

MEANING-MAKING OF FOODWAYS: A STUDY OF FOOD IN MIZO SOCIETY

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Chapter 7: CONCLUSION: REFLECTIONS ON MIZO FOODWAYS AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

This concluding chapter discusses the central arguments of the study by highlighting the key research findings in relation to the research aims and research questions, as well as the value and contribution thereof. This chapter also proposes future directions and opportunities in the area of food studies.

Analysis of Key Findings

The overarching narrative that binds this study is the recognition of Mizo foodways not merely as culinary practices, but as a symbolic and social system that constructs and sustains cultural identity. Through everyday meals, rituals, and communal feasts, food operates as a language of belonging, a means of expressing collective memory, and a vehicle for maintaining traditional values amidst changing social landscapes.

This study sets out to investigate three main objectives focused on understanding Mizo foodways: to explore the historical influences and socio-cultural dynamics shaping their development, to understand the symbolic meanings embedded in their food practices, and to examine the function and significance of communal feasting in Mizo society while analysing the impact of modern influences on these traditions. By exploring the interconnectedness of food, culture, and identity, the thesis argues that Mizo foodways serve as a powerful medium through which cultural identity is expressed, preserved, and negotiated in both traditional and contemporary contexts.

I

The first two core chapters, Chapters 2 and 3, address the first objective of the study by describing the historical dynamics of Mizo food culture from the pre-colonial era to post-insurgency in Mizoram. These chapters provide a socio-historical overview of Mizo society through the lens of food, revealing its central role in shaping cultural, political, and historical narratives. The analysis begins by exploring how geography, indigenous religion, and subsistence patterns informed the early Mizo worldview. In this context, food was central to ritual life and community organisation, from the symbolic value of meat and salt to the expression of collective values such as *Tlawmngaihna* (altruism).

The findings revealed that the evolution of Mizo food culture is closely tied to their geographical conditions, agricultural practices, and major historical events such as migration, colonisation, conversion to Christianity, famine, and insurgency, all of which have shaped the way Mizos eat today. Each experience contributed to the development of distinct food practices and cooking techniques, while food itself remained a marker of adaptation and continuity. For example, potatoes and dal, once foreign, are now integrated into everyday Mizo cuisine, reflecting how identity evolves without abandoning its roots. Similarly, the cultural shift from drinking *zu* (rice beer) to tea with *kurtai* (jaggery) shows how food habits evolve while maintaining social functions such as hospitality and connection.

These chapters position food as a lens for understanding broader socio-political transformations, showing how culinary shifts often mirror changes in power structure, belief system, and community dynamics. The study also shows how the act of cooking and sharing food reflects a communitarian ethos of Mizo society where meals are often prepared not only for family but for potential guests or neighbours in need. This practice underscores an ethic of mutual care and shared responsibility, reflecting core values of *Tlawmngaihna*, kinship and solidarity. Understanding these historical and cultural frameworks is essential for appreciating the deep connections between the actual food items consumed, cultural identity, and collective life in Mizoram.

II

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the second objective of the study by examining how traditional Mizo foods and their preparations are not only culinary practices but also critical sites for the expression and construction of cultural identity. These chapters show that food in Mizo society operates on both a sensory and symbolic level; it is not simply consumed but deeply felt, memorised, and performed. In this way, food becomes a vessel through which cultural memory, emotional attachment, and communal belonging are transmitted across generations.

These chapters show that taste is not only a biological experience but a cultural one, shaped by memory, socialisation, and history. The aroma of *saum* (fermented pork fat) or the taste of Mizo porridge, to name a few, evokes not just flavour but a sense of nostalgia and belonging, connecting individuals to their familial histories and collective identity. These elements of taste and smell function like a cultural language, one that encodes memories of home, kinship, and belonging. Thus, food becomes a form of embodied identity, where what is eaten, how it is prepared, and how it is experienced communicate values, traditions, and emotional landscapes.

Moreover, contrary to the external perception of Mizo food as plain or minimal, this study highlights a complex culinary system rooted in sensorial richness and cultural symbolism. Traditional Mizo preparation methods before the colonial period, such as boiling and using minimal spices, fermentation, smoking, and sun-drying, still seemed to be a choice of taste at present, and the processing methods have remained more or less the same, which shows both continuity and taste rooted in cultural values despite outside influences. These methods reflect a form of cultural resilience, asserting identity in the face of external pressures and culinary globalisation. At the same time, the study highlights how identity is not static but negotiates with modern influences. The incorporation of dishes and ingredients from across borders has broadened the culinary landscape while preserving and reshaping local identity. New culinary practices do not erase older ones but are absorbed and reinterpreted in ways that preserve cultural distinctiveness. The hybridisation of Mizo food reflects both a transformation and a reaffirmation of identity in an interconnected world.

Additionally, the subjectivity of taste is central to understanding how food is valued not only from person to person but across different cultures. What one group finds delicious, another may initially find strange or even unappealing, as in the case of dog meat consumption or fermented food. Yet, these preferences are not fixed; they evolve with exposure and socialisation. As Kikon (2021) argues, what some may find foul or unpleasant smell might instead be cherished by others as comforting, culturally meaningful, or even sacred. Nevertheless, over time, people can become accustomed to these unfamiliar flavours, as many foods possess an acquired taste. This highlights that taste and culinary identity are both internalised and relational, shaped by how communities view themselves and how they are viewed by others.

III

Chapter 6 addresses the third objective of the thesis by describing the role of communal feasting in Mizo society and the impact of modern influences on the tradition. Communal feasts were found to serve as vital spaces for fostering social solidarity, reinforcing kinship ties, and celebrating collective identity. However, the study also noted the gradual transformation of these traditions under the influence of modernisation, urbanisation, and globalisation, raising questions about how these shifts might reshape the cultural meanings attached in food rituals.

Social change and continuity in a society are often upheld by dominant institutions, which can act either as agents of change or as preservers of tradition. This chapter highlights the roles of

two key institutions, *Thangchhuah* (the traditional feast of merit) and the Church (through the Christmas feast), in shaping Mizo foodways and feasting traditions. While Christianity challenged and replaced several indigenous rituals, the Church has also played a crucial role in reframing communal feasting as an expression of Christian fellowship while preserving certain traditional elements. For example, even as rice beer and sacrificial rites were eliminated, practices like animal slaughter, collective cooking (*fatu* culture), and communal singing (*Lengkhawm*) have endured, albeit with altered meaning. These practices reflect the relationship between religion, tradition, and community, showcasing how cultural identity is both transformed and preserved through institutional adaptation.

While the Church has preserved certain communal values, globalisation and modernity have significantly reshaped aesthetics, logistics, and values of feasting. Globalisation brings new ideas and changes that shape people's tastes, ingredient availability, and preparation methods, incorporating new elements into traditional customs. This shift in dietary habits reflects broader societal changes, as globalisation, modernity, and evolving consumer preferences transform cultural practices. For example, the growing preference for fast food or processed food over *Chhangban* (Mizo sticky rice bread) and *Ar kan* (fried chicken) for Christmas Eve highlights not only changing tastes but also shifting values, as traditional foods are increasingly replaced by globally popular options. Modern influences are progressively redefining how people celebrate and engage with their traditions, resulting in a shift in communal values and practices. The reliance on market-sourced goods for feasts further reflects the broader economic transformation within Mizo society. In this light, Mizo foodways reveal how identity is not merely preserved but actively negotiated through daily and ritual practices.

Furthermore, the interaction between global food systems and local traditions has given rise to hybrid cultural identities. For instance, at community Christmas feasts, traditional dishes are often prepared with both local and imported ingredients and presented in styles influenced by private catering services. The study finds that modern catering services play a meaningful role in negotiating between traditional food practices and contemporary culinary trends by incorporating local ingredients and traditional recipes into modern dining practices, reflecting a blend of local customs and global influences. This interplay between preservation and innovation generates a hybrid identity, where cultural continuity is asserted through reinvention. Moreover, such modern practices also reveal emerging class disparities, as the financial strain of hosting private feasts with catering services undermines the egalitarian spirit these gatherings traditionally embodied. In this way, Mizo feasts have become spaces where

modern political and economic forces intersect with traditional structures, reshaping both practices and societal values.

The study also observes how gender shapes participation in communal food practices, revealing a deeply embedded patriarchal structure. It is widely believed, and supported by sociological research, that in the domestic sphere, women are primary cooks, but in the public sphere, like communal feasts, men dominate roles such as slaughtering, cooking, and leading food-related rituals. Women typically assist by preparing vegetables, washing dishes, and serving. 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. Due to these traditional roles and division of labour, *fatu* membership remains largely male-dominated, perpetuating male authority in public food culture while relegating women to supporting roles. These practices reflect how traditional gender hierarchies continue to structure food labour, even as other cultural elements evolve.

Food as Cultural Identity in Mizo Society

Through this study, it is clear that food is not only about survival or tradition for the Mizo community. It plays a significantly larger role in shaping how people perceive and redefine their cultural identity, which is continually evolving in response to social, political, and economic influences. While food carries the past in its methods and meanings, it is also a site of negotiation. Whether in the quiet intimacy of a family meal, the meticulous preparation of food in the kitchen, the collective joy of a community feast, or the evolving preferences shaped by global markets, each chapter shows how food remains a cultural bond, connecting people in shared memory while also allowing for change.

Overall the foodways of the Mizo society reflect a dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, continuity and change, memory and innovation. They narrate a unique and evolving story in which cultural identity is not only preserved through food but also performed, reimagined, and passed down through generations. By examining food as both a material and symbolic medium, this thesis demonstrates that what the Mizos eat, how they prepare it, and why they share it are powerful cultural practices through which they understand their identity and situate themselves in the world.

Ultimately, this thesis also brings attention to an often-overlooked topic of the Mizo foodways. By focusing on this, it helps fill a gap in the research and highlights voices and practices that

have rarely been studied. It adds to the broader field of food studies and cultural analysis, especially in the sociological understanding of Northeast India and Mizoram, by demonstrating that food culture and identity are not fixed categories but a process that is embodied, practised, and tasted. In the context of Mizo society, this process is articulated not only through language or ritual but also through the preparation, sharing, and reimagining of food. Food is not just sustenance, and it should not be taken for granted; it carries meaning, memory, and identity. This study hopes to show why that matters.

Further Scope of the Study

While this study provides some important insights, it is not possible for a single study to cover all aspects of the topic. There is always scope for improvement and exploration of new areas. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the constraints of this study and the potential for future research. First, the research primarily focused on the Mizo community within specific geographic and socio-cultural settings. Future research could extend the scope to include comparative studies with other indigenous or regional foodways to provide a broader perspective on the dynamics of food and culture. Second, as Mizos migrate to various parts of the world and establish communities in different countries or regions, the food culture of these Mizo diasporas can also be further analysed and discussed for further research. Third, this study does not cover how outsiders or non-Mizos perceive Mizo cuisine. Given that Mizo food is markedly different from common Indian cuisine in general, there is significant potential for future research in this area. Such studies could explore outsiders' perspectives on Mizo food, its potential to attract tourism, opportunities for food export, and its role in food diplomacy as a means of cultural exchange and international engagement. Fourth, the increasing use of digital platforms like YouTube by food enthusiasts and content creators to upload cooking videos and tutorials for Mizo cuisine has made recipes and cooking techniques more accessible to a diverse audience. Future studies could explore the shift from traditional cookbooks to digital platforms. Finally, as there is a lack of interest and limited knowledge about the traditional food and foodways among younger generations, future research could explore into experiences of youth as they go through the complexities and tensions between tradition and modernity. Additionally, further exploration of how younger generations are reinterpreting Mizo foodways in the digital age could offer valuable insights into the future avenues of these culinary traditions.