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## **Traditional Food Culture and Women in the Angami Naga Society**

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**Abstract:** Production, processing and distribution of food had always been a primary responsibility of women in all societies. From hunting, gathering societies to settled cultivation, to the horticulture and villages formation, and to modern cities, food has been a dynamic component in changing all spheres of living beings. The contribution of women in the traditional Naga society has been excluded in most of the writing. The paper attempts to bring out the relationship between food and women in the traditional Angami Naga Society and also gives a brief layout of the different traditional food in Angami Naga society in India. The paper focuses in the traditional period when the Nagas were unknown to the foreigners or before the coming of Christianity, which is commonly termed as the 'modern period'. The selective writings while writing history need to be challenged, thus, in this paper, food and women are put at the centre of debate to understand better the role and contribution of women in the traditional time.

**Keywords:** food, women, patriarchy, identity, religion.

### **Introduction:**

The Study of food culture has been a very recent subject in the social sciences. There have been some studies done in the past few decades by the historians, anthropologists, economists and other

disciplines on food habits and other issues related to food. But little has been done on the study of food and culture within India's multi-ethnicity. Though food has been a part of every person's life, studies on food has been an excluded area for a very long time. For a better understanding of a culture of a particular region, this area needs to be studied thoroughly and analyzed from a different perspective. This paper aims to study the relationship between food and women, which has been very close since the traditional time; yet this is a much neglected area of study. Food in Angami Naga society in India has been playing a unique role in its own ways both in both social and religious ways which have been carried on mostly by the female members of the society.

Socially and culturally, food has been a very important part of human existence. Food production, processing and distribution have always been a primary responsibility of women in all societies. From hunting, gathering societies to settled cultivation, to the horticulture and villages formation, and to modern cities, food has been a dynamic component in changing all spheres of living beings. Carole M. Counihan stated that, apart from all the other authority that a woman has, the power of a woman is derived from the power of food (Counihan 1999, 47). Anthropologists viewed that food is used to developed social relationship of exchange and alliance between the various individuals and by a larger unit of the system. Mary Douglas understands how food and eating system reflects distinctions of social categories; she viewed that food can be understood as a part of material culture rather than a natural object in that like pottery it is the product of individual labor and reflects a cultural conception and designs (Douglas 1884, 105). As the reproducers and nurturance of society, women are involved in preparing the food for the whole family. They influence people and the whole society through their manipulation of the symbolic language of food. Food takes a symbolic significance of language and a channel of communication which connects and creates obligations and exerts influence (Counihan 1999, 48). Women build up the relationship between persons through food, and are the linchpin between the source of food, food preparation and the end consumer.

The Naga culinary world fits in perfectly into Levi Strauss's theory of culinary triangle. He argued about the culinary triangle on raw, cooked and decayed where men do not think about food in term of energy, but that one of the major civilizations of a society is the art of cooking the food. The cuisine of Nagas from the traditional society comprises of raw, cooked and fermented food. The Angami tribe and most of the tribes in the Naga society eat raw food, cooked food and fermented food (decayed food according to Levi Strauss). The ideology of food in terms of taboos, beliefs, habits, customs, etc, in Naga society has been determining the different attitudes towards communities among the people. Angami Naga society has many social aspects of food for consumption. Food consumption patterns in Angami Naga society are one social aspect which is a means of cultural identity. The Angami Nagas are all identified as non-vegetarian, but the traditional society witnessed the identity of rich and poor through their food consumption of rice and meat. The casteless society witnessed the difference of wealth, and depending on that, the pattern of consumption differs, where food is seen as a sign of wealth. Food categorizes and separates the people in the society into different classes. Food acts as one of the most important aspect for religious ceremonies and festivals.

Angami Naga women's identity is based not on the satisfaction of their own needs and desire, but of altruism and sacrifice for their family and menfolk of the society. In spite of the unselfish nature of a woman in Naga society, taboos surround them in all spheres of their life till death. The power of food that women have influenced the community to a great extent has identified with the food they offer. In a Naga society, giving food to neighbors, visitors, friends, and families has not been an uncommon act since the traditional times. Giving and exchanging of food is considered as a bond between two or more different groups or people. Rejection of food was considered as rejection of social mores. Barter system between different varieties of food was also seen in traditional period.

### **Different traditional foods:**

Food among the traditional Naga society can be broadly divided into wild fruits, cereals, vegetables, animal meat, rice beer, etc. Both

vegetarian and non-vegetarian foods are consumed by the Angami Nagas. The traditional Angami Naga society consumed millet and maize more than rice as rice was a rich man's food<sup>1</sup>. People had to work and earn rice from rich families or exchange of crops takes place very often in villages. Through the barter system of different food among the people, the relationship among them strengthens in many ways. The wealth of a person in the traditional Angami village is recognized from the amount of rice and food he owns.

Since the traditional period, Angami women have been a part and parcel in the whole aspect of life and especially with the social aspect of food. The later part of the traditional Angami society witnessed rice as the staple food<sup>2</sup>. People try to cultivate more of rice and less of other crops. There are different types of rice in Angami society. Rice can be cultivated from *nhalie* or *jhum*<sup>3</sup> cultivation and also from *tekhu* or terrace cultivation<sup>4</sup>. Barter system was common in traditional period. There are crops which are favorable in some specific region, thus the barter system was in practice before the money value came into being in Naga society. Mostly people who are poor cultivate other cash crops and rich people mostly cultivate rice. Thus, there was an exchange of different crops among them. All the families are non-vegetarian and one will find hardly any pure vegetarian in the whole of Angami village.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the elderly people, as told during the interaction and personal interview.

<sup>2</sup> Rice was brought into Naga Hills from Assam.

<sup>3</sup> Jhum cultivation is also known as burn and slashes cultivation. It is practice mostly by the northern and western Angamis as this type of cultivation needs less water unlike the terrace cultivation. Unlike the terrace cultivation, jhum cultivation needs more labor work. James C. Scott in his book '*The Art of Not Being Governed; An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*' also explains about the cultivation pattern about the regions who practices slash and burn cultivation. One of his findings in his book was the so called jhum cultivation among the upland Southeast Asian countries.

<sup>4</sup> Terrace cultivation is practiced mostly by the southern Angamis as they have more abundance of water unlike the northern Angamis.

The communication through food acts as a very strong bonding among the people knowingly and unknowingly. Giving food of any type to each other was a common act. Giving was highly appreciated by all without much expectation. The relationship between neighbors can be better by giving food to each other as love and taste of others' recipe. This untold communication of food built a bridge between two people or two families. Giving and offering of food to friends and foes bring together people from different place.

The working system of *peli*<sup>5</sup> or the peer group was prevalent and an important component in traditional Naga society. The members of the *Peli* usually enjoy working together and also enjoy having the good food being served to them. When we say good food here, we are referring to non-vegetarian food along with the traditional drink *Zu* the rice beer. Breakfast and lunch consist of Rice beer *Zu* i.e. the traditional beer, rice, meat, green vegetable curries, boiled vegetable items, etc. It is the women in the family who prepares and serves the group. The feasting of the *peli* or the peer group at night was considered to be one of the most important and merry making through food and drinks. The night party over food and drinks was hosted by the person whom they have worked for during the day. All the arrangement of the food and drinks are served by the women of the family and not by men. Any woman takes up serving as their duty even if it's not her home. Women are hired to cook food for the *peli* if there is no woman in a family.

### **Zu the traditional rice beer:**

The traditional Angami Naga society witnessed the free flow of *Zu* i.e. rice beer, which was considered as a daily drink and a ritual of the people. Drinking *Zu* was not wholly associated with the religious belief of the people. But *Zu* is used in all the religious ceremonies and

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<sup>5</sup> *Peli* is a name given to a group of people working together in the field. This group can be formed in a group or according to the convenience of the people who wanted to work together. Traditional Angami society witnesses the importance of *peli* according to age group. The peer group takes turns to work in the field of every members of the *peli*. *Peli* is one of the most important age group in a village in terms of work and bonding.

festivals of the Angami Nagas, which later on was perceived by many people that it was associated with the traditional religious belief. Offering and accepting of the drink to friends and families was considered to be a bond of friendship and relationship between the people. Rejection of *Zu* from others was seen as a rejection of friendship.

*Zu* in Angami Naga society takes one of the most important places among the food items in the traditional society. *Zu* is of different types but all are made from rice. The different categories of *Zu* also classify and determine the status of people in the village as the poorer families could not afford to produce rice in abundance in the traditional time. Some of the common *Zu* among the Angami are *Zutho*, *Thutshe*, *Zupfulho*, *Khe*, *Zuraho*, *Rohi*, etc. Mary Douglas is of the view that drinks act as markers of personal identity and boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (Douglas 1887, 8). A wealthy man in traditional Angami society provide *Zu* to all the village members during the time of feast of merit. Through the giving of *Zu* to the people in the village the wealthy men identify himself from the rest of the fellow villagers.

The preparation of the rice beer was usually done by the women. A woman is praised by the people by the way she makes *Zu* and serves the people. The identity of a woman earned through food gives her popularity among the village and community. Here, through her cooking and making *Zu*, food speaks for her on her behalf about her work as a woman. The power of food through the influence, power as termed by Counihan, is very much relevant in women's lives when it comes to food and cooking skills. Unlike many societies, the traditional women have the liberty to drink the rice beer *Zu* with or without their husbands. *Zu* was not considered to be an alcoholic drink, but as a normal daily drink which strengthens one's body. It was considered a respectable drink where the drink is served to the elderly male members' meetings in *dahu*<sup>6</sup> i.e. the sitting place. Serving drinks to

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<sup>6</sup> *Dahu* is built in front of the house of the village elder or In the higher place in the village where everyone can hear the announcement being shouted by the clan elder.

people was a daily duty of a woman of the community except in some few cases of ceremonial times.

The social structure in Angami society was also seen through drinking *Zu* in traditional period. Drinks occur and indicate groups in a society (Douglas 1887, 220). In Angami society before the coming of foreigners, apart from *Zu* and drinking water, no other foreign drink was used. Within a social system of a village state, *Zu* occurs within the social groups such as sexes, classes, guests, outsiders, etc. *Zu* was used in all the occasions in traditional society, be it in fields, homes, festivals, rituals, ceremonies, etc. *Zu* were used as ceremonial rituals in different forms. As a ritual, *Zu* was poured on the head of men's head by women chanting some words of victory against their enemies during head-hunting period. Many people<sup>7</sup> perceived that *Thutshe Zu* has medicinal purposes.

### **Ceremonial and Festival food:**

In all the festivals of the Angamis, along with celebration and merry making, food was considered an important part. The festivals of Angamis are closely associated with meat and through food people make merry and enjoy the festivals. Food is used as a part of a sacrificial item to their supernatural beings that they believe and worship. Ritual foods among the Angami community try to offer the possibility of understanding the world and changing it. With offering the food the people ask for fertility blessings and a better life. The activity of the Naga society starts with the rituals and sacrifice as first (Jacobs 1990, 84).

First, harvested crops are usually used for rituals and ceremonies. Then cock sacrifice, an important ritual, is made by the traditional Angami society. There are some ritual foods which are to be followed strictly by the villagers. For instance, a separate ritual curry is cooked

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<sup>7</sup> Almost all the respondents who say that *zu* is taken as medicinal purpose were those women who made and sell *Zu*. They told that people will come and buy *zu* from them for people who have problems especially who had surgical operations even if they are Christians.



specially for the woman during childbirth, which was not supposed to be shared by anyone. The other instances were, a healthy hen is cooked specially for the women to consume alone<sup>8</sup>. Returning menfolk from warfare and head-hunting were served food cooked by their wives and womenfolk of the village. Food rituals are followed when a person dies. When a person died an amount of food and *Zu* is kept on top of the grave as a ritual. They believe that the dead person should not go hungry to the dead land and that they should take the food and *zu* and fill their stomach on their way. It was a custom and ritual for women to initiate agriculture in Angami Naga society. So here, there is a link and a relationship created between human and the supernatural being by women. The beginning of the harvest was led or started by a woman known as “*Liedepfü*”<sup>9</sup> or the first reaper. The *liedepfü* played a very important role; until she starts the harvest no one could start harvesting. This ritual was done for the fruitfulness for the whole village.

### **Feast of merit:**

Feast among the Nagas was an important part of life which makes a symbolic statement about their power (Jacobs 1990, 80). Feast of merit or “*thessa*” in Angami Naga society can be given only by a wealthy man in a village. The person who gives the feast of merit is known as “*zhariümia*”. To gain fame and honor a wealthy man has to organize a feast for the whole of the village people that they acknowledge his wealth and he gets a title. It was to enhance the prestige of the feast giver and for social rank. The feast consists of food and drinks which will be served to the people to satisfy themselves to the fullest. It was through food that man identifies himself eligible to get the title of a wealthy one in the village. The identity of a wealthy man can be seen through his distribution of food and drinks. The symbolic behavior of food here plays a very important role. This exchange of wealth in terms of food plays a very important role in the lives of a person and for which women’s help is needed.

<sup>8</sup> This custom is practice till today by many Angami families.

<sup>9</sup> *Liedepfü* is a *tenyidie* word which means the lady who starts the harvest or reaps the crop.

The wife of the host tries her best to cook the best and serves the people with the *zu* she makes. Food here brings identity to both the husband and the wife. But when we looked into the work distributions of the feast, women are the one who works more than men in every activity. The making of *zu* for the feast of merit or the preparation of food items are all prepared by women and hardly by men. The traditional society witnesses the rigid patriarchal nature in this form of culture. A widow can never throw the feast of merit as the ritual requires the presence of both husband and wife. There is an exclusion of praise of the women in this feast even if they are the one who work for all the success of the feast. Foods which are prepared mostly by women bring honor and respect for the hosts to gain the title of wealthy men in the village and get other privileges. The culture of feast of merit in traditional Angami Naga society plays a very important role through food as its agent to identify a person's rank in a society before and after death.

### **Marriage food:**

Marriage between two people is celebrated with feasting and merry making. Feasting being one of the most important components of marriage, the use of meat was emphasized a lot by both the families. The traditional Angami family marriage is taken care by the groom in term of monetary needs. All the expenses are looked after by the groom and his family. The number of cattle he killed for the feast was counted and accordingly people understand whether he had earned enough to marry a girl or not. Food served to the people is considered the most important in a marriage in Angami society. Food here connects the relationship between the couples and the people who attend the marriage.

### **Unity or friendly feast:**

“*Kezekevi he*” or “Friendly or unity Feast” is another important feast among the Angamis. This feast can be given by a single person or community or village as a whole. Usually when there is disunity between two people, groups, villages, etc., the feast is given to have a

reconciliation or as a sign of unity. This friendly feast is given as a sign of unity between two persons or between villages. The friendly feast consists of varieties of meat and vegetables according to the economic status of the giver. Here food plays as a bond of relationship between peoples and between communities. People perceived that food builds relationships between humans and also with God.

### **Food taboo for women:**

From religious taboos to the social taboos, a girl from her childhood follows all the rules and taboos made by men. Of all the taboos, food taboo in Angami Naga society was followed strictly in the traditional period. Mary Douglas (1884) understands ritual prohibitions as protecting established categories, but one needs to carefully think and understand about this statement in Naga society. Fredrick Simons argues that belief system and their attendant rituals are the casual factors behind food taboos (Simmons 1994, 98). Food taboos among the Angami Nagas seem to be one of the major obstacles and deprivation for women when it comes to enjoyment and festivity in society. Though most of the foods are consumed by menfolk, there are also some foods which are avoided by the menfolk. But unlike men, women face more restrictions and taboos in the intake of food. Women in Naga society do not oppose taboos of food because of the sex-gender hierarchy embedded in Naga culture.

Partake of the food which are tabooed to women are considered to pollute and threaten the men and the society, whereas on the other hand, those tabooed foods which are seen as polluted were eaten by men. These food taboos can be seen as a power and enhance the male perception superiority to female. The rituals and food taboos create divisions of labor and economic niches. We can say that Women are shackled by the accepted food praxis in Naga society. The fear of supernatural calamities, economic disasters, and unusual dangers made them keep the taboos well. For instance, it is taboo for women in Angami society to eat animals which have nails. Because women are the one who cook the food for the whole family, they are the one who

takes the rice from the grain basket i.e. *chünuo*<sup>10</sup> and clean it to cook. It was a belief that, since women collect rice from the grain basket, they should not eat animals which have nails. If they take those meats, which are taboo for them, the grains will finish off so fast or go down easily because the animals which have nails are believed to dig things easier than the rest of the animals which do not have nails. Broken earthen pots and utensils are taboo for women to use as women take out rice to clean and cook for the whole family. Cooking and eating from broken utensils lead to poverty of wealth in terms of rice. Women in Angami Naga society are not allowed to partake those meats of the animals killed by wild beasts whereas men can eat without any restrictions. Almost all the taboos of food on women were related with the economy of the family in terms of food. The women folk are indirectly blamed for the quantity of food the family has.

It is argued that all these “taboos” are levied on women as a “protection for women from defilement” (Roy 2004, 35). Women in society are considered to stay at home and do all the household chores; this was also the reason why they were not allowed to eat some of the animals which roam around freely. The concept of ‘women stay inside and work’ relates itself to the food habit a woman takes. Women are not allowed to eat the taboo food prepared on a separate hearth for the *Sekrenyi* rituals. It is taboo for the women folk to even touch those foods, as the foods are cooked specially for the rituals of the festivals which is to be performed by the male members alone. Women are considered to be unclean and a weaker sex; thus the food touched by them cannot be used for ceremonial purposes. These food taboos increase the barriers of separation between men and women and not just a “protection from defilement” as mention above. There is no such food taboo for men in Angami society. But there are some food which is prepared especially for women during childbirth and marriage. But these foods are not taboo for men.

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<sup>10</sup> *Chünuo* is a huge bamboo basket which is weaved and kept for storing grains. They store all their harvest grains and keep in the *chünuo*. All the families in the villages own at least one or two. The wealthy family owns more than one or two to store their grains.

## **Conclusion:**

The identity of Angami women in traditional society witnesses the allocation of society into individuality and gender by the function of food. Sidney W. Mintz and Christine M. Du Bois also try to understand how the food functions in social allocation in terms of race, class, individuality and gender. Food also identifies a woman of a community from the other through the ethnic cuisine she cooked, which associates her with the geographically, and historically defines her community (Mintz and Du Bois 2002, 109). Understanding food and eating is a statement of understanding about identity and the boundaries of self. There are many scholars and writers who state that a major component of female identity is the predominant role of women in feeding and food. We can thus say that women get identified with the power of food. Women from traditional period had been processing all the food products as a nurturance to the family. Women from marginalized to the rich family with supervisory and management role have attachment with food processors and the cooks.

It is through food that the cultural differences of men and women can be expressed and seen by the food they eat and taboo. Different food habits and ways influence different classes of people in the same society. The analysis of food habits and food ways need to be studied in depth for a better understanding of socio-cultural aspects of women in society. Women have been an important part in bringing the changes and continuity of food ideology and food habits. Women have been a carrier of socio-cultural identities through their enormous work in the process and preparation of food.

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