

Scripting Gender through the Culinary: A Study of *Axone* among the Sumi Naga Tribe of Northeast India

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Abstract

Axone is an integral part of everyday cooked meals among the Sumi Naga tribe of Nagaland in Northeast India. The paper looks at the preparations of Axone within the domestic spaces and its consumption which is associated with women's labour and identity both within the private and public spaces. Despite similarities and commonalities of consumption of fermented soyabean among different communities in the region and across societies, there are differences in the techniques and processes of fermenting and smoking soyabean for consumption among different tribes of Nagaland. The paper therefore closely looks at the Sumi practices of making, fermenting and smoking Axone. It further engages with different relevant issues and concerns through fieldwork experiences. Reflexivity has been used as the key methodology, and ethnographic and auto-ethnographic insights form the bases of the analysis around production, consumption and circulation of Axone. The paper argues that Axone is central to women's labour and their community knowledge. This mundane everyday food and knowledge is central to Sumi women's identity and through the culinary experiences, women gain access to community knowledge across generations which otherwise is the domain of community elders (men). The paper also highlights the context of outward migration of the people from the Northeast to different metropolitan cities of India along with their culinary practices and culture which leads to different forms of contestation and negotiations in the new locations. The paper marks how different aspects of identity get constituted. Food and smell associated politics emerge as access points of identity informing the experiences of belonging and difference at multiple locations.

Keywords: *Axone*, Gender, Fermenting and Smoking, Food and Identity, Sumi Naga Tribe, Women's Labour

Introduction

This paper is located in the domain of Food Studies which is a fairly developed area of academic inquiry (Appadurai 1981; Goody 1982; Harris 1985; Lévi-Strauss 1966; Mintz 1979). When we mention food, people may think and believe that it is an immediate reality but food is also a significant "system of communication" (Barthes 2013: 25). The eligibility or ineligibility to consume

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