

UNVEILING THE CULINARY HERITAGE OF THE TRADITIONAL FESTIVALS OF THE MAO

¹A Kazhiini, ²Dr. Mamata Pandit

¹Assistant professor, Department of History
Don Bosco College (Autonomous) Maram

²Dean of Academics, Mahatma Gandhi University

Abstract

The culinary traditions of the Mao Naga community are deeply interwoven with their agricultural practices, ritual life and collective identity. Festival foods prepared from locally cultivated crops, forest resources, livestock and preserved ingredients embody indigenous knowledge systems that emphasize sustainability, communal labor, and reverence for nature. Within Mao traditional festivals, food is not merely consumed but ritually prepared, shared, and symbolically interpreted as an expression of gratitude, unity, and continuity of ancestral heritage. This study explores the culinary heritage embedded in the traditional festivals of the Mao. Based on unstructured interviews, participant observation, the research examines how festival foods function as expressions of identity, spirituality, and social cohesion. The findings reveal that rice and its fermented form as rice beer constitute central ritual offerings symbolizing hospitality, communal bonding, and thanksgiving for agricultural abundance. Prominent festive foods such as rice, meat, smoked meat with bamboo shoot or fermented soybean, sticky rice soup, cooked beans and traditional sticky rice bread reflect an indigenous culinary system grounded in local biodiversity, preservation techniques and minimal-oil preparation. Beyond sustenance, these foods embody cosmological beliefs, ancestral memory and ecological relationships that reinforce communal values and cultural continuity. The study highlights the importance of documenting and preserving Mao festival culinary traditions amid socio-cultural transformation, affirming their enduring role as vital expressions of heritage, identity and collective belonging.

Keywords: Traditional festivals, culinary heritage, ritual food, indigenous knowledge, cultural identity.

Introduction

The culinary traditions of the Mao Naga community represent a living expression of agricultural heritage, ritual practice and collective identity rooted in the hill regions of Manipur particularly in the ecological landscape inhabited by the Maos. Living in close relationship with forest ecosystems, the Mao people have developed food systems grounded in indigenous knowledge, seasonal resource use and sustainable practices. Traditional foods are simple in preparation yet culturally profound emerging from locally cultivated crops, forest resources, livestock and preserved ingredients. Within festival contexts, food transcends nourishment to become a symbolic medium of gratitude, unity and ancestral continuity. The preparation and sharing of foods such as rice beer, smoked meat, sticky rice soup, cooked beans and traditional sticky rice bread reflect communal cooperation, hospitality and reverence for the land. These culinary traditions also embody medicinal knowledge, ecological awareness and ritual meaning, reinforcing the interdependence of food, spirituality and social life.

Mao festival gastronomy further illustrates the broader patterns of tribal food culture characterized by fermentation, preservation and minimal processing. Boiling and smoking remain dominant cooking methods; while fermented ingredients derived from bamboo shoots, soybean, and other indigenous resources enhance flavor, nutrition, and longevity of food. Women play a central role in preserving culinary knowledge through the preparation of fermented foods and ritual beverages, ensuring cultural transmission across generations. Seasonal harvesting, storage practices and communal preparation demonstrate an adaptive food system deeply aligned with environmental rhythms. However, socio-cultural transformations and the increasing influence of modern food systems pose challenges to the continuity of these traditions. Against this backdrop, the culinary heritage of Mao traditional festivals emerges as a vital cultural archive one that sustains identity, strengthens social cohesion and calls for systematic documentation and preservation.

Literature Review (Theoretical Framework)

Scholarly discussions on traditional food systems emphasize that indigenous cuisines extend far beyond biological sustenance to encompass ecological knowledge, cultural practices and ritual meanings embedded within community life. Kuhnlein and Receveur (1996) conceptualize traditional food systems as dynamic networks of knowledge linking food production, preparation and consumption to local ecosystems and seasonal rhythms. Within this framework, food functions as a repository of intergenerational knowledge and cultural continuity. Complementing this perspective, Bhalla et al. (2008) highlight that food habits are shaped by cultural values, belief

systems and social structures, demonstrating that dietary practices operate as expressions of identity and collective worldview. These theoretical insights provide a foundational lens for interpreting festival foods among Mao communities in Nagaland as embodiments of ecological adaptation and inherited cultural knowledge.

From a historical perspective, food traditions have been interpreted as carriers of collective memory and socio-economic history. The work of Sidney Mintz demonstrates how food practices encode historical processes, cultural adaptation and social relationships over time. This historical lens positions Mao festival foods as living continuities of ancestral knowledge shaped by ecological conditions and ritual traditions. Integrating historical and anthropological approaches thus enables the conceptualization of Mao festival gastronomy as a bio cultural system in which ecological resources, ritual practices, and symbolic meanings interact to sustain cultural heritage.

Anthropological scholarship further deepens understanding of food as a symbolic and ritual medium. Food practices are not merely nutritional responses but socially constructed acts shaped by religious, economic, and political influences (Bhalla et al., 2008). Phillips (2006) expands this view by emphasizing that cultural change in food systems must be understood through interconnected processes of production, preparation, and consumption. These perspectives resonate with structural anthropological interpretations advanced by Claude Lévi-Strauss, who viewed food practices as symbolic systems mediating relationships between nature and culture. Applied to Mao traditional festivals, ritual foods function as cultural texts that encode social relations, reinforce communal bonds, and communicate shared cosmological beliefs.

At the same time, contemporary scholarship documents significant transformations affecting indigenous food systems worldwide. The expansion of industrial food markets and processed diets has contributed to the displacement of traditional dietary practices (Sekhar, 2018). Institutional mechanisms such as public distribution systems frequently marginalize indigenous food preferences and reshape consumption patterns (Settee, 2011). Environmental change and land degradation further erode biodiversity and indigenous ecological knowledge (Malhotra et al., 2021), producing consequences for nutrition, social cohesion, and cultural continuity (Kearney, 2019). In response, scholars emphasize the urgency of documenting and revitalizing traditional food practices as integral components of sustainable cultural systems (Edison & Devi, 2019). These transformations provide an essential contextual backdrop for examining Mao festival cuisine as a site of negotiation between continuity and change. Amid changing scenario, the study intends to: 1) document the culinary heritage 2) To examine how Mao festival foods express indigenous knowledge, ritual meaning, and collective identity, sustaining cultural continuity 3) To examine how Mao festival foods express indigenous knowledge, ritual meaning, and collective identity, sustaining cultural continuity.

Mao Festivals and Culinary Practices

Mao traditional festivals are deeply rooted in the agricultural cycle, marking key stages such as pre-planting, sowing, and pre-harvest periods. Within this ritual framework, food serves both sacred and social purposes: it is offered to God and deities in gratitude for abundance while also anchoring communal feasting practices that express shared beliefs and values. Guided by the lunar calendar, the preparation and consumption of festival foods reinforce cultural identity, social cohesion, and collective well-being. Major celebrations such as Chithuni, Saleni, Chijini, and Onuni therefore function as important contexts through which the culinary heritage of the Mao community is preserved and transmitted across generations.

Chithuni expresses the culinary heritage of the Mao Nagas through ritualized preparation, offering, and communal consumption of food. Festival foods especially rice, meat, rice beer serve sacred functions and other food items such as sticky rice bread, sticky rice tea, steam beans, smoked meat, seasonal green leafy vegetables, seasonal fruits, fermented bamboo shot, soya beans symbolizing gratitude, blessing and prosperity. Preparations such as brewing rice beer in advance, baking decorated bread, and preparing meat follow a structured ritual calendar that sacralizes both production and consumption. Ritual offerings, including rice beer placed in banana-leaf cups as thanksgiving to God, and the sacrificial preparation of animals for shared meals, highlight the spiritual and agricultural foundations of festival food practices.

Meat and rice beer are widely shared among households with special distributions to married women, guests and newlywed couples, reinforcing kinship ties and communal solidarity. Evening gatherings around bonfires further strengthen social cohesion through collective consumption and celebration. The culinary cycle concludes with ceremonial seed sowing and post-festival restrictions on animal slaughter, linking ritual abundance to renewed agricultural activity and ensuring the continuity and transmission of Mao culinary heritage across generations.

The Saleni (Kapeni) festival preserves Mao culinary heritage through sacred preparation, offering, sharing and exchange of food embedded in ritual life. Food functions as a spiritual medium linking the community with Oramei

(God) and ancestral spirits, as seen in rites where rice grains symbolize abundance and sacred meals express thanksgiving and purification. Animal sacrifice especially pigs and other permitted animals transforms domestic and agricultural resources into consecrated festive food, while offerings of rice, meat, and rice beer placed on banana leaves seek protection, prosperity, and health. Culinary exchange reinforces kinship bonds, with families preparing and gifting food and drink (such as Odu and pork portions like Sonü) during reunions and send-off rituals. Through these practices ritual offerings, sacred meals and ceremonial food sharing Saleni integrates spiritual belief, social relationships and agricultural symbolism, ensuring the continuity of Mao ritual food traditions across generations.

The Chijini festival expresses Mao culinary heritage through ritual offerings, communal feasting and the sacralization of agricultural food resources. Food functions as a medium of thanksgiving and supplication, with offerings made to the earth and sky and to the land deity for favorable rainfall and a successful paddy season. The feast marks the formal beginning of paddy transplantation, linking ritual consumption with agricultural renewal and collective labor. Communal feasting accompanying prayers, rituals, and shared work reinforces unity, gratitude, and reverence for the natural elements that sustain food production.

The Onuni festival reflects culinary heritage as a celebration of harvest abundance and communal sharing. Large quantities of meat and rice beer are prepared and generously distributed among family, friends, and visitors, symbolizing prosperity, hospitality, and gratitude for a successful agricultural cycle. Evening gatherings around bonfires, where elders share rice beer while singing traditional songs, highlight food and drink as carriers of memory, identity, and social continuity. Through thanksgiving feasts and widespread sharing of harvest foods, Onuni preserves the Mao tradition of linking sustenance, spirituality, and community life.

Continuity and Change

Continuity in Mao festival gastronomy is sustained through the persistent ritual role of food as a medium of gratitude, blessing, and communal solidarity. Even amid religious change, many households continue preparing sticky rice bread smeared with perila seeds, meat, and traditional foods for offerings, feasting, and exchange, preserving the symbolic link between sustenance, spirituality, and agriculture. While the adoption of Christianity has reduced or reshaped certain ritual elements in some villages, core practices of thanksgiving, communal sharing, and harvest celebration remain active, demonstrating cultural adaptation rather than disappearance. Thus, culinary traditions continue to function as carriers of identity and collective memory within Mao communities across Nagaland and Manipur.

Modern transformations have introduced both pressures and adaptations within Mao culinary heritage. Changing lifestyles, education and expanding modern food systems have influenced preparation methods, participation patterns and the scale of traditional feasting. Some ritual restrictions and practices have declined in frequency and convenience-oriented foods increasingly coexist with indigenous dishes. Nevertheless, traditional techniques such as fermentation, smoking and seasonal preservation remain integral and festival contexts continue to prioritize locally sourced ingredients, communal preparation and structured ritual calendars. These dynamics reflect a process of selective continuity in which tradition is maintained through modification rather than static preservation.

Efforts toward preservation are embedded within everyday practice and collective memory, particularly through intergenerational transmission led by women who safeguard knowledge of fermentation, ritual beverages and ceremonial foods. Festival feasts, food exchange and agricultural rites function as living archives that document indigenous knowledge, ecological awareness and social values. Increasing recognition of the cultural significance of Mao festival gastronomy has strengthened calls for systematic documentation, safeguarding and scholarly engagement. In this context, the culinary heritage of Mao traditional festivals endures as a resilient cultural system one that negotiates religious and modern influences while sustaining identity, cohesion and continuity across generations.

Findings

Documenting the culinary heritage of Mao traditional festivals reveals a food system deeply rooted in agriculture, ecology, and ritual practice. Festival foods prepared from locally cultivated crops, forest resources, livestock, and preserved ingredients reflect indigenous knowledge of sustainability, seasonal resource use, and minimal-oil preparation. Core items such as rice, rice beer, smoked meat, fermented bamboo shoot, soybean preparations, sticky rice soup, cooked beans, and traditional sticky rice bread represent a biocultural system linking production, preservation, and consumption. Cooking methods such as boiling, smoking, and fermentation, along with communal preparation and intergenerational knowledge transmission—especially through women—form a living archive of Mao foodways across Nagaland and Manipur.

Mao festival foods express indigenous knowledge, ritual meaning, and collective identity through their sacred preparation, offering, and exchange. Within festivals aligned to the agricultural calendar, food functions simultaneously as nourishment and symbolic communication with divine and ancestral forces. Ritual offerings of rice, meat, and rice beer signify gratitude for abundance and prayers for prosperity, while communal feasting and food gifting reinforce kinship bonds, hospitality, and social cohesion. The use of locally sourced ingredients, preservation techniques, and seasonal timing demonstrates ecological awareness and sustainable practice, embedding cosmological beliefs and ancestral memory within everyday culinary acts.

The continuity of Mao cultural identity is sustained through festival gastronomy as a dynamic system of adaptation and preservation. Despite religious change and modern influences that reshape certain practices and introduce new consumption patterns, core traditions of communal sharing, ritual thanksgiving, and agricultural symbolism remain resilient. Festival feasts, food exchange, and structured ritual calendars continue to transmit ecological knowledge and social values across generations. Through documentation, lived practice, and intergenerational transmission, Mao culinary traditions persist as vital expressions of heritage, reinforcing collective belonging while negotiating continuity and change.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the culinary traditions embedded within Mao traditional festivals constitute a dynamic cultural system in which agriculture, spirituality, ecology and social life are deeply intertwined. Festival foods derived from local biodiversity and prepared through indigenous techniques such as fermentation, smoking and communal processing function not only as sustenance but as symbolic expressions of gratitude, identity and ancestral continuity. Ritual offerings, communal feasting and structured agricultural observances demonstrate how food mediates relationships between humans, nature and the divine while reinforcing social cohesion and intergenerational knowledge transmission. Despite religious transformation and the growing influence of modern food systems, core culinary practices persist through adaptive continuity, sustained by collective memory and everyday practice. The study therefore affirms that Mao festival gastronomy remains a vital cultural archive across Mao inhabited areas, one that preserves indigenous knowledge, strengthens communal belonging, and underscores the urgent need for systematic documentation and preservation in the face of ongoing socio-cultural change.

Reference

1. Devi, P., and P. Kumar. "Traditional, Ethnic and Fermented Foods of Different Tribes of Manipur." *Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2012
2. Edison, M., and R. Devi. "Preserving Traditional Food Systems and Cultural Knowledge." *Journal of Indigenous Studies*, 2019.
3. M Kearney, J. (2019). Changing food consumption patterns and their drivers. *Encyclopaedia of Food Security and Sustainability*, 16-24. <https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-08-100596-5.21988-4>
4. Levi-Strauss, Claude. *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology. Volume 1*. Translated by John and Doreen Weightman, University of Chicago Press, 1983.
5. Maheo, Lorho Mary. *The Mao Naga Tribe of Manipur: A Demographic Anthropological Study*. Mittal Publications, 2004.
6. Malhotra, A, Nandigama, S., & Bhattacharya, K. S. (2021). Food, fields and forage: A socio-ecological account of cultural transitions among the Gaddis of Himachal Pradesh in India. *Helion*, 7(7), e07569. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e07569>
7. Mao, A. A., and N. Odyuo. "Traditional Fermented Foods of Naga Tribes of Northeastern India." *Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2007, pp. 37–41.
8. Mintz, Sidney W. *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. Penguin Books, 1985.
9. Nepuni, William. *Socio-Cultural History of the Shiipfomei Naga Tribe*, Mittal Publication, 2010.
10. Phillips, Robert B. "Cultural Change and Food Systems." *Food Systems and Sustainability Theory*, edited volume, 2006.
11. Sekhar, D. (2018). *An Analysis of the Performance of Targeted Public Distribution System in Kerala* [Doctoral dissertation]. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/248988>
12. Sette, P. (2011). Indigenous knowledge: Multiple approaches. *Indigenous Philosophies and Critical Education*, 434-450. <https://doi.org/10.3726/978-1-4539-0131-1/37>
13. Singh, Thangjam Anand, Prakash K. Sarangi, and Ng. Joykumar Singh. "Traditional Processed Foods of the Ethnic Tribes of Western Hills of Manipur, India." *International Journal of Current Microbiology and Applied Sciences*, vol. 7, no. 10, 2018.