



Culinary Healing: Exploring the Therapeutic Role of Food in Tibetan Refugee Communities"

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Abstract:

This research paper explores the psychological significance of food memories among Tibetan refugees, with a focus on their experiences in Majnu Ka Tilla, Delhi. Through qualitative observation and interviews conducted in the vibrant Tibetan settlement, the study examines how food serves as a vehicle for preserving cultural identity, fostering a sense of belonging, and promoting healing among refugees. Traditional Tibetan dishes are analyzed as symbols of resilience and continuity in the face of displacement and trauma. The paper also delves into the role of festivals and rituals in reinforcing cultural bonds and providing emotional support for the community. By exploring the intersections of food, culture, and psychology, this research highlights the importance of addressing the psychological needs of Tibetan refugees and promoting holistic approaches to healing and integration.

Keywords: Tibetan refugees, culinary traditions, cultural heritage, healing, sense of safety, comfort, and home away from home.

Introduction:

Memories of food among Tibetan refugees are strongly intertwined with their psychological experience of displacement, adaptation and cultural identity.

These memories are deeply rooted in the traditional cuisines of Tibet but they are also shaped by the new environment and experiences that come with resettlement in India

Tibetan refugees have carried their rich cultural traditions to their new homes, especially in India, where they formed vibrant communities. Festivals play a significant role in preserving Tibetan culture, providing opportunities for social gatherings, religious observances, and celebrating heritage. Food is an essential component of these festivals, with specific dishes symbolizing prosperity, community, and tradition.

Common Traditional Dishes:

- **Tsampa:** A staple food made from roasted barley flour, often mixed with tea or butter. It's a simple, portable, and highly nutritious food, usually associated with Tibetan nomadic life. Its preparation and consumption evoke memories of home and offer a sense of continuity in exile.
- **Momo:** Tibetan dumplings typically filled with meat or vegetables, often prepared for special occasions and family gatherings.
- **Thukpa:** A noodle soup that can include meat or vegetables. Thukpa symbolizes comfort and nourishment, providing warmth during harsh weather. For Tibetan refugees in India, this dish evokes the feeling of home and the security of being with family.
- **Butter Tea:** A traditional Tibetan beverage made with tea, yak butter, and salt. It is closely associated with Tibetan hospitality and community.

: - The lady (named Tsering, age- ~60) I talked to, has been visiting her sister to help her with business, was the second generation of Tibetan refugees, her parents came to India and settled in Dehradun, she also talked about her favorite food and said that we eat what you people eat like daal(lentils), chawal(rice), dahi(curd) and other vegetables.

: - Later I asked her about what she or her parents miss about food...she said the ghee (refined butter) is not pure here and she doesn't remember much about her homeland but does want to visit that place.

she talked about other dishes like momo, Tshampa, and also Wednesday celebration to preserve their culture where they make their traditional meals and dance together to celebrate their culture}

Major festivals of Tibet:

- **Losar -Tibetan New Year:** It is celebrated with traditional rituals, family gatherings, feasting, music, dance, and religious ceremonies. Houses are cleaned and decorated, people wear new clothes, and special foods like "Guthuk" (a soup with dumplings) are prepared.
- **Monlam Chenmo (Great Prayer Festival)-** This festival is a large gathering of people and monks for praying, chanting, and ceremonies aimed at promoting peace and well-being for all sentient beings.
- **Saga Dawa** - is a Buddhist festival that commemorates the birth, enlightenment, and death of Gautama Buddha. It takes place during the fourth month of the Tibetan lunar calendar, typically in May or June.

Food memories -A connection with the homeland

Food memories play a significant role in the lives of Tibetan refugees, acting as a bridge that connects them to their homeland, preserves cultural identity, and fosters a sense of community. -through various way

- **Preserving cultural identity-** It involves cooking traditional meals and passing down recipes and cooking techniques to younger generations, reinforcing a sense of identity and continuity. Some excerpts from one of the poems of "Tenzin Tsundue" that touches upon the Tibetan refugee experience and the preservation of Tibetan culture:

"We carry our culture like a flame,
Through the darkness of exile's night.
In the taste of butter tea and momos,
We find the strength to fight"

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- **Creating a sense of comfort and belonging-**Food plays a crucial role in providing a sense of comfort and belonging among Tibetan refugees. As an essential part of culture, food not only nourishes the body but also nurtures the spirit, especially for those living far from their homeland, the taste of familiar foods can provide a comforting sense of nostalgia, recalling family gatherings, festivals, and life in Tibet. This emotional comfort is especially significant for those who have experienced displacement and upheaval, as it offers a semblance of normalcy and a reminder of home.
- **Coping with displacement-** Food memories also foster a sense of community and continuity, as shared meals become a space for storytelling, bonding, and preserving cultural traditions. Through these memories, Tibetan refugees find a way to hold onto their past while navigating the challenges of their new reality, ultimately using food as a tool for emotional resilience and adaptation.
- **Integration and adaptation-**Tibetan refugees in India face the challenge of adapting to a different culture, climate, and social environment. Food serves as a familiar anchor, offering comfort and continuity in an unfamiliar setting. By integrating traditional Tibetan dishes with locally available ingredients, refugees demonstrate psychological resilience, balancing the preservation of cultural identity with the need to adapt.

Example: The adaptation of momo, a traditional Tibetan dumpling, using Indian spices and vegetables reflects this process. It allows refugees to maintain a connection to their culinary heritage while adapting to the Indian palate.

- **Economic Opportunities:** The establishment of Tibetan restaurants and food stalls in India provides economic opportunities for refugees. This not only supports their livelihoods but also creates spaces for cultural exchange and community building, further promoting healing through food.

: - As I observed in Majnu ka Tilla, this place was full of eateries, serving traditional Tibetan food with a fusion of Indian taste. These small and medium restaurants with glass walls beautifully decorated with small plants and lights. It was like plants were glowing with lights and giving the sense of smile and comfort to on goers and the people of Majnu ka Tilla

Healing through food and rituals

- For Tibetan refugees in India, healing through food starts with the preparation and sharing of traditional dishes like Momo, thukpa, and tsampa. These foods are not just meals but representations of a rich cultural heritage, evoking memories of home and family. The act of cooking and eating these dishes can be soothing, offering a sense of continuity and grounding amid the uncertainty of displacement.
- Rituals, both religious and secular, play a crucial role in healing. Tibetan Buddhist practices, such as the offering of butter lamps or the chanting of mantras, are often accompanied by specific foods and drinks, like butter tea. These rituals are deeply ingrained in Tibetan culture and serve to reconnect refugees with their spiritual roots, providing a source of comfort and guidance during difficult times
- The continuity of food traditions and rituals across generations serves as a testament to the enduring strength and unity of a community, even in the face of profound challenges.

Food a sense of safety and psychological well-being - Conclusion

Tibetan refugees often endure significant psychological trauma due to forced displacement, loss of cultural identity, and the uncertainties of life in exile. This trauma, rooted in the experience of political upheaval and separation from one's homeland, can lead to heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and identity disorientation. Within this context, traditional food plays a critical role in providing a sense of safety and psychological well-being.

The familiar Flavors and rituals associated with Tibetan cuisine, such as tsampa, momo, and thukpa, act as grounding mechanisms that offer a connection to cultural heritage and a comforting sense of continuity. This connection to familiar foods can serve as an anchor, mitigating the destabilizing effects of trauma by promoting a sense of security and reducing stress.

The simple act of preparing and sharing food can also serve as a coping strategy, offering a structured activity that promotes mindfulness and emotional regulation.

From a psychological perspective, these communal practices facilitate social cohesion and help refugees maintain a coherent sense of self, which is critical for mental health and recovery from trauma and psychological wellbeing, needed to navigate the complexities of life in exile.

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