

FOOD AND THE SELF: AN EXPLORATION OF FOOD ANTHROPOLOGY

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While keeping in mind that the issue of gastro-politics and symbolism is in itself quite ambivalent, this narrative self exploratory paper tries to explore how status is claimed and obvious social meanings are expressed through food consumption practices. In line to the ethnographic tradition, I paint the basis picture of conflicts that is seen within the cultural logic in understanding meanings and interpreting symbols by self questioning certain issues of stereotypes, modernity and civilization attached to the Naga food culture vis-a-vis the larger national food culture. In other words, I illustrate how values, beliefs and practices guide what people eat and how people react about different kinds of food. Examination to these aspects, I situate the apprehensive issue of my food culture in the nationalistic discourse, if I may, to show the nuances involved.

It is hoped that this self exploratory paper shed insights into the socio-cultural constructs of modernity and by exploring the meanings of the kind of stereotype associated to certain types of food culture how a particular process of cooking and consumption practises defines the identity of a person and a nation at large. It is not only to explain what my food culture is, but also to examine it as one of the most important descriptors and building blocks in the current lifestyles transformations and consumption practices among my people.

“A strange tribe has Delhi police worried..., and officers say, their food smells so awful that it is a threat to public order.

...Bamboo shoot, *akhuni* and other smelly dishes should be prepared without creating ruckus in the neighbourhood.

...Bamboo shoot features in the cuisine of most of North Eastern states¹ while the *akhuni*, made from fermented soya bean is a Naga² staple”.

(*The Telegraph*, July 10, 2007)

A TYRST WITH FOOD

I am your average girl next door who loves to eat ‘simple’ home cooked food. I love to eat, though I am also particular about certain taste(s). More than any other food, I love my own Naga food³ prepared with all exotic traditional condiments, wild herbs and all kinds of local produce. My definition of a ‘meal’ is sitting down together with my family and digging in a proper platter of hot rice, meat, vegetables and *chutney*, and eating with my hand. I am not much of a fried food person, and I do not reckon fried/spicy curry as ‘my’ food. It does not belong in my food culture! “Naga food is always the winner. There is no food as good as our food” is my take on food with much pride complimenting myself shamelessly on how good my food is!

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Occasionally on holidays my parents would take us out for dinner in restaurants that serve *non local* food. For dinner mother would sometimes prepare *roti/puris* and *sabjis*, all non-local food. Oh how forlorn I used to be! Since I was not a fan of anything that is ‘non Naga’, I would pester mother to prepare me ‘dinner’ as soon as they finish eating. I could not go to bed with a two piece *roti* or *puri*. My stomach refused to accept! As a child I had this perfect picture in my mind how a meal should be. I would be often cowed by my siblings of how ‘un-modern’ and highly ‘old fashioned’ I am in my taste. It always resulted in exchanging mighty kicks and blows between me and my siblings.

As I grew older I had to leave home - for higher education. Nagaland, torn by insurgencies and uncertain political situations, was no longer a ‘safe’ place to study. Therefore many of us had to venture out especially for our Masters degrees and higher studies. The further I walked away from home the closer I was getting to the bigger picture. It was nothing creditable rather a disapproval of my alleged theory about the ‘world’s finest food’. I had studied Ethnocentrism in my college and while I was busy studying ethnocentrism I failed to understand my own ethnocentrism and prejudice. Truth is, I have been judging these diverse food cultures of the world through the tiny lens of the food in my plate and by the measure of its taste. For the first time I saw the pride that I had of my concept of ‘food’ shattered!!

To my utter consternation when I started travelling beyond India, I realised people do not know what my food culture is. Standing at 5.3 ft tall with perfect Mongoloid features (straight black fine hair, small eyes, and yellowish skin tone) and very modest in attitude, my life became more challenging than ever. I have read quite a few articles and have heard of stories from my people what happens when you leave your comfort zone and venture out. I did not get the message they were sending out. The empathy I showed then is not really true because I did not feel their emotion. A human learns better with encounters and first hand experiences and now was my time to face the world. I appear to be having a terrible time of identity crisis. Who would have thought explaining to people about my identity would become a daily routine. Meeting new people is sometimes gruelling because I have to go on clearing up at my best, “No, No, I am not a Korean. I am not Japanese either, nor am I a Chinese or Thai... No, my parents are not immigrants”. “I am an Indian, from India” “No, I am not vegan and spicy masala is not our kind of food culture”. After locating Northeast India in the huge map of India and explaining my people and my food culture somehow they believe me. Well, thanks to google!

THE PARADIGMS OF ‘CIVILIZATION’

Growing up, I have consumed, and continue to consume dog meat⁴, though not on a daily basis. I also enjoy snacking on crunchy grubs, grasshoppers, silkworms,

locusts and many other edible insects. Wild animal meat is a special delicacy not everybody can afford because it involves a lot of risks and demands hunting skills. If available in the markets for sale, it tends to be very pricey. To me, dog meat is nothing extraordinary. It is a normal meat like any other meat because dog meat is a part of my food culture. It is readily available in markets in my home town. Some dogs are reared for food alone. Early monographs on the Nagas reveal how dogs have been valued depending on the type of duty it performs. The Lotha Nagas, for instance, breeds their hunting dogs separately. Hunting dogs are never killed for food and when one dies, it is given a decent burial outside the village (Mills, 1922). This shows how dogs are raised separately; the kinds of dogs that are to be consumed for food and which are not to be killed. In the recent times however, the issue of dog meat consumption has been heightened because of the growing concerns in animal security rights and animal activists that continue to voice out against killing dogs for food as illegal.

Despite the issue of animal security rights, it is upsetting when I am stripped off my right to 'culture'. It was the year 2007 when the Police Department in my country's capital city, Delhi, published a handbook for 'my' people, supposedly a guideline to peaceful coexistence in the country's capital. It was a guideline, yes, no arguments. Then what was it that upset me? I am constrained to cook my local food when I stay in their city, the Indian capital. I am not allowed to cook fermented soy beans, fermented fish or bamboo shoots and without these basic ingredients I cannot prepare a complete meal. It is agreed the smell is not pleasant. It is rather pungent and strong that takes time for people to actually develop the likeness of the food and its flavour. Acquired taste it is!! But well we do live in a secular diverse country so I expected some regard from my fellow countrymen as much as they respect their own food.

Hold on. It did not end there. My brother was evicted out of his university hostel, yet again the country's capital city because he consumed dog meat. News splashed all over local media. I could not hide my embarrassment. He was fined, humiliated and then thrown out of the hostel because by killing and eating a dog, and by doing so he had proved himself unworthy of a prestigious place in the University and the society at large.

I am being ridiculed by my fellow country brothers pointing at me as uncivilized. Very recently there was strife in social media about such fundamental issues. My brothers from different cultures call us names as 'lame' and 'uncivilized' putting false allegations. The Indian Prime Minister, on his maiden visit this year to my humble state for the inauguration of our state's festival, the very well-known Hornbill Festival, he was photographed inside a traditional *morung*⁵ standing next to a fireplace where a chunk of meat (pork) is hanging above the fireplace. It is supposed to be a traditional kitchen set up and hanging meat pieces is very much part of my tradition. This particular photograph became sensational among many

groups of people from outside the North East region. Few of my fellow brothers concluded it was dog meat and so by his logic, I am ‘uncivilized’ because I consume dog meat. The picture did its round in social media for quite some time. Some were diplomatic and articulate in their words carefully trying to win me over by taking the prime Minister Modi’s strict veganism and how he is showing respect to my culture despite his ‘veganism’ by audaciously stepping inside a *morung* where meat (supposedly dog meat) were on display.

As a University graduate staying in a city, I behave like any other normal civilized person is expected to; I dress decently and I speak decently, and proper English. Is this not enough to prove that I have moved far beyond the days of savages? This is a question that continue to plague many of us.

QUALIFYING “CIVILIZATION” AND “MODERNITY”

Against the backdrop of this statement, I would like to borrow Bourdieu’s (1984) term “game of culture” to show the nuances involved in the definition and understanding of how society defines, expresses and constructs one’s identity through food. How am I using my perspectives on my food culture as a lens to weigh another cultural identity? The game of culture, according to Bourdieu is, protected against objectification by all partial objectifications which the actors involved in the game performed on each other.

What qualifies me a ‘civilized’ social person? I feel aberrant to prepare my food when I am in the company of my Other friends from another culture. I have been called ‘uncivilized’ because of my food several times which has now terrified me. Once bitten, twice shy! I do not want to be discomfited in my friend’s company. I want to be accepted socially, I want to fit myself in their ‘modern’ lifestyles. I am uncomfortable with the kind of stereotype I am associated with and therefore I emulate my friend’s food habits; I am changing my food values by adopting new eating habits in order to break the stereotypes. For instance if I eat a KFC or a McDonald I look ‘modern’. It proves that I have a modern taste. If I cook the same chicken in my traditional way, I am uncivilized in my taste because it is ‘smelly’ and nobody has a taste for bad smell. I do not want to lay out a dinner that my friends cannot enjoy or feel disgusted about my food, so I settle for foods that are ‘trendy’ and ‘modern’. I do not prepare rice twice a day anymore. I am now learning to live with one plate of rice a day and settle with pasta, salads, bread and sometimes meat and fries. My staple diet is changing eventually so is my lifestyle. In order to show my modern taste, I have also adopted a pug. Dog meat which used to be a special delicacy has now become my best friend, almost certainly a little sister. She is dressed in pink dress and a lovely pearl adorns her neck. If I sometimes gorge down a delightful meal of dog meat, it is done in silence because I do not want people to mock me.

While trying to establish a connection between breaking stereotypes and changing lifestyles, I posit Cairns *et al.*’s (2010) proposition on how a new culture

has evolved in the recent times where a consumer now views food in a perspective that surpasses that of consumer needing its food source for survival but rather an essential aspect to their identity. By adopting a pug, I am using her as an object at the same time emulating the lifestyles of the elites which is my way to validate my legit claim of being 'modern' and 'civilized'. In this context food becomes a commodity valued for leisure and identity.

'MORALITY' REDEFINED

My identity today is still the identity of the past but it is 'refined' and modernized. While the history of my local food culture is an association of distasteful stereotypes and gastro-politics, in recent times it is changing. These stereotypes are receding although faintly in the light of nationalistic food culture and social dynamics. The changing value on food and consumption practices is not, however, confined only to me and my people in my region, it also resonates throughout the world, through the growing global food chains and retail markets.

By looking at self explorations of food, the basic need of all humans, we realise how modernity (and social status) is manifested through contemporary food knowledge; knowledge of current food trends, awareness of food markets, and an understanding of food functionality, cooking skills etc. Food products, procurement, preparation, presentation, and performance of food is a system in which all activities bear upon each other, and some meaning emerges out of these relationships.

One cannot deny that issues on topics of food continue to be inherently political in nature, and that it involves not only the fields of production and distribution and gastro-politics at large, but also politics is clearly seen in deciding and creating symbolic meanings of what foods are culturally significant and what foods are not, what food items are mine and what are outsiders' foods, what foods are modern and what foods are not.

By eating the food of others which are supposedly 'trendy' and 'modern', such as veganism and Mc Donalds, we all explore the Otherness through their food. On a personal level, by emulating their lifestyles, I do not necessarily become one of them, rather I get to build my relationship by breaking the stereotypes while redefining identities of my people.

Food is, after all, an important social agent that binds people across the globe, and at the same time segregates people depending on individual choices of food and tastes. This self-exploratory paper has enabled me to employ food as a lens through which identity and symbolism is shaped and constrained by political structures. As mentioned earlier the issue that I have highlighted is very ambivalent and there are conflicts and tensions involved. In this scenario I feel there is an opening for extensive ethnographic foodways research to be carried out that can be a good contribution to theory and methods.

Notes

1. North East India is a frontier region comprising of eight different states and each state sharing international borders with Bhutan, China, Nepal, Myanmar and Bangladesh. It is one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse region in India. The eight states include Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Sikkim and Tripura. Inhabitants of Northeast India are generally tribal Christians, although there are Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and people who follow their indigenous religion. One of the most unique characteristic features about the region is that the inhabitants show Mongoloid features in their appearances. The North East in general has been undergoing a severe crisis on identity issue for the past several decades.
2. The word 'Naga' is an umbrella term used to refer to all the different tribes spread in various pockets of North East India and Myanmar. The state of Nagaland is home to 17 different Naga tribes namely the Ao, Angami, Chang, Chakesang, Lotha, Sema, Pochury, Zeliang, Konyak, Yimchunger, Khiamnungan, Poumai, Rongmei, Phom, Rengma, Sangtam and Mao. The Nagas have a unique cultural tradition particularly in their culinary skills. The Nagas are basically cultivators known to many as 'Hill People' owing to their hilly mountainous terrain. Seventy one percent of the total population are engaged in agriculture. Rice being their staple food, rice cultivation alone occupies about seventy percent of the total cultivated area. Setting up of townships and establishment of urban centres in Nagaland are to a large extent recent developments.
3. Naga food comprises mainly vegetable-based fermented food, bamboo-based fermented and pulses (legumes) - based fermented food products, smoked or dried meat and fish products, dried vegetables, jungle leaves, berries and herbs. Nagas being traditionally agriculturalists, their staple food is rice. Naga food culture features meat and fish, which are often smoked or dried or fermented and a mug of rice beer. A daily diet of a typical Naga consists of a meat dish, a boiled vegetable dish, rice and chutney. All meals are eaten with hands. In the olden times, the use of cooking oil for frying was unknown to them, and therefore preparation of food was simple. Meat, fish and vegetables, jungle leaves and berries were cooked only with salt and chilly. Fermented bamboo shoots, fermented vegetables and fermented soya beans were treated as an important ingredient. Because of their late contact with the outside world, most of the other food items/vegetables were introduced only in the recent times. With the introduction of other vegetable crops by the State Government, farmers have started cultivating newer plant crops. However vegetable crops such as potato, cabbage, ladyfingers, beans, onion, carrot, radish etc, although have been incorporated in their farming, these are considered an 'outsider' crop and not as an indigenous produce.
4. Dog meat is a delicacy among a number of tribes in North East India such as Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur. Dog meat is marketed openly in Nagaland. It is a part of their food culture. It is seen as illegal by outsiders though. More importantly an issue on dog meat consumption is seen to be very edgy because of the stereotype that is associated with the Nagas and the North Easter people in general.
5. The *morung* is the bachelors' dormitory traditionally found in Naga villages. It was a formal institution for socialization and for learning the different art and crafts of the Nagas including training in warfare.

References

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