

TRADITION AND TRANSFORMATION: WOMEN'S STORIES OF FOOD CULTURE IN TIBET AND BHUTAN

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Abstract: This paper explores the food cultures of Tibet and Bhutan through the lens of women's narratives, focusing on their roles in preserving and transforming culinary traditions. Drawing on personal stories, this study illustrates how women in these regions not only sustain but also adapt food practices to meet the demands of social and environmental changes. Through these narratives, food emerges as a symbol of cultural identity, resilience, and spiritual devotion, as well as a tool for community cohesion and heritage preservation.

Keywords: Resilience, Food Culture, Identity, Spirituality, Community Bonding

The food culture of the Himalayas holds profound significance, not only as a means of sustenance but also as a foundation of identity, spirituality and resilience. Food traditions in the region are markers of cultural identity, with each community having unique foods, flavours and cooking methods that differentiate them from neighbouring regions. Food preparation is considered an act of cultural preservation. The practice of making Tsampa, which is roasted barley flour, and brewing butter tea is integral to the Tibetan identity and symbolizes resilience in harsh climatic and topographical conditions. Ema datsi, a fiery cheese and chilli dish is central to Bhutanese cuisine and is often tied to celebrations and rituals. These are a few examples of staple delicacies which not only represent the local flavours but also signify the resourcefulness and harmony of the natural environment.

Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuk, the Queen Mother of Bhutan, writes in her book *Treasures of the Thunder Dragon- A Portrait of Bhutan* about the numerous annual rites and rituals that are part and parcel of the serene life of Nobgang. The religious festivities and celebrations are representative of the changing seasons in the Himalayan region. The annual choku or puja (a religious ceremony with offerings) is usually held November or December. The monks in charge of the ceremony would engage in the preparation of tormas- which are offerings made of rice flour or wheat dough mixed with butter, and coloured and sculpted into intricately beautiful forms (Wangchuk 40).

Prepared in veneration of Chenrezig (the Bodhisattva of Compassion), Tseringma (the Goddess of Long Life and Prosperity), Yeshe Gampo and Paldo Lhamo, the all-powerful Protecting deities of Bhutan, these tormas would be placed on the altar. There would be seven bowls of fresh water, normally found on the altar of every Buddhist household, representing the seven offerings of food, drink, water, flowers, incense, light and perfume. The whole family would assemble for the choku and they would be served suja (salty buttered tea) and deysi (sweet saffron rice) during the prayer breaks.

Food would always be an integral part of the chokus, celebrating the bounty of harvest and prosperity. Supplies of special delicacies stored for a year, would be served during the ceremony. Ema datsi, the national favourite, a spicy combination of hogay (cheese) and green chillies would be served. There would also be sausages stuffed with rice, ginger, Sichuan pepper and pig's blood; cucumber salad and spare ribs of pork.

There would be the annual Punakha Domchoe (a three-day Buddhist festival) during the first month of the lunar year (February) at Punakha Dzong (Buddhist place of worship in Punakha) where people would travel to on horsebacks. These travellers would carry along wooden containers filled with buttermilk and singcha, a mildly alcoholic drink brewed from wheat. A dash of red rice, dried pork, beef and chillies, radish and toasted rice would be integral to the travelling party's baggage.

The Bhutanese usually carry different forms of snacks to keep them lively and energetic in the challenging topographical and geographical conditions. Churpi or hard cubes of cheese made from yak milk are munched upon and a little round box for betel nut wrapped in paan leaf smeared with lime paste or doma is also carried. Chewing doma is considered a Bhutanese passion (Wangchuk 3).

Apart from the native cuisine, the Queen mother shares her experience about her elder sister eating aloo dum (potato curry) and puris in Kalimpong, when at Dr Graham's Homes in West Bengal, India. Ashi was a student of St Helen's in Kalimpong and her memories of the dining hall are vivid. The girls were divided into three groups, 'Vegetarians', 'Beef' and 'Mutton'. The Bhutanese girls would be in the 'Beef' group, but as far as the delicacy was concerned, the beef stew was the most unappetizing dish that one could ever stomach, according to Ashi.

Radio Shangri-la: What I Discovered on my Accidental Journey to the Happiest Kingdom on Earth by Lisa Napoli offers the readers ample knowledge on the indigenous food cultures of Bhutan and the contemporary food habits of the young generation. Lisa reaches Bhutan to guide youngsters in a newly started FM channel which is the first of its kind in Bhutan and known as Kuku FM. Having flown all the way from Los Angeles to Paro, Lady Jane or Lisa is in for a 'culture shock'. Lisa says that for an outsider like her, it was difficult to get used to lots of rice and emadatse (sometimes alternately spelled as ema datsi).

At lunchtime again today, I'd stuck a fork into a bowl of emadatse and thought I might die- both from the spicy heat of it and the runny processed cheese of it. Perhaps I'd fall in love with Bhutan and its people, but I was fairly certain I would never become a fan of emadatse. Locally grown foods, good; local cuisine, beware (Napoli 59).

Bhutan was heavily reliant on India for all its major food sources. Lisa, who is fond of eggs cannot purchase any when there is a bird flu in India. The narrator describes doma- the Bhutanese equivalent to chewing tobacco (Napoli 59).

There couldn't possibly be any positive health benefits associated with sucking on this "delicacy." The trio of ingredients (betel leaf, lime paste and arecanut) emitted a smell worse than the stinkiest cheese [...], the way it lightened the head- the same impact as a shot of whiskey,... Those who indulged in doma insisted that the high did not impede their ability to work. They also convinced themselves that the lime paste wasn't eating away at their guts, even as doctors diagnosed a growing number of cases of stomach cancer and gastritis (Napoli 65).

Those who chewed the doma with great frequency and gusto, were easy to be identified as the teeth and lips would be stained with varying degrees of red colour. The author says that Bhutan has undoubtedly progressed in the recent years with the availability of a few gourmet dishes, carbonated drinks, beverages and packaged food (Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Nescafe and Lays), cornflakes and burgers. However, the culture of dining out was considered not very common

in Bhutan, especially among the young generation as they did not have sufficient pocket money. The Zone was supposed to be the only place in town with the Swiss bakery that sold small, spicy meat patties on rolls which were the Bhutanese interpretation of hamburgers.

Lisa draws our attention to the fact that during the Bhutanese New Year, the act of slaughter and selling of meat is considered bad karma, illegal-as per Government rules during the first calendar month- and inauspicious. Majority of the meat proprietors were immigrants, mostly from Nepal; as the job of slaughtering animals at any time of the year- was considered as bad karma. Drinking as much alcohol as possible is on the other hand considered an essential part of all celebrations. Ara, a clear wine, distilled from rice, is a common beverage which though delicious may leave one's head thick and cloudy.

In *Across Many Mountains: The Extraordinary Story of Three Generations of Women in Tibet* by Yangzom Brauen is a daunting tale of the resilience of three women. During the Chinese infiltration, Kunsang and her mother are forced to leave Tibet and during the haranguing escape, it is mostly the staple food of Tibet tsampa (roasted barley flour), that helps them survive the harsh climatic and geographical challenges. The cold climate did not give Tibetans the option to grow varieties of vegetables. Meat was the only high-calorie, high-protein food source which was cured by either placing it in open air or above the fireplace, in both cases which would cause the meat to be contaminated. This lead to food poisoning, which was common. Kunsang remembers how her mother's death was the result of consuming stale meat. Yak meat was considered filling, not because it was a large animal, but as per the Tibetan culture, instead of killing a small animal and an individual taking up the blame; "it is better for karma to divide up the guilt of killing among many, keeping the blame as small as possible for each individual." (Brauen 29)

When an animal had to be slaughtered, Tibetans gutted it completely, using almost every part of it: the flesh and the hair, skin or fur, the brain, the intestines, the tendons and the bones. It was unthinkable to throw away part of the creature to which they had caused suffering. For this reason, meat was kept for too long, even after it started to smell bad- a custom that had tragic consequences for Kunsang's mother (Brauen 30).

Prior to migration, Kunsang who wanted to spend her life as a nun, describes the kind of food that the nuns ate, especially when the pilgrims offered these delicacies as a gift. As mentioned earlier, tsampa with two flakes of butter and a pinch of chuship (grated cheese) was filled in wooden bowls and hot tea would be poured over the mixture to complete the meal. The meagre Buddhist fasting diet would be supplemented with occasional cuisine like thugpa (thick soup made off dried meat, peas or wheat seasoned with chilli or yoghurt), ala buk (flat, unleavened buckwheat bread), momos (meat, vegetable or cheese dumplings) and bazamagu (noodle with melted butter).

In *Dalai Lama, My Son: A Mother's Story* by Diki Tsering, the latter tells her own amag story and that of His Highness the Dalai Lama in his formative years. Diki paints a poignant picture of the Amdo society in Tibet. Every house in Amdo would have a large room for tsampa, flour, butter, dry meat and oil. Class distinctions were prevalent in the society during Diki Tsering's childhood and there would be no social intermingling with the servant class within the household. The butchers would be kept at bay, but out of hospitality, when

offered a cup of tea, the cups would be washed in ash, a ritual that was supposed to sterilise the cups.

Bread was an important part of the Tibetan diet. Different types of bread would be baked like kunguntze-the traditional bread, kuki- bread baked in an earthenware vessel baked on the fire for about two hours, kansho- oven baked and yenmi- a crispy bread, dry-baked in sand, ash and manure or wood. Typical Amdo dishes called ranfan and chowtan, were made from barley. Meat would be eaten only twice a week; and dried meat was had. Thukpa- noodles in broth from Amdo was made a national dish by Diki Tsering. In summer, her family ate cold noodles and in winter noodles cooked in soup would be eaten.

During Losar, the Tibetan New Year and the largest festival of the year, noodles, pastries, rolls, kabse, and timomo would be allowed to freeze naturally, stacked up in the storehouse and used as and when required. Bread had to be heated a little the previous evening, or else it would become hardened and rock-like. On the eve of Losar, a pig's head would be cooked and some mutton and pork would be boiled. During other ceremonies, like betrothal and marriage, different rituals linked to food and beverages took place.

Diki's family decided to marry her off to Taktser Rinpoche's nephew. The mutual consent from the bride and groom's families was indicated by drinking a mug of chang (barley beer). Diki remembers how tsampa was thrown on her to be father-in-law to signify the antagonism that was prevalent in the bride's family when they had to part with a daughter. The bridal party which visited the groom's house after the wedding ceremony asked several questions which had references to food. Questions like "What is the taste of water?" would be posed to the groom's cook in the kitchen.

In the course of the narrative, the narrator draws the readers' attention to the kind of delicacies that was made available to Dalai Lama and his mother on their arrival at the Potala Palace, Lhasa. The assembled gathering were given Tibetan tea and domadesi (a kind of pastry). Kodan (brewed sweet chang)- along with cheese and kabse (fried bread) would be offered at the altar during Losar.

In comprehending the intersections of tradition and transformation, the narratives of women from Tibet and Bhutan portray how food culture acts as a vessel for heritage and as a medium of change and transformation.

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