A Kitchen Story: Participation, Patriarchy, and Cooking Pork

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Published by Zubaan 2024
In collaboration with Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Regional Office, New Delhi

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Zubaan's work in the past few years has been to achieve this goal through the publication of books and pamphlets, creation of archives (www.posterwomen.org), organizing literary festivals, and encouraging the exchange of authors from under-represented regions and communities, meetings and workshops to bring together multiple feminist perspectives. Zubaan has often brought forward the voices of marginalized communities through its publishing work, focusing on women, queer and trans experiences and in the recent past, has also shifted its focus to research and action work. Zubaan Publishers Pvt. Ltd, an offshoot and sister organisation of Zubaan, continues the publishing tradition in the areas of humanities and social sciences, as well as fiction, general non-fiction, and books for children and young adults under its Young Zubaan imprint.

Typeset in PT Serif 11/18.

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Naga pork cooking

They say the finesse of the Naga people is recognized by the way they cook pork. Many Naga tribes are identified by their traditional pork cooking style. The Lotha people cook it with finely chopped and dried bamboo shoot; the Ao and Konyak people with *anishi* (sun-dried and baked taro leaves processed into patties); and the Sema people with *akhuni* (lightly fermented and smoked soya beans).

The Raphei peoples' way of cooking pork is considered one of the finest.

Dregs of raphei hoksa that can be stored and cooked with potatoes or any leafy vegetables

Tracing the roots

Ukhrul is a mountainous district where the hills are calming and make one feel like the place can heal loneliness and sickness. It is an 82 kilometre serpentine, uphill drive from the nearest airport at Imphal in Manipur. It is home predominantly to the Tangkhul Nagas, a people who speak more than 250 distinct dialects, cook different types of food on similar hearths, and share stories of struggles and hopes against a history and a present crippled by ongoing conflict, militarization, underdevelopment, and deprivation.

Raphei is the northern region of Ukhrul and it shares trade, border and history with Nagaland and Myanmar. Raphei is known for its *luira phanit* (seed sowing festival), *longpi ham* (black pottery), *hao machi* (locally produced salt), and its unique style of cooking pork, popularly known as *raphei hoksa*.

Interestingly, not all Tangkhuls share the same recipe for cooking pork. Every region cooks it differently, but no one will dispute that the Raphei preparation is unmatched.

Of chillies and *hoksa*

The beauty of *raphei hoksa* lies in its simplicity. It does not rely on any condiment to build or enhance its taste. Its strength lies in the only two ingredients used in Raphei pork cooking: a generous amount of hand pounded chilli powder and salt to taste. Sometimes people add ginger and garlic, but others argue that this is not an authentic *raphei hoksa*. As a child, the only time I remember my parents adding a node of ginger in with the cooking pork was when the fat was not tender enough.

The chilli powder comes both from home gardens and from the jhum fields where seasonal crops are grown. After harvesting, the chillies are sun-dried for days and are readied to be stored for the year. Whenever there is a need to restock, a portion is kept near the fireplace to smoke it. Some roast the chillies before pounding them. Each process gives the chilli powder a different flavour and produces a darker or redder colour depending on how long the chillies are kept near the fireplace.

Unlike other food like black sesame, rice, or paddy, pounding chillies is uninspiring. The powder and flakes from it burn the nostrils and sting the eyes, so women wrap their faces and shoo the kids away when they pound it. But no household would substitute its homegrown and hand pounded chilli powder with what is commercially available and is also cheaper. It is rare for households to run out of chilli powder and boiled drinking water in the Raphei region.

I asked Seth Shatsang, a student leader and activist from the heart of the Raphei region, what was so special about *raphei hoksa*. 'How do I explain it?' he said. 'It is in the preparation and how it is cooked – beautiful red!'

He paused over the phone and stressed, 'You see, we usually cook it in an earthen pot and cook it slowly for hours, like you are going to suck the fat instead of eating it. During *luira phanit,* it is a tradition that every family spreads the food and eats outside the house. Neighbours pass on dishes from one table to the other. People usually don't lay any other meat on the table but pork. *Raphei hoksa* is the specialty of the festival, and it is served with rice beer to guests,' he said.

Usually big chunks of pork are cooked overnight till the fat is really soft and tender, so tender it flutters like a beautiful bird when the dish is displayed and served in a *koklui* (wooden stand bowl) that elders in most families usually eat from. The pork tastes better when cooked in large quantities, and every time it is reheated, it gets better and better.

Somipam Lungleng, a father of three teenagers and a longtime activist who has travelled extensively in the Naga villages, told me that those who have been to *luira phanit* will know that *raphei hoksa* is special and unique, but he added that the Lotha pork cooking, too, is one of his favourites. In Raphei pork cooking the pieces are huge, while in the Lotha way the pieces are smaller and cooked till they are dry, with bamboo shoot.

Guests are usually served raphei hoksa with rice beer

Raphei in Delhi

When we moved to a bigger house in Delhi I had the space to experiment with one of my dream projects: a kitchen affair. After much discussion and persuasion, I launched 'The Family Kitchen', which had buffets on Fridays and Saturdays. This was to align my housekeeping with the routine of my school-going kids.

It took some time for people to pick up on the idea of eating in a 'rustic home space,' and we had to mention this often in our weekly creatives/flyers. For a few weeks, the buffet was purely on a trial basis. On some days we would have no bookings, but I would cook anyway. On other days we would get mixed group bookings, and I would have to turn down some requests because every buffet required more detail than I had anticipated.

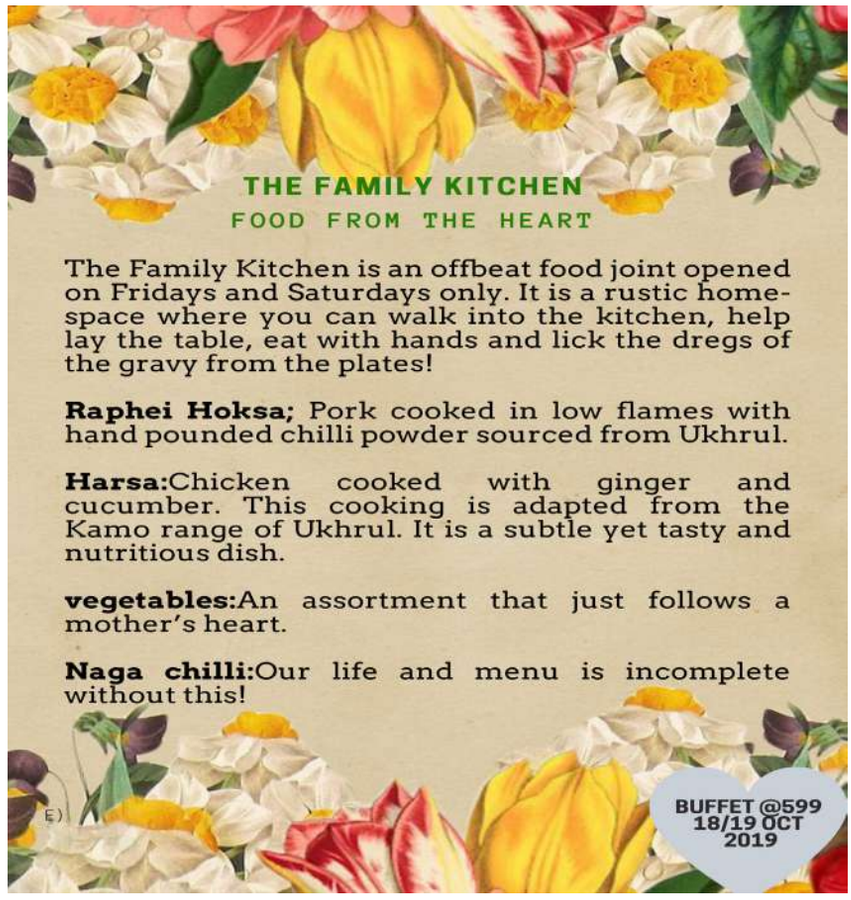
The first buffet went like a dhaba party, where friends and strangers met, talked, and ate. When it was time to pay, neither I nor my cousin (who was helping me) knew how to react when people gave the money. We shifted and traded this responsibility between us and endured both joy and embarrassment. The joy did not last long, but the embarrassment stayed.

I struggled with expanding and cutting down the food menu. Both experiments did not follow any clear course, but I kept *raphei hoksa* as the main item.

A family table during luira phanit

The menu

After a few weeks of running the buffet I was confident about the food that could be continued and what could be struck off the menu. The decision was not difficult. The response of the guests to *raphei hoksa* emboldened me, and I started and served a fixed menu around it. This meant two things: it was easier for me to manage, and people knew what to expect.



The Family Kitchen: Food From the Heart!

The food fellowship

A meal at 'The Family Kitchen' might have seemed like it was just about food, but it meant so much more. People walked in for the love of pork prepared in a certain way and the assurance that the *raphei hoksa* would not disappoint.

Mary Khuvung, communications consultant with iPartner India, who often dropped into The Family Kitchen, said she had tried many styles of pork cooking, and *raphei hoksa* was one of the best. She sometimes packed takeaways and shared her experience of reinventing new dishes by adding a bit of *raphei hoksa*

to vegetables or dropping a few chunks of potatoes into the hoksa. ‘It makes a delicious meal,’ she added.

I told her that my brother Cyril Pamza called the dregs of *raphei hoksa* ‘killing drops’ because adding a few spoons of the gravy to steamed or boiled vegetables greatly enhanced the taste. This is what most mothers do in every home when the hoksa is about to get over. They scoop the dregs, store them in jars and pots, and add them to potatoes, yams, mustard leaves, and vegetables, which are then greatly enjoyed. Children who stay away from home take it with them when they leave after their vacations. It rarely gets spoiled and stays good for a long time even without refrigeration.

I had not thought of what could possibly follow the meals since there was no dessert on the menu. A long conversation over green tea always ensued after every meal, so much so that it became a ritual. This was something I had not mentally prepared for in terms of how long a meal can last. I had not imagined strangers walking in not just to eat but to sit and unpack stories of who they are, what they do, where they come from, and sharing their politics and partialities.

Some stories would take away all the hours that I could have invested in cleaning the kitchen, but every conversation was special and worth working for late into the evening or night. The stories led to us finding each other on Facebook and the social media space where I used to share my politics, nonsense, sarcasm, rage, food, children’s posts, and the mundanities of life as a mother.

Truly, *raphei hoksa* brought people and politics in ‘The Family Kitchen’; it turned eating into small ceremonies of food fellowship.

My story

Running ‘The Family Kitchen’ was not easy. It was hectic, and on most days it could barely cover the costs. The solace was that we did not have to pay rent for the space, and meeting new people can never be accounted for in monetary terms. It also helped me expand my thoughts and deepened my roots. It made me think about food, *raphei hoksa* in particular, in a more intimate way, which I would not have explored had it not been for the kitchen. Though it was my parents who always couriered the chilli powder and salt cakes without which the kitchen could not exist, I started tracing the source of the chillies through phone calls, conversations, and through the life of one of my aunts who lives alone and rarely rests. It was women in the Raphei region who were sustaining not just families but a diaspora with the crops and food they grow.

Closer to my heart is my personal journey. My husband and I never had fixed household chores, but what happened after we started running 'The Family Kitchen' is something we wish to pass on to our children.

As a stay-at-home parent, I did most of the household chores. It was not a matter of dispute or disagreement, but our lives were organized around the routine we had. But when the kitchen project started there were days we had no help, and I was held up by guests, some who stayed for hours, and dishes would pile up in the sink. My husband cleaned them often. On one such day he commented, 'I have done the dishes for you.' I immediately retorted that if it was meant to be a favour, then all the effort and help could be trashed in the patriarchy bin. It got me into a fit for a while, but it slowly got us into a long conversation about patriarchy, child rearing practices, and gender roles. We started unpacking how we were raised, how our mothers and society had passed down values and restrictions we sometimes don't understand. As we opened them up for conversation we realized there are reasons behind these practices; a whole history went into shaping the understanding, conduct, and articulation of gender relations and personhood. We live in a different time and world now, and don't need to carry many of them forward anymore.

The conversations did not change the history that went into making us who we are, but they definitely widened our world and kept the sink cleaner.

My learning

I had nothing when I started the kitchen project. I did not possess any professional or culinary skills to run a home eatery. I relied only on one thing: the traditional knowledge my family and the region I come from had passed on to me about food, feeding, sharing, and the communion of people. That home-grown tradition emboldened me to undertake a project that did not make any economic sense, but brought together people I would never have met or known had it not been for this knowledge.

It is also this indigenous pork preparation that lifted the curtain on a patriarchal gender role I could not see through before. My husband doing the dishes will probably be mocked by some, but we owe it to our children and their future to let them know that the making and breaking of gender roles starts at home. It can be angry or gentle. It can be through food.

May we all cook more and love more!

Here's to *Raphei hoksa*!