



Everyday food and public feasting: A discussion of the Manipuri platter

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Abstract

This paper is a descriptive study of the Meitei community's *usop chakluk* (feast platter), which constitutes at least seventeen dishes that are ritually placed in fixed positions. It attempts to discuss ritualistic nuances that go into the preparation of this *chakluk*—from the recipe of every dish to its preparation and the science involved in the placing of the dishes. It highlights the composition, the rules of serving, the concept of sacredness involved in the procuring, making, and eating of the *chakluk*. Through this, it tries to explore the aspect and role of memory in the re-enactment of cultural knowledge regarding rituals of consumption of the Meitei community.

Through an ethnographic exploration of three spaces involving both the public and private realm—the kitchen, the community feasting, and market system, the paper explores the notion of eating which is imbued with cultural symbolism and ritualistic importance. The ingredients used in such *chaklaks* or feasts are mostly sourced from the Ima Keithel (Women Market) in Manipur where one can see the convergence of the sacred and the profane. The Ima Keithel thus serves as a significant culinary contact zone. The historical importance of Ima Keithel and its continuing relevance is explored to understand the linkages of traditions and contemporary innovations in community feasting. Eating as an effective tool in these spaces evokes different emotions, follows distinct trajectories and serves to invoke certain memories of the past whilst creating new ones at the same time.

Keywords: Eating, Food Culture, Purity-Pollution, Meitei

1. Introduction

'*Chak-cha yuthak fajaba*' is a common saying of the Meiteis. It literally translates to having good mannerisms in eating and drinking. One also usually greets someone by asking '*Chak Charabo?*' (Have you had food?). Conversations on food lubricate the social interactions of the community. Community feasting or a feast in general is part of a Meitei individual's life. From one's birth to death, a moment of celebration or grief, food has always been central to social events. Food preparation and consumption is thus taken very seriously among the community. An invitation to feast together essentially conveys closeness, hospitality, and courtesy and is thus an effective tool to reinforce social bonds.

This essay, through the *usop* looks at three spaces where consumption, production and distribution of food takes place to grasp an understanding of foodways among the Meiteis – the kitchen, public feasting and the market. The rituals and principals involved in the ways of eating among the *Meiteis* are explored through conversations with *eigya(s)* who are assigned to cook public feasts and women who occupy spaces of the kitchen at home and market space. Their everyday life narratives are explored to highlight the significances of consumption rituals. Nostalgia is a theme that runs through the paper, in terms of remembering past notions of eating and commensality.

2. Eating Rituals in the Home: The Meitei *Chaksang*

Every culture has ways of eating and offering everyday food whether it be in the public or the private space. Among the Meiteis, preparation and consumption of everyday food follow certain rituals of purity and sacredness.

Religion and family tradition are mainly the factors that shape such norms and traditions. The concept of purity and pollution is relevant even today in both the private and public sphere of the community. T.C. Hodson, a professor of social anthropology at the University of Cambridge, who has worked on culture and communities of Manipur, in his book *The Meiteis* (first published in 1908), argues that the food and drink culture of the Meiteis has seen certain changes after the introduction of Hinduism, such as prohibition of eating meat and even the intake of milk (Hodson 2016: 47). Among the Meiteis, he highlighted that certain groups of people were abstained from consuming certain food items. These items are understood as *namungba*, meaning taboo for the Meiteis.

Indeed, of every prohibition which rests on vague undefinable sanctions, they use the term *namungba*. Each clan ^[1] in Manipur regards some object as *namungba* to it, and believes that if by inadvertence some member of the clan touches one of these objects he will die a mysterious death, or suffer from some incurable, incomprehensible disease, pine away and die. (Hodson 2016: 118).

In a Meitei household, *chaksang* must be located in the north-west section and is more than just a space of cooking and eating but also a sacred space of offering and rituals. This norm is generally followed even today. Besides the cooking hearth which is now replaced by gas stoves, there is a fireplace known as *phunga*, where a smoldering fire is maintained. This space is considered sacred as it is associated with Goddess *Imoinu* ^[2], who is placed next to the fireplace in the form of small earthen mound. Today, these mounds are being replaced by photographs or clay statuettes of *Imoinu* who is often represented as an old woman. Before each meal, food is offered to the figurines or photographs that are placed in a specific corner of the *chaksang* in most households where the *phunga* is absent.

Women are taught from early adolescence to bathe before cooking, believing in the notion of menstrual cycle as impure. After bathing in the morning, Meitei women apply the *chandon* (a mark drawn on the nose or forehead using a sandalwood paste) after which the women usually offer morning prayers and then enter the kitchen. A daughter-in-law especially is expected to follow the norms of the family they become a part of which mostly revolves around maintaining the concept of purity and pollution, or what is called *amang-aseng*. Earlier, most Meitei household followed a strict vegetarian diet. Other than fish, consumption of any other kind of meat was considered impure. The space of kitchen was thus considered sacred where even clothes used for *puja* or rituals are stored, a practice which is diminishing. Sinam Ebempishak (77) and Thounaojam Sanatombi (75) ^[3] talk about the gradual changes of norms that has taken place within the space of *chaksang* (kitchen). Both women in

conversation narrates how in their early years of marriage used kitchen as a space for more than just cooking. A corner of the kitchen was particularly used for changing attires for ritual purposes. Commensality in the kitchen was strictly maintained in the Meitei household. Sharing meal space with the in-laws and husband was not the norm. Certain areas of the porch were moped, and guarded with a seat so that children and pets do not enter before elders took their seats. In terms of consumption of meals, the patriarch and male members were served first separately while women and other members of the family generally share the dishes from the same bowl. However, it is important to note that in-laws are served first before everyone. This pattern reflects the hierarchy and basic rules set in the Meitei kitchen bounded as it is by patriarchal notions.

With changing food habits, different meats came to be a part of the consumption pattern in the community. Earlier, cooking meat in the kitchen was not allowed while fish was permitted. Considered a masculine labor, it was often cooked in a temporary fireplace set up outside the kitchen where the men would cook it. Even today for certain families, it is cooked outside the kitchen but not as widely as before.

Like in every other culture, food holds certain meanings and symbols influenced by the events of everyday life. Food holds a strong sense of togetherness and celebration among the Meiteis. Eating together becomes a medium of exchanging and acknowledging celebrations of all kinds. Among the Meiteis, commensality is performed in many contexts ^[4]. During celebrations such as *Ningol chakouba* ^[5], the family eats together and certain commensality norms are relaxed even in terms of division of cooking. On this day, male members of the family cook for their sisters. In times of death, the deceased family members along with the extended family are considered 'impure' and thus follow specific mourning rituals which extends to the *chaksang* (kitchen). When the news of death reaches the relatives, the utensils are all washed and the kitchen cleansed. The families follow a simple diet with no meat or fish for the entire grieving period of 14 days which is followed by a feast on the *shradda* ceremony as a send-off of the deceased.

3. Public Commensality: *Usop Chakluk*

Feasting is held in various ways among the Meiteis, depending on the occasion. The particular feast of *usop* is held to commemorate death anniversaries or as offerings to God, wherein a family invite others, especially the elders of the locality and extended family members and friends for a meal. An invitation is extended to the deity of the local *bhamon* ^[6] to grace the occasion. The meal is prepared by *bhamons* who will also serve the food at the gathering. The following is a small ethnographic study conducted at

¹ Loosely translated as clan, 'salai' is a large exogamous unit, each tracing from a common, mythical ancestor, who is part of the Meitei divine pantheon. It includes the *Mangangs/Ningthoujas*, *Angoms*, *Khumans*, *Moirangs*, *Khaba-Nganbas*, *Luwangs* and *Chengleis*, all of which have a territorial boundary in the valley. See: Brara, Vijaylakshmi. N. (1998)

² *Imoinu Ima* is worshipped in the kitchen space in Meitei household. She is the deity of food and prosperity and every year Meiteis celebrate *Imoinu* by offering the season's vegetables and fish, particularly *sareng* (*Wallago attu*).

³ As a part of my field work, personal interviews of women at home, *bhamons* and women in the market space were conducted. The narratives of

everyday life of these two elderly Meitei women have been included in this paper to highlight the changes in the kitchen norms.

⁴ C.B. Tan (2015:(34-65)

⁵ *Ningol Chakouba* is one of the biggest festivals celebrated among the Meiteis. On this day married daughters visit their parental home and share a luncheon with parents and siblings

⁶ A term used to refer to the Brahmins of Manipur. There have been migration and settlement of Brahmins from South Asia to Manipur since the fourteenth century. They were gradually assimilated within the folds of Meitei society with the King granting them land rights and permission to marry Meitei women.

Govindaji Temple ^[7], Imphal.

Eigyā ^[8] Sh. Inaocha (65), a brahmin chef who has been the head-chef for feasts since 1988 explains the science of the food presented in the Meitei feast platter, *chakluk*. *Chakluk*, he says, are not arranged arbitrarily but involves rules and technicalities. It involves careful study and selection of ingredients, recipes and preparation of the dishes, as there are 'taboo' ingredients, which cannot be included in certain feasts. Even in the speech or language used, one has to be careful in addressing the *eigyā*.

The term *chak-chaba* (to eat rice) is used for daily meals but when it comes to feasting, the term *laigi usop* (feast for Gods) is used. Therefore, when a person requests *eigyā* to make ritualistic food, it should be addressed in the thought of offering to the Gods and not for human consumption. For a successful *usop*, there are certain essential dishes to be prepared regardless of personal preference of the host. According to *eigyā* Nabakumar, some of the essential *mathel* (dishes) include— *champhut* (simple boiled vegetable), *eromba* (mashed vegetable with chili), *singju* (a mixture of fresh seasonal vegetables with roasted and pounded perilla seeds and besan), *utti* (a popular dish made by slow cooking vegetables with cooking soda, it can be prepared by varied vegetable of choice), *saag*, *kanghou* (dry fried vegetables), *hangam thongba* (mustard leaves curry), *suktani* (a bitter dish made from the leaves of *nong-mang-kha* (*Phlogacanthus thyriformis*) and *achar* (of green chili/gooseberry made with mustard seeds), three to four variety of lentils, etc.

The above dishes are traditionally served on skillfully crafted banana leaves. The dishes are systematically arranged and sequenced, starting from the right side of the *chakluk*. The first dish served is *champhut*, and so on in the same series described above. The idea is to serve the dishes in the form of a garland. Among the dishes there are hierarchies based on taste and form for instance, *Hawaithongba* (Dal/lentils) plays an important role in vegetarian feasts, as its stock is used as a base for other main dishes. All of the dishes perform its own tasks of complementing each other in taste.

All these dishes are first offered to deities, however certain

fermented dishes—*hawaizaar* made of soyabean or *soibum* made of bamboo shoot are prohibited from offering, as it is considered impure. As the feast commences, commensality ritual and norms are strictly followed—men and women are sat separately, the servers are all *bhamon* men, the person who serve water may not be a *bhamon* but always a man. In the course of the feast when the *eigyās* serve food, certain distance is maintained by putting away the hand from the *chakluk* and any contact with them is avoided. The host family ideally eats in the second round or in the last round of the feasts. The head-chef announces the beginning of the feast with a slogan. As explained by the *eigyā*, in order of serving, the first dish marking the beginning of the feast is a lentil dish—*sagol hawai* (split black beans) served on the right side of the platter. The reason for serving it first is that it as a sticky texture and therefore moistens the food pipe. *Utti* dish is served as cooling flavor in between spicy dishes such as *eromba* or *singju*. *Mairen thongba* (Pumpkin dish) is considered an important dish in a feast as it acts as a catalyst, in case of food poisoning. It even goes by a saying— "*Mairen katladi sana katpadouna mahei chaowi*" (If you offer pumpkin dish in feasts, you shall receive the blessings in gold). The end of the feast is marked by the distribution of a fruit dish and salt.

Food consumption of a community is heavily influenced by stories of the past. This is clearly seen in *usops* offered at the Govinda temple where the norms of consumption are still dictated by traditions. As narrated by *eigyā* Nabakumar, at the temple, aromatic herbs and ingredients such as onion, ginger, garlic and leeks are completely prohibited. This practice also emphasizes the importance of offering all goods of the rituals to the deities before consumption. Hence, even the aroma and scent are regulated within the temple.

In *Raj Bhog*, a feast arranged for the royal family 108 dishes are prepared for offering and consumption. It is also known as *Ningthem Kriton* and continues to be followed wherein 108 dishes are cooked and offered to the royal ancestors in prayer and consumed only by the royal family members.



Source: Kangla Online (<https://kanglaonline.com/2011/07/108-dishes-offered-to-shri-shri-govindajee-manipur/>)<accessed on 20 Jan. 23>

Fig 1: 108 dishes offered at the Govindaji Temple

⁷ Govindaji Temple is located within the compound of the erstwhile King of Manipur. Housing the household deities of the royal family of Manipur, it occupies and embodies an important place in the socio-religious and cultural life of the people of Manipur.

⁸ Another term used to refer to *bhamon* who are specialized in the cooking trait

Meitei *usops* hosted at home^[9] echo the notion of purity and sacredness throughout its time of offering to consumption. The various actors in the *usop* perform specific tasks responsibly to guard the tradition. The status and roles of the *bhamons* in the Govinda temple was appointed by the monarch to only certain *yumnak* (clans) to maintain the division of labor in cooking system—status given to cut ingredients and arrange vegetables, another to add or collect water, etc. The *kala* or art of cooking is entrusted from generation to generation and by accompanying the older *eigyas* to the *usops* and learning from their cooking.

As shared by *eigya* Nabakumar, the Govindaji temple was invited to participate in the event of Temple Foods of India in Delhi to showcase the food culture of Manipur wherein each dish of different temples across India were cooked and served. He explained that it was a task just to finalize certain dishes that could particularly represent Manipur and its identity through food. In addition to the traditional cooking tools, the head-chefs were also equipped with a microphone to announce and explain the dishes served for this particular event. This speaks of the consumption norms of the Meiteis, as *usops* are generally consumed in silence and even the *bhamons* wear mouth guards known as *khangchet* to avoid any form of pollution.

We have seen that eating patterns among the Meiteis follow a strict notion of purity and pollution, both in the private and public space. In *usops* and other ritual ceremonies, people are required to make offerings to the deities, other than the seasonal vegetables or fruits. These specific offerings are particularly arranged—such as banana leaves, dairy products, honey, sage, agarbati, garland, flowers, beetle nuts and leaves, fruits, garments and cloth for the gods or deities, and so on. These items in meiteilon are known as '*lai gi potlam*' (*lai*: deity, *potlam*: goods). A ceremony depending on the occasion demands particular *potlams* and is not considered complete without the necessary *potlams*, which are to be procured from the market.

These *potlams* in the market space are sold in a certain manner—from the placements of the stalls to the vendors, there are elements of purity and pollution played out even in a public realm like the market. The vendors who sell *lai gi potlam*, are mostly those women who have undergone menopause. They would also be seen wearing '*chandon*', the conspicuous symbol of purity among the Meiteis. Therefore, for a holistic account of understanding the purity-pollution aspect, the demarcated functions and spaces within the market is further examined. The following is a descriptive exploration of the Khwairamband *Ima Keithel*, one of the main markets in Manipur.

4. *Ima Keithel*: Where the private and public converges

When we talk about food consumption or food habit of a particular region or community, we must talk about the source of the food itself. This section discusses the development of markets in Imphal, particularly, the *Ima Keithel*. Literally translated as women market, it is located in Imphal, the capital of Manipur. It is much celebrated as a

space managed and run by only women vendors. Naoroibam (2015)^[10] discusses the function and importance of market in the context of Manipur. Markets in meiteilon is called, *Keithel*, where the prefix '*Kei*' means the place where food grains and other commodities are stored; the suffix '*thel*' means to put or place for displaying. More than just the commodities, what is interesting in the market system is the attachment of cosmological beliefs of the people. Naoroibam writes, 'The place where the seven goddesses were selling articles on '*Lukmai*' (rounded shallow basket) is still preserved as a sacred place in Kangla^[11].^[12] His work highlights the importance of the belief system of the community that even extends to the public sphere such as the market, and more importantly how the market system existed since an early period.

During the pre-colonial period, Meitei kings were involved in the construction of *keithels*, closely observing the location and associated architectural principles. The kings religiously paid homage to the deities guarding the *keithel*. There is a space delineated within the *keithel* for performing rituals and offerings to the deities. There are designated attendees, who take care of this sacred space where regular offerings are made. The *Ima keithel* is guarded by '*Mahousa Lairembi*' who ensures the protection and prosperity of the market and its vendors.



Source: Author

Fig 2: Mahousa Lairembi or Lairembi Achouba at the Ima Market, Imphal

Many goods and produce are accumulated and sold in *Ima Keithel*—pottery, fresh and dried fish, vegetables of all kinds, handloom products, caned handicrafts, cutlery and also products for ritualistic purposes or otherwise including fruits, puffed rice, agarbati, candles, sage, banana leaves, milk and dairy products. Each vendor is allotted a space or plot to sell their goods. Social contacts and inheritance laws play a major role in securing market plots in the *Ima Keithel*. Over the years, the *keithel* has followed its cultural norms and traditions that guide the market and the women vendors. The following is a reflection on the diminishing *keithel* traditions.

4.1. Stories from the *Keithel*

Kabok is one of the traditional food items used for everyday as well as for rituals in the Meitei household—marriages,

⁹ Most people now choose to offer *usops* at the various temples where bookings can be made upon payment of a fixed rate per *chakluk*. Some of the most popular temples where this service can be availed are Bijoy Govindaji at Sagolband, Ramji Prabhu at Wangkhei, Narasingh at Singjamei.

¹⁰ Naoroibam, Indramani (2015: 167-180)

¹¹ Arambam, L. (2004:67) writes, "Kangla a sprawling stretch of land was originally a mound or hill east of the Nambul river. It included the ancestral abode of the ruling clan, their burial places, areas of worship with a host of sacred shrines and thatch-roofed houses spread over its territory... The word Kangla emphasizes the fine spread of dry earth at the centre of Kangleipung, the area of freshly emerged dry land."

¹² Ibid: 168.

puja, funeral services, engagement, etc. essentially every ritual that is linked from birth to death. It is made from cooking unpolished or unhusked rice grain and shaped into desired style with cooked jaggery, called *chuhi*. The shapes and the kind of grain used define the kind of *kabok* and its usage. It is a trait that she had learnt from her grandmother and mother since young. The entire process is made with the hands, manually from collecting firewood, to cooking the rice grain, to mixing and shaping and to packaging it. For a perfect *kabok*, one needs to make the right jaggery concoction to hold the grain together, for taste and longevity of the produce. It has to travel few kilometers to reach the market. For the rice grain, *K.D. Amuba* (a variety of rice) is popular and *Chakhao Phou* (black rice) is used. *Kabok* vendors and makers have social contacts with the paddy farmers who cultivate rice grains only for the produce of *Kabok*, example— Tronglaobi in Moirang. For the making of the concoction, one must select the jaggery carefully and must have knowledge of choosing the right one. Manipuris love to use sounds mostly to describe certain things, texture, flavor to heighten sensorial experiences. Naoton, a *Kabok* maker and vendor describes the right kind of jaggery—it must feel *naap-naap*, meaning it must stick together, if at all it feels *swai-swai* then, it won't hold the grain long enough and the *kabok* will have a shorter shelf-life.



Source: Author

Fig 3: Naoton Leima, a Kabok vendor

One of the many challenges they face now is the rise in the price of ingredients and most importantly the lack of good quality jaggery that were used earlier to make *Kabok*—*chuhi tin*. Packed jaggery from outside the state is commonly used in the making of *kabok* today. Today, such inferior quality jaggery often is innovatively manipulated to achieve the required texture for *kabok* making. In the past, tribal women from the hills, particularly from Pallel area (a town in Kakching district of Manipur and the gateway to Tran-Asian Super Highway) would bring down their locally produced jaggery to Imphal. However, today this is seldom seen in the market. The impact of this diminishing trade can be observed in the rise and demands of machine made *kabok*. This has

consequently affected the *kabok* making tradition.

4.2. Keithel norms: Continuity and Change

Traditionally the market has been very strict of what is allowed and not allowed based on concept of purity and pollution, which explains the systemic arrangements of vendors and their produce since time immemorial. The *keithel* is arranged in long columns of raised platforms which are divided for specific sections such as section only for rituals, tools, vegetables, fruits & flowers, fish, clothing, etc. Such demarcation is maintained to reiterate the significance of the concept of *amang-aseng* (purity and pollution) even in the *keithel*. For instance, filleting of fish was earlier not allowed within the space of *keithel*. Contemporary *keithel* scenes, as expressed by the elder vendors witnessed many changes—from men participating in filleting fish, carrying loads to the seating arrangements where generally only women were allowed.



Source: Author

Fig 4: Betwixt the 'pure' milk and 'impure' fish

In the above photograph, the vendors on the right sell dairy products, honey, and jaggery, for consumption and also for rituals. These *potlams* for rituals must be protected from dirt, meat, etc., that constitutes what is termed as *amangba*. She expressed that even if she has taken bath, and sells commodities for rituals, it becomes futile as the next vendor sells fish. The increasing congestion of space resulting in the collision of the *potlam* section and that of other spaces of the *Keithel* reflects the blurring boundaries of the idea of 'purity'.



Source: Author

Fig 5: Konjengbam Pakpi manages a rice hotel

Pakpi has been a vendor in the food stall section of the market for almost ten years. She prepares meals for customers who are mostly office workers as well as *keithel* vendors. Traditionally, food preparation and distribution in the public sphere was monopolized by the *bhamons*— which includes food stalls in the market space. However, the food stalls in the *keithel* today are no longer exclusively run by the *bhamons*. Most of the women who run such food stalls have undergone menopause and wear *chandon* during their working hours. This space also imitates the sanctioned norms of the kitchen as discussed earlier, performing the notion and norms of purity and pollution.



Source: Author

Fig 6: Jostling for space inside and outside the *Ima Keithel*. The woman holding a mic drives away the vendors who ‘illegally’ sit outside the market area. The Police intervenes to calm the agitated vendors

5. Conclusion

As discussed, the rituals of consumption practiced by the Meitei community whether it be in the private or the public realm; the private *chaksang* or the public *usop* and *keithel* are laden with rules of purity and pollution. Such symbolic as well as ritualistic practices continue to be passed down and maintained. However, there are certain points of departure that has developed over time with newer ways of living and social life, and the upending of the complex relationship between traditional norms and modernity. The study has tried to discuss some of these fissures and departures through the memories of women at home, *bhamons* in *usops* and women in the *Keithel* space. In recent times, the COVID-19 pandemic has also made a significant impact in the public commensality tradition. An example of this is the rising catering services in Manipur in which the role of the *bhamon* is reduced and almost removed in cooking or serving during an *usop*. Consequently, the relationship between the *bhamon* and the host is reduced to that of a client paying for a service. This reduces the *bhamon* to the role of just a caterer, wholly responsible for only serving *chakluks*.

Similar changes are seen in the market space as well the kitchen traditions. The disintegration of traditional norms and customs in eating patterns are mostly felt by the older generation, as reflected from the narratives already discussed. An ongoing negotiation regarding what it means to be ‘Meitei’ seems to be inherently present vis-a-vis the changes seen in the *chaksang* and the *keithel*. The blurring boundaries of ‘purity’ mentioned above suggest the diminishing grip of religious norms in the daily lives of the people. It could perhaps be asked if the changes which we see regarding access to the *chaksang*—norms, manners and sequence of

consumption have taken away the fundamental essence of the *chakluk* within the Meitei community commensality and the sense of familial camaraderie it breeds. In spite of all the continuity and transformative aspects of food in its social and cultural context seen in—the *chaksang*, *chakluk*, and *keithel* in terms of its preparation, cooking and serving, food remains an emotive subject and commensality reinforces communal solidarity.

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