



The Taste of Salt: Identity, Memory and Food Culture of the Mizo Tribe

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Abstract

The Mizo people are believed to have come from northern Yunnan Province in China to Hukaung Valley in Myanmar around 4th century A.D. and made their entry into the hilly regions of Northeast India, later known as Mizoram, in the late 17th century A.D. This paper attempts to study the nomadic life of the Mizo people that sets them apart from other race in relation to their food and their memory functions. As far as Mizo history books go, Mizo people hardly stayed in a fixed location for long until they entered the present Mizoram; the most likely reasons being feuds and battles. This unsettling life required them to live an extraordinarily simple life to save time since they had to move out from one place to another to escape or strategize at short intervals, which in turn demanded them to prepare their food as simple, easy and quick as possible. There are no complex food cooking processes as such for this tribal people, especially with the local cuisines, even to this day. The term food is generally associated by the Mizo people with rice and whiteness; most of the vegetables or meat were eaten boiled; and half a century back edible-oil was really scarce for its main source was pig fat, salt still rarer and a delicacy. The Mizos say *Chibai* at greeting and farewell while shaking hands and this particular Mizo word literally translates ‘to cook with salt’ comparing the value of the salt and the gesture to signify treasured bonds between themselves. This study expounds how the simple ways of life of the Mizos, amidst extreme hardships, parallels their memory functions to an extent using their food tradition as a trajectory.

Keywords: Mizo, Food, Identity, Culture, Memory.

Introduction

In a very narrow sense, the Mizos are dwellers of Mizoram, one of the Northeast States of India. They are identified as having Mongolian ancestry and, linguistically, belonging to the Assam-Burma branch of the Tibeto-Burman family (Lorrain, 1983, p. 5). The pre-Christian Mizo religious practices show that the Mizos were not much influenced by the teaching of Buddha or even Confucius; nonetheless, they appeared to have had a great amount of contact with more civilised races through earlier generations for they professed “those traits of nobility, bravery, and hospitability common to the most cultured perceptions of human relationship.” (McCall, 1949, pp. 34-35) Earlier Mizo authors never recorded much about their ancestors’ history in the Burmese plains but more often started their discussions from their presence in the hilly regions, this being the reason for the association of the word Mizo with people of the hill.

Owing to the inability of the mountain slopes to retain soil fertility, the Mizos had to resort to shifting cultivation in order to avail the fertility of the soil to the fullest. This was one of the important factors that led to their movement from hilltop to hilltop every four to five

years. (Zawla, 1964, p.147) Their movement in quick successions disabled them to produce a well-cultured food traditions of their own. To add to this, Mizoram is located in such a region that it was quite far from all directions to obtain salt in the earlier ages which more than anything increased blandness to the food. Throughout the preparation of this paper, I have engaged in thorough conversations with my mother Rohumi and my father B. Lalhmingliana who have not only tasted the harshness and joy of rural life wherein ancientness is still clinging but in whose memories are clear inscriptions of the earlier Mizo foodways in relation to their livelihoods.

The Nomads and the Hills

Our understanding of the term food and its categories can be very different from one culture to another for it had so many things to do with a given community's cultural experiences. In Mizo language, specifically for the Mizos in Mizoram, food literally translates to *chaw* which has direct reference to *buh* (rice). A few hundred years back, when the Mizo ancestors were lingering in the Chin Hills¹, food could not have as significant connection it has with rice today as it had with corn, because the Chin Hills are much higher in altitude than the Lushai or Mizo Hills² and rice could not survive in those regions whereas corn prospered. Likewise, it can be inherited that during their stay in the Burmese plains their definition of food must have been different as the soil was very productive not only for rice and corn but for wheat and millets as well.

Since historicity pertaining to the entrance of the Mizo people from China to Myanmar is somewhat speculative and vague, the Mizo people, in this paper, are located to their presence in Chindwin and Kabaw valleys in Myanmar and specifically their movement thenceforward. More importantly it was in the hills their identity and memories with respect to their foodways were largely developed:

Pi pute hian Kawlphai an chhuahsan dan leh a chhante hi titi khawchangah takngial pawh an sawi ngai hauh lo a, ziaktu hmasate pawhin an tar lang ngai hek lo. Kawlphai atanga an pan tur Than tlang leh Run kam vel hi a chhengchhe em em a, a tlang a Sangin a vawt em em bawk a, ei leh bar zawn harsatna ram a ni lehzal bawk a, a vawhem avangin la (cotton) a par thei lo a, buh (rice) a vui thei hek lo. Chu bakah an la chen ngai lohna ram ngaw dur pui pui a ni a, Kalkawng tha a awm bawk si lo. Chuvangin hmasawn tum vang leh an duhthlanna chuan an panin a rinawm lo (Lalthangliana 2009, p. 16)

(The (Mizo) ancestors never mentioned, in any of their discourses, their reasons and processes of leaving the Kabaw Valley nor did earlier authors mention about them. Such places Than tlang³ and Run kam⁴ they set out for from the Kabaw Valley were very rugged with high mountains and were very cold, it was really difficult to cultivate in those parts, cotton could not bloom due to excessive coldness, even the ear of rice could not come out. Moreover, the regions were covered with unexplored thick forests with no proper roads of access. Hence, it was unlikely that they approached these regions out of willingness or for civilization).

After the Zo⁵ clans, for no known reason, moved out from the Burmese plains of Kabaw Valley to hilly regions of Chin State of Myanmar around 1200 A.D,⁶ there was continual dispersion of the sub-clans to different parts of the present Chin State of Myanmar and farther to Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh and the majority of them to the Indian States of Mizoram, Manipur and Tripura until early 20th century. In the 1500s, the Mizos dwelled in the mountainous regions between Run and Tiu River, and set foot in Mizoram in the second half

of the 17th and early 18th century. (Siama, 1953, pp. 9-10) Even after reaching Mizoram the Mizos never stayed in a fixed location for long; they frequently moved from one mountain to another due to their practice of shifting cultivation and more importantly due to battles fought amongst themselves:

Hetianga an insawn kual fo avang hian an awmdan leh eizawn dan chenin a inthlak thleng lo thei lova. Ram vawt atangin ram lumah an insawn chhuak a. Tun hmam leileh thiam mah se an pem kawi nasat avangin an theihngilh bo mai thei a. Buh leh buhtun te chawah lo ring tawh thin mah se, an vah velna atangin bahra leh bal te chauh chawah an lo hmang leh mai thei bawk a... Tun hmam rante vulh thin tawh mah se, an chenna hmam azirin an ran vulh a inthlakthleng mai thei a, hmar lam rama vulh theih ran chu chhim lamah a vulh theih loh avangin an chhawm zel thei lo ang a, chuvangin, ui, ar, vawk leh kel te chauh an vulh hmel tawh a. (Lalthangliana, 2001, p. 57)

(Since they led such a nomadic life their behavior and profession were also bound to change. They moved out from cold regions to warmer places. Even if they had known tillage before, they might have lost its know-how in the process of regular migrations. Even if rice and millet had been their main food, they might have shifted to yam and sweet potato in their wanderings...Even the livestock they used to keep had to be switched inferably due to climate difference, for the flocks they reared in northern region were not suited for southern region they probably were unable to continue keeping them, hence, leading to their rearing of only dog, fowl, pig and goat).

The Mizo tribe had tasted civilisation but backtracked on their way to reaching Mizoram. For many years they had no formal contacts with mainland Burmese or Indians resulting in the diminishing of the civilising process; even poor development of their culinary practice is one of the ramifications of this isolation. Moreover, the clans became so divided among themselves that each village, regardless of the number of the population, separately functioned as a single nation in their own territory. A Chief in such village used to be the sole authority of administration. Although there was efficiency of administration, the divisions of the clans in small units brought more conflicts amongst the sub-clans for every village had its own independence to safeguard or encroach others' territories. For this reason, they led an unsettling and migratory life which conditioned all of their traditional practices. Even the easy way of their preparation of food reflects the lives they had carried on for hundreds of years; to an extent, the culinary practices act as a reminder of the turbulent years. The smallness of their physique can also be attributed to the restlessness of their life and the lack of good food.

Food to the Mizos

For hundreds of years, rice has been the staple food of the Mizos and all other vegetables or meat only serve to this day as side dishes. To ask in Mizo *Chaw⁷ i chhum tawh em?* (Have you cooked food?) is equally same with Have you cooked rice? The question excludes all other dishes prepared alongside although food literally translates to *chaw*. This is because the people inseparably associate food with rice. If a Mizo eats cooked rice without any other accompaniments, he is considered as having his food, but, if anything other than rice is eaten to fill the emptiness of the stomach, for example- vegetables, meat, fruits etc., during meal hour he is not considered as having his real food. They would say *Chaw-ah a ring* which can be rendered as 'He takes it as food.' Hence, in the Mizo terminology if one does not have any 'food to cook' it means he does not have rice; the absence of rice deprives of the food-ness of the Mizo food. The subsidiaries eaten with rice collectively fall under *chawhmeh⁸*. Even if salt or water alone is eaten with rice, they are called *chawhmeh*. This evenly applies to all other

vegetables or meat. Therefore, in the traditional sense, rice can never be a side dish or *chawhmeh* but always the main course. This practice which has been carried on to this day is one of the products of cultural experiences and is an anchor of “memories generated and shared by a community.” (Humphreys, 2002, p. 1)

Lack of variety of the Mizo dish, among other factors, are due to the natural vegetation and geographical condition of Mizoram which restrict rearing of a number of different livestock and plantation of a number of crops. Moreover, life, in the earlier Mizo society, had to be maintained as simple and as easy going as possible for a given village could always be raided at any moment. Not only rice but all the rest of the crops were cultivated to last them for a year. There was no proper banking system of the food-crop as such. This clearly mirrored restless people who lived in continual fear. The undemanding characteristic of the Mizo foodways was unrefutably described by a Britisher, Major A.G. McCall (1949) in his book *Lushai⁹ Chrysalis*:

Lushai tastes and culinary arts could hardly be simpler. The only form of cooking widely used is boiling, ingredients of a meal rarely being cooked in separate pots. Three meals are taken, one shortly after sunrise, one at midday, and one at dusk, none varying very much from rice cooked with mustard, jungle vegetables, or roots. Variety in taste and the mineral needs are secured chiefly by the addition of salt, chillies, occasionally ginger, and turmeric, and green vegetable and egg yolk. It is the exception for fats or oils to be used in cooking... (pp. 185-186)

The Food and the Belief System

The first stage of traditional Mizo cultivation is slashing down of forest trees. As a part of the unwritten rules of demarcated roles between men and women, the men exempted women in clearing the trees due to the dangers involved in it (Dokhuma, 1992, pp. 24-26). The heaviness of the task was increased by inefficiency of the implements used for cutting, dangerous beasts and raiders who often singled out lonely men at work. Accidents also often occurred during the burning of the slashed dried trees. The weeding and harvesting seasons were the most interesting seasons because farmers used to exchange labour for labour in groups which was a very important source of unity but they sweated no less. Lastly, transportation of harvested crops, especially rice, was never an easy task for they had to tread the ups and downs of the steep hillside and carry them on their own head and shoulders repetitively. All these hard works were to sustain them only for a year.

Crushing and cleaning the husk of rice using mortar and pestle¹⁰ and preparing food for the family solely fell into the hands of the women barring such exceptional cases as sickness, demise or festive days¹¹. The hard-earned food used to be routinely enjoyed in one large dish of wood called *chawthleng* shared by all the members of a family living under one roof. (J, 2019, p. 47) In the meal hour “all will sit around and help themselves with their hands, the men taking unchallenged precedence over children and the women.” (McCall, 1949, p. 187) But life must have really been harsh and restless because in the way of Mizo expression meal-times chiefly breakfast and dinner were said to be *hmelchhiat lai* (ugly moment).¹² They were hardened yet superstitious people who turned unboastful when it comes to food:

Chaw tihduhdah leh tihnawmna chu thil thiing lo, bul leh bal mir lohna leh thlawhhma lama hmuingil lohna thila an ngaih avangin chaw ei bang fahran pawh an tiduhdah ngam ngai lo. Tin, buh-chang chauh hi chaw-a an ngaih avangin a dang zawng chu chaw-chhia a ni a... Miin buh-chang a tlakchham chuan ei nei lo leh tam a ni a. Mualpho tawpkhawk a nih avangin ei neih tumin tan an la nasa ngiang reng thin. (Dokhuma, 1992, p. 24)

(It was considered a taboo to mishandle or abuse food, since they believed that such an act could bring ill-luck upon their crops¹³ or in their farming, they never dared mishandle even the leftover food. Moreover, since they took only rice as food, all others are only half-food¹⁴... If a man lacked rice, he became foodless and regarded as starved. For this was extreme disgrace, they had to toil really hard to earn their meal).

According to the ancient Mizo's beliefs, there are two places after death- one is known as *Mithi Khua* or Dead Man's Village where ordinary people go; then there is a higher realm known as *Pialral* where all the ancient Mizos longed to go but only exceptional people can achieve to reach. The most important reason the Mizo ancestors were desirous to go to *pialral* or paradise was that they would be fed with *faisa*¹⁵ and that there would be no more toiling for food (Dokhuma, 1987, p. 110). This was reflective of the extremely burdensome life the earlier Mizos lived. They could not dream of anything more ideal or pleasurable than taking rest from the hard life of reality with all its processions to feed one's hunger. It was their highest wish to put off all the troubles of life and enjoy their readymade meal. The consciousness of their day-to-day hardships appeared to have penetrated them psychologically and spiritually as can be seen in the proclamation of their inner wish.

The Taste of Salt

Due to the rarity of meat in the earlier times,¹⁶ vegetable was a part of the Mizo regular diet or *chawhmeh* but hardly eaten fried for the main source of edible oil was fat obtained and kept in the form of lard from slaughtered pig. Hence, the vegetables were mainly prepared in two broad ways- *tlak* and *bai*. *Tlak* is the simpler form of the two; it is stewed or cooked vegetables, usually a mixture of two or three types of vegetables, without adding salt. Whereas, for *bai*, the ingredients can go up to seven or eight in the mixture varieties including salt. It is important to note that salt is the essence of Mizo *bai*, because this dish can be prepared in a number of ways using mustard leaves, pumpkin leaves, beans leaves, bamboo shoot, yam, banana flower, *bekang ro* (dried fermented soya bean) or *saum* (fermented fatty pork), ginger, spice, aromatic herbs etc., on the other hand, one can exclude any of them without taking away the *bai-ness* in the *bai*, but if there is no salt or the presence of saltiness in it it cannot be *bai* regardless of the variety of the ingredients.

A century back scarcity of salt was immense in Mizoram due to its geographical location; to make up this shortage, *chingal* (lye) or "ash water drained through wood ash" was "a regular ingredient in most meals." (McCall, 1949, p. 186) Salt could not but be precious earlier since the Mizo men had to walk hundreds of miles down to the plains to bring it home. Even after treading all the distances, they could never bring it in large quantities for it was usually carried using their heads and shoulders. So, due to the strenuousness of the tasks involved for its procurement, they had to use the small quantity they possessed economically to last them for a long time. It is often told that there were times when salt was so scarce that a hospitable Mizo would say to his/her traveller guest while preparing food- *Chi ngatin ka bai sak ang che aw* (Let me specially cook for you with salt). This, as is often told, was the origination of *Chibai* in Mizo culture. It shows the hospitable nature of the Mizo tribe who treated their guests with all kinds of goodness:

Hmanlai Mizo dan kal phungah chuan mikhual thlenrawn dil reng reng an awmin an hnar ngai lo va, ei leh barah tam mangan lai tak pawh ni se, mikhual hnar chu thiang lo tlukah ngaiin an neih ang anga eia in ve mai turin chhungkua harsa hle mah se an thleng hram hram thin a ni. (J, 2019, p. 88)

(In the ancient Mizo tradition, if any traveller asked for lodging, they never turned the person away, even during the height of famine they always hosted them to eat and drink whatever could be provided for it was considered morally wrong to turn travellers away).

Chi was so valuable that it transpired into the Mizo language, etiquette and meaning formation for the emotional and spiritual communication. The word *Chibai*, coined from *chi* and *bai* is not only used to greet and fare other people well while shaking hands but to wish them happiness, as in *piancham chibai* (happy birthday) or *kumthar chibai* (happy new year), and to worship as well, as in *Pathian chibai buk* ('to worship God).'

What is still more interesting is that the Arthington Christian Missionaries¹⁷ who came to Mizoram in 1894 exchanged salt for labour. The practice attracted the Mizos so much that it helped the missionaries gain admiration and trust. When they were settling in Bawlhmun near Fort Aijal:

They began to build a small house of bamboo, roofed with sungrass, but the unsettled nature of the country made it almost impossible to get labour for it... At the beginning, the people thought that they were simple and wandering sahibs and they could not contact them properly... Those who helped the missionaries in erecting a hut were given a letter to obtain salt from the shop. Sometimes they gave salt as wages to the helpers. In this way the natives' impression of the missionaries changed. They were reported to have said, 'they were not mad sahibs, they obviously own everything in the shops, they must be chiefs' [sic]. They, therefore, trusted and obeyed them and cooperated with them in their work. (Khangte, 1990, pp. 30-31)

What makes the situation more interesting is the coincidence of the occurrence with the missionaries and the words they came to preach to convert the Mizos from paganism to Christianity- "You are the salt of the earth..." (Mat. 5:13) In 1941, forty-seven years after their emergence, the total population of Mizo Christians numbered at a massive 98,108 out of the total population of 1,52,786 (Liangkhaia, 1976, p. 211).

Conclusion

It is to further an understanding of the influence of food culture on the workings and functions of memory that a historical approach has been employed in this paper.

The hardship-driven life reflected in the foodways is enwrapped in a number of Mizo folk ways and lore. It is through them that fractions of the past Mizo society are put together and memorialised to make a larger thread which in consequence is a part of the Mizo cultural formation. Even to acquaint with psychical construction or for the creation of the collective memory in a given community's culture, folklore can be very helpful since the past history of the tribal people is recorded in them as in one of the most valued Mizo folktales *Liandova te Unau*¹⁸ wherein the poverty and wish of the people for abundance with regards to food are reflected. Extreme poverty called for extreme saying in such words as: *Sem sem dam dam, ei bil thi thi* (Share share live live, eat alone die die). This saying was a way of teaching children to live an ethical life. (Dokhuma, 1987, p. 299)

Notes

1. A range of mountain in Chin State of Myanmar.
2. A mountain range in Mizoram and Manipur.

3. The Than mountain. A town in the region is named after the mountain and is presently one of the nine townships in Chin State of Myanmar.
4. The Run or Manipur River banks.
5. People of the hills. The term *Zo* has a wider appeal than Mizo.
6. B. Lalthangliana theorised that the *Zo* clans were pushed out from Kabaw Valley by the more powerful Shan people who entered Myanmar from China in the early 13th century. (2018, pp. 12-13)
7. Food; often the term *buh* (rice) is interchangeably used with the English word food.
8. It literally translates to ‘that is eaten with rice or food.’
9. Mizo.
10. In a number of villages in Mizoram, *sum* (mortar) and *suk* (pestle) from the previous generations are still to be found. Though it has been decades since the people abandoned crushing rice for food using these tools, yet the nostalgic taste of *chhawchhi* (sesame seed) or *buhban* (sticky rice) powdered using such tools lingers in the memories of the Mizos, particularly the villagers, and some of them still use them instead of electric grinders to this day.
11. From the ancient time to the present day, preparation of food, during such special occasions as festivals or celebratory functions of a community, falls into the hands of the men.
12. In Mizo society, customarily, the head of a family takes meal-time as an opportunity to counsel on matters pertaining to family members’ responsibility or work distribution and more importantly for admonition. So, the scenes are often serious and gloomy. (Dokhuma, 1987, p. 135)
13. By the phrase *buh leh bal* the Mizos mean all the food crops that are sown in the *jhum* (Buh-rice; leh- and; bal- yam).
14. The literal meaning of *chaw-chhia* (translated as ‘half-food’) is bad-food.
15. Cleaned or milled rice.
16. “Meat so eaten was all considered as extra, was eaten in lumps, and formed no part of the routine meals.” (McCall, 1949, p. 186)
17. Rev. F.W. Savidge and Rev. J.H. Lorrain (Liangkhaia, 1976, p. 224).
18. Liandos Brothers.

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Bio-note

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