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Food, Rituals and Taboos: An Exploration Among the Sangtam Tribe of Nagaland

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Abstract: Food has always been an integral part of all living organisms. Anthropologists have been interested in food and food-related studies for a long time. Next to breathing, eating is the most essential of all human activities and one with which much of our social life is intertwined. Thus, because of its centrality in our lives, food acts as a vehicle for rituals, and food rituals have become central to most religions. Food taboos are also as universal as food, as religious identity plays a massive part in the formation of cultural food taboos. Food has always been a topic of interest among the Sangtam people. The tribe has a deep-rooted culture of beliefs and rituals in their personal and communal life. With the advent of Christianity in the early twentieth century, Sangtam people gradually shifted their belief system into their newfound faith; some Indigenous beliefs and rituals associated with food, practised by the people for many generations, were discarded, and some merged with their new beliefs.

This study is based on fieldwork conducted among the Sangtam tribe in Sanphure village, Kiphire District, Nagaland, from January 15 to March 22, 2020. Using anthropological methods such as observation, semi-structured interviews, and case studies. This paper explores the role of food in the sphere of rituals among the Sangtam tribe of Nagaland.

Keywords: Food, Taboos, Rituals, Christianity, Sangtam

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Introduction

Food has been studied in history to examine its cultural, economic, and environmental impact. Historians view food as one of the essential elements

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of culture, reflecting a society's social and economic structure; archaeologists explore this dimension by linking food with evolutionary perspectives and issues of migration and diffusion, while anthropologists explore food from a holistic bio-cultural perspective. The study of food in anthropology was led by pioneers like E.B. Tylor, Mary Douglas, Marvin Harris, Jack Goody, and Sidney Mintz, who looked at modern social life critically. Audrey Richards (1932, 1939) produced a complete account of food production, distribution, preparation, and consumption, including the many beliefs and rituals attached to each activity. Anthropologists also began investigating the effect of child-rearing, including feeding practices, on adult behaviour (Whiting & Child, 1953). Mary Douglas (1966) studied notions of purity, pollution, and taboo; her analysis concluded that food taboos were based on categorical identities and symbolic boundaries. Jack Goody (1982) addresses the question of why a differentiated 'haute cuisine' has yet to emerge in Africa compared to other parts of the world.

Food plays a significant role in defining family roles, rules, and traditions (Sibal, 2018) and is important in religious rituals and belief systems. It has long been sacred and valued by people who see it as a connection to their faiths and associate it with supernatural beings. The study of the symbolic implications of food helps cast a light on the social functions of rituals. Also, it aids in understanding religions – For example, studies of the Japanese tea ceremonies (Anderson, 1991), Mexican rituals involving sugar for the Day of the Dead (Brandes, 1997), and the Andean practices of eating and drinking during religious fiestas to understand the use of food as a means of religion by the community (Weismantel, 1991). Food rituals, thus, act as a vehicle for enforcing hierarchies, access to material goods, divisions of labour, and economic niches.

All human societies can associate themselves with a food taboo in one form or another. Most communities or religions declare certain food items fit and others unfit for human consumption. What may be considered unsuitable by one group may be perfectly acceptable to another. Thus, food taboos become subjective. They may be associated with special events such as the menstrual period, pregnancy, childbirth, lactation, wedding preparation, hunting, battle, funeral, etc. The term 'food taboo' distinguishes between deliberately avoiding a food item and simply disliking food preferences (Meyer-Rochow, 2009: 6). Food taboos exist in one form or another in every society. Kin group members may impose them on individuals to manifest themselves through instructions and examples during socialisation. When it comes to food taboos, the majority

of the restrictions are on meat and its by-products. Preferences and taboos may overlap between cultures, as there are cases where a food item is a preference in one culture but taboo in another.

Thus, a comprehensive study on food systems reminds us of food's ubiquitous role in human life. Different cultures have different foods and ingredients that act as a means of retaining their cultural identities. This paper explores the role of food in rituals among the Sangtam tribe of Nagaland.

Methodology

The study results from fieldwork conducted among the Sangtam tribe residing in Sanphure village, Kiphire District, Nagaland. It is one of the oldest Sangtam villages, with 131 households and a population of 731 individuals, of which the males numbered 219 and the females 207. The children comprise 305 individuals, of which the males are 159, and the number of females is 146. Fieldwork was conducted from January 15 to March 22, 2020, using anthropological methods such as observation, semi-structured interviews, and case studies. A total of 25 people were interviewed, including men and women.

The Sangtam tribe is one of the major tribes of Nagaland inhabiting the eastern part of the state in the Tuensang and Kiphire Districts. The Sangtam dwelling areas in Eastern Nagaland do not form a contiguous block because of a mountain range separating the two regions. The Sangtam in the north inhabit the westernmost part of the Tuensang District in the Chare and Longkhim subdivisions, and the southern section occupies the Kiphire District west of the Zungki River. They are referred to as Northern Sangtam and Southern Sangtam, respectively. The Chang tribe borders Northern Sangtam in the East, the Phom tribe in the Northeast, the Sumi tribe in the Southwest, the Ao tribe in the Northwest, while the Chang and Khiamniungan tribes border Southern Sangtam in the North, Sumi in the West, Pochury in the south, and Myanmar in the east. Till the early twentieth century, the inhabitants of both these areas were unaware of each other's existence[1]. Today, the Sangtam comes under a standard banner, "United Sangtam."

Before the advent of Christianity in 1918, the Sangtam were animists who believed in several spirits and supernatural forces inhabiting the natural world. Higher beings were the personified powers of nature, and people worshipped them because they would receive either a boon or a punishment. The Sangtam believed in one supreme god called *Lihjapa*, the creator of all humankind. However, they took to personify various forces of nature as gods (*tsingrang*). They have several gods, such as *Lihjaba* (the creator), *Luh Tsingrang* (field god),

Kuh Tsingrang (house god), *Kihkha Tsingrang* (pond god), etc. They practised jhum or shifting cultivation, and most festivals were associated with the agricultural cycle. The Sangtam has celebrated 12 festivals annually in the past; however, only Amungmung (which takes place in September) is celebrated today. Despite embracing Christianity, many Sangtam people have retained elements of their traditional beliefs and practices.

Food Getting Activities

Cultivation

The people of Sanphure village majorly practice jhum cultivation (*luh*), and only 15 households have terrace fields (*kihluh)*. The cycle for shifting cultivation is 9-10 years. The crops grown as a multi-crop are maize (*tsesu)*, beans (*lengli*), tomato (*beyanglasih)*, onions, potato, purple yam (*ho*), yam (*panu),* chillies (*mürüsih*), spring onion, garlic (*lasing*), ginger (*sheng*), etc.

The preparation for shifting cultivation starts in October-November when the field for cultivation is selected. The cultivators start clearing out the forest by December-January; this process is called *Dbangdbang.* By the end of March, when all the fallen trees have dried up, the entire field area is set on fire (*luh-tah*), followed by the construction of a field hut (*vi*), and the process is called *Vithung*. The remaining unburnt wood and leaves are collected, and the field is ploughed with a rake or hoe (*mükheh*). The month of April is called *Machi,* a season of paddy sowing followed by the first weeding phase, which usually starts around May (*Luhmüh*), and the second phase in July/August (*Luhjang*). The third and final weeding phase occurs at the end of August or early September. When the paddy is ready to be harvested, Sangtams celebrate a pre-harvest festival called Amungmung, which is celebrated in the first week of September. After paddy is harvested in September or early October, crops like kidney beans (*lengli),* perilla (*züdong)*, maize (*tsesu*), etc., are harvested one after another. Shifting cultivation continues to be a household activity today, even though they use hired workers.

At present, all households maintain a kitchen garden where they grow chillies, cabbage, mustard, pumpkin, bottle gourd, chayote, tree tomato, beans, maize, chives, fish mint, spring onion, lettuce, mint, etc.

Hunting, Fishing, and Gathering

Hunting was also a significant part of Sangtam's life. They hunted in the nearby forests of Tetaling and Linlonglin, which surrounded their villages. The

main methods of hunting included still-hunting and stalking, and the animals hunted were deer (*shühmüshü*), stag (*shoh*), boar (*shuhnyah*), squirrel (*jingrü*), wild cat (*hünyah*), porcupine (*tpohdbu)*, wild hen (*rangmühüna*), birds (*uza*), etc. In communal hunting (*Amülungshuh-iba)*, the hunting group comprises around nine to ten expert hunters.

Whenever an individual or communal expedition was successful, the head of the hunted animal was presented to the chief. The meat from the head was consumed, and the animal's skull was kept as a decorative showpiece in his (chief's) house. However, with the onset of Christianity, such practices were looked upon as an old tradition, and all the animal heads (skulls) were burnt and disposed of. In communal hunting, the head, liver, lungs, and one leg of their kill are given to the hunter who first shot or speared the animal. The remaining three legs are given to the hunters, who arrive first at the kill spot. The remaining meat is divided into equal shares amongst the hunters – this practice is called *Yangshuhkha.*

Along with hunting, communal fishing (*Kih-Zyühba*) was prevalent and continues to be so. Several rivers surround the village, such as Tsülote, Zingki, Tizü, and Thsingaki. The methods used in fishing include *Müdongsa/ki-imülaba*, *Tha-thsaba, Kih-Zyühba,* etc. The fish caught include fish such as rohu, common carp, *katla*, etc, as well as other aquatic fauna like crabs (*shühkong)*, cockle (*shuhnyanyülung)*, frogs (*kangkang*), prawns (kongchilarü), etc. In community fishing, the catch is divided equally; however, the sizes of the fish vary - the older the person, the bigger the fish (i.e., his share).

Foraging for food from the jungles and forests continues today. Usually, leaves, fruits, flowers, roots, shoots, barks, etc. are foraged. Some commonly collected floral items include wild banana flowers (*bohta*), fern (*müxüva/ nguhtsangva*), bamboo shoots (*zü*), sumac (*samih)*, gooseberry (*kihyungsih*), fig, wild mushroom (*kongru*), etc.; while foraging for wild plants, wild fauna are sometimes collected. These include bee hives (*thsahtrüp*), woodworms (*singzah*), termites (*bengtingrü*), etc.

Rearing of Animals

Domestication of animals like pigs (*shüka*), hens (*hüna*), and dogs (*fühza*) can be seen in every household. With the commercialisation of every sector, animals like pigs and broiler/ layer chickens are brought in from the market and reared for consumption. However, most of the community still prefers to eat local-breed pigs and chickens, especially for the *Amungmung* festival, weddings, and Christmas.

Salt Extraction

Before commercial salt reached the area, Sanphure village extracted salt near the river Tsülote and supplied salt to the neighbouring villages. The extraction method involved channelling the water underground, whereby the salt gets deposited on the wall. To produce salt cakes, a traditional earthen pot called *alaphihare* is filled with salt water and kept boiling until the water evaporates and only the salt residues are left.

Today, salt extraction is no longer practised, but salt water is stored and used in cooking; this is believed to be a remedy for cough.

Market and Trade

Sanphure annually exports kidney beans (*lengli*), maize (*tsesu*), black sesame (*pideng*), and perilla (*zühdong*) seeds, pumpkin seeds to Kohima and Dimapur. In addition, the villagers also sell fresh vegetables and fruits in temporary shades along the national highway and Kiphire town's local markets. The village also supplies a considerable quantity of pumpkin seeds (*apherütse*). It is common for most villagers to take only the seeds and throw away the pumpkin, as carrying it from their field takes much work.

FOOD HABITS

Daily Food

The staple food of the Sangtam is rice; however, in the past, during famine, crops like maize (*Tsesu*), little millet (*titse*), sorghum (*Lüdi*), job's tear (*mümtse*), etc., were consumed in large quantities. Almost all the essential vegetables, like chilly, mint, cabbage, mustard, pumpkin, bottle gourd, chayote, tree tomato, beans, maize, etc., are harvested from their kitchen garden or the field. Fresh vegetables like okra, bitter gourd, yam leaves and shoots, bamboo shoots, etc., are dried and kept to be eaten during the dry season. Such preservation of vegetables is still very much in practice because of the excess cultivation and for the 'preferred' taste. Fermented soybean paste (*honyangsü*) constitutes an integral part of their dish. They use fermented soybean paste in almost all their dishes to replace tomatoes.

A typical food plate of a Sangtam family includes rice, vegetable stew, chutney, and occasionally meat. Consuming meat-based products is a luxury even today. Unlike in towns where meat is the central dish on various occasions, a villager will serve a wage worker with just rice and vegetable stew. However, tea is essential to their diet despite their low income. In Sanphure, guests are

always welcomed with a cup of tea and a glass of water. Rice beer, once an essential part of their daily diet, is no longer brewed or consumed.

Delicacies

A popular delicacy is the *Naga dal* salad. The *Naga dal* used by the Sangtam is bigger (similar to kidney beans in size) than other lentils. After soaking overnight, the outer layer is peeled off, separating the two dicots, mixed with a paste of king chilli and tomato (*honuhinyang*), and garnished with sliced onion. In addition to popular local snacks such as sticky rice biscuits (*ashehamthse*), cooked sticky rice (*ashetsang*), boiled yam (*panu*), sweet potato (*ketphangtphü*), and tapioca (*singxo)*, one other popular snack is roasted *Naga dal with* salt water. *Naga dal* is roasted in a wok for a couple of minutes, and salt water is added and stirred until all the water gets absorbed.

The geographical location plays a significant part in deciding the kind of food a particular group of people consume. People from the same tribe may have a very different palate if they are geographically separated. The Southern Sangtam (Kiphire district) consumes large quantities of *honyangsü/ axone* (fermented soybean) in every dish, similar to their Sumi neighbours[2]. A delicacy made from Perilla paste, preferably cooked with smoked pork and *axone*, garnished with a local herb called *mülehi,* is more common among the Northern Sangtam (Longkhima-chare area) than their southern counterpart. Most Southern Sangtam say the dish does not sit well with their stomach.

Other delicacies are pork with bamboo shoots, fish cooked in bamboo, fish with bamboo shoots, etc.

Meal Plan

Sangtam people have three meals a day. Their day starts with a cup of tea and biscuits. After about two hours, they have an early lunch before heading to the field. Around noon, they have their second lunch in the field, which may be preceded or followed by a cup of red or milk tea. After returning from the field, they have tea, followed by dinner. Due to the warm weather of Sanphure, some family dinner stretches back to 8 or 9 p.m. Most married couples share one plate for their meal, similar to their Sumi neighbours. Generally, the mother or female members of the family serve food while the other members eat.

Distribution of Food

Gifting and sharing among relatives, friends, and neighbours is deeply embedded in Sangtam culture. People share vegetables they procure from their

fields and other processed foods bought from the market. In the olden times, when there were no shops or markets in the villages, the men of Northern Sangtam (Tuensang District) went to Assam on foot to sell their local produce and bring back salt, giving their well-wishers a spoon or two. During the *Amungmung* festival and Christmas, people present each other with meat. When a family slaughters a pig to sell or for personal consumption, the pig's head is cooked and always shared among neighbours and relatives.

Weaning

Parents prefer to feed their young children with local fish (*ngu*) as part of the weaning process (*Yangtsubheh*). They considered fish to be an active and intelligent animal. So, they believe that weaning the child with fish makes their child wiser and more thoughtful. Before the commercialisation of markets, either the father or grandfather went fishing for the event; however, today, fish from the market are used for the process. It is also believed and practised that chicken liver (*hünamüci*) should not be fed while weaning a child, for the child would become timid like a chicken.

Rituals Associated with Food

As discussed earlier, the Sangtam are major shifting cultivators. There were several rituals connected to it, which are discussed below.

Rituals before Meals

Whenever a family sits to eat, the head of the family is served first, and he offers the first morsel to God, Tsingrang[3]. He places some rice (from his plate) and blows rice beer from his cup into the fireplace, thanking Tsingrang for his blessings. The food is offered this way because they believe Tsingrang resides in the cooking hearth. The offering of food to the gods always precedes food consumption; food thus becomes sanctified. The rest of the family starts their meal only after this ritual is complete.

Vithung

After burning the forest for shifting cultivation, the villagers construct a hut in the field called *vi,* and the process is called *Vithung*. On the day of making the *vi*, a pig is carried to the field where they pierce the side of the pig with a sharp bamboo; if the pig gives out much blood, they believe that the harvest will be plenty, but if the pig's blood is less, they think that they will have an insufficient harvest.

Amungmung

This is a pre-harvest festival celebrated in the first week of September. It is one of the major festivals of the Sangtam before the advent of Christianity and continues to be celebrated today. Thus, when the paddy is ready to be harvested at the end of the year, the people come together to thank the creator *Lihjapa* (also known as *Tsingrang*) for his protection and blessing. The third day of the *Amungmung* festival is dedicated to the *Kuh Tsingrang* ('house god,' *khu*=house, *tsingrang*=god). The cooking hearth was thoroughly cleaned and worshipped as they believed *Tsingrang resided there*. The eldest woman in the family keeps sticky rice, meat, pork/chicken liver, and rice and beer near the cooking stone. After this ritual, the rest of the household eats and continues their other festive activities. However, with the advent of Christianity, though the festival is celebrated, worshipping the cooking hearth is no longer practised. Today, the festival centres on Christian faith and beliefs.

Ritual for Rice Beer

When rice beer becomes tasteless, it is believed that *Kuh Tsingrang* (house god) is not pleased with them. So, to appease him, Sangtams place a leaf (called *tsambiva*) on the animal skull (animals that were slaughtered or hunted earlier), which is put up on the outside wall of the kitchen. A hen is next slaughtered, and the blood is smeared on the leaves placed on the skull. After that, the entire fireplace is cleaned by removing all the ashes. They believe that by doing so, they would get back the lost taste of the rice beer.

Rituals to Eradicate Insects and Rodents

After harvest, a small portion of the produce is kept aside for the next plantation season. Some crops, such as kidney beans, paddy, mustard seed, etc., are kept in a closed container; however, crops like maize are held in the open area or near the fireplace. If the harvested crops are infested with insects and rodents, those insects are collected and tied in a banana leaf and thrown into a river. They believe that by doing so, those insects would not destroy their harvest again.

Villagers also perform rituals to eradicate rodents and insects from their fields. On the appointed day, all the men gather at the village gate, each carrying water containers made of bamboo or gourd attached to a long rope. They pull the water containers, visit the village chief's house, and slowly march towards their fields, singing and chasing the insects and rodents as they move along. After this ritual, they believe crop-damaging insects and rodents will leave their field.

Food Taboos

Most food taboos practised among the Sangtam are associated with women and children. Men have fewer food taboos to observe. Different practices of food taboos among the Sangtam are discussed below:

Food Taboos for Women and Children

1. It is a taboo for children to eat the intestines (*axü*) and head (*athah*) of the pig (*shüka*).
2. Any slaughtered animal's ear (*anangku*) and nose (*anabung*) parts are also not offered to children and women; they are considered men's food. It is believed that women and children would have itchy and runny noses if they consumed them.
3. Children are not allowed to eat chicken heads (*hünathah*) because of the fear that the child would get grey hair immaturely.
4. Parents restrict their children from eating chicken feet (*hünajing*) as they believe they will stumble while walking.
5. In Sanphure village, unlaid eggs obtained from chicken are considered a delicacy. In contrast, parents from the Chimonger village restrict their children from eating unlaid eggs, which are considered "old people's food."
6. The consumption of sloth (*mümsü*) is frowned upon. Parents often tell their children not to eat or even look at it. They believe that they would become slow like the sloth.
7. Pregnant women are advised not to eat enjoined bananas (*büridalasi*) for fear that their child might be conjoined twins.
8. Earlier, women were not allowed to eat the meat of wild animals, so whenever the villagers made any kill, the men would feast in the *kuying*or *murong* (a commonplace of socialisation for men).
9. Earlier, when the bride price (*mii*) was practised, it was taboo for a woman to eat the meat received as part of her bride price. It was said that the woman would become clumsy or even driven to insanity.
10. It was taboo for women and children to eat the heads of the animals killed by bullets. They believed that if they consumed it, the hunter would not catch any game in the next hunt.

General Food Taboos

Some food taboos and health beliefs were unspecific to gender or stages in life. Instead, unspecified food avoidances are applied to all members of the family.

1. Members of the Dhongrü clan are restricted from eating animal's intestines. This is because the *bebürü* (one who conducts rituals in the jhum fields) belongs to the Dhongrü clan. They believe that as the intestine collects all the waste materials, it is unclean to eat them. It was also thought that the person would be infected with boils (furuncle) if they ate animal intestines.
2. Meat used for the funeral should not be preserved for future consumption. If there is any surplus, it must be thrown away or burnt on the last day of mourning (three or six days after the burial), or it is believed that more members would die from the family.
3. It is taboo to kill or use blemished animals (especially Mithun) for the feast of merit[4]. The owner will be met with misfortunes or even death.
4. Eating food from an enemy's village was considered taboo. If one were to break the taboo, they would be cursed (*shühmülang)*.
5. Eating the food offered to *Tsingrang* (God) as part of the ritual is also a taboo.
6. Serving chicken as a parting dish is considered taboo. They believe that by doing so, someone among them will die before their next meeting. Thus, chicken is preferably served as a welcome dish.
7. No matter the animosity between two individuals or families, if one offers fresh meat, the other cannot return. If such meat is returned, the one (intermediary) who brought the meat will be inflicted with a severe stomach ache. The intermediary's illness would be appeased only when they are treated (i.e., massaged) by the one who received the meat.
8. It is taboo to consume the meat of animals that other animals have killed.

Discussion

The different Naga tribes have their own cultures and traditions; nevertheless, they share a similar belief in the existence of spirits in the forces of nature. Christianity's onset into Sangtam land in 1918 significantly shifted their belief systems, including views in the food sphere. Accepting the new faith, many traditional cultural norms were discarded, while some were re-defined and merged. Practices such as the Feast of Merit are no longer practised in

their entirety, but wealthy families offer Christmas feasts to the villagers or community, thereby achieving social status. Today, one prays to the Christian god for his protection and blessing when reaching the field. Nevertheless, they continue to believe in a spirit residing in the field; hence, the feathers of the hen/rooster that they carry to the field for self-consumption are burnt to appease the spirit. In February, before the sowing of crops, one Sunday church service is dedicated to sanctifying the seed/crop that will be sown that year. This Sunday program is called *Jünangrü müsühcheh dangkhidangnang thüpcheh* (seeds/crops sanctification prayer program), and only after this prayer service do the villagers start sowing. In the past, the head of the family was served first, who also made the family's offer to Kuh Tsingrang. Today, there are no such rituals, but out of respect for the father, he is usually served first; everyone eats at their convenience, but most families prefer to eat together. Each individual offers grace and prayers according to the Christian faith before meals. During communal feasts like Christmas or *Amungmung*, church leaders sanctify and give grace for the food on behalf of everybody.

Agriculture continues to be the primary source of food for the Sangtams – where they procure the majority of their daily diet. At one point in time, all the food cooked in the kitchen was locally sourced or grown in their fields; the excess produce was distributed amongst neighbours and relatives, while a portion of their surplus produce would get spoilt regularly. Today, with the commercialisation of various sectors, the villagers heavily depend on markets for their daily requirements – including rice (their staple), vegetables, and meat – besides new food items that have entered their meal plans. They have also started selling their excess produce in nearby markets and towns, thus augmenting their income. However, the gifting culture continues, especially during *Amungmung* and Christmas, when they give each other cakes, cookies, homemade biscuits, and meat. Communal hunting and fishing have significantly declined – if and when a hunting expedition takes place, the earlier norm to offer the head of the hunted animal to the village chief is no longer followed. It is now at the discretion of the hunter(s). Animal skulls (of hunted animals or sacrificed Mithun), which once adorned the walls symbolising status and power, are now no longer used as decorations. Instead, they are burnt and disposed of.

Due to cultural contact and acculturation, many taboos connected to food are no longer strictly followed – in some cases, they have turned into delicacies. The intestine and ears of pigs, once tabooed for children, women, and the Dhongrü clan, are amongst the most loved food items today. Chicken

drumsticks and innards like intestines and liver are put aside for children out of love, and the parents eat the chicken's neck, tail part, wings, gizzards, etc. However, some beliefs connected to an underlying fear of the unknown are still followed. For example, not preserving surplus meat used in funerals, not returning gifted fresh meat, avoiding conjoined bananas (by pregnant women), etc. When it comes to the slaughtering of animals for a special occasion (such as marriage or Christmas), the Sangtams still fear blemished animals (such as Mithun), which could lead to a bad outcome. Today, the first harvest of vegetables, fruits, crops, or the healthiest domesticated animals, such as pigs and chickens, is offered to the church as thanksgiving; thereby, the pastor or the church elders sanctify the harvest, and then it is communally consumed.

Conclusion

Food continues to be an integral vehicle through which the Sangtam people express their religious and cultural beliefs – through the use of ritual food and the use or disuse of tabooed food. Much of their beliefs and practices surrounding the procurement and consumption of food were centred on their belief in the forces of nature – thus, the first and best produce was offered to different gods. The shift in their belief system from animism to Christianity played a significant role in the changes seen in their food habits. Additionally, cultural contact through markets, education, mass media, etc., has impacted their diet.

Declaration of conflicting interest

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning this article's research, authorship, and publication.

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Notes

1. "The Northern and Southern Sangtam were cut off from communication by a wedge of invading Semas" (Mills, 1937: 1).
2. Sangtam and Sumi of Kiphire District (Nagaland) have a close affinity. They also speak each other's languages.

3. *Tsingrang* and *Lihjapa refer to the creator God. These two terms are used synonymously.*
4. The Feast of Merit is a cultural feature of the Naga pre-Christian era, which conferred social status to a person.

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