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COMFORT FOOD: ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN GARO SOCIETY

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Introduction

The concept of 'comfort food' is practically new in anthropology. Locher (2002: 442) defines comfort food as "any food consumed by individuals, often during periods of stress, which evokes positive emotions and is associated with significant social relationships." According to Lupton (1996:31), "Comfort food is generally a very personal fixation; a very unique complex for each individual. Foods we consider comforting are manifested by a particular food's associations with strong memories coupled with warm, savory, and simplistic taste." Therefore comfort food refers to food that gives solace or comfort.

A single aspect of culture many times tells much about a particular society. The present paper is an attempt to look into the latent norms of Garos through the microcosm of one aspect: comfort food. Comfort food can be a means of looking at the emotional quotient of an individual and the larger group as well. In many cases it may also reveal an underlying social significance.

The Studied People

Garos are a matrilineal group of people residing in the north-eastern part of India and Bangladesh. In India they mainly occupy the Garo hills region of Meghalaya; Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam; and certain parts of Tripura, Nagaland and North Bengal. The present study has been conducted among Garos of Gohalkhona a village in Kamrup District Assam.

Gohalkhona is a village where 80% of the population are Garos while the rest comprises of Bodos, Rabhas and Assamese caste groups. Garos in the village are all Christians and live on agriculture. They follow wet paddy cultivation and in a very minor scale slash-and-burn cultivation too. In terms of interaction, commensual relations between Garos and non-Garos are practically non-existent. In terms of food, Garos are known to consume all animal-food and there is no known food taboo. On the other hand, non-Garos have a food taboo on beef consumption since majority of them are Hindus; even the few who have embraced Christianity still follow taboo on beef consumption.

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In terms of food practices, Garos consider those food as indigenous which are collected from the wilds: plants, animals and aquatic fauna as well as food grown in slash-and-burn plots. Again, food cooked in locally produced alkali called kalchi is considered indigenous. *Kalchi* is procured after distillation of the ash collected from burnt bamboo and plantain stalks.

Comfort Food in Garo Society

A total of 40 individuals were interviewed, 10 from each gender. Each of the informants was questioned regarding comfort food and reasons thereof. The query was "What food gives you the most comfort?" or "Which is the most comfort-inducing food?" The responses given were listed according to the method of preparation of food item. Again, some respondents listed more than one comfort food. The table-1 shows the responses given.

Interestingly the Table 1 shows that Garos consider meat and dry-fish as comfort-inducing. However when the sex-breakup of respondents is studied (Fig.1), it shows a preponderance of beef as comfort-inducing food among men. Women on the other hand also listed dry fish and chicken. There was one man who listed dog-meat as comfort inducing.

Discussion and Conclusion

When the reasons cited for comfort food were analyzed, it was very revealing. It revealed the emotional attachment to certain types of food that Garos have. I classify the comfort food listed on four levels:

1. **Yearning:** The most common reasons behind the food sought were because: "I like it", and "I haven't eaten it for some time". One male respondent said, "I haven't eaten dog-meat for a long time. When I think about it, I feel like eating right now (*chasu-chasu daka*)." This seems to underlie the fact that yearning or longing is one of the main reasons for naming a particular comfort food. Meat, dry-fried in alkali, seems to be the most widespread longed food, irrespective of the type of meat, whether beef, pork, chicken or dog.

2. **Indulgence:** Another very common reason why some kind of food was sought was because they said, "It is tasty". Taste seems to be an over-riding principle behind comfort food among Garos. As one respondent said, "*Matchu kapa* (beef dry-fried in alkali) is so tasty that I can eat it any day." Levi-Strauss (1969), and Mennell *et al* (1992) have explained, food, ranging from "taste" to entire cuisines, is largely influenced by culture and constrained by society. This seems to be the over-riding principle as to why Garos prefer meat over other food items, and consider it as a comfort food. Pleasure is obviously the chief reason behind it.

3. **Nostalgia:** Some food items give comfort due to certain memories attached to it. "I remember the pork dry-fried in alkali that I ate in my uncle's house in Baghmara (Garo Hills, India)," said one respondent. "I have not tasted that food after that. A couple of respondents mentioned pork liver fry (cooked in oil) during Christmas feast. This was no doubt because of pleasant memories attached to the eating.

4. **Physical Comfort:** Some food items were listed as comfort-giving because it provided solace physically. *Matchu rita* (stewed beef bones) seem to be a comfort item. However, the reason behind was rather interesting. One female respondent talked about how when one is weak, beef stew helped in regaining one's strength. *Nakam suoa* (dry-fish chutney) is another such food that induced physical comfort. One respondent said, "When I am sick with malaria, *nakam suoa* is what gives me comfort!" Therefore the reasons behind physical comfort food were twofold: (a) It gave physical comfort to the body when one is down, and (b) It aided recovery from sickness.

Among comfort food items, meat is clearly the most sought-after food. This in some way seems to identify Garos as avid meat eaters. This finds echoes in common discourses where Garos consider themselves as people who eat any and every animal-food. But in actual practice, it is not so. Though yearning for meat is widely prevalent, majority of Garos can afford to eat meat only on special occasions. Many families ate meat only once or twice a month on normal occasions. Again, men were more avid beef and pork consumers than women. Interestingly, women were more interested in supposedly health-inducing foods like stewed beef bones or dry-fish chutney.

Surprisingly only 3 women listed dry fish as comfort food. This was unanticipated because dry fish is a daily constituent of Garo diet. When the informants were asked why they did not list dry fish as comfort food, the overwhelming answer was, "We eat dry fish every day." This seems to indicate that Garos long for food that is not a constituent of daily diet. This reality is reiterated by the fact that even though they consider rice to be their staple food, and one that is an essential requirement for all rituals and feasts, they do not list it under comfort food.

While listing comfort food, a preponderance of beef was seen (18 out of 40 respondents). This shows that Garos in Gohalkona prefer beef over other meat. However the reason behind such a preference is difficult to gauge. Nonetheless the reason may lie on the fact that public slaughter, sale and consumption of beef are banned in Gohalkona. Even the weekly market of this predominantly Garo village do not sell beef. Beef is privately slaughtered and sold house to house. The social sanction on beef consumption may be the factor leading to its preference due to its scarcity.

Finally, the responses overwhelmingly pointed towards *kalchi* (alkali) preparations. These indicate that Garos identify themselves as *kalchi-chagiparang* (alkali-eaters). In fact Garos consider alkali as the differentiating ingredient in Garo food vis-à-vis non-Garo food.

Thus among Garos it is seen that there exist strong relationships between emotions, memory, and food preferences. The study into comfort food exposes certain aspects of social significance, such as the fact that Garos consider themselves as avid meat-eaters and

alkali consumers. Moreover, Garos prefer those food items which are not a daily constituent, rather those which are scarce.

References

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Table 1
Comfort Foods

List of Food	Manner of Preparation
Beef	A. Beef dry-fried in alkali B. Beef intestines in alkali C. Beef bones stew
Pork	D. Pork dry-fried in alkali E. Pork liver fry in oil (cooked during Christmas feast) F. Pork curry with rice powder in alkali
Dry Fish	G. Dry fish chutney
Chicken	H. Chicken dry-fried in alkali
Dog meat	I. Dry-fried in alkali

Fig. 1
Comfort Food and Gender

