



The Anthropology of Food: Core and Fringe in the Angami Naga Diet

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ABSTRACT

Anthropologists have studied food cultures long before food studies gained interest among scholars; yet this issue was studied merely as a means to understand other aspects of a culture rather than a central idea, until recently. Today the anthropological study of food has matured enough to serve as a medium to understand other aspects of culture. The present paper is an attempt to study the dietary elements or patterns of the Angami Nagas, one of the major tribes of Nagaland, whose staple food is rice; its cultivation is still of the utmost economic importance even today. Sydney Mintz' (2001) proposed the concept of core and fringe element in the food we eat which is common to all agrarian societies. Thus, following Mintz' concept of agrarian food the element of core and fringe as well as the function of legume in the Angami diet, its preparation and consumption will be discussed.

Introduction

Anthropologists have long been interested in the study of food and although the focal point was not food itself but food habits, they were studied in order to understand other aspects of a culture. Garrick Mallery's (1888) *Manners and Meals* and Robertson Smith's (1889) *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* were some of the pioneering works when it comes to the study of anthropology of food. A more functionalist approach to the study of food was applied by Malinowski (1978) in his study of the Trobriand Islanders where he explains the importance of the crops produced there and the role of food which not only serves as fuel for the body but is also deeply intertwined with other aspects of their traditional society. Levi Strauss' basic culinary triangle (2013) which is formed by the categories of raw, cooked and rotted takes a structuralist approach, while Mary Douglas' *Deciphering a Meal* (1972) considered food as a code and the message encoded can be found in the patterns of the social relations expressed.

Sidney Mintz, an American anthropologist best known for his contribution to the anthropology of food, developed a food pattern hypothesis – the Core-Fringe-Legume – which may be a 'commonly voiced generality' (2001: 41) in large agrarian societies. This pattern applied to stable agrarian societies with farming skills and did not apply to societies that lived primarily by hunting, fishing, gathering, or pastoral societies that relied on animal domestication. Mintz opined that in those societies meals commonly consisted of a starchy 'core,' which was complemented by a 'fringe' of foods; and this 'fringe' consisted of substances that made the 'core' more palatable and appetizing – that led people to

eat more. Mintz's (2001) core always consists of a complex carbohydrate, either a tuber (e.g. potatoes, taro, yams, cassava) or a tuber product, such as cassava meal or poi; or a cereal (e.g. maize, rice, barley, wheat) or a cereal product, such as polenta or pasta. The core is eaten in most meals, homogeneous in texture and color, bland in taste, and consumed in bulk. In contrast, the fringe can consist of many different things – animal, vegetable, mineral, fresh or preserved, hot or cold, liquid or solid, etc. The fringe enhances the core, 'helps it go down'; and anyone who has tried, even when very hungry, to eat a whole plateful of potatoes, pasta, or kasha without any accompanying flavor – such as oil, salt, garlic, pepper, cheese, olives, mushrooms, mustard, salad greens, cured fish, or anything else – will understand immediately what the fringe does to make the core more appetizing (ibid, 41).

Mintz's Core-Fringe-Legume pattern can also be tested in the Angami food. Thus the present paper will discuss what is considered as food among the Angami Nagas and the core and fringe element of it, its preparation and use.

Materials and Methods

The state of Nagaland in the northeastern part of India consists of sixteen tribes, of which the Angami Nagas are one of the major, occupying areas under the Kohima district and some parts of the Dimapur districts. The Angami Nagas are further divided into four groups – the northern Angamis occupying areas north of the state capital, the southern Angamis in the southern region, the western Angamis in the western region, and the Chakhro Angami who occupies areas around the Dimapur district.

The Angami society is patriarchal and patrilineal in nature. Even today agriculture is the main occupation of the majority of the population with rice their main crop. Property among the Angamis is divided equally and the youngest son inherits the parental house and also takes care of his parents. They were traditionally animist but with the coming of Christianity the majority of the population have become Christians with just a handful of the population still practicing the traditional *krüna/pfutsana* religion. Since rice plays a very important role in Angami lifestyle, each agricultural activity is marked by a festival before or after harvest. The largest Angami festival still celebrated today is the *Sekrenyi* or *Phousanyi*, which marks the Angami New Year and the beginning of the agricultural cycle, and takes place in February in the northern Angami region and in December in the southern region.

For the purpose of this study ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in the Angami Naga village of Kigwema, located 12kms away from the district capital Kohima; the national highway 39 connects Kohima to Imphal passing through the village. Kigwema, considered to be one of the oldest villages with many traditional practices, is one of the many villages in the southern Angami region also called the *Japfüphiki* group. Many clans in other villages are said to have moved out from this village, since they trace their migration route from here. According to the 2011 census Kigwema was made of 769 households with a total population of 3872. The literacy rate is 74.15%. The majority of the population is Christian belonging to different churches, namely Roman Catholics, Christian Revivalists and Pentecostals. There is also a small group of people who still practices their traditional religion, *krüna*, but interestingly all practitioners are male as all the female members of the community have converted to Christianity.

The data for this paper was collected through interview and observation method during fieldwork conducted in the years 2015-16. Both men and women, particularly village elders who have an

understanding of the earlier practices were interviewed. The observation method was also used while in the field, observing the community and its members involved in their daily activities.

Angami Food

Audrey Richards (1935), in her study of the Bemba diet of Northern Rhodesia, gives a clear picture of how a preferred starch food can be a nutritive anchor of an entire culture. According to her, to a Bemba in order for a meal to be satisfactory it must be made of two constituents, a thick porridge, *ubwali*, made of millet, and the relish of vegetables i.e., *umunani*. However, a Bemba native declares that although he cannot live without *ubwali*, he also cannot eat *ubwali* alone and needs *umunani*, a form of liquid stew. Mintz (1985), describing Richards' work on the Bemba, also states that people brought up in amylaceous-centered cultures may feel that they have not really eaten until they have had their '*ubwali*' (starchy food), which in this case may be rice, tortillas, bread, potatoes etc. however in these cultures they also feel that '*ubwali*' alone is not enough unless they have it with '*umunani*' (dressed or seasoned food).

Likewise, an Angami meal, to be satisfactory and filling should be made up of two main components, which can be described as the '*ubwali*' and '*umunani*' of the Angamis. The '*ubwali*' here is rice which is termed *khutie* and the '*umunani*' is the flavor element of a meal i.e., *ga* or *gadzü*, which is a vegetable stew or meat cooked with water, salt, and chilies, together with various local condiments. How these two components of food came to be eaten together is not entirely clear, but as Mintz (1985: 11) says, 'the centricity of the complex carbohydrates is always accompanied by its contrastive periphery and this gains its importance because it makes basic starches ingestively more interesting'. For an Angami Naga although he/she cannot imagine a meal without rice, he/she also cannot eat rice alone. *Khutie* or rice is usually dry and is not very tasty, thus *ga* is mixed with it in order to make it easier to swallow as well as to add flavor to the plate of rice.

Khutie (Rice) as Core

As mentioned above, the core element in the Angami diet is cooked rice locally known as *khutie*. The rice cultivated and eaten by the Angamis can be broadly divided into two categories based on the colour of the grains, a reddish variety and white variety and this two varieties can again be divided into different categories depending on the texture when cooked.

In a typical Angami kitchen all the cooking is done in the fireplace and firewood is used as fuel. *Khutie* is rice cooked with water, prepared by simply putting some husked rice in a cooking pot, the quantity depending on the number of people in the family and then carefully rinsed once or twice with water. Water is almost double the amount of rice. It is then brought to the fireplace to be cooked. A good fire is required to let rice cook evenly, a disturbed fire will result in half cooked rice which is despised and equals a wasted pot of rice. The cooking pot is allowed to boil and simmer until the rice starts absorbing the water and starts drying. The fire is then banked, and the dying embers continue to warm the cooking pot so that rice properly absorbs the water and dries up evenly to produce soft fluffy rice. This is the most common way of cooking rice. However it can also be cooked by first allowing the water to boil in the cooking pot and then adding the rice after rinsing it. A meal is satisfactory, that is savory, if rice is cooked well with the correct amount of water on a proper fire.

There are different varieties of rice which the Angamis eat and each variety has a different taste, colour and texture when it is cooked. Some varieties like *kemenya*, which is a glutinous and soft variety, are preferred to others. *Kemephrou* as opposed to *kemenya* is a non-sticky variety, glutinous but with a tough texture; while the latter preferred variety has a sticky texture, and softens when cooked. Rice that is considered good to eat is often described as *khutie mene* (rice is soft), *menya* (glutinous/ sticky), *mu* (sweet) and *thengu* (aromatic) and thus a dish of good rice is soft, sticky, sweet and aromatic. The preference of rice on the basis of colour, whether white or red, does not exist; rather it is the texture that matters.

***Gal gadzü* as Fringe**

For a person brought up in a non-staple food culture, eating the same thing everyday twice or thrice a day is quite unimaginable and boring. However, in cultures where a complex carbohydrate defines food, people do not think they have had their meal until they have eaten their staple food, which is rice in this case. Although rice is eaten everyday at every meal, the 'supplementary component' i.e., *gal gadzü* cooked to eat together with rice, gives the variation required in a meal which otherwise is monotonous.

The Angami *ga* is very simple, as people prefer to eat just plain vegetables boiled in water added with a generous amount of salt and chilies. The idea of adding a number of spices or frying of vegetables with different kinds of oil is unknown to them, and not part of their daily diet. The use of oil to cook food came in much later after contact with the neighbouring state of Assam.

Ga kemeluo, as they call it, from *ga* (vegetables) *kemeluo* (boil/simmer), is a stew eaten with rice daily. This is usually seasoned with local herbs, such as tamarillo (tree tomato), cherry tomato, fermented soybean (*dzachiel byati*) or lard (*tshüchie*) to improve the taste. All kinds of vegetables are eaten, both from the kitchen garden as well as from the forest. Some very common vegetables are *gakrie* (mustard leaves), *kobi* (cabbage), *iskus* (chayote/squash) including the tender leaves, *aloo* (potato), *khuvie* (spring onion), *süla*, *lizienuo* (Nepal gynura), *chiepfü* (*solanum* sp.), *kerila* (bitter gourd), *füdishi* (brinjal), *rümo* (pumpkin), *dzünuo* (taro) etc and wild leaves from the forest grouped under the term *ketsa ga* (forest vegetable). The southern Angami region is blessed with a thick forest, where edible plants grow abundantly in the wild. All these are cooked in a similar manner; sometimes two or three vegetables are cooked together.

One of the most common vegetables eaten in Kigwema is potato (*alu*), probably because it is cultivated extensively in the area today. Next to cultivation of rice, potato cultivation takes up most of the agricultural land. Potatoes are cooked in the same manner or sometimes are mashed to make gravy thicker and creamy, and other vegetables are added. Potatoes are added to most *ga kemeluo* to form the base of the vegetable stew.

Besides vegetables, small insects (*ku*) and larvae (*kelu*) and game meats (*nha tshü*) are also commonly consumed. The Angamis are traditionally meat eaters and they eat all kinds of meat both wild and domesticated, whichever is available to them except for some, to which there are restrictions and taboos attached. Game meats (*nha tshü*) are not easily available and pork (*thervo tshü*), beef (*mithu tshü*) and chicken (*thevü tshü*) are the most common types of meat consumed. As meat is not easily available it is not eaten daily. In Kigwema, meat is sold on most Sundays, and most households eat meat this day. Meat is simply boiled with a generous amount of dried chilies and salt, added ginger and garlic. Since meat is not easily available it is preserved by smoking it with fire, keeping it right above the fire so

that the smoke directly goes to it, for a long time until it becomes very hard and it is slowly added to the boiled food for flavor. A common sight we see in a kitchen in Kigwema is a long strip of pork fat (*puostühe*) hanging from the beam of the kitchen roof. During festive days earlier, and in the present day during the Christmas season, every household slaughter pigs for the occasion and whenever a pig is killed, the entire fat portion of the back, starting from the neck till the tail is sliced in one long strip and made to hang in the kitchen for a long period of time and gradually consumed in the coming months. A little piece of pork fat (*puotsühe*) is cut and added while cooking vegetables to add flavor.

Fermented and smoked food also forms an important part of the Angami diet. Fermented food includes fermented soyabean (*dzachie*: *dza* = soyabean, *chie* = rot), fermented bamboo shoot (*kese*), fermented fish (*khuochie*: *khuo* = fish, *chie* = rot) etc. A chili paste called *tathu* is normally eaten, prepared by roasting chilies, tomato and fermented fish or soyabean in warm ash and charcoal in the fireplace and then all mashed together to give a hot spicy paste.

Legumes in Angami Diet

Mintz placed legumes in a different category although they can either be the third element or a sub-category of the fringe element because of their protein contribution. Due to their versatility, they can be processed in a variety of ways, and thus, they have received a special treatment particularly in Asian cuisines. The role of lentils in Indian food, beans which goes really well with tortillas in Mexican food or for that matter beans and bean products in all forms, fresh, dried and fermented, has contributed a lot to the diet of different societies, hence they are hard to ignore.

In Angami diet, lentils and different types of pulses are not part of the daily meal but fermented soya beans product form a very crucial part in preparing the fringe element of the meal. Fermented soya beans, locally called *dzachie*, are prepared by boiling them and letting them ferment for few days before squashing into a paste, wrapping in leaves, and being left near the fireplace to let them dry. *Dzachie* is almost always added to the vegetable stew or ga and tathu as a flavoring agent which makes the taste distinct.

Another legume which needs to be mentioned is *kerhü* more commonly called *naga dal* by the Nagas, which is rice beans (b. *Vigna umbellata*). Rice beans are also known by different names such as *mambi beans*, *oriental beans*, or *naurangi dal* in Uttarakhand and are found in different colours and sizes. Back when brewing and drinking rice beer or *zutho* was common, *kerhü* formed an important part of the diet. *Kerhü* is cooked by boiling it with a little bit of water until the water is completely dry and sometimes adding ginger and salt for taste, but it can also be eaten raw. Instead of eating during the midday meal, *zutho* and *kerhü* were eaten throughout the day in order to have enough energy to carry out daily chores.

Discussion

Angami core food, that is rice, is cultivated on steep terrace rice fields carefully carved out of mountains and flooded by water through proper irrigation systems, which Hutton (1921) observed as a kind of cultivation unique to them. The Angamis practice wet rice cultivation as well as jhum or shifting cultivation although to a lesser degree. These rice terraces play a very important role in the Angami society and these lands are considered as the most valuable lands. Some terraces which are

fed by perennial streams are flooded throughout the year while other terrace fields solely depend on monsoon rain, hence they are flooded during the cultivation season otherwise they remain dry for the rest of the year. Rice can be cultivated only once a year in the terrace fields and yams and legumes such as soya bean and rice beans are cultivated on the dykes of the terrace benches. However, a separate small patch of land is also always prepared to cultivate soya beans and rice beans. The terrace fields which remain dry in the lean season are used to cultivate potatoes.

Rice is also cultivated in *jhum* fields; however, a mixed cropping system is usually followed in this type of cultivation. Maize, millet, jobs tears, different varieties of herbs, yam, pumpkin, chili peppers, beans and gourds etc. are all cultivated in *jhum* fields. Rice beans are mostly cultivated in small patches of land which is prepared specifically for it, although they can also be cultivated in the terraces as well as *jhum* fields.

Women are importantly involved in all the agricultural activity, from producing the core food to all the vegetables. Rice production is labour intensive and done collectively by both men and women where irrigation channels and constructing of dykes or clearing and burning of forest for *jhum* cultivation are mostly done by men and weeding, preparing of nursery and sowing etc. are mostly women's work. The production of all vegetables eaten daily is also done by women, while procuring game meat is specifically done by men. Pigs, cows and chicken etc. are all domesticated for food.

Traditionally three meals per day, morning, noon and evening, is the norm. In the village, the day starts at the break of dawn. Most of the villagers start their daily chores very early and in most cases the mother of the family is the first to start. She makes the fire and prepares tea for the family and starts preparing *khutie* and *ga* for the family which is usually eaten very early in the morning to break fast. Food is again prepared for the noon meal as well as in the evening, which is always *khutie* and *ga*. Angamis typically eat a large serving of rice and the fringe element added is hardly equal in quantity to rice, meaning the quantity of rice in the plate is much more than the vegetable stew or meat item eaten. *Chutney* or *tathu* which is a roasted chili and fermented fish or soya bean paste and other sorts of pickle with a strong taste are eaten in much lesser quantity. Food is eaten with the right hand usually and forks, spoons and knives are not used; rice, curry, *chutney* etc. are all mixed together in the plate with their fingers and is eaten. When brewing and drinking rice beer was extensively practiced, the midday meal was usually not taken and half of the total produce of the rice from the fields were specifically kept for brewing rice beer. Rice beer along with *kerhü* was the midday meal. But with the coming of Christianity, with the Christian missionaries discouraging the use of rice beer, it was slowly replaced by drinking tea and also by the midday meal, which would help them carry out their daily work in the fields. For most villagers involved in agricultural activity, three meals per day is a must and are always made of *khutie* and *ga*.

Conclusion

In Angami society, a proper meal is when food consists of *khutie* and *ga*. *Ga* is made of mostly two or three items, either a vegetable stew, or meat (occasionally) or *tathu*. The proportion of the fringe is hardly equal to that of the core and fringe foods with a very sharp and strong taste, and sometimes a pungent smell such as the spicy chili paste, are often taken in much lesser quantities as compared to other fringe food. On festive occasions we do see an increase in the fringe element. Thus, here we deal with an agrarian society following the core-fringe-legume pattern proposed by Mintz, the core being rice, fringe is a vegetable stew, which Richards (1935) also referred to as a relish, and legume maybe

the fermented soybean. Unlike the diet in the west, which is composed entirely of what these societies take as fringe, a meal made entirely of fringe food in these communities is not considered as food in the same way.

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