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Ethnic preparation of *Chubitchi*, an alcoholic beverage of the Garo tribe of Meghalaya: a sociocultural analysis

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Abstract

The Garo community living in Meghalaya has always relied on fermented rice liquor known as *Chubitchi* as a main beverage in their everyday life. *Chubitchi* is celebrated by the Garos during feasts and ceremonies. The indigenous populations of North-East India prepare alcoholic beverage in their traditional ways, almost always using rice as the base for those drinks. *Chubitchi* is a popular traditional alcoholic beverage prepared by the Garo tribe of Meghalaya, India. It is consumed during festive occasions such as *Wangala* (harvest festival), *Do.si Do.doka* (wedding festivities) and religious rituals, and also served as refreshments for weary field labourers and guests. It has a great significance in the social and cultural life of the Garos. This paper deals with the traditional preparation of *Chubitchi* by the Garo tribe, which is a vital part of their culture, and also examines the sociocultural significance of the beverage.

Keywords: *Chubitchi*, Garo, Meghalaya, *Wanti*, Ethnic food

Introduction

Almost every country and region of the world has traditional alcoholic beverages made from local agricultural products [1]. Alcoholic beverages are a wide range of products. Meghalaya is a state in the North-East of India. Meghalaya's ecoregion is characterised by the state's distinctive lowland and montane forests. The state is well known for mammalian, avian and botanical diversity. There is a significant commercial forestry sector, especially potatoes, pumpkins, rice, maize, papayas and pineapples, which dominates the economy of Meghalaya. The Garos are residents of the Garo Hills region of Meghalaya. A few concentrated population of Garos can be seen in the plain areas of Kamrup and Goalpara districts of Assam adjoining the Meghalaya border and also in Bangladesh, across the border. The Garos believe that they

came to their present abode in the Garo Hills from Tibet in the north. The tribe itself is known to outsiders as 'Garo', but the Garos call themselves 'A. chik' or 'Mande' [2]. It is estimated that more than eight lakhs *A.chiks* live in India, and around two lakhs live in Bangladesh [3]. They belong to the Tibeto-Burman language group. Early British encounters with the Garos were recorded by William Carey, a missionary, and Mr. John Eliot, commissioner of Dacca, who was sent by Lord Cornwallis in 1788–1789 [4]. William Carey in his *A Garo Jungle Book* noted the social, cultural and political life of the Garos based on his experiences of association with the people.

Alcoholic beverages made from rice have been consumed by many tribal communities living in the North-Eastern states of India from time immemorial [5, 6]. One consistent element associated with festivities, traditional practices and rituals among the Garos is the intake of alcoholic beverage traditionally fermented, which is known to them as *Chubitchi*. William Carey observes: 'When in liquor the Garos are merry to the highest pitch; men, women, and children dancing until

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they can scarcely stand. A birth, a marriage, a death, the opening of a market, the sitting of a council, the trial of a delinquent, almost any and every event serves as an occasion for feasting and an excuse for drink. The liquor, which is generally a weak home-brewed beer, of a milky colour, made from rice or other grains, is even poured into the mouths of their babies as soon as they can swallow. Their festivities sometimes last for two or three days' [4]. This observation of Carey has become anachronistic in the post-colonial *Garos* social life. With the conversion of major chunk of *Garos* population into Christianity, they have gradually distanced themselves from their traditional customs and practices, often contemptuously looking at those practices as superstitious and evil. It does not mean that the *Garos* people have left practices like drinking, etc., what has transformed is the customary practice of drinking traditional liquor to the modern practice of social drinking of foreign liquor. Thus, whatever traces of such customs and practices have remained are secular in nature, devoid of the ritualistic elements. It, therefore, has become imperative to preserve such practices and traditions. It is pertinent to mention here that the Government of Meghalaya has legalised the manufacture and sale of local homemade wine or alcoholic beverage.

Garos consider *Chubitchi* as one of the most important parts of their cultural life. *Chubitchi* is used during religious rituals, meetings, social gatherings, birth, marriage, during *Wangala* (harvest festival), house warming ceremony, before fighting enemies (in the pre-modern era) and in almost every occasion. The old and young, men and women drink alike. The intake of *Chubitchi* is not considered a bad practice among the *Garos* nor is it considered unhealthy. There is no particular age when a *Garos* can taste his/her first liquor. Written records of the traditional ways of making *Chubitchi* is absent as communication was basically oral among the *Garos* until the arrival of Baptist American Missionaries. However, the practices have been passed down orally and hence the knowledge of brewing *Chubitchi* continues in the interior places of Garo Hills, though it is no longer a preferred practice in urban areas and educated neighbourhood. The intake of *Chubitchi* is essentially associated with festivities and gatherings. However, on regular days when the occasion of a celebration is absent, men sit in front of houses sipping from *Abet* (hollow dried gourd as in Fig. 1a) and passing it to others, while discussing and debating about various things. One of the positive influences of this *Chubitchi* during such conversations is the transmission of folktales, myths and legends. Furthermore, guests and



Fig. 1 Utensils and ingredients for preparing Chubitchi—*Abet* (a), *Janti* (b), *Dikka* (c), *Chubitchi* (d), *Chu cheka* (e), grinded rice for *Wanti* (f)

relatives visiting from afar are welcomed by the host with *Chubitchi*. The maternal uncle, who plays a great role in the matrilineal practice of the *Garos*, is usually shown respect, on his visit to his sister's house, with the offering of the best and strongest *Chubitchi* by his nieces. Religious rituals among the *Songsareks* (non-Christian *A.chiks*), who still practise traditional customs and ethnic practices, necessarily include the offering of *Chubitchi* to Gods. Even when a truce was made between two parties, who had a feud for a long time, *Chubitchi* would invariably be offered to each other in a *Rang* (a brass utensil) marking the end of the feud [2]. It is also a sign of fostering *bonhomie*, a pact to deliver their children a peaceful life.

Chubitchi, in the recent times, has received considerable attention from the researchers as evidenced from the fact that three papers on this traditional alcoholic beverage are found in the SCOPUS database (in August 2021) and around 21 documents in Google Scholar. The current paper is devoted to cultural study, ethnic preparation of various starter cake, plant leaves/parts used for making starter, chemical characterisation of *Oryza sativa var. glutinosa* which has been used as a substrate in beverage production and names of various types of *Chubitchi* used by *Garos* in different occasions. However, no works specifically devoted to stereochemistry of organic compounds and alcohols produced using these methods have been found in the database in a bibliographic search.

Ethnic preparation process

Meghalaya is situated in the North-Eastern part of India. It shares its borders with Assam in the north and Bangladesh in the south. The Garo Hills region, where the Garo community predominates, is situated in the western part of the state. The region known as the Garo Hills is divided into the following districts—West Garo Hills, East Garo Hills, North Garo Hills, South Garo Hills and South West Garo Hills.

Before visiting the field to gather information about the traditional preparation process of *Chubitchi*, we prepared a structured questionnaire. The authors visited and gathered information for this study in various parts of the locality, particularly in Akelgre village located within Samanda Block of East Garo Hills district. Respondents who were involved in *Chubitchi* preparation were interviewed. During this study, we focused primarily on elderly people who sell liquor to customers on a commercial basis. We recorded the information provided by them. The data generated, as well as the information disclosed by the respondents, have been cross-checked to ensure the accuracy of the information. We thus discovered that the paper has addressed almost all the

ethical practices involved in the preparation of *Chubitchi* through the process discussed herein.

Things needed for preparing *Chubitchi* are—*Merong* (rice), *Wanti* or *Chuwanti-chuginde* (rice cake starter), *Abet* (hollowed dried gourd as in Fig. 1a), *Janti* (cylindrical strainer that is made of bamboo as in Fig. 1b), *Dikka* (huge clay pot as in Fig. 1c), banana leaves. The *wanti* is the natural starter and most important ingredient in making *Chubitchi*.

Wanti preparation (starter cake)

For the preparation of *Wanti*, *Merong* (rice), plant species, *Sa-sam-rimol* (wooden mortar and pestle), *Sarat* (fern), *Ruan* (winnowing basket) are needed. Any variety of rice can be used for the preparation of *Wanti*. Any amount of rice, depending on the amount of *wanti* to be produced, is soaked in water for a few hours and the water is drained off. It is kept in *Ruan* allowing the remaining water to drain off. The rice grains are then finely pounded adding chilli and leaves of plants. Different leaves can be used in this process but the most commonly used are the leaves of *Te-brong* or jackfruit (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*), *Kimka* (*Solanum torvum*) and *Sarat* (*Pteridium aquilinum*). Only two or three leaves of these plants are added to the starter cake.

Any type of chilli can be added along with the leaves. A little amount of old rice cake starter is mixed with the fine powder of rice. A little water is sprinkled over the pounded rice and mixed thoroughly to form a paste which is then moulded into small cakes. The shape of *Wanti* is usually flat and round. A finger is pressed on three spots of each side of a *Wanti* to form small depressions. The cakes are then placed on top of *Sarat* (*Pteridium aquilinum*/ fern leaves) inside a *Koksep* (traditional conical basket with one open end made of bamboo). The cakes are vertically placed one on top of the other, with leaves of *Sarat* (*Pteridium aquilinum*) in between them all, so that the cakes do not come in contact with each other. It is kept untouched in the *Koksep* for seven days. The *Koksep* is hung in the verandah or inside a room with ample amount of sunlight. The cakes become harder after seven days. It is then transported to the fireplace. After keeping the cakes in the fireplace for seven days, it is considered ready for use. It is commonly believed that when the insect *Lyctinae* (powder post-bettle) dug into the *Wanti*, it is a sign that the *Wanti* is ready. Unused cakes are kept wrapped in banana leaves for further use. A *wanti* weighs around 200–500 g after the completion of the process.

The most popular among plant leaves used in the preparation of *Wanti* are—leaves of *Te-brong* (*Artocarpus heterophyllus* Lam.), leaves of *Kimka baring* (*Solanum aethiopicum*), leaves of *Kimka* (*Solanum torvum*

Table 1 Plant leaves/parts used for making *Wanti* (starter cake)

Native name	Scientific name	Familiy	Part used
<i>Ja-lik</i>	<i>Capsicum frutescens</i>	Solanaceae	Leaves and fruit
<i>Kimka</i>	<i>Solanum torvum</i>	Solanaceae	Leaves
<i>Kimka baring</i>	<i>Solanum aethiopicum</i>	Solanaceae	Leaves
<i>Komperam</i>	<i>Psidium guajava</i>	Myrtaceae	Leaves
<i>Sarat</i>	<i>Pteridium aquilinum</i>	Pteridaceae	Leaves
<i>Te-brong</i>	<i>Artocarpus heterophyllus</i>	Moraceae	Leaves

Sw.), leaves of *Sarat* (*Selaginella semicordata*) or a variation of it—*Pteridium aquilinum* (L) Kuhn., leaves of *Komperam* (*Psidium guajava* L.). Along with these leaves, *Ja-lik* (*Capsicum frutescens* or any other variety from the same family) is always added (Table 1).

Some claims have been made about the medicinal values of various herbs used in traditional alcoholic rice beverage from ethnopharmacological studies [7]. The leaves of *Capsicum frutescens* used in the preparation of *Wanti* are known to be commonly used to treat headache [8, 9], while the fruits are used in traditional medicine to treat typhus, intermittent fever, dropsy, gout, dyspepsia, cholera and stomachache [8, 10]. *Capsicum frutescens* is also used in traditional medicine to treat painful muscle spasms in areas of shoulder, arm and spine; for treating arthritis, neuralgia, diabetes, blood pressure, bronchitis, burning feet; to increase circulation, relieve rheumatic pain, mouth sores and wounds; in reducing blood clots; and in aiding digestion [11, 12].

The leaves of *Solanum torvum* are found to have medicinal properties like antibacterial, antiulcer [13–17], anti-inflammatory [18] and antioxidant property [19]. The fruits, leaves and parts of *Solanum torvum* are said to be used as medicine for fever, cough, wounds, pain, liver problems, tooth decay, reproductive problems, arterial hypertension and as an antidote against poisoning [18, 20, 21]. The leaf juice of *Solanum torvum* is taken orally to beat body heat [14, 22]. The Garos of Bangladesh used the juice of roots and leaves of *Solanum torvum* for asthma, diabetes and hypertension [14, 23].

The leaves of *Psidium guajava* have been used in traditional medicine to cure diarrhoea [24]. Guava leaves also show antimicrobial activity and are also said to cure cough [25]. Guava leaves along with pulp and seeds are also used in treating respiratory and gastrointestinal disorders [26, 27]. The leaves are also known for having antispasmodic, antihypertension, antiobesity and antidiabetic properties [28].

Though fern or *Pteridium aquilinum* is known mostly for its poisonous effects, its positive effects have also been noted, such as its use in burned wounds, galled

Table 2 Field produce that can be used for making *Chubitchi* apart from any type of rice

Local name	Scientific name	Family
<i>Me-garu</i>	<i>Cenchrus americanus</i>	Poaceae
<i>Me-raku</i>	<i>Zea mays</i>	Poaceae
<i>Minil</i>	<i>Oryza sativa var. glutinosa</i>	Poaceae
<i>Misi</i>	<i>Setaria viridis</i>	Poaceae
<i>Ta-bolchu</i>	<i>Manihot esculenta</i>	Euphorbiaceae

cattle, ulcers, pain of spleen, nose bleeds and in case of general wounds. It has also been used as a cure for rickets [29].

Another ingredient, the leaves of *Artocarpus heterophyllus* are useful in fever, boils, wounds and skin diseases [30]. The extracts of the stem and root, barks, stem and root heart wood, leaves, fruits and seeds of *Artocarpus heterophyllus* are said to exhibit antibacterial properties [31, 32] and anticariogenic properties [31, 33]. *Artocarpus heterophyllus* is well known for its antibacterial, antifungal, antidiabetic, anti-inflammatory and antioxidant activities [34].

By and large, the starter culture is prepared by incorporating many medicinal plants, herbs and spices that are locally available in a given region. It is believed that the herbs impart an intoxicating property to the fermented rice beverage [5]. They also contribute to various organoleptic and certain medicinal properties to the beverage that could be dependent on the type of medicinal plants used [6]. The plant may also furnish certain nutrients that could be essential for the survival and growth of the indigenous microflora present in the starter cakes, produce fragrance and keep down the growth of undesired micro-organisms in the final products.

Fermenting Chubitchi

Me-dik (aluminium or silver pot), *Am* (straw mat), *Janti* (bamboo cylindrical sieve as in Fig. 1b), *Dikka* (clay pot as in Fig. 1c) and banana leaves are needed for the preparation of *Chubitchi*. Any variety of rice can be used for the preparation of *Chubitchi*. Traditional *Chubitchi* was made from non-glutinous rice and also other produce from the fields (Table 2) such as *Minil* (glutinous rice or *Oryza sativa var. glutinosa*), *Misi* (foxtail millet/ *Setaria italica*), *Me-garu* (pearl millet/ *Pennisetum glaucum*), *Ta-bolchu* (tapioca/ *Manihot esculenta*) or *Me-raku* (corn/ *Zea mays*).

Rice is cooked in a pot and allowed to cool. It is then dried in a straw mat (*Am*). The dried *Wanti* is crushed and mixed with the cooked rice, and the mixture is filled into the *Dikka* (huge clay pot). A banana leaf is usually placed at the bottom of the *Dikka*. Before filling the

Dikka with the rice, the *Janti* is positioned in the middle of the *Dikka*, while the surrounding space around the *Janti* is filled with rice. The rice around the *Janti* is softly pressed compactly and is never filled above the level of the *Janti*. As the rice grows old, it shrinks lower than the level of the *Janti*. The *Janti* is sealed with banana leaves. The *Dikka* is also covered with banana leaves and sealed tightly. Some charcoal and chilli is put on the top of the *Dikka* after sealing to keep away evil spirits. The liquid from the rice seeps through the *Janti* and settles inside it, which becomes what the Garos called *Chubitchi*. The beverage is considered ready to drink after seven days of fermentation during summer (28–33 °C) and ten or fifteen days during winter (18–25 °C). The longer the liquor is kept in the *Dikka*, the stronger the drink becomes.

When *Chubitchi* is prepared from *Misi* (Millet), *Me-raku* (Corn) or *Me-garu* (Pearl millet), after being cooked they are grinded into coarse powder and mixed with old rice cake starter. It is then put inside the *Dikka*. When tapioca is used, it is boiled and allowed to cool before being mashed, mixed with starter and put inside the *Dikka*. One batch of rice weighing 10–15 kg put in one *Dikka* can produce at least 4–6 L of *Chubitchi*.

Names for different types of *Chubitchi*

If the beverage tastes sweet, it is called *Chu me.chik* (lady wine), and if it is bitter it is called *Chu bipa* (male wine). If it is both bitter and sour, it is called *Kakimeseng*. If it has a little bit of sweetness, salty and bitterness, it is called *Chumekrip*. The best *Chubitchi* is considered to be the one which has the combination of both bitterness and sweetness. *Chu me.chik* is meant to be consumed by women, while *Chu bipa*, which is stronger, is consumed by the men. *Wanti*, which has been prepared with *Sarat* (*Pteridium aquilinum*), yields a pungent taste in *Chubitchi*, and it is liked by men.

Chu cheka

Chubitchi is scooped from the *Dikka* with the help of *Abet* (dried gourd) and kept in bottles or dried gourds. The process of mixing the remaining liquor with water and stirring it for consumption is called *Chu cheka*. After *Chu cheka* is done, the liquor is no longer called *Chubitchi*, it is called *Biwak*. *Chu cheka* is usually done with the help of *Abet*. The *Abet* is made of dried gourd called 'long handle dipper gourd' (*Lagernaria Siceraria* as shown in Fig. 1a). The long handle dipper gourd is a large gourd with a hard shell, a round belly and a long swooping top that can be used as a handle. The gourd is cut off at the end of the swooping top and a hole is punched in the belly through which the seeds and flesh is emptied. It is then dried in the sun and kept in the fireplace until the shell hardens and turns dark brown or black. It is taken

out from the fireplace only when it is about to be used as a utensil. When the *Abet* is immersed in the liquor, it seeps inside the *Abet* through the hole in the belly while the end of the long neck is used to pour out the drink. *Chu cheka* also implies the process of reducing the alcoholic content in rice-based beverage by diluting it with water, which increases the quantity of *Chubitchi* from the normal 4–6 L yield to 5–7 L. It involves pouring a little water over the rice. The water seeps through the rice and settles inside the *Janti*, mixing with the already available liquor from fermentation. The water and the liquor is stirred and mixed for several minutes with the *Abet*. The water is scooped up from the *Janti* with the help of *Abet* and poured again on the rice. This process is followed several times until the alcoholic content from the rice decreases. *Chu cheka* can be done separately in parts by first drawing out the alcoholic content from one side. This process of stirring and pouring the liquid over the rice goes on simultaneously. When the first scoop of *Chubitchi* without performing *Chu cheka* from the *Dikka* is given to someone, the *Garos* believe that the person has to consume it all by himself, it cannot be shared nor can it be passed around to others.

For the *Chubitchi* to taste stronger, it has to be kept longer than six months. When the rice inside the *Dikka* shrinks, and if the *Chubitchi* from the *Dikka* is meant for stronger taste, more rice mixed with *Wanti* is filled inside the *Dikka* on top of the older rice and sealed again. So, layers and batches of rice can be found in a *Dikka* which has been kept without drinking for a year.

Discussion

Rice-based alcoholic beverage is widely consumed by the people belonging to the indigenous communities. It is therefore an integral part of human history, a natural dietary component and a recreational ingredient. Using and producing alcoholic beverages in order to drink with friends and loved ones additionally ensure good nutrition and intimacy into our everyday lives [35]. Cereal-based fermented beverage like *Chubitchi* has been known for low cholesterol content, high minerals, dietary fibres and phytochemicals content [36]. Fermentation is also known to increase the nutrition and energy produced by cereals such as rice. The fermentation process enriches and supplements the rice with essential amino acids, vitamins, minerals and probiotic organisms [37]. For instance, it was noticed that fermented brown rice and rice bran showed chemopreventive potentialities [38]. The Korean rice wine and the Japanese *Sake* are known for its antimicrobial and anticancer properties [39]. Similarly, a study conducted on *Chubitchi* also showed antioxidative and antimicrobial activities [40].

Chubitchi preparation shares similarities with the process of making cereal-based fermented beverage practised among the tribes of Assam, such as *Jou bishi* by the Bodos, *Horlang* by the Karbi, *Xaj* by the Ahom tribe, *Sujen* by the Deori tribe, *Jonga mod* by the Rabha tribe, *Apong* by the Mising tribe and *Rohi* by the Sonowal Kachari tribe [41].

Rice, locally referred to as ‘*Mi Ma*’ meaning ‘Rice mother’, plays a central role in the life of the Garos. Rice is the staple food of the Garos, which is consumed thrice a day. Further, many traditional rice varieties are conserved and grown which include white rice (Migra), red rice (Mi Gitchak), black rice (Mi Gisim) and sticky rice (Minil). Glutinous rice or sticky rice (*Oryza sativa* var. *glutinosa*) is treasured for its aroma and normally used for making savory snacks. It is also preferred over normal rice for making traditional rice-based alcoholic beverage called *Chubitchi*, which plays an important role in the rural life of the Garos. Comparison of principal nutrients of glutinous and non-glutinous brown rice showed higher average content and wider range for non-glutinous rice protein and fat perhaps due to larger sample size. Protein content influences the nutritional quality of rice. The average protein concentration of 7.24 g/100 g is found in glutinous rice genotypes. *Minil Gitchak* and *Minil Jaha* are the most preferred genotype in preparation

of Glutinous rice. Figure 2 depicts the approximate protein, vitamin, amino acid, mineral and fibre composition [42].

Preparation of *Chubitchi* was one of the important activities of a *Garos* household in Meghalaya, India. The practice has disappeared in modern day *Garos* households. Its cultural significance is treasured by the *Song-sareks*, the non-Christian *Garos* who inhabit interior villages of Garo Hills. *Chubitchi* was used by *Garos* in almost all occasions. Celebrations like wedding, engagement and clan meetings allowed as much intake of *Chubitchi* as one wished. The *Garos* depend mainly on agricultural produce for their livelihood. The first step in *jhum* cultivation of the *Garos* is called *A-a O-pata*, which involves the villagers along with the *Nokma*, going to the chosen field and building an altar. The *Nokma* then offers eggs and *Chubitchi* while seeking permission from the god or custodian of the forest, *Abet Rengge*, and the creator of land and water, *Tatara Rabuga*, to show their approval or displeasure by appearing in his dream. *A-galmaka* (burning the trees and shrubs from the *jhum* field) is another festival where all families carry their own *Chubitchi* to the *jhum* field and drink it after offering it to the gods. Any remaining *Chubitchi* is shared among others to ensure that not a single drop returns home as it is considered inauspicious. *Rongchugala* implies the

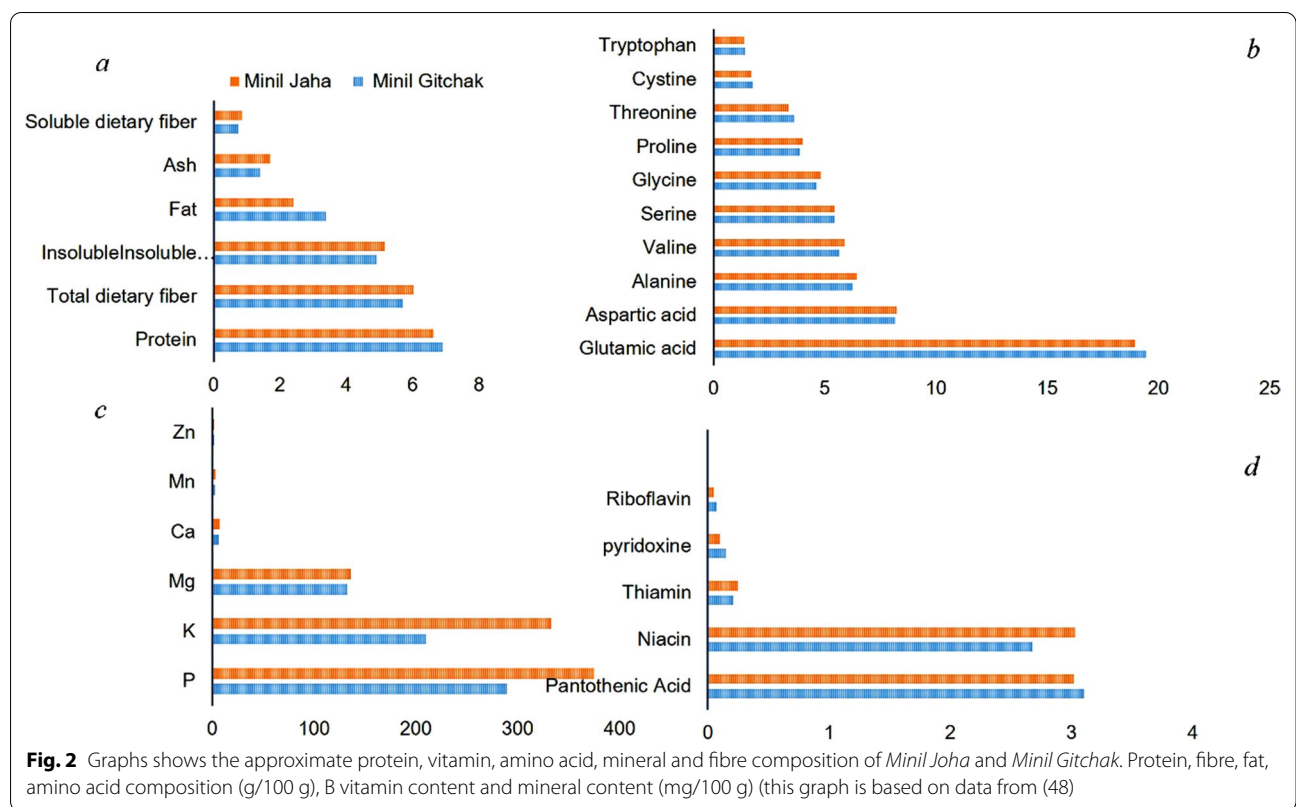


Fig. 2 Graphs shows the approximate protein, vitamin, amino acid, mineral and fibre composition of *Minil Jaha* and *Minil Gitchak*. Protein, fibre, fat, amino acid composition (g/100 g), B vitamin content and mineral content (mg/100 g) (this graph is based on data from (48))

harvesting of early produce from the fields such as melons, maize, millets and other fruits. After celebrating in their own homes, the villagers gather at the *Maljuri* (centre pole or altar) of the *Nokma's* (Chief) house. Here the first fruits and produce are offered along with *Chubitchi*.

The *Wangala* is the greatest festival among the *Garos* marking the end of harvest and a ceremony to send off the gods who had blessed them by staying throughout the harvest. The beverage prepared for any festivities is same except for the ceremony of *Chu rugala* during *Wangala* and childbirth. While performing *Jamegapa Amua*, a ritual in the fields before *Wangala* (harvest festival) where a cock has to be sacrificed, the priest uproots stalks of rice while uttering the words '*Mialona ang bangbolona patiepabo, aganepabo tengte bone, misi cholsi*' which is a prayer directed to the gods of crops *Misi Saljong* and *Mima Kiri Rokkime* to bless the rice of his fields till the barns are full [2].

The *Wangala* is celebrated after the harvest is done. A ceremony called *Chu rugala* requires the burning of incense at the *Maljuri* of the *Nokma's* house. The incense is acquired from the resins in the bark of a tree called *Cha-chat*. The rice-based alcoholic beverage for *Chu rugala* is prepared from the sheaves of paddy brought home at the time of *Jamegapa Amua*. No other fermented rice-based alcoholic beverage can be used for sacrifice during the *Wangala*. The produce from the fields are never consumed before being offered to the gods first during *Wangala*.

The centre pole of the *Nokma's* house, *Maljuri*, is prepared for the *Wangala*. Produce from the *A.ba* (*jhum* field) like pumpkins, gourds and ginger are kept as offerings to the gods. Sheaves of paddy and millets are tied to the *Maljuri*. The special *Chubitchi* prepared for this day is kept in a *Dikka* near the *Maljuri*. On the day *Wangala* is fixed, the villagers gather in the house of the *Nokma* (chief). The *Kamal* (priest) along with drummers gather around the *Maljuri*. The *Kamal* chants prayers thanking *Misi Saljong* and *Mima Kiri Rokkime* for blessing them with bountiful harvest. He bids adieu to them and pleads for their return in the next season. The *Nokma* usually performs the role of the *Kamal*, and in his absence, any *Kamal* from the village who is familiar with the chants and rituals takes his place. The *Chubitchi* which has been prepared for this special day can be touched only by the *Kamal*. He scoops the *Chubitchi* from the *Dikka* and pours it at the *Maljuri* as an offering to the gods. Only after offering it to the gods, the *Kamal* is allowed to drink it himself and offer it to others in the *Abet*. *Wangala* is celebrated for days, even up to a week.

Another distinct practice in the use of *Chubitchi* is during childbirth. The expectant mother will prepare *Chubitchi* for the day of childbirth when she is about two or

three months pregnant. This beverage prepared by the expectant mother is known as *Chu janggi* (drink of life). It is kept covered with a cloth indicating that it is reserved for the special occasion. *Chu janggi* is considered sacred and no one is allowed to taste it. If anyone mistakenly takes a sip from the *Chu janggi*, it will have to be repaid in the same amount prepared in the same manner. The *Garos* also believe that disobeying the rules and consuming *Chu janggi* will result in ill luck such as death of a relative or a villager or a calamity of great magnificence over the land. In circumstances where the family or the pregnant woman has shamed the clan or the village, the maternal uncles have the right to take this *Chu janggi* and consume it, as reparations. This fermented *Chu janggi* can be used only on the occasion of child birth. It cannot be used for any other occasion in the house. If the mother or the child dies during childbirth, this very *Chu janggi* is poured into a *Rangmatchi* (brass utensil) and used to bathe the dead before cremation. The *Chu janggi* shall have to be *rugala* (offer libation) first to the dead before offering it to the people who have come for the cremation. It is believed that consuming *Chu janggi* after childbirth cleanses the woman's womb and gives strength to her. It is also a custom among *Garos* to put a few drops of *Chu janggi* on the tongue of a newborn baby believing that it will have a positive health effects on the baby.

The *Garo* matrilineal custom requires the girl's family to ask for the boy's hand in marriage. Keeping in mind an impending engagement, *Chubitchi* is usually prepared about a year earlier. On the day the boy is to be asked to marry a girl, all members from the girl's family including the maternal uncles and brothers who are known as the girl's *Chra* goes to the boy's house taking with them fowls, pigs and even cows if possible. This occasion is called *Chawari sing-a*, and *Chubitchi* is a necessity to be taken along with the fowls and pigs. *Chubitchi* is also prepared beforehand for *Do-si Do-doka* (traditional wedding). In certain cases where a *Do-si Do-doka* has to be done hastily and, if there is no *Chubitchi* available in the house, *Chubitchi* is loaned from the neighbours, which of course has to be repaid later.

During *Nokdong gaa* (house warming ceremony), the *Kamal* chants prayers and offers thanks to the gods for blessing the family with necessities such as bamboo, wood and mud. He then pours the first of the *Chubitchi* to the gods and drinks only after that.

The cremation rites among the *Garos* involve the bathing or cleaning of the dead person by his or her sisters and nieces. *Chubitchi* is poured onto a utensil called *Rangmatchi* (brass utensil), and then, it is used to cleanse the body of the dead person before being cremated. The *Garos* believe that the spirit of the dead do not leave until they are properly send off with rituals.

Hence, after cremation *Memang nok* or *Delang*, a small hut meant as a resting place for the spirit is constructed. The family members keep food for the deceased along with *Chubitchi* in cups or bottles near the *Memang nok*. A special day is chosen for the farewell of the spirit after which the spirit is believed to leave for the land of spirits, Balpakram. On this day, the bones of the dead person are carried around the village as a sign of mourning and honouring the departed. *Chubitchi* is prepared separately for this day of *Mangona* or *Delang so-a*. This ceremony involves feasting and drinking in honour of the departed.

Apart from its social and religious significance, *Chubitchi* is also consumed by the *Garos* as a beverage to relax the muscles after a hard day's work in the fields. When visiting a sick relative in another village, fowls and pigs are taken along with *Chubitchi*. Hence, almost all social activities among the *Garos* involve *Chubitchi*. *Garos* also believe in the medicinal properties of *Chubitchi*, particularly its role in relieving stomach cramps, gastro intestinal problems, joint pains, menstrual cramps among women and as an antiageing agent. But these claims are yet to be scientifically tested and proved. These are the areas where further scientific research are needed. The folk medicinal practitioners of the tribe use the beverage in many of their concoctions, claiming cure for several illnesses. These so claimed medicinal properties of *Chubitchi* have not been scientifically studied so far.

Conclusion

With the advancement in modern technology and the spread of Christianity, the age-old tradition of preparing *Chubitchi* and the traditional knowledge associated with it has dwindled in recent years. Only a few *Songsarek* villages still continue this traditional practice. With increasing population, it has also become harder to acquire land for cultivation, and the produce from the *jhum* fields has decreased a lot in recent times. Hence they have started to use imported rice grains for preparing *Chubitchi*. Many households who live nearer to towns are now engaged in preparing *Chubitchi* for commercial purposes. They sell half a litre of *Chubitchi* at a rate of hundred and fifty rupees. While this may seem like an income opportunity for poor households, the traditional knowledge associated with the preparation of *Chubitchi* has faded, so much so that very few people who make *Chubitchi* today, apart from the *Songsareks*, are aware of the traditional associations, significance and relevance of *Chubitchi* in *Garo* tradition. Hence, retaining this traditional practice is of an utmost importance for future generations. This traditional knowledge that has great significance in the social and cultural aspect of a tribe needs to be preserved. The paper is limited only to this aspect of sociocultural significance of *Chubitchi*.

But, the dying practice of preparing *Chubitchi* needs to be revived. This can be achieved through scientific study of its health benefits. Another way to keep alive this traditional practice is by teaching the younger generations about its significance and importance in the social and cultural life of the tribe.

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