

MAWHIANG: Eat, Pray, Love... & Clean



Text and Photographs:
Amrita Ravimohan

The road leading to Mawhiang village is a bumpy one, especially by the high standards set by most roads in the state of Meghalaya, and the first thing that one sees while bouncing down the narrow village road is a sign reading “Open Defecation Free”. This may seem an odd welcome to Mawhiang, but it should certainly be comforting to anyone planning to visit. India fights the battle of open defecation every day, from its largest cities to its smallest villages. The people of Mawhiang realized that their unhygienic practices were leading to illness among the people and livestock. The stand-alone outhouses seen around village are indications that Mawhiang has managed to effectively curb this disease-spreading menace; an accomplishment that was officially recognized by the government in 2014. Since then, Mawhiang is regarded as one of the cleanest villages in the region.



One of the villagers from Mawhiang reports that now that they promote cleanliness in the village, they are able to maintain good health, meaning that the community has seen the vital connection between the two firsthand. She also said that not only do they care about the cleanliness of their village, but also about the cleanliness of their food, drink and clothing. Cleanliness is viewed as an important contributor to wellbeing, which they call *ka jingim bapura*, or “life in its fullness”. They feel proud to talk about this to their friends outside of the village, since it is now well-known for its sanitation. Cleanliness has given them a sense of pride and satisfaction. In fact, their spirituality dictates the practice of cleanliness and they believe that it is a clean person, internally and externally, who enjoys good health. From this belief grows a desire for peace and harmony, and the respect for other’s cultures and traditions.



CONVERSATIONS OVER KWAI



TOILET CUBICLES

For the people of Mawhiang, land is more than a physical space for building houses or cultivating. It also means identity, culture and tradition. Their sacred forest reserve is where they perform their traditional and indigenous worship of the god of the *Sirdarship* (village chief). The forest reserve is also maintained by the traditional governing body under the *Sirdarship*. They believe in *basa*, the god of nature who safeguards them and brings good health and fortune. The villagers from Mawhiang reiterated the importance of spirituality as it relates to good health, community and good governance.



The village would not be considered prosperous by some standards, but it is rich in the variety of produce it cultivates in its fields – vegetables such as sweet potato, yam, cauliflower, cabbage, radish and squash, among others. Plantain and banana trees also proliferate, and every part of the tree including the trunk and flowers are used to cook up dishes unique to the region.

The culinary highlight of a trip to Mawhiang is the layered rice cake prepared by Kong Mardalin Kharsyntiew, using a traditional recipe of Pusyep, which she cleverly gave a modern twist. It is now so popular in the area that she has started receiving orders for these cakes for weddings. She prepares the cake by alternating layers of sweetened red and white rice meal in a pot. She then ties the pot securely with a muslin cloth and inverts it over another similarly sized pot filled with boiling water to steam for 20-30 minutes. When the cake has cooled, the muslin cloth is removed and the cake is now ready to be cut and eaten. This unique cake can have up to 10 layers and is quite festive with its alternating pink and white stripes.


When invited into a villager's home, one should remove one's shoes before entering the house, as is the custom. Any meal, snack or tea begins with the recitation of a silent prayer, much like saying grace. Even the interpreter may have difficulties in fully grasping what the locals have to say during a visit, since the people of Mawhiang speak a slightly different dialect of Khasi. These unique features of daily village life are what make a visit to Mawhiang an experience to remember.



LAYERED RICE CAKE

What to expect on a visit to Mawhiang:

- Visit to farms and the school garden
- Walk in a sacred forest
- Traditional dance
- Demonstration of indigenous handicrafts
- Local food



WHERE: Village Mawhiang, Meghalaya

DISTANCE : 50 km from Shillong

TRAVEL TIME: 1 ½ hours each way

HIGHLIGHT: Tasting Kong Mardalin Kharsyntiew's layered pink and white rice cake