



## Himachal Pradesh National Law University, Shimla (India)

Journal Articles

HPNLU Journal of Social Sciences

### Volume: I (2024)

Cultural Beliefs of Food Restriction and Consumption during Pregnancy and Lactation among the Liangmai Tribe of Manipur, Northeast India- A Qualitative Study

*Melodynia Marpna*

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ISSN: XXXX-XXXX

### Recommended Citation:

Melodynia Marpna, *Cultural Beliefs of Food Restriction and Consumption during Pregnancy and Lactation among the Liangmai Tribe of Manipur, Northeast India- A Qualitative Study*, I HPNLU JSS. 1 (2024).

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**CULTURAL BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF FOOD RESTRICTIONS AND  
CONSUMPTION DURING PREGNANCY AND LACTATION AMONG THE  
LIANGMAI TRIBE OF MANIPUR, NORTHEAST INDIA:  
A Qualitative Study**

*Melodynia Marpna<sup>1</sup>*

**Abstract**

*Pregnancy and lactation form one of the vital stages in human life and development. Nutritional requirements increase gradually during this period. However, poor maternal nutrition adversely affects pregnancy and lactation. In every society, pregnant and lactating women have food restrictions and consumption, resulting in a lack of vital nutrients. This study aims to explore the cultural aspects of food restriction and consumption during pregnancy and lactation among the Liangmai tribe. The study design is a qualitative study. In-depth interviews through phone calls were conducted and a total of nine respondents participated in the study. The data was transcribed and translated into English and data were thematically analysed. Seven themes were documented, the themes are food restriction and their reasons, food craving, women being compared to food during pregnancy and lactation, forbidden, food that is considered good during pregnancy and lactation, common cultural practices, and consequences of not following. The study showed the Liangmai tribe has various food beliefs and food taboos during pregnancy and lactation. The Liangmai women follow different food restrictions because it is important for the health and well-being of their children. Moreover, these practices are found to be more predominant in the rural areas. The Liangmai tribe holds strong cultural beliefs and food taboos that are more pronounced for pregnant women than for lactating mothers. Some of these beliefs and taboos affect pregnant women's intake of nutritious food.*

**Keywords:** *Tribal people, food beliefs, Liangmai tribe, cultural, Northeast India.*

**Introduction**

Cultural practices are common around the world and these are propagated in every stage of life. Different cultures adopt numerous forms of food taboos and restrictions and these are seen to be common among pregnant women and lactating mothers, and these practices

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor and Head, Department of Nutrition and Dietetics, Martin Luther Christian University.

hinder the accessibility of nutritious food. A pregnant woman and a lactating mother need to eat enough nutrients to meet their nutritional requirement and the child's requirement to maintain health<sup>2</sup>.

These cultural practices are deep-rooted customs and may or may not be supported by scientific explanations. Women in numerous communities are susceptible to various micronutrient deficiencies such as vitamin A, folate, iodine, iron, calcium, and zinc which are essential, especially during pregnancy and lactation, because they have to follow certain cultural taboos and practices<sup>3</sup>. Pregnant and lactating women have numerous food taboos that can lead to a lack of various vital nutrients.

The Liangmais have food restrictions and food taboos that are practiced from generation to generation. This study aims to document these cultural practices. The Liangmais are one of the Naga tribes belonging to mongoloid race. They share close similarities with their kindred tribes of *Rongmei*, *Zeme*, and *Inpui* which collectively are known as *Zeliangrong*. The *Liangmais* speak a language known as *Lianglad* meaning the language of the *Liangmais*<sup>4</sup>. They inhabit both the states of Nagaland and Manipur.

## **Methodology**

The respondents were from Tamei Town and Langmei or Chiang village which falls under the Tamei sub-division, Tamenglong District Manipur. The research design of the present study is Qualitative. The respondents were the Langmei tribal men and women and all were married. The sampling method was purposive and the point of saturation selected the sample size. A point of saturation is when no new information is obtained from the respondents. A total of nine respondents were interviewed, out of which five were from Tamei Town and four from Langmei or Chiang village. Among these, six respondents were female and the remaining three were male.

<sup>2</sup>Sreetama Chakrabarti & Abhik Chakrabarti, *Food taboos in pregnancy and early lactation among women living in a rural area of West Bengal*, 8 JFMPC, (2019).

<sup>3</sup>Mmbulaheni Ramulondi, Helene de Wet & Nontuthuko Rosemary Ntuli, *Traditional Food Taboos and Practices during Pregnancy, Postpartum Recovery and Infant Care of Zulu Women in Northern KwaZulu-Natal*, 17 J Ethnobiology Ethnomedicine, (2021).

<sup>4</sup>Ab. Dijinbou, *Pajeng Luilura Npeng Phenjiu Kadenbo*, Aliu Naihpanwan (Dec. 23, 2021, Manipur) 21-26.

The data collection method was an in-depth interview with respondents through phone calls, and these interviews were conducted in *Lianglad*, the local language. A structured questionnaire was used and all interviews were recorded. Two elderly Liangmai women participated in the content validation process, and changes were made based on their suggestions and recommendations. The data collection was done in 2022. Data was analysed using thematic analysis. The qualitative data were transcribed in MS Word format 2007 and verbatim was translated from the Lianglad to English. Transcripts were reviewed repeatedly to gain a thorough sense of the overall content, identifying central meaningful units in the material, and condensing the contents through colour-coding of the text. The colour coding was done in a Mural, a digital workplace for visuals, and finally creating categories that contain the condensed meaning of the main themes. The themes were evaluated and revised to ensure that each theme had enough data to support them. The results were presented using the verbatim of the study participants as illustrations to substantiate major assertions.

### **Ethical consideration**

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Nutrition and Dietetics, Martin Luther Christian University, Shillong<sup>5</sup>. Verbal consent was obtained from the respondents to participate in the study and to record the in-depth interviews.

### **Results and discussion**

The results are broadly categorised into demographic profiles of the respondents and the themes of the cultural aspects of food consumption and restrictions during pregnancy and lactation.

### **Demographic profile**

More than half of the respondents are elderly from a nuclear family. Most of the respondents are entrepreneurs and homemakers. The highest education qualification of just about half of the respondents was primary school.

<sup>5</sup>Letter No: VI/40 (PROJECT AND RESEARCH) /ND/1/2022-421, *Ethical clearance* (8 June, 2022)

**The themes of the cultural aspects of Food Restriction / Food Taboos are described below:**

**Theme1: Food restriction and their reasons For Food restriction for pregnant women**

According to the Liangmais culture, the common fruits that are restricted include papaya, banana, and walnut. The respondents identified various types of animals restricted to consumption during pregnancy, including beef, edible insects, bees, eggs, monkeys. Some birds include owls, eagles, and hornbills. There is no restriction on vegetables except for the first buds of green vegetables, vegetables that are from climbers, and mushrooms locally called *Chapung pen*.

**Reason for food restriction for pregnant women**

**Bee:** The Liangmai women who are at the end of the second trimester and early third trimester are not allowed to eat bees. Eating bees during this period will lead to blood clots during delivery that are similar to a brood. A bee brood or brood refers to the egg, pupae, and larvae of a honeybee. It will lead to delayed delivery and even still births. Most respondents stated that this belief and practice has been passed down from generation to generation. *“If she consumed bee or brood during the time of labour she will give birth to a blood clot that is similar to brood and delay the time of delivery in some severe cases, it will lead to the death of the baby and for some women, it will cause allergy”*<sup>6</sup>. The tribe believes that honey or bee turn poisonous in the stomach which can lead to miscarriage. *“Honey or bees are believed to be sweet for our taste however when they reach the stomach they will turn to poison leading to miscarriage (sic)”*<sup>7</sup>. The tribe believes that consumption of bee brood or brood might grow inside her stomach and lead to difficult labour. *“If the pregnant women consume the bee broods before the brood becomes strong enough to fly it is believed that the bee brood might grow inside her body and cause difficulty while delivering the baby”*<sup>8</sup>.

**Birds:** The pregnant women of the Liangmai tribe are not allowed to eat birds like eagles, owls, and hornbills as it will lead to a child being insatiable for food. *“Birds like owls, eagles, hornbills, are restricted to consume because it will cause a child to be insatiable for*

<sup>6</sup>In-depth interview, Female, 52 years old, Tamei village.

<sup>7</sup>In-depth interview, Female, 50 years old, Tamei village.

<sup>8</sup>In-depth interview, Male, 63 years old, Tamei village.

*food as he or she grows*"<sup>9</sup>.

**Edible snail:** Pregnant women are not allowed to eat edibles snails as it brings bad luck to the mother and the unborn baby. It is believed to prolong labour. *"Snails are slimy insects and bring bad signs for the unborn baby and the mother"*<sup>10</sup>. *"Consumption of Snails will extend the time of labour"*<sup>11</sup>. **Monkey:** Many respondents shared that eating wild animals like monkeys is a taboo for pregnant women. According to them, a monkey is mischievous and a child whose mother ate monkey meat when pregnant will grow up without morals. *"Monkeys are restricted because when the child grows up he or she will be naughty like monkeys"*<sup>12</sup>. *"Monkeys are restricted for consumption as the baby is likely to be naughty like a monkey"*<sup>13</sup>. *"It's a taboo because the child will be a thief when he or she grows up"*<sup>14</sup>.

**Edible insects:** The Liangmais do not allow pregnant women to eat edible insects as they believe that it leads to painful labour.

**Egg:** Pregnant women of the Liangmais tribe are not allowed to eat eggs throughout the pregnancy. According to them, consumption of eggs can lead to delayed labour and it might cause birth complications or stillbirth. *"If pregnant women consume egg the process of water breaking might delay and torture both the unborn infant and the mother"*<sup>15</sup>.

**Beef:** Pregnant women of the Liangmais tribe are not allowed to eat beef as it results in rude behaviour of the women during the delivery. *"Eating beef can cause the woman to be in a rage and even attack the people who are helping her during delivery"*<sup>16</sup>.

**Papaya:** Usually when papaya is ripened it topples on the ground and breaks by itself. Thus, the Liangmais believe that consuming papaya may lead to miscarriage. Furthermore, they believe that even if the baby is born it is likely that the child will meet with an untimely death. *"When Papaya is ripened, it topples and breaks. So, this is*

<sup>9</sup>In-depth interview, Female, 50 years old, Tamei village.

<sup>10</sup>In-depth interview, Male, 74 years old, Langmei Chiang village.

<sup>11</sup>In-depth interview, Female, 74 years old Langmei Chiang village.

<sup>12</sup>In-depth interview, Female, 50 years old, Langmei Chiang village.

<sup>13</sup>In-depth interview, Female, 56 years old, Tamei village

<sup>14</sup>In-depth interview, Male, 55 years old, Langmei Chiang village

<sup>15</sup>In-depth interview, Female, 52 years old, Tamei village

<sup>16</sup>In-depth interview, Female, 50 years old, Tamei village.

*considered as a bad omen for any pregnant women. Consumption of papaya is believed to lead to miscarriage. Therefore, we just avoid it*<sup>17</sup>.

**Banana:** Pregnant women should not eat bananas that are fused and this can lead to the birth of twins. Bananas that are damaged either by insects or pests are not to be eaten by pregnant women as this can lead to difficult labour and it is also considered a bad omen to the unborn child and the mother. *“During pregnancy, fused bananas are restricted/not encouraged from consumption as it is believed it might deliver twins babies”*<sup>18</sup>.

**First bud of green veggies:** The pregnant Liangmais woman is not allowed to eat the first bud of all the green leafy vegetables. It is believed that this leads to difficult labour. *“Consumption of these buds is said to set an obstacle for the child’s future and cause difficulties to the mother during the child’s birth”*<sup>19</sup>.

**Vegetables that are from climbers or creepers:** A pregnant Liangmai woman is not allowed to eat vegetables that are from climbers or creepers and these cause stomach problems such as; gas pain, bloating, and flatulence. The most common belief is that the vegetables will grow in her stomach and it leads to complications during labour.

*“Consumption of vegetables which are from climbers or creepers will cause stomach problems like Flatulence, gas pain or bloating”*<sup>20</sup>. *“The consumed fresh buds will grow into climbers inside the stomach, therefore they must be avoided”*<sup>21</sup>.

### **Food restriction for lactation mothers**

Lactating mothers are not allowed to eat leftover food, spicy foods, sour foods, sticky beans, onion, garlic, oil/fat, limit salt, turmeric powder, mustard leaf, pumpkin leaf, and green leafy vegetables.

### **Reason for restriction of food during lactation**

The majority of the respondents revealed that during the lactation period, the foods that are

<sup>17</sup>In-depth interview, Female, 52 years old, Tamei village

<sup>18</sup>In-depth interview, Female, 50 years old, Langmei Chiang village.

<sup>19</sup>In-depth interview, Male, 63 years old, Tamei village

<sup>20</sup>In-depth interview, Female, 72 years old, Tamei village.

<sup>21</sup>In-depth interview, Male, 74 years old, Langmei Chiang village



restricted include leftover food, spicy food, sour foods, sticky beans, oil or fats, and salty food. Some respondents also mentioned that green leafy vegetables that are restricted from eating include pumpkin leaf and mustard leaf as it is believed that these vegetables cause diarrhea and other health complications for both mother and the baby. Furthermore, the consumption of onion and garlic is believed to cause headaches in the child, and eating turmeric is believed to cause jaundice in the child. *“Onion and garlic are also restricted during lactation because it will cause headache to the baby”*<sup>22</sup>. *“Due to the natural colour of the turmeric, it is believed to cause jaundice to the baby. Therefore one must avoid it”*<sup>23</sup>.

## **Theme2: Food Craving**

According to the Liangmai tribe, a pregnant woman can either crave a certain edible food or non-edible items such as stone, ice, charcoal, sand, fuel, wood, clay, etc. The craving and eating of non-edible items is called pica. This period when pregnant women crave edible food and non-edible items is locally known as *“katakaboh”*. The most common foods that pregnant women crave are rice, wheat, pulses, pumpkin, gourd, yam, orange, and sour fruits like lemon, gooseberry, pomelo, unripe mango, etc. some non-edible food items include charcoal, fuel, wood, paper, ink, paints, stone, etc. The tribes make sure that the craving of the pregnant woman must be given to her or else it will affect the health of the unborn child. Moreover, if the cravings are non- fulfilled then the child will drool over food.

## **Theme3: Women are compared to food during pregnancy and lactation**

**Walnut:** Walnuts are hard to crack and a hard object is needed to break them to break it. A pregnant woman with complications during labour is compared to a walnut which is a sort of metaphorical explanation to the process of childbirth. Therefore, pregnant women are not encouraged to consume walnuts. *“Look how complicated it is to crack the walnut and get the edible parts of the fruit... Walnut is restricted for consumption”*<sup>24</sup>. *“It is believed that women during childbirth are like walnut and as walnuts are known for strong shells, she will face a difficult labor”*<sup>25</sup>.

## **Theme 4: Forbidden for the Other**

<sup>22</sup>In-depth interview, Female, 52 years old, Tamei village

<sup>23</sup>In-depth interview, Female, 56 years old, Tamei village

<sup>24</sup>In-depth interview, Female, 52 years old, Tamei village

<sup>25</sup>In-depth interview, Male, 74 years old, Langmei Chiang village

*The Liangmais forbids a new mother to step outside their house for a week after childbirth. This period is locally known as “Nabangky”. “It is forbidden to step outside the door for 7 days after delivery, this period is called “Nabangky” and during this period she has to take care of the baby. The Liangmais also forbid pregnant women to touch brooms as it is believed that it causes skin diseases, chicken pox, and measles. They are forbidden to touch or pluck green leafy vegetables as it brings undesirable outcomes to the baby. Moreover, she is forbidden from lifting and carrying heavy loads. “She is forbidden to use brooms and clean the house as it will cause a disease like chicken pox and measles”<sup>26</sup>.*

### **Forbidden for the fathers**

The new father is forbidden to use rope / thread for any construction purpose including making trellises, constructing fences, and any other related activities for about five months. However, even if he does, the rope should be tied loose. This practice is based on the belief of misfortune during the execution of any activity by the child when he/she grows up. They believed that performing any forbidden activity including this one may bring bad fortune.

### **Forbidden for both the parents**

According to the Liangmais' cultural beliefs, they identified and categorized two kinds of marshy bodies; one brings good air and the other is contrary to the former. If one of the parents (either the mother or the father) steps or walks across the mud that brings bad air, the baby will become sick that very night. Either parent is also prohibited from traveling, climbing trees, or crossing rivers, as these actions are believed to bring bad dreams and misfortune to the child. *“If one of the parents walks across a river or steps on certain secret places, the baby will have a bad dream on a particular night and that brings bad omen”<sup>27</sup>.*

### **Theme 5: Foods that are considered good during pregnancy and lactation**

Many foods are considered good for pregnant women and lactating mothers. Eating these foods will result in good health for both the mother and the baby. They purify the blood, help recover blood lost during delivery, increase milk secretion, and improve the brain development of the child. These foods are fish, chicken, yam, banana stems, and green leafy vegetables. To increase milk production for a lactating mother, food such as yam, yam stem, banana stem, banana flower, rem, and kharai (*Centella Asiatica*) are encouraged to be consumed regularly. Besides consumption of local chicken and soup, fresh fish, including some meats, are encouraged to consume to recover the blood loss during parturition.

<sup>26</sup> In-depth interview, Female, 65 years old, Tamei village.

<sup>27</sup> In-depth interview, Female, 65 years old, Tamei village

The tribe also encourages pregnant women and lactating mothers to drink locally made rice beer called “Takhui Jou”. It is believed to be nutritious for women and it also purifies blood. However, pregnant women or lactating mothers decide whether or not to drink it. She also decides the quantity to drink Takhui Jou.

### **Theme 6: Common Cultural Practices**

There are some cultural practices that pregnant women and lactating mothers have to follow for a certain period. There are foods that a pregnant woman must eat and she is encouraged to eat more than her regular meal. There is a separate fireplace to cook food for the pregnant women and every food and drink is prepared in it for a few months. It is considered taboo for a pregnant woman to break or cut the pumpkin as this can lead to cleft lip and cleft palate. *“Pumpkins are not allowed to be cut by pregnant women. By doing that we are cutting the child’s body. Therefore, the baby will be born with cleft lip and cleft palate”*<sup>28</sup>. Every lactating mother smears a leaf called *alukbuan* on their breast before breastfeeding their baby. It is believed that *alukbuan* increases milk production.

### **Theme 7: Consequences of not following cultural practices**

The Liangmais believe that following cultural practices benefits the mother and child; however, if these are not followed, it leads to stillbirth, difficult childbirth, miscarriage, birth defects, mother mortality, and child mortality. These cultural beliefs and practices are taught by the mother, in-laws, grandmother, or elders.

*“If the mother didn’t follow these cultures she might have a problem during delivery. You see many young mothers today undergoing operations! Isn’t this to be pondered upon?”*<sup>29</sup>.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The practice of food taboo is widespread in developing countries, while there is variation in the types of food considered taboo, and the reason attached to the taboo varies from society to society<sup>30</sup>. Some pregnant women in middle- income countries do not get access to healthy

<sup>28</sup>In-depth interview, Female, 50 years old, Tamei village.

<sup>29</sup>In-depth interview, Female, 74 years old, Langmei Chiang village.

<sup>30</sup>Dereje Tsegaye, Dessalegn Tamiru & Tefera Belachew, *Food related taboos and misconceptions during pregnancy among rural communities of Illu Aba Bor Zone, Southwest Ethiopia*, available at <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-33789/v2> (Last visited Jan. 22, 2021)

food because of food taboos and restrictions<sup>31</sup>. However, there are pregnant women or lactating mothers who obtain nutritious food due to their traditional beliefs.

Women in some rural areas of Kenya are forbidden to eat certain foods such as includes; animal organs, meat, eggs, oily food, salt, beans, cold water, cabbage, fresh milk, and avocado as they are believed to be the cause of anemia, miscarriage or stillbirth, maternal deaths, big fetuses and poor skin conditions after birth. Some practices benefit pregnant women such as smoking or drinking alcohol is forbidden because they cause malnutrition and retardation in children<sup>32</sup>. Honey is also not eaten by pregnant women since it leads to a baby with discoloured skin, abortion, and stillbirths<sup>33</sup>. Eggs are not eaten by pregnant women as this is believed to increase libido in pregnant women which will get transferred to the child<sup>34</sup>.

In India, pregnant women's dietary habits are mostly affected by cultural taboos and religious beliefs<sup>35</sup>. Papaya is avoided by pregnant women because it could cause abortion<sup>36</sup> which is similar to the Liangmai tribe. Restrictions and taboos exist as they believe in protecting the health of both mothers and babies, but these cultural beliefs on food restriction may also increase the risk of protein, vitamin, mineral, iron, and fat deficiency in pregnant women<sup>37</sup>.

The Liangmai women follow different food beliefs and food taboos because they feel that it is important for the health and well-being of the unborn child. Most foods restricted are rich sources of proteins that are beneficial to the mother and pregnant women. The restriction of food was seen to be more prevalent among pregnant women than lactating mothers. There is

<sup>31</sup>Mmbulaheni Ramulondi, Helene de Wet & Nontuthuko Rosemary Ntuli, *Traditional Food Taboos and Practices during Pregnancy, Postpartum Recovery and Infant Care of Zulu Women in Northern KwaZulu-Natal*, 17 J Ethnobiology Ethno., (2021).

<sup>32</sup>Roselyter Monchari Rianga, Jacqueline Broerse & Anne Kisaka Nangulu, *Food beliefs and practices among the Kalenjin pregnant women in rural Uasin Gishu County, Kenya*, 13 J Ethnobiology Ethnomedicine, (2017).

<sup>33</sup>Supra 31

<sup>34</sup>Nejimu Biza Zepro, *Food Taboos and Misconceptions Among Pregnant Women of Shashemene District, Ethiopia, 2012*, 3 SJPH, (2015).

<sup>35</sup>K. Banu, A. Prathipa, B. Anandarajan, A. Sheriff, S. Muthukumar & J. Selvakumar, *Food taboos during antenatal and postpartum period among the women of rural and urban areas of Tamilnadu*, 7 IJBAR, 393-396 (2016).

<sup>36</sup>R. Patil, A. Mittal, D. Vedapriya, M. Khan & M. Raghavia, *Taboos and misconceptions about food during pregnancy among rural population of Pondicherry*, 8 CMJ, (2010).

<sup>37</sup>Rian Diana, Riris D. Rachmayanti, Faisal Anwar, Ali Khomsan, Dyan F. Christianti & Rendra Kusuma, *Food taboos and suggestions among Madurese pregnant women: a qualitative study*, 5 JEF, 246-253, (2018)

a need to relook scientifically at these restrictions, taboos, and beliefs to either encourage or discourage them for the benefit of pregnant and lactating mothers.