Chapter 5: PRESERVATION PRACTICES AND CULINARY FUSION IN MIZO FOOD: A CULTURAL ANALYSIS

Preservation methods and culinary innovation are integral to understanding Mizo foodways. This chapter explores the preservation methods that have allowed Mizos to store food and maintain flavours across seasons, from age-old techniques like fermentation, smoking, and sun-drying, to the emergence of hybrid and fusion cuisines influenced by cross-cultural interactions. These practices not only address the challenges of food storage in a resource-limited environment but also reflect adaptability and creativity of the community. By examining these methods, this chapter highlights how Mizo cuisine balances tradition and innovation, preserving its identity while embracing change.

5.1 Methods of Preservation

Food preservation dates back to the beginning of human civilization, with each culture developing its own traditional techniques for storing food. Historically, these methods emerged in response to the lack of sufficient storage facilities for surplus food and the need to ensure the availability of seasonal crops during off-seasons or times of scarcity (Lalthanpuii et al., 2015). Various cultures have adopted distinctive preservation methods based on the crops they produce, achieving different levels of success in applying the basic principles of safe food storage. These traditional techniques, which have remained largely unchanged over time, owe their effectiveness to the incorporation of scientific principles, though accidentally (Mobolade et al., 2019). The choice of a traditional storage system is often influenced by local climate, although local natural resources and cultural practices also play a significant role (Hall, 1970, as cited in Mobolade et al., 2019). In essence, these traditional preservation techniques represent a form of indigenous knowledge that has evolved within communities and been passed down through generations (Natarajan and Santha, 2006, as cited in Mobolade et al., 2019). What initially began as a necessity for survival gradually became deeply rooted in cultural traditions, shaping the dietary habits of communities over time. Eventually, people not only adapted to the flavours that developed from these preservation techniques but also came to relish them, transforming once-essential practices into the basis of delicious and highly valued ethnic foods. These preserved foods have become a significant part of cultural identity, symbolising the historical connection of a community to its environment and resources.

In the case of the Mizos, like many other cultures, the methods of preserving food have developed into an integral part of their traditional cuisine. Despite the gradual decline in the practice of homemade food preservation – such as smoking, sun-drying, or fermenting food from scratch – these methods still hold cultural significance. The art of traditional food preservation continues to be a marker of the Mizo identity, even as modern conveniences threaten to replace it. These preserved foods represent not just a taste preference but a link to the past, embodying the culinary and cultural traditions passed down through generations. As with other ethnic groups, preserved foods have become more than just sustenance for the Mizo people; they are a living expression of cultural continuity, tradition, and identity.

5.2 *Um*: The Art of Fermentation

Fermentation, which in Mizo means *um*, is one of the methods of preserving food, primarily to extend its shelf life. Beyond preservation, fermentation enhances food by transforming its flavour, aroma, texture, and even its nutritional value. As Kikon (2021) notes, the unique aroma and flavour of fermented foods evoke strong sensory reactions related to taste. Fermentation and the consumption of fermented foods are central to many communities in Northeast India. Whether it is vegetables, rice, or seafood, the widespread use of fermented foods highlights the diverse food cultures of the region. For the Mizo people, fermented foods are deeply embedded into their food culture and identity. Even with the availability of new spices and ingredients from outside, these traditional foods remain irreplaceable. Many Mizo migrants bring these fermented foods with them when they move, and if they cannot access them, they find ways to make them on their own, even in foreign countries. As Ruatfeli, who used to live in Delhi during her studies, shared, "We do not just give up fermented food, we crave it, especially when we are far from home" (personal communication, June 1, 2019). However, the tradition of home fermentation for one's consumption is gradually decreasing, especially in urban cities like Aizawl, with many people opting to buy fermented products from the market. This shift has created a small but thriving source of income for those who continue the practice. As Kikon (ibid.) points out, fermented foods play a transformative role in shaping communities, economies, and identities throughout Northeast India, including Mizoram. Among the fermented foods that are integral to Mizo traditional cuisine, *saum*, *chhi-um*, *aium*, and *bekang um* are documented in this research. These fermented products have long been an essential part of the staple diet in Mizoram, playing a significant role from ancient times to the present day.

5.2.1 *Saum*

Saum is a semi-liquid fermented pork lard or fat used as a condiment to enhance the flavour, aroma, texture, and appearance of food. It has been a staple in Mizo cuisine and culture for generations, perhaps the most common fermented product used in Mizoram. A Mizo kitchen is considered incomplete without a "*saum bur*," a dried bottle gourd used for fermenting the *saum*. The use of gourds is not only economical but also superior to unlined pits for food storage, offering better protection and easier monitoring for insect infestations (Mobolade et al., 2019). In traditional Mizo households, the *saum bur* is hung above the fireplace to maintain warmth and preserve its distinct flavour. As one female respondent puts it, "As long as we have *saum bur* in our kitchen, we will never lose our Mizo identity," highlighting its cultural significance (Ruatfeli, personal communication, June 1, 2019). Today, the traditional *saum bur*, previously made using bottle gourd, has largely been replaced by glass jars, which are stored in the refrigerator to extend shelf life.

Figure 5.1 "Saum bur" displayed in the Mizoram State Museum (Photo taken by the scholar)

Saum plays a central role in the preparation of *bai* and *bawl*, two essential dishes in Mizo cuisine, which has been discussed in Chapter 4. Growing up in a Mizo family in Aizawl, it was typical for our meals to include at least one dish made with *saum*, though, as a child, I initially found its taste unappealing, as it is an acquired flavour. Bamboo shoot *bai* prepared with *saum* is particularly favoured among the Mizos and is widely appreciated. However, during my childhood, my sister and I did not enjoy bamboo shoot bai with *saum*, so my mother would

make two versions, one with *saum* for the adults and one without for the children. Over the years, I observed my mother, relatives, and friends consistently use *saum* as a staple in their cooking. It is often regarded as the secret ingredient that elevates *bai* and various other Mizo dishes. Consequently, I learned to incorporate *saum* into my cooking as well. Mastering the preparation of a flavourful *bai* with *saum* and a well-made bubbly *saum bawl* (chutney) is seen as a significant culinary milestone, which felt more like graduating from my mother's kitchen, symbolising a transition into advanced cooking within the household

Although *saum* is a traditional condiment commonly found in every Mizo kitchen, not everyone can ferment it successfully, particularly in urban areas like Aizawl. Many consumers purchase *saum* from the market rather than fermenting it themselves. Those skilled in producing high-quality, flavourful *saum* often turn this expertise into a livelihood. Consequently, individuals who excel at making delicious *saum* gain local recognition for their expertise. One such individual is Pi Khumtei, a respondent in this study, who has become well-known in her neighbourhood for her *saum* product and *vawksa rêp* (smoked pork), which she has been selling since 2010. Pi Khumtei originally learned the fermentation process through personal experimentation, well before she began selling it commercially, and her experience has allowed her to perfect the art of making exceptionally tasty *saum*.

In an interview, Pi Khumtei described in detail the traditional process of fermenting *saum*. She emphasised that the key to successful fermentation lies in overcooking the meat without any added ingredients, not even salt. The meat is cooked in a pot or pressure cooker with water until all the liquid evaporates, taking care not to burn it. Afterwards, the meat must be cooled, and any remaining water and oil should be thoroughly drained. According to Pi Khumtei, retaining the cooking liquid would result in an overly pungent *saum* that may not ferment properly, rendering it inedible. Likewise, excess oil can dull the flavour and diminish the fermented aroma, making the *saum* less appetising. Once the meat has cooled, it is lightly mashed by a clean hand, which Pi Khumtei prefers to do manually, even though some people opt for grinders or pestles. She believes that hand-mashing enhances the flavour: "I feel that it makes it tastier when I mash it with my clean hands," she explained (personal communication, July 14, 2022). The mashed meat is then placed in an airtight container for fermentation. Although it is preferable to use a traditional *saum bur* made from dried bottle gourds, a glass jar or a steel container can serve as an alternative if properly sealed with a clean, dry plastic sheet to ensure it remains airtight. As she often produces *saum* in large quantities for sale, Pi

Khumtei ferments it in a large pot or *dekchi*, which she ensures is tightly covered to maintain the airtight environment necessary for fermentation.

For optimal fermentation, the container should be placed in the warmest area of the house. Traditionally, this would have been hung on the fire-shelf, known as "*rap*" in Mizo (the shelf over the fire), but in contemporary Aizawl, where hearths are uncommon, the best approach is to leave it outside in the sun during the day and place it near the gas stove at night. Pi Khumtei stressed that the most critical factor in the fermentation of *saum* is maintaining a consistently warm environment, sufficient to facilitate the fermentation of the fat. It is also crucial that the container remains sealed until the fermentation process is fully complete. Typically, the appearance of bubbles after three to four days serves as an indicator of fermentation progress and that the product is ready for consumption. According to her, to intensify the pork flavour, a higher proportion of fat and minimal or no meat is advised. To prevent the smell from getting stronger or more pungent, it is usually stored it in the refrigerator. Refrigeration not only transforms the liquid into a smooth, butter-like consistency, making it easier to handle but also extends its shelf life while preserving the original taste and aroma. Conversely, storing the container in a room temperature will result in a more pungent odour and eventual spoilage. Scientific studies indicate that refrigeration (at 3-4°C) is the best storage method among the three common options—exposure to sunlight, refrigeration, and storage near a heat source (Debberma et al., 2023). Refrigeration showed the lowest levels of *E. coli* (Escherichia coli) bacteria, highlighting its effectiveness for safe, hygienic storage of *saum* after preparation (ibid.). This suggests that storing *saum* in the refrigerator immediately after preparation helps improve both hygiene and preservation.

Figure 5.2 Refrigerated Saum in a glass jar (Photos taken by the scholar)

It is often joked about that to produce a quality batch of *saum*, one must begin with a small amount of *saum* itself. This reflects the idea that a well-made batch is often the result of a prior successful one. It was common for the fermenter to take just a single spoonful of a previous batch as a seed, ensuring the new batch would carry the same exceptional flavour as the last. The variation in taste can arise from several factors – some are able to ferment the *saum* into something flavourful, while others may struggle to achieve the same result. This process can be influenced by the type of pork fat used, the temperature, and other variables, leading to different outcomes.

The process of fermentation also requires patience for successful results. Betty, a respondent living in Bangalore, shared her experience with fermenting *saum*, which she attempted on her own since she is far from home. Due to her impatience, her first attempt was unsuccessful. "I kept opening it too soon, checking every day," she admitted (personal communication, December 2, 2022). It was not until her friends advised her to wait at least three days before opening the container that she was able to make it successfully. She further noted that the fermentation process is more effective during the summer months when there is ample sunlight. Now, after several attempts and learning from her mistakes, Betty confidently makes her own *saum* and ensures her kitchen is never without it. This perseverance, even after initial failures, shows how individuals actively engage with and preserve their culinary heritage. It also highlights a sense of cultural identity that remains significant despite spatial and environmental changes. Her actions embody the concept of "habitus," where her ingrained cultural dispositions guide her behaviour, even as she adapts to new surroundings.

5.2.2 *Chhi-um*

Chhi-um is a fermented sesame seed, with *chhi* being short for *chhawhchhi*, meaning sesame seeds, and *um* meaning fermented. A variety of white sesame seeds called *chhibung* in Mizo is used for this fermentation. Fermented sesame seeds are also an essential ingredient in Sierra Leone and other West African cooking, where they are known as *Ogiri*. In Sierra Leone, they are commonly used as a condiment and flavouring agent in soups, sauces, and stews (Chukwu et al., 2018). Among the Mizos, *chhi-um* is eaten as a side dish or used as a condiment to add an umami flavour to other foods.

Among the Mizos today, *chhi-um*, a traditional fermented sesame seed product, is no longer a common kitchen item. Unlike saum, which remains widely used, *chhi-um* is consumed less frequently, and many younger generations in the urban areas are unfamiliar with it. In many

Mizo households, particularly in rural areas, food practices like fermentation methods are passed down from one generation to the next, often through hands-on learning. This exchange reflects the significance of oral traditions and lived experiences in preserving cultural heritage. During the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, I had the chance to learn how to ferment sesame seeds from my mother, which became a valuable lesson in the transfer of traditional knowledge.

The process began when my aunt informed my mother that relatives from Haulawng village had sent around 10 kilograms of *chhibung*, a variety of white sesame seeds, to Aizawl, with half of it meant for us. My mother asked me to obtain permission from the local task force for a pass to pick up the seeds. Upon returning home, she distributed some to our neighbours, set aside some for future use, and decided to ferment the remaining portion. Since I was unfamiliar with the fermentation process, I assisted my mother and observed each step closely. First, she lightly fried the sesame seeds in a pan without oil, stirring them until they turned lightly golden. During this step, my mother repeatedly stressed the importance of careful attention. She explained that the way food is prepared and whether the ingredients are handled with care can greatly impact the flavour. Stirring too much or too little would affect the outcome, and burning the seeds could spoil the batch. This lesson goes beyond cooking, illustrating the broader cultural importance of care, patience, and skill in everyday practices. Although some people ferment the seeds without frying them, my mother prefers frying because it enhances the aroma, giving the *chhi-um* a pleasant *hmui* (smoky) smell.

After frying, we lightly pounded the seeds to release their fragrance. Next, we placed them in a glass container and added warm water, just enough to cover the seeds without making the mixture too watery. We stirred it thoroughly to ensure every seed was coated. My mother emphasised that the mixture must be neither too dry nor too wet, as this balance is crucial for proper fermentation. We sealed the container tightly to make it airtight, then left it in the sunlight during the daytime and near the stove in a warm part of the kitchen at night for three days to allow the fermentation process to complete. After this period, the *chhi-um* was ready to eat. The result was a flavourful mixture with a rich umami taste and a mild pungent kick. For those seeking a more intense flavour, roasting the *chhi-um* before eating is also an option. Once the fermentation process is complete, *chhi-um* can be stored in the refrigerator to extend its shelf life while maintaining its aroma. However, if left outside the fridge, the smell can become even more intense over time.

This process underscores how traditional knowledge adapts to changing times. While *chhi-um* is no longer as commonly made or consumed in many urban households, the knowledge is still present among older generations. The act of my mother sharing this tradition with me during the lockdown is symbolic of the resilience and adaptability of cultural practices. Even in times of crisis, the passing down of knowledge continues, bridging generational gaps and maintaining cultural continuity. Furthermore, the process also highlighted not only the technical aspects of *chhi-um* fermentation but also the deeper cultural values of attentiveness, care, and knowledge transmission that are central to Mizo food traditions.

5.2.3 *Aium*

Ai-um is a fermented crab paste with sesame seeds. The term *ai* is short for *chakai*, meaning crab, and *um*, meaning fermented. The dish is closely linked with the earlier Mizo food culture, a delicacy since ancient times that cannot be missed when discussing the traditional Mizo cuisine and is still enjoyed and valued to this day. Fermentation of crab or fish is a traditional delicacy commonly practised by various communities in Northeast India. Among the Ao Naga tribe of Nagaland, fermented crab is referred to as *japangangngatsu* (Deb and Jamir, 2020).

Small crabs, typically about the size of a thumb, are collected from rivers and streams, and then killed by immersing them in hot water before being ground using a mortar and pestle. The ground crab is thoroughly mixed with *chhawhchhi* (sesame seeds), with the proportions of each ingredient adjusted according to personal preference. Pi Ropari, one of the respondents, explained that to achieve a stronger, more pungent aroma, one should use less sesame seed and more crab. Conversely, for a milder flavour, one can increase the amount of sesame and reduce the crab (personal communication, July 14, 2022). The mixture is then wrapped in heated banana leaves or can be kept in an airtight container and then placed above a fireplace to ferment. Pi Ropari, having grown up in a rural setting, shared that when she moved to Aizawl in a concrete building without a traditional hearth, she asked her husband to build a small fireplace on their rooftop to continue fermenting food and smoking meat, a setup she is particularly fond of. However, for those without access to a fireplace, fermentation can also be done by leaving it in the sun or placing it near a gas stove in a warm area. After approximately three days, the mixture is ready and can be consumed directly, though it is often dried, either by sun exposure or over a fire, for future use. To store it, heat a frying pan without oil and stir-fry the paste until completely dry. Once dried, it can be kept in any type of container and used

as a side dish or as a condiment to enhance *bai* or *bawl* chutney, imparting a distinctive pungent aroma and umami flavour.

Among the Mizos, *ai-um* dish became widely known through the popular mythical story of *Chhûrbûra*, which is considered the earliest reference to *ai-um*. Chhûrbura, often referred to simply as Chhûra, is a character well-known for his stupidity and industry. One of the episodes in the story, "*Chhura'n ai-um a hloh*," (Chhûra lost *ai-um*) is a well-known Mizo folklore. According to the folklore, which I have translated and paraphrased into English:

> Once upon a time, Chhûrbûra visited a village where he was served a dish called *ai-um*. He enjoyed it so much that he thought to himself, "I will have my wife make this as soon as I get home." Wanting to remember the name of the dish, he asked what it was called, and they told him, "It is *ai-um*." On his way back home, worried he might forget the name, he kept repeating, "*ai-um*, *ai-um*." Alas, he slipped on a slippery clayey soil and forgot the name. Desperately, he searched around the spot where he had fallen, cleaning the entire area in his search. Later, a Pawi man passed by, and Chhûra asked him for help, saying, "Pawia, help me find what I've lost." The man asked, "What did you lose?" Chhûra replied, "If I knew, I would not be searching for it!" The passer-by joined him, even though neither knew what they were looking for. After a while, the Pawi man remarked, "What could you have lost? You smell like *ai-um* yourself!" Then Chhûra exclaimed, "That's it! Ai-um is what I've been searching for!" Overjoyed, he started repeating "*ai-um*, *ai-um*" again as he happily continued on his way. (Dahrawka, 1984, p. 205-206)

The story of Chhûrbûra's search for *ai-um* has become a culturally embedded metaphor for the act of searching for something one cannot recall, reflected in the phrase *Chhûrbûra ai-um zawng ang,* meaning "like Chhurbura searching for ai-um." This folk narrative illustrates how food, in this case *ai-um*, transcends mere sustenance and becomes a symbol of memory, identity, and shared experience. Moreover, it also highlights the significance of sensory experience, particularly the sense of smell, in evoking memories and shaping identity. The lingering scent of certain foods can become an indicator of one's consumption, connecting individuals to cultural or personal narratives through the sensory impressions they carry. Furthermore, in associating forgetfulness with Chhûrbûra's journey, the story reinforces the deep cultural ties between food and personal identity, where ai-um is not only a beloved dish but also a marker of nostalgia and collective heritage. Those who express a particular fondness

for the dish are likened to Chhûrbûra, further reinforcing the intimate relationship between food and cultural memory.

5.2.4 *Bekang um*

Fermented soyabean, known as *bekang um* in Mizo dialect, is a longstanding tradition and popular favourite among several cultures in Northeast India as well as other Asian countries. Some of the common fermented soyabeans of the Northeast Indian states are *kinema* in Sikkim, *tungrymbai* in Meghalaya, *akhuni* in Nagaland, *hawaijar* in Manipur, *peruyaan* in Arunachal Pradesh, and *bekang um* in Mizoram (Tamang, 2015).

During my fieldwork, everyone I talked to about fermenting soyabeans described a standard process that may have a slight difference per person and location due to differences in preparing skills while all aim to achieve one goal. Firstly, the dry soyabean seeds are soaked overnight and then boiled in a large cooking pot or preferably a pressure cooker. When the beans are well cooked and its water turns a bit sticky, the excess water is drained, and the soyabeans are cooled in a strainer while also draining any remaining water. Once the water is well drained and the beans have cooled down, the boiled soyabeans are spread evenly on the leaves of *Vaiza* (largeleaf rosemallow/*hibiscus macrophyllus*) placed over a bamboo tray. Clean ashes from the hearth are sprinkled evenly on the beans and then carefully covered with *Vaiza* leaves. However, while some people say that ash is the most important ingredient in fermenting soyabean, and they carefully collect clean ashes from a clean hearth, some people do not add ashes to their fermentation. After the beans are carefully covered, leaving no gaps for air to enter, it is then kept undisturbed above the warm fireplace for three nights. On the morning of the third day, the soybeans are fully fermented, developing a viscid texture and a flavourful, pungent aroma. At this point, they are uncovered in a process the Mizo refer to as "*kai tho*," meaning "to wake up," and are now ready to be consumed. The duration of placing above the hearth depends on the climatic condition: in summer, it is kept there for two to three days, while in winter, it stays for about four to five days. The final product may also be sun-dried for preservation and future use. Fermented soyabean is one of the common traditional Mizo side dishes, which is consumed directly or added to other food as a seasoning. The widespread use of fermented soyabeans in Mizo cuisine, whether as a flavouring agent for stews (*bai*) or as a side dish accompanying rice, indicates historical culinary connections with East Asian cultures, particularly those of Japan and Korea (Jacob, 2020).

Soyabean has been cultivated in traditional *jhum* farms for generations in Mizoram, thriving in the soil and yielding high-quality crops. This local production has historically sustained many soyabean fermenters, allowing them to be self-sufficient. However, with the import of soyabeans from Myanmar, many fermenters now prefer the Myanmar variety which are smaller in size. Pi Mawiteii, a 62-year-old *bekang* fermenter, notes that while Mizo-grown soyabeans are excellent and larger, similar to those from Nagaland, the smaller Myanmar beans are favoured (personal communication, April 18, 2023). Pi Mawiteii began fermenting soyabeans in 1995, and has experimented with both varieties and ultimately chose to use the Myanmar soyabeans, which she continues to work with today. This does not mean that everyone has switched to imported soyabeans. Farmers, particularly in rural areas, still grow and ferment locally produced soyabeans. Another respondent, Pi Zaii (age 60), mentioned that she continues to buy only local soyabeans, as she knows they are grown without chemicals or insecticides. She sun-dries the beans herself to prepare them for fermentation (personal communication, June 6, 2022).

Fermenting soybeans is an intense process that requires more than one person; it is not a task that can be fully managed by a single individual. Two different respondents, Pi Mawiteii and Pi Zaii, both receive assistance from family members and friends. Pi Mawiteii's husband, Pu Kiamlova (81), has been a consistent partner in her work from the start. Together, they started their *bekang* business and dedicated themselves entirely to it, even building their own home through the profits of selling *bekang um*. Following Pi Mawiteii's health issues in 2008, Pu Kiamlova took on more of the work, gathering materials and overseeing the fermentation process. They say that making *bekang* together brings them joy, and although their children encourage them to stop due to their age, they are still unwilling to give it up. However, they have reduced the quantity and frequency of their fermentation work. They maintain a separate *bekang* kitchen near their main house, where they set up a hearth specifically for fermenting the soyabeans, and not for cooking. Pi Mawiteii emphasised how meticulous and hygienic they are in their process. She explained that they keep their fermentation materials and utensils completely separate. They have dedicated tools for everything and even change their shoes before entering the *bekang* kitchen. They are very careful that they do not allow even their grandchildren to come near the kitchen to avoid any risk of contamination.

Pi Zaii, a widow, is assisted by her son, Lawma (30), who helps gather the leaves necessary for fermentation. He would typically go into the forest to collect *Vaiza* leaves (*Hibiscus macrophyllus*). Both Pi Zaii and Pi Mawitei prefer using *Vaiza* or *Hnahkhar* leaves (*Mallotus*

tetracoccus) due to their large size, which reduces the quantity needed for fermentation. However, they also use *Sazu theipui hnah* (*Ficus hirta*) and *Hnahkiah* (*Callicarpa arborea*) in the process. Pi Zaii noted that some people prefer *Hnahkiah* leaves, believing that the *bekang* ferments better in that leaf.

Reflecting on his role, Pi Zaii's son Lawma recalled that, when he was younger, he would frequently collect leaves for his mother's *bekang* fermentation, and they later planted these trees in their garden. Despite this, there were times when their supply was insufficient, and he would still venture into the forest to gather more. Speaking with pride about his mother's skill, he said, "My mother is the best soyabean fermenter in the world; her *bekang um* never has *rim ṭeng* (a strong foul smell), which many people appreciate." Lawma also highlighted his mother's experience, noting that she had been fermenting soyabeans even before his birth. As a result, the entire family is well-versed in the process, and anyone can take over the task if she is unavailable.

Unlike other fermented foods like *saum*, *ai-um*, and *chhi-um*, discussed above, fermenting soyabeans requires a more detailed and careful process that demands greater attention. Not everyone knows how to prepare it, and there are now fewer experts who still practice this traditional fermentation. Soyabean has its own character, explained Pi Zaii, which can turn out either very delicious or unpleasant depending on the skill of the person fermenting it and the method used. She said that while it is easy to learn just by watching others without formal training, mastering the process is more challenging than it appears. This is why some people build a strong reputation for their products, while others may not be as successful. Moreover, there have been several reports of food poisoning due to the consumption of certain fermented soyabean in Mizoram. This has caused many people to be cautious about buying unfamiliar products, choosing instead to purchase only from trusted sources known for safe practices. In response to these incidents, the Food and Drugs Administration team launched training back in 2017 to raise awareness among soyabean fermenters about the micro-organisms and bacteria that are present in the fermented soyabean and how to prevent any harmful bacteria during their processing (Bekang umtute, 2017). However, only a few fermenters could attend the training sessions, leaving the majority without access to such awareness initiatives. Despite this, traditional knowledge and hands-on experience remain central to successful fermentation practices. Each fermenter relies on their own unique techniques, developed through years of experimentation and practice, making this process an art form refined over time. For instance, Pi Zaii explained that it is not ideal to smoke chicken over the hearth while fermenting

soyabeans. She also shared that the fire must be warm enough for proper fermentation. Also to ensure clean wood ash, they first clean the hearth and burn fresh firewood without anything else so the ash remains uncontaminated. In contrast, Pi Mawitei does not use ash in her fermentation process, explaining that it makes the *bekang* too viscid, a texture that both her customers and she herself find unappealing.

Researcher's note on Bekang um

My memories of *bekang um* are not only about its taste but are linked to my grandmother, Rothangi, who is now 83 years old. She is praised in our small neighbourhood as an excellent *bekang* fermenter. From the ages of eight to nine, I often spent Saturday mornings helping sell her *bekang um* around the neighbourhood, sometimes alongside my cousins. Each packet, wrapped in banana leaves and priced at just five rupees, was in high demand. We would carry 15 to 20 packets and knew precisely which neighbours would want to buy them. Going door to door, we would quickly sell out, often within just a few minutes.

Interestingly, my grandmother did not know how to ferment *bekang* before her marriage. She learned the skill from her sister-in-law, my great-aunt, after moving to Aizawl as a young bride. Over time, she perfected her cooking skills, becoming especially expert in making dishes like *bai*. Initially, she fermented soyabeans for family consumption and shared her *bekang* with friends and neighbours. However, as a side income, she began preparing larger batches for sale in the neighbourhood in the late 1990s. Although her reach remained limited, she became well-known locally, as neighbours trusted her meticulous attention to cleanliness and carefulness. They valued her expertise in achieving the perfect fermentation, just long enough to avoid the strong odour yet not too short to risk contamination, as it is believed that improperly fermented *bekang* can lead to severe food poisoning. One of my grandmother's customers once said that, "*I pi bekang um hi chu eisual a hlauhawm ve ngailoh bakah a rim pawh a tui thin*" (There is no risk of food poisoning with your grandmother's fermented soyabeans and the smell is wonderfully appetising).

Today, as my grandmother has aged and can no longer prepare *bekang um* herself, my uncles have taken up the practice but only for family consumption and only occasionally. This intergenerational transfer of skills from my great-aunt to my grandmother and later to her sons indicates how cultural knowledge are preserved within families. This process demonstrates that, while these traditions were once primarily passed down among women, they now transcend gender boundaries. The traditional gender role, where women were once the primary

custodians of food culture, is gradually shifting. This change reflects both an evolution and a potential decline of the tradition as it passes from generation to generation, suggesting that while cultural practices endure, their form and intensity may transform over time. Furthermore, with the decline in her production, our family, and even some of our neighbours, eat fermented soyabeans far less frequently. Many neighbours say that since my grandmother stopped fermenting, they no longer buy it, preferring to go without it rather than risk purchasing from unfamiliar sources.

Additionally, in view of the pungent aroma, Kikon (2021) suggests that the sensory experience of taste is often tied to the stimulation of the sense of smell, with fermented foods like fermented bamboo shoots (or, in this case, fermented soyabean) evoking strong emotional connections to one's home and community. In my experience, similar to many other Mizo respondents, I found the strong odour and sharp smell of certain types of *bekang* to be overwhelming and stinky. This particular ill smell is often considered unpleasant by the Mizo community and is typically regarded as a sign of improper fermentation, which they refer to as "*rim ṭeng*." However, when I shared the ones I consider *rim ṭeng* with my Naga friend, she did not perceive it as unpleasant at all. Instead, she remarked that it was much milder than *akhuni*, the Naga fermented soyabean. While I found the odour off-putting, she considered it a delicacy and a comforting reminder of home. As Kikon (2021) argues, smell undeniably matters in the experience of fermented foods, not only with fermented soyabeans but also with other types of fermented foods discussed above. Despite both me and my friend enjoying fermented soyabeans, our differing reactions to the smell highlight how cultural background shapes our acquired tastes – one person favours a milder aroma, while the other prefers a stronger one. This contrast highlights the wide variation in acquired tastes and sensory experiences among individuals and how food preferences are not only subjective but also deeply influenced by one's cultural background. While those unfamiliar with certain fermented soyabeans may find its smell strong and pungent, people who enjoy this dish consider its aroma to be delicious.

Figure 5.3 Steps of fermenting soyabean by Pu Kiamlova (Photos taken by the scholar)

5.3 *Sa rêp*: From Preservation to Preference of Smoked Meat

Hunting was an integral part of the early Mizo culture, and men often hunted wild animals. To preserve the meat (*sa* in Mizo) of the animal they shot, they would dry it over a fire, especially if it takes days to return back home. Smoking the meat, called *rêp* in Mizo, not only preserved it but also made it easier for hunters to bring it home from the forests. As Shakespear wrote, "When a large animal has been killed at any distance from the village the flesh is cut into strips and dried over a slow fire, after which it remains edible, according to Lushai ideas, for a very long time" (1912/2008, p. 36). Since they lacked proper storage methods, they believed that smoking helped the meat last longer. Once the meat was dried, they would hang it above the hearth, exposing it to the warmth and smoke of the fire, which altered its colour, texture, and even taste. Although hunting has now been prohibited by the State Forest Department, it is not uncommon to occasionally find the meat of *sazuk* (deer), *sakhi* (barking deer), *sanghal* (wild boar), or other animals in the market, either smoke-dried or freshly cut. Despite its rarity, these wild animals' meat commands high prices, as people are willing to pay for its desirable flavour.

In addition to wild animals, domestic animals were also traditionally preserved by drying over a fire. With refrigerators available in most homes, food can be stored fresh for much longer in modern times. Historically, however, this was not possible, without immediate consumption, fresh meat would spoil due to the lack of freezing options, making dried meat extremely valuable for storage. Today, smoking meat is still common, as many people enjoy its distinctive flavour and aroma. Smoked meat has become highly popular in Mizoram, where it is considered a delicacy and a valued offering for guests. Many respondents express a particular preference for smoked pork, which is regarded as a special treat.

The method of smoking meat has remained largely unchanged over time. Pi Khumtei, who has run a smoked pork business for many years, explained that "the fire should be kept low, allowing the meat to sit over a gentle heat, almost like grilling over charcoal." She noted that the smoking process reduces the excess fat in the meat, making it less oily and improving its flavour. The smokiness or charred taste from the charcoal added a whole layer of flavour to the dish. Smoking not only preserves meat for several days but also enhances its flavour, making it a preferred choice over fresh meat for many people. Today, smoked meats are stored in freezers to extend their shelf life even further.

Figure 5.4 Pi Khumteii checking her smoked pork (Photo taken by the scholar)

Smoked meat, particularly smoked pork, smoked beef, and smoked fish, are popular among the Mizo community. Mizo migrants living outside Mizoram frequently bring smoked meat with them when they return after holidays, as it is hard to find elsewhere. When friends or relatives visit, they often bring smoked pork from Mizoram, providing a comforting taste of home while studying or working in other parts of India. "Although pork is also available elsewhere, it cannot compare to the rich flavour of Mizo smoked pork, which is exceptionally delicious," explained a 32-year-old female respondent. She further expressed that she cannot enjoy pork from outside Mizoram due to its distinct smell, texture, and different taste, preferring only Mizo pork for its aromatic *hmui* flavour, a quality she finds lacking in other varieties. Some Mizo migrants shared that they occasionally smoke the pork themselves, either at home or on the outskirts of the city, to enjoy the distinct flavour of smoked pork rather than consuming the fresh meat available from the local market. For them, the unique qualities of Mizo smoked pork are likely more than just flavour; they symbolise home, familiarity, and authenticity, qualities that their "*habitus"* naturally privileges over the foreign flavours and textures of pork from outside Mizoram. This manifestation of their "habitus" embodies a form of "cultural capital," where familiarity with and preference for Mizo cuisine contributes to individuals' sense of cultural identity and distinction.

Figure 5.5 Two varieties of smoked dried fish (Photos taken by the scholar)

5.4 *Thlai rêp*: The Mizo Tradition of Sun-Dried Vegetables

Like other preservation methods, the Mizos traditionally use sun-drying (*pho ro* or *rêp* in Mizo dialect) to store food, primarily due to the lack of proper facilities for storing surplus produce. The main idea behind drying is to decrease the moisture content of food to a level that prevents

spoilage over time. For the Mizos, drying is an essential food processing technique because the availability of certain vegetables is limited by season and location. Therefore, preserving vegetables during the off-season and in remote areas ensures they can be used effectively over a longer period. Drying techniques and specific practices are often passed down through generations, creating a sense of continuity and belonging. Elders play an essential role in teaching younger generations about which foods to dry and how to do it effectively. Sun-drying develops distinct flavours and alters the taste, aroma, and texture of food. These sensory changes have become a valued delicacy and part of local culinary identity in Mizo cuisine.

Sun-dried food is much more than a preservation technique in Mizo cuisine, playing a vital role in cultural identity. It holds significant socio-cultural importance in Mizoram, reflecting both traditional practices and contemporary economic shifts. Some of the common sun-dried food items among the Mizos are *dawl rêp* (dried taro), *behlawi rêp* (dried cow pea leaves), *mautuai rêp* (dried bamboo shoots), *anthur rêp* (dried roselle leaves), *bekang rêp* (dried fermented soyabean), and *baibing rêp* to name a few. Historically, sun-drying was widely practised within each household to ensure food availability during off-seasons or in times of scarcity. However, with increasing urbanisation, this practice has declined in cities like Aizawl, where urban residents now rely primarily on rural producers for their supply of sun-dried vegetables. Instead, farmers and rural communities have taken on the role of drying, packaging, and selling these products in city markets, where they meet the growing demand.

The commercialization of sun-dried food has extended beyond local consumption, with packaged products being exported to other states. These items have become particularly significant for Mizos residing outside the state, who depend on them not only for convenience but also as a means of maintaining cultural continuity. For members of the Mizo diaspora, carrying sun-dried vegetables when migrating or travelling serves as both a practical necessity and a symbolic connection to their cultural heritage. This shift from domestic subsistence to commercial enterprise highlights the dynamic role of sun-dried food in preserving cultural identity while also contributing to regional economic development.

Dawl rêp (Dried taro leaves)

Anthur rêp (Dried roselle leaves)

Muatuai rêp (Dried bamboo shoot)

Khatual rêp (Dried chirata leaves)

Figure 5.6 A variety of packaged dried vegetables available at the roadside market in Aizawl. (Photos taken by the scholar)

5.5 Culinary Hybridisation

Appadurai (1996) introduces the model of "*global cultural flow*," through which ideas and information are transferred and adapted across regions. Culinary hybridisation, within this framework, emerges as local food practices incorporate elements from global cuisines, especially visible in diasporic communities adapting to new environments. Additionally, the influx of diverse foods and ingredients across the world has contributed to the rise of fusion cuisines, which represent both the preservation of cultural identity and the embrace of different cuisines from other cultures.

Mizo cuisine has not remained static but has undergone significant transformation, particularly in response to the forces of globalisation and increased cultural exchange. While traditional ingredients continue to form the foundation of Mizo food, the methods of preparation and consumption have evolved, leading to a degree of hybridisation. For example, the geographic proximity of Mizoram to Myanmar has facilitated the incorporation of Burmese dishes and ingredients into everyday Mizo culinary practices. Similarly, more interaction with other Indian cultures has introduced mainstream Indian cooking techniques, such as the use of spices, into the Mizo kitchen. Today, it is common to find a blend of traditional Mizo dishes alongside

more pan-Indian cuisine. Additionally, the influence of international cuisines, particularly Western, Korean, and other Asian foods, has further diversified the Mizo culinary landscape, with restaurants and individuals alike embracing these global food practices. As with many other regions, Mizo food culture has undergone notable changes, reflecting the dynamic nature of culinary traditions in the context of modernity and globalisation.

Mizo culture is dynamic and constantly evolving, leading to the adaptation of foods to reflect changing environments. Over time, new recipes and ingredients have emerged, and traditional components have been modified based on availability and circumstance. For example, cooking oil or butter is often used as a substitute for *saum*, while cooking soda replaces *chingal*. People creatively incorporate accessible ingredients to develop hybrid dishes. Vered, a Mizo scholar based in Sydney, shared:

> After moving to Sydney, I began cooking for myself whenever I crave home-cooked meals. I would visit farmers market for fresh greens and Asian supermarkets to pick up ingredients, often using Indian spices along with Chinese and Myanmar products. Occasionally, I also draw inspiration from YouTubers and bloggers to recreate Mizo dishes. Typically, I prepare rice and vegetables, sometimes adding meat, seasoned with Indian spices and sauces to replicate familiar flavours. (Personal communication, September 27, 2023)

This remark exemplifies cultural hybridisation through the lens of global cultural flow where migration brings traditional culinary practices into new contexts, and global trade and digital media facilitate the exchange and adaptation of ideas. The result is a dynamic and hybrid culinary identity that bridges the local and global, personal and communal, traditional and modern.

To evoke a sense of home while managing time and resources efficiently, Mizo students and migrant workers have developed a fusion cuisine based on readily available ingredients. Another example is that since *saum* is a pork-based component, respondents noted that purely vegetarian *bai* is rare. However, some use vegetable oil as an alternative, especially in contexts where *saum* is unavailable. Sylvine, a 33-year-old Mizo immigrant living in the UK, explained, "When cooking for vegetarian friends or when I run out of *saum*, I substitute it with vegetable oil in my *bai* recipe" (personal communication, August 3, 2023). She added that while the aroma and texture may differ slightly, the taste remains largely consistent. This highlights how cultural environments shape culinary practices, with social contexts influencing food choices.

Sylvine also mentioned that she rarely prepares traditional Mizo food herself since she lives with non-Indian roommates. The only time she cooks or eats Mizo food is when she has a strong craving for it or when she shares meals with her Mizo friends living in other parts of the UK. This act of sharing traditional meals with others from the same community also reflects a form of cultural preservation and reinforces a sense of identity and belonging. Thus, food, while still serving as a strong marker of identity, also plays an important part in the blending and hybridisation of culinary practices, especially in the context of migration (Cardon and Garcia-Garza, 2012). This process of hybridisation reflects how cultural as well as regional food boundaries become increasingly fluid as they adjust to available local resources, especially within the Mizo diaspora.

5.6 Fusion Cuisine: Food from the Borders

The geographical location of Mizoram plays a significant role in shaping its food culture, as the bordering states and countries exert considerable influence on local food choices. This influence cannot be overlooked when examining the culinary traditions of the Mizos. Here, the term "border" refers not only to the adjacent national and international boundaries but also to the neighbouring states of northeast India, such as Manipur, Tripura, and Assam, as well as Meghalaya and Nagaland which may not directly border Mizoram but still contribute to this cultural exchange. Much of the food consumed in Mizoram, particularly in the capital city, Aizawl, originates from these border areas, reshaping local culinary practices and traditions. This shows how boundaries, whether between tribes, states, or countries, are not rigid but porous, allowing for the continuous exchange and incorporation of diverse culinary traditions.

When mobility occurs, as Poulain notes, "distinctive dietary practices are among the last cultural markers to disappear" (2017, p.127). Migrants from the peripheral areas of Mizoram, drawn to cities like Aizawl in search of opportunities, have brought more than just their belongings. They have introduced their own memories, traditions, and distinct food cultures into the communal space. For example, *Sihneh* (tapering leaf eurya) is widely consumed by the Mizos in the northern regions of Mizoram, while *Pelh* (melinjo) is more common in the southern areas. It is interesting how each region has embraced these vegetables as part of their identity, with *Sihneh* and *Pelh* becoming subtle markers of the people from the north and south, respectively. However, both vegetables are now readily available in the Aizawl market and have become popular across the state as well. As recipes from the northern and southern fringes became inseparable from the broader Mizo cuisine, so too did the meals of Burmese

immigrants from the western Chin Hills, Bru (Reang) refugees from Tripura, and Chakmas from the Chittagong hill Tracts of Bangladesh. Their foodways have integrated with and expanded the traditional Mizo palate, reflecting a dynamic process of cultural adaptation and hybridisation. This raises the question of cultural ownership: who has the authority to define what is authentically "Mizo" food?

In this section, I focus on a particular category of food that, while not traditionally Mizo in origin, has been adopted from neighbouring communities. It includes one dish from each direction: *sanpiau* from the east (Myanmar), *vaipaden* from the west (Tripura), *tungrung* from the north (Meghalaya), and *dangpuithu* from the south-west (Bangladesh). The Mizos have adapted and modified these foods, incorporating their own ingredients and assigning them resemblant names, thereby creating a hybridised culinary tradition. This process of cultural exchange and adaptation reflects the dynamic nature of Mizo cuisine, blending external influences with local practices to produce distinctive variations.

5.6.1 *Sanpiau*

The dish known as *Sanpiau* is a Mizo adaptation of Burmese rice porridge. The original recipe is believed to have derived from the Burmese *hsan pyoke*, which refers to rice boiled into congee or porridge. The Mizo people have adapted the phonetics of *hsan pyoke* to create the term *Sanpiau*, which does not have a literal meaning in the Mizo language. *Sanpiau* is prepared by cooking rice in a meat broth, typically using chicken, though pork and beef are also used based on individual preferences. The process begins by boiling meat, removing it, and then using the broth to cook the rice until it reaches a porridge-like consistency. To enhance the umami flavour, a small amount of Ajinomoto (MSG) and chicken seasoning powder may be added as preferred. The boiled meat is shredded into small pieces and fried, then used as a topping for the porridge. The crispier the meat, the more flavourful the dish. The dish is finished by topping it with rice noodle chips, fish sauce, black pepper, and herbs like coriander, adding texture and flavour. It is typically served and enjoyed with a traditional Mizo *chutney* made with onion and smoked chilli flakes.

Notably, *Sanpiau* has become widely available in eateries across Aizawl and Mizo restaurants in cities such as Delhi, Guwahati, and Shillong. This dish has significantly integrated into Mizo culture. However, despite its cultural integration, due to its name, many still perceive it as a Burmese dish rather than an authentic Mizo creation. This perception is partly due to the origin of certain key ingredients such as rice noodle chips, fish sauce, and black pepper which are not

locally produced in Mizoram but are instead imported from Myanmar. Thus, while *Sanpiau* has blended into Mizo culinary culture, its Burmese roots remain evident to many. It is primarily common among the areas near the Myanmar borders such as Champhai and Zokhawthar near the Ṭiau River which is the main trade point.

Some people have claimed that *Sanpiau* in Zokhawthar is more authentic than those prepared in other places of Mizoram. Ramhluni, a female respondent from Aizawl, currently stationed in Zokhawthar for work, remarked that the *Sanpiau* available at restaurants in Zokhawthar possesses a pronounced authenticity in both taste and aroma. She noted that eating *Sanpiau* in Aizawl after experiencing the dish in Zokhawthar felt notably different; the version in Zokhawthar is characterised by a strong umami flavour, whereas the preparation in Aizawl tends to have a milder taste profile (personal communication, November 19, 2023).

The argument about the authenticity of *Sanpiau* in Zokhawthar versus other parts of Mizoram raises critical questions about the nature of authenticity and cultural ownership in culinary traditions. If the dish has been adapted into Mizo cuisine over time, its authenticity becomes tied not to an original form but to the collective identity and practices of the Mizo people. The claim that the dish version of one place is "more authentic" may reflect a regional preference or perception shaped by stronger flavours aligning with local tastes. However, since *Sanpiau* itself is a culturally integrated dish, authenticity may be viewed as fluid and evolving rather than fixed. Authenticity in this context is less about adherence to a singular origin and more about how the dish is embedded within the Mizo cultural and regional variations. Thus, *Sanpiau* prepared in the border area is not inherently more authentic but represents one of many valid expressions of the dish within Mizo identity.

Figure 5.7 A bowl of Sanpiau at a restaurant in Zokhawthar (Photo taken by a respondent)

5.6.2 *Tungrung*

The Mizo side dish *tungrung* is a hybrid version of the *tungrymbai*, a traditional fermented soyabean dish popular among the Khasis and Jaintias of Meghalaya. In Khasi dialect "*tung*" is short for *iwtung* meaning "smelly," and *rymbai* means "soyabean" (Amos, personal communication, September 24, 2024). The Khasis prepare their fermented soyabeans differently from the Mizos and Nagas. They pound the fermented soyabeans into a paste and mix it with other traditional ingredients like black sesame seed paste, raw turmeric, garlic leaf paste, chillies, and ginger, along with pork (or any meat). The dish is cooked without adding oil, relying solely on the fat from the pork. This preparation has been a staple food for the Khasi people since early times, and it continues to be a Khasi delicacy enjoyed by everyone today.

The introduction of this Khasi dish to the Mizo people is not precisely dated, but it is believed to have occurred as a result of increased contact between the Mizos and the Khasis of Meghalaya, possibly through migration or travel. The Khasi dish, known as *tungrymbai* was adopted by the Mizos, who gave it the name *tungrungbai* or simply *tungrung*. This Mizo name does not have any specific meaning in the Mizo language; rather, it reflects a phonetic adaptation. While the Khasi term *tungrymbai* combines "rymbai," meaning soyabean in Khasi, the Mizo term *bai* does not carry the same meaning, as the Mizo word for soyabean is *bekang*. Despite this linguistic distinction, the Mizos have made the dish their own, creating a hybrid version that reflects their culinary traditions.

As the name suggests, fermented soyabean is the primary ingredient in *tungrung*. According to a respondent, Pi Rempuii, the recipe begins with selecting high-quality, flavourful fermented soyabeans. Other ingredients include tomatoes, onions, ginger, garlic, culantro, Mizo smoked dried chilli flakes or fresh green chillies, salt, and sesame seeds, with the quantities adjusted to individual preferences. These ingredients are then ground using either an electric grinder or a mortar and pestle, or chopped into small pieces before being cooked. Unlike the Khasis, they do not mash the fermented soyabean into a paste. Adding pork or meat is optional, and oil is used to fry the ingredients. Pi Rempuii humorously added that one must be in a good mood while preparing the dish, joking that "if you aren't happy while making it, it won't taste good" (personal communication, April 19, 2023). Her son, who was present during our conversation, agreed, noting that "as we jokingly said earlier, it is important to be in a good mood when cooking to be more delicious, not just for *tungrung* but for any dish." His mother affirmed this sentiment, stating that "a happy heart and mind definitely add flavour to the food." Once

prepared, the dish can be stored in refrigeration and consumed over time, as it is typically served as a side accompaniment, similar to a chutney, rather than as a main course. The dish has a distinctive flavour, smell, and texture, which may not appeal to everyone at first but tends to grow in those who become accustomed to it. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, Mizo fermented soyabeans in particular have a much milder scent compared to those from the Khasis or Nagas. This makes the Mizo version of *tungrung* less pungent and not as strong-smelling as the Khasi *tungrymbai*. As Pi Rempuii noted, the incorporation of local herbs and Mizo fermented soyabeans enhances the flavour, making the dish more palatable and appealing to the Mizo palate.

Figure 5.8 Tungrung prepared by Diki (Photo taken by the respondent)

5.6.3 *Vaipaden*

Vaipaden is a dish adapted from the Reang (Bru) community of Tripura. Known locally as *pingmo* or *thamso pingmo* in the Reang language, which translates to "cooking vegetables in a bamboo tube," this dish is cooked by combining vegetables and meat (or fish) within a bamboo tube (Bibal, personal communication, 15 October, 2022). Traditional Reang ingredients include banana flower, onion, chilli, dried or fermented fish, salt, and water, though other vegetables may be added based on availability or preference. The tube is sealed with banana leaves and then slowly cooked over a wood fire at a low temperature to prevent burning. Once the ingredients are tender, they are mashed together within the bamboo tube, resulting in a semi-puree consistency enhancing the unique blend of flavours and textures.

Driven by employment opportunities and various socio-economic factors, many Reangs have migrated and settled in Mizoram, predominantly in the western regions along the Tripura border. However, the Reang community in Mizoram occupies the fringes of Mizo society, both geographically, residing along the Tripura-Mizoram border, and socially, where they are regarded as outsiders and often classified as refugees rather than part of the Mizo ethnic group. In Mizo terminology, they are sometimes referred to as *Tuikuk* or *Vai*. This marginalisation is reflected in the Mizo term for the Reang dish, *vaipaden*, where "vai" denotes a non-Mizo Indian, "pa" means man, and "dên" refers to the act of mashing or pounding, implying a dish prepared and mashed by a non-Mizo man. On the contrary, food similar to Reang's *pingmo* and Mizo's *vaipaden* are also found in other parts of the world and not just exclusive to these two societies, as with the case of fermented soyabean and other fermented products. This raises ongoing questions about the rightful cultural ownership of these dishes.

Among the Mizo people, those from western regions near the Reang community are typically regarded as experts in preparing *vaipaden*. Although this dish has now gained popularity state-wide, it remains a regional speciality of the western parts of Mizoram, often referred to as "Khawthlangpa special," meaning "a western man's speciality" (Lalawma, personal communication, November 6, 2022). Traditionally, *vaipaden* is cooked within a bamboo tube over an open fire; however, in urban settings where fireplaces are uncommon, it is typically prepared in pots or pressure cookers with some adjustments to the ingredients. Nevertheless, as Lalawma argues, *vaipaden* cooked in bamboo tube retains the smoky essence of the bamboo, enriching its umami flavour and offering an unmatched taste (ibid.). Versatile in its preparation, *vaipaden* incorporates key ingredients such as onion, ginger, garlic, chillies, and perilla seeds alongside vegetables like brinjal, bamboo flowers, and bamboo shoots. It can also be adapted to include non-vegetarian elements, such as chicken, smoked pork, beef, or fermented dry fish, according to individual preference.

Again, the argument about authenticity and regional specialisation in the preparation of *vaipaden* raises an important question about cultural ownership and regional identity within the Mizo community. If *vaipaden* is widely recognised as a Mizo dish, attributing its "expert" preparation to the western regions introduces a layer of regional differentiation that appears contradictory to its state-wide acknowledgement. This regional distinction likely reflects historical and cultural factors, proximity to the Reang community, for instance, may have influenced the development of unique techniques or flavours associated with the western parts of Mizoram. However, emphasising regional expertise does not diminish its status as a Mizo

dish. Instead, it highlights the diversity within Mizo culinary practices, where local nuances coexist within a broader cultural identity. In this context, the concept of authenticity is layered. While *vaipaden* belongs to the Mizo culinary item, regional expertise enriches its identity rather than fragmenting it, suggesting that authenticity can encompass both collective and localised expressions.

Figure 5.9 Vaipaden prepared by Pi Mamuani (Photo taken by the scholar)

5.6.4 *Dangpuithu*

Dangpuithu is a type of shrimp paste commonly enjoyed in the southern regions of Mizoram, which is imported from the neighbouring country of Bangladesh. Shrimp paste, a staple in many Southeast Asian cuisines, is traditionally made from dried small fish or shrimp mixed with salt and put to ferment over several days. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, shrimp paste, made from dried small fish and shrimp, serves as a fundamental ingredient in the culinary traditions of local tribal communities. The Chakma people of Bangladesh called this paste “sidol,” while in the Marma language of Bangladesh, it is known as “nappi.” Due to the longstanding proximity between the Mizo people and those of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, dating back to the colonial era, both trade and cultural exchanges have flourished. This close relationship has led to the intermingling of food practices, with neighbouring communities adopting each other’s culinary traditions. The local markets in villages near the Bangladesh border like Tlabung village (formerly Demagiri), Chawngte (Kamalanagar), and nearby

villages are regarded as the best places to obtain a good quality product of *dangpuithu*, and the prices vary based on the quality of the paste.

Dangpuithu is famous for its pungent aroma yet rich umami taste. Like many other foods, it has distinctive flavours that require time to appreciate, as they often have an acquired taste. Due to the extremely strong smell of the paste, *dangpuithu* is not liked by all, especially for the uninitiated and thus, as Tochhawng (n.d., p. 10) asserted, "it can only be declared 'appetizing' for the discerning (very Mizo) olfactory senses" and those who have grown up with it and acquired a taste for its unique flavours. Over time, though, people can adapt and come to enjoy these unfamiliar dishes. Shrimp or seafood paste differs across Southeast Asian cultures, with variations in smell, texture and taste although they all have a pungent aroma. Related to *dangpuithu*, *nghapih* from Myanmar is also common among the Mizos, especially among those who live in close proximity with the Burmese as well as at the centre. *Nghapih* is another pungent paste made from fermented shrimp or fish called "ngapi" in Burmese. While *dangpuithu* and *nghapih* are not locally produced in Mizoram, both are not alien to the Mizos and are prepared mostly as a tastemaker in *bai* and *chutney* and featured as a side dish in a Mizo meal platter. Nonetheless, not all Mizos enjoy these strongly pungent dishes, and many are hesitant to generalise or label them as authentically Mizo cuisine. While some individuals have no issue consuming these foods, others are reluctant due to the intense smell and still view them as foreign. The question of cultural ownership—whose food this truly represents—remains open for debate.

The presence of these dishes (*sanpiau*, *tungrung*, *vaipaden*, and *dangpuithu*) in Mizo cuisine highlights the complex ways in which different food cultures interact and blend, often making it challenging to distinguish which community each dish originally belongs to. The debate over authenticity and cultural ownership within the Mizo community reflects a broader tension between maintaining ethnic distinctions and embracing a shared culinary identity. Some Mizos hesitate to label certain dishes as authentically "Mizo," fearing that doing so may blur the lines between different communities and undermine their unique cultural heritage. However, despite these concerns, many Mizos also consider these dishes part of their culinary identity due to their popularity and long-standing presence in Mizo cuisine. The fact that the origins of these dishes are often unclear highlights the fluid and interconnected nature of culinary traditions, where influences from various cultures have seamlessly blended over time. This reflects Appadurai's concept of the "disjunctured" nature of globalisation, where different "scapes" interact in ways that can challenge fixed cultural boundaries. As these different cultural flows

come together, they create a hybrid identity that transcends traditional concepts of authenticity, illustrating how global and local influences shape and redefine cultural practices in an ever-evolving way.

5.7 Conclusion

Traditional food preservation methods and the incorporation of external influences discussed in this chapter highlight the ingenuity and adaptability of Mizo culinary practices. Techniques like fermentation, smoking, and sun-drying not only prolong the shelf life but also create distinct flavours and textures that characterise the Mizo foodways. Their taste has been deeply rooted in the Mizo sensorial attributes and is preferred to this date even with the presence of proper storage, like refrigeration. Moreover, it has been observed that the cooking and preservation processes, handed down from earlier generations through oral traditions and other means, slightly vary by region and family and have been modified in some way over time for greater convenience and improved methods. The chapter also discussed the incorporation of dishes and ingredients from across borders, which have broadened the culinary landscape while preserving local identity. Furthermore, migration and globalisation have fostered a fascinating hybridisation of Mizo food, blending traditional dishes with global cultural influences to create a fusion that respects and reshapes cultural identity.

The following chapter will explore deeper into Mizo culture through the lens of the traditional feast, where various traditional dishes, as well as hybridised foods influenced by neighbouring regions and global tastes, feature in a celebration of Mizo culture and identity. This communal meal portrays both the continuing legacy of Mizo culinary tradition and the adaptability of the cuisine in a changing world, showcasing dishes that are not only central to community life but also to the preservation of cultural heritage.

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