesion within the broader community.

6.2.1 The Beginnings of Christmas in Mizoram

The precise date and location of the first celebration of Christmas in Mizoram remains a subject of debate due to conflicting historical accounts. Some historians have noted that the first Christmas celebration in Mizoram took place in 1871, while others have recorded it as happening in 1872, during the *Vailen* period, i.e., the time of the British invasion. This event is believed to have occurred during the first Lushai Expedition of 1871, near the Tuivai River on the Manipur border, conducted by the British army (For Mizos, 2014; Mizoram Prepares, 2021). However, Zawnga (2009) opposed that the event in question cannot be regarded as the first Christmas celebration in Mizoram. He argued that while the southern bank of the Tuivai River is part of Mizoram, the northern bank lies within Manipur territory, and the British army camp was likely established on the northern side for safety reasons. Due to the lack of definitive records identifying the exact location of the camp, Zawnga maintained that this event does not qualify as the first Christmas in Mizoram. Instead, he highlighted another incident during the same expedition, where a different group of British troops entered southern Mizoram through Tlabung village and celebrated Christmas at Belkhai village in 1872. General Brownlow reportedly hosted a gathering of officers for a shared meal. According to Zawnga, this event

[14] "*Man hlanna*" is a pre-wedding ceremony hosted by the bride's family where they receive the traditional bride price from the groom's family and then distribute among close relatives and friends. This ceremony concludes with a feast arranged by the bride's family.

[15] "*Lungphun*" is the occasion dedicated to observing the memorial stone laid on the grave to honour and remember the deceased. It represents the last ritual in the death ceremonies.

represents the first Christmas observed in Mizoram, although it was celebrated exclusively by British soldiers in their British tradition rather than by the local Mizo population.

According to a church elder Upa Thanga, as mentioned in an article by Darkunga (1954, p. 278), Mizo students, along with their teachers in Aijal (Aizawl), started observing Christmas in 1899, five years after the arrival of the missionaries. Initially, the observance was limited to a small group of students celebrating alongside the missionaries. In 1901, a few Mizo converts celebrated Christmas with Welsh missionary Edwin Rowlands, popularly known as Zosapthara, at Pukpui village in southern Mizoram (Zawnga, 2009). According to Lloyd (1991), this event is considered the first Christian festival celebrated by Mizo Christians. For the Christmas celebration, they prepared *sial* (mithun) for a feast and sang hymns. Zawnga (2009) writes that Pukpui had 47 converts at the time, and with other converts who came from nearby villages, approximately 57 people participated in the festivities. It is also believed that some non-converts may have joined the celebration as well (Zawnga, 2009). In contrast, Dawngliana (2003) stated that the Mizos began celebrating Christmas in 1903 with a feast, marking 2003 as the centenary of Christmas celebrations in Mizoram.

Lalrinthanga (2020) writes, "According to Lalnghinglova, the first Christmas celebration was hosted at Aizawl in 1905 in the presence of Rev. D.E. Jones and Rev. and (Mrs) Edwin Rolands (sic)" (p. 49). For the feast that year, they set traps in the forest to catch birds and also purchased a pig to prepare for the celebration (Zawnga, 2009). In Aizawl, the celebration was reserved only for schoolchildren till 1912 (Lalrinthanga, 2020). The earliest recorded public celebration of Christmas in Aizawl took place in 1913 with a community feast (Darkunga, 1954). This is the earliest instance of community-wide feasting in Aizawl in connection with Christmas. Based on these writings, Christmas was first celebrated by the Mizos in Pukpui in 1901 and later in Aizawl in 1905, and the first Mizos who celebrated Christmas indulged in a celebratory feast. From then on, Christmas has been a part of Mizo culture, where *Krismas ruai* or *Masi ruai* (literally translates to 'Christmas feast' in Mizo language) has become a tradition in every Christmas celebration to date. As Dawngliana (2003) noted, from the very beginning, the Mizos have celebrated Christmas with a communal feast, and even after 100 years, no celebration is considered more meaningful or grander than sharing a feast with the community.

People who identify as *Mizo Kristian* (Mizo Christian) celebrate Christmas as a time to commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ by attending church services, listening to sermons, singing hymns of gratitude to God, and concluding the celebration with a grand community

feast prepared by the church members. In addition to Christmas, the church also observes the New Year, promoting the religious significance and observance of festivities beyond the occasion of Christmas. This emphasises the crucial function undertaken by the church in organising and coordinating these religious observances.

Furthermore, the term 'Christmas feast' can also carry nuanced connotations, such as when someone asks about another person after the celebrations by saying, '*Krismas i hmang nuam em*?' (Did you have a good Christmas?), or '*Ruai i ṭheh em*?' (Did you join the feast?). In these instances, 'Christmas' and 'feast' appear to denote individual experiences influenced by cultural norms and traditions observed during the holidays. This highlights the multi-layered nature of Christmas celebrations within the *Mizo Kristian* community, which encompass both religious and cultural elements. While these terms may initially evoke images of elaborate holiday meals, their usage in everyday conversation reflects a broader cultural understanding that encompasses not only culinary delights but also the collective experiences and memories associated with the holiday season.

6.2.2 From Sacrificial to Celebratory Animal

During pre-Christian periods, in order to appease the spirit world and to attain the Thangchhuah title, one had to make sacrificial offerings, which were then followed by a feast. The most potent sacrificial offering involved *sial* (mithun), a large semi-domesticated bovine (*Bos frontalis*) indigenous to the hills, while less significant offerings consisted of pigs, chickens, and wild birds (Pachuau, and van Schendel, 2015, p.78). Apart from its significance in sacrificial practices, the mithun holds symbolic importance as a representation of wealth and functions as a form of local currency, serving as a bride price and a means of settling legal disputes. Because of the considerable socioeconomic and cultural significance of mithun in festivals and sacrificial practises the tradition of slaughtering mithun at feasts continued even after the adoption of Christianity. The first Christmas celebration among Mizo converts at Pukpui in 1901 featured a traditional mithun slaughter owned by Pu Rochawnghluta (Zawnga, 2009). Likewise, in 1913, when the first public celebration of Christmas in Aizawl was held, Upa Thanga mentioned that funds for the feast were collected from a few affluent families. In addition to their contributions, a mithun was donated by a clerk named Pu Paliana for the provision of food for the feast (Darkunga. 1954, p. 279). This exemplifies the relevance of a mithun to Mizo culture and community gatherings. Moreover, the mithun, originally domesticated by the Mizos, continued to be a symbol of wealth. Those who could afford it

would slaughter a mithun to celebrate significant events like marriages or Christmas feasts. In addition, whenever missionaries returned from their furloughs in Britain, early Mizo Christians would traditionally slaughter mithun to celebrate their safe return (Pachuau, and van Schendel, 2015, p.78). Besides, sharing mithun meat was a part of revival feasts with Christian influences. Lalrinthanga (2020) wrote that revival feasts were a prevalent occurrence until the early 1960s, where killing mithun and pigs was even considered a notable aspect of the revival. He further stated that although their popularity has decreased due to social changes, many villages still continue to observe this tradition.

Sial (mithun) holds significant value for the Mizos and other ethnic groups around the region. Once revered as a prized sacrificial animal in the pre-Christian era, mithun continues to retain its importance within the Mizo community. Even in the contemporary era, certain churches and affluent members of the community prefer to serve a mithun instead of a cow due to its enduring cultural and symbolic significance. During the course of my field study, it was evident that Mizos continue to hold the mithun in high regard when it comes to Christmas feasting. At the church where the fieldwork took place, a feast was organised to accommodate approximately 3000 attendees, where they prepared mithuns along with pigs, cows, chickens, fish, eggs and vegetables. This inclusion of mithun meat in the Christmas feast was highly valued, and the *fatu* (cooks) members took pride in serving it, often boasting about their contribution. Moreover, the attendees highly value the mithun meat and eagerly look forward to consuming it during the feast. It is important to note here that not every church can afford to include mithun in their feasts due to its high cost, and its availability for purchase is limited in the capital city of Aizawl, where mithun rearing is not practised. As a result, churches have to place orders for mithun from villages where the animals are reared before their Christmas preparations.

On the contrary, as much as the mithun is esteemed in a feast, it is pork that occupies the most prominent role, consistently being included in the feast menu, and rarely do feasts occur without the presence of pork. The Mizos are known to be fond of pork, as discussed in Chapter 4, making it likely the preferred and most favoured meat. When questioned about their favourite meat, a majority of the respondents overwhelmingly mentioned pork, both in fresh and smoked form. In fact, in the absence of other meat options, pork alone is sufficient to make the feast complete. In the traditional feast, the main items on the menu were meat, particularly pork and beef/mithun, accompanied by rice, chillies, and sometimes eggs. Boiled pork, known as '*vawksa chhum*' in Mizo, is indisputably the most favoured dish among the Mizos, and a

feast lacking *vawksa* (pork) is considered incomplete. There was hardly any mention of another dish being served at a feast in the early times.

Furthermore, the quantity of meat prepared for a feast holds significant sociocultural meaning, symbolizing status and prestige within the community. In particular, the number of animals slaughtered for such occasions is directly linked to the host's social standing. For example, in the case of weddings, the ability of a family to provide a substantial amount of meat reflects their economic capability and enhances their prestige among kin and community members. This is especially evident in Mizo society, where the phrase "*Ran lu kim* in" (literally translated as "including every head of the animal) captures the cultural ideal of preparing a diverse array of domesticated animals available at the moment for feasts. These often include mithun, pigs, cows, goats, chickens, and fish. Such practices underscore the cultural emphasis on abundance and generosity, particularly in pivotal social events. Moreover, serving rice without at least one type of meat is considered unimaginable, further highlighting the centrality of meat in the Mizo feasting tradition as a marker of hospitality and social significance.

6.3 *Fatu*: The Local Chefs

The preparation of food for the feast is carried out voluntarily by individuals known as *fatu*. The term *fatu* encompasses all those who contribute to the cooking process for the feast. Lorrain (2008/1940) defines *fatu* as "one who presides at a feast; one who prepares and cooks a feast, serves the guests, and clears away after they finished" (p. 134). At large feasts, there may be several *fatu*, individuals responsible for preparing the food, who either volunteer or are appointed for the task. These individuals perform their duties without receiving any monetary benefit. For private occasions such as weddings and funerals, the *fatu* are often close relatives of the one who give the feast, including sons-in-law and other male family members. In contrast, at community events like festivals or Christmas feasts, the *fatu* are members of the community who contribute their expertise voluntarily, expecting neither payment nor any form of reward. Among these cooks, a *fatu* leader is usually appointed to oversee the entire food preparation process. These leaders are mostly older members with significant experience and expertise in managing such tasks. They provide guidance to younger volunteers while also managing their responsibilities.

The majority of *fatu* members are typically men, as historically, men have carried out the roles of slaughtering domestic animals and hunting. Moreover, in traditional sacrificial rituals, only the designated priest and the male members were allowed to participate and only men were

permitted to eat the sacrificed animal. These traditional roles and division of labour have resulted in men predominantly assuming the role of *fatu* in public feasts. On the other hand, women assist men in cutting vegetables, collecting water, and serving drinks. The male-dominated *fatu* system in Mizo society embodies the gender-based division of labour in food preparation, illustrating the exchange of roles between men and women in both the public and private spheres. With this exchange of roles in public and private spheres, Lalrofeli (2019) argued that men choose to cook for the sake of the outside world. This was perhaps their attempt to project themselves as good husbands or good men in general. She said that cooking outside the home earned men social recognition, and therefore, food became the creator of power. It reflects patriarchal values, where men hold exclusive authority in public spheres while women are secluded. Such customs underscore the traditional prioritisation of male participation in religious and communal activities, reinforcing gender hierarchies and limiting women's roles in these cultural practices.

In a sociological context, the role of *fatu* members in feasts is highly significant. They often eat either before or after the guests, as their primary responsibility during the feast is to oversee its smooth operation. They also bear the responsibility of cleaning up after the feast, managing materials, and disposing of waste generated during the event. Remarkably, they undertake these tasks willingly with a sense of duty, without hesitation or complaint. This voluntary labour is widely regarded by the Mizos as embodying the essence of *Tlawmngaihna* – a traditional moral code emphasising selflessness, altruism, and dedication to the welfare of others. This practice not only upholds a highly valued moral ideal but also confers social honour and respect to those who embody it. Many aspire to join the *fatu*, particularly younger men, who find joy and mentorship in collaborating with more experienced members, particularly in cooking and organising – a process that strengthens social bonds and facilitates the intergenerational transmission of skills and values.

Moreover, in the case of religious feasts, such as those held during Christmas or New Year, these gatherings exemplify a broader sociological principle: the division of labour. Church members, regardless of age, gender, or social status, collectively contribute to the preparation of the feast. As Malsawma remarks, "Christmas *fatu* does not distinguish your social position; even government officials, political leaders, NGO leaders, and the poorest members of society participate without distinctions or special treatment" (personal communication, June 14, 2019). This inclusive participation reflects a breakdown of traditional hierarchies, as everyone contributes according to their abilities. The success of the feast is not merely the result of

professional expertise but the collaborative efforts, skills, and ideas of the fatu members working in harmony.

Figure 6.1 Mithun meat prepared by male "fatu" members (Photo taken by the scholar)

Figure 6.2 Cutting mithun tripes and chillerlings etc. for Sachek (Photo taken by the scholar)

6.4 Contemporary Christmas Celebrations in Aizawl

As December approaches, anticipation fills the air, as captured by the phrase *Krismas rim a nam*, meaning “there is a smell of Christmas in the air.” This expression signifies the arrival of Christmas with the fragrance of oranges, the aroma of firewood and charcoal, the crisp chill in the air, and the comforting warmth of the winter sun that collectively evoke the essence of

Christmas for a Mizo. Every year, the government of Mizoram officially designates a state holiday from the 24th to the 26th of December to commemorate the Christmas festival. But beyond the bureaucratic declaration lies the true spirit of the holiday, as local churches take the stage in organising the grandest celebrations in their respective communities. Every church becomes a symbol of joy and celebration as it is decked out with vibrant lights and decorations. The streets of Aizawl, the capital city, are lit with decorative lights put up by the local residents in almost every neighbourhood, while Christmas carols and songs reverberate from shops to street corners.

The holiday season is characterised by a remarkable spirit of generosity as individuals and communities extend their efforts to support those in need. Among Mizo Christians, as with Christians worldwide, Christmas is a time to give back and uplift others. Gift exchanges are a common tradition among friends and relatives. Beyond personal exchanges, government agencies, NGOs, churches, friend groups, and individuals actively reach out to hospitals, orphanages, prisons, old age homes, and rehabilitation centres and offer meaningful gifts to ensure that even the marginalised can partake in the festive joy. In the days leading up to Christmas or on Christmas Eve, church youth groups take the initiative to organise carol services. These groups visit hospitals, nursing homes, orphanages, and families mourning the loss of loved ones, singing Christmas carols to provide solace and spread a message of hope and togetherness during this special season.

The most significant and celebrated days of the Christmas season are Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and Feast Day. Additionally, New Year is also observed with feasts. Beyond the community feasts, it is common for families and friends to indulge in foods throughout the festive period. Traditional dishes such as *Chhangban* (sticky rice bread), *Sawhchiar* (rice porridge) and *Arsa kan* (fried chicken) were particularly popular, complemented by Western-style treats like Christmas cake and pudding, reflecting a blend of local and global culinary traditions.

Christmas Eve signified the formal commencement of the Christmas festivities, following an extended period of both physical and spiritual preparation. This day marked a cultural and social pause, with all labour or activities external to the household typically ceasing. The social norms of the time strongly emphasised the importance of family members who were away, whether for work, education, or other responsibilities, making it a priority to return to the family home by this time. The collective effort to reunite by Christmas Eve underlines the

sociological significance of family cohesion and ritualistic homecoming as central to the holiday celebration.

6.4.1 Christmas and Celebratory Food

Food plays a central role in Christmas celebrations around the world, and in the context of Mizo tradition, a range of dishes are prepared to commemorate the occasion. In Mizoram, the culinary tradition of enjoying *Arsa kan* (fried chicken) on Christmas Eve has evolved into a cherished cultural practice with deep festive significance. Known among the broader community as *Urlawk Zan*, meaning a night dedicated to preparing for the upcoming celebrations, this evening takes on special meanings for different age groups. For children, it is affectionately termed *Dawhthlak Zan*, a night filled with anticipation for their gifts from Santa Claus or *Krismas Putar*. For certain church members, young to old, it is *Zaikhawm* or *Lênkhawm Zan*, a night when they gather to sing indigenous Christmas songs and eat traditional food like *Sawhchiar* (rice porridge) and tea. For young adults, it is celebrated as *Ar Kan Zan*, emphasising the tradition of frying and savouring chicken with friends and family.

Following the Christmas Eve worship service, families and friends come together, exchanging warm invitations to partake in this joyous occasion. For young adults, spending *Urlawk Zan* with friends is considered essential, and the night also serves as an opportunity for courtship among young couples. It is common for friends to playfully tease one another by asking, "Do you have someone to fry chicken with?" adding a light-hearted, social element to the celebration. The night is marked by the sharing of food, symbolising unity and festivity. Those who could not afford chicken would prepare other food such as *Chhangban* (sticky rice bread), chow, boiled yam, etc., with tea. Nearly every household prepares food on this night, and many respondents expressed that you can visit any house and expect to be warmly welcomed with an invitation to share the food prepared for the occasion. The origins of this '*Ar kan zan*,' or the tradition of indulging in food, remain unclear, adding an air of intrigue to what has become an exciting culinary and social tradition central to Christmas celebrations in Mizoram.

In recent years, the advent of fast food establishments such as KFC, along with the growing popularity of non-traditional options like tandoori chicken, frozen foods, and barbecue or grilled meat, has influenced this practice. Long queues at KFC outlets in Aizawl on Christmas Eve reflect the changing preferences of some, particularly among the middle class, resonating with Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, where consuming branded, globalised food signifies being part of a particular social class (Bourdieu, 1984). While the traditional fried

chicken feast continues to hold a significant place in the hearts of many, indulging in a large bucket of KFC has, for some Mizos, evolved into a marker of cultural capital. However, despite variations in the specific foods prepared across families and friend groups, the underlying tradition of sharing and savouring a festive meal late on Christmas Eve retains its symbolic value and celebratory essence across different social groups.

Another traditional food that adds to the festive spirit of Christmas is *Chhangban*, a traditional Mizo sticky rice bread. During the holiday season, both in earlier times and in rural areas today, every household is considered to have sticky rice flour in their kitchen. This flour is either boiled or fried and enjoyed with tea, jaggery, or sesame seeds. Even households that do not cultivate sticky rice in their *jhum* fields typically purchase it from others or from the market to prepare for the holidays.

Before Christmas, the rice is pounded into flour using a large wooden Mizo mortar and pestle. While grinding machines are more convenient and require less time and effort, the wooden mortar and pestle remain the preferred choice for making sticky rice flour. According to Pi Chawitei (65 years old, *Chhangban* seller), rice flour can be made using machines or grinders, for *Chhangban,* the traditional method of manually pounding it in wooden mortars and pestles is favoured because it produces better-tasting flour. She said that machine-made flour tends to be too powdery, which affects the flavour (personal communication, December 22, 2019). While women primarily handle the rice pounding, friends and relatives often join in to help. For young adults, these communal activities, especially pounding rice together, served as a form of camaraderie and were eagerly anticipated. In churches planning to offer *Chhangban* as part of the celebration, a *hnatlang* (communal work) would be organised, where church members come together to prepare the rice flour. A community feast is usually not held on Christmas day, as the main feast is reserved for the following day. Thus, after the church services, a *Chhang Ruai* or bread feast was organised and served with tea.

In urban centres like Aizawl, the traditional practice of pounding sticky rice together and organising church *hnatlang* for its preparation has largely disappeared. This decline is due to several factors, including the reduced availability of *chhangban* and the increasing convenience of serving alternative tea snacks. In addition, the influence of globalisation and modernity has shifted people's preferences, as they increasingly move toward Western-style bakery products, such as cakes and biscuits, rather than embracing traditional Mizo foods like *chhangban*. This

cultural shift reflects broader societal changes where convenience, modern tastes, and global trends have gradually overshadowed the longstanding customs of earlier generations.

One of the most notable changes in the culinary landscape of Aizawl is the growing popularity of Christmas cakes. Over the past two decades, the consumption of Christmas cake has increased rapidly, as it has become a central part of the holiday season for many families. This shift in food preferences reflects broader cultural changes, with the rise of bakery shops contributing to the growing demand for commercially prepared cakes. During the Christmas and New Year seasons, these bakeries experience a surge in sales, with their Christmas cakes often selling out within a short time. The practice of giving Christmas cake as a gift has also increased, reflecting a shift in gift-giving traditions towards more Westernised practices, further strengthening its status as a key part of modern holiday celebrations.

For many older generations, preparing *chhangban* for Christmas has become a cherished memory, a nostalgic Christmas story they recount to their children about a way of life they once experienced. While *chhangban* is still prepared at home and in tea stalls, the labour-intensive tasks of pounding and boiling the rice are now often handled by small-scale sellers who prepare it for the market. Some sellers used to sell sticky rice flour and pre-boiled flour wrapped in banana leaves by going door to door. One respondent explained that their family enjoys *Chhangban* to such an extent that they continue to order it before Christmas from the same seller who used to visit their home to sell it. They have maintained their loyalty as regular customers of this vendor.

Despite the decline of serving *Chhangban* on Christmas day by the church and the increasing popularity of Christmas cakes and bakery products, similar to the case of *Arsa kan*, *Chhangban* remains a beloved food for many and is still considered an essential part of Christmas traditions. As Pi Thari, a 51-year-old respondent remarked, “Christmas feels incomplete without *chhangban*; it truly is part of what makes Christmas special” (personal communication, December 27, 2022). She described how their small immediate neighbourhood, consisting of five households, keeps this tradition alive by purchasing sticky rice flour individually and then gathering at one house to fry and enjoy it together with tea for lunch during the holidays. This shared tradition is cherished by all family members, from young children to elderly parents.

Figure 6.3 Fried Chhangban, black tea and kurtai (jaggery) (Photo taken by the scholar)

6.4.2 Christmas at the Church

The Church where the main study was conducted is the Presbyterian Church at Republic Veng[16], one of the largest localities in Aizawl, and all members of the church are residents of this locality. At present, there are 20 Upa (ordained church elders), two ministers[17] and one pastor with around 3,400 church members. The "Kohhran Committee" (church committee), consisting of the pastor, church elders and ministers, prepared a financial plan and a special budget to be collected from each family for the festival at the beginning of every year named *Krismas leh Kumthar Thawhlawm*, meaning "Christmas and New Year Contribution." Apart from these monthly contributions, certain generous church members have willingly donated for this event in cash and also in kind. Furthermore, the Kohhran Committee formed a special committee named "Krismas leh Kumthar Celebration Committee" in which certain church members were appointed and led by an ordained church elder. This Celebration Committee act as the main planner and organiser of the event. They assigned different departments such as the *Ruai* (feast) department, *Tui* (water) department, Sanitation department, and *Thingpui* (tea)

[16] The Mizo term *Veng* translates to locality.

[17] Ministers here refer to retired pastors.

department. The Programme Committee planned all the programmes for the church services and any activities during the Christmas and New Year celebrations.

On the weeks ahead of Christmas day, the celebration committee would call for church *hnatlang*, a communal work in which the members of the community are expected to take part. It is considered as the channel where the idea of *Tlawmngaihna* is exercised in reality, people come out to help others in need, clean the neighbourhood, etc. without any wage but the whole community benefits together. *Hnatlang* is organised based on ideas of common service for the common good of the community, here the church members work for the church programme. A Christmas *hnatlang* is typically organised for cleaning the church premises and getting ready for the Christmas celebration, collecting firewood for cooking, collecting leaves for the feast preparation, setting up counters for serving food, collecting water, cleaning utensils, and any necessary work needed to be prepared for the festive programmes.

The Christmas celebration started on Christmas Eve (24th December), known as *Urlawk ni* and *Urlawk zan* in Mizo dialect, meaning "a day (*ni*) and night (*zan*) of preparation," with a worship service at church in the evening, followed by *Lêngkhawm* (congregational singing) at a smaller hall within the church premises or even at a private residence that opened its door for it. However, only a small number of dedicated members who desire to sing praise and worship attend this *Lêngkhawm* programme. Children and youths also joined this *Lengkhawm* programme mostly to experience the festive atmosphere and savour the traditional food served. The attendees are served tea and *Sawhchiar* (rice porridge with meat) as a refreshment prepared by men and distributed by the women who are members of the *Thingpui* department. If they are deeply immersed in the spirit of singing, they may sometimes continue until dawn. At home, families and friends come together where women prepare delicious traditional food like *Chhangban* (sticky rice bread) and *arsa kan* (fried chicken), singing Christmas carols while eagerly waiting for midnight to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ.

On Christmas morning, the entire community comes alive with a sense of shared joy and camaraderie. Children eagerly unwrap their *Krismas dawhthlak* (Christmas gifts) and proudly show them to friends and family, while adults diligently prepare *tûkṭhuan* (morning meal) for the family, ensuring everyone attends the church Christmas service on time. Every family prepares the best meal they can on Christmas day. Inside the church, the air resonates with hymns of gratitude and sermons about the true meaning of Christmas as the members come together in prayer and praise. At the Republic Veng Presbyterian Church, where fieldwork was

conducted, there exists a longstanding custom wherein all senior members above the age of 75 received a special Christmas gift from the congregation, presented by the church committee members (*Kohhran puipate*) during the Christmas service. A soft blanket, symbolising comfort and warmth during the holiday season, was chosen as the gift for the year 2023. The Christmas service usually lasts for one hour, followed by high tea known as *Thingpui ruai* (feast of tea) or *Chhang ruai* (feast of bread). This tea banquet was arranged by church members designated as refreshment coordinators by the Christmas Celebration Committee.[18] Traditionally, church attendees were served tea and *chhangban* (sticky rice bread). However, in many churches today, the practice has changed. Attendees are now offered neatly packaged boxes containing a slice of cake, biscuits, and other snacks, often adorned with labels bearing warm Christmas greetings. The food packages were also dispatched to the homes of those members who were unable to participate in the service physically. As the church secretary announced during the service, this practice of distributing food to both church attendees and those unable to attend the service was to ensure that all members, regardless of their ability to participate in religious gatherings, are provided for and included in this Christmas celebration. Additionally, it fosters a sense of unity and solidarity among community members, emphasising the importance of supporting one another in times of celebration and need.

Furthermore, as an expression of gratitude to God, some church members bring their harvested crops or homemade goods to the church as an offering known as "*Thlai thar thawhlawm*," (fresh harvest offerings), as discussed in Chapter 2. The church then sells these offerings to its members, sometimes through an auction depending on the church, and uses the proceeds to fund the Christmas celebration. After the church service, most people spent the rest of the Christmas day visiting relatives, exchanging gifts, cutting Christmas cakes, and indulging in scrumptious homemade food. From young to old, everyone joins in the festivities, exchanging greetings and spreading warmth and cheer. The Christmas Day concluded with an evening church service, followed by another *Lengkhawm* programme at the Sunday School Hall.

[18] The Church Committee, consisting of ordained elders and the pastor, appointed members for the Celebration Committee responsible for organising the Christmas celebration. This Celebration Committee then established additional sub-committees to oversee various departments necessary for the event.

Figure 6.4 Republic Veng Presbyterian Church. Photo retrieved from https://mizoramsynod.org/gallery/album/98

6.4.3 Christmas Feast and The Preparation

The celebrations do not end on Christmas Day. The subsequent day marks the most celebrated day of the Christmas festival, known as '*Ruai Ṭheh Ni*' (Feast Day), featuring a community feast that serves as the peak of the celebration. While there are certain churches that arrange a feast on Christmas Day itself, the majority of churches in Aizawl host their feast on the 26th of December. The feast may even continue the following days, depending on the enthusiasm of the people and the financial condition of the church. In Mizoram, *Krismas Ruai* (Christmas feast) is an integral part of the tradition, a time-honoured ritual that brings the whole community together around tables overflowing with a spread of delightful dishes. This community event takes place in almost every church, where food is prepared for every church member, and everyone feasts together. From traditional Mizo delicacies to festive favourites, the feast exemplified the essence of sharing and abundance that defines the season. Among the staple foods of a Christmas feast are rice with pork and beef or mithun, accompanied by vegetables and chillies, which form the cornerstone of the festive meal.

Preparation for the *Krismas Ruai* commenced weeks before Christmas, during which the necessary materials for the event were procured in advance. The Mizo community incorporated traditional practices such as *hnatlang*, a communal work, into their Christmas preparations (Hlawndo, 2011). The tradition of '*ran lak hnatlang'* (gathering animals), predominantly embraced by male members of the community, has persisted as a longstanding custom in communal feasting rituals since pre-Christian times. In this tradition, either on the eve of the feast day (i.e., Christmas Day) or in the days leading up to it, young men and youths come together under the guidance of their appointed *fatu* leaders to collect animals for slaughter in

preparation for the feast. Traditionally, men would hunt and trap animals, providing meat for the celebrations. Simultaneously, the church would organise a *hnatlang* (community work) to gather firewood (*Thing phurh hnatlang*) and banana leaves (*Hnah lak hnatlang*) for the Christmas feast. Typically, young adults from the church would eagerly venture to nearby forests or the outskirts of the village or city to collect these materials. They would pack lunch (*chawfun*) to share with friends, turning the task into a picnic-like outing while contributing to the community effort. Many recall these experiences fondly as some of their most cherished Christmas memories. Pu Thanga (54) recounted how they used to enjoy the communal efforts during Christmas *hnatlang*:

> Before 2000, most churches in Aizawl still used banana leaves as plates at feasts. Young men and women would go to the outskirts of Aizawl to collect leaves and firewood, as gas stoves were not yet commonly used for cooking feasts. Few people owned vehicles then, so we would cram into the ones available. Collecting leaves and firewood was what truly made Christmas special. (Personal communication, December 26, 2022)

These practices reflect how Mizo Christianity adapted traditional communal values like *hnatlang*, and incorporated them into church activities and celebrations, which played a significant role in shaping local religious identity and fostering social bonds. It also reflects the communal efforts and simplicity of the past, the reliance on natural resources, and the shared sense of interest and camaraderie that defined the season.

Figure 6.5 Men collecting pigs for Christmas feast (Photo taken by a respondent)

At the church where the fieldwork took place, a feast was organised to accommodate approximately 3000 attendees. The *Ruai* (feast) department that was appointed by the Celebration Committee to be in charge of the feast was further divided into smaller sub-groups to take care of each food item prepared. In this *Ruai* department, more than 250 *fatu* members were appointed with leaders who were in charge of a particular group. What was noticed here was that the food of the feast was prepared mostly by men, and all the leaders of the different food departments were men. Few women workers were appointed to help in cutting vegetables, preparing salads and serving tea. Out of 250 *fatu*, only 79 were females, and most of them were the youth group, Kristian Ṭhalai Pawl (KTP), members of the church. Apart from the appointed *fatu*, the teenagers' group of the church, named Christian Youth Service (CYS), also volunteered to help in the feast preparation. They are the *fatu* helper. About 160 CYS members came out to help with the preparation. They cut potatoes on the night before i.e., Christmas night, and on feast day they help with serving the food and are readily available for any needs.

With regard to the food items, the secretaries of the feast committee decide what items to be included in the feast, where and how much to buy. Except for the animals which had to be ordered and bought beforehand, food items and the necessary resources were collected on Christmas Eve. The feast committee collected pigs, mithuns, chickens, fishes, and a large number of eggs and vegetables for the feast. All preparations took place in the church parking lot, while the feast itself was served on the front porch of the Kohhran Hall, located directly above the parking area where the preparations were made.

The main item of the feast was *sial*, a domesticated mithun, where the meat was fried. Alongside this, the Christmas feast included a variety of dishes to accommodate diverse dietary preferences. The pork was boiled in a typical Mizo style with mustard leaves and the broth was utilised to prepare rice porridge. Boiled chicken and fish curry were prepared for people who do not eat red meat, referred to in Mizo as "*Ke pali sa ei theilo,*" meaning those who cannot eat four-legged animals. Boiled eggs were served for children and individuals who cannot eat meat, along with boiled vegetables, salads and chutneys for side dishes.

Apart from these, traditional Mizo delicacies were also prepared, which give emphasis to cultural identity and culinary traditions. These included *sawhchiar* (rice porridge made from pork broth), *sachek* (broth made from tripe, chitterlings and the small intestines of the mithun), *vawk lu bai* (traditional chutney made from pork head and other local ingredients), *sa kawchhung* (pork innards which include the liver, heart, intestines and blood sausages), and *a*

tuipui (rich bone broth of mithun) are special items prepared in the feasts. Additionally, lemonade was also offered to top off the end of the feast.

Pu Rinfela, the secretary of the feast department, noted the evolving dietary preferences among younger generations, many of whom now favour vegetarian options and salads over red meat. In response, significant effort and resources were devoted to preparing scrumptious salads, with an estimated cost of approximately 70,000 rupees allocated specifically for salad ingredients (personal communication, December 26, 2022). This shift reflects broader sociocultural trends, including the interplay between traditional practices and modern food preferences shaped by health awareness and changing lifestyles.

The Mizos, both young and old, have a particular place in their hearts for *sawhchiar*, rice porridge made with pork broth. Upa Muana, a 65-year-old church elder, recalled warmly how much he used to enjoy eating it in their younger years. He recalled feeling especially joyful whenever *sawhchiar* was served during feasts and how excitedly he would eat more of this delicacy than the normal boiled rice served on his plate (personal communication, December 26, 2022). It is highly favoured as a comfort food among the Mizos of all age groups. Apart from being featured on the feast menu, it is also served as a snack along with tea during the Christmas *Lêngkhawm*, as mentioned earlier.

Sachek is a flavourful broth made from tripe, chitterlings and the small intestines of the animal, here they prepared *se-chek* (*Sachek* of mithun). *A tuipui* is a rich broth of mithun meat. *Sachek* and *a tuipui* are predominantly favoured by adults and are not typically enjoyed by children, therefore they are exclusively served to adult attendees. *Sa kawchhung* is the pork innards which include the liver, heart, intestines and blood sausages. This is typically considered or set aside for the elders, church leaders, attendees of *Lengkhawm*, and are also set aside as *fatu*'s share. These recipes not only testify to the rich culinary heritage of the Mizo but also the skills of the local chefs (*fatu*).

Food was served in a buffet system where six food counters were prepared outside the hall out of which one counter was prepared especially for elderly members above 70 years old and another one counter for children. The feast started at 2:30 in the afternoon, where children were served first, followed by adults and it ended at 5 pm. The *fatu* ate only after all the feasters have finished eating. They are also responsible for winding up the feast and taking care of all the places, materials, and garbage of the day.

Figure 6.6 Children feast before adults inside the Kohhran Hall (Photo taken by the scholar)

Figure 6.7 Church members queuing near the food counters (Photo taken by the scholar)

At the Christmas feast, participation in the feast preparation is valued, with individuals placing significant importance on being involved, even if they are not officially appointed as the *fatu*. While the appointments are made primarily as a formality to ensure adequate participation in case of any absenteeism, the broader community is encouraged to join in. It was observed that both those officially designated as part of the *fatu* and those who attend solely to partake in the feast often share photos on social media, signalling their involvement and enjoyment of the celebration. Many of the *fatu* work diligently without complaint, and when asked if their role

is exhausting, they respond by saying that it is an honour to be able to participate as a *fatu*. As one of the female *fatu,* Hriati (40), said, "What makes Christmas truly fulfilling is being part of the *fatu*. Every year, my friends and I make an effort to help and participate in preparing the feast, as simply attending as a guest and eating the meal feels incomplete without contributing as a *fatu*" (personal communication, December 26, 2022).

On the other hand, many people participate primarily because the event is organised by the church. This is particularly evident among men who typically do not engage in domestic cooking or family feasts, yet they willingly participate as *fatu* in the Christmas feast because it is a church event. As pointed out by one of the respondents, church activities are prioritised by many, and members feel a strong obligation to fulfil their role in them. This highlights the influence and authority of the church within the community. The role of the church as an institutional force reinforces social solidarity and moral obligations within the community, highlighting how religious institutions can influence individual choices and maintain social order. This participation also reflects broader societal norms, where church-based activities transcend personal preferences or familial roles, emphasising collective duty over individual inclination.

Figure 6.8 The fatu members eating after serving all the feast attendees (Photo taken by the scholar)

6.5 Modern Adaptations with Traditional Elements

Traditions and customs only have meaning if the practices of the tradition continue to be acted out. The Mizo feasting traditions like the Christmas feast can only become customary or traditional if social actors continue to perform them as practices. By taking the pre-Christian feast of merit (*Thangchhuah*) and the post-Christmas Christmas feast (Church) as institutions to identify the Mizo foodways, it is true that they both do not contain all the fragments of the society, but majority of the culture is based on these two, i.e., *Thangchhuah* and the church. Mizo foodways cannot be fully understood without bringing these two institutions into the context. They can be referred as the most powerful institutions in the Mizo society in the past and the present. This is because the worldview and even life after death are centred around these two institutions. In the traditional society, the major aim of the people was to attain the bliss of *Pialral* (paradise), while in modern society, their aim is to enter *Vanram* (heaven).

It has been discussed that when Christianity was introduced in Mizoram, the missionaries condemned most of the cultural values as profane, and the converts abandoned their traditional practices, including the *Thangchhuah* feast. However, they incorporated some of them into their new religious practices and are now performed by the church. Thus, in the context of the rapid dissolution of traditional practices, the church upholds traditional community experiences through the Christmas feast. As stated by Lalrinthanga (2020), historically, affluent families hosted public feasts as displays of wealth and social status; in contrast, within Christian practice, such feasts have been recontextualised as acts of devotion aimed at glorifying God and expressing communal joy. Although the traditional religious practices were superseded, the elements of worship in feasting still prevail today. The Mizos now give community feasts as a celebratory act or to glorify God in an expression of joy.

With Mizo Christianity, a feast is held not only to celebrate Christian occasions but also to acknowledge indigenous practices by empowering them through feasts. Therefore, as discussed earlier, in order to complete a celebration and empower cultural and religious practices, it is imperative to slaughter or prepare domesticated animals on Christian occasions such as the Christmas feasts. Although the concepts and motivations may vary, the functions and symbolic meanings remain largely consistent. Christianity, for instance, upholds beliefs in the afterlife, observes the Eucharist sacrament, and hosts communal feasts to glorify God. Beyond feasting, certain traditions associated with it – such as the *fatu* system, the collective gathering of resources through organised *hnatlang* (communal work), the cultural valuation of

the *mithun* and pork, and the traditional gendered division of labour – continue to be practised today, albeit in modified forms. This shows that even amidst change and discontinuity, certain elements of continuity and stability persist, particularly in the sphere of traditional beliefs and practices closely tied to foodways within Mizo society.

6.6 The Influence of Catering Services on Mizo Feasting Culture

With the influence of external culture, globalisation, migration, and changing lifestyles, the traditional dietary patterns and feast practices in Mizoram are evolving. In the past few years, catering services have grown rapidly, with notable impact on the traditional community feast and influencing the dietary practices of the Mizos. According to records from the Food and Drugs Administration (FDA) of Mizoram, as of May 2023, there are 110 registered catering services operating within the state. Here, catering service refers to a type of privately owned food service that provides foodstuff (nutritional needs) to consumers while also organising various events, their execution, and food ordering and delivery. It is generally linked with "social events where food and beverages are served in a professional manner" (Doppler et al., 2020, p. 133). Every event, including charity events, religious and social events, celebrations or mourning, requires food. Hiring commercial caterers to provide food at such events rather than cooking by themselves has become a popular trend over the past years, especially in Aizawl. Thus, catering services are in huge demand at present.

6.6.1 Emergence of Catering Business in Aizawl

The emergence and evolution of catering services in Mizoram, particularly their social acceptance and cultural implications, offer valuable insights into the intersection of tradition and modernity in Mizo society. Catering services began in Mizoram at the beginning of the 2000s. One of the first catering services, 'Chhangte Catering,' was started in 2006 by a woman named Pi Zothanpari Chhangte (Pi Pari) from Tuikual South locality of Aizawl. Her journey highlights both the entrepreneurial spirit and adaptability within a traditionally community-oriented society.

Pi Pari began her first business as an off-premise caterer, personally visiting customers' homes to cook and prepare feast for them. Initially, being an avid cook herself, her entry into the business was unexpected – she first prepared a side dish (chutney) for a wedding feast at a friend's request. People began to take notice of her service and requested her to prepare food for their events from then on. Word-of-mouth recommendations from satisfied customers

allowed her business to grow gradually without the need for formal advertising. Over time, she established her own kitchen, which now serves as her business headquarters, and expanded her services to provide home delivery. Without any formal training but by learning through experiences, she started her full-time business as a caterer at the age of 45, employing around ten workers and several part-time assistants. Her workforce primarily comprised Mizo employees, including college students and individuals in need of part-time work, thus contributing to local employment generation.

Catering services like Pi Pari's and others not only met the increasing demand for professionally managed feasts but also reflected a shift in societal preferences. While the traditional Mizo feast typically consisted of simple fare—such as boiled rice, pork or beef, boiled vegetables, and chutneys—modern catering menus offered a broader variety of dishes. Chhangte Catering, for instance, mostly focused on preparing meals suited to the Mizo palate, including Mizo traditional dishes like *bai* (a vegetable stew), *chhum hân* (boiled or steamed vegetables), *sawhchiar* (porridge), varieties of *bâwl* (chutneys made with fermented pork fat), and *tungrung* (a chutney made with fermented soybeans), along with salads, papad/papor and variety of other side dishes. Desserts (puddings, sweets, or fruits) and beverages like lemonades are also served after food. Various types of meat are prepared not only in the traditional Mizo boiled style but also in diverse forms, such as Naga pork curry, butter chicken, chicken manchurian, beef, and mutton curry prepared in Indian styles, often incorporating spices, with preparation methods tailored to meet customer preferences. The inclusion of diverse cuisines, such as Indian, Chinese, and continental dishes, further highlighted their adaptability to customer preferences, especially for events involving non-Mizo guests. On the contrary, Pi Pari noted that while some non-Mizo clients initially struggled with the acquired taste of Mizo cuisine – characterised by minimal use of oil and spices – many grew fond of it over time.

Interestingly, while catering services introduced a more diverse and elaborate dining experience, they also reinforced traditional culinary values. Pi Pari observed that, despite the availability of various global cuisines, Mizo customers often leaned back to traditional dishes like *bai* and *bawl*, suggesting that food remains a critical marker of cultural identity. Her statement, "At the end of the day, Mizos always end up preferring 'Zo food'" (personal communication, April 25, 2023), underscores the enduring significance of Mizo culinary traditions, even in the face of modernisation and globalisation.

Catering services in Mizoram may not be as established or developed yet as that of other states in India or other nations. The industry started gaining momentum only over the past decade in Aizawl and other areas of Mizoram. However, home catering services are in huge demand nowadays. This interest in catering services, as well as the increasing number of caterers, can have several dynamics. Firstly, it is labour-saving, which is seen as an advantage. Relying on relatives and close friends to help prepare a large feast is not always practical nowadays since everyone has become occupied and lacks time, especially in urban areas. Secondly, Mizos are known to be impressionable and susceptible/suggestible by positive remarks made by others. They are easily influenced by popular trends such as eating out or ordering food instead of cooking at home, which led to the popularity and growth of the catering industry. Additionally, there is no denying that globalisation greatly impacts the growth of the food industry and the influx of "outside" food in Mizoram, which has a considerable impact on the traditional food culture. Moreover, new technologies, an increase in private consumption, an increase in the level of education and skills, travel, and tourism have all contributed to the development of catering services in Mizoram. Apart from these, interest in catering services is also because the quality of food, taste and flavours, the presentation, and the service itself by means of being empathetic and attentive to the needs of the customers satisfy both the emotional and sensory experience of their customers.

Figure 6.9 Nupuii Catering at Aijal Club (Photo taken by a respondent)

6.6.2 Impact on Community Feasts

At the core of marketing lies the concept of consumer satisfaction, which plays a pivotal role in determining the success of any business venture. In a highly competitive and dynamic modern environment, service providers, including caterers, are increasingly driven to adopt innovative practices and develop creative offerings to meet the evolving expectations of their customers (Doppler et al., 2020). This shift has resulted in the diversification of menus to include multi-cuisine options alongside traditional offerings, as well as notable improvements in service quality, product presentation, and overall dining experiences. Such transformations exemplify the broader sociological phenomenon of cultural hybridity, wherein elements of traditional and contemporary practices merge, coexisting to form a dynamic cultural synthesis.

The term "hybrid" in this context signifies the blending of the old and the new, where traditional practices and modern innovations either coexist alongside each other or intertwine to create new cultural forms. This cultural hybridisation is particularly evident in the evolution of the Mizo community feast. Historically, traditional Mizo feasts centred on staples like pork, beef, sawhchiar (a porridge dish), and rice, often served on plantain leaves. These feasts emphasised a communal culture with minimal emphasis on side dishes or elaborate preparations. However, contemporary catering practices have redefined this tradition by incorporating diverse side dishes, improved nutritional balance, and sophisticated presentations. For instance, items such as *bai*, *bawl*, and other side dishes, previously absent from traditional feast menus, are now standard features of community feasts both in rural and urban areas even where commercial catering services are not available. Such changes reflect the broader influences of catering services, which adapt rituals to meet modern aesthetic and nutritional standards while maintaining cultural relevance.

Catering services in Mizoram represent more than just a commercial enterprise; they embody a transformative force within the social and cultural fabric of the community. By modernising traditional feasts while simultaneously adapting to contemporary demands, they have redefined communal dining practices. The ability of catering businesses to bridge tradition and innovation demonstrates their influence on how Mizos celebrate and preserve their foodways in an evolving society. The influence of catering services in communal events, including church-organized Christmas feasts, exemplifies this cultural modification. These changes extend beyond the culinary realm, influencing feast presentation, upgrading cooking materials and cutleries, hygiene standards, and food safety protocols, such as the adoption of gloves and

caps by food preparers (*fatu*). Moreover, the involvement of women – particularly those with expertise in catering – has loosened traditional gender roles in feast preparation, marking another layer of social transformation. The fusion of traditional Mizo food practices with contemporary catering innovations shows how cultural hybridity enables the preservation of rituals and customs while simultaneously accommodating the needs of modern lifestyles.

Figure 6.10 One of the counters in a Christmas feast 2022 (Photo taken by the scholar)

6.7 Socio-Cultural Dimensions of Feasting Practices

6.7.1 Feasting and Social Hierarchy

As feasts are organised and funded by certain individuals or groups, the host (i.e., the church as in the case of Christmas feast) often has full authority, the one that holds the power position. But, on the other hand, also bears the burden of responsibility for the interests of the attendees. This can also reflect and reinforce social hierarchies and power dynamics within a community. In traditional *Thangchhuah* feast, the host gained a title which comes with honour, status and position in the society, but he should provide lavish feast to the people in order to gain such power. Likewise, in Christmas feast, the church as an organization acts as the authority that serves the conscience for the members. The fact that the Christmas feast is hosted and organised by the church does not inherently imply the absence of social distinctions or hierarchies, as certain church leaders may claim.

The Mizo Christmas feast is often depicted as a social equalizer, bringing together people of all backgrounds, age groups, and social statuses. While it holds true that overt distinctions between the wealthy and the less fortunate, or between social classes, may not be visible, there are subtler nuances of hierarchy or inequality among the attendees and the organisers, and even among the *fatu* members. According to a respondent, "Even government officials and political leaders partake on equal terms without any VIP designations, but the true VIPs are the elderly members of the community" (Thangthuama, personal communication, January 14, 2023). A separate food counter was arranged for elderly members over the age of 70, and a separate dining space was set up to cater to their needs. In a communitarian society, such practices are rooted in respect and care for elders, reflecting cultural values rather than being interpreted as hierarchical or exclusionary. However, what merits closer sociological scrutiny is the extension of this preferential treatment beyond the elderly to include church leaders such as pastors, church elders, and leaders of youth and women's groups, regardless of their age. While these individuals may not perceive or intend such practices to signify hierarchy, the underlying power dynamics become evident. Certain food such as pork innards, beef bone marrow, and other *fatu's* specials was mostly reserved for these individuals, symbolising their privileged positions within the church community. Thus, despite the egalitarian and communitarian ethos that is emphasised in contexts of commensality of the Christmas feasts, it can be seen that social hierarchies and differences are often unintentionally made visible, reflecting broader patterns of social stratification within a religious context.

Figure 6.11 Seating arrangements for senior members above 70 y/o. (Photo taken by the scholar)

6.7.2 Gender Dynamics in Feasting Practices

The preparation of the Christmas feast in Mizoram requires a large, coordinated labour force. This work is carried out by *fatu*, a term referring to both appointed and voluntary cooks from within the community. Traditionally, the roles associated with feast preparation reflect a gendered division of labour rooted in pre-Christian Mizo society. While cooking and other domestic tasks have long been associated with women, public feast duties—particularly those involving meat preparation—have historically been dominated by men. Activities such as slaughtering animals and handling large-scale cooking were considered masculine domains, derived from the association of men with hunting and other physically demanding tasks.

This historical division remains embedded in contemporary feast practices. During the *Krismas Ruai* at the Republic Veng Presbyterian Church in 2022, over 250 *fatu* were appointed, of whom only 79 were women. Most of the female participants were middle-aged women and members of the church's youth group *Kristian Ṭhalai Pawl* (KTP), assigned primarily to cut vegetables, prepare salads, and serve tea. Meanwhile, all departmental leaders overseeing food preparation were men, and the core work of cooking meat remained their responsibility. The significant numerical and hierarchical dominance of men in feast preparation illustrates how gendered roles continue to persist in the present.

Despite this continuity, recent years have seen subtle shifts. With the significant influence of globalization, the feast menu has expanded, incorporating a diverse array of dishes which were not previously prepared as feast food, including traditional everyday Mizo dishes such as *sa-um bawl*, *bai*, *bekang*, and other non-traditional food like potatoes, *dal*, salad and other side dishes. Notably, these dishes are now predominantly prepared by women, resulting in an increase in the participation of women as *fatu*. This reflects both an expansion of their culinary contributions and their greater visibility in the public domain of feast labour. However, their roles remain limited by the traditional gender binary where women handle vegetables and lighter tasks, while men control the preparation of meat and leadership of the feast committees.

This dynamic can be interpreted through the lens of Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, wherein men's participation in cooking activities during communal events can enhance their social prestige. As Lalrofeli (2019) argues, men often cook for the sake of the outside world, gaining recognition and moral capital through public acts of service. This was perhaps their attempt to project themselves as good husbands or good men in general. She said that cooking

outside the home earned men social recognition and, therefore, food became a source of power. In contrast, women's work, though essential, remains less visible and often excluded from leadership roles. Thus, although both men and women contribute to the feast, the perceived value of their labour may appear unequal when viewed from an external perspective.

Moreover, the centralisation of feast preparation under formal church structures, such as designated departments and appointed leadership, institutionalises this gendered division. While participation is open to volunteers and youth groups, leadership remains male-dominated. Within the framework of communal gatherings such as Christmas feasts, rather than contesting or dissenting against traditional gender roles, assuming the role of a *fatu* in the feast is regarded as an indispensable opportunity. People make every effort to engage in feast preparations to the best of their abilities, even if their contributions may be minimal. A number of respondents articulated sentiments such as 'the essence of a feast lies in one's involvement as a *fatu*,' underscoring the symbolic importance of labour participation regardless of role. This statement emphasizes the enthusiasm and festive spirit imbued within the Christmas feast. Over time, the unwritten established gender roles and division of labour have become embedded or subtly acknowledged in the community, persisting across generations. While there is growing female participation, particularly among younger generations, these changes have not yet disrupted the deeper structure of gendered hierarchy. The Christmas feast, therefore, becomes a site where tradition, identity, and labour intersect, revealing both continuity and quiet transformation in gender roles within Mizo society.

Figure 6.12 Some of the female fatu members (Photo taken by the scholar)

6.7.3 Preservation of Traditional Elements

As Whit (1995) argued that the American Thanksgiving meal provides a socialisation experience in cooking, so does the Mizo community feast. The passing on of cooking practices between elders and youths is summed up in the multitude of food that must be cooked for the feast. During the process of feast preparation, older and more experienced *fatu* train the young ones, passing on their indigenous knowledge of the culinary arts and techniques involved in preparing these dishes to the younger generations. It appears that this is one of the few remaining experiences for both men and women to learn and practice the skills necessary for organising large feasts. Additionally, the act of sharing experiences and knowledge about age-old culinary techniques and practices during feasts provide an opportunity for people to acknowledge traditions and values, and promotes a sense of unity and solidarity among members, reinforcing social relationships within the community.

Figure 6.13 A boy learning to cut meat among adults (Photo taken by a respondent)

In traditional feast preparations, food is served on plantain leaves on a common *thlangra* (winnowing tray), which is shared by a group of friends or relatives. A practice that builds up the bond and connection between one another. However, it is believed that the influx of Christianity superseded the traditional way of partaking food from a common leaf and bowl. Instead, the practice of individual plates was initiated since the missionaries found it more appropriate and hygienic. While this claim holds true for urban areas and some rural regions, it has been observed that many rural areas continue to uphold the tradition of serving food on plantain leaves and sharing a large communal spread. It is also observed that certain churches

in Aizawl have brought back this age-old practice of sharing a single leaf during their Christmas feast as an element of acknowledging and upholding the traditions.

Figure 6.14 Mizo feast spread on banana leaf (Photo taken by a respondent)

Figure 6.15 Traditional Mizo feasting style at Khatla Presbyterian Church, Aizawl. (Photo taken by a respondent)

In the traditional Pawl Kut celebrations, Lalrinthanga (2020) mentioned that the male members of the community would gather at the house of a well-to-do person and would sing together over a pot of rice beer. The enduring tradition of communal singing remains an integral part of modern Christmas celebrations, wherein the church arranges a *Lêngkhawm* program following the regular church services. During this gathering, interested members of the church assemble to sing praise and worship God, which can even last for a whole night depending on their enthusiasm. However, the traditional pot of rice beer has been replaced with a serving of tea and *sawhchiar* (porridge).

Moreover, in the Christmas feast, the participation of every member of the church is made sure irrespective of age and gender. Those who could not come to the church due to health issues, medical duties and other unavoidable instances were provided packed meals which can be collected by their family members. This practice is carried out to ensure inclusivity and ensure that all individuals can fully participate and enjoy the Christmas feast; a traditional practice passed on through generations.

Figure 6.16 Packaged meat for the sick (Photo taken by the scholar)

6.7.4 Homecoming and Social Bonding

Fischler (2011, p. 8) believes that the idea of "you are what you eat" is universally acknowledged across cultures. This notion proposes that when people eat a certain meal, they also absorb its prominent characteristics. According to him, if eating a food makes one more like that food, then people who share the same food also tend to become more like one another. In this sense, partaking in the Mizo feast becomes a transformative experience, where individuals become more than just consumers of food; they become participants in a shared cultural narrative.

Commensal festive occasions like the Christmas feast serve as pivotal moments for reuniting families that have become dispersed over time (Fischler, 2011). Siskind (1992) posited that the American Thanksgiving had become associated with the concept of homecoming. In line with her argument, the Mizos similarly identify Christmas with the idea of returning home for festive celebrations, signifying the immense cultural and emotional significance of this seasonal homecoming within the community. Many people who are living outside the state

made an effort to come home in time for Christmas. Even people from rural areas living in the capital city or other places returned home to spend Christmas with their families and partake in the community feast. As Siskind argues, returning home for Christmas is "both a metaphor and a ritual performance of solidarity, renewing or validating family ties" (1992, p.176) This act of coming together reaffirms values and beliefs about community and family about cultural identity and belonging. It serves to reinforce and validate the value of family as well as community connections within the larger social fabric. For many, it is a long holiday away from work obligations, a precious time for rest after a yearlong struggle, a quality time with friends and family. Furthermore, those individuals who are actively involved in community and church activities are busy with a variety of activities, provide charity to the less privileged members of society, and participate in the preparation of the grand feast.

Rather than simply eating food with others, the Christmas feast offers a shared experience, bringing people together and celebrating the holiday as a unified community. One of the respondents shared that Christmas feast provide a rare opportunity to reconnect with people we rarely see throughout the year. He said that it is a chance to meet childhood friends, old acquaintances, and even church members who seldom attend services. It has also been observed that people come together to create new memories before, during, and after enjoying a delicious meal. Instead of leaving right after eating, many stay in and around the church compound, socializing, taking pictures, and sharing laughter. One respondent emphasised that the most enjoyable and precious time is spent sitting and relaxing with friends and family after the feast. As Fischler (2011) suggests, the feast temporarily restores loosened kinship ties, bringing families and communities together both physically and emotionally. The act of returning home symbolises deeper cultural meanings, symbolising belonging, identity, and the continuity of shared traditions. These homecoming rituals during Christmas not only strengthen familial and communal bonds but also imbue the holiday with deeper emotional and cultural meaning through shared interactions and collective participation.

6.7.5 Symbolic Meanings of Feast Food

In contemporary society, where a variety of meats and other food items are readily accessible to all, the foods typically prepared for everyday meals often share significant overlap with those used in rituals and festivals. As Douglas (1972, p. 71) points out, "a very strong analogy between table and altar" exists, highlighting the symbolic connections between mundane dining and ceremonial feasting. While the food items that are prepared during special occasions

may often be the same as what people cook every day at home, their presentation within the context of a feast setting gives them a more meaningful cultural and symbolic significance. As Pathak (2021) noted, the ordinary food that we consume at home becomes extraordinary when it is served as a feast, supporting the idea that context transforms meaning. This transformation from the mundane to the extraordinary is not just about quantity or presentation but about the collective experience and cultural significance attached to sharing those dishes in a festive context. Moreover, it not only elevates the culinary experience but also reflects the culinary heritage and cultural traditions. The act of gathering, celebrating, and ritualising these meals elevates them from mere sustenance to symbols of unity, tradition, and shared identity.

For Mizos, a Christmas feast is not a normal dinner where people passively eat what is in front of them. It is a highly structured event that is densely meaningful to participants. The act of partaking in the Christmas feast is not merely a culinary experience but a deeply symbolic and ritualistic one. In agreement with Pathak's (2021) argument, it indeed has a unique way of transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary, creating memories and celebrating the beauty of shared meals. Especially in a closed-knit society like Mizo, even though many families could cook better meals at home, they make every effort to get in time for the Christmas feast because they do not want to miss the event and wish to be a part of the festivities. Coming together to share a meal and celebrate not only elevates the experience, making it a special occasion that enriches the flavours and adds a sense of joy and togetherness, but it also provides them with a sense of belonging and identity. Individuals tend to prioritise attending the feast, putting greater emphasis on it than church services, as it bears symbolic value and represents a special occasion that holds both cultural and religious meaning. The interplay of ceremonial rituals and communal feasting is a deeply rooted part of the tradition, reflecting a longstanding practice that connects the spiritual and social dimensions of festivals. In fact, as articulated by a respondent, '*Krismas a ruai theh loh te chu a Krismas lo,*' meaning that "Christmas celebration is incomplete without a feast" (Bulbula, personal communication, December 26, 2023). This widely accepted statement highlights the central importance of feasting in capturing the essence of Christmas celebrations. This connection between the ceremonial aspects of the Christmas celebration and communal feasting symbolises the intersection of food consumption with the performative nature of ritual.

6.8 Conclusion

This chapter focuses on the key elements that come together in a ritual and community tradition–such as the observance of a Christian event, a communal feast, the symbolism of the food, and the interplay of change and continuity–in order to understand the connection between foodways and cultural identity through the lens of Christmas feasting.

Whenever there is social change or continuity in society, it is usually upheld by dominant institutions. These institutions may be a regulator of change or an instrument of continuity. This chapter focuses on how the two institutions, namely, *Thangchhuah* and *Church,* played their role in Mizo foodways and feasting traditions. Despite the rejection of many traditional cultural practices by Christian missionaries, Mizo Christians have reimagined feasting as a significant aspect of worship and celebration, removing elements of sacrifices and rice-beer consumption from the festivities. The analysis revealed that traditional beliefs were replaced by a Christianized ideology, while traditional knowledge and practices were found to play a significant role in preserving cultural identity through feast-related practices.

Globalisation and modernity have also influenced and reshaped Mizo feast practices. The shift in dietary habits can be viewed as a reflection of broader societal changes, where globalisation, modernity, and changing consumer preferences have reshaped cultural practices. The preference for cakes and biscuits over *chhangban* highlights not only a shift in taste but also a shift in values, as traditional foods become increasingly side-lined in favour of more globally ubiquitous options. In many ways, the decline of *hnatlang* gatherings due to reduced usage of firewood and banana leaves, along with the decline of certain traditional practices, reflects a transformation in the social and cultural dynamics of the Mizo community. Dependency on market-sourced goods for feasts also reflects a larger narrative of economic transformation in Mizo society. Modern influences are increasingly redefining the way people celebrate and engage with their heritage, signalling a shift in communal traditions and values. However, the Christmas feast remains a time for people to reconnect with loved ones, reinstate community life, and uphold traditions.

However, despite the fact that there are many important values and symbols manifested in the feast, the analysis of feasts has not received enough scholarly attention. Especially in the field of sociology, the study of food and feasting as a distinct and well-defined phenomenon does not exist. As this process involves a substantial degree of social solidarity, coordinating the

political economy, as well as generating deeply held cultural values, it serves as a lens to what sociologists and anthropologists are interested in; what better way to understand people than to attend a feast? Since feast is an integral part of Mizo culture and identity, it should not be confined solely to its traditional and religious functions; instead, it must be understood as a complex socio-cultural phenomenon that symbolises collective memory, social cohesion, and the symbolic reproduction of cultural values within the broader context of food practices and traditions.

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