

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Dog Meat, Cultural Identity, And Ethical Boundaries: A Sociocultural Analysis of Mizo Society

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Abstract

Food practices are not merely nutritional activities but important sites through which societies construct identity, social distinction, morality, and cultural belonging. The consumption of dog meat presents a particularly complex case because dogs may simultaneously occupy categories of companion, animal, food, and culturally meaningful social object. This article examines dog-meat consumption in Mizo society through a sociocultural and interpretive framework, focusing on the relationship between cultural identity, food classification, moral boundaries, and changing ethical perceptions. The study adopts a qualitative conceptual methodology based exclusively on the provided anthropological and sociological literature. Particular attention is given to Appadurai's concept of food as a field of social negotiation, Douglas's analysis of purity and taboo, Bourdieu's theory of taste and distinction, Fischler's relationship between food and identity, and scholarship on human-animal relationships. The analysis indicates that attitudes toward dog meat cannot be adequately understood through a universal binary of acceptable and unacceptable food. Rather, they emerge through culturally specific systems of classification, socialization, historical experience, religious influence, and changing relationships between humans and animals. The article further argues that Mizo food practices should be understood as dynamic rather than culturally fixed. Moral disagreement surrounding dog meat reflects broader processes through which communities negotiate tradition, identity, modernity, and ethical change.

KEY WORDS

Dog Meat, Mizo Society, Cultural Identity, Food Ethics, Food Taboos, Human-Animal Relations, Sociocultural Analysis, Moral Boundaries, Food and Identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Food occupies a central position in the organization of social life. What people eat, avoid, prepare, share, or classify as unacceptable is connected to systems of meaning that extend beyond biological nutrition. Food can express social identity, cultural belonging, religious values, class distinctions, and moral judgments. Anthropological scholarship has therefore treated eating as a significant social practice through which communities organize relationships between people, animals, institutions, and symbolic categories (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002;

Fischler, 1988).

Dog-meat consumption provides an especially important context for examining these relationships because dogs occupy an ambiguous position in many societies. They may be regarded as companions and socially intimate animals while, under different cultural classifications, being treated as a potential source of food. Serpell (1996) demonstrates that human-animal relationships are culturally variable and historically constructed, while Franklin (1999) emphasizes the

changing social organization of relationships between humans and animals. These perspectives make it possible to examine dog meat without assuming that the meaning of the practice is universally determined by the biological characteristics of the animal.

The problem addressed in this article is therefore not simply whether dog meat is consumed, but how such consumption becomes culturally meaningful and morally contested. The central question is how food classification contributes to the construction of Mizo cultural identity and how ethical boundaries surrounding dog meat may change in response to social transformation. Food preferences are embedded within systems of distinction and classification. Bourdieu (1984) demonstrates that taste can function as a mechanism of social differentiation, while Douglas (1966) shows that categories of purity and pollution are produced through systems of social order.

The article has three principal objectives. First, it examines dog meat as a culturally constructed food category rather than treating consumption as an isolated dietary practice. Second, it investigates the relationship between food, cultural identity, and moral boundaries. Third, it develops a conceptual interpretation of how traditional classifications can encounter changing ethical attitudes within Mizo society.

The significance of this analysis lies in its attempt to move beyond simplistic representations of dog-meat consumption. Treating a food practice exclusively as either tradition or taboo obscures the social processes through which meanings are produced and contested. Appadurai (1981) demonstrates that food can become a field of social negotiation in which cultural values, status, power, and identity intersect. The same analytical principle is useful for understanding debates over dog meat: disagreements about food can simultaneously become disagreements about culture, morality, and belonging.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature provided for this study offers several complementary theoretical approaches to understanding food, animals, identity, and cultural boundaries. Rather than presenting these works as isolated contributions, this review synthesizes them into a framework for analyzing dog-meat consumption in Mizo society.

Mintz and Du Bois (2002) establish food and eating as important anthropological subjects because dietary practices

connect material consumption with social organization, symbolic meaning, and cultural experience. Fischler (1988) develops this perspective by linking food directly to identity. Eating is not simply an act performed by an individual; it can become part of the process through which individuals understand who they are and where they belong. From this perspective, food preferences can function as markers of collective identity.

Appadurai's (1981) analysis of gastro-politics is particularly important to the present study. His approach demonstrates that food practices may involve negotiation over status, authority, cultural values, and social relationships. Food therefore becomes a medium through which social tensions can be expressed. Applied to dog meat, this framework suggests that disagreements over consumption may represent broader negotiations concerning cultural legitimacy and changing social values. Food is not politically or socially neutral; decisions about what is eaten and how it is judged can reveal underlying structures of social power (Appadurai, 1981).

Douglas (1966) provides another major theoretical foundation by demonstrating how concepts of purity and pollution depend upon culturally established classification systems. Foods become acceptable or unacceptable not necessarily because of their intrinsic physical properties, but because they occupy particular positions within symbolic systems. This perspective is especially useful for understanding why the same animal may be categorized differently across societies.

Bourdieu (1984) extends the analysis through the concept of taste. Taste is socially structured and can distinguish groups by establishing boundaries between what is considered desirable, ordinary, sophisticated, traditional, or unacceptable. Dog-meat consumption can consequently become a marker through which cultural difference is produced or challenged.

The human-animal literature adds another dimension. Arluke and Sanders (1996), Franklin (1999), and Serpell (1996) demonstrate that relationships between humans and animals are socially organized and culturally variable. Haraway (2003) particularly emphasizes the relational character of human-animal interaction through the concept of companion species. These perspectives complicate any universal distinction between animals regarded as companions and animals regarded as food.

Joy (2010) provides a framework for understanding culturally

organized distinctions between animals that societies classify as edible and those treated differently. Although her work addresses broader patterns of carnism, it is relevant to the present analysis because it demonstrates that eating animals involves cultural categorization rather than purely individual choice.

Goody (1982) and Lévi-Strauss (1966) further establish cooking and food classification as systems through which societies organize cultural meanings. The culinary process transforms biological materials into culturally recognizable foods, while culinary categories distinguish what is considered appropriate for consumption.

The historical materials concerning communities of the Mizo region are particularly significant. McCall (1949) and Parry (1928) provide historical ethnographic perspectives relevant to understanding cultural practices and social organization in the region. Their historical distance is also a limitation: such accounts should not be treated as complete descriptions of contemporary Mizo society. Rather, they provide contextual material for examining historical patterns and their relationship to later transformations.

Asad (1993) and Bauman (1991) contribute broader perspectives on religion, discipline, modernity, and ambivalence. These concepts help explain why cultural practices can become sites of tension when inherited traditions encounter new systems of ethical judgment.

The literature therefore reveals a research gap. Existing theories provide strong explanations of food, taste, taboo, and human–animal relations individually, but their combined application to dog meat and Mizo cultural identity requires further conceptual development. This article addresses that gap by integrating food politics, classification, taste, identity, and human–animal relationships into a single sociocultural interpretation.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and conceptual research design. It does not claim to present original survey, interview, or ethnographic fieldwork. Instead, it critically synthesizes the supplied anthropological and sociological literature to construct an analytical interpretation of dog meat, cultural identity, and ethical boundaries in Mizo society.

Creswell (2013) identifies qualitative inquiry as appropriate for

examining meanings, experiences, social processes, and culturally embedded phenomena. The present research therefore treats food consumption as a socially meaningful practice rather than reducing it to measurable dietary behavior.

3.2 Analytical Framework

The analysis is organized around five interconnected dimensions: food classification, cultural identity, moral boundaries, human–animal relationships, and social transformation.

The first dimension concerns classification. Douglas's (1966) framework suggests that food categories acquire meaning through systems of order. The question is therefore not simply whether dog meat is biologically edible, but why it is categorized as acceptable, unacceptable, desirable, or morally problematic in particular social contexts.

The second dimension concerns identity. Fischler (1988) demonstrates that food participates in the construction of personal and collective identity. A food practice may consequently operate as an expression of belonging. Conversely, rejecting a food may also communicate identity.

The third dimension concerns moral boundaries. The classification of an animal as food or companion involves ethical assumptions about appropriate human relationships with animals. Serpell (1996) and Franklin (1999) demonstrate that these relationships are socially differentiated rather than universal.

The fourth dimension concerns cultural negotiation. Appadurai (1981) provides the concept of gastro-politics, allowing food practices to be analyzed as arenas of negotiation. In the context of dog meat, competing judgments can represent competing conceptions of tradition, respectability, morality, and cultural legitimacy.

The fifth dimension concerns social change. Bauman (1991) provides a useful conceptualization of modern ambivalence, while Asad (1993) helps situate changing moral and religious practices within broader systems of discipline and meaning. These perspectives allow traditional food practices to be examined as dynamic rather than static.

3.3 Interpretive Procedure

The literature was analyzed comparatively according to four questions: how food is classified; how food contributes to identity; how human–animal boundaries are constructed; and

how cultural meanings change. The resulting interpretation does not assume that all members of Mizo society hold identical attitudes. Instead, it recognizes internal diversity and moral disagreement as important components of social life.

A hypothetical example illustrates the analytical logic. Suppose one individual regards dog meat as a culturally familiar food associated with family or community practices, while another regards dogs primarily as companion animals and therefore considers consumption morally unacceptable. The disagreement is not simply a difference in taste. It represents two different systems of classification and moral interpretation. Bourdieu's (1984) theory helps explain the social dimension of taste, while Douglas's (1966) framework explains the classification underlying the disagreement.

3.4 Methodological Limitations

Because this is a conceptual literature-based analysis, its findings should not be interpreted as statistical measurements of contemporary Mizo attitudes. The historical sources also require contextual caution because cultural practices can change considerably over time. Consequently, the framework developed here should be supplemented in future research with interviews, participant observation, community-based research, and comparative studies across generations.

4. RESULTS

The analysis identifies five major findings concerning the relationship between dog meat, cultural identity, and ethical boundaries in Mizo society.

First, dog-meat consumption is best understood as a culturally classified practice rather than an inherently universal food category. Douglas's (1966) theory demonstrates that food boundaries emerge from systems of social order. The distinction between edible and inedible is therefore culturally produced. This finding is reinforced by Goody (1982) and Lévi-Strauss (1966), whose approaches demonstrate that culinary systems organize natural materials into socially meaningful categories.

Second, dog meat can operate as a marker of cultural identity. Fischler (1988) establishes a direct relationship between eating and identity, suggesting that dietary practices can become components of collective self-understanding. In this context, attitudes toward dog meat may communicate belonging to particular cultural traditions while rejection of the practice may communicate changing ethical or social

identities.

Third, ethical boundaries surrounding dogs are shaped by the social relationship between humans and animals. Serpell (1996), Franklin (1999), and Arluke and Sanders (1996) demonstrate that human–animal relations vary according to social context. Haraway (2003) further complicates the boundary by emphasizing companion relationships. Consequently, when dogs become increasingly associated with companionship, affection, and individualized social relationships, their classification as food may become morally difficult for some social groups.

Fourth, disagreement concerning dog meat represents a form of gastro-political negotiation. Appadurai (1981) shows that food practices can become arenas in which social values and power relations are negotiated. The significance of dog meat therefore extends beyond consumption itself. Debates about its acceptability may involve competing interpretations of tradition, modernity, cultural authenticity, and moral legitimacy. Food becomes a medium through which broader social disagreements are expressed (Appadurai, 1981).

Fifth, the moral meaning of dog meat is not necessarily fixed. Bauman's (1991) concept of ambivalence provides a useful explanation for situations in which inherited cultural practices encounter new forms of ethical judgment. As cultural relationships with animals change, practices previously regarded as ordinary may become controversial, while individuals may simultaneously maintain attachment to tradition and adopt new ethical positions. This indicates that Mizo food culture should be approached as dynamic and internally differentiated rather than homogeneous.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that dog meat occupies a contested cultural position at the intersection of food, identity, classification, and morality. Its significance emerges through social interpretation rather than through the material characteristics of the food alone.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that dog-meat consumption should be understood through a multidimensional framework in which food, identity, morality, and human–animal relations interact. The central theoretical contribution is the integration of food politics with theories of classification and human–animal relationships.

The first important implication concerns the concept of cultural

identity. A narrow interpretation could treat dog-meat consumption as a fixed cultural tradition. However, Fischler (1988) suggests that food contributes to identity precisely because individuals and groups attach meaning to it. Identity is therefore not simply inherited; it is continually reproduced through social practices. A practice may remain culturally significant while its interpretation changes.

The second implication concerns moral classification. Douglas (1966) demonstrates that taboos operate within systems of classification. When the cultural status of dogs changes from predominantly utilitarian or food-related categories toward stronger companion-animal associations, the moral boundary surrounding consumption can shift. This does not mean that one classification is objectively superior in all contexts. Instead, it demonstrates how moral judgments depend upon socially established relationships and categories.

The third implication concerns taste and distinction. Bourdieu (1984) shows that taste is socially structured. Consequently, disagreement about dog meat may involve more than individual preference. What one group considers ordinary, another may interpret as unacceptable, backward, sophisticated, traditional, or ethically problematic. Such judgments can become mechanisms for producing social distinction.

The fourth implication concerns gastro-politics. Appadurai's (1981) approach is particularly valuable because it prevents food from being treated as politically neutral. Food practices can become arenas for negotiating status, belonging, and authority. In the Mizo context, arguments about dog meat may therefore involve competing claims concerning who has the authority to define cultural authenticity and what constitutes legitimate tradition. The politics of food is consequently also a politics of identity and moral interpretation (Appadurai, 1981).

The human-animal literature introduces an additional contradiction. Serpell (1996), Franklin (1999), and Haraway (2003) demonstrate that animals can occupy multiple social roles. A dog can be materially understood as an animal while simultaneously being socially constructed as a companion. This creates the possibility of ethical ambivalence: the same animal can be located differently within different relational systems.

The analysis also reveals limitations in applying universal ethical judgments to culturally specific food practices. Joy's

(2010) work demonstrates the broader cultural organization of meat consumption, but moral evaluation should still recognize variation across societies. Similarly, historical works such as McCall (1949) and Parry (1928) provide important contextual material but cannot by themselves establish the attitudes of contemporary Mizo populations.

A major practical implication is that future research should avoid treating Mizo society as culturally homogeneous. Generational differences, changing relationships with animals, religious and social transformations, urbanization, and exposure to broader ethical discourses may produce divergent attitudes. Asad (1993) and Bauman (1991) help explain why moral systems can be experienced as processes of negotiation rather than static rules.

The most significant contradiction identified by the analysis is therefore between cultural continuity and ethical transformation. Preserving cultural identity does not necessarily require preserving every historical food practice in an unchanged form. Conversely, rejecting a traditional practice may be experienced by some individuals as a challenge to cultural continuity. Dog meat consequently becomes a useful case through which the broader relationship between tradition, modernity, morality, and identity can be examined.

6. CONCLUSION

This article has examined dog meat as a sociocultural phenomenon situated at the intersection of food, cultural identity, ethical classification, and human-animal relationships. Drawing exclusively on the provided literature, the analysis demonstrates that the meaning of dog meat cannot be reduced to a simple distinction between consumption and non-consumption.

Food practices acquire social significance through systems of classification, identity, taste, and cultural negotiation. Douglas's (1966) theory demonstrates the importance of symbolic boundaries, while Fischler (1988) explains the relationship between food and identity. Bourdieu (1984) highlights the social organization of taste, and scholarship on human-animal relations demonstrates that the status of animals is culturally and relationally constructed. Appadurai's (1981) concept of gastro-politics provides the strongest integrative framework because it explains how food practices can become sites of negotiation over culture, authority, identity, and social values.

The case of dog meat in Mizo society demonstrates that cultural practices should not be treated as static or internally uniform. Historical food practices may acquire new meanings as social relationships, ethical perceptions, and cultural classifications change. The resulting tensions should therefore be interpreted as processes of cultural negotiation rather than simply as conflicts between tradition and modernity.

The study contributes a conceptual framework for understanding dog meat through five interconnected dimensions: classification, identity, morality, human–animal relations, and social transformation. Its principal limitation is the absence of original empirical fieldwork. Future research should therefore investigate contemporary Mizo perspectives through qualitative interviews, intergenerational comparison, ethnographic observation, and community-centered research. Such studies could determine how different social groups negotiate the changing meaning of dog meat and how cultural identity is reconstructed amid changing ethical boundaries.

Ultimately, the sociocultural significance of dog meat lies not only in the act of eating but in the meanings attached to that act. Food becomes a language through which societies define belonging, difference, morality, and cultural continuity. In this sense, the debate surrounding dog meat provides a broader analytical window into how communities continually negotiate the boundaries between tradition, identity, and ethical change.

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