CHAPTER V

FOOD IN LIFE CYCLE RITUALS
Food in Life Cycle Rituals

In the previous chapter we have discussed the normal food cycle and the food taken during festivals. Now we are going to discuss food during life cycle rituals.

Pregnancy and the Rites Among the Tangsas

The Tangsas regard the period of pregnancy as a delicate period and a number of restrictions are laid down which have to be followed. This is done so that the women has an easy delivery and is protected against evil spirits.

The Lungchang group of the Tangsas perform certain Nobo (ceremonies) when a woman is pregnant. This is done in order to ensure a smooth and easy delivery. This ritual is, however, not done at one's home but in the jungle and that too under a particular tree called "Pamthom". In order to perform the ritual they require a number of things. These are an egg, a little uncooked rice, one dog, a small piece of cloth which is torn from the dress of the pregnant woman, some thread, wooden reel and a batten hat.

First, they make an image out of the cloth, resembling a baby which they offer in the name of the God "Pamthom".

Before going to the jungle the priest goes round the pregnant woman nine times holding the items of the ritual.
She in turn touches the articles and requests the priest to carry it to the Pamthom tree in the jungle sincerely praying that the God in the Pamthom tree may bless her with safe and easy delivery.

The priest then goes to the jungle to arrange the articles of ritual in the following order:

a) The dog is tied to a wooden post which is fixed adjacent to the tree. The dog is tied in a standing position with its face turned upwards so as to expose only the front side leaving the backside opposite to the village. Then the dog is sacrificed. All other things are left behind in the place of ritual.

b) Salt as well as uncooked rice and an egg are kept in a "Kaupat" under the tree.

c) The other articles are arranged and placed under the tree.

After arranging the articles the priest recites certain hymns under the tree and then returns to the house of the pregnant woman and the articles mentioned above are left behind. After this a pig is sacrificed at the house of the pregnant woman reciting certain hymns at the same time. The meat of the pig is then boiled in water with other locally available spices, salt and vegetables. Rice beer, meat and rice are then served to the members present there.
Pregnancy Among Moklams

In the advanced stage of pregnancy the Mokloms perform certain rites called "vokap". It commences in the morning after arrival of the priest. First, the priest takes a wohang (brown coloured hen), some rice powder packed in a leaf, cooked rice and rice beer which they arrange neatly on a bamboo tray or basket. These articles are then taken to the forest and placed under a tree and some rituals are performed in the name of "Vokap". After performing the rites they leave behind the things and let loose the hen. They then come back home, and cook hen and the rice. The cooked food is then served among the people present there. This marks the closure of the ritual.

Thus the main items offered during pregnancy are a dog, an egg, salt, uncooked rice and rice beer in the case of the Lungchang, and fowl, rice powder and cooked rice and rice beer in the case of the Moklom. The animals offered are simply left in the jungle along with rice and rice beer for the spirits. A pig (Lungchang)/fowl (Moklom) is also sacrificed at the house of the pregnant woman and after some rituals, the pig/fowl is boiled in water along with vegetables, salt and locally available spices and then served with rice and rice beer to the people present there.
Observance of Birth Ceremony

Birth of a child is an important social occasion and is usually marked by the performance of some rituals. Among the Tangsas, birth of a child is followed by celebration and is an occasion of rejoicing. Birth of a child is considered to be a heavenly gift. According to the Tangsas birth, growth and death lies in the hands of God.

Birth Ceremony of the Lungchang

The Lungchang have an elaborate birth ceremony with certain rites which are to be zealously celebrated. As soon as a couple is gifted with a child, they first remove the old firewood from the tap (hearth) and clean the tap properly. They then bring in new firewood and light the fire. On that fire, wong (rice) is boiled. After preparing the doong, a small amount of it is placed on a plate and this doong along with kham (local beer) is then taken near the mouth of the new born child. Next the mother is offered doong and kham. This is done because the mother goes through a lot of pain and hardship during the process of delivery of the child. The food served to her is considered to help her get rid of her weakness. On the first day of the new-born child they pierce holes in its ears. On the second day they try to read out the omen and find whether the child will be fortunate or unfortunate. For this
purpose, a hen is sacrificed in case of a female child and a cock in the case of a male child. The father does the sacrifice. He observes the position of the leg and accordingly find out whether the omen is good or bad. It is seen that even among the Hill Lalung of Assam sacrifices are common. In case of a male child twelve pairs of cocks and in case of a female child six pairs of cock are sacrificed in the alter of the courtyard containing twenty-one sheets of banana leaves (Sharma Thakur, 1985).

On this occasion they invite the parents and relatives of both sides and also the neighbours. They are invited in order to bless the new born child. The invitees are also offered food consisting of meat, boiled rice and rice beer. The cooking is done in the normal style. The male members are served food in the outer room near the hearth, while the female members sit around the inner hearth. Serving is generally done by the females (family members or members of their clan). Food is served on leaves and rice beer on a bamboo mug. The rice beer is served first followed by rice and meat. Food is first served to the old and children and then to the other men and women.

A remarkable feature of the food habits of the baby is that, from the first day itself the baby is given rice. The process of feeding the baby is quite similar to that of birds. First the mother will take a morsel of cooked rice
in her mouth and make it into a pulp and then the baby is fed mouth to mouth. Breast milk is also given to the child. Gradually the child’s daily diet will be the same as that of the other members.

Chungrong (Birth Ceremony) of the Moklom

Among the Mokloms the birth of a child is considered to be fortunate. But the birth of a twin is considered to be unfortunate and they kill the twins. They even go to the extreme point of destroying the very house by fire in which the twins were born. They believe such a house would bring bad luck to them.

Soon after a child is born, it is given breast milk. On the very first day itself some rites are performed. On this day, rice will be offered to the child. They believe if the child is not offered rice it may develop cough later while visiting others. On this ceremony fire is considered to be a sacred symbol. Rice on this day is cooked on the firewood of a special tree called "Sakhang" which is generally used for ritual purpose. A temporary hearth is made outside the house for this purpose. A little amount of rice and water is packed and tied with a leaf and is then burnt on fire. After cooking the rice, the mother first chews the rice and makes it into a pulp and then feed the child mouth to mouth. This is repeated three times. After
this, the child can take its food anywhere. While performing this rite they do not invite any guests.

On the third day minghom (name giving) ceremony is performed. For this the maternal uncle is specially invited and also they invite the parents of both sides as well as neighbours.

They have a special way of finding a suitable name for the child. First they take six sprigs of the paddy plant. Then they place a plate with water on it, and take two grains of unhusked paddy and hold it with the thumb and middle finger. After that they propose a name and drop the grains into the water. As the grains float on the water, if they meet head to head, the name is considered to be suitable otherwise they go on repeating the process suggesting new names until the two grains meet head to head. After a name is given, local beer is served to the invitees followed by rice and meat which are compulsory items. The food is cooked in the normal style and is served by the family members. The male members are served in the outer room around the tap and the female members around the inner or main tap. At first kham (local beer) is served on tungpak (bamboo tube) which is followed by till (rice) and ngam (meat) on leaf. After eating is over the plates are collected and stored in one place.
To sum up, for the Langchang and Moklom, fire plays an important role in maintaining the social relation. Again food takes a special meaning in specific occasion. Soon after the birth of the child, the mother is offered rice and rice beer and this is done to provide energy. Rice, rice beer and meat plays an indispensable role in their food cycle. Similarly the best part of the meat, goes to the maternal uncle and parents. Before taking their food they always keep a portion of food aside and also drop little rice beer to keep away the bad influence of the other world.

Marriage

The Tangsas give great importance to marriage. For them like any other group, marriage is a social institution and they give great sanctity to marriage. It is the accepted form of union between man and woman. For them marriageable age is attained soon after puberty. Usually boys marry between the age of eighteen to thirty and girls marry between the age of fifteen and twenty.

The clan exogamy is the general rule which regulates the marriage system of the Tangsa. In most cases marriage takes place within the village itself, but inter village marriage is also not uncommon.

Monogamy is the most widely practised form of marriage. Generally polygamy is not practised, but in
exceptional cases, a man can have more than one wife, provided the first wife agrees to it. Cross-cousin marriage (MBD), livirate and sororate are also noticed in their society. In the cross-cousin marriage, the mother's brother's daughter (MBD) is considered to be the potential wife of father's sister's son (FSZ).

Marriage System in Lungchang

At first the proposal goes to the girls place. The message is carried by the elder family members or relative or any other person (chosen by the boy's parents). But a person who does not have any child is forbidden from going. Such a person is not considered to be a good omen. They carry *kham* (local beer) in a *tungpak* (bamboo tube) when they go to propose for marriage. They consume the *kham* (local beer) in the girl's place if the marriage proposal is accepted. Similar practices are observed among the Purum tribe of Manipur. A man who wants to negotiate, regarding matrimony of his son to a certain girl takes a present of rice beer to the girl's father, and appeals to him not to be "angry" and if the latter agrees to the proposal he drinks it. This has double meaning that of the character of the person, and also of the wife-taker acknowledging humbly his inferiority by taking the initial step in the process of negotiations, which may not be accepted sometimes. During
the marriage ceremony rice beer is taken from the groom's father and given to the wife's father, together with pig meat curry just as mortals do to the Gods. Thus it can be seen that the wife takers are regarded inferior to wife givers (Needhan, 1960).

After proper negotiation, if both sides come to an agreement, then the girl's parents invite the boy to come and stay with them for a period of one or two years. During the period the boy is required to work in their fields and perform other duties as well. After staying there the boy returns to his house and starts preparing for the marriage.

A day before the marriage the following items are to be given to the girl from the boy's side:

1) *ngam* (fish) - 99 pieces
2) *wang* (raw rice) - 3 baskets (11 kgs/baskets)
3) *dung* (cooked rice) - the maximum they can give
4) *Kham* (local beer) - 5 numbers (the length of the bamboo tube should be 5 ft., 4 ft., 3 ft., 2 ft., 1 ft. respectively).

The *dung* (boiled rice) is carried on leaves. As per the existing customs the first packet of rice is tied with three leaves and the rest are tied with one leaf. All the packets are then tied together by a rope.

The articles are delivered in a systematic manner. *Kambe*, the man who had first gone with the proposal to the
The above diagram shows obligatory gift and return.

"A" indicates bridegroom's side giving a pig along with fish, boiled rice, raw rice and local beer to the bride's side. This shows the female's primacy.

"B" indicates obligatory return of the neck portion to the bridegroom, to carry it back. This shows the relationship of reciprocity between the two families.

"C" shows that during special occasions, meat is prepared by the males, while rice and rice beer are prepared by the females, which indicates the clear cut division of labour.

"D" indicates the tail portion of prepared meat along with rice and rice beer which are served first to the clan members of the bride, which symbolizes the honoured guest status of the bride's side.

"E" indicates that the other portions of prepared meat are served to the other invitees who are present, which shows the importance of hospitality as a way of promoting goodwill within the community.
girl's house carries the basket of dung. He is then followed by the bangwang, the man carrying the wang (raw rice). Wakpaiben, the last person carries the wak (pig).

On the day of the wedding, 5-15 pieces of nga are carried by the bridegroom's side. Out of these pieces, 5 pieces are given back to the person who first carried the proposal for marriage. The rest of the items are then cooked in the bride's place, which is cooked by the young boys and girls from both sides. The ngam (meat) is usually cooked by the boys and dung is cooked by the girls. The girls also prepare the Kham (local beer). When the wak is cut, the neck portion is given to the groom to carry it back to his house. Cooking is done in the normal style. The only difference is that meat is prepared by the males and rice and local beer by the females.

System of Partaking Marriage Feats

When the meal is served the clan members of the bride's family take the meal first. They are given the tail portion of the pig. The rest of the invitees then start taking their meal. While taking food, first of all they pour some beer and also a little bit of rice on the ground. This is done to get rid of the evil things which may be associated with food.
After having food the boy along with the other members of the family return back to their respective houses. Sometimes the bride comes with them and if she does not wish to come together she can come afterwards. There is no hard and fast rule as such. A *pak* is slaughtered when the bride comes to her in-laws' house and a grand feast follows. It is the custom that whenever a bride comes to her husband's house there is merry making and feasting in the groom's house. For this the special invitees are those persons who carried the articles to the bride's house and the married sister(s) of the bride. In case of a well-to-do family other guests are also invited. In this feast the neck portion of the *pak* is served to the married sisters of the bride as a gesture of respect and importance. The other items of food consists of *doong*, *ngam* and *kham*. Food is served on leaves and rice beer on bamboo tube. The rice beer is served first then rice and then meat.

In conclusion from the above description, it can be observed that during marriage, food plays an important role in maintaining the social relations. Prior to marriage, the boy's side offers fish, rice, rice beer, pig to the girl's side in odd numbers. The girl's side as an obligation, returns the neck portion to the bridegroom. Again when the bride comes to the bridegroom's house there is merry making and feasting in the groom's house. It is an act of honour.
and importance shown to the bride as she is considered to be an important person. Again in this feast the neck portion of the pig is served to the married sister of the bride and it is seen that gifts are exchanged between both the families during marriages. During marriage feasts, the clan members of the bride’s family takes the meal first and they are given the tail portion of the pig which is supposed to be the most valuable portion. During such occasion boys prepare meat while girls prepare rice and rice beer. That is a clear cut division of labour on the basis of sex.

Salwang (Marriage) Ceremony in Moklom Society

The marriage system in a Moklom society is performed on the basis of some traditional procedures. When a boy reaches the age of 17 proposals for his marriage are made. In case a boy falls in love with a girl and wants to marry her he informs his parents. If they approve, they appoint a kamwa (mediator) who should be their relative. The Kamwa then approaches the girl’s parents to seek their permission who normally give their consent for the marriage.

Even in arranged marriage the boy’s parents will send a relative as a Kamwa to the bride’s house. The Kamwa then puts forward the proposal in the presence of both the parents and the bride. If the bride agrees to the proposal, the Kamwa will then give Rs. 30/- to Rs. 50/- to the girl as
an engagement gift. After the Kamwa wholly confirms the engagement, the boy’s parents will fix a date to solemnize the marriage. Then the parents of both sides discuss the plans of the marriage and the number of invitees.

On the day of the marriage the boy’s side prepare vong (rice), kham (local beer) and ngam (meat) according to the number of invitees. Sometimes the elder sister and aunt of the bride offer meat and rice beer to the boy’s family. But it is not compulsory from the bride’s side. If the boy’s side is rich they offer a lie (buffalo) which is highly prestigious and valuable in the Moklam society. If the boy’s side cannot offer buffalo they offer 2(two) waks (pigs) in lieu of buffalo. One of the wak is for the maternal uncle of the girl and the other one for the girl’s parents. In case the boy’s family is not in a position to afford two waks, only one wak is offered in which case one leg is offered to the maternal uncle of the bride and one leg to the bride’s parents.

On the day of the marriage the Kamwa goes to fetch the bride who is accompanied by her friends and her junnu (best friend) who leads the way. As they progress and reach the mid point between the bride’s house and the bridegroom’s house the mediator then plants 3 sticks in a criss-cross manner which is actually the branch of a particular tree.
called Manrung bang. While planting the sticks the Kamwa chants certain hymns in order to bless the couple.

Tunliking    Chamliking
Hikantio     Hisolio
Runglamking  Kiklamking
Khopungna    Pasangna
Chamtong

The girls from the bride’s side carry bamboo tube containing local beer which they drink on reaching the midpoint.

Then they proceed to the boy’s house. On reaching the boy’s house the bride enters the house through the newly constructed Kheri (steps) made out of a particular wood called Tokhibang. As soon as she enters the boy’s house she is given a warm welcome and good wishes. After welcoming the bride, a grand feast takes place. The head of the boy’s family invite the Lungwang (village head) and his subordinates and three persons who are the head of different clans. As a mark of respect these people are served first. They are also given special rice beer. They pour little rice beer on the floor and rumtam (bless) the couple, and then the actual feasting takes place and all the invitees are served food. The distribution of food is generally done by the members of the boy’s family. The rice and meat are served on a napjack (leaf) and rice beer is served in
tungpak (bamboo mug). The male members take their food on the floor around the hearth of the main room and the womenfolk usually sit in the kitchen. Before taking their food they wash their hands. After the feast is over the bride along with her friends go back to her house. After keeping the bride her friends return to their respective houses. The next day a feast is given in the bride’s place. All the villagers are invited. Here also the village heads are called and given special treatment and rice beer is offered to them. Simultaneously a pig, is sacrificed at the bride’s house by the boy’s side and the members who had actively participated in the marriage along with the Kamwa are specially invited. They are offered food. Raw meat is also given to be taken home. This is done so that they have bumper crops of rice, millets in the coming season. On the day of marriage the villagers do not go to the fields, but attend the marriage.

To sum up, a kind of bride price is offered to the bride’s parents, which consists of a buffalo and a cow. In case these cannot be given, cash is offered in reciprocal to the price of a buffalo and a cow now-a-days. Thus the marriage comes to an end.
Observation of Rites Relating to *Rie/Tik* (Death)

The Tangsa believe that death is not only the result of diseases caused by the evil spirits but also an outcome of the natural phenomenon. Death owing to old age is regarded as natural. But premature death is thought of as an unnatural event and the evil spirits are held responsible for it.

When a person dies, as a matter of rule, the relatives are informed and they are expected to arrive for a condolence before the dead body is disposed off.

The method of disposal of the dead body is different amongst the different Tangsa sub-tribe. The Lungchang have cremation ground, but the Mokloms cremate the dead body near their house (in front of the house).

After that all the household belongings are taken out of the house, as they think that these would become *anan* (impure), particularly, the seeds *tungli/chamli* for the coming year. They then strangle a hen or a cock. After cooking the meat it is placed near the dead body along with boiled rice and rice beer on the plate in which he used to eat when he was alive. A small bamboo *chunga* is taken on which a single hair of the dead body is kept. It is followed by firing the guns three times. Hearing the gun shots the villagers come to know that someone has died. Soon all the villagers and relatives assemble in the dead
persons house. After the arrival of people a pig is sacrificed and is cooked. After cooking, the head and tail portion of the meat is placed on a plate near the dead body along with steamed rice and rice beer. It is believed that by offering the head and tail portion of the pig to the dead body it would think that the whole pig is being offered to him and thereby he would be satisfied. The food which is offered to the dead body is given by the father or mother or the eldest son and sometimes even by a close relative. The person who offers the food chants certain hymns, the meaning of which, is that "we are offering you food and hope that you will be satisfied and do not haunt us or disturb us latter on." After that all the people who had assembled there, are offered food. The next day, the villagers go to the forest to collect firewood, bamboo etc. in order to perform the mangsat (last rite) of the dead person. On that day, again a buffalo or cow is sacrificed; then they cook rice and meat. The food is first served to the dead body along with rice beer. Thereafter, food and rice beer is served to other people.

On the third and final day preparation to perform the last rites start from the morning. First they build satang (wooden platform) on the front side of the house and a tree is planted adjacent to the wooden platform. The tree is planted with the belief that it will provide shade to the
dead body and protect it from the rays of the sun. They also dig a temporary pond near the wooden platform so that in the course of burning of the dead body they can occasionally pour water on the dead body to relieve it from the heat of the fire. When the satong is ready they bring out the dead body which is carried by four persons (relative). Prior to that, they have to perform another ritual. First they clean the tap (hearth) and cover it carefully with a basket and a stone is placed on the basket. The old man of their clan will take a biluk (shield), now-a-days wan (winnowing fan), in one hand and a pa (spear) in the other hand. He then makes three rounds in the funeral pyre. An old lady from their clan will then collect the food offered to the dead body in a basket and all the articles which were used by the deceased in his life time are offered as grave goods which are kept suspended from a post near the funeral pyre. Apart from these, rice beer, cooked rice and drinking water are put on the ground near the grave. Finally, the dead body is placed on the bamboo platform with its face upwards. The body is covered with leaves after removing the clothes, and the eldest son or a close relative lights the fire. During the process of burning, water is sprinkled from time to time and the position of the body is changed with its back facing upwards. After the body is completely burnt, the family
members go near the pyre, and the person who lit the pyre will bring a burnt out wood and place it on the head of each member assuring that the spirit of the dead person will not haunt them. The members of the family will then enter the house and check the hearth, to see if it has any marks or impression on it. If there are some signs, these signify that someone else from the village would die, but if it is spotless they presume everything to be alright.

After this the person who had assisted the family to perform the last rites are invited to a feast. In case of a well-to-do family, the whole village is invited. The feast consists of boiled pork, steamed rice and rice beer.

Their normal food (Jakha) is served on leaves. But on this occasion, the food is served only on the jaknil (reverse) side of the leaves. On such a feast day, the entire house is properly illuminated throughout the night. The next day the villagers do not go to the field as it is regarded as an inauspicious day. Normal life begins on the fifth day. They have a custom, of keeping one piece of raw food from their meal for one year upto the Mol festival. This food is stitched into a garland or in a bamboo tube or basket and is kept for the dead person. The last ritual of the death ceremony is completed only after one year just before the following Mol festival. They make an image out of bamboo and cloth representing the dead person, 2-3 days
before the *Mol* festival. The image is placed inside the house and is offered meat, rice and rice beer. The family members sit near the image and sing songs narrating the incidents of the dead person life and also cry at the same time. They then have their food in front of the image. The following day the family members carry the image and make three rounds in the village. They then come back home and offer food to the image and also take their food. On the third day, the image is placed on the village compound and the vegetable tube along with the articles which he/she used during his/her life time are placed near it and this marks the conclusion of the death ceremony. On the death ceremony day they do not invite any particular guest but whoever comes is offered food.

Among the *Lungchang*, immediately after death, the dead body is washed with warm or cold water. Then dressed and placed on a mat made of bamboo.

Immediately after death the dead body is kept in the position and place shown at Fig. A. The dead body is kept for a maximum of two days to enable relatives from far away villages to pay their last homage. In the early morning of the day on which the body will be cremated the position is changed and kept at the place shown in B.

Besides the dead body all the articles which he used during his life time are placed on a plate rice and chicken
are offered and on a bamboo mug, water and rice beer are offered to the dead person. The next day the dead body is taken to the cremation ground where a shed is built. Inside the shed, they keep the articles used by the dead person during his life time.

As a custom, the dead body is first lifted by family members from the position at B to C (ground). From C it is generally carried by the villagers. However, if there is no grown up person and if all are very young or too old in the family then one member (not small boys and girls) will simply touch the dead body. Then it is carried away by the nearest relatives of the same clan. From the ground to the place of cremation it can be carried by any able person irrespective of clan.

For cremation no such bamboo platform is prepared. Actually a large quantity of firewood is collected by the male members of the village and the pyre is prepared in a systematic manner by the elder persons who know the method. The height of pyre is 1½ metres to 2 metres depending upon the size of the dead body. The pyre is lit up by a family member, generally by an aged person. They also sprinkle water from time to time as they believe that the dead person might feel thirsty. After completion of cremation, the villagers return to the village. Before entering their houses they wash their face, hand, feet and daos used at the
cremation ground. On reaching home they are offered rice beer. On the night and the following morning the family members are forbidden to take any vegetables with their food. They are only allowed to take steamed rice that too without salt. They also offer rice on a leaf for the dead person near the place where the dead was kept. But the plate is kept on the side, in which its legs pointed. They then clear the hearth and get rid of the old firewood and new firewood is lit. After this chicken is cooked and if there is no chicken, fish is cooked. They offer meat, steamed rice and rice beer to the dead person. For the next two days the family members are forbidden to go to the field or to visit anyone in the neighbourhood and they also cannot eat anything in any one’s place. The other villagers also do not come to their house or eat anything in the house.

After two days, a feast is offered to the people who assisted them in performing the last rites. Food items consists of meat, rice and rice beer or whatever is possible within their capacity. From the next day onwards normal life begins. As a mark of final farewell to the dead person, they sacrifice a pig and invite the villagers. This is done during the Moh festival. Here again doong, ngam, kham are offered in the name of the dead person and after food is served to the invitees.
Thus food plays an important role in performing rituals. It is also very clear that according to them the dead person also has desire for food and has to be offered like anybody else. Not only that, food is kept aside for the dead every day for one year and on the day before the Mol festival, the last ritual is performed by offering rice, rice beer and meat to the dead. This marks the completion of the death's last rites and the fact that they offer food to their ancestral spirits during rituals and ceremonies, signify that the dead still have significance in their day to day life. Again for two days normal work cannot be done as a sign of respect to the deceased. Normal activity begins after the 5th day after completion of the mourning period.
### Prescribed Items of Food on Life Cycle Rituals

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<tr>
<td><strong>Milk &amp; milk products</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Raw Rice</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Common Items**: Rice, Local Beer, Meat, Vegetables.

**Significant Items**: Eggs, Fish, Row Rice, Rice Powder.