

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE AND ECOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF TRADITIONAL MIZO FOOD: LENSING THROUGH FOLKTALES AND BELIEFS

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Abstract: Traditional foods are an essential aspect of cultural heritage, shaped by the ecological context in which they emerged which embody cultural values and beliefs, often transmitted through oral traditions such as folktales. Indigenous communities, in particular, have long-standing food practices that are deeply rooted in their cultural traditions and spiritual beliefs. Understanding the cultural significance and ecological context of traditional food practices is crucial for promoting sustainable food systems and preserving cultural diversity. However, these practices are often threatened by factors such as globalization, industrialization, and climate change. To address this challenge, understanding the cultural significance and ecological context of traditional food practices is necessary. This paper aims to explore the intricate relationship between the socio-ecological context of historical Mizo life and food. This involves examining how communal living, subsistence practices, and local environments shaped dietary habits—factors that are vividly illustrated in the narratives. In doing so, this paper highlights the importance of folktales as a resource in food studies, as well as the role of storytelling in transmitting indigenous ecological wisdom. This study aims at exploring how the study of folktales and indigeneity can enhance our understanding of traditional food practices and inform efforts to promote sustainable food systems and preserve cultural diversity. The study further seeks to answer the question: How can the study of folktales and indigeneity contribute to our understanding of the cultural significance and ecological context of traditional food practices, and inform efforts to promote sustainable food systems and preserve cultural diversity?

Keywords: Food; Traditional; Folktales; Practices; Indigeneity.

INTRODUCTION

Food is not just a source of nourishment but also a critical aspect of cultural identity, traditions, and practices. The Mizo people, an Indigenous community residing in the Northeast region of India, have a rich and diverse culinary heritage that is closely intertwined with their ecological context and cultural history. Food is a critical aspect of indigenous cultures and identity. Indigenous food systems are diverse and complex, shaped by local ecosystems, cultural traditions, and social and economic conditions. These systems are often based on traditional knowledge and practices that have been passed down from generation to generation, and they play a central role in maintaining cultural identity and community cohesion.

According to Dillon (2022), traditional dishes are those that have been eaten for many years and have a cultural or historical connection to a particular region, country or locality. These foods are typically passed down from generation to generation. The unique and diverse traditions, ethnicities, and food cultures of a specific region are represented in their ethnic cuisines, and documenting these types of foods can provide valuable insights into the connections between food, local production systems, dietary

environments, cultural traditions, food and nutrition security, societal cohesion, and the economy. The consumption of ethnic cuisine is important for meeting nutritional needs and boosting immunity, and the support of local food systems is crucial for preserving cultural identities and promoting sustainable economic and environmental practices.

Folktales are a valuable source of cultural knowledge are a product of their society and culture, and they reflect the values and beliefs of that society (Tiwari, 2013). Folktales can provide a platform for marginalized groups to express their views and concerns, and they can offer alternative visions of society and culture (Tiwari, 2013). Folktales play a crucial role in passing cultural values from one generation to another. This helps people become more aware of their shared historical knowledge systems, which enables them to participate more effectively in decision-making and negotiations on issues that affect them. Folktales convey messages that are easy to understand and relevant to the target audience, and even though many folktales provide entertainment, they also have moral lessons. The values presented in folktales help people to see their immediate environment in a new light and empower them to start a dialogue with the world and the people around them (Mphasha, 2015).

Moreover, the Mizo people's deep connection to their land and environment has shaped their food practices and ecological consciousness. Despite the cultural and ecological significance of traditional food in Indigenous communities, there has been limited research that explores the cultural and ecological context of Mizo traditional food. While there is growing interest in Mizo traditional food, little is known about the specific ways in which Mizo folktales and indigeneity inform their food practices and ecological consciousness. Therefore, the problem addressed in this study is the lack of comprehensive research on the cultural significance and ecological context of Mizo traditional food through the lens of folktales and indigeneity. By exploring this topic, this study seeks to address this research gap and contribute to our understanding of the intricate relationship between food, culture, and ecology in Indigenous communities. Therefore, this study seeks to explore how folktales and indigeneity can help us understand the cultural significance and ecological context of Mizo traditional food. By delving into the rich culinary heritage of the Mizo people, this study hopes to contribute to our understanding of the intricate relationship between food, culture, and ecology in Indigenous communities. It also aims at locating the cultural significance of food in Mizo society. It also tries to understand the socio-ecological context seen in food culture which can further build a defence mechanism for preserving the traditional knowledge of Mizo food.

This paper is organized into several key sections: thematic analysis found in the current body of literature, recognition of research gaps, a description of the methodological framework, a presentation of findings, and a conclusion that integrates insights and their implications.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF TRADITIONAL FOOD

The UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) highlighted the role of indigenous cultures in environmental conservation. Diaz (2021) emphasizes that indigenous food systems, characterized by a deep understanding of natural cycles and spiritual ties to land, offer sustainable alternatives to industrial agriculture. Similarly, the FAO outlines five essential features of indigenous

food systems that prioritize local knowledge, ecological integration, and sustainability.

In the Indian context, Ghosh-Jerath et al. (2022) underscore the ecological adaptation and cultural importance of wild and cultivated indigenous foods. Kuhnlein & Chotiboriboon (2022) echo this by presenting case studies from Canada and Thailand that highlight how underutilized indigenous food resources contribute to both biodiversity and nutrition. Vijayan et al. (2022) argue for the inclusion of indigenous perspectives in sustainable food system reforms, noting how traditional knowledge is often overlooked in policy and development discourse.

Trichopoulou et al. (2007) emphasize the heritage value of traditional European foods, many of which lack complete documentation but form an integral part of national identities. Rocillo Aquino et al. (2021) build on this by identifying dimensions of traditional food, including the transmission of knowledge and materials across generations. These works collectively point to the role of food in preserving cultural memory and identity. Gutierrez et al. (2022), studying the Kumiai people, highlight how traditional food systems serve as forms of cultural resistance and identity preservation amid industrial food encroachment. Their research illustrates the intimate ties between food, health, and cultural continuity. Kala & Nautiyal (2022), through empirical work in Uttarakhand, document how traditional cuisines are sustained socially and ecologically, thereby reinforcing community identity while aligning with natural resource availability.

FOLKTALES AS REPOSITORIES OF ECOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

Tiwari (2013) asserts that folktales carry cultural morals, values, and knowledge, adapting over generations to maintain relevance. Mphasha (2015) reinforces this idea, noting how African folktales metaphorically address real-life issues and transmit cultural values. Canonici (1991) uses Zulu folktales to analyze food-sharing customs, suggesting avenues for further research in cultural symbolism around food.

Long (2009) presents food as a folkloric aesthetic domain, incorporating activities such as preparation, performance, and presentation, which collectively provide meaning. Dundes (1969), a foundational figure in folklore studies, supports this approach by advocating for the study of folktales to understand cultural diversity and promote cross-cultural appreciation.

FOOD BEYOND NUTRITION: SOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS

Several scholars stress that food should be viewed through multiple lenses—not just as nourishment, but as an ecological and socio-cultural phenomenon. Hammada et al. (2022) argue for a multi-dimensional understanding of food, recognizing it as a part of the ecosystem with inherent ecological, economic, and social functions. This aligns with emerging approaches in food studies that contextualize food systems within broader environmental and cultural frameworks.

The reviewed literature collectively highlights that traditional and indigenous food systems are not only ecologically sustainable but also deeply rooted in cultural narratives, especially folktales. These systems encapsulate a wealth of knowledge passed down through oral traditions and are vital for understanding human-environment interactions in a culturally specific context. However, a notable gap remains in examining how these narratives directly inform socio-ecological relationships in specific communities, particularly among the Mizo people underscoring the need for focused studies like the present one.

Based on the thematic review of literature provided, here are the key research gaps that can be clearly identified.

1. Limited Focus on Mizo Traditional Food Systems. While several studies explore indigenous and traditional food systems in various global and Indian contexts (e.g., Kumiai people, Uttarakhand, Pwo Karen people), there is a distinct lack of research specifically focusing on the Mizo community. This includes both documentation of traditional food items and the socio-ecological knowledge embedded within them.

2. Folktales as Ecological Texts Remain Underexplored. Although many works acknowledge the cultural and moral value of folktales (Tiwari, Mphasha, Canonici), few treat them as critical ecological texts that offer insight into food systems, subsistence patterns, and environmental relationships. The potential of folktales to act as repositories of ecological knowledge—especially related to food—is largely overlooked in mainstream food studies.

3. Lack of Interdisciplinary Approaches Connecting Food, Ecology, and Oral Traditions. Most studies focus either on food systems (e.g., sustainable agriculture, nutritional aspects) or on folklore/literature, but rarely do they adopt an interdisciplinary lens that links food, ecology, and oral traditions. This is a significant gap, particularly in the context of indigenous epistemologies where these elements are deeply interconnected.

4. Underrepresentation of Indigenous Knowledge in Mainstream Food Studies.

Scholars like Vijayan et al. (2022) and Kuhnlein & Chotiboriboon (2022) stress the marginalization of indigenous perspectives in global food discourses. However, there is still insufficient attention to how storytelling and oral heritage contribute to the preservation and transmission of indigenous food knowledge, particularly in marginalized communities such as the Mizos.

5. Inadequate Documentation of Traditional Food Items Through Narrative Forms. Existing documentation of traditional food (e.g., Kala & Nautiyal, 2022) relies heavily on ethnographic interviews or empirical surveys. There is a methodological gap in utilizing narrative sources like folktales as valid data for identifying, documenting, and interpreting traditional food items and practices.

6. Ecological Dimensions of Traditional Foods Often Overlooked in Cultural Studies. While cultural studies (e.g., Long 2009; Dundes 1969) delve into food as a cultural practice, they seldom incorporate the ecological dimensions of traditional food systems—such as resource sustainability, foraging knowledge, or territorial management—which are crucial for indigenous communities like the Mizos.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The following are the objectives of the study

1. To consolidate the traditional Mizo food items through the analysis of folktales.
2. To examine the relationship between food and socio-ecological context in earlier Mizo society through tales.

METHODOLOGY

In order to achieve the aims of the study on the cultural significance and ecological context of Mizo traditional food through folktales and indigeneity, a comprehensive methodology will be employed. This methodology involved analysis of traditional folktales and narratives. The research utilised secondary sources of data collection to obtain information for the study. Secondary data means data that are available i.e., they refer to the data which have already been collected and analysed by someone else (Kothari & Garg, 2014).

STUDY FINDINGS

The finding presented in this study focused on Mizo traditional food based on folktales. The study emphasizes the cultural and ecological significance of traditional food systems and the challenges of passing on this knowledge to younger generations. Khiantge (2017) in his book,

"Folktales of Mizoram," compiles 66 traditional stories from Mizoram, providing insights into Mizo culture and literature. The interpretation of Mizo folktales is done using Khiantge's works.

INTERPRETATION OF THE FOLKTALES

In the world of Mizo folklore, the most interesting personality would be Chhurbura. He is often considered as the 'silliest of all simpletons' among the Mizo folk protagonists. Yet on the other hand he is considered as the cleverest of all. In the tales of Chhura, Dr. Laltluangliana Khiantge has mentioned that Chhura and his brother Nahaia were both jhum farmers as was the practice of the day. There was a mentioning of Chhura and his family owning a very large earthenware vessel which they held in great pride which has been used for cooking

purposes and hence it rather signifies how cooking was held a great importance in earlier days. In one of the tales of Chhura, we witnessed the mentioning of a fruit called Chengkek (*Garcinia cowa*) wherein Chhura tried plucking the Chengkek fruit from its tree which he failed to do so.

One sunny day Chhura and his brother Nahaia went to the jungle in search of Kawlbahra (sweet potato). Chhura selected only the ones that has ripened and they both cleansed Kawlbahra in the stream. This indicated that even if Chhura, considered as the silliest among the Mizo protagonist also had the knowledge of selecting ripened Kawlbahra and the act of cleaning it with water in the stream; we can tell that Mizos were not illogical. They had the knowledge of selecting food that are edible and are aware of cleanliness in terms of fooding. Chhura sold fire to his village people as fire was needed to cook food.

Chhura enjoyed Ai-um, a traditional Mizo food, during his village visit and asked about the preparation in the hope that his wife would prepare for him. The hope of knowing the preparation so as to let it cook for Chhura by his wife portrayed that cooking and preparing of food are considered as woman's work.

However, in one of Chhura's tales, we have seen that while his wife left for jhum, she instructed Chhura to cook dinner. Chhura carried all the cooking utensils and the grains of rice as well as water and firewood towards the tree. These lines from the tales provided us the idea that men also indulge in cooking when the counter-part went out for jhumming and as such, we can say that domestic roles played by both genders depend on the availability of both the partners. The used of cooking utensils, grains of rice, water and firewood indicated the raw materials and utensils used by the earlier Mizos in cooking process.

There was one time when the villagers promised Chhura to throw a grand feast in his honor to make up for the loss of the pretty fly which he sells in the village. This promised made by the villagers to throw a grand feast in order to make up for the loss indicated that food served as a medium of restoring their relations. We have also seen the growing of rice and other vegetables by Chhura in his large field. Chhura often went fishing and set out to catch crab. All these indicated the variety of food items eaten by the Mizos.

Looking at the memoir of males, we have seen how Mr. Lengkawia applied chingal (lye) and sa-um on the face of Phungpuinu. Chingal and sa-um can thus be count in as traditional food. In the story of Chemtatrawta, we have seen the presentation of food eaten by the villagers namely, kha-um, lobster and wild fowl. A man called Samdala, who was inherently lazy went into the forest and found a fig tree full of ripe fruits. He had eaten the fruit when it fell into the mouth; this has shown that fruits are also included among the diet of the Mizos.

In a tiny village, there lived a young man named Hualtungamtawna who was well known for being a good hunter. Being such a good hunter, he bagged many wild animals and when he bagged a huge bear, he planned on celebrating it with a great pomp and merriment. He had many pigs to kill for the celebration. This can thus be seen as a manifestation of using pig for celebrations. It was also mentioned having breakfast by Hualtungamtawna and family in the morning. It can be said that Mizos had the habit of having breakfast in the earlier days as well.

Rahtea, who had a stepmother suffered a lot and was given very little food. This showed how food was used as a means of showing affection and the offering of very little food to Rahtea by his stepmother can be seen as a sign of unhealthy relationships between the two. In the story of Fahrahtea, a poor orphan used to work in the jungle watching over some rice. One day, a dragon had given Fahrahtea a magic stone and later on got married and the wedding celebration was observed with a great feast. This has depicted how food was placed as the center of any big event such as wedding, etc. In the story of Sazaltepa & Bakvawmtepu, we have seen the incident where Bakvawmtepu went to work in his jhum, meanwhile Sazaltepa had consumed fowl, pork and the anticipation of having a hearty meal. The consumption of such meat as well as the anticipation of having a hearty meal exhibited the existence of food at the core of people's hearts.

In the tales of Phawthira & Hrangchala, we have seen the priest demonstrating a sacrificial ritual by sacrificing rooster, dog, pig to cure sickness of Kungawrhi. However, nothing worked out of it. A man called Sairama cured her by using his magic box. Kungawrhi thus married him for curing her. Later, they found out that Sairama was nothing but a wicked magician, the mother of Kungawrhi tried

her best to rescue her daughter at any cost. In an attempt to rescue her, Kungawrhi's mother killed her only pig and made a big feast for all the young men of the village. She also prepared a special dish which was meant for the one and only hero who could rescue her daughter. This can be used as an illustration of how food was used as a medium of pleasing and requesting other people in the hope of building a strong bond so as to obtain their needs and wants.

In the story of an ugly man called Kawrdumbela, we have seen the occurrence of catching an enchanted fish using fishing net. This reflected the consumption of fish in earlier days. In the tales of Lalruanga and Keichala, there has been the mentioning of Zawngtah, killing of deer by Lalruanga's father and the used of lunch packets. All these showed the presence of Zawngtah and deer meat in the earlier days which implied that they had eaten such food. Also, the habit of having lunch even when they are away from home for work by the ancestors of Mizo can be seen from this story.

Lalruanga went to Keichala's village, when Lalruanga met the parents of Keichala, Keichala's parents were pleased and decided to adopt Lalruanga as one of his sons. The father said to Keichala, "When you offer drink of food, and he happens to take little, you must know that it is because of his modesty and you should serve him plenty. Give him also the best presents before he returns home." This statement given by the father clearly depicted how the acceptance of little amount of food/drink even when they are served plenty was seen as a sign of modesty.

At the end of the tale, Lalruanga refused to take food when he gave up hope. This also showed how eating was considered as a sign of radiating hope and strength in life. In the story of Vaichaka, the strong man, we have seen a situation where people get hungry and make a meal out of fish from the river nearby. The people cooked fish and had eaten it in comfort and with great content. Therefore, food was seen as a comfort food and not just for filling up hunger.

In the story of two brothers who were orphans called Liandova and Tuaisiala, we have seen the incident where the mother left her children for another man. As the mother was about to leave, the elder one pleaded with her saying, "Dear Mother,

please do not go away. Without you, I shall not be able to look after my younger brother and we may die of hunger.” This has shown that feeding one’s mouth was the ultimate necessity for one’s living. In proceeding, the elder brother asked the younger one to follow him in search of food which further indicated the significance of food in everyday living.

In the following story, we have seen how much the elder brother cared for her younger one. Whenever Liandova could earn a penny or a meal, he always shared it with his brother and they hardly had a full meal. There was one time when Liandova and his brother Tuaisiala shouted at the flying crow carrying a snake, at their shouts, the crow dropped the snake. Thereafter, Liandova and his brother found cooked food waiting for them every day during meal time. They later found out that it was an old witch who had prepared food for them as a token of her gratitude for saving her child, i.e., the snake dropped by the crow. This incident thus portrayed how food was used as a token of showing gratitude and appreciation. One day, the entire village went on a group hunt. The younger one, Tuaisiala spotted a python and he told the elder Liandova. When they both informed the group about what they saw, they killed the python with great joy. However, Liandova and his brother were given the worst share, the entrails. This distribution of meat has shown that there was inequality among the community which was seen in their sharing of meat portions.

Thailungi, a little in a village was sold by her mother to a man from the Eastern Hills. Thailungi had a little brother who set off to look for her long sister and he met an old man who was making a mortar for grinding rice. This indicated the use of mortar for grinding rice in earlier days. Long time ago, there lived a young girl named Nuchhimi whose parents killed a pig and as was the custom it was decided that they should send the thigh of the pig they had killed to Nuchhimi’s aunt. This has depicted the custom of the Mizo in earlier days when they kill pigs. In the following story, the parents decided to send Nuchhimi to her aunt to deliver the meat.

In the story of Chhawnlaihawiihi, when she was captured by Bakvawmtepu, the brothers of Chhawnlaihawiihi went to search for her. The youngest of the brothers suddenly turned into a dove and met the sister who was in the house while Bakvawmtepu was away from home. The dove then turned into a baby. And when Bakvawmtepu returned from work, Chhawnlaihawiihi suggested

him to adopt the baby and he agreed. He loved the child and gave him eggs daily. This offering of eggs daily acted as the sign of showing affection and love.

In the tale of Maurangi, we have seen her parents going to another village in search of grain. Mauruangi’s father married another woman, and she received ill treatment by getting food fit for pig only. Food was thus used as a means of exploitation. Mauruangi went to a river where her mother had drowned. There, she was fed by her mother every day. Her mother made crab, fish and prepared nice dishes for her daughter. However, her mother was killed by the villagers. Mauruangi then suffered from mal-nutrition. Her mother surprised her by feeding her through a beautiful Phunchawng plant wherein the daughter enjoyed its nectar. This account provided the love and care given by the mother to her daughter by nurturing her well-being through food. In Mauruangi’s jhum, all kinds of vegetables ranging from cucumber, watermelon, maize, etc. had grown abundantly. Mauruangi offered her crops to strangers who passed through her jhum. This has shown how food can be used as a medium for showing hospitality to other people.

Mauruangi’s step-mother tried to kill her and she made an attempt to do so, Mauruangi got hurt and she ran away. Mauruangi was being healed by Sazaltepa using medicinal herbs. When Mauruangi’s husband, Vailalpa sent a group of his men to bring her back, they had paid Sazaltepa two branches of banana in exchange for Mauruangi. Therefore, this showed that food was used as a medium of exchange in earlier days. It was also seen that the servants of Vailalpa made ‘Sathau & Erfu’ in the tales of Mauruangi. Therefore, ‘Sathau & Erfu’ can be count in as traditional Mizo Food.

Rimenhawii who was famous for her beauty, has recited in a song which goes like, ‘I live on pure water, I live on pure vegetables.’ This has shown that she was a woman who lives on pure vegetables which can be referred to as ‘vegan’. Orange was also mentioned in the tales of Rimenhawii which she finds it difficult to resist.

In the story of Kelchawngi we have seen the case where her mother instructed her to cook pumpkin for dinner. Thus, pumpkin was also seen in earlier Mizo culture. The sympathetic story of Ngaiteii who lived in a village with her grandmother used to dig yams in their jhum. We have thus often seen the digging of yam for consumption in earlier days which must have been their common dish.

In the tale of Chawngchilhi, her parents had given equal food to both Chawngchilhi and her younger sister. Despite this, Chawngchilhi had become thinner day by day and they found out that she had an affair with a snake. The father then killed the snake and they cut the snake into pieces and they cooked it and ate it. This showed that snake was eaten in earlier days. Also, the head was given to a widow who marked that widows were marginalized in terms of a sharing of meat as well. Sichangneii, a beautiful fairy married a farmer and they both had five wonderful sons. One day, all the five sons went to the river to catch prawns. They then divided the catch into equal shares. This has shown the practice of earlier Mizos in terms of sharing food among siblings and near ones.

In the story of a beautiful maiden called Vanchungnula, we have seen how cooking, preparation of food and feeding males is done by woman. It can be inferred that domestic roles are played by women. In the story of Chawngvungi and Sawngkhara, we have witnessed a love story which was one-sided. The boy was in love with Chawngvungi and he could not win her heart. He thus stopped eating as he suffered from love-sickness. His parents and friends started worrying about his health. This indicated that there was no substitution for food when one gets ill and cannot consume food in earlier days. Food was the primary means of acquiring strength both physically and mentally.

In the story of two lovers called Tlingi and Ngama, we have seen an occasion where both the lovers would hunt and fish together. This signifies a strong bond between two lovers. In the story of Zawlpala and Tualvungi we have seen that Zawlpala was offered different kinds of foodstuff by Phuntiha as a good host. This showed that offering of food to guests was considered as a way of placing oneself as a good host. In the story of Chawngfianga and Lianchhiari, Lianchhiari's father gave a sacrificial feast, sekhuang which could be given only by the rich men of the village. On the eve of sekhuang, called as thingfar zan, all the young men and maidens would gather for drinks at the host's house.

IDENTIFICATION OF TRADITIONAL MIZO FOOD ITEMS BASED ON THE ANALYSIS OF FOLKTALES

Based on the analysis of the above-mentioned Mizo folktales, we can identify several traditional Mizo food items that were consumed by the people in the past. These include:

1. Kawlbahra (sweet potato): Chhura and his brother went to the jungle to search for this root vegetable, which they then cleaned in the stream. Digging yam for consumption was a common practice in earlier days, as seen in the sympathetic story of Ngaiteii who lived in a village with her grandmother.
2. Ai-um (fermented crab): This dish was offered to Chhura in a village he visited and he found it delicious. He inquired about the preparation process in the hope that his wife would cook it for him.
3. Rice: Chhura grew rice in his large field and it was mentioned in several tales. The use of mortar for grinding rice was indicated in the story of Thailungi, which suggests that rice was a staple food in earlier days.
4. Vegetables: Along with rice, Chhura also grew other vegetables in his field. In the jhum of Maurangi, all kinds of vegetables ranging from cucumber, watermelon, maize, etc. had grown abundantly. Rimenhawii was a vegan and lived on pure vegetables.
5. Fruits: Chengkek (Garcinia) fruit was mentioned in the tales of Chhura and was found on a tree in the jungle. Orange was mentioned in the tales of Rimenhawii, which suggests that fruits were a part of their diet.
6. Seafood: Chhura went fishing and set out to catch crabs. In the story of Kawrdumbela, an enchanted fish is caught using a fishing net. This suggests that fish was a common food item in earlier days. The tale of Kawrdumbela highlights the consumption of fish, as the enchanted fish was caught using a fishing net. In the tale of Vaichaka, we see how people cooked and ate fish from the river as a comfort food. In the story of Chemtatrawta, we have seen the presentation of food eaten by the villagers namely, lobster. The

story of Sichangneii and her husband showed that catching and sharing prawns was a common practice among siblings and near ones. In the tale of Maurangi, her mother fed her crab and fish every day, which suggests that seafood was a part of their diet.

7. Chingal (Lye) – In the tales of Lengkawia we have seen the application of chingal (lye) on the face of Phungpuinu.

8. Sa-um – We have also seen the mentioning of saum in the tales of Lengkawia.

9. Kha-um (Lard seed)

10. Rooster, dog, and pig: In the tale of Phawthira & Hrangchala, we see the priest sacrificing these animals as part of a ritual to cure sickness. These animals were used in sacrificial rituals to cure sickness. Pig is also used for celebrations and feasts. We have also seen the consumption of pork in various folktales. In the story of Nuchhimi, it was customary to send the thigh of a pig they had killed to the aunt. The servants of Vailalpa made 'Sathau & Erfu' in the tales of Mauruangi, which can be considered as traditional Mizo food.

11. Zawngtah (stink bean): In the tale of Lalruanga and Keichala, we see the presence of

12. Zawngtah in their diet.

13. Deer meat: In the tale of Lalruanga and Keichala, we see the killing of a deer by Lalruanga's father and the use of lunch packets, indicating that deer meat was consumed in earlier times.

14. Eggs : Bakvawmtepu gave eggs to the baby he adopted, which acted as a sign of showing affection and love.

15. Pumpkin: Pumpkin was a common food item in earlier Mizo culture, as seen in the story of Kelchawngi where her mother instructed her to cook pumpkin for dinner.

16. Snake: The story of Chawngchilhi showed that snake was eaten in earlier days. Overall, these folktales provide insights into the traditional Mizo diet indicating that food was a significant aspect of the traditional Mizo culture. The consumption of meat, fish, and portable meals provide a glimpse into the traditional Mizo food.

MIZO TRADITIONAL FOOD IN RELATION TO SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The tales of Chhura provide insights into the relationship between food and socio-ecological context in earlier Mizo society. The Mizos were heavily dependent on forests for their livelihoods, as they practiced jhum cultivation. This is reflected in the fact that Chhura and his brother were jhum farmers and their entire lives were dependent on forests.

Cooking was also held in great importance in earlier days, as indicated by Chhura and his family's large earthenware vessel used for cooking purposes. Mizos were not illogical and had knowledge of selecting food that was edible and aware of cleanliness in terms of fooding, as seen in Chhura's selection of ripened Kawlbahra and cleansing it in the stream.

Cooking was primarily considered as a woman's work, as seen in Chhura's hope of knowing the preparation process of Ai-um so that his wife could prepare it for him. However, men also indulged in cooking when their counterparts went out for jhuming, indicating that domestic roles played by both genders depended on the availability of both partners.

Food also served as a medium of restoring relations, as seen in the villagers' promise to throw a grand feast in Chhura's honor to make up for the loss of the pretty fly which he sells in the village.

The variety of food items eaten by the Mizos is reflected in Chhura's growing of rice and other vegetables in his large field, as well as his fishing and catching of crabs. The mention of Chengkek fruit in the tales of Chhura also signifies the presence of indigenous fruits in earlier Mizo society. Overall, the tales of Chhura provide a glimpse into the socio-ecological context of food in earlier Mizo society.

From the tales analysed above, it is clear that food was not only a source of sustenance but was also used to signify cultural events, express affection and even as a means of punishment. In the tale of Mr. Lengkawia and Phungpuinu, chingal and sa-um were used as traditional food items. These food items were not only used for

consumption but also had cultural and symbolic significance. Similarly, in the story of Hualtungamtawna, pig was used as a means of celebration. This indicates that the Mizos used food as a way to mark important occasions and events.

In the tale of Fahrahta, food was placed at the center of any big event such as a wedding. This shows that food was not just a physical need but also an integral part of the social and cultural fabric of the Mizo society. The story of Rahta and his stepmother reveals that food was also used as a means of expressing affection or lack thereof. This shows that food was not just a commodity but also had emotional significance.

In the story of Sazaltepa and Bakvawmtepu, the consumption of fowl and pork, as well as the anticipation of a hearty meal, highlights the importance of food in the lives of the Mizos. This suggests that food was not just a basic necessity but also held cultural and emotional significance in their lives. Food played a multifaceted role in their lives and was not just a means of sustenance but also a way to mark cultural events, express emotions, and maintain social relationships.

The consumption of a wide variety of food items like wild fowl, lobster, figs, pork, and different types of meat like rooster, dog, pig, deer, and fish, reflects the diversity of food habits in the earlier Mizo society. This indicates that the Mizos had a rich and varied diet, and their food habits were highly influenced by their natural surroundings.

Food was also used as a means of social interaction and building relationships. The feast organized by Kungawrhi's mother for the young men of the village, using her only pig, in an attempt to build a strong bond with them, is a clear example of this. The use of food to request help or favors from others was also prevalent in earlier Mizo society.

Food also played a vital role in rituals and celebrations. The sacrificial rituals performed by the priest to cure sickness, the grand feast organized for the wedding celebration of Fahrahta, and the use of lunch packets by Lalruanga's father, all highlight the importance of food in religious and celebratory events.

The sacrificial ritual in the tale of Phawthira & Hrangchala reflects the importance of traditional

beliefs and practices in the society. It also shows how food was used to seek the help of others, as Kungawrhi's mother used a feast as a means to seek help in rescuing her daughter.

The story of Lalruanga and Keichala highlights the social significance of food, where accepting little food as a sign of modesty was appreciated, and offering plenty of food was a way to show hospitality and respect. Lalruanga's refusal to take food when he gave up hope reflects how food was considered as a source of hope and strength.

The story of Vaichaka shows how food provided comfort and contentment to the people, and how they could rely on it during difficult times. In the story of Liandova and Tuaisiala, food was a matter of survival, and the brothers had to struggle to find enough food to survive. The incident where they received cooked food as a token of gratitude shows how food was used to express appreciation and gratitude.

We can see that Mizos had a variety of food options available to them, including vegetables like pumpkin and yam, and animals like snakes and prawns. Hunting and fishing were also common practices, and they were often done in pairs, indicating the importance of teamwork and partnerships.

Women were primarily responsible for cooking and preparing food, which suggests that gender roles were quite defined in earlier Mizo society. However, we can also see examples of men and women coming together to share food and celebrate special occasions, such as sekhuang. Sharing food was a common practice, whether it was among siblings, friends, or guests. This highlights the importance of hospitality and generosity in Mizo culture. In some instances, the act of sharing food was used to demonstrate one's status or wealth. The story of Chawngvungi and Sawngkhara, for example, illustrates that there was no substitute for food when one fell ill. This suggests that food was not just a source of sustenance but also a source of strength and resilience.

The following are some of the relationships between food and the socio-ecological context of earlier Mizo society, as depicted in the tales:

1. Food and Custom: The tale of Nuchhimi shows that killing pigs was a custom in the Mizo society

in earlier days. When the parents killed a pig, it was customary to send a portion of the meat to the relatives. This indicates that food was an important part of the culture and customs of the Mizo society.

2. Food and Exploitation: In the tale of Maurangi, food was used as a means of exploitation. After her father married another woman, Maurangi received ill-treatment and was given food fit for pigs only. This shows that food was used as a tool to exert power and control over others.

3. Food and Love: The tale of Chhawnlaihawii shows that offering eggs daily was a sign of affection and love. Bakvawmtepu loved the child he adopted and gave him eggs daily. This shows that food was used as a means of expressing love and care.

4. Food and Hospitality: In Mauruangi's tale, she offered her crops to strangers passing through her jhum as a sign of hospitality. This indicates that food was used as a means of welcoming and showing hospitality to others.

5. Food and Exchange: In Maurangi's tale, Szaltepa was paid two branches of banana in exchange for healing Maurangi. This shows that food was used as a medium of exchange in the earlier Mizo society.

6. Food and Health: Rimenhawii's song indicates that she lived on pure vegetables and water, which suggests that she was a vegan. This shows that food was not only a means of survival but was also considered to be essential for maintaining good health.

Overall, Mizo traditional food provides a glimpse into the rich and varied culture of the Mizos.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of Mizo folktales provides us with valuable insights into the traditional Mizo diet. The stories reveal that food played a significant role in the culture and daily life of the Mizo people. From rice, vegetables, and fruits to seafood, meat, and portable meals, the tales offer a glimpse into the diverse range of food items that were consumed in earlier times. This knowledge not only enriches our understanding of Mizo culture and history but also highlights the importance of preserving and celebrating traditional cuisine in our increasingly

globalized world. By recognizing the cultural significance of food, we can ensure that the unique culinary traditions of different communities continue to thrive and evolve.

The folktales emphasize the deep connection between Mizo traditional food and the local ecosystem including various aspects of traditional Mizo food and their association with the local ecosystem. It highlights how the Mizo people depended on forests for their livelihood and the selection of food that is edible was done by considering its ripeness. The analyzed stories reveal the cultural practices and beliefs of the Mizo community in earlier times, particularly regarding food and family. Fishing and hunting for food were common practices, and the consumption of fish and meat was considered a comfort food. The significance of food in everyday living was also evident, as it was necessary for survival and a sign of hope and strength in life. The sharing of food was seen as a token of gratitude and appreciation, while the unequal distribution of meat portions showed the presence of inequality among the community. The use of mortar for grinding rice and the custom of sending meat to relatives also depicted the cultural practices of the Mizo in earlier days. Overall, these stories provide insights into the customs and values of the Mizo people and their way of life in earlier times.

In conclusion, the tales of earlier Mizo society show how food was an integral part of their socio-ecological context and how food was intertwined with the socio-ecological context of earlier Mizo society. Food was not just a means of sustenance but it was also an essential part of the culture, customs, and traditions of the Mizo people. Food was also used for social interaction, building relationships, religious and celebratory events. The diversity of food habits reflects the influence of their natural surroundings, and their dependence on it for survival.

Thus, the study of folktales and indigeneity provide a deeper understanding of the cultural significance and ecological context of traditional food practices, and inform efforts to promote sustainable food systems and preserve cultural diversity.

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