Tattva – Journal of Philosophy
2025, Vol. 17, No. 1, *85-104*
ISSN 0975-332X/https://doi.org/10.12726/tjp.33.8

The Philosophy of the Plate: Food, Culture, and the Quest for Identity in Northeast India

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Abstract

Beyond its basic nutritional function, the food we eat defines us in many ways, forming an integral part of our identity, and it also reflects cultural norms and social practices. This paper explores the meaning of food and its relationship with culture and identity. Scholars across different fields have long overlooked the importance of food. However, in recent decades, this topic has gained considerable attention from academics. Based on food's material and metaphysical qualities, this paper explores the concept of food, culture, identity, and the sensory experience of food. By briefly exploring the Mizo food culture, this paper also looks at the interconnectedness of these fundamental concepts in Mizo society. This paper encourages future analysis across multiple disciplines, encompassing interdisciplinary studies that philosophise culinary and food studies.

Keywords: culture, food, identity, Mizo society, sensory experience.

Introduction

The statement "*Man is what he eats*" remains one of the most widely recognised assertions by German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (Turoldo et al., 2021, p. 761). Originally articulated in his 1850 review of physiologist Jacob Moleschott's work, this phrase underscores the fundamental link between diet and human existence (Perullo, 2016, p. 93). Over time, it has become a cornerstone in discussions on the intersection of food, health, and society, maintaining its relevance in contemporary debates on nutrition, medicine, and human well-being. While Feuerbach's assertion stemmed from a materialistic

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standpoint, often interpreted within the realm of health and nutrition, it concurrently prompts a deeper exploration into the symbolism attached to the food we consume. This perspective extends beyond the mere physiological impact of nutrition, inviting us to consider how food practices profoundly influence and shape our identities. In essence, it raises broader questions about how our dietary choices are interwoven with cultural and symbolic meanings. These inquiries inquire into food's broader cultural and symbolic significance, encapsulating how culinary traditions and eating habits contribute to our personal and communal identities. Thus, Feuerbach's statement transcends the limited scope of nutritional considerations and signals us to reflect on the multifaceted role that food plays in defining who we are as individuals and as a society.

This reflective approach encourages us to appreciate the intricate ways in which food practices symbolise and reinforce cultural values, traditions, and social norms. Whether through religious rituals, celebratory feasts, or everyday meals, the food we consume becomes a medium through which we express our cultural heritage and personal beliefs. Hence, the act of eating is not merely a biological necessity but a rich, culturally infused practice that continuously shapes and reshapes our identities in various different ways.

Food and eating play an intrinsic role in people's daily rituals, yet these activities are often overlooked, rendering their deeper socio-cultural implications unexplored. For Kikon (2021), food and consumption practices reflect sociocultural and political orders that stem from class and caste hierarchies. A study of food practices offers valuable social insights when examined within its context. The food we consume not only shapes but also reshapes our sense of self, playing a crucial role in defining our individual and collective identities. Food consumption serves as a medium for preserving and transmitting cultural heritage, while maintaining and reinforcing social cohesion. Our food choices, preparation methods, and the social and cultural rituals associated with food and eating are inextricably linked with our sense of self and community.

For Deborah Lupton (1998), "food is a metonym of the mortality of human flesh, the inevitable entropy of living matter" (p. 3),

highlighting the notion that much like all living matter, the human body is subject to entropy. To put it simply, it will eventually break down and perish. Food, as essential sustenance for the body, serves as a poignant reminder of life's natural and inevitable cycle. Over time, our dietary choices and eating habits have evolved to become significant contributors to illness and mortality. This reality is evidenced by contemporary society's widespread fear and anxiety surrounding food. In addition, Warren Belasco points out the paradoxical relationship humans have with food when he states, "We can't live without food, but food also kills us" (Belasco, 2008, p.2). For instance, poor dietary choices, overeating, extreme hunger, or consuming unhealthy foods can cause health issues which can ultimately be fatal. Thus, while it is true that food sustains life, it can also pose significant harm if not managed judiciously.

Despite its health implications, nutrition only plays an insignificant portion in our food choices (Fox, 2002, p.1). Taste, memory, accessibility, cultural values, religion, and social influences often exceed nutrition in one's food choices as they serve as a powerful symbol and a fundamental aspect of identity. Eating is not solely driven by biological needs, as Sidney Mintz (1996) argues, but rather a practice that is "always conditioned by meanings"(p.7). He highlights that eating is not merely a physiological necessity but a practice deeply embedded with cultural, social, and symbolic significance. His perspective encourages us to explore how food choices are shaped by traditions, social norms, and personal identities. This underscores the intricate relationship between the universal need for nutrition and food's rich layers of meaning in our everyday lives.

As previously mentioned, over the last few decades, food studies have gained increasing attention across various disciplines, including philosophy and sociology. This growing interest has significantly contributed to our understanding of food and its related issues (Borghini et al., 2021; Belasco, 2008; Counihan& Van Esterik, 2013; Neuman, 2019; Murcott et al., 2013; Beardsworth and Keil, 1997). Scholars from diverse disciplines—anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, history, archaeology, geography, philosophy, and psychology—must recognise the need for an interdisciplinary approach in studying food. In engaging with and

drawing upon methods, approaches, and themes from various other fields, scholars are better situated to develop a more nuanced understanding of food and its web of relationships (Miller & Deutsch, 2009). Such an interdisciplinary approach enriches any philosophical discourse by broadening the scope of inquiry - demonstrating that food is a critical topic for philosophical exploration. Thus, positioning the philosophical exploration of food, culture, and identity in a diverse setting enhances our understanding of how food practices shape and reflects who we are as individuals and how we are connected to our broader community.

Metaphysics of food

When something is very common or ordinary, usually it tends to be underestimated and neglected. Philosophically, based on Kantian and Hegelian reasons of the lesser senses, it is recognised that food can be eaten mindlessly and superficially (Perullo, 2016). However, approaching food with attention and care, some expertise can become an aesthetic experience. This mindful approach elevates eating from mere sustenance to an act of sensory and existential appreciation, much like experiencing art. In this way, food allows for a deeper interaction with the world, encouraging us to savour the present moment and find beauty in the everyday. Food is often seen and consumed as a mundane necessity, a routine aspect of daily life. However, it can potentially elevate ordinary moments into joyous, meaningful experiences. This transformation is rooted in the way food engages our senses, evokes memories, and develops social connections. For example, the act of preparing and consuming food can be a multisensory experience that brings joy and pleasure. The vibrant colours of vegetables, the aroma of spices, the texture of a cooked meal, and the process of cooking could turn a simple meal into a celebration. The new wave of philosophy seeks to emphasise the significance of these ordinary items, recognising that they are crucial for exploring deeper ontological and epistemological questions. Though philosophy came to consider food later than other disciplines (Perullo, 2016; Kaplan, 2012; Linares&Meskin, 2021), the idea of food is very much present even if it is not thematically addressed in the philosophical works. Perhaps, philosophers have come to understand that food is not merely fuel or material

substance, as Feuerbach suggests, but also something more reflective. Interestingly, along with his famous quotation, Feuerbach noted that food is the missing link between the body and the mind. He writes, "Food becomes blood; blood becomes heart and brain, food for thoughts and feelings. Human food is the foundation of human development and feeling" (Grün 1874, as cited in Turoldo et al. 2021, p.762). For Feuerbach, food consumption directly influences how human beings behave and feel (Celimli-Inaltong, 2014, p.1849). He argues that food connects the mind and the body because it is the only part of the external world we consume, facilitating a continuous exchange between the internal and external through food (Perullo, 2016). This exchange has metaphysical or mental consequences, not just material ones.

Food could be considered as both a material and a metaphysical object. It has significant meanings beyond the materiality of nourishment. The foundational argument is that food is an essential prerequisite for life, representing a fundamental biological necessity. Without food, life cannot exist. Without life, there can be no thought, science, or philosophy. Thus, food is foundational to the very possibility of philosophy. Several studies from psychology, anthropology, and sociology have demonstrated that food influences not only the physical body and bodily pleasures but also an individual's intellectual and social aspects. Levi-Strauss writes, for food to be good to eat, food has to be "good to think". For a person to eat food willingly, it must fit within the cognitive and perceptual frameworks that people use to make sense of their world (Levi-Strauss quoted by Murcott et al. 2013, p.11). In other words, for something to be considered edible, it must first be recognised as food by human minds and accepted for its social meanings. This includes classifications of what is considered clean or dirty, sacred or profane, natural or unnatural, and other culturally specific dichotomies. People cognitively accept it as food, and only if it aligns with their cultural and personal values do they proceed to eat it.

Food embodies social and cultural values and is also deeply connected to religious identity, as food holds significant symbolic value even in religion. In many religious traditions, food is more than mere sustenance; it is imbued with symbolic significance that reflects and reinforces core beliefs and practices, as in the case of the

Christian Eucharist. Contrary to the claim that the symbolic importance of food is overlooked in Western culture, Christianity exemplifies the highest metaphysical values in symbols like wine and bread of the Eucharist (Perullo, 2016). This represents the body and blood of Christ, symbolising sacrifice, salvation, and communal unity. Similarly, fasting during Ramadan and the subsequent feasting signify spiritual cleansing and communal solidarity in Islam. These religious observations and considerations shape what is perceived as appropriate or desirable to eat and practice within a cultural context. As Perullo (2016) remarks, religion has consistently emphasised the symbolic importance of food. It is a powerful medium for conveying deeper spiritual, cultural, and ethical meanings. Through these symbolic acts, food becomes a means of expressing and experiencing religious life's metaphysical and moral dimensions, connecting the material world with the transcendent and reinforcing both individual and collective values and identities.

Food and Culture

Cultural influence plays a significant role in shaping one's perception of food. People from different societies have different relationships to food, and their food choices are impacted by their cultural and religious background. Food considered a delicacy by one culture could be disgusting and taboo by another culture. While every society invests significant effort to obtain the food they prefer, they sometimes tend to overlook nearby and valuable food sources. For instance, Hindus taboo beef, while Jews and Muslims avoid consuming pork, and so forth. Regardless of the situation, people will avoid eating food that their culture or religion prohibits, even if they are facing extreme hunger and starvation. Especially in a country like India, despite the presence of poverty and starvation among people, Hindus will hardly regard beef as food since cows are considered sacred, even if the food sources are available in large quantities. The ethical beliefs and cultural norms influencing people's diets and food choices are arguably the most apparent philosophical aspects.

Since culture plays such an important role in eating habits, Margaret Mead (2008) argues that recommending nutritionally healthy foods will not change one's eating habits on their own. She

emphasises the need to understand how the community pursues and accepts food, their family food habits, their notions of sharing food, the emotions associated with their food, and methods of preparation and presentation. Moreover, it is also important to be knowledgeable about the food habits of other cultures in order to learn from them or help them accordingly. Even though certain food and food habits may be unhealthy, they are considered a tradition in one culture. For instance, the Northeast region shows the highest cancer incidence rates in India, with Mizoram reporting the highest age-adjusted rates for all cancers among males (Ngaihte, 2019, p.251). Numerous studies have attributed this high incidence of cancer and other diseases to the excessive consumption of tobacco as well as fermented and smoked food items, which studies have believed to be detrimental to health (Ngaihte, 2019; Lalrohlui et al, 2021). Despite their health implications, these dietary habits have been deeply embedded in their culture for generations. Moreover, in the past, their physically demanding agricultural lifestyle, including walking long distances, seems to have balanced their diet. However, the modern sedentary lifestyle, combined with unchanged food practices, can result in the development of diseases and declining health. It could be challenging to bring change without disrupting the entire community because of the socially acceptable ways of eating and using food that has developed in the social surroundings since childhood.

These culturally and socially recognised foods are attached to a certain level of identity. As people from different cultures attach different meanings to food, it is often regarded as a means of retaining their cultural and historical identity. Indeed, in Northeast India, various ethnic groups have an ethnic heritage food with a unique way of preparation resulting from long-term practices. The Khasis of Meghalaya are famous for their *jadoh*, the Manipuris for *eromba*, the Nagas for *akhuni,* and the Mizos for *bai*, to mention a few. Their ingredients and preparation processes have been transmitted from generation to generation, becoming deeply rooted in cultural traditions and family rituals. Generally, these food items and practices have been passed down from mothers to daughters and so on. Like one's grandmother's cherished recipe, which had been a favourite dish within the family, holds significant value and is deeply attached to many memories. However, these traditions

evolve over time, incorporating new influences while maintaining core elements, such as specific ingredients and techniques, that define a culture.

Additionally, as people travel and migrate across different countries and societies, they bring their food culture and beliefs about food with them to new places. Despite communities and groups constantly recreating it according to the agro-climatic conditions, their interaction with nature, and the availability of ingredients, these traditional foods stand the test of time, giving them a sense of identity and continuity amid change. When mobility occurs, as Jean-Pierre Poulain (2017) notes, "distinctive dietary practices are among the last cultural markers to disappear"(p.127). On the contrary, as food becomes more processed and integrated through globalisation, the cultural and physiological identity through food is becoming threatened (Fischler, 1988). Although certain foods are particularly identified with specific cultures, such as roti with Indian culture or tacos with Mexican culture, some foods are common to almost everyone such as vegetables and processed food. This commonality, in turn, shows the neutral ground in food across different cultures. In other words, it shows that despite our differences, there are common elements in our diets that can bring us together. However, even though items such as meat and vegetables may be universally available and accessible, arguably it is the distinct cooking methods, the shared values, and the daily meal routines that uniquely define cultural identities. Consequently, this coexistence of culturally specific dietary practices and universally accepted foods emphasises the complexity of food as a cultural phenomenon.

Food and Identity

"Food is a marker of identity" (Kaplan, 2012). Identity encompasses various elements that define who we are, including our personal preferences, sense of self, taste, family and ethnic background, and our memories about certain foods and past events. Cultural identity includes shared values, ideas about the good life, and specific food preferences and practices that set one community apart– like how some groups enjoy certain foods that others dislike (Belasco, 2008, p.8). This relationship between food and identity poses various

philosophical concerns. Yes, food does symbolise one's identity, but it still does not explain everything. No particular food that we consume determines our identity. Yet, our food preferences significantly shape our individual and collective identities. Food and eating influence our pleasures and anxieties, memories and desires, and feelings of belonging or detachment from one's cultural heritage (ibid.).

Discussing the relationship between food and identity formation, Claude Fischer (1988, p.275) shows how food is central to individual identity as every individual is constructed biologically, psychologically and socially by the food that a person chooses to incorporate into his or her body. He explains disgust as a "socially constructed biological safeguard" where the mouth functions as a safety chamber (p.282). Fischer also mentions the "omnivore's paradox" where he argues that the fundamental components of one's identity as an omnivore are that it implies the autonomy, freedom and adaptability to consume a wide range of food. However, this independence also implies dependence and constraint as the culinary system regulates a series of rules defining what should be eaten, and the methods of preparation and consumption that should be applied. According to him, the basis of identity is incorporation, i.e., the act that involves food crossing the boundary between the "outside" and the "inside" of the body (ibid., p.279). This refers not merely to the process of incorporating nutrients into the body but also to beliefs and representations, which Feuerbach had suggested as the connection between the mind and the body.

Taste and Identity

As anthropologists and sociologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966), Mary Douglas (1972), Pierre Bourdieu (1979), and Claude Fischer (1988), to name a few, have effectively demonstrated, taste has long been essential in the construction and expression of socio-cultural identity. In the last two decades, philosophers including Carolyn Korsmeyer (1999), Nicola Perullo (2016), David Kaplan (2012), and Barry Smith (2016) have deliberately worked on the philosophy of taste, senses, and food in general. These scholars have profoundly illustrated how taste and food preferences are not

merely individual choices but are deeply intertwined with cultural norms, social structures, and symbolic meanings.

Eating involves the senses—taste, smell, sight, touch, and sometimes sound—which create strong emotional connections and memories. By mediating through these senses, food and eating shape identities and cultures, which "create a hierarchy of values". Kikon argues that sensory perceptions must be contextualised, as what one culture finds unpleasant might be considered delightful and culturally significant in another (Kikon, 2021, p.377). For instance, among the Mizo people of Northeast India, *saum*, a fermented pork fat is a savoury food item found in every Mizo household. *Saum* has a unique sensorial element due to its fermentation process, which releases a distinct, delectable aroma from the fat, infusing the dish with a rich umami flavour. While this delicacy is highly valued within the Mizo community, the pungent aroma and the pork itself are often avoided in many Indian regions, where it may even be considered unhygienic.

Sensory experiences are tied to significant moments and rituals, reinforcing a sense of identity and belonging. Although a particular smell can cause significant discomfort and aversion in individuals, leading them to repel and distance themselves, an aromatic smell, on the other hand, can be deeply linked to aesthetics and emotional attachments to home and memories, illustrating its importance in defining what is considered odorous or pleasant. For instance, the smell of a traditional dish can evoke memories of home and family, strengthening emotional ties. Every individual has encountered at least one moment where the taste or smell of a particular food evokes a memory so powerful that it transports them back in time, enveloping them in vivid recollections of the past. In French, that moment when a fond memory intrudes, triggered by taste, smell, or even sound, is called *une madeleine de Proust*, known as the "madeleine moment," or the "Proust phenomenon" (Smith, 2016, p.38). This phenomenon underscores the connection between taste and identity, illustrating how sensory experiences with food are deeply intertwined with our sense of self, memory, and cultural narratives.

The concept of taste in food, as David Kaplan argues, encompasses both epistemological and aesthetic dimensions

(Kaplan, 2020, p.5). He believes it is epistemological as it concerns acquiring knowledge through our sense of taste. When we taste food, we use our sensory experience to identify and learn about its flavour, ingredients, and texture. Aesthetics pertains to our pleasure, preferences, and judgments when tasting food. Eating a well-prepared meal involves appreciating its flavours, presentation, and overall culinary creativity. Especially in Western philosophy, the concept of taste is central to the idea of aesthetics in interpreting art, beauty, and sensory experiences. Conversely, Pierre Bourdieu (2019) examines how the aesthetic elements of taste contribute to social distinction and hierarchy among different social groups. He posits that taste, as an aspect of embodied cultural capital, reflects an individual's socio-economic status and cultural background through their food choices and preferences.

As Belasco puts it, "Our tastes are as telling as our distastes" (Belasco, 2008, p.1). This shows that the food we like and dislike reveals who we are. In other words, recognising what one enjoys and resists can offer a comprehensive understanding of one's preferences and identity. However, there is a distinction between the physiological need for food and the cultural factors that shape our preferences and perceptions of taste. Even though hunger and the desire for food are often perceived as natural and universal among human beings, taste is culturally constructed. Certain traditional foods have an acquired taste due to their distinctive flavours and textures. The previously mentioned Mizo delicacy, *saum,* is largely enjoyed by adults. As people adapt to its distinctive flavour, their palates develop an appreciation for its unique and pungent taste. This acquired sense of taste transforms *saum* into a treasured delicacy among those who have grown to savour its rich, fermented essence. Celimli-Inaltong (2014) asserts that the acquisition of taste is a learned process, shaped by social and historical contexts. It serves as an indicator of individual identity and reflects one's socio-economic and cultural position (p.1845).

Similar to cultural values, religious principles predominantly influence taste and disgust. Mary Douglas (1972), argues that certain food taboos and symbolism are based on religious conceptions such as pure or impure, edible or inedible. In this regard, she talks about the Hebrew dietary laws, where everything is about holiness and

defilement for them. She describes the abominable pig, which is forbidden to eat or even touch, as it is considered unholy by the Old Testament of the Bible. She argues that the social and religious values that govern human relationships are not abstract but manifest in everyday practices, such as our food choices. These values influence what we eat and do not eat, embedding themselves in our daily lives. Douglas further states that the meaning of a food transcends its physical elements, which are found in a system of repeated analogies (ibid.). These analogies create a network of meanings that connect the metaphysical realm of values and beliefs to the physical act of eating, suggesting that our food practices symbolise our larger metaphysical and social worlds.

Food, Culture, and Identity in the Mizo Society

This paper explores three key concepts: the cultural dimensions of food, food as a marker of identity and the taste is socially constructed. These three concepts embody the non-materialistic perspective in contrast to what Feuerbach opines as "man is what he eats", particularly shedding light on how we make sense of food and eating, how food shapes our identity, and how sensory experience functions. All these are related to and influence one another in the meaning-making process of food. They are inseparable in understanding human experience and are found in most of the traditional cultures around the world.

To illustrate this interconnectedness between food, culture and identity, this discussion briefly examines Mizo food culture and its significance as an example. The Mizos are an ethnic group who predominantly inhabit the state of Mizoram, the southernmost region of Northeast India. The Mizos, recognised as having Mongolian ancestry and linguistically as members of the Tibeto-Burman family (Pachuau, 2014), possess a distinctive cultural identity and ethnicity, sharing closer affinities with Southeast Asian nations in aspects such as historical narratives, cultural practices, physical features, and culinary traditions. The Mizos reside in the mountainous terrain and rugged region that lies under the eastern Himalayan ecosystem with rich forest resources. Their main agricultural practice is *jhumming* or shifting cultivation. Throughout their history, with agriculture being central to their daily lives, the

structure of the meal and food habits of the Mizos have been closely connected with their work activity, profoundly shaping their culture and identity. Festivals and rituals were also centred on food and drinks and were held based on different seasons. The whole perception of time and seasons is termed according to their agricultural and culinary practices. For instance, the Mizos refer to their packed lunch as *chawfûn*, which they eat while working in their jhum lands or travelling. The Mizo term for forenoon, *chawhma*, literally translates to 'before food,' with *chaw* meaning 'food' and *hma* meaning 'before.' Similarly, the term for afternoon, *chawhnu*, translates to 'after food,' with *hnu* meaning 'after'. The linguistic structure of their terms for parts of the day reflects the centrality of food in their daily lives.

The act of sharing food embodies a fundamental yet profound element of societal interaction. This principle is distinctly evident within the Mizo community, where sharing of food is deeply ingrained. This practice is not merely a cultural tradition, but a fundamental aspect of their society, reinforcing their communal identity and values. It is hard to imagine a meaningful social experience that does not involve sharing food, whether a casual cup of tea with a friend, a family meal, or an elaborate community feast. In fact, the famous Mizo maxim, *sem sem dam dam, ei bil thi thi*, which plainly means 'one who shares with others will survive but one who eats alone will die,' conveys a moral principle about food, culture, and identity. This proverb reflects a broader philosophical perspective on communal sharing and liberality, highlighting how food practices can embody and reinforce ethical values. It underscores the belief that food is not solely a means of physical nourishment but also a reflection of moral values and social interconnectedness, shaping individual and community identities. Thus, as a close-knit society, Mizo society represents a communitarian ethos deeply rooted in the practice of sharing food.

Mizo food culture and identity

Without the cultural dimensions of food, it is incomprehensible to make sense of one's food habits, and when and how they eat certain foods. Like every other culture, food and eating are integral to Mizo's daily lives, the very essence of culture and history that shapes

their lifestyles and social connections. Similarly, if we exclude identity, we overlook the profound connection between food practices and socio-cultural and personal values. Hence, we are missing crucial knowledge about how food shapes individual and cultural identities. To give an example of how connected Mizo food culture is with other practices, Yorke (2020) writes, "Even the popular greeting in Mizo, i.e., *Chibai* meaning hello, contains the name of the dish that is universal across Mizoram". In addition to the verbal greeting, the act of greeting someone with a handshake is also referred to as *Chibai* in Mizo.The word *Chibai* translates to a combination of the food items i.e., *chi* and *bai*. *Chi* means salt, and salt was not something that was very easily sourced in the past; it was a highly-priced commodity. This was due to its limited local sources and the logistical challenges of transporting it over difficult terrain. This scarcity not only shaped dietary practices but also had broader economic and social implications, influencing trade relationships and even local power dynamics. For example, the Christian missionaries sometimes paid the local labourers with salt as their wages (Pachuau & van Schendel, 2015, p.179). Meanwhile, *bai* is a vegetable broth cooked in a typical Mizo style. The word *bai* is a homonym that refers to the dish and the act of cooking this particular dish. It is the addition of *chi* (salt) or *chingal* (filtrated ash water used in the absence of salt) in Mizo *bai* that signifies its true identity apart from other ingredients. Without *chi*, the dish fails to embody the fundamental qualities that define *bai*, illustrating how a single element can be essential to the ontological nature of a culinary tradition.

Bawitlung (2022) notes that salt held such historical value that it permeated into the Mizo language, and was often used to demonstrate hospitality towards guests. The phrase '*Chi ngatin ka bai sak ang che aw*' (Let me specially cook for you with salt) (p.86) was commonly expressed to guests during meal preparation. This highlights the generosity and special favour made by the host to honour their guests. This practice, frequently recounted in local stories, is believed to be the origin of the term *Chibai* in Mizo culture (ibid.), symbolising a deep-rooted tradition of welcoming and honouring guests. Nevertheless, the historical significance of *Chibai* related to food has faded in contemporary Mizo society, where its depth of meaning often goes unrecognised, limited to greetings with

handshakes and expressions of good wishes. Yet, it is crucial to revitalise its culinary significance.

Mizo food and the senses

If we ignore the sensory dimensions of food, we miss out on understanding the basic role that sensory cues play in one's food preferences, satiety and overall food aesthetics. For instance, although a typical Mizo *bai* sounds like a simple broth or stew style of cooking that one can easily prepare, it seems to be just the reverse. To bring forth a taste that is enormously deep and rich, to perfect that sweet aroma of *bai*, it is highly necessary to be acquainted with the dish. It may be more than what it sounds, perhaps an 'art' one may say.The uniqueness of Mizo *bai* from other traditional foods is that any vegetable item can be added and the number of ingredients can reach seven, eight, or even more. However, a perfect blend of these varieties of food to produce *bai* varies as it requires skill and experience in preparing it. This cooking process, which Levi-Strauss (1966) argues is the transformation of nature into culture, is a form of art as some argue (Borghini, 2021). Suppose food is perceived solely through the lens of consumption or nutrition, as opposed to experiencing it. In that case, one misses out on the opportunity to explore one's creative potential in terms of cooking. In the spirit of Nietzsche, cooking allows us to become artists of our own lives. Each individual possesses a unique interpretation of this dish, often rooted in personal experiences. For many Mizos, *bai* prepared by their mothers holds a special place in their culinary affections. Consuming a *bai* that replicates the precise taste of their mother's version evokes a "Proust phenomenon," where the convergence of taste and smell brings forth a deep, nostalgic recollection.

Nevertheless, taste is subjective, and so is the dish; the perfection of *bai* may be solely based on the taste of the subject, respectively, hence, *bai* may not be objectively perfect for everyone. Such a significant dish identifies the Mizo people's taste. This highlights that the aesthetic and sensory aspects of food, including taste, smell, touch, and presentation, are influenced by cultural norms and practices. What is perceived as delicious or appealing is influenced by culturally acquired taste and practices, making certain foods "good to think" because they fit these aesthetic criteria. Likewise, as

stressed in the discussions above, taste and smell draw out memories, and these sensory experiences enhance a sense of belongingness and cultural sentiments.

Conclusion

The food holds a unique significance and special place in the cultural fabric of societies around the world. It is a means of expressing identity, preserving traditions, and developing a sense of belonging. The ways in which food is prepared, shared, and consumed are deeply rooted in cultural practices and rituals. For instance, the preparation of traditional dishes often involves specific techniques and ingredients that have been passed down through generations. These culinary practices are not merely functional but are imbued with cultural meaning and historical significance. The sensory experience of food engages all our senses, making it a powerful medium for creating memorable experiences. The colours, aromas, textures, and flavours of food can evoke strong emotions and memories. The sensory experience of eating is not just about the physical act of consuming food but also about the emotional and psychological responses it elicits.

Philosophically, the sensory experience of food can be seen as a form of aesthetic appreciation. Just as we appreciate art or music for its beauty and emotional impact, we can also appreciate food for its sensory qualities and the pleasure it brings. This aesthetic dimension of food enhances its cultural significance and deepens our connection to it. Food is also a reflection of values and beliefs: How we choose, prepare, and consume food are influenced by our values and beliefs. Dietary practices often reflect ethical, religious, and moral considerations.

The duality of particularism and universalism is a key philosophical theme in understanding the relationship between food, culture, and identity. While certain food items may be universally available, their cultural significance and the practices associated with them are deeply particular to specific communities. This duality highlights the tension between the universal human experience of food as sustenance and the particular cultural practices that define dietary norms. Bourdieu (2019) aptly captures this duality by asserting that eating habits and preferences "cannot be

considered independently of the whole lifestyle"(p.143) and cultural context. Food is not just a means of sustaining the body; it is a cultural element that carries symbolic meanings attached to identity. This interplay between the universal and the particular reflects the broader philosophical tension between universal human experiences and culturally specific practices.

Food encompasses both the metaphysical and material dimensions of human life. On one hand, it is a physical necessity that sustains the body and provides nourishment. On the other hand, it is a cultural artefact that carries symbolic meanings and reflects our values and beliefs. This dual nature of food highlights the intricate relationship between the material and metaphysical aspects of human existence. Philosophically, this duality can be understood through the concept of "embodiment". Our food experiences are not just physical but also shaped by our cultural and social contexts. Our cultural background, our social interactions, and our personal memories and emotions influence the way we experience food. This embodied experience of food highlights the interconnectedness of the material and metaphysical dimensions of human life.

Food plays a crucial role in shaping our identity and cultural heritage which has been already discussed in the previous sections. The foods we eat, the recipes we follow, and the rituals we practice all express our cultural identity. They connect us to our heritage and provide a sense of continuity and belonging. For many people, food is a way of preserving and passing down cultural traditions. The preparation and sharing of traditional dishes are acts of cultural preservation that keep heritage alive. These food practices are not just about maintaining traditions; they are also about creating new memories and experiences that contribute to our evolving identity.

Thus, the intricate relationship between food, culture, and identity reveals the profound impact of food on our lives. It is a source of nourishment for the body, a medium for cultural expression, and a reflection of our values and beliefs. By exploring the intricate dimensions of food, we gain an understanding of its role in shaping identity and maintaining cultural heritage. This article highlights the significance of food in terms of its preparation methods, daily routines, sensory experiences, and the cultural contexts in which it is consumed. It also emphasises the need for an

interdisciplinary approach that considers the physiological, cultural, social, and philosophical dimensions of food, enriching the appreciation of its profound impact on individuals and societies.

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