



Traditional Food and Cultural Identity: A Study of the Zeliang Naga Community in Nagaland

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Abstract. Food tells about one's culture. The cultural heritage of the region has always been significantly shaped by food. Food is often used by people to maintain their sense of ethnic identity. Food not only provides for our sustenance and nutrition, but also has far more social, cultural, and symbolic connotations. Different ethnic groups have varying dietary preferences according to their habitat and cultivability, especially for the Nagas in the northeastern region of India. In this context, Food may also serve as a symbol for social separation between oneself and others. This social stratification can also be seen through the food that people eat. Food items are prepared in a household style, with the traditional way of preparation and manner of consumption varying by clan or village in Naga society. The way you prepare your food and eat each day reinforces your cultural identity. Many traditional food cuisines have been assimilated with diverse cultures and cooking techniques have undergone major changes in the modern era. The paper discusses some of the traditional cuisine including Jegietsang dui/Njeitim (mustard leaves paste), Kebakjinam (fermented pork fat), Nchang tam (Roselle seeds paste), koilungdui (burnt bark ashes water), Kechuihia (fermented bamboo shoot), among others. The objectives of the study are to identify the indigenous cuisine of Zeliang Naga and analyse the method used by the Zeliang Naga in the preparation of food cuisine. This study is based on secondary data as well as an observation method and focus interview method were included in the study. This paper is a modest attempt to investigate and document the traditional food culinary of Zeliang Naga.

Keywords: Culture, Cuisine, Change, Identity

Introduction

According to Gabaccia,¹ “Food and language are the cultural habits humans learn first and the ones they change with the greatest reluctance.”

The social science research has recently expanded to include the study of food culture. Food has been researched throughout history for its cultural, economic, and environmental impact. Historians view food as a key cultural aspect that reflects social and economic dynamics. Archaeologists and pre-historians investigated the relationship between food and evolution, as well as migration and diffusion. Anthropology provides a comprehensive view of food from a biological, social, and cultural perspective.

Every culture has its eating traditions. Culture is the culmination of a group's learnt and shared habits. Culture, which people acquire through their daily lives, provides beliefs, practices, and information, as well as a sense of identity, order, and security. It specifies social structure, decision-making processes, and communication styles. Culture, which is passed down both formally and informally from generation to generation, governs behaviour, etiquette, culture and ritual. Food is a basic necessity for survival and to sate hunger. Food can serve as a potent metaphor for how we structure our social interactions and organise ourselves. Food is more than just a means of survival; it's a social and cultural representation of who we are.

According to historians, one of the most significant aspects of civilizations is their food, which reflects the social and economic systems of the day. We can learn more about our shared future, history, and cultures via food. Food can be a tool to explore social and political dynamics in society. Food tells about one's culture. A community's identity and culture are greatly influenced by its food. Food describes a society's history by describing how they live, where they live, their economic background, their cultural background, and how they change. It also narrates the tale of ethnicity and migration. One's cultural identity is reflected in their food culture.

Undoubtedly, the choice of whether or not to consume a certain kind of food lies solely with the individual. Religious prohibitions limit what people can choose to eat in many societies. The cultural heritage of the region has always been significantly shaped by food. Customary diets are a reflection of a tribe's cultural identity and health beliefs. With changes in their lifestyles, food habits have also been constantly changing. Due to the impact of modern foods, which have fostered a tendency of ignorance towards traditional foods, there have been significant changes in the eating habits of the Zeliang. The study aims to document the traditional food cuisine of Zeliang tribe.

Brief Background Of The Study :

Nagaland is a state in the northeastern region of India, covering an area of 16,579 square kilometers (6,401 sq mi) with a population of 1,980,602 as per the 2011 Census of India. It is bordered on the north by the state of Arunachal Pradesh, on the west by Assam, on the south by Manipur, and the east by Myanmar². Nagaland is a tribal state populated by various Naga tribes, each with its distinct customs and culture. Although Nagaland is home to 16 indigenous tribes with other sub-tribes, each with unique culture and heritage, food

¹ Gabaccia DR: We Are What We Eat. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1998

² Official state portal of Nagaland available at <https://nagaland.gov.in/pages/nagaland-profile> last visit on 29.01.2025

unites and brings people from different backgrounds together. Since ancient times, the majority of Naga people have been preserving and enhancing the flavour of their food using unique fermentation techniques. Since Nagas are primarily hunters and cultivators, meat is an essential component of their diet.

For the Nagas, agriculture is the primary means of survival. They cultivate rice, millet, maize, pulses, vegetables, and fruits through a process known as "Jhum" or shifting cultivation. Rice is the dominant crop and also the staple diet of the people. The Naga people in Nagaland place a high value on food and use it as a part of their identity in their daily lives.³ When it comes to distinguishing one ethnic group from another, food is a key factor. Because of their traditional food habits and way of life, it is particularly remarkable that urban-dwelling ethnic communities continue to have a very high demand for wild edibles. The cuisine of the Nagas is diverse, with each tribe having its unique style. Every fermented food has a distinct flavour and cooking technique. Nagas typically don't use oil in their cooking because the majority of the dishes are simmered in local herbs. The importance of food in Naga culture is evident in its socio-cultural and economic framework. The region is a treasure of indigenous knowledge systems pertaining to agriculture, food, medicine, and natural resources management⁴. Each ethnic or cultural group's food habits are frequently connected to its religious practices and cultural customs. The way you eat each day reinforces your cultural identity⁵.

Like any other Naga tribe, the cuisine of the Zeliang tribe is renowned for its simplicity and variety. The Zeliang tribe is one of the prominent tribes in Nagaland, which has a diverse traditional cuisine culture. Residing largely in associate areas of Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland. The Peren District of Nagaland is home to the Zeliang population. It is located in the southwest of Nagaland, bounded by Manipur in the southeast, Assam in the West, Dimapur District in the North, and Kohima District in the northeast. Zeliang are mostly inhabited in Assam, Nagaland, and Manipur. The Zeliang tribe is renowned for its unique traditions, customs, laws, values, folklore, music, festivals, and feasts. The patriarchal and patrilineal structure that characterized the Zeliang culture in the past is still in place now and rice is the staple food of the Zeliang tribe.

Every ethnic group is unique because of its culture. Food is often used by people to maintain their sense of ethnic identity. Food holds far more social, cultural, and symbolic connotations than just providing sustenance and nutrition.⁶ Different ethnic groups have varying dietary preferences. One will observe that a dish that is a delicacy for one community may be taboo or unsuitable for other communities. Zeliang Naga has its distinct food system. Mothers pass on their culinary skills to their daughters or teach them to cook alongside them, thus passing down culinary knowledge from one generation to another.

Like other Naga tribes, the Zeliang prepare their food by steaming and boiling it while simmering it in local herbs instead of using oil. Back then, the Zeliang tribes dwelling in the remote hills had no idea that oil might be used to fry meals. The primary foods consumed by the Zeliang tribe were rice, meat, vegetables, and boils. The dish was prepared, usually consisting of boiling vegetables, boiling meat with rice powder, or

³ Venkataraman, S. (n.d.). ANTHROPOLOGY OF FOOD IN NAGALAND Based on the Literature Reviews and Personal Interviews.

⁴ Singh A, Singh R and Sureja A "Cultural significance and diversities of ethnic foods of Northeast India ." (2007) pp. 74-94

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⁶ Bell David & Valentine Gill Consuming geographies we are where we eat.(1997) p-3

cooking meat with some veggies, salt, and chili. Zeliang Naga highly favours fermented dishes. They frequently use various types of fermented foods and herbs to enhance their basic curries.

Objective

The objective of this paper is to identify the indigenous cuisine and importance of Zeliang Naga of Nagaland and analyse the various methods used by the Zeliang Naga in the preparation of food cuisine.

Methodology

The Zeliang Naga's ethnic food habits have been thoroughly examined in this paper using both primary and secondary data. The Observation Method and Focus Interview Method were used to gather primary data, while the internet and relevant literature, including books, journal articles and local magazines, were used to gather secondary data.

Traditional Culinary of Zeliang: A Cultural Identity

Traditional food is an essential component of cultural identity, linking people to their history and heritage through shared culinary practices. Across the world, food goes beyond mere sustenance—it represents family, community, and the continuation of traditions passed down through generations. For instance, in Italy, food is a symbol of togetherness, with dishes like pizza and pasta embodying the pride Italians take in their culinary heritage. The Italian dining experience is about savoring flavors and cherishing the joy of preparing and sharing meals with loved ones.

Similarly, in the Zeliang tribe, cuisine is inextricably linked to culture. Zeliang food is renowned for its refinement, simplicity, and attention to detail. Jegietsang Dui/Njeitim, Kebakjinam (Fermented Pork Fat), Nchang Tam (Roselle Seeds Paste), Koilungdui (Burnt Bark Ashes Water), Kechuihia (Fermented Bamboo shoot) foods that are prepared and presented in a simple manner. Zeliang culinary culture values food's value and symbolism while also honouring culturally based reverence for the environment and history.

Jegietsang Dui/Njeitim (Mustard Leaves Paste)

It is made up of mustard leaves. It is a lengthy and time-consuming procedure. Mustard leaves are gathered from the field and placed on a platform/mat until they turn a shade of yellow, after which the withered leaves are collected and pounded in a traditional wooden pounder. The crushed leaves are then gathered in jars or pots for at least ten days or more. After that, it is pressed with both hands to release the liquid from the leaves. Then the liquid is boiled in a pot to make it thicker. The liquid turns into a paste known as Jegietsang dui / Njeitim. It can be preserved for about a year. In the off-season, it is challenging to find. Thus, preservation techniques are used to ensure Njeitim (Mustard Leaves Paste) is available even in the off-season.



Fig: 1 Jegietsang Dui/Njeitim (Mustard Leaves Paste)

Kebakjinam (Fermented Pork Fat)

It is prepared by cutting the pork meat into small pieces. Keep it in a pot or container for two to three days, then it will soften. After frying, keep it in a bamboo or glass container and keep it near the fire. Once it has fermented, it can be stored for a longer amount of time and can be added to any curry to give it a delicious flavour. Since fresh meat cannot be kept for longer than a few days, it is believed that in the past, to be consumed on a regular basis

basis, they used the perversion procedure.



Fig 2 Kebakjinam (Fermented Pork Fat)

Nchang Tam (Roselle Seeds Paste)

It is prepared by boiling the roselle seed until it softens. After it has boiled, remove and ferment it in a bamboo container for three or five days, or longer if it is winter. After four or five days, remove and stuff with banana or natural leaf litter. Hang it close to the fire after packing. Nchang's delicious flavour and perfume will emerge when it heats up with fire. Once it's prepared, it tastes great.



Fig: 3 Nchang Tam (Roselle Seeds Paste)

Koilungdui (Burnt Bark Ashes Water)

It is prepared by gathering young bamboo trees, which we use to make bamboo thread locally. (Old or mature cannot make quality koilungdui). Cut it up and let it dry; burn the dried bamboo. After burning, gather the Ashes or burn the bark, then collect the burned bark and transfer it to a container with a filter inside. To filter, we drill multiple tiny holes in the pot's bottom. We then place water and burn bark in the holes, starting with the layer of banana leaves. Koilungdui is also believed to have medicinal benefits. People tend to drink a small amount of liquid for relief when they have stomach issues or gas issues.



Fig 4 Koilungdui (Burnt Bark Ashes Water)

Kechuihia (Fermented Bamboo shoot)

The bamboo shoots are prepared when fresh shoots begin to form, in May or June, the process for bamboo shoots is carried out by collecting fresh shoots then removed sheaths, and need to be completely rinsed before being cut into pieces, placed in a container, and filled with water to the level of the bamboo shoots. Close the container lid in an airtight manner by lightly pressing down on it and preserving it at ambient temperature to start the fermentation process; the longer it is maintained, the better the fermentation. The fermented shoots can be stored and consumed throughout the year, while being preserved in a pot or basket, and can be prepared in any kind of curry.



Fig 5 Kechuihia (Fermented Bamboo shoot)

Traditional Food Habits: A Cultural Reflection

The relationship between food and culture is deeply intertwined, and food choices have always been shaped by changing social and cultural contexts. Different regions have distinct local cuisines influenced by their environment, resources, and traditional practices. However, as people move from one area to another, either through migration or exposure to new cultures, regional food habits begin to change, incorporating new ingredients, preparation techniques, and influences. For centuries, families played a central role in passing down not just cooking skills, but entire ways of life anchored in food traditions. However, the pressures of urbanization and modernization are steadily reshaping these patterns. In the 20th century, the culture of "eating out," the explosion of fast food, and the growing availability of fast food and global cuisine have expanded food choices. This shift has introduced more cosmopolitan eating habits, distancing communities from their traditional dietary practices, which were often rooted in rituals, family customs, and local agriculture.

Several factors contribute to these changes. Migration and urbanization play a key role as people adapt their food habits to new environments, leading to a greater reliance on processed and convenience foods. Additionally, the influence of mainstream culture, particularly through media and the global availability of fast food, has further accelerated the transformation of traditional diets. Another significant factor is the gradual decline of ritualistic food practices, which were once central to cultural identity. For example, among the Zeliang Naga, the advent of Christianity led to a decline in the traditional practices of offering food as part of spiritual rituals, thereby altering their approach to food and its significance. In the past, the Zeliang Naga ate from banana leaves or wooden plates and drank from cups made out of bamboo or bottle gourds, but as modernization took hold, these traditional utensils were replaced by contemporary dishes and cups, signaling the growing impact of mainstream culture.

The Zeliang Naga tribe of Nagaland has long had a rich tradition of food habits that reflected their connection to the environment and their simple agrarian lifestyle. Food was prepared using locally available ingredients and methods passed down through generations. However, in recent years, these traditional practices have undergone significant changes. As modernization and outside influences reshape their way of life, younger generations are moving away from age-old culinary traditions, preferring modern food varieties and faster methods of preparation. This shift represents not just a change in diet but a broader loss of cultural identity tied to food.

Since food is so closely tied to cultural identity, documenting and preserving the traditional food practices of the Zeliang Naga is vital for maintaining their heritage. Through recording their indigenous cuisine and food preparation methods, researchers can help protect these cultural traditions from being permanently lost. By understanding the traditional culinary practices of the Zeliang Naga, we can gain a deeper appreciation for their culture and support efforts to conserve their unique socio-cultural practices, which face growing threats from modernization. This research will play a critical role in ensuring that future generations retain a sense of connection to their cultural roots through the food that has been central to their identity for centuries.

Conclusion

The Zeliang Naga tribe is one of the major tribes residing in the state of Nagaland in Northeast India. Traditionally, the Zeliang Naga had distinct food habits and culinary practices were an integral part of their rich cultural identity and social customs. Their indigenous cuisine was adapted to the local biodiversity and influenced by the simple agrarian lifestyle led in the villages. Food was prepared using ingredients grown or caught locally without many modern techniques and technologies. However, in recent decades, the traditional ways of living among the Zeliang Naga have undergone significant changes due to increasing modernization and adoption of mainstream lifestyles. As villages become more connected and exposed to outside influences, traditional occupations and food habits are being replaced. Younger generations in particular now have limited exposure and opportunity to learn age-old practices and indigenous knowledge related to Zeliang Naga cuisine. With modern food varieties and patterns of eating becoming prominent, there are visible alterations occurring in their customary food culture as well.

Henceforth, food is so intertwined with identity and plays a vital role in cultural continuity, and the study aims to document the indigenous cuisine and various methods of food preparation that have been passed down for generations among the Zeliang Naga. By scientifically recording their traditional food practices before more transformations take place, this research can help preserve this invaluable cultural heritage. Understanding their indigenous culinary traditions will also enhance appreciation of the rich culture of the Zeliang Naga. This may further support conservation of their unique socio-cultural traditions that are facing threats from outside influences.

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