

## Food Habits and Food Taboos of the Marams of Manipur, India

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**ABSTRACT:** *The Marams are one of the sub-tribe of Naga tribes inhabiting at Senapati district of Manipur of northeast India. Marams have distinct food habit and food choices. The dietary habits of Maram are quite simple and mostly depend on the local sources of variety of vegetables and meats and other non vegetarian food items. Rice is the staple food and rice beer prepared from the locally available rice species is the favourite drink of the Marams, Their daily food intake normally includes rice, meat, fish, green leafy vegetables, potato, oil or fats etc. Food taboos may affect the nutritional status of a community or a subsection within it. Again, there may be appropriate reason for prohibiting certain food stuff. The present paper aims at exploring the food habits and food taboos of the Maram tribe living in Senapati district of Manipur, India. Information on food habits and taboos of the Maram are given in this paper.*

**Key Words:** *Maram, Naga, nutritional status, food habits, taboos.*

### INTRODUCTION

Man eats what his forefathers ate, if possible, and what his environment offers. Many changes took place in food pattern prior to middle age. As man moved from one place to another, he found new foods growing in his new settlement. In developing countries, the inadequacies of food are not only in the quantity of food, but also in its quality, leading to malnutrition as well as under-nutrition (Manay et al. 1998). In every part of the society, people have diverse feeding habits that have been inherited from generation to generation. Food is used to satisfy hunger, provide comfort and relief from boredom or anxiety, as a status symbol, as well as in the performance of various rituals and rites. Several factors influence the choice of the food we eat. These include availability, economy, cultural and social habits, physiological and psychological attributes, marketing methods, and nutritional

knowledge, among others. Food has been a basic part of our existence. Through the centuries we have acquired a wealth of information about the use of food as a part of our community, social, cultural and religious life. It has been used as an expression of love, friendship, and social acceptance. It is also used as a symbol of happiness at certain events in life (Mudambi et al. 1991).

Human nutrition is governed by many factors like food habits and behaviour, food beliefs, ethnic influences, geographic influences, religious and sociological factors, psychological factors, food and production, income, national and international food policies, food technology, processing, fisheries, transportation, marketing, educational status and other mass media facilities. The benefits of good nutrition are health, happiness, efficiency and longevity (Begum 2003). Recently it was published by the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington that poor dietary habits are killing more than smoking in America ([www.foodsafety news.com](http://www.foodsafety news.com)).

Food taboos are known from virtually all human societies. Most religions declare certain food items fit and others unfit for human consumption. Probably food taboos (as unwritten social rules) exist in one form or another in every society on earth ([www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/NCBI](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/NCBI) literature). Food taboo can be defined as rules, codified or otherwise, about which foods or combinations of foods may not be eaten and how animals are to be slaughtered. The taboos origins or are result of human symbolic system, religious periods, stages of life, classes of people although the foods in general is permissible ([www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/taboo-food-an](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/taboo-food-an)).

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The Maram are one of the important tribe among the thirty-eight recognised tribes of Manipur in northeast India. The total population of the Manipur as per 2011 census is 27, 21,756 comprising 13,69,764 males and 13,51,992 females. The population is distributed in more than 2391 villages and 33 towns. The sex ratio for total population of the state is 989 and that for the children in the age group of 0-6 years is 934. The state has a literacy rate of 79.85 percent.

The Marams are one of the sub-tribe of Naga tribes inhabiting at Senapati district of Manipur. Senapati district has six Assembly Constituencies viz; Kangpokpi, Karong, Mao, Saikul, Saitu and Tadubi. There are two Autonomous District Council viz., North Autonomous District Council at Senapati and Sadar Hills District Council at Kangpokpi. Both councils

have twenty members each with the same staffing pattern system, power and functions with other Autonomous District Councils of the state. The Maram mainly lives under Tadubi and Kangpokpi sub-divisions. There are more than thirty one Maram speaking villages distributed in Tadubi and kangpokpi blocks. The Maram tribe was declared as a primitive tribe by the state government of Manipur in the end of the fifth five year plan (1974-79). Marams belong to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group. Like other Naga tribes the Maram family is not only patrilineal but also patriarchal in nature.

The main objective of the present paper is to identify the taboo foods associated with their culture and to find out the traditional dietary practices.

This paper is based on primary data collected from the Marams living in native villages of the Maram located at Senapati district, at the northern side of Manipur bordering the state of Nagaland. Data for the present study was collected using in-depth interviews and observation method. Field study was conducted during November 2012 to April 2013. A total of 138 respondents (including 82 males and 56 females) were interviewed. Respondents include Oral historians, the village elders and the educated members of Maram tribe to gather information related to food habits and taboos.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **I. Food habit of the Maram**

The life and occupations of the Maram Naga centred close to the village which is very much related to their agricultural activities. Ever since time immemorial the Marams were agriculturists. The main method of agriculture is terrace cultivation though shifting cultivation was also done by some people to plant vegetables. The Maram, apart from rice which they gathered annually from the paddy field, still depends for other seasonal wild vegetables, fruits and animals from the surrounding forests. Hunting for wild animals and fish by men and collections of wild vegetables by women folks are frequent leisure activities found in the Maram society.

Food and drinks of the Maram people are mostly simple and it meets the daily requirement of nutrients so also it is a great source of fun and gratification in times of festivals. Rice (*Abai*) is the staple food of the people which were taken twice a day with simple boiled curry. Seasonal products like maize and cereals also supplement the people in lean season. The favourite drink of the Maram is the rice beer (*Reshujou*) which they themselves manufactured from the locally available rice species. A certain amount of this energetic drink

is taken both by men and women with chutney as refreshment at various intervals of the day. Meat of domesticated animals and wild animals including fresh water river fish are very much part of their special menu of festivals and rare occasions. Meat eating was a popular food habit among the ancestral Naga tribes. Even pork meat was a favourite dish for all the Naga tribes except the Maram.

Table 1: Taboos Foods of the Maram

Sl.No.	Observant	Food items
1	Pregnant women	Eggs, crabs, brain of animals and rotten meat.
2	Mother with infants	Fruits, bitter vegetables, fermented foods and climber products.
3	Newly inducted boy	Meat procured from animal's head.
4	Chief and his wife	Red tasar worms, dog, fowl, wild rat ( <i>jazineng</i> ), pork.
5	New bride	Delicious food on the first day of marriage.
6	Patient	Sacrificial food items of the rituals.
7	General public	Food offered to the dead ancestors on their grave and other ritualistic items offered to the deities.
8	Maram	Pork and wild rat ( <i>jazineng</i> ).

Table 2: Indigenous drinks of the Maram

Sl. No.	English name	Local name
1	Rice beer	<i>Reshuujou</i>
2	Rice husk beer	<i>Joukhii</i>
3	Liquor	<i>Jou hei</i>
4	Banana beer	<i>Aghumti jou</i>
5	Red tea	<i>Acha kagang</i>
6	Plain boiled water	<i>Dwe kamaliim</i>

Table 3: Fermented food items consumed by the Marams

Sl.No.	Local name	English name	Time required for preparation
1	<i>Kabiit Badue (Soibum)</i>	Fermented bamboo shoot	Three months to one year
2	<i>Lachiitimatang (Houyaijar)</i>	Boiled fermented soya bean	One week
3	<i>Zangein dui (Hanggam mahi)</i>	Fermented boiled mustered leaf juice	One week

The traditional drinks of the Maram includes; rice beer (*Reshuujou*), husks beer (*Joukhii*), banana beer (*Aghumtijou*), red tea (*Acha Kagang*), plain boiled water (*Dwe kamaliim*) and sometimes liquor (*Jou hei*) are also taken by the elders which are imported from Imphal valley. Fermentation of food for future use is an age old skills of the Maram Naga. The Maram women spare time to preserve easily decomposable seasonal food items by

fermenting or drying. Bamboo shoot (*Kabiit badue*), Soya beans (*Lachiitimatang*) and mustered leaf juice (*Zangein diu*) are commonly fermented food items.

There is a myth among the Marams that the pig was believed to be the progenitor of the Maramei Namdi people, hence forth; their descendents abstained themselves from pork meat. Even today, the villagers of Maramei Namdi, particularly the non Christians abstain from taking pork meat and wild rat (*Jazineng*). This wild rat was avoided thinking it to be an unclean animal.

## **II. Food taboos associated with Maram Culture**

In the traditional Maram society, various food items are considered as taboo for different categories of people. These food taboos were handed down from the ancestors from generation to generation with the belief tested by time that the abstinence of certain food items by the people can prevent them from various harmful effect caused by its consumption. The observant of these food taboos may vary from age, sex, status, occasions, and situations with different durations. Some of these food taboos are still practice by today's generation also especially those food taboos which are related to the chief, queen and pregnant woman. The Maram Chief and his wife are not supposed to eat red tasar worm, dog, fowl, pork and wild rat. It is believed that the violation of these taboos may bring bad luck to the people. There is a myth that the queen was killed by the enemy's warriors. The people found her one year old son sitting beside his decomposed mother with red tasar worms inside her head. From that day on the said worm became a taboo for the chief's family. Eating dog meat could bring bad luck to the hunters. Fowl meat is also avoided as taboo because the people think that if they eat the villagers would go insane. The Village Chief and his wife also avoid eating in stranger's house or other villages. For the pregnant women the taboo foods are eggs, crabs, brain of animals and rotten meat. If she breaks this taboo she may suffer from miscarriage and other complicacy during child birth.

For the lactating mothers the food items avoided includes fruits, bitter vegetables, fermented foods and items procured from climber family so as to protect the health of the child, increase milk production and enhance her recovery. A child who is newly inducted to boyhood should not eat the meat obtained from the head of the animal as a sign of subordination to the elders. In the ancient Maram society, new brides were to stay away from very delicious food on the first day of the marriage as a sign of respect for her husband. Sacrificial food items cannot be touched by the patient and general public.

## **CONCLUSION**

The origins and evolution of taste are quite complex and have a big impact on cultures and regions. Anthropologists and sociologists have studied about food habits and beliefs in different cultures of the world. Certain food habits and customs including specific food habits are associated with particular culture. From the present study, many substantial conclusions can be drawn about the food habits and taboos of the Maram people. Undoubtedly, the Maram has distinctive dietary habits which are culturally rooted and depend on local environment.

The traditional food habits, particularly the indigenous food and drinks of the Maram are as old as their history and it is practised even today not only for the sake of fulfilling the hunger and thirst alone but it has been learned, preserved, and practiced by the people with pride and as important part of living material culture of the Maram people. In the traditional Maram society, various food items are considered as taboo for different categories of people. These food taboos were handed down from the ancestors from generation to generation with the belief tested by time that the abstinence of certain food items by the people can prevent them from various harmful effect caused by its consumption. The observant of these food taboos may vary from age, sex, status, occasions, and situations with different durations.

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