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Nga-Ayaiba: An Indigenous Fish Product ofManipur

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ABSTRACT: *Nga-A yaiba i*s one of the most indispensable food items of Manipur since time immemorial. It is a non-fermented preserved fish product prepared from raw fishes by furnace drying technique. Processing of Nga-Ayaibais one of the oldest traditional and economical methods of producing and preserving fishes. In Manipur, various traditional non-fermented fish products such as Nga-Ayaiba (Ngaphak, Nga-thangjee); and fermented food products i.e. soyabean(Hawaijar), bamboo shoot products (soibum/soijin, soidon), Ngari, Hentak, beverages (Yu Atingba; Rice beer), etc. are being consumed as a regular food item over a period of long time. The practice of these food habits is passing down through generation by generation. In the present paper, an attempt has been made to highlight the traditional making process of Nga-Ayaibain terms of its cultural significance.

Keywords: Fishes, Raw Fishes, Furnace, Non-fermented, Traditional, Preservation.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Freshwater fishes are of major economic and nutritional, ecosystem-services, scientific, and historical and cultural importance, worldwide. Today, fishing remains the largest extractive use of wildlife in the world. About 94% of all freshwater fisheries occur in developing countries (FAO, 2007). They provide food and a livelihood for millions of the world's poorest people and also contribute to the overall economic wellbeing by means of export commodity trade, tourism and recreation (Worldfish Centre, 2002). Ethnic people of North-East India catch fishes from the rivers and lakes (Tamang, 2011), some of these are traditionally preserved by adopting different methods. Traditional processing of fish such as fermentation, salting, sun-drying and hot-smoking are the principal methods of fish preservation in South-East Asia (Cooke,*et al.,* 1993) and furnace-drying method in Manipur. In Manipur, various traditional non-fermented fish products such as *Nga-Ayaiba (Ngaphak, Nga-thangjee*); and fermented food products i.e. soya-bean (*Hawaijar*), bamboo shoot products (*soibum/soijin, soidon),Ngari, Hentak*, beverages (*Yu Atingba*; Rice beer), etc. are being consumed as a regular food item over a period of long time (Jeyaram,*et al.*, 2009). The practice of these food habits is passing down through generation by generation.

II. NGA-AYAIBA

Nga-Ayaiba is one of the most indispensable food items of Manipur since time immemorial. It is a non-fermented preserved fish product prepared from raw fishes by furnace drying technique. Indigenous preserved fish products contribute to a large proportion of daily intake of the people of Manipur. *Nga-Ayaiba* being a delicious fish product, it has been consumed as a regular food in every household. It is either consumed directly or used as a flavouring agent in vegetable items almost throughout the year and its addition makes the vegetable items tastier. Dry fish is low-cost dietary protein source and used as a substitute for fish at the scarcity of fresh fish (Mohammad Abdul Momin Siddique, et al., 2011).

III. MATERIAL AND METHOD

The traditional preparation process of fermented foods products of Manipur i.e. soyabean (*Hawaijar*), bamboo shoot products (*soibum/soijin, soidon), Ngari, Hentak*, beverages (*Yu Atingba*; Rice beer) are well documented by K. Jeyeram, *et al.* 2009 (and SomishonKeishing,*et al*. 2013). However, reports on *Nga-Ayaiba* of Manipur are still very scanty. In the present paper, an attempt has been made to highlight the traditional step by step making process of *Nga-ayaiba* in terms of its cultural significance. Data are collected from *Thanga*, a fishing village of *Bishnupur* district located at bank of Loktak Lake, 54 km. away towards the south (National

Highway no.150) of Imphal, the capital of Manipur. The average elevation of the village is about 780 metres above mean sea level. The land comprises two natural features namely, the vast lake and small island on it. In fact,their territory is the vast stretch of water dotted with floats of thick weeds and hyacinth locally called *Phum*. The hillocks are the only islands that rise above the water. These are the only dry land where people could establish their settlement. The people who inhabit the village belong to *Loi,* a Scheduled Caste of Manipur. Though they belonged to *Lois* section, their culture and tradition vary from the *Lois* of *Sekmai, Phayeng, Khurkhul, Andro,* etc. The *Lois* of Thanga follows almost a similar culture and tradition with the core Meitei. Fishing is their primary economy. Agriculture also plays important role in their economic life. Being, the practice pattern of *Nga-Ayaiba* preparation is homogeneous throughout the *Thanga* village, six (6) subjects were engaged, two of them are fishermen and four are women who are practitioners of *Nga-Ayaiba* preparation. Unstructured interview method, non-participant observation (visual observation) and photography were employed as a part of data collection for the said study.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Processing of *Nga-Ayaiba* is one of the oldest traditional and economical methods of producing and preserving fishes. The step by step procedures of making *Nga-Ayaiba* are as follows:

Preparation of Nga-Ayaiba:

i.) Fishermen catch fishes from Loktak Lake by using different techniques, catching fishes with the fishing net is one of the fishing methods most widely practised throughout the year. The study took consideration into this fishing method.Fishing nets are kept as a trap inside the water bodies of Loktak Lake from late afternoon to the next early morning (Photo Plate 1). Then nets are collected in the morning (Photo Plate 2). This fishing method is only done by the menfolk while the removals of fishes from the nets are done by both sexes at their home (Photo Plate 3).

Photo Plate 1: Entangling by Fishing Nets

Photo Plate 2. Collection of Fishing Nets

3. Collection of Fish from the Nets


ii.) The fishes were spread on metal-net (*jalon*) in a regular or irregular manner depending upon the type of fish or availability of their time (Photo Plate 5 & 6). The regular type of spreading is usually done in case *Amblypharyngodonmola i.e., Muka-Nga (***Photo Plate 6***).* Such type of arrangement takes time but it makes more profit.

Photo Plate 4: Spreading on metal net

Photo Plate 5: Irregular pattern

Photo Plate 6: Regular pattern

iii.) The metal-net with the fishes are placed on a square shape muddy or metal furnace (Photo Plate 7 & 9). Firewood is burned inside the furnace to produce heat for drying the fishes (Photo Plate 8 & 10). Though this type of drying method is somewhat similar with that of smoking method, the basic difference lies that firewood is burned in such manner of producing smoke for drying the fishes in the case of the smoking method. Usually, only dry firewood is used in case of furnace drying method. Where as firewood of dry firewood or both dry and non-dry firewood for producing more smoke is used in the smoking method (Holma,et al., 2003).

Photo Plate 7: Furnace chamber

Photo Plate 8:Burning of firewood inside the chamber

9. Fishes ready for furnace drying

Photo Plate 10:Fish drying by burning firewood

iv.) Burning of firewood continues around 15-18 minutes. It makes the lower sides of the fishes dry. Then, the fishes were turned with the help of another metal-net and again the burning continues for about 10-14 minutes. Drying through burning takes around 30 minutes.

v.) The fishes along with the metal-net is covered by clothes and continued keeping on the furnace for some hours, usually 4-6 hours or as long as the furnace emits heating effect. On the other hand, smoke fishes or smoke meats continue to keep on the smoking place throughout the month or year or a minimum of two days (Holma,et al., 2003). Now, these dry fishes are ready for market distribution and consumption. One of the most interesting findings of the study is that there is not even a single report or comment of negative-health impact on consumption of this product from any consumer or community or health-professionals and researchers. While supplementing this statement, most people of Manipur including the authors themselves doesn't face any negative impact on health even though they have been consuming this product since the beginning of solid food winning process.

V. CULTURAL ECONOMIC IMPORTANCE:

- There is division of labour between the sexes, men catches fishes, removal of fishes is done by the both sex, spreading of fishes on the metal nets, burning, heating, drying and market transaction are only carried out by the womenfolk.
- No taboos for making *Nga-Ayaiba* throughout the year.
- Market transactions are mostly carried out at local level, though this product has high demand from the neighboring states.
- This indigenous fish product acts an indispensable regular daily food item of Manipur except in the mourning (death) occasion.
- Families who are producing and selling this product support their livelihood.

Nga-Ayaiba at Market (Eema Market, Khoirmband Keithel)

VI. CONCLUSION

Nga-Ayaiba being an indispensable food item of the people of Manipur reflects a uniqueness of the socio and cultural lives of the people. The methods and materials involved in the preparation of dry fish, *Nga-Ayaiba* are found only in the local area and not borrowed from other culture or society. The technique is quite different from the smoke drying method. Dry fishes provide protein and unique pleasant taste which had made a stamp in the health of the people since time immemorial. Thus, the circle of the diet of the people along with its cultural attachment and moreover with the economic activity of the Meitei can also be reflected in the processing of dry fish, *Nga-A yaiba.* Based on the above observation and self-experience of the authors, the product and consumption of the same seems to be non-health hazardous. However, an in-depth clinical scientific study on this aspect is required so as to substantiate the present findings.

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