

ABSTRACT

The Mizos are an ethnic group predominantly residing in the state of Mizoram, located in Northeast India. They possess a unique culture where food holds a crucial role in their society. Mizo food traditions not only reflect dietary practices but also embody the sociocultural, economic, and religious dimensions of their way of life. The historical development of Mizo food practices is closely tied to their agrarian lifestyle, local biodiversity, indigenous knowledge systems, and external influences like colonialism and religious conversion. Exploring these interconnected aspects provides a comprehensive understanding of Mizo foodways, which encapsulate the broader way of life of the community. However, despite the importance of food in Mizo society and the ongoing interplay between tradition and modernity in their food culture, the study of Mizo foodways remains significantly underrepresented in academic and public discourse.

The study focuses on exploring and documenting the traditional food culture of the Mizo society, including the types of foods consumed, preparation methods, and the cultural meanings associated with these practices. Additionally, it examines the dynamics of change and continuity in Mizo food culture and evaluates the role of food in shaping the community's social and cultural identity. Thus, this research addresses the gaps by exploring and documenting the Mizo foodways, contributing to the broader fields of food studies and cultural analysis. Accordingly, the objectives of the study are as follows:

- To explore the historical influences and socio-cultural dynamics that have shaped the development of Mizo foodways.
- To understand the symbolic meanings associated with dishes, ingredients, and cooking practices in Mizo culture, and to analyse how these meanings are conveyed, expressed, and preserved within the community.
- To explore the function and significance of communal feast in Mizo society and analyse the impact of modern influences on the feasting tradition.

Conceptual Framework

This thesis explores key concepts essential for understanding Mizo foodways—namely culture, identity, and taste—and these concepts subsequently informed the foundational structure of the study. The three fundamental concepts form the framework for understanding how food carries cultural meaning (Whit, 1995), serves as a marker of identity (Kaplan, 2012), and reflects

socially and culturally constructed notions of taste (Celimli-Inaltong, 2014). These concepts embody the non-materialistic perspective on food, in contrast to the materialistic views, by shedding light on how people make sense of food and eating, how food shapes identity, and how sensory experiences function. While the materialistic aspects of food cannot be overlooked, a comprehensive understanding of food must consider both its material and non-material qualities. All these elements are interrelated and mutually influential in the meaning-making process of food. The interplay between culture, identity, and taste in food studies is a complex and dynamic process, resisting reduction to a simple cause-and-effect relationship. These concepts are inseparable in understanding human experience and are found in almost every traditional culture around the world. Grounded in this conceptual framework, this thesis explores the foodways of Mizo society.

Overview of Literature

Seminal works on food studies, such as Miller and Deutsch (2009), Borghini et al. (2021), Belasco (2008), Counihan (1999), Counihan & Van Esterik (2013), Neuman (2019), Murcott et al. (2013), and Beardsworth and Keil (1997), have contributed significantly to establishing an interdisciplinary approach to the study of food, thereby positioning it as a crucial topic for academic exploration. Although Simmel addressed the common yet individual nature of eating in his short essay *The Sociology of the Meal* in 1910, it was not until the late 20th century that sociologists became interested and sensitive to such food-related issues. Works by scholars such as Levi-Strauss (1966, 1970), Douglas (1972), Harris (1985), Barthes (1961), Fischler (1988), Bourdieu (1984), Mead (2008), and Appadurai (1988) have been instrumental in advancing our understanding of the sociocultural dynamics of food-related issues. By the 1980s, there was a growing scholarly interest in the sociology of food, particularly reflected in the increasing number of publications on the subject, especially in Western countries. Notable contributions from Goody (1982), Murcott (1983, 2019), Mennell et al. (1992), Whit (1995), Lupton (1996), Beardsworth and Keil (1997), Germov and Williams (2017), Poulain (2002), Ward et al. (2010) and Mintz (1996, 2002), among others, have provided a rich foundation for sociological analysis. To understand Mizo culture—and foodways in particular—the works of Pachuau (2014, 2015), Dawar (2019), Malsawmdawngliana (2015), Lalrofel (2019), Bawitlung (2022), Sitlhou (2020), Zama (n.d.), Chhange (2009), Ralte (2022), Jackson (2015, 2023), along with colonial and historical literature, provide essential insights for contextualizing Mizo society.

Methodology

The research adopts a qualitative approach, engaging a broad cross-section of respondents from Aizawl and utilising a combination of ethnographic methods to collect and analyse primary data. The study follows a descriptive research design, aiming to provide context and background information that can inform more in-depth future studies. Although interdisciplinary in nature, the research integrates concepts and methods from multiple fields, albeit with some limitations in expertise, thereby allowing for a broader analytical scope. The primary methods of data collection include participant and non-participant observations, open-ended interviews, telephonic conversations, and informal conversations. To enrich the qualitative framework, specific ethnographic methodologies were incorporated. *Charlas culinarias* (culinary chats) (Abarca, 2007) involved engaging in conversations during cooking activities, creating a natural and interactive setting to explore food-related experiences and cultural knowledge. Sensory ethnography (Pink, 2015) was used to focus on the embodied and sensory dimensions of food practices, emphasising how taste, smell, and touch contribute to cultural identity and meaning-making. Additionally, autoethnography (Cooper and Lilyea, 2022) allowed the researcher to reflect on personal experiences and connect them to broader cultural contexts, adding depth and authenticity to the analysis. Another revealing method for gathering data is what Carol Counihan called “informant documentation” (Miller & Deutsch, 2009, p. 175), where informants provide or produce materials such as descriptions of their food, food logs, old handwritten recipe books, journals, and old photos. Data collection was carried out in various settings, including kitchens, dining spaces, and community gatherings, providing contextually grounded insights into the subject matter. The secondary sources of data for this study include books, journals, published articles, e-resources, cookbooks, photographs, and other available records. A literature survey was undertaken, and this information was integrated with the insights gained from fieldwork and personal experiences of the researcher.

Discussions of Findings

The study has been able to describe the different traditional foodways and decipher traces of change and continuity in them in a broad context. It reiterates the fact that historical dynamics have been effective in understanding Mizo food culture and traditions through generations. The impact of Christianity and other factors on the social life and identity of the Mizos has also been reflected upon. Furthermore, the impact of modern influences and cultural assimilation

on Mizo society has been briefly observed via the lens of food from the border or transnational cuisine.

The first objective, discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, was to explore the historical influences and socio-cultural dynamics that have shaped the development of Mizo foodways. Through an analysis of historical records, oral histories, and cultural practices, the study revealed that Mizo foodways are closely tied to the historical experiences of the community, including their local ecological conditions, colonial encounters, religious conversions, and political conflict. Meanwhile, traditional festivals and rituals involving food reveal the spiritual and cultural dimensions of sustenance, where food is not merely a necessity but a symbol of status, togetherness, and tradition. Each experience contributed to the development of distinct food and cooking techniques and has shaped the way Mizos eat today. The findings demonstrate how these influences have collectively shaped the distinctive identity of Mizo cuisine, while also highlighting the adaptive strategies the community employs to preserve their food traditions amid changing socio-economic contexts.

The second objective, addressed in Chapters 4 and 5, sought to explore the different traditional foods and understand the symbolic meanings associated with dishes, ingredients, cooking practices, and preservation techniques in Mizo culture. The analysis revealed that food in Mizo society is more than sustenance; it is a medium through which identity, values, and social ties are expressed and reinforced. From indigenous staples like rice and *bai* (Mizo stew) to different preservation practices, Mizo cuisines reflect a deep connection to the land and its resources. Preservation methods, including fermentation, smoking, and sun drying, not only enhance the longevity of food but also contribute to the distinctive flavours and textures that define Mizo culinary traditions. These traditional methods, tied to the sensory preferences of the Mizo people, remain highly valued and practised, even with the advent of modern storage technologies such as refrigeration. Cooking practices, on the other hand, serve as a cultural performance that conveys collective memory and continuity, ensuring the preservation of these meanings across generations. This symbolic dimension of Mizo foodways highlights the integral role of food in shaping and sustaining a shared cultural identity.

The third objective, explored in Chapter 6, was to examine the function and significance of communal feasts in Mizo society and to analyse the impact of modern influences on the feasting tradition. Communal feasts were found to be crucial in promoting social cohesion, reinforcing cultural norms, maintaining cultural identity, and upholding certain traditional practices within

the community. These feasts not only serve as a space for communal bonding but also act as a stage for the performance of Mizo cultural traditions. However, the findings also indicated that modern influences, such as urbanisation, globalisation, and technological advancements, are gradually reshaping the feasting tradition. While some traditional elements are being adapted or replaced, the communal essence of the feasts remains resilient, demonstrating the ability of the Mizo community to negotiate between tradition and modernity.

To conclude, the study argues that Mizo foodways are not static traditions but dynamic cultural practices that converse with larger socio-political and economic forces. While the food items and the feasting traditions continue to characterise Mizo identity, their adaptation to external influences and market forces reshapes both the practice and its symbolic meanings. Beyond nourishment, food reflects social dynamics, communal ethos, and relationships with land and resources. Furthermore, while the symbolic role of feasts in reinforcing community and cultural values remains steadfast, their execution adapts to the realities of urbanisation, resource constraints, and market influences. Thus, Mizo foodways offer a window into how traditional communities negotiate change while retaining their cultural element.

Keywords: food, foodways, community, culture, identity, Mizo society.