



UGC-Aligned | HEI-Approved Peer Reviewed Refereed Journal (Under New UGC Guidelines)

DOI: doiglobal.org/doilink/10.2025/69a86d9561086

TRADITIONAL FOOD CULTURE OF MANIPUR: THE NGARI (FERMENTED FISH)

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ABSTRACT

The study of historical factors that shape our food habit is a relatively recent area of enquiry. This method study history by analysing how food expresses the character of a period, location, society and culture. Fermented fish occupies a significant place in food traditions across many societies, functioning not only as a nutritional resource but also as a marker of cultural identity. It also plays an important role in the socio-cultural life of the people as it is found to be associated with many occasions like merry making, rituals ceremonies, festivals, marriages and even death ceremonies. The techniques of fermentation are generally transmitted orally from generation to generation reflecting the adaptation to the surrounding ecology demonstrating indigenous knowledge system. Ngari the fermented fish product of the Meiteis of Manipur forms an important component of daily cuisine. Besides, it also plays an important part in some of the rites and rituals of the Meiteis. The paper is a humble attempt to highlight that ngari should not be understood merely as a dietary component but as an important component in the cultural life of the Meiteis.

KEYWORDS: Culture, Tradition, Ecology, Ngari.

INTRODUCTION

The use of fermented fish as a dish in the food habits of various communities goes all the way back to ancient times in many societies of the world. Fermented fish products are popular in East, Southeast and South Asia, and also in other parts of the world like the Middle East, Africa and the Scandinavian countries.ⁱ In India, especially in the North eastern region, various types of fermented fish products like shidal, lonailish, ngari, hentak, tungtap, numsing etc. forms an important part of their food. It also plays an important role in the socio-cultural life of the people as it is found to be associated with many occasions like merry making, rituals ceremonies, festivals, marriages and even death ceremonies.ⁱⁱ In certain rite, ritual, ceremonies and seasonal festivals of the Bodo (group of people residing in Assam, India), the preserved food items were made compulsory.ⁱⁱⁱ Ngari is a traditional

fermented fish made from various small freshwater fish species and is a commonly used ingredient in various dishes prepared by every household of the Meiteis. With this background, the paper tries to examine that ngari functions as an important role in the food culture, identity and history of the Meiteis

MATERIALS AND METHODS:

An inter-disciplinary method has been adopted as a methodology for the present article. Indigenous literary sources like the Puyas, Cheitharol Kumpapa and relevant literature on fermentation techniques, secondary sources written by different scholars who work on the history of Manipur along with other directly or indirectly related works of various scholars belonging to other discipline with the theme has been adopted. Research tools like observation, interview with knowledgeable person, participation, field work is conducted to collect related information. The collected data has been analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively wherever necessary.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

One of the most significant aspects of our daily life is food. Food is not only a means of sustenance but also a marker of cultural identity, social relations and ritual life. It has outlived empires, religion, kings and the method of food preparation, the specific types of food being eaten serve as a sense of connection and belonging to a specific cultural group or identity. As an academic topic, the study of food is like peeling an onion with every layer that is peeled a new meanings and underlying issues emerges.^{iv} Historian look at food to uncover the significant aspect of culture revealing the ecological, social and economic structures of a society. The consumption of a particular kind of food function as a cultural identity regarding how we perceive ourselves and others.^v The idea of identity is an intricate and multidimensional concept shaped by history, individual experiences and cultural norms. Cultural identity according to the Cambridge dictionary refers to “the fact of belonging to, or feeling that you belong to, a particular culture.”^{vi} It is maintained and constructed through the process of shared knowledges such as language, heritage, customs, aesthetics, traditions and norms.^{vii}

The dietary culture of a community is a result of traditional knowledge influenced by a wide of factors such as ecology, religious beliefs and history. The consumption of a particular kind of food function as a cultural identity regarding how we perceive ourselves and others.^{viii} The food culture of many indigenous people comprises of various fermented and non-fermented items to meet the nutritional requirements. Fermented foods and beverages are defined as “foods or beverages produced through controlled microbial growth with conversion of food components through enzymatic action”^{ix} Food preservation methods may have developed by our ancestors to protect themselves from hunger or as safeguard against the unpredictability of nature.^x Presently, the need for preserving food may not be relevant but the preserved food items are still retained because of its unique and acquired taste.^{xi}

Taste as a concept according to Mouritsen, is a biological and sensory phenomenon based on our perceptions and the ability of our taste buds and our brain to identify and combine molecules and nerve impulses in the five basic tastes: sweet, umami, salty, sour, and bitter.^{xii} Charles Spencer however argues that taste is not limited to physical sensation it involves feelings such as pleasure and disgust shaped by the mind rather than the mouth.^{xiii} According to Pierre Bourdieu taste is habitus and is connected to identity, social class and cultural belonging shaped by history, education and cultural background.^{xiv} Taste, when examined through physiological, psychological and sociological perspectives, ultimately reveals itself as a profoundly cultural phenomenon. This

concept aligns closely with the famous statement of Brillat Savarin in *The Physiology of Taste* “Tell me what you eat and I will tell you who you are,” which explores how food choices reveal identity and shapes our culture.^{xv} Thus, food choices and the tastes of a certain type of food especially fermented food presently can reveal the identity and ethnicity. In the case of the Meiteis, ngari is an indispensable food item which is consumed almost on a regular basis as a culinary item and a symbol of heritage, continuity and collective identity.

The history of ngari can be traced to the pre- Vaishnava period. It is previously known as utong (hollow bamboo) ngari since it has been traditionally stored in hollow bamboo stick. Fish and its preservation techniques plays an important role in shaping the history of the Meiteis. Both men and women took an active part in catching, preservation and marketing the fishes but the preservation of fish and marketing the preserved fish products is generally carried out by the women. In the puya (an ancient text of the Meiteis) Panthoibi Khonggul, Panthoibiis frequently referred as going to rivers, lakes and pond to catch fish (lemlei nga) using inn (fishnet) and the technique of catching fish is called ‘inn chingba’ which clearly indicated that Meiteis women in particular are associated with fishing and related activities.^{xvi} British accounts also recorded the technique of fishing, T.C. Hudson, in his book, ‘The Meitheis’ mentioned that fishing is a source of employment for both men and women and special care is taken to prevent monopolisation of fishing rights by reserving a number of jheels and pats (lakes) which are open to the public at certain times of the year. “Dried fish is an important diet of the Meiteis and the women dried fish vendors are allotted a separate place in the Nupi Keithel an exclusively women’s market”.^{xvii} The history of Manipur is constantly associated in conflicts, trade, alliances and marriages with the Burmese and in a Shan account of the Shan Kingdom of Pong, Samlong, a brother of the Pong King of Shan dynasty found the Meiteis masticating bits of dried fish as an universal habit amongst them.^{xviii} Fishes also played an important role in the socio-cultural life of the Meiteis which is supported from the fact that a universal shout of ‘Nga-Chak’ (Fish and Rice) on the occurrence of an earthquake as a prayer so that the supply of fish and rice be not diminished.^{xix}

Traditional food culture of the Meiteis shows a similarity with other communities and in this regard, T.C. Hodson as opined that the, “The food and drinks of the Meiteis, were once like the ‘wild Nagas’ of the hill”. He further opined that some 300 years ago, the Meiteis had a religion and set of habits customs and manners and some of which is still to be found in the non-Christian Naga villages.^{xx} In the 18th century, historical circumstances developed which led to the introduction of Vaishnavism in Manipur^{xxi} beginning with the initiation of King Charairongba and culminating in the reforms of King Garibniwaz and Bhagyachandra. These course in the history of the Meiteis led to a cultural change in the life of the Meiteis and a new form of food culture was introduced along with a set of food taboos.^{xxii} Thus, from the 18th century onwards not only the spiritual but also the dietary and culinary practices of the Meiteis was redefined. Food became a powerful tool of religious and social regulation with the imposition of vegetarianism, codification of purity and pollution in culinary spaces.

A unique food culture of the Meiteis developed at the end of the 18th century where meat especially beef is forbidden but eating of fish is allowed except during certain rites and rituals where vegetarian foods are partaken.^{xxiii} These new food cultures is characterised by the adoption of techniques belonging to both South Asia and South East Asia^{xxiv} which suited their taste and preferences. However, this transformation did not entirely eliminate the use of ngari in the Meiteis food culture. While in certain rites and rituals of the converted Meiteis into the Vaishnavite tradition emphasize on vegetarianism in accordance with its norms, however outside these ritualistic observance ngari is continued to be widely used in everyday cooking of dishes like eromba and kangsoi. This demonstrate that ngari continued to be consumed, especially among common households,

symbolizing an undercurrent of indigenous persistence beneath the new religious reforms as a symbol of perseverance and cultural continuity. Such continuity reveals that religious reform may reshaped but did not wholly replace the earlier food practices, allowing the acquired taste systems and cultural memory to endure alongside new religious identities.

TRADITIONAL ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

Each community evolved a distinct preservation technique which is best suited to their climate, food supplies, need and culture.^{xxv} The Meitei also produce various types of region-specific fermented foods having their own distinct techniques of preservation and amongst the various fermented food items the techniques of preparing ngari is also an act of traditional ecological knowledge involving a sequence of methods which is mostly retained till the present times. Traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), or local ecological knowledge (LEK), as it is sometimes known refers to a body of knowledge, practices, and ideas transmitted or regenerated orally and non-verbally in various forms from generation to generation.^{xxvi} It involves practical knowledge of diverse habitats and local livelihoods, such as fishing, collecting, protecting certain forest patches for animals and plants, use of fire for planting, gardening, selecting, weather forecasting, use of medicinal plants, and moving through the forest and waters.^{xxvii} Traditionally, ngari is produced at the household level and the techniques are passed on in individual kitchen amongst women illustrating an inter-generational transmission of traditional knowledge.

The method of preparing ngari by the Meiteis begins with the choice of freshwater fish species locally called phabou ngaof different sizes mostly collected during the months from October to January. These durations is specially favourable because this period marks the end of the monsoon and the onset of the dry/winter season and during this period the fishes are easier to catch specially in shallow water bodies as the water levels in lakes and wetlands of Manipur decreases significantly, causing the fishes to concentrate in reduced areas.^{xxviii} Phabou nga of different sizes mostly collected during the months from October to January were sundried to reduced it into half decay or rotten state and mixed together to be stored in utong (hollow bamboo stick) which were replaced nowadays by dried gunny bags. Before the process of fermentation, the unwanted living and non-living materials like other undesired fishes, snails, weeds, fibres, etc. are taken off and segregated. The half decay or rotten phabou nga were washed thoroughly with water in porous bamboo baskets, locally called “polang” and then drained overnight and sun-dried.

After having dried up the phabou nga, was spread on phoura (mat made of bamboo) and this was covered with another phoura. The use of bamboo baskets, locally called “polang” for washing and phoura(mat made of bamboo) for sun-drying and finally storing them in traditional hollow bamboo sticks is a fine example that the Meiteis had the knowledge of the surrounding ecology where bamboo is abundantly available in the state of Manipur. After this process it was then stamped and pounded with a typical long handled pounding hammer locally called (Droomboos) to crush or soften the head and bones for quicker and better fermentation. The crushed and softened dried fish was filled tightly in the Utong without any air spaces by pressing hard using wooden pestle/mallet, locally called “Shuk.” The technique of storing in hollow bamboo has been replaced by a pot locally called “Ngari-chafu.

Ngari-chafu are thick earthen pot tightly netted with thick strong iron wires on outer wall for strengthening the pots. Mustard oil was applied in the inner walls of the pot repeatedly to avoid lower wall absorption during fermentation. New pots required 8-10 times oil coating with an interval of 1 to 2 weeks, while a

single coating was sufficient for old pots, for quality fermentation.^{xxix} Around 45-50 kg per pot was packed tightly and sealed airtight with polythene sheet, fish scales, oil slurry and smeared with mud/sand and cow dung slurry.^{xxx} It was then stored by stacking in proper order in the dark at room temperature for fermentation to occur naturally.^{xxxi} The fermentation was completed in 3 to 6 months and matured in 12 months, producing a characteristic aroma.^{xxxii} The fermented fish were ready to eat from the third month onwards, however the taste was best from the 12th month and were stored in utong/earthen pots to be used in the daily cuisines of the Meiteis.^{xxxiii}

CHALLENGES AND CONTINUITY

Ngari is an essential ingredient in some of the traditional food of the Meiteis like eromba, kangsoi, singju. It is also consumed as a side dish along with rice in the form of morokmetpa. It has become an essential food item of the Meiteis and is consumed almost on a daily basis^{xxxiv} either as an ingredient in dishes or as a condiment. The addition of ngari as an ingredient in these dishes makes it flavour able which complemented with the rice meals making it an inseparable item from the culinary identity of the Meiteis. It is also a cheap source of protein, amino acids and energy.^{xxxv}

Ngari as a preservative food of the Meiteis is not limited to culinary tradition but also play a significant role in the cultural and economic life of the Meiteis. During the pre-vaishnava period, in-order to keep the new born baby safe from various ailments a garland made from seven ngari i.e. fermented fish, along with a mixture in the form of singju prepared from the offerings of uncooked rice, heibi mana (meddler leaves), cut pieces of yendem (alocacia), banana stem, dry fish, chilly and fermented fish are offered to the deity 'loklaoleima' in the morning.^{xxxvi} This traditional practice of offering ngari and singju is still practised in the morning as a tradition even today. Ngari is offered to evil spirits along with raw vegetables, salt and chilli during the lunar month of lamta (March-April) to ward off their evil eyes. The older women of the Meiteis community carry out this customary ceremony, known as saroi khangba.^{xxxvii}

Ngari also plays an important role in the economic life of the Meiteis. Both dry fish and ngari is an inseparable culinary item required almost every day in the kitchen of a Meitei. Therefore, there is a huge demand of both ngari and dry fish throughout the year and is able to provide livelihood to many families of the Meiteis who are engage in this trade. It is also widely available for sale in all of Manipur's major markets, including grocery shops and departmental stores. Ngari is typically sold unpackaged from the producing earthen pots; however, in recent years, numerous small-scale enterprises have started to produce it in appealing commercial packaging, which makes it more convenient and safer for customers. It serves as a means of earnings for farmers, artists, and retailers and a link that connects the different communities of Manipur.

Fermented fish products like ngari, despite their socio-cultural and economic importance, face several challenges relating to safety, standardization, environmental sustainability, commercialization, and cultural continuity. Lack of standardised production protocols can cause serious health implications.^{xxxviii} Food adulteration, the addition of chemicals and pesticides to accelerate fermentation is another cause of health concern.^{xxxix} The process of making ngari would results in microbial contamination if the fish is not sun-dried hygienically, resulting in contamination by dust, bacteria, or insects from the environment. Again, if the gunny bags are not fully sealed, fishes kept in them may become contaminated with dust, dirt, or other materials from

the storage environment or in certain cases loose threads from the gunny bags may mix with the fishes, there could be a physical contamination risk. There is a chance that minerals like clay particles from some unglazed or untreated earthen pots could contaminate the fishes.^{xi} Although, there haven't been any cases of sickness or toxicity associated after consuming ngari, contamination can be removed by observing standard regulation relating to food safety as prescribed by the FSSAI (Food Safety and Standards Authority of India). Therefore, in order to mitigate the challenges, certain steps need to be taken up which requires a combination of scientific research, government or policy support and documentation of the indigenous techniques of fermenting fish. Apart from this, modernity along with increasing globalisation is also influencing the food cultures of the Meiteis since they are exposed to a wide range of global cuisines bringing about an alteration in the food consumption pattern. However, in domestic cooking and some of the traditional festival like ningol chakkouba, cheiraoba, ngari is often incorporated reinforcing social bonds and continuity. The traditional technique/process of preserving ngari is still continuing which embody the transmission of indigenous knowledge across generation, even though there are some changes in the method of its preservation due to modernity and commercialisation.

CONCLUSION

Ngari is not merely a fermented fish added to various dishes or as a side dish to be eaten along with rice but has become a culinary identity of the Meiteis. It has endured through centuries and is also an indispensable item in some of the rites and rituals of the Meiteis. Ngari has traverses through faith and history because of its taste as a resilience and adaptation shaping the culinary cultures of the Meitei. It has become a distinct marker associating with the identity of a Meitei cutting across social classification. It forms an integral component of the daily cuisines of the Meiteis. The techniques of fermentation reflected the transmission of traditional ecological knowledge orally through generation reinforcing cultural heritage and identity. On the other hand, it also functions as a regional identity with the Meiteis diaspora which often carry ngari along with them to sustain the taste of it and also remind them of their hearth and home. Thus, ngari becomes a cultural symbol that crosses the territory of Manipur. Its enduring presence is a testimony of how food practices reinforce cultural continuity by linking the present with the past.

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