BETWEEN TASTE AND TABOO: DOG-MEAT AND THE MORAL IMAGINATION OF MIZO SOCIETY

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Abstract

Food is never simply nutrition. It is a site where culture, morality and identity intersect. In Mizoram, the consumption of dog-meat illustrates this complexity. Historically valued both as food and in sacrificial rituals, dog-meat today has become one of the most contested delicacies in Mizo society. This article examines the sociological significance of dog-meat consumption through case studies of consumers and non-consumers of dog-meat in Aizawl. While some respondents describe dogs as companions too intelligent and affectionate to be eaten, others regard dog-meat as a normal if occasional, part of cultural practice, prized for its taste and status. Christianity further complicates the issue by casting dog-meat as a taboo in religious contexts, thereby reshaping cultural edibility codes. The divergent viewpoints demonstrate how food functions as a moral battlefield, where tradition, globalization and ethical sensibilities collide. By placing these narratives within the broader sociology of food, this article highlights how the contested practice of eating dog-meat mirrors deeper questions of cultural continuity, religious influence and the shifting boundaries of belonging in Mizoram.

Keywords: *Foodways, Mizoram, Dog-meat, Culture, Taboo, Identity*

INTRODUCTION

Food does more than fill the stomach. It reveals who we are, how we relate to one another and what we choose to value. Across societies, questions of what may or may not be eaten map onto larger debates about morality, kinship, religion and identity. As Mary Douglas (1966) famously noted, "what is considered dirty or taboo is matter out of place," reminding us that food taboos are never arbitrary but deeply cultural, serving as markers of symbolic order. To eat or to refuse is rarely a private matter alone. It is an act through which societies reproduce boundaries of belonging and exclusion. Anthropologists and sociologists alike have long emphasized that food functions as both nourishment and communication. Lévi-Strauss (1966) saw cooking as a cultural code while Fischler (1988) described food as a central medium for identity formation encapsulating the paradox that "we are what we eat," yet also "we are what we refuse to eat." In this sense, diets are collective texts through which communities narrate who they are, who they are not and how they wish to be seen. Mizoram offers a striking case study in this regard. The consumption of dog-meat once woven into sacrificial ritual and everyday diet has become a subject of deep moral debate. On one hand, dog-meat is still available, often at a price higher than pork, suggesting its prestige as a delicacy. On the other hand, its edibility is increasingly questioned. The rise of Christianity, the spread of pet-keeping in urban households and global animal welfare discourses have placed dog-meat at the center of a cultural tension where affection collides with appetite and tradition collides with taboo.

In many ways, the debate in Mizoram mirrors wider global controversies around "boundary foods" items that fall uneasily between categories of food and non-food. Like the contested status of beef in Hindu India, pork in Islam or horse-meat in Europe, the question of whether dogs can or should be eaten mobilizes powerful symbolic associations. Dogs, in particular, embody this ambivalence. In some contexts, they are workers and protectors; in others, companions and kin; in yet others, sources of meat. Each classification carries a different moral universe.

This article draws upon case studies of both consumers and non-consumers of dog-meat in Aizawl to examine how the practice embodies the tensions between culture, modernity and morality. By foregrounding the voices of young Mizos who articulate their reasoning in terms of taste, tradition, empathy or cruelty, the analysis highlights the sociological significance of food as a symbol of belonging, identity and ethical imagination. Through this lens, dog-meat becomes more than a contested dish. It becomes a mirror of how Mizoram negotiates its past, its religious present and its global future.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Classical anthropological and sociological work positions food as a symbolic system through which societies classify the world and maintain moral order. Mary Douglas (1966) argued that 'dirt' and 'taboo' are categories of matter out of place; food prohibitions thus map the social boundaries between purity and danger. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) likewise framed cuisine as a cultural code as the raw/cooked/rotten known as "culinary triangle" through which edibility is assigned, negotiated and sometimes revoked. These foundational insights inform contemporary readings of contested foods. When an animal moves from the category of 'livestock' to 'companion' its edibility becomes morally charged because its social classification has shifted. Fischler (1988) further links food to identity formation suggesting that what groups refuse to eat is as constitutive of their identity as what they embrace. Together, these works clarify why dog-meat in Mizoram can be both a delicacy and a moral problem. It sits at a classificatory fault line where categories such as food/kin, sacred/profane are unsettled.

Modern human–animal studies document a broad historical shift from utilitarian to affective relations with animals, especially dogs. Serpell (1996) and Franklin (1999) describe the rise of companionate bonds, empathy and the moral elevation of pets that reconfigure dogs as near-kin. Haraway (2003) theorizes companion species to capture the dense, coconstitutive relationships between humans and dogs; such ties reshape ethical horizons and daily practices, including diet. As pet-keeping expands in urbanizing contexts, the petization of dogs produces powerful counter-pressures against their classification as edible (Arluke & Sanders, 1996). This literature illuminates the non-consumer voices in Mizoram. Their refusal of dog-meat is not only individual sentiment but part of a wider cultural transformation that relocates dogs from the culinary to the domestic-affective domain.

Religious traditions codify edibility and moralize diet creating symbolic boundaries around the sacred and the profane (Durkheim, 1912). Douglas (1966) shows how dietary rules sustain social order by policing categorical boundaries. Asad (1993) emphasizes how religious disciplines shape everyday conduct beyond explicit doctrine. In Mizoram, Christianity has played a central role in cultural change including reforms of public comportment and ritual life. Even if the church does not clearly forbid it, Christianity often shifts dog-meat from something acceptable at home to something inappropriate in religious or community settings. This shows how religion can limit the use of certain foods in rituals without fully stopping people from eating them in private.

Beyond taboo, food participates in the politics of taste and prestige. Appadurai (1981) coined "gastro-politics" to describe how cuisines mediate hierarchy, identity and power while Bourdieu (1984) shows that tastes are socially stratified, what is "acquired", "refined" or "transgressive" signals distinction. Mintz and Du Bois (2002) argue that everyday foods encode histories of labor, trade and class. In contexts where dog-meat is priced higher than common meats, cost can index rarity and status even as stigma grows. Literature on "boundary foods" suggests that such items often persist in niche, private or special-occasion settings because they articulate both continuity and difference within changing moral economies. Comparative research shows that controversies over dog-meat pivot on similar axes, affection vs. appetite, heritage vs. modern ethics, private practice vs. public legitimacy even as the local histories differ. Podberscek (2009) documents

polarized positions in South Korea where opponents draw on animal welfare and global modernity frames while supporters invoke tradition, taste and sovereignty. Studies from China trace how festivals and markets become flashpoints where local custom meets transnational activism. This comparison helps place Mizoram in a wider context. While its Christian influence and local history are unique, the main arguments about culture and modernity are similar to debates in other regions.

Regional ethnographies are crucial for historical grounding. Colonial and early post-colonial accounts (Parry, 1928; McCall, 1949) note the sacrificial and dietary roles of dogs among Mizo and related communities showing that edibility historically coexisted with ritual significance.

While dog-meat consumption has been widely discussed in other Asian contexts, little research has examined how it is understood and debated within Mizoram, where Christianity, pet-keeping and global ethics intersect with local cultural traditions. What remains unexplored is how ordinary Mizos especially the younger generation make sense of this contested food in their everyday lives whether through taste, culture, empathy or religious morality. This study fills that gap by foregrounding the voices of both consumers and non-consumers showing how their reasoning reflects larger questions of identity, belonging and cultural change.

METHODOLOGY

This article draws upon qualitative case studies conducted in Aizawl, Mizoram to explore the contested meanings of dogmeat consumption. The case studies were designed to capture both consumer and non-consumer perspectives with particular attention to the ways in which individuals narrate their choices and assign cultural or moral value to food practices. An exploratory qualitative approach was adopted, appropriate for examining a practice that is both culturally embedded and morally contested. As Creswell (2013) notes, qualitative research enables the researcher to understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to social phenomena, allowing for an in-depth exploration of lived experiences and cultural narratives.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with young Mizo adults in Aizawl. Participants included both consumers and non-consumers of dog-meat providing contrasting perspectives on the practice. The narratives were analysed thematically guided by concepts from the sociology of food and anthropology of taboo.

As with all qualitative work, the researcher acknowledges the interpretive nature of the analysis. The findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable but to provide a sociological interpretation of contested food practices in Mizoram. By foregrounding participants' voices and situating them within theoretical debates on culture, taboo and identity, the article highlights how food serves as a moral and cultural battleground in contemporary society.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

From Sacrifice to Delicacy

In the early Mizo society, dogs were not only eaten but also carried symbolic weight in ritual contexts. Ethnographic accounts suggest that their chief value was often derived from sacrificial purposes, where they were offered in ceremonies tied to community well-being, fertility or spiritual appeasement (Parry, 1928; McCall, 1949). This dual status both as consumable and as sacred offering highlights what Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) called the "culinary triangle" where animals oscillate between the raw, the cooked and the forbidden depending on cultural classification.

In contemporary Mizoram, however, the position of dog-meat has shifted. It is no longer primarily sacrificial but rather a sought-after delicacy often priced higher than pork which is otherwise central to Mizo cuisine. In Aizawl, dog meat sells for roughly ₹600 per kilogram, compared to pork at ₹400. This price differential signifies more than market logic, it reflects what Arjun Appadurai (1981) terms the "gastro-politics" of food, where taste, prestige and cultural identity intersect. A higher cost signals status, rarity and the endurance of a practice that resists easy assimilation into global norms of animal ethics.

At the same time, the visibility or rather invisibility of dogs in public space points to the embeddedness of this practice. Unlike in many Indian cities, stray dogs are notably absent in Aizawl. Veterinary reports further suggest that Mizoram has had relatively few rabies-related deaths, complicating external critiques of dog consumption as a health hazard. Here, food consumption is not merely nutritional but entwined with public health narratives, urban order and the politics of cultural self-definition.

Thus, the historical arc of dog-meat in Mizoram reveals a trajectory from ritual significance to contemporary delicacy but also exposes the ambivalence of a practice positioned uneasily between cultural heritage and modern moral critique.

Dogs as Kin, Not Meat

For many non-consumers in Mizoram, the refusal to eat dog-meat is not simply a matter of taste but a moral stance rooted in empathy, kinship and emotional attachment. A 22-year-old respondent explained that she has never eaten dog-meat because she finds dogs "too friendly and too intelligent to eat." Having grown up with a pet dog that she describes as loyal and trusting, she regards the animal less as livestock and more as family. Her testimony reflects a form of anthropomorphism in which animals are attributed human-like qualities, strengthening the perception of dogs as companions rather than consumables.

She further described her distress when witnessing dogs being transported for slaughter noting how she would cover her eyes and ears unable to intervene yet emotionally affected. This moral discomfort resonates with what Adrian Franklin

(1999) calls the "postmodern animal," wherein cultural modernity reshapes human-animal relationships to emphasize companionship, rights and sentience. In her view, eating dog-meat is not only outdated but also cruel and she advocates for its criminalization.

Interestingly, she situates her opposition within a broader cultural comparison, noting that in Nagaland and other Northeastern states, dog-meat consumption remains common. For her, the association of dog-meat with alcohol consumption suggests that its appeal is less about sustenance and more about sensory indulgence, a distinction that echoes Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) insights on taste as a marker of social distinction. Her disdain for those who consume dog-meat despite owning dogs whom she labels as "the cruellest human beings" underscores how food choices become moral judgments classifying others not merely by their diet but by their perceived humanity.

From a sociological perspective, such voices represent a cultural shift in the symbolic classification of animals. Mary Douglas's (1966) notion of "matter out of place" helps explain how dogs are increasingly categorized as companions in the domestic sphere and therefore unfit for the kitchen. This reclassification reflects the impact of urbanization, pet ownership, and Christian moral codes that align with global discourses on animal ethics. In short, the rejection of dogmeat among some Mizos signals not only individual preference but also the reconfiguration of edibility boundaries, where dogs cross over from the category of food to that of kin.

Taste, Normalcy and Culture

In sharp contrast to non-consumer perspectives, those who eat dog-meat in Mizoram frame their choice as both normal and culturally legitimate. A 23-year-old woman, for instance, reported that she occasionally consumes dog-meat usually prepared at home. For her, the primary reason is taste. She did not emphasize cultural heritage or ritual obligation. Instead, she described the practice as part of everyday food choice comparable to eating pork or chicken. Unlike the non-consumer, she showed little awareness or concern for the conditions in which dogs are transported or slaughtered. Her perspective suggests that proximity to cruelty or the lack thereof shapes moral reasoning, a pattern also observed in broader food studies literature (Joy, 2010).

A young male respondent, also 23 took a slightly different stance. He explicitly positioned dog-meat as part of Mizo cultural practice, though not as a staple consumed regularly. Instead, he associated it with special occasions and homecooked meals, treating it as a dish with ritual resonance but social limitations. Importantly, he drew a distinction between private and public contexts. While personal consumption felt acceptable, serving dog-meat in religious ceremonies would be inappropriate. This distinction arises from the influence of Christianity in Mizoram which redefines edibility along moral-spiritual lines, placing dogs in the category of taboo.

Both respondents emphasize that eating dog-meat is in their view "normal." Yet, their definitions of normalcy diverge. For the female respondent, normalcy is grounded in taste and habit while for the male respondent, it is grounded in cultural continuity. These contrasting logics highlight what Jack Goody (1982) identified as the "domestication of the savage mind," where food practices encode both everyday rationality and symbolic rationality.

Furthermore, the male respondent's comment that personal attachment to a dog makes consumption difficult underscores the blurred boundary between pets and food animals. Sociologically, this reveals a conditional classification system. The edibility of the dog depends not on the species itself but on the relationship built with it. This resonates with Claude LéviStrauss's (1966) insight that food taboos are relational and context-specific rather than absolute.

Together, these consumer voices suggest that dog-meat eating persists not as a uniform tradition but as a spectrum of practices ranging from culinary preference to cultural assertion. For consumers, dog-meat represents a site where taste, identity and tradition intersect, even as it remains morally charged in the broader society.

The Christian Taboo and Social Boundaries

One of the most significant influences on food practices in contemporary Mizoram is the spread of Christianity. Since the late nineteenth century, Christian missionaries have played a central role in reshaping not only religious life but also social norms and cultural values. Foodways as an intimate domain of everyday life became a site of reform. Foods once consumed freely such as dog-meat gradually came under scrutiny as incompatible with Christian notions of purity, morality and civility.

The male respondent in the case study reflected this dynamic when he argued that dog-meat consumption while acceptable in private would be inappropriate in religious ceremonies. Here, Christianity operates not as an outright prohibition but as a boundary-setting framework, delineating what is suitable in sacred contexts versus profane ones. As Mary Douglas (1966) reminds us, food taboos are not only about hygiene but about symbolic order. They distinguish what belongs inside or outside the moral community. In Mizoram, dog-meat has increasingly become classified as "matter out of place" within Christian moral categories.

The tension between private practice and public disapproval reveals what Emile Durkheim (1912) described as the duality of the sacred and the profane. While individuals may continue to consume dog-meat as a matter of taste or heritage, Christianity redefines the social landscape by stigmatizing its inclusion in communal and ritual life. This not only limits the spaces where dog-meat can be consumed but also marks its eaters as belonging to a moral minority within the community.

At the same time, the persistence of dog-meat consumption despite religious disapproval illustrates the complexity of cultural change. Practices rarely disappear entirely. Instead, they adapt, recede or survive at the margins. As Talal Asad

(1993) argues, religious influence operates not as a totalizing force but as a set of disciplinary practices that shape but do not fully determine social life. In this sense, the Christian taboo against dog-meat in Mizoram highlights how food functions as a site of negotiation between tradition and religion where cultural identity and spiritual discipline are constantly balanced.

Between Culture and Compassion

The contrasting voices of consumers and non-consumers reveal that dog-meat in Mizoram occupies a liminal position suspended between cultural tradition, religious taboo and emotional attachment. Unlike pork, which enjoys near-universal acceptance as a staple of Mizo cuisine, dog-meat remains a divisive marker of identity. For some, it represents continuity with ancestral practices and a distinctive taste preference. For others, it symbolizes cruelty, backwardness and a betrayal of the human–animal bond.

This tension can be understood through Zygmunt Bauman's (1991) notion of ambivalence in modernity where practices once taken for granted become subject to doubt, debate and moral contestation. Dog-meat embodies this ambivalence. It is neither wholly forbidden nor fully embraced, existing instead in a contested cultural space where legitimacy is always questioned.

Non-consumers highlight empathy and kinship often shaped by pet-keeping and exposure to global animal-rights discourses. Their moral reasoning reflects what sociologists call the "sentimental turn" in human-animal relations (Franklin, 1999) in which animals are increasingly valued for companionship and emotional bonds. In contrast, consumers defend the practice by invoking cultural normalcy or taste situating dog-meat within the logic of heritage and sensory pleasure rather than cruelty.

Yet both groups acknowledge that context matters. Even those who eat dog-meat recognize boundaries. It is rarely consumed in public celebrations, avoided in Christian rituals, and often restricted to private domestic settings. This conditional acceptance underscores that food is never judged in isolation but within specific cultural and social contexts. As Claude Fischler (1988) notes, food decisions are deeply tied to the social construction of identity, what we eat (or refuse to eat) says who we are.

Thus, dog-meat in Mizoram functions as a moral battlefield where issues of culture, compassion and modernity intersect. The debate is not only about edibility but about what kind of society the Mizos imagine themselves to be that is one that preserves cultural distinctiveness, one that aligns with Christian taboos or one that embraces global ethics of animal protection.

CONCLUSION

The case of dog-meat in Mizoram is more than a dietary choice. It is a sociological window into how communities negotiate culture, morality and identity in the face of change. Historically valued in ritual sacrifice and later prized as a delicacy, dog-meat now stands at the crossroads of heritage and modernity, both cherished and condemned. The consumer voices reveal how taste, habit and cultural pride sustain the practice, while non-consumers express a growing moral unease rooted in affection, empathy and globalized discourses of animal ethics. Christianity, meanwhile introduces an additional layer of taboo, confining dog-meat to private rather than communal spheres and recasting it as a boundary marker between sacred and profane.

What emerges from these narratives is not a settled consensus but an ongoing negotiation. Dog-meat continues to circulate as food, but always with ambivalence, secrecy or justification. It symbolizes the contested moral imagination of Mizo society, where tradition is neither abandoned nor uncritically preserved, but continually debated. As Pierre Bourdieu (1984) reminds us, taste is never innocent, it reflects social positioning, values and symbolic boundaries. In Mizoram, the taste for dog-meat or the refusal of it thus becomes a statement about belonging, ethics and identity.

Ultimately, the moral debate over dog-meat consumption reveals the plural identities within contemporary Mizo society. It mirrors the broader sociological truth that food is never merely about survival, it is about how people define themselves and others, how they reconcile cultural memory with religious and ethical codes, and how they imagine their place within a global moral community. In this way, the contested practice of eating dog-meat is not simply a local curiosity but part of a larger story of how societies everywhere grapple with the politics of edibility, compassion and cultural continuity.

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