

Traditional Food and Beverage Knowledge of the Kamar of Chhattisgarh State: An Explorative Study

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Abstract:

This study explores the Traditional Food and Beverage of the Kamar, a Particularly Tribal Group in Chhattisgarh state emphasizing its significance for community health and cultural identity. It encompasses the local food systems that are culturally acceptable and derived from the natural environment, crucial for sustaining healthy communities. The research highlights the socio-cultural meanings, processing techniques, and nutritional benefits associated with traditional foods, such as millet, green leafy vegetables, and beverages rich in vitamins and minerals. It also documents the preparation methods. The use of Mahua fruit for alcoholic beverages and Mandiyo Pej non-alcoholic summer drink, showcase the resilience of these practices in the face of modern dietary changes. The findings reveal that traditional food practices are not only vital for nutrition but also play a significant role in community building, healthcare, and cultural rituals. However, the research underscores the risk of losing traditional knowledge of food and beverages as the young generation is facing challenges due to modernization and changing dietary preferences. Despite these challenges, there is an opportunity for them to revive interest in traditional food and beverages. By recognizing the nutritional and medicinal benefits of these foods, they can play a pivotal role in promoting traditional food and beverages ensuring their relevance in contemporary society. This exploration serves as a reminder of the interconnectedness of food, culture, and health advocating for recognition and revitalization of traditional food systems for future generations.

Keywords: Traditional food knowledge, Traditional alcoholic beverage, Traditional non-alcoholic beverage, food behavior, food epistemology etc.

1. Introduction:

Traditional Food Knowledge (TFK) is a term coined here to define relationship between traditional culture and healthy communities (Kwik, 2008). TFK involves individuals, families, and communities face serious challenges in providing quality, nutritious food for them. The word “traditional” is used by Kuhnlein and Receveur (1996) to define indigenous food systems “Traditional food systems of indigenous peoples can be defined as items that are from the local, natural environment that are culturally acceptable. It also includes the socio-cultural meanings, acquisition/processing techniques, use, composition, and nutritional consequences of the people using the food.”It refers to a culture of sharing food, recipes, cooking skills, and techniques from generation to generation. We examine the role

of TFK in promoting bio-cultural diversity and enhancing food production capacity (Kwik, 2008). Beyond these social groups, food also connects us to the history of global trade and commerce and the local places where each edible ingredient grows. It is an age-old concept and worthy of research. This knowledge is then passed down from one generation to the next, taking into account the potential food sources in their environment. Indigenous or tribal people for centuries have maintained a very unique relationship with the environment, including its protection, which is essential for their food sovereignty and food security (Scott & Gutierrez, 2005). Indigenous food systems contribute to enhancing the quality of life. "Let food be thy medicine, and medicine be thy food." There are five main steps in the process of providing and changing food: growing, allocating, cooking, and eating. These steps are production, distribution (storage), preparation, and consumption often overlooking the fifth step (Goody, 1982). Hancock (1985) analysed individual potential for individual and community health ecosystems. Appropriate recognition of the value of TFK could play a role in community building by connecting the capacities of individuals (Kwik, 2008). Researchers found a close link between traditional food practices and the healthcare system. Traditional dishes not only served nutritional purposes but also had ethno-medicinal values, helping to treat various ailments (Kala & Nautiyal, 2022). This is very simple and has a special significance with some rituals, festivals, and curative properties against diseases. By recording and acknowledging young people who show interest, we could raise the profile of these issues (Devi & Kumar, 2012). Community members suffer from numerous diseases as a result (United Nations, 2005). The loss of their traditional knowledge and their ability to provide for their traditional means and subsistence is the loss of their worldview and purpose, a profound spiritual loss, and a loss of identity as self and as people (United Nations, 2005).

Traditional alcoholic beverages and non-alcoholic drinks hold a significant place in cultural histories, reflecting the intricate interplay of tradition, geography, and social practices. These beverages offer more than just flavours; they provide insights into the values, rituals, and daily lives of different communities. These beverages range from the ancient method of brewing to embodying ingenuity and cultural identity, imbued with rich narratives of community bonding. It involves understanding the raw materials used, the methods of production, and the cultural significance of these drinks. They are not just relics of the past; they continue to evolve and adapt, contributing to the contemporary food and drink landscape. They play an essential role in religious ceremonies, social gatherings, and rites of passage. Local suppliers source the ingredients, and the inventive methods employed in their production showcase their ingenuity. The following fermentation process creates an alcoholic drink. Fermentation not only preserves food but also improves its nutritional profile. The process enhances the bioavailability of the nutrients, making them more accessible to the body. Some regions also use wild edible plants to make beverages (Tiwari et al., 2020). Some tribal people prepare refreshing non-alcoholic beverages from local plants like *Aegle maemelos* and *Magnifera indica*, which are consumed during hot seasons and social gatherings (Kumar & Rao, 2007). Fermented beverages and drinks are widely accepted for consumption in religious practices. This acceptance underscores their importance in social interactions and customary traditions (Tamang, 2020). By exploring traditional food knowledge, alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages of the Kamar offer cultural expressions and are deeply intertwined with the cultural identity of the Kamar. Exploring this aspect can provide a deeper understanding of how these drinks preserve cultural heritage.

The food and beverage knowledge of the Kamar, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group of Chhattisgarh, is nutrient-rich, healthy, and traditional. Their traditional food, such as millet, green leafy

vegetables, lentils, and pulses, contains different types of vitamins and minerals. Muhu (Mahua), a fermented alcoholic drink, and Mandiyo Pej (Madia Pej), a non-alcoholic beverage, are traditional summer drinks. Their significance and potential extend beyond mere sustenance, as they deeply intertwine with the Kamar social and cultural fabric. Festivals, rituals, ceremonies, community gatherings, and social life often link each dish and drink. The knowledge of these practices is preserved and passed down through oral traditions, ensuring they transfer rich culinary heritage to each generation. The Kamar talks about how they grow millet, store, process, eat, keep them safe, and how they know what they know. This knowledge is passed down orally from one generation to the next. They have immense knowledge of the food they produce, prepare, and cook. The different types of green leafy vegetables, food related to their rituals, their preservation, production of beverages, the process of cooking and eating root, tubers, fruits, seeds, leaves, etc., they believe have the nutrient content in them, and also it is part of their diet. The pattern of food preparation is maintained by them, but the advent of modernization has its impact because the younger generation is not exposed to traditional practices. Many previous studies reveal that traditional knowledge about Indigenous foods is decreasing slowly and gradually. Contemporary food often replaces traditional foods. Therefore, this research aims to systematically document and preserve these practices for their nutritional value and medicinal properties. This research could provide a paradigm of how traditional food practices and beverages in Kamar can contribute to cultural preservation and community cohesion. There is an urgent need for policies that support the preservation and promotion of their traditional food knowledge.

2. Aim of the study:

1. To explore traditional food practices, knowledge, and epistemologies of the Kamar regarding food and beverages.
2. To document the changes in their food behaviour and consumption due to modernization.

3. Materials and Methods:

3.1 Study Area for the present study:

To meet the objective of the present study, fieldwork was conducted in 21 villages of Dhamtari and Gariaband districts of Chhattisgarh purposely in those villages where those who are still following their traditional food and beverages.

Table 1: Sampled districts and studied villages.

District	Block	Villages studied
Gariaband	Mainpur	Bhatigarh, Kulhadighat, Bhaludigi, Matal, Gavarmund, Besrajarh
	Churra	Dhrampur, Parsapani, Devgaon, Jamli, Mudipani, Dhundhunipani
Dhamtari	Nagri	Dugli, Kauhabahara, Jabrra, Birnasilli, Amali, Sambalpur, Pharsia, Masandabra and Kharka

3.2 Research Methods:

The explorative research method in this paper is characterized by fieldwork in 21 (twenty-one) villages from Dhamtari and Gariaband districts. The qualitative documentation and analysis of the impact of

modernization on the Kamar traditional food and beverage knowledge allows for a comprehensive approach and rich understanding of the cultural significance of their traditional food systems. This approach was specifically chosen to gather firsthand information from communities that still practice traditional food and beverage preparation. The selection of twenty-one villages was purposely done and still focused on those that maintain their cultural practices, which was crucial for understanding the depth of traditional knowledge. The explorative research method facilitated an examination of the changes in food behaviour and consumption patterns due to modernization. By documenting these shifts, this study highlights the challenges faced by the Kamar in preserving their traditional practices. This aspect underscores the dynamic nature and its vulnerability in the face of contemporary influences. The study aimed to document the traditional food practices, knowledge and epistemologies of the Kamar. This involves recording food patterns, including ingredients used, method of preparation and cultural significance of these practices. The explorative nature of the research allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how these practices contribute to their sustainable way of living. It also includes qualitative insights into the cultural significance of traditional alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages. By exploring the intricate relationship between these beverages and the kamar social practices, the study provides a deeper understanding of how food and drink reflect community values and identity.

The traditional food of the Kamar, such as Muhu Lata, an alcoholic beverage, Mandiyo Pej, and an alcoholic drink made up of Mahua, for instance, Mahua (made up by fermentation process) and other food items, is scientifically documented and offers a rich tapestry and flavours and techniques. The sampling method was used to collect primary data from the Culturally Specialized Experts (CSE) among Kamar. CSE are the people who are experts in their field of knowledge, such as elders (age group 35-60) who are pioneers in holding their traditional knowledge of food and beverages, along with women who hold custodianship of traditional knowledge of food, and Mukhaya, a community leader of the tribe. This paper also discusses the ingredients used in the traditional recipe and the pattern followed by them. The epistemology of the kamar regarding their food and beverage was recorded to know their sustainable way of living. The information of the review published in this article was found in Google Scholar, Jstor, ResearchGate, etc. For the compilation of the review, original research papers, review articles, book chapters, published books, online reports, and e-books are mentioned in the reference section.

4. Results and discussion:

4.1 Different types of foods cultivated and food behaviour of the Kamar:

The Kamar have vast knowledge of the food they produce, distribute, consume, prepare, and cook. Their food system is mainly based on locally sourced ingredients and sustainable practices. The food is related to their rituals, preservation, production of beverages, the process of cooking, and eating roots, tubers, fruits, seeds, green leaves, etc. It has nutrient content in it, and it is also part of their diet. Millets are the earliest grains cultivated and consumed by the Kamar. In earlier times, they used to eat millet such as Mandiyo, which is also known as Madia or Ragi, kodo, Kosra (kutki), kangni, sava, कांग, etc. These are the heritage crops of India, a group of cereal grains belonging to the Poaceae family, commonly known as the grass family. They are drought-tolerant, require low rainfall, can be grown in poor soils, are highly resilient to adapting to different ecological conditions, and are ideal for climatic changes, pest attacks, and contingent crops. They are also called "Nutri-cereals," due to their high fibre content, quality protein, and mineral deposition. It has ecological, nutritional, and socio-economic benefits. They

cultivate it for their self-use. They don't cultivate it for selling purposes in the market. Millet production and consumption decreased in their area over the past 20 years due to the increasing production of rice.

Table: 2 Different types of millets cultivated by the Kamar:

Name of the millet in Kamari	Name of the millet in Hindi	Name of the millet in English	Scientific name	Use of the millet in the Kamar
Mandiyo	Madia, Ragi	Finger millet	Elusine coracana	Mandiyo Pej a non-alcoholic traditional drink is preferential at the time of the summer season. The benefit of drinking is it has nutrient content in them; they don't feel dehydrated, protects them from heat waves (loo) and aids cooling effect in the body. Once consumed in the daytime or afternoon they feel satiated for the whole day.
Kodo	Kodo	Ditch millet	Paspalum scrobiculatum	They make kodo pej from the kodo millet. Kodo rice is also eaten which is beneficial in every season.
Gurji Kosra, khedi	Kutki	Panicum sumatrense		In ancient times it was steam-cooked and consumed in the form of rice. Its low glycemic index releases sugar slowly in the bloodstream, making it ideal for managing diabetes and blood sugar spikes



Figure 1: Mandiyo (Madia, Ragi)



Figure 2: Gurji kosra

4.2 Traditional Food of Kamar:

4.2.1 Muhu laata (Mahua laata):

Mahua (*Madhuca indica*), a member of the Sapotaceae family, is naturally found in the forests of Central India, mainly in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, Gujarat, and Orissa. People collect it between March and April when it blooms. People use its various parts, including fruit, seeds, and wood, for a variety of purposes. It gives various health advantages and prevents many diseases. Kamar people collect Mahua fruit, also known as Muhu, between March and May and then sun-dry it. After that, they place it in a hadiya (small pot), dry-fry it, and then boil it with partially filled water. As soon as it starts to turn into a semi-liquid paste, they take it in their hand and bind it in a round shape. It appears to be dark red in color and has a smooth texture; by eating it, they feel satiated. Muhu seeds, along with sarai seeds are boiled together in a pot overnight, and they then consume it in the morning, especially in the rainy season.



Figure 3: Muhu laata (Mahua laata)

4.2.2 Mandiyo Roti (Flat Bread):

Mandiyo (ragi) is ground in jata (traditional grinder), and after mixing it with water, they prepare the dough and make roti (flat bread) and then wrap it in the Sarai (sal) leaves (scientific name: Shorea robusta). Sarai leaves have anti-microbial and antifungal properties, leaving their nutritional value and medicinal properties in the flatbread.

4.2.3 Kodha Roti (Flat Bread):

The muser, a traditional grinder, grinds the paddy husk before mixing it with Mahua. They mould that dough in the form of round flatbread. They then bake this in a coal hearth. These were then baked in a coal hearth. But the young generation doesn't like to cook and eat in their traditional pattern because it is now hard for them to digest, and also in their taste buds they find it non-palatable.

4.2.4 Green leafy vegetables:

During the monsoon and post-monsoon, they get different types of green leafy vegetables and tubers to eat, according to them, which are highly nutritious and contain lots of vitamins and minerals. They believe that all types of vitamins and minerals are available in green leafy vegetables, and consuming them will protect them from bacterial and viral infections caused by germs.

Table 3: Green leafy vegetables found in the forest

Name in Kamari	Name in English	Scientific name	Benefits of green leaves
Munga bhaji	Moringa leaves	Moringa oleifera	It is consumed by them especially when they suffer from colds and cough
Charota bhaji	Senna Tora	Cassia obtusifolia	It is wild leaf consumed by them in the belief it will provide immunity in the body
Kochai patta	Colocasia	Clocasia esculenta	Leaves are rich in calcium, iron, vitamins A, B and C. It also has antibacterial and anti-inflammatory properties.
Kuppa bhaji	Green amaranth	Amaranthus viridis	It is a bit sour and is used as a medicinal herb among them. It is cooked in dabka form atraditional way of cooking of the Kamar.
Chunchuniya bhaji	Small green leaves	Marsilea quadrifolia L.	It is a good source of fibre and minerals. It is helpful in the treatment of constipation.

4.2.5 Process of cooking:

They prepared green leafy vegetables using the traditional method known as dabka bhaji in ancient times. It was their traditional method of cooking. Dabka means boiling green leafy vegetables in water, and after boiling, if they wish, they can fry them with a few drops of vegetable oil by putting in onion, garlic, red chillies, and salt, or you can just consume it in a boiled form. They believe that eating in the boiled form is more nutritious as compared to frying. They eat dabka bhaji along with plain rice or basi bhaat. In earlier times they used to cook many vegetables by following this method. Females of the younger generation don't want to follow this method, as they feel that's a way too long cooking process. Back then, they even used to boil meat from hens, goats, and pigs and consume it in boil form.

4.3 Beverages, alcoholic, and non-alcoholic traditional drinks:

4.3.1 Mandiyo Pej (Madia Pej):

You can enjoy Mandiyo Pej, a refreshing non-alcoholic summer drink, in both the summer and winter seasons. In a container, they put water, mandiyo powder, and a few grains of rice and start boiling it for 15-20 min. Once prepared, they add half a tablespoon of salt to taste and store it in their traditional vessel or pot. After preparation, it turned into a chocolate-brown colour. People mostly consume it during the summer season to shield themselves from heat waves. They carry it with them when they venture deep into the forest during the summer season, believing that it will shield them from the heat waves. In the past, Kamar was fortunate enough to obtain rice, which they would then incorporate into Mandiyo Pej.



Figure 4: Mandiyo Pej

4.3.2 Muhu drink (Mahua alcohol):

Muhu Mahua (*Madhuca indica*), a plant with strong cultural significance in tribal groups, serves as the primary ingredient in the preparation of alcohol. Tribal groups distil and ferment it to create "mahua daaru," an alcoholic beverage with 20 to 40% alcohol content. They also offer it to deities as part of their cultural heritage (Patel & Patel, 2023). This beverage has cultural, medicinal, and nutritional value, contributing to the overall health and well-being of the individual. They gather ripe mahua flowers from the forest to make this beverage. Then they keep all the mahua in the pot by keeping three pots in a row. The lower pot holds water, the middle pot contains mahua and water, and the upper pot holds cold water. They heat the pot and maintain its temperature for five days. They believe that keeping alcohol in that clay pot will keep the body cool. They produce it during the summer months when it is available abundantly.



Figure 5: Process of making Muhu (Mahua) alcoholic drink

4.3.3 Jaggery alcohol:

The Kamar also make alcohol from jaggery and grapes. In the month of winter, they mix jaggery along with mahua alcohol. They make alcohol from loose grapes. The jaggery is beaten into a powder, and then added to water and allowed to decompose. You have to keep this solution in water for as long as jaggery is not leaving its sweetness. In the summer, it takes 3-4 days and 7-8 days in the winter. After drinking, some people say that all their body pain disappears.

5. Food Preservation:

They wash, cut, and sun-dry mushrooms before storing them in their bamboo basket. They make curry in the winter and summer seasons. They also dry the tomatoes using this method. Aamakhula: They cut the raw mango into pieces and then sun-dried it. They use it in curry, daal, and other dishes after it has dried. It is sour and used in the replacement of tomatoes during the summer season.

6. The Young generation's contribution to traditional food practices:

The younger generation of the Kamar is currently facing challenges in the preservation and continuation of traditional food and beverages due to modernization and changing dietary preferences. For instance: many young individuals of the Kamar find traditional foods kodha roti (flatbread) less palatable as compared to wheat or rice flatbread. Millets and some green leafy vegetables which contain a high source of nutrition such as iron, calcium, fibre, and vitamins A, B and C were used to protect them from bacterial and viral infections. This shift in taste and preferences poses a challenge to the continuation of

traditional cooking methods and dietary habits. The transmission of traditional food knowledge relies on them as they are the ones who will inherit and carry forward this heritage. However, a current trend shows a decline in their exposure to traditional practices which threatens their transmission. The advent of modern lifestyles has led to a decrease in the younger generation's participation in food preparation and consumption. This detachment from their cultural roots can result in a loss of identity and traditional knowledge. Despite these challenges, there is an opportunity for the young generation to revive interest in traditional food and beverages. By recognizing the nutritional and medical benefits of these foods, they can play a pivotal role in promoting and ensuring their relevance in contemporary society. The interest shown in the preservation of their food practices can help restore awareness. Their engagement is vital for documenting and preserving these practices, which are rich in cultural significance and nutritional value.

7. Conclusion:

The present study among Kamar is a step towards documenting the traditional knowledge of food and beverages of the Kamar of Chhattisgarh, state. Their ecology provides them with a wide range of plants, green leafy vegetables, fruits, roots, tubers, beverages, and much more, all intermingled with their traditional knowledge and epistemological beliefs. Millets are rich in nutrients, and in the recent past, when they used to consume them, they never used to fall ill; since rice has become their staple food, they believe they frequently fall ill. Therefore, we strongly recommend reintroducing millet crops into their diet by raising awareness among them. Different types of green leafy vegetables and other foods, their preservation, production, process of cooking, etc have nutrient content in them. Indigenous cultural practices and traditional knowledge are meant to ensure the subsistence and survival of the community and maintain the balance between the natural method, environment, and the people. Traditionally fermented beverages play a crucial role in the life of the Kamar. They are integral and significant in various ceremonies, such as marriage, birth, and death, which show cultural significance. The epistemology of the Kamar is intertwined with their socio-cultural identity, where foods practices are not merely about sustenance but also encompass rituals, social gatherings, and community health. This reflects a holistic understanding of food that integrates ecological, nutritional, and socio-economic dimensions. The advent of modernization has led to a preference for contemporary over traditional foods and beverages in Kamar. This change in food behaviour has overshadowed local culinary practices. The young generation of the Kamar faces challenges in engaging with traditional food practices. Their active participation is essential for the preservation. Encouraging their involvement can help bridge the gap between traditional and modern dietary practices, fostering a sense of cultural identity and community cohesion. A paradigm shift can be seen in their agricultural sector; i.e., millet crops have been replaced by rice crops and due to that shift pattern, many nutrients have also been replaced from their diet. This poses a significant challenge to their knowledge, preferences, nutritional habits, and cultural identity. Addressing these challenges is crucial for the preservation of their rich culinary heritage.

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