Chapter 4: TRADITIONAL MIZO CUISINE: EXPLORING FOOD, CULTURE, AND IDENTITY

Most cultures have a unique culinary heritage that is attached to a certain level of identity, often referred to as traditional food. As described in Chapter 1, "traditional food" refers to the food items, culinary traditions, and cooking styles associated with specific cultural, regional, or national groups. These cuisines are characterised by their unique flavours, local ingredients and raw materials, cultural meanings, and techniques of preparation and processing, that have been passed down through generations within a particular cultural or geographical context. Knowledge regarding these foods is commonly rooted in traditional wisdom that has been transmitted verbally or gained through hands-on experience. In short, traditional food is an expression of a group's identity and heritage, reflecting their history, geography, climate, and available ingredients. However, communities and groups constantly recreated it according to the agro-climatic condition, their interaction with nature, and external influences while giving them a sense of identity and meaning in the midst of change. Without an understanding of traditional food and its significance, including the people, culture, and region from which it emerges, the vibrant aspect of food culture remains incomplete. Mizo cuisine is a reflection of their history, culture, and geography, as described in the previous chapters. This chapter explores the classifications of Mizo foods and tastes, from daily meals to special occasion dishes, and examines the traditional cooking processes that emphasise slow, natural flavours. It also highlights the essence of culinary traditions and the narratives that are blended into each dish, surpassing the mere act of eating and cooking. Each food item carries cultural, historical, and social meanings. Additionally, it looks at the influences from neighbouring regions and cross-border interactions, which have brought new ingredients and ideas into Mizo cuisine.

4.1 Describing the Taste of Mizo Food

The concept of taste, as argued by Sutton (2019), has a double meaning: taste as cultural judgment and class distinction, and taste as a sensory experience. The first one refers to taste based on an individual's preferences in cultural matters, focusing on how "good taste" becomes a form of Bourdieu's cultural capital. The other meaning of taste is more literal, referring to the "sensory experience" associated with eating – the physical sensation of flavour (Sutton, 2019, p. 90). Although Bourdieu touches on practices like eating when dealing with the cultural or aesthetic sense, he primarily overlooks the sensory aspects of taste. However, exploring sensory taste could lead to insights into various aspects of culture, such as myth, healing, or

even advertising, depending on the society in question (ibid.). Both senses of taste, one social and the other sensory, involve judgment and discernment. However, while the former is tied to cultural capital and class identity, the latter is connected to immediate physical experience. While the emphasis of this chapter is on both the cultural meaning and the sensorial experiences of tastes, this section explores the sensory elements that contribute to the distinct taste of Mizo cuisine.

The taste of Mizo food is a unique blend of various flavours including salty, spicy, bitter, umami, and smoky, with lesser sugary sweet and sour taste in the meal platter as compared to other Indian dishes. Colonial ethnographers often portrayed the culinary practices of the Mizos as simplistic (McCall, 1949; Shakespear, 1912; Parry, 1932), reducing their unique tastebuds and cooking techniques to something unworthy of attention and understanding. However, this perspective is an oversimplification and misrepresentation of the actual culinary traditions that existed in their culture long before colonialism. As Kikon (2015) argues, there is a deliberate sensory aesthetic involved, with careful attention to achieving unique and distinct tastes for each dish, challenging the perception of simplicity. Kikon's analysis of Naga food and their jhum practices applies similarly to the Mizo community and other jhum cultivating societies. The Mizo possesses an innate knowledge of clearing fields, identifying edible plants, and knowing which vegetables to eat in each season. This highlights the relationship between their agricultural practices and the food they consume. Despite this, according to Kikon, these complex connections are often reduced to primitive ecological knowledge, disregarding the sophistication of their tastes and flavours.

The Mizos have distinct terminology for sensory experiences of tastes in food; some do not have direct equivalents in English. Certain tastes defy precise word-for-word translation, often resulting in a loss of meaning when attempting to describe them. Nevertheless, we will endeavour to convey these concepts as clearly as possible. Taste, or gustation, is how we sense food on our tongue by the taste buds that help us identify the flavour of different foods (Cole and Kramer, 2016). In the context of the Mizos, there are approximately nine distinct terms used to describe the basic tastes of food. These are – *thlum* (sweet), *al* (salty), *khâ* (bitter), *thûr* (sour), *thak* (spicy/hot, also used to describe tingly/prickly), *hmui* (charred/smoky/toasty), *phak* (astringent taste/dry), *hâng* (umami/meaty, bland/plain/earthy), and *hiar* (minty, sting/buzzing sensation).

"*Hâng*" primarily describes something flavourful, excluding sweet, sour, and bitter tastes, commonly found in Mizo foods. It refers to a distinct taste, often hard to translate into English, such as the savoury flavour of meat broth or fermented food. Today, this taste is commonly known as umami – a savoury, meaty flavour. However, "*hâng*" can also describe food boiled without added salt or sugar, like unsweetened black tea or plain boiled vegetables, where the raw and natural taste of the food comes through without any seasonings. In some cases, the flavour can be enhanced by adding salt or MSG (Monosodium glutamate). Once the umami tastebud in the tongue is activated, it opens all the other tastebuds at the same, thus the *hâng* flavour (umami) enhances our sensitive tastebuds in flavouring the food that we are eating. In Mizo culture, the deliciousness of food is sometimes judged by its level of *hâng*-ness, the more prominent this savoury, unadulterated flavour, the more enjoyable the dish is considered.

Furthermore, unlike many other Indian cuisines that rely heavily on spices and masalas for flavours, Mizo cooking showcases a more subtle yet vibrant palate. Traditional dishes are elevated by the use of fresh, local herbs such as tangy roselle leaves, aromatic culantro (wild coriander), ginger, chives, *lengser* (*Elsholtzia griffithii*), parsley, and the Mizo bird's eye chilli[9], infusing the dishes with extra flavours and fresh aromas.

4.2 Classification of Food: Mizo Traditional Dishes

In the context of Mizo culinary traditions, the conception of food consists of a combination of meals, typically including rice alongside complementary components like vegetables, meat, and various side dishes. Meals are often centred around rice (*chaw*), accompanied by an array of side dishes (*chawhmeh*), emphasising the importance of harmony in taste and presentation. Each traditional dishes consumed by the Mizos are intimately linked with Mizo identity, embodying social and cultural significances that go beyond mere nourishment.

4.2.1 Rice: The Staple Food

Similar to other Northeast Indians, the Mizo people have historically relied upon rice as a fundamental dietary staple. The earliest evidence of rice farming dates back to about ten thousand years ago (8000 BC) in the Yangzi River basin of China (Sweeney and McCouch, 2007). It is believed that the Mizo ancestors who migrated from China brought rice with them,

[9] Mizoram bird's eye chilli, called *hmarchate* or *vaihmarcha*, received a Geographical Indication (GI) tag in 2015.

and have continued to cultivate it wherever they settled. It has been a staple food for the Mizo for countless generations. According to the Mizo origin myth, in ancient times, maize, millet, and fruit were the staple foods instead of rice, and it was Vanhrikpa (the mythical ruler of all living things) who introduced them to rice (Zama, 2005). Zama (2005) translated the origin myth of rice as follows:

> Long ago, it was not rice but maize, millet and fruit that were the staple food. One day Vanhrikpa announced to his subjects that as long as they depended on maize and millet, they would always be at the mercy of Manmuaia, which destroyed these crops. "Therefore, take rice as your staple food, make a choice between *bukhiririrum* rice and *buchangrum* rice," he urged. They all looked at each other not knowing how to respond. So Vanhrikpa continued, "*Kiririrum* has such an excellent taste that you would not need any other dish. *Buchangrum* on the other hand, though tougher, enhances the taste of other dishes. Now make your choice."
>
> To test the views of Vanhrikpa, they first tasted *kiririrum* and in the process swallowed their tongues, as it proved extremely tasty. Thus they opted for *buchangrum* as they declared they would have no tongues left if they chose the tasty *kiririrum*. (p. 10-11)

Rice is a versatile crop that can be grown in various regions and climates in Mizoram. It is predominantly cultivated on jhum lands in hilly areas, although wet rice cultivation (WRC) is also prevalent in valley areas which was originally promoted by the colonial officials as mentioned in Chapter 2. Rice translates to *buh* or *buhchangrum* in the Mizo language and the cleaned husked rice is called *buhfai* or *faisa*, where *fai* means clean. According to Sharma and Hore (1993), a substantial number of rice varieties, ranging between 90 and 95, are cultivated in Mizoram, which has been brought in from Myanmar, Bangladesh (Chittagong hills), Manipur, and Assam (Surma Valley) on various occasions in the historical past. Nevertheless, these varieties have transformed over time, losing their original distinctiveness and can now aptly be referred to as landraces or local rice (Sharma and Hore, 1993). Among the rice variants available in the state, the local rice, which is commonly cultivated by the native people in their paddy fields, is typically referred to as *Zo buh* or *Buhpui*. There is also a glutinous rice variety known as *Buhban* or sticky rice. A cherished traditional delicacy, *Buhban* particularly holds a special place in the hearts of many. Its delectable taste is enjoyed either on its own, highlighting its natural flavours, or paired with a sprinkle of salt and sesame seeds for an extra dimension

of taste. For those looking for a cosy indulgence, it pairs wonderfully with a warm cup of *thingpui* (tea) and a touch of sweet jaggery called *kurtai*, creating a delightful combination of flavours that entice the palate. Rather than being cooked as part of a meal, *Buhban* is typically eaten as lunch or as a snack in between meals in the present day.

The local names attributed to the varieties of rice vary across different villages depending on their geographical location. Even if they are of the same rice variety, the terminology used to distinguish them differs. This disparity may arise due to the absence of standardised written records officially recognising the names of these rice varieties universally. In certain cases, as stated by a respondent, they happen to be identified after the people who are said to have brought them to a particular village; these people are usually the first person to cultivate or introduce the particular variety. For example, if a man named Liana introduces a certain variety of rice to someone, it would be called "*Liana buh*" (Liana's rice). Similarly, if the rice comes from a village named Kelkang, it would be referred to as "*Kelkang buh*" (Kelkang rice) (Ruatpuii, personal communication, April 25, 2022). *Buhban* are often identified based on their color, such as *buhban sen* (maroon) and *buhban var* (white). Varieties such as *Îdaw*, *Fazû*, *Kawlbuh*, *Zakeuva*, *Kâwnglâwng*, *Ṭai* and *Ṭai sanghar* are some of the common names mentioned by respondents to refer to this glutinous rice. Likewise, some of the names given to different types of *Buhpui* in diverse locales across Mizoram include *Phul buh, Zongam, Fang sâwl, Mang buh, Sahchhuah, Fazai, Biru, Kawilam, Ṭialte, Zaite, Hmawrhang, Lianrân, Farêl, Beti.*

In the traditional Mizo culture, rice was the only cereal regarded as acceptable food for a meal, while other cereals such as corn, wheat, maize, millet etc., were classified as non-staple food. In his monograph about the people of the then Lushai Hills, Shakespear (1912/2008) wrote "The Lushai when speaking of food always means rice. Though he is fond of meat and likes vegetables and seasonings, he only considers them as a garnish to his rice" (p. 36). The absence of rice was perceived as a shortage in food supply, resulting in deprivation and starvation. Such a circumstance was considered not only as a matter of hardship but also as one of shame and disgrace within the cultural context (Dokhuma, 2021). Consequently, people make intensive efforts to ensure the presence of rice in their barns, reflecting the vital importance attached to rice as a staple and socially significant food source. However, as urbanisation progressed and people migrated to cities, rice cultivation in rural areas became barely sufficient to meet the needs of individual families, let alone the entire village. Therefore, rice consumed by the majority of the population had to be imported from other regions of India, which they called

vai buh (rice from the plains, or the non-Mizo's rice), which was considered less delectable compared to the *zo buh* (Mizo rice) from the jhum. A male respondent, Malsawma, noted that the traditional pride of a man, once rooted in his rice production and the amount of grain stored in his granary, has now shifted to dependence on *vai buh* imported from Punjab (personal communication, June 14, 2019). Even at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, when rumours of a lockdown circulated in Aizawl, it has been observed that many men were primarily concerned about securing enough rice for their families, with efforts made to stockpile as much as possible to endure the uncertain duration of the lockdown.

This significance of rice within Mizo foodways is emphasised by the fact that the Mizo term for food, "*chaw*," literally translates to rice, which also refers to the Mizo word "*buh*," as mentioned earlier. In Mizo culture, the term *chaw* holds a multifaceted significance, encompassing both the specific item of rice and the broader concept of food. While *buh* is the designated term for rice, *chaw* is used interchangeably to denote both rice (mostly cooked rice) and food in a general sense. Bawitlung (2022) described how this linguistic dichotomy is exemplified in everyday expressions:

> To ask in Mizo *Chaw i chhum tawh em*? (Have you cooked food?) is equally same with Have you cooked rice? The question excludes all other dishes prepared alongside although food literally translates to *chaw*. This is because the people inseparably associate food with rice. If a Mizo eats cooked rice without any other accompaniments, he is considered as having his food, but, if anything other than rice is eaten to fill the emptiness of the stomach, for example- vegetables, meat, fruits etc., during meal hour he is not considered as having his real food. They would say *Chaw-ah a ring* which can be rendered as 'He takes it as food.' (p. 84)

Thus, *chaw* serves as a versatile term, encapsulating both the tangible element of rice and the broader concept of nourishment and sustenance in Mizo culture. Rice is such an essential part of Mizo cuisine that a meal without it is often not considered complete. Even with the growing popularity of restaurants and diverse cuisines, many Mizos still feel that something is missing without rice. Puia, a 36-year-old bachelor, expressed: "Even if the food at a restaurant is very tasty, I still prefer homemade food. I do not feel fully satisfied if I have outside food for dinner. I need boiled rice, cooked at home, to feel truly satiated" (personal communication, April 23, 2023). This sentiment is shared by many others which highlights the strong connection between

food, tradition, and personal fulfilment in Mizo culture, where rice is not just a staple but a defining element of a proper meal.

Additionally, other food items or side dishes eaten with rice are called *chawhmeh* (*chaw* = rice/food, *hmeh* = to eat with), thereby emphasising the cultural and culinary significance attributed to rice within Mizo dietary practices. According to the *Dictionary of the Lushai Language* by Lorrain (1940/2008), the term *chawhmeh* is defined as any item consumed along with rice or primary food, including but not limited to meat, fish, curry, vegetables, dal, chutney, as well as non-solid items like soup, milk, tea, and water (p. 63). Notably, even the consumption of salt or water only with rice falls under the classification of *chawhmeh* (Bawitlung, 2022). Since rice holds such a high value in Mizo culture, eating what is prepared as *chawhmeh* without rice is considered unpleasant and can make people feel uncomfortable or uneasy. It is customary to always eat *chawhmeh* with at least a small portion of rice.

4.2.2 Mizo Rice Porridge: A Comfort Food

Rice porridge is a versatile dish with a thick, oatmeal-like texture that can be served plain or enriched with ingredients like meat, vegetables, and eggs. In many cultures, rice porridge symbolises comfort and warmth, often given to those recovering from illness or enjoyed as a nourishing breakfast to start the day. The origin of rice porridge dates back about 4500 years ago in China, making it one of the oldest comfort foods in history (Shan, 2023). Early Chinese agrarian communities cooked rice in large pots and simmered in water over open fires. This method was both practical and efficient, allowing the rice to absorb water, swell, and create a filling, easily digestible, and nourishing dish. These simple cooking techniques gave rise to the earliest forms of rice porridge (ibid.). Cooking rice this way could feed more people with fewer grains. As the practice spread across Asia, rice porridge took various forms, reflecting local ingredients, culinary traditions, and cultural values.

In East and Southeast Asia, congee, a popular version of rice porridge, is widely enjoyed. Interestingly, according to Tochhawng (n.d.), while congee (also spelt conji) is commonly associated with East and Southeast Asia and appears on five-star hotel breakfast menus, its roots trace back to the Tamil word “kanji,” which refers to rice boiled in a large amount of water until it reaches a thick consistency. In the Chinese community, rice porridge is known as *zhou* in Mandarin, while in Japan it is called *okayu* and in Korea, *juk*. In Indonesia and Malaysia, it is called *bubur*, in Vietnam *cháo*, in the Philippines *lugaw* or *arroz caldo*, in Myanmar *hsan pyoke*, and in Bengal, *khichdi* or *khichuri* (Tanumihardja, 2019; Aranita, 2020;

Shan, 2023). Each variation of rice porridge reflects the essence of Asian cuisine – fragrant, spicy, and deeply savoury, offering a satisfying meal.

Among the popular rice-based dishes in Mizo cuisine are the delicious porridges called *sawhchiar*, *buhchiar* and *buhhawp*, enjoyed by people of all ages, that could be found in the simplest of homes and the most lavish of feasts. They are prepared by blending rice with savoury meats or vegetables, creating a delightful fusion of flavours. In the past, porridge was prepared in such a way as to increase the quantity of food. This culinary approach is more economical, especially during scarcity of meat or off-season and famine, allowing it to cater to a larger number of individuals.

Sawhchiar

The Mizo rice porridge, *sawhchiar*, is derived from two words: *sawh*, meaning to pound, and *chiar*, meaning to mash or puree. Although it can be made with various grains, rice remains the most common base. It is typically prepared with meat, salt, and turmeric, resulting in a distinctive hearty dish. Nowadays, some people also add local herbs such as culantro, chilli, onion, ginger, garlic, and a touch of oil.

Barthes (1961/2013) notes that food often tends to transform itself into a "situation" by gaining meaning from the setting, the people involved, and the cultural norms surrounding it. *Sawhchiar* is more than just a regular item in the Mizo cuisine; it holds deep cultural significance. It is often served during both celebratory and mourning occasions, symbolising nourishment, care, and comfort. As Tochhawng (n.d.) noted, *sawhchiar* is closely linked to the Mizo value of *tlawmngaihna*, a trait that often emerges during difficult times but also plays a role in good times. For many Mizos, the midnight *sawhchiar* is an accustomed part of overnight gatherings like *Mitthi lumen* (mourning rituals), as discussed in Chapter 2. However, it is also enjoyed during festive occasions, such as New Year's and Christmas Eve. *Sawhchiar* is not only a beloved traditional dish but also a staple at feasts, as described in Chapter 6. It is even enjoyed as a snack in small gatherings and intimate social settings. For instance, for many Mizo men who are avid football enthusiasts, it is common to gather at someone's house to watch the games together, especially during events like the World Cup. They prepare and enjoy *sawhchiar* as part of the experience during the halftime break, particularly for matches broadcast late at night in the Indian subcontinent. With the growth of restaurants and tea stalls in the state, *sawhchiar* has become a popular commercial item as well, featured on menus throughout the region. As Pi Nguri carefully arranged small bowls of *Sawhchiar* on the table,

she remarked, “They call it fast food these days, but in the past, no one would have imagined selling and charging money for such occasional dishes” (personal communication, September 3, 2023). Her words reflected a nostalgic perspective on how traditional meals, once freely shared within communities, have been commercialised in modern times.

Figure 4.1 Arsa sawhchiar (Chicken porridge) with onion chutney (Photo taken by the scholar)

Buhchiar

Buhchiar is another type of rice porridge made by boiling rice and chopped meat or vegetables with salt to create a stew-like consistency (Ralte, 2022). It is primarily prepared with vegetables and often served as a *chawhmeh* (side dish) with regular meals. This version of *buhchiar* made with vegetables for chawhmeh is also called *buhbai* in Mizo. Variants include *antam buhbai* (mustard porridge), *behlawi buhbai* (long bean leaves porridge), and *pelh buhbai*, among others. Unlike *sawhchiar*, *buhchiar* usually does not include seasonings such as turmeric, onions, or oil; it is typically plain with less rice that is not finely mashed. A notable example is the savoury *Zo ar buhchiar*, or country chicken porridge, infused with a small amount of either fresh or dried roselle leaves (*anthur*), adding a hint of tanginess, which is highly regarded as a quintessential form of *buhchiar* among the Mizos.

Many Mizos in contemporary times are unfamiliar with the distinctions between “*buhchiar*” and “*sawhchiar*.” When asked, many respondents indicated that the two dishes are perceived as quite similar, often providing vague explanations. For instance, one respondent admitted, “I honestly do not know the difference; I thought they were the same.” Another noted that *buhchiar* contains less rice and more vegetables, whereas *sawhchiar* features more rice and

minimal meat, with chicken or pork stocks used to flavour the porridge to enhance the meaty *hâng* (umami) taste. On the other hand, some described *buhchiar* as specifically prepared for *chawhmeh* (a side dish), while *sawhchiar* is enjoyed as a snack with tea on special occasions. Thus, it can be summarised that *sawhchiar* typically involves finely ground or chopped meat and rice, with a higher rice content, and is often made for social gatherings. In contrast, *buhchiar* features bite-sized pieces of vegetables or meat with a less dense texture, and is commonly prepared for daily meals.

Figure 4.2 Behlawi buhbai (long bean leaves porridge) (Photo taken by the scholar)

Figure 4.3 Arsa buhchiar (Chicken porridge with dried roselle leaves) (Photo taken by the scholar)

Buhhâwp

Another type of porridge is *Buhhâwp*. It is a rice porridge without any condiments, just plain rice and water, but sometimes salt is added to taste. The difference between normal boiled rice and *buhhâwp* is the amount of water added. More water is added to *buhhâwp* to make into a soft and watery mash. Hence the term *hâwp* means 'to eat with a spoon' as it is very soft and watery and difficult to eat with hands. This food is specially prepared for those who need extra care, such as the sick, elderly, infants, or individuals who struggle to chew or have a poor appetite, providing them with essential nourishment and comfort. Reflecting on her childhood, Hriatpuii recounted, "My grandmother used to prepare *buhhawp* for my ailing grandfather, who no longer had teeth. She would cook it using a very small pressure cooker. Every time I see a tiny pressure cooker, it reminds me of her *buhhawp*, my late grandfather, and how she took care of him" (personal communication, April 10, 2022). For Hriatpuii, *buhhawp* symbolises the love and care her grandmother showed in looking after her late grandfather, creating cherished memories tied to compassion and family bonds.

Sawhchiar, *buhchiar* and *buhhawp* are widely popular among the Mizos for the comfort and warmth they bring to the eater and are prepared by most Mizo households. *Rice porridge takes* on a special meaning beyond its ingredients as it holds a special place in the hearts of the Mizo people. It is a traditional dish handed down through generations, with each family adding their own narration and special touch to the recipe. Whether served as a midday meal, a side dish, a comforting meal for the sick, or a special dish for a festive occasion, rice porridge remains a symbol of tradition, continuity and the deep connections people share with food and with each other. It reflects the cultural values, emotions, and traditions of the Mizo people, illustrating Barthes' idea that food transforms into a "situation" shaped by its social and cultural environment.

4.2.3 *Bai*: A Versatile Mizo Stew

The word *bai* is a homonym that refers to the dish and the act of cooking this particular dish. The Mizo (Duhlian) term *bai* does not have a direct translation in English, which makes it something that is uniquely Mizo. People often call it a vegetable stew or broth, but even that does not capture what *bai* truly is or what it means in Mizo food culture. A typical Mizo meal always includes *Bai*, a Mizo-style stew cooked with salt, *chingal* (filtrated ash water) and *saum* (fermented pork fat). When asked about what immediately comes to mind when talking about Mizo food, many people responded with "*Bai"*. The assortment of *bai* ingredients varies with

one's preferences and seasons, offering diverse recipes based on locally harvested vegetables of choice, both fresh and smoked or sun-dried, without any spices/masalas (seasoning) or oil. The cooking process involves a simple stewing method and requires 10 to 15 minutes to prepare, producing a quick and delicious meal. Some of the commonly mentioned *bai* with exotic vegetables include *saisu bai* (plaintain bith), *maian bai* (pumpkin leaves), *behlawi hnah bai* (cowpea leaves), *rawtuai bai* (bamboo shoot), *antam bai* (mustard leaves), among others. Another type of *Bai* is one that is prepared with a variety of vegetables like an assortment of beans, eggplant, *samtawk* (bitter eggplant), chayote, and any leafy vegetables, with a dash of local herbs for a savoury aroma. To enhance the flavour, these different *bai* dishes can be simmered in a savoury pork stock, depending on its availability. For added thickness, a small amount of rice can also be included in the cooking process to create a heartier, more flavourful broth.

Figure 4.4 Maian bai (pumpkin leaves bai with snake gourd and szechuan pepper leaf) (Photo taken by a respondent)

The uniqueness of Mizo *Bai* from other traditional foods is that any vegetable item can be added to *bai* and the number of ingredients can reach seven, eight, or even more. The ingredients used in this dish typically consist of fresh, seasonal vegetables, which vary depending on their availability. For instance, during the peak season for bamboo shoots, every household eagerly prepares *rawtuai bai*, a beloved dish made with freshly harvested bamboo shoots, unlike other northeast communities that ferment them, showcasing a unique Mizo preference for fresh ingredients. Similar to Mizo *bai*, the Manipuri have *kangsoi*, a vegetable stew. The term *kangsoi* is Meiteilon (Meitei language), but the dish is commonly prepared by all the Manipuris (Joanna, personal communication, August 16, 2024). The Manipuri *Kangsoi*, like Mizo *bai*, is a simple, oil-free stew prepared by boiling vegetables and herbs in water. But

unlike *bai*, *kangsoi* is seasoned with the Manipuri traditional dried fermented fish called *Ngari* (Gupta, 2022), along with ginger, onion, and green chillies, which is very uncommon in a Mizo *bai* preparation.

Bai can be prepared any time of the year using basic ingredients. Salt is the most important and indispensable ingredient in this dish. Without salt, the dish is merely a plain boiled vegetable or *chhum hân* in Mizo. In Mizo culture, the significance of *bai* extends beyond the culinary sphere, as evident in the Mizo greeting *Chibai*, which means "hello" and incorporates the name of this dish, highlighting its universal presence and importance throughout Mizoram (see Chapter 3 for further insight into the significance of *Chibai* and salt). However, simply cooking vegetables with salt is also common among other cultures, but what sets Mizo *bai* apart from other dishes is its essential traditional ingredients like *chingal* and *saum* that add texture and flavour to the dish. *Chingal*[10] is an alkaline solution derived from wood ash filtrate but has been substituted with cooking soda in modern times. Besides this, *saum* plays a crucial role as an essential ingredient in *bai*. It is a fermented pork fat that adds a thick texture and meaty aroma to the dish which will be discussed in Chapter 5. In his cookbook titled "*Mizo Pot – Cook Book*," Tochhawng (n.d.) argues that *saum* is the most important and indispensable ingredient for *bai* although it can be substituted with vegetable oil. He wrote, "It is difficult though to conceive of a typical mizo (sic) bai sans *saum*" (p. 9). According to Tochhawng, *bai* is preferable to serve immediately once it is fully cooked. Avoid reheating, as it diminishes the delectable essence of any *bai*. Therefore, as Tochhawng (n.d.) wrote, the golden rule is to prepare it just before mealtime to savour its goodness at its best.

Furthermore, it is the unique preparation, not the ingredients, that truly embodies Mizo's identity. A respondent, Esther, expressed that although other cultures may prepare foods like boiled vegetables, the unique process used to create a traditional Mizo *bai* is distinct to our (Mizo) culture (personal communication, June 3, 2022). This expression highlights the cultural identity attached to the dish. Although *bai* sounds like a simple broth or stew style of cooking that one can prepare at ease, it seems to be just the reverse. To bring forth a taste that is enormously deep and rich, to perfect that sweet aroma of *bai*, it is highly necessary to be

[10] *Chingal* was also used for washing clothes and hair before the availability of soap, besides as an ingredient in cooking.

acquainted with the dish. It may be more than what it sounds, perhaps an 'art' one may say. The ingredients as stated, are simple and diversely available and may vary from vegetables and meat apart from the traditional ingredients. Furthermore, a perfect blend of these varieties of food to produce *bai* varies, as it requires skill and experience in preparing it. A traditional dish that went through years of production and numerous hand-down generations towards perfection, under no circumstances, can be simple. Indeed, a perfect *Bai* that oozes the aroma and drools its tastes to the extent of nostalgic feelings of one's home kitchen may require an individual's nurturer, the master of the art perhaps. According to Puii, a 35-year-old female respondent, "In my opinion, repetition is key. For a dedicated housewife like my mother, cooking for her family daily is her top priority. After years of making *bai* every day, it is only natural that she has mastered the recipe and cannot help but prepare a delicious *bai*" (personal communication, January 10, 2023). Although her opinion brings out the importance of repetition in the acquirement of skills, it subtly underlines how the social expectations placed on women to manage domestic duties can lead to a mastery of skills like cooking, highlighting the intersection of gender roles and cultural transmission.

As Rinzuali, a 23-year-old female respondent, fondly shared, "In our family, grandma's *bai* is incomparable, everyone adores it, and whatever type of *bai* she made is always the best. Even when we follow the same recipe, it never quite matches hers. The second best is my aunt's *bai*, who used to cook with grandma" (personal communication, August 5, 2022) The fact that her grandmother's *bai* and the inability to replicate it exactly suggests a deep respect for traditional cooking methods and underscores the value placed on family recipes, which are treasured and handed down through generations. This also reflects the important role of women in preserving and transmitting food traditions within Mizo culture. She continued, "Now that *Api* (grandma) can no longer cook due to her age, my aunt has become our go-to for a truly satisfying *bai* experience" (ibid.). While she meticulously stirred her stew and offered me a taste, Rinzuali shared a piece of wisdom passed down from her aunt that the key to preparing a delicious *bai* is all about attentive stirring and tasting until it meets one's standards of perfection. Thus, as Sutton (2019, p. 89) argues, cooking is not just a creative activity; it is also a skilled process that requires judgment and the thoughtful use of the senses.

Puii learned to cook from her mother. Unlike Rinzuali, who had the opportunity to cook alongside various female family members over generations, Puii had to learn from afar. Due to her work, she lived in a different city from her mother. To bridge this distance, she diligently

recorded her mother's recipes and compiled her own menu book. As she handed the book to me, Puii states:

> My mother is definitely among the top three when it comes to making a very good *bai*. Back in 2013, I wrote down some of her *bai* recipes in a notebook, which I carry with me wherever I get posted due to work. This book has been a treasure to me ever since. (Personal communication, January 10, 2023)

She explained that her intention behind writing down the recipes was to have them handy for when she got married. However, after getting a job in 2015 and moving to another city, she took the cookbook with her. Now that she is married, she continues to rely on and treasure it. She mentioned that she initially recorded only the dishes she liked at the time but plans to add more recipes. She humorously added that her mother encouraged her to write everything down so she would not have to call her every time she needed help. She also added, "It is because of this book that I was able to make a tasty *saisu bai* for dinner this evening" (ibid.). Recipes and cookbooks are essential to Puii's cooking, serving as crucial references for details she might forget, like measurements and the timing for adding seasonings or ingredients. However, she also relies heavily on "rule of thumb" methods (Ingold, 2000, p. 332) and "sensory memories" (Sutton, 2019, p. 106).

Figure 4.5 Puii's Cookbook (Photo taken by the respondent)

Figure 4.6 Puii's saisu bai (plaintain pith) (Photo taken by the respondent)

A typical Mizo *bai*, cooked with tender care by an experienced hand, is not only nutritious but also brings a sense of comfort, and connection to loved ones, making it an ideal choice for any day. Every Mizo mother is regarded to have their own style of *bai*, a sentiment echoed by many respondents. Several individuals expressed that their mother's *bai* is the best, and they often long for it when they are away from home. The craving for one's mother's recipe implies that food is tied to emotions, memories, and a sense of comfort. This sentiment was vividly expressed by a friend during a dinner at another friend's house, where I had prepared bai with passionfruit leaves and rice. Since I was cooking in an unfamiliar kitchen, I was not very confident about the dish. However, while eating, this friend approached me and said, "You've made me miss my mother." His mother had passed away two years ago, and he went on to say, "She used to make a dish exactly like this – the smell, the texture, everything is the same. I like it so much that I ate so much of it, I nearly forgot to eat the other dishes." The friend's reaction to the dish – so reminiscent of his late mother's cooking – reveals how taste and smell can trigger vivid memories, transporting us back to moments of warmth and familial love. The fact that he missed his mother while eating the *bai* underscores the deep emotional ties people have to the foods associated with their upbringing. This is not just about the dish itself but about the entire sensory experience—smell, texture, and flavour—all of which were enough to evoke a sense of nostalgia and longing. His remark emphasises how food can serve as a medium for remembering those who have passed, keeping their presence alive in a very tangible way.

Nevertheless, taste is subjective and so is the dish, the perfection of *bai* may be solely based on the taste of the subject respectively, hence *bai* may not be perfect objectively for everyone. Such a significant dish identifies the Mizo people. It has remained the most common comfort food as well as an identity marker even for Mizo diasporas. Pi Rimawii, a 65-year-old respondent who migrated to Assam following her marriage, mentioned that even though her husband and children were not interested in a Mizo *bai*, she used to prepare it for herself with any locally available food items. It is this particular dish that made her miss home despite being away from her hometown for over forty years. She also mentioned that she always buys pumpkin leaves whenever she sees them in the market, which is very rare, and she would eagerly prepare *bai* out of it. In the absence of leafy vegetables, which are not commonly found in her nearby market, she still finds alternatives with locally accessible ingredients as simple as an eggplant and chayote. Interestingly, due to her family's Hindu dietary restrictions, she had to prepare without traditional ingredients such as *Saum* and instead seasoned with only salt and cooking soda (personal communication, March 10, 2023). This also highlights the dynamic interplay between dietary practices and cultural adaptation within migrant communities. Thus, *bai* has become an identity marker for the Mizos, not only the ones residing in present-day Mizoram but also for a large number of Mizo ethnic tribes who are living in adjoining areas like Manipur, Tripura, Assam and the diasporic community across the world.

Bai with lots of chilli, known for their spiciness, are called *bai thak* (spicy *bai*). Among the Zohnahtlak, the Hmar clan is especially known for their high tolerance for chilli and their reputation for preparing particularly spicy *bai*, even though they themselves do not use the term *bai.*[11] As a result, very spicy *bai* is often referred to as "Hmar bai" in the Duhlian dialect. There is even a humorous exaggeration suggesting that Hmar *bai* is so spicy that the pot used for cooking stays spicy afterwards. However, this is a stereotype, as not all members of the Hmar clan can handle extreme spiciness, and many people from other clans also have a high tolerance for chilli when it comes to preparing *bai*.

[11] Some clans use different names for this dish instead of calling it *bai*. For example, the Hmar and Kuki clans refer to it as *chial hme* or *changal hme*.

4.2.4 *Tlak*: Savouring the Simplicity of Boiled Vegetables

As discussed in the previous chapter, salt was a valuable commodity for a long time. Consequently, early Mizos often consumed food without salt, a tradition that remains highly popular among the Mizo people. The term *tlak* refers to boiling any green vegetables without salt such as *antam tlak* (boiled mustard), *phuihnam tlak* (boiled East Indian glory bower), *zikhlum tlak* (boiled cabbage). This preparation is also called *chhum hân*, where *chhum* means to boil and *hân* signifies plain or bland like *maipawl chhum hân* (boiled ash gourd), *iskut chhum hân* (boiled chayote). Boiling brings out the natural sweetness of the vegetables, allowing the inherent taste to stand out. Moreover, the cooking water itself becomes a savoury delight, infused with the essence of the fresh vegetables. This nourishing broth is traditionally sipped alongside food, complementing the meal.

Although colonial monographs and texts often describe Mizo food as simple and unsophisticated, the Mizos take pride in what Kikon (2015) termed a "sensory aesthetic" that redefined the savouring of the authentic taste of food without any seasoning. As Esther puts it, "My mother used to say that good food does not need extra condiments to be delicious; it is already tasty on its own. Any food that requires extra spices or flavourings cannot be truly appetising" (personal communication, June 3, 2022). The unadulterated, natural essences of these dishes have come to represent the quintessential Mizo palate. Many Mizo people find it difficult to enjoy a meal without boiled items on their plates. Their sensitive tastebud and appreciation for simple, plain food sets the Mizo apart from others.

For the Mizos, boiled vegetables, *tlak* or *chhum hân*, goes beyond the mere act of boiling vegetables; it reflects the expertise of the cook in maximising the qualities of the dish, not only in terms of taste but also in its visual appeal and presentation. Emphasising the importance of appearance, Zothani explained, "By first bringing the water to a boil before adding the vegetables, leafy greens become softer and more appealing. Also, leaving the lid open during cooking helps retain their vibrant green colour, giving them a fresher and more aesthetically pleasing appearance" (April 26, 2023). Besides, it is not only the green vegetables, but meat is commonly prepared in boiled as well with very little to no condiment usage.

Figure 4.7 Anhling tlak (Boiled black nightshade leaf) (Photo taken by the scholar)

Figure 4.8 Anṭam tlak (Boiled mustard leaf) (Photo taken by the scholar)

4.2.5 Meat

The Mizo word for meat is *sa*, which refers to all types of meat, including seafood. Varieties of meat are consumed by the Mizos including wild animals, birds, domestic animals, and seafood. In contrast to Western cultures, where large cuts of meat like steak are often eaten on their own, Mizos prefer to pair meat with rice as *chawhmeh*. Despite their strong fondness for meat and seafood (especially fish, crabs, freshwater snails, oysters, and prawns) they emphasise the need to balance these dishes with rice. Mizos often say that seafood requires a lot of rice, meaning that the more seafood they consume, the more rice they feel is needed to complement it. Besides, because seafood demands greater attention and takes longer to eat due to the need to separate the bones and shells, compared to other meats that can be consumed

more easily, rice is often eaten more frequently throughout the meal. It is believed this has led to the expression that "seafood requires more rice." As a result of these characteristics, earlier Mizos referred to crab as a food suited for women (although it was avoided during pregnancy[12]) and seafood was generally regarded as feminine food.

Historically, the Mizos valued meat so highly that it was collected as taxation or tribute for the village chief. Since it was not always readily available, it was consumed only on special occasions. As Whit (1995) stated, meat is a marker of class division in different societies, and this has also been the case among the Mizos since earlier times. Unless one belonged to a family of successful hunters like *Pasaltha* and *Thangchhuahpa*, or from a chief's family who received meat dues, meat was a rare commodity and consumed infrequently. As a result, during feasts and festivals, it was an opportunity and the dream of ordinary people to eat as much meat as they could. The expression "*kut sa lo hawi*," which means to look around in confusion or disappointment as if there were no meat at a feast, reflects the reality that even during such communal gatherings, the absence of meat—often due to poverty and famine—was a possibility. The most lavish feast a Mizo could traditionally prepare involved slaughtering all types of domestic animals, which they called "*ran lu kim*." This included mithun, pig, goat, dog, and chicken (Dokhuma, 2021). From this, we can see what types of meat the early Mizos consumed. Today, however, "*ran lu kim*" typically includes pig, cow, goat, dog, chicken, and fish.

Over time, as the supply of meat increased, it became common for people, regardless of wealth, to ensure they consumed meat at least once a week, particularly on Sundays. Despite discussions around class distinctions and social inequality, *chawlhni sa* (Sunday meat) remains a widely observed practice. *Vawksa chhum* (boiled pork) and *vawksa rêp* (smoked pork) are undoubtedly the most popular dishes among Mizos, commonly eaten on Sunday mornings. It is a shared tradition, with most people responding that they had *vawksa* (pork) when asked about their Sunday meals. As one of the respondents pointed out, boiled pork is a staple in the Sunday morning meal for the Mizo people, enjoyed by all regardless of social class. Though there are differences in wealth among the Mizo, both the rich and poor share this tradition

[12] Consuming crab during pregnancy is believed to result in the child having excessive saliva and drooling more than normal.

(Zara, personal communication, December 13, 2022). While the quantity and cooking method may vary, a Sunday meal is often considered incomplete without some form of meat, typically pork. Similarly, in a Mizo feast, boiled pork is a key component, which will be discussed in Chapter 6. Unlike other cultures, Mizos prepare pork by boiling it without adding any seasonings. The only additions are mustard leaves and salt, depending on individual preferences. Traditional Mizo boiled pork, *vawksa chhum*, is as simple as its name implies, sometimes including the innards, with green leafy vegetables like mustard, pumpkin, or chayote leaves, added occasionally. The Mizo's fondness for pork, particularly *vawksa chhum*, is rooted in their appreciation for its pure and natural flavour. Tochhawng wrote:

> The love for pork (vawksa) is actually very subtle in that the typical mizo palate is essentially so accustomed to the 'unadulterated' finish of a vawksa chhum, that any condiment or spice or herb outside or beyond the acceptable range of traditional usage would result in a *vawksa chhum* product 'unbecoming' of a mizo taste. (n.d., p. 18)

Except for individuals who avoid pork for religious reasons, such as Seventh-day Adventists, most Mizos commonly consume it. However, due to growing health concerns, particularly the rise in blood sugar levels, some people now choose to eat less pork or avoid it altogether. While pork remains integral to communal feasts and celebrations, evolving health awareness and religious diversity can also create challenges for inclusion in contemporary times. Sharing his concerns about the cultural norms that prioritise popular pork preferences over diversity in food choices, Zara mentioned, "Since pork is the most popular meat at community feasts, those who do not eat it often face difficulties when it is the only meat served" (personal communication, December 13, 2022). Individuals who do not consume pork, whether for religious, cultural, dietary, or personal reasons, may encounter challenges finding suitable alternatives during such gatherings.

Figure 4.9 Boiled smoked pork with mustard leaves (Photo taken by the scholar)

Along with pork, *zo ar* (country chicken) is considered one of the most ideal Mizo dishes. Despite taking longer to cook than regular poultry, as the meat is firmer, it is highly prized for its rich and distinct flavour. Although it remains a staple meat and is commonly reared in rural areas, it has become scarce and expensive in urban areas like Aizawl and is highly valued. In Mizo culture, serving country chicken, especially an egg-laying hen (*arpui tui lai*), symbolises deep hospitality and favour, as discussed in Chapter 2. Offering such a hen reflects the host's appreciation for the guest. The Mizos held meat in high regard and traditionally believed that consuming chicken and beef together, or combining seafood with other types of meat, was incompatible and discouraged. However, this belief lacked scientific basis and was more likely rooted in practical considerations. Given the scarcity and high cost of meat in earlier times, such notions may have emerged as a way to encourage the economical use of resources.

Figure 4.10 Zo ar chhum (Boiled country chicken) (Photo taken by a respondent)

While pork and country chicken are among the Mizo favourites, mithun meat (known as *Se sa* in Mizo) holds significant cultural value among the Mizo people. Historically, the mithun was highly prized as it represented the highest form of exchange in the Mizo traditional economy. Before the introduction of money, all transactions, including bride prices, were made in kind, and the mithun was the most valued animal. A man's wealth and status were often measured by the number of mithun he owned. Although this practice is no longer followed, the mithun still holds significant cultural value. During major events such as weddings and Christmas feasts, those who can serve mithun meat take great pride in doing so. It is considered the most prestigious meat one can offer, and it holds high regard among guests, especially among the older generations. However, there has been a generational shift in cultural values and consumption habits regarding the mithun. Muanpuia, a 22-year-old male participant, noted that "our generation does not hold the mithun in as high regard as older generations, such as that of our fathers, who still value it greatly" (personal communication, February 24, 2023). Similarly, his friend Joshua, also 22, observed that "we do not bother much if mithun is served or not, although its current market price and value is acknowledged. As we rarely consume it, I cannot distinguish much between the taste of beef and mithun meat. In fact, I think the taste is similar to beef, depending on how it is prepared" (personal communication, February 24, 2023). Their remarks highlight the diminishing symbolic importance of the mithun among younger generations, while they recognise the cultural importance passed down from their fathers' generation, their appreciation is shaped more by its economic value and rarity in their diets. This indicates a complex relationship where the younger generation respects the traditional

value of mithun but is less personally connected to its symbolic and dietary significance due to changing modern lifestyles.

4.2.5.1 Dog meat: a controversy

Although controversial and banned in many Indian states, the consumption of beef and dog meat remains part of Mizo culture. While cow herding is thought to have been introduced by the Gorkhalis/Nepalis during the colonial era (Dawar, 2019), Mizos regarded beef as a delicacy since then and a more affordable alternative to the costly mithun meat. However, dog meat has been deeply connected to Mizo culture, as it was once used as a sacrificial animal in traditional Mizo rituals. Shakespear wrote, "Dogs are eaten freely, but their chief value is derived from the demand for sacrificial purposes." (2008, p. 31). Before the arrival of Christianity, dogs were domesticated and used as sacrificial animals, particularly in peace treaties known as "*sa-ui tan*" (as discussed in Chapter 2). Only men were allowed to eat the sacrificial dog, while women generally avoided dog meat, which McCall (1949/2015) attributed to its "unpleasant proclivities" (p. 186). Given its long-standing cultural significance, dog meat remains popular today, especially among Mizo men.

With increasing awareness about animal rights, many individuals today have become animal activists, especially advocating against dog meat consumption. This has led to diverse opinions about dog meat, which has been a part of Mizo cultural tradition and was considered a delicacy for many in the past. While some enjoy eating dog meat, others find it deeply repulsive, creating a sharp divide between the two groups. Those who eat dog meat often consider it their favourite dish, while those opposed to it not only dislike the meat but may even hold strong resentment towards those who consume it. Opinions among people vary widely. One respondent remarked, "People who claim to love animals and criticise those who eat dog meat still enjoy pork and beef – so what is the difference?" (David, personal communication, December 28, 2023). Another respondent, however, argued, "Dogs are meant to be pets or companions for humans, not food. I could never eat food along with someone who eats dog meat" (Mary, personal communication, December 28, 2023).

As a step towards ending the dog meat trade, the Mizoram Animal Slaughter (Amendment) Bill, 2020, was passed by the Mizoram Legislative Assembly in 2020, in which dogs are no longer included among animals suitable for slaughter ("Progress! Mizoram", 2020). Prior to this legislative amendment, the Mizoram Animal Slaughter Act of 2013 categorised dogs among animals permitted for slaughter, a classification that the Mizoram State Animal Welfare

Board (MSAWB) actively opposed, deeming it both unlawful and unconstitutional (Colney, 2023). Although the bill has been passed and there are strong demands and pressures from the MSAWB to stop slaughtering and selling dog meat, many dog meat sellers in Aizawl have claimed that they do not face problems and there is no decline in customers ("Uisa Zuarten Harsatna Tawk Lo", 2023). The fact that dog meat sellers report steady business implies that a significant portion of the community continues to view dog meat as an acceptable and desirable food choice, possibly due to cultural traditions or personal preferences that outweigh the influence of legal or moral arguments imposed by animal rights campaigns.

On September 10, 2023, the District Commissioner of Kolasib district issued an official notice banning the serving of dog meat at feasts and gatherings within their district (Colney, 2023). This decision has sparked a lot of debate and opinions amongst the community. Some believe that animal rights groups may have connections within the administration, influencing the authorities to implement the ban. While some support the ban, many others oppose it, criticising the decision of the administration. Dog meat vendors and consumers, in particular, have voiced strong opposition, arguing that individuals should have the right to choose their food freely and that the state government should not give in to pressure from groups advocating for dog protection (ibid.). The political-economic argument in the dog meat controversy revolves around the interplay of cultural autonomy, market dynamics, and external influence. As one of the respondents commented, "For a tribe having the cultural concept of *sa-ui tan*, banning dog meat does not seem appropriate nor align with Mizo values. It feels like the decision is being influenced by few privileged individuals with connections to a minister" (Khuma, personal communication, December 28, 2023). This sentiment resonates with Kikon's argument, where she explains that debates around animal rights in India are often shaped by "class and caste" dynamics, creating a kind of "leaky politics" (2017, p. 39). Here, "leaky politics" refers to how the arguments for certain moral or ethical standards do not fully respect the cultural diversity or socioeconomic backgrounds of all groups. What is being labelled as a morally "right" or "civilised" dietary choice overlooks local customs and appears to be influenced by a select, socially advantaged few.

4.2.5.2 'A misa': Beyond the Meat

In Mizo cuisine, not only is the meat itself consumed, but the other parts of the animal, referred to as '*a misa*' in Mizo, hold significant culinary value. Among the Mizos, *a misa*, which includes the head, legs (trotters), and offal – especially from pork and beef – are considered

special delicacies. One such *misa* delicacy is '*a lu bai*,' prepared from the head of pork or beef, boiled with local ingredients such as *phuihnam* (east Indian glory bower), culantro, *lengser* (*Elsholtzia griffithii*), ginger, garlic, onion, and chilli. Another relished dish is '*a ruhkawl*,' the bones containing the bone marrow of the beef, traditionally reserved as a special portion for the head of the family. The pork offal, called '*vawk kawchhung'* in Mizo, includes the liver, kidneys, heart, braided intestines, and blood sausages—a mixture of pork blood and local herbs stuffed into pork intestines. These are regarded as exceptional delicacies.

Figure 4.11 "Vawk kawchhung" - Pork offal prepared for a feast (Photo taken by a respondent)

These dishes are traditionally considered the "adult's share," enjoyed primarily by adults, and are typically not served to children. However, in modern households, while still seen as an adult privilege, these parts are occasionally shared with children. During communal feasts, however, these delicacies are customarily set aside for elders and special guests as a symbol of respect and privileges and are usually not shared with children and ordinary attendees. However, children often do not eat these dishes not only because of their prestige but also because most dishes do not appeal to young tastes as their tastebuds differ from adults. Children still lack the developed palate of adults and may not appreciate the subtle flavours or complexities of these foods (Mennella and Bobowski, 2015). They also consider these dishes as "adult food." In fact, as they grow older, they often make an effort to eat and enjoy these flavours to demonstrate their maturity and eventually come to enjoy them.

Another celebrated dish is '*sachek*,' a flavourful broth prepared from the tripe, chitterlings, and small intestines of beef, goat, or mithun. *Sachek* exhibits a complex flavour profile, characterised by a rich, bitter taste complemented by a distinct *hâng* (umami) essence. The

different textures of the tripes and small intestines, coupled with the smoky and meaty flavours, create a multifaceted culinary experience. The subtle aroma of local herbs enhances the overall depth without overpowering the taste. Beef tripe, in particular, is prepared in various ways across different cultures and is enjoyed by people around the world. The Mizo community holds a special fondness for this dish. Historically, they took great pride in having *sachek* in their meals, viewing it as a rare delicacy. Today, it is not only cooked at home but also sold in restaurants and by street vendors. In Aizawl, it is also commonly found in Saturday morning markets, where vendors without proper shops sell it on their temporary stalls. Typically, those who butcher and sell beef also prepare the broth and sell it along with the meat. People often eat it on-site or take it home to enjoy with their meals. Diki, a food enthusiast who sells *sachek* from her home, remarked that some people find the tripe unappetising and unhealthy because it comes from the stomach and intestines, perceiving it as unhygienic. However, she emphasised that when cleaned and prepared properly, it is a very nutritious and flavourful food. She noted, "The key is to ensure that the lining is washed thoroughly to eliminate any unpleasant odour and ensure cleanliness" (personal communication, February 8, 2022).

Nonetheless, children often refuse this dish because of its bitter taste, which is intensified by the addition of passion fruit leaves to enhance its smoky flavour. Children only enjoy this dish when it is prepared to minimise the bitterness. Vered (33) narrates that her fondness for *sachek* began at around age 10. Every evening after school, she would visit a small *sachek* shop in Dawrpui bazar area. The owner's uniquely mild preparation hooked her, but unfortunately, the shop closed, and she has never found a comparable taste since. Her fondness was remarkable for someone so young, which impressed her relatives and even the owner. Another respondent, Joshua (22) shared, "When I was younger, I never thought about eating *sachek* because it was bitter, and the meaty smell was too strong for me. But as I grew older and tried it more often, I started to like it. Now that I am away for my studies, I always crave it and make sure to eat it whenever I go home" (personal communication, February 24, 2023). This clearly illustrates the concept of an acquired taste, where a person learns to appreciate flavours that they might initially find unpleasant. Apart from the acquired taste, it also highlights that food holds deep emotional and cultural significance, especially when tied to memories of home and simpler times.

Figure 4.12 Beef innards for Sachek (Photo taken by a respondent)

Figure 4.13 Sachek prepared by Diki (Photo taken by the respondent)

4.2.6 *Bâwl* and *Chawṭani*: the Mizo Chutney

In contrast to many Indian cuisines, which incorporate spices and chillies into most dishes, Mizo cuisine typically refrains from adding chillies to their ingredients. Instead, chillies are often served as a side accompaniment. However, a Mizo meal is incomplete without at least one type of *bâwl* or *sawh*, a fiery side dish similar to *chutney*. Tochhawng (n.d.) compared *bâwl* to a salad, a unique part of Mizo cuisine. While the ingredients vary, ranging from vegetables to meat or both, *bawl* is always chilli-based. It typically features fermented pork fat (*saum*) or occasionally fermented fish (*nghathu* or *dangpuithu*), always with chillies, either

dried or green, as the main ingredient. The essence of *bawl* lies in combining ingredients like *chingal* (or cooking soda) and *saum* (fermented pork fat) into a frothy mixture that enhances the natural flavours of the chillies and other elements. This frothy presentation is the marker of an ideal *bawl*. In many ways, *bâwl* can be considered the Mizo version of coleslaw, though it differs in its intense use of chillies and fermentation (Tochhawng, n.d.).

Lalrofeli (2019) noted that *chawṭani*, another chilli-based side dish, is a colonial influence on Mizo cuisine. The Mizos adapted the Hindi word '*chutney'* into '*chawṭani*,' which eventually replaced older dishes like *bawl* as a key part of their meals (Lalrofeli, 2019, p. 103). While *bawl* traditionally includes *saum*, *chawṭani* is a simpler mix of crushed chillies, garlic, ginger, and other herbs, eaten in small amounts with rice. Despite this adaptation, as claimed by Lalrofeli, crushed chillies have long been a part of Mizo food culture, predating British colonialism. The love for chillies, called *hmarcha* in the Mizo dialect, runs deep in Mizo cuisine. Chillies are believed to have been introduced to the region from Southeast Asia rather than through Indian sea routes (Jacob, 2020). The successful campaign of Mizoram for a Geographical Indication (GI) in 2015 for its local "bird's eye chilli," *hmarchate* or *vaihmarcha*, further highlights the importance of chillies in Mizo cuisine. Crushed chillies, or *hmarcha râwt*, have traditionally played such a significant role in Mizo households that a newly married daughter-in-law was judged by how finely she could grind them with a mortar and pestle. A coarse grind indicated laziness, while a fine grind was seen as a mark of diligence and skill.

In summary, both *bâwl* and *chawṭani* are integral to Mizo cuisine, with chillies at their core. While *bâwl* shares similarities with coleslaw, it stands out with its bold flavours and fermented ingredient. *Chawṭani*, on the other hand, reflects a colonial adaptation that has become a key part of Mizo meals, demonstrating how tradition and external influences have shaped the culinary identity of the region.

Figure 4.14 Zawngtah bâwl (Stink beans with Mizo bird's eye chilli and fermented pork fat) (Photo taken by a respondent)

4.3 Conclusions

Recognising that cultural reasons or significances attribute meanings to the flavours of foods is essential. In this chapter, the different traditional foods that have sustained the Mizos for generations are explored. Though seemingly simple, the culinary traditions of the Mizos are composite and rooted in the preparation, cooking, and sharing of food. These practices are an expression of their cultural identity, shaped by the cultivated local vegetation available from the past that has been carried around the various journeys of migration to the current habitat of the Mizos. From indigenous staples like rice and *bai* to different cooking practices, Mizo cuisines reflect a deep connection to the land and its resources. It has also been emphasised in the previous chapter that the introduction of certain ingredients and cooking styles since the colonial encounters is often viewed as an improvement in food preparations. However, this may be subjective, as traditional Mizo preparation methods prior to their arrival, such as boiling and using minimal spices, still seemed to be a choice of taste at present, and the cooking methods have remained more or less the same, which shows the resilience and continuity of traditional Mizo cuisine despite external influences. Furthermore, while some have claimed that Mizo food is plain, simple, and basic, the variety of traditional dishes described above highlights that the original unadulterated flavours, sensory attributes, and textures are essential to Mizo cuisine.

Through this exploration of traditional cuisine, it has been observed that taste is subjective, varying 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. Similarly, foods like fermented soyabean or spicy dishes might be adored in some regions but seem repulsive to others, which will be discussed in the following chapter. As Kikon (2021) argued, 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. With repeated exposure, individuals often learn to appreciate and sometimes crave dishes they once disliked. This adaptability highlights how taste preferences are shaped by experience, culture, and openness to new flavours.

Figure 4.15 A typical Mizo dinner (Photo taken by a respondent)

4.4 References

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