

SEASONS OF LIFE AND SEASONS OF LAW: LAW, ANTHROPOLOGY, AND EATING BAMBOOSHOOT AND DOGMEAT

*Dolly Kikon**

with photographs by Mhademo Kikon

in conversation with the JLHR Editorial Team on her recent documentary Seasons of Life

We imagine Seasons of Life is much more than just fermented bambooshoot. If “Life” acts as a metaphor for the centrality of this delicacy, then “Seasons” could denote its vicissitudes—the climatic, economic, and social factors affecting the production of bambooshoots. Would we be correct in surmising so?

Dolly Kikon (DK): I chose to name my first film Seasons of Life due to the interconnectedness of human and plant life. It speaks of our dependence on bamboo and how it has sustained livelihoods, cuisines, and culture. Bamboo is integral to Naga village architecture. Bambooshoot is integral to traditional Naga cuisine. My documentary focuses on the lives of women who forage and ferment bambooshoot in Nagaland. Fermented bambooshoot is a delicacy as well as an everyday staple for many communities across Northeast India. It is an integral part of the food culture there and links the region to its Southeast Asian and East Asian neighbours. In Nagaland and its neighbouring states like Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Meghalaya, Sikkim, and Mizoram, bambooshoot is used in various forms: fresh, soaked in brine, and dried. As one of the protagonists in the documentary, Pithunglo, tells us, fermented bambooshoot is a vital spice for many indigenous communities in the Himalayan region. My documentary *Seasons of Life* follows Tsumungi, Pithunglo, and Yanchano, as they labour to forage and ferment tender bambooshoot, a food item cherished across several Himalayan households in South Asia.¹

How did you insert yourself into the field? There is indeed a great deal to learn from your negotiations with positionality, as someone from Nagaland who now lives in the West—the

* Dolly Kikon is Senior Lecturer at the School of Social and Political Sciences, Melbourne University, and the author of *Living with Oil and Coal: Resource Politics and Militarization in Northeast India* (The University of Washington Press 2019).

¹ For more details, see <http://www.dollykikon.com/seasons-of-life/>.

academic elsewhere where the geography of South Asia is imagined as a political construct. Where would you like to place yourself behind the visuals of the documentary?

DK: Seasons of Life is an extension on my work in Anthropology of Food, particularly fermented food. Food has always been my passion. While I conducted my ethnographic fieldwork for my doctoral work between 2009–2011 in Assam and Nagaland, I discovered food in variant ways and how they symbolized everyday human relations and evoked memories and sociality. My first attempt to make sense of food was a short essay I wrote titled “Tasty Transgressions: Food and Social Boundaries in the Foothills of Northeast India”. The hills and valleys in Northeast India are known for specific and distinct food produce which can be exhibited as an extension of its unique culture. The exchange between the hills and valleys appeals to the senses of taste, sight, and touch.

In relation to the documentary *Seasons of Life*, I wanted to venture out and try a different medium besides text/writing. I have been drawn to various forms, and this was a chance for me to experiment with different kinds of storytelling. Anthropology is a discipline that grounds itself in fieldwork, so I draw deeply from interviews and my engagement in the field. South Asia for me is a region that I engage with. It is not an imagination because violence is not imagined, neither is inequality or caste. In terms of my positionality, I am a feminist anthropologist from the Naga community. I come from the Lotha tribe. I am a Scheduled Tribe in India, a woman of colour, and indigenous outside India. I am not recognized as an Indian in Australia by the Indian diaspora because I don’t “look” Indian. I am called a chingchong baby in India. And as I continue to wonder where this chingchong baby country is, all these experiences place me in a good place to speak about caste/race/sexism.

How is ethnographic writing different from the documentary form in terms of textualizing fieldwork? Do videos reveal the presence and agencies of your subjects more unadulteratedly and directly, without the proxy of—say—the writer? As you hint while acknowledging your camera crew and post-production team, does film-making demand a greater degree of collective labour than writing? Finally, do you feel that as a writer you can stake a more legitimate and singular claim to the produced piece than as a film maker who borrows from the contribution of many specialized agents?

DK: I think about forms; storytelling as a form. From there, I deal with structures, and what is distinct between writing and filming is the speed at which we are absorbing the narrative. There is something very powerful about moving images and visuals that demands a mastery over techniques which include the storyboard. I am a Naga and I come from a very strong oral tradition. Since I was a child, the world of orality, story, imagination, and memory were stitched together. I did not grow up with a book full of stories. I grew with a mind full of stories, memorizing my ancestral tales, and then working on a language through which I was able to tell those stories. Without arming myself with the wisdom of my ancestors, who left with me this strong storytelling gift,

I could not do what I am doing today. For example, switching from writing to documentary making, to working with artists to turn my ethnography into theatre performances.²

I am writing a book on fermentation, so look out for that! The documentary story is a chapter in the book. So there you go, your imagination of the documentary as a book is indeed a real thing. As a filmmaker, the story rests with me. I take responsibility for the script, managing the team, the budget, and many other things. I directed the shots, selected the location, and realized how much work it takes to make a film. And I am grateful for the amazing team who worked with me.

Seasons of Life celebrates the diversity and flexibility of ethnographic methodologies. It has been an extension of my journey into understanding food cultures. Research work is about and should be about collaboration. Just like the documentary making process, there is an entire labour force involved in doing fieldwork and writing a book/chapter. We do work with several people to make our fieldwork possible, though some researchers hardly acknowledge them. This “local” support is often overlooked as mere “services”. Writing and getting our work published is also a collaborative work that involves publishers, reviewers, designers, printers, and many more. Research and writing have always been collaborative.

Before your plunge into academia, you were a practising lawyer at the Gauhati High Court. Did your training as a lawyer help you in breaking into the Western academy or had the routineness of law numbed your anthropological instincts, that is, your “sociological imagination” to put in C. Wright Mills’ words? What can legal writing learn from anthropological writing, and is there anything that anthropology can gain from the juridical methods of collecting evidence and constructing narratives in the courtroom?

DK: I stopped being a practising lawyer but I never gave up my engagement with human rights advocacy or reflecting on what constitutes justice and what constitutional rights mean to us. This is central in my first book, *Living with Oil and Coal*, where I engage with constitutional guarantees and also extra-constitutional delegations like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958). The routineness of law is a fascinating subject, and in Anthropology it is the everydayness of these legal experiences that allow us to examine how violence and inequality become mundane and normal.

My legal training allows me to be fascinated with issues of ethics, boundaries, values, and how we try to instil law and order. My training in anthropology allows me to connect with a larger world out there; from the plant world (understanding colonization through laws and regulations on plants), to the animal (prohibitions, animal rights, and conservation) and the spirit world (occult and witchcraft). These

² To engage with my non-writing projects, check out, www.dollykikon.com/projects.

Seasons of Life and Seasons of Law

*"Our ancestors foraged for Bambooshoot. They traded Bambooshoot
and fed it to us too...This is how we were brought up"*

A FILM BY
DOLLY KIKON



SEASONS OF LIFE

FORAGING AND FERMENTING BAMBOOSHOOT DURING CEASEFIRE

PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY DOLLY KIKON
CINEMATOGRAPHY P. MENANGNICHET AND MHADEMO KIKON
EDITING HIRAK JYOTI PATHAK
SOUND TRIHANGKU LAHKAR
MUSIC REN MERRY



trainings in my life have prepared me for a fun-packed career in research and engagement. Please do let me add that I graduated with History honours as an undergraduate student. So there you have it. I am armed with a historical-legal-ethnographic training which forces me to pay close attention to the world around us. For example, it is these combined trainings that allow me to write about things such as the social life of vernacular human rights culture like my essay, "Terrifying Picnics, Vernacular Human Rights, Cosmos Flowers".³ Witnessing everyday experiences of human rights activities in Northeast India has also helped me to understand the importance of engaging with human rights and justice in militarized societies in India and beyond. Human rights are not assured only in the annals of law or the courtrooms. The prevalence of Armed Forces Special Powers Act⁴ for more than half a century means that what is law/justice/rights is often different for the state agencies and the community on the ground.

Women seem to feature predominantly in the bambooshoot enterprise. However, sociological insights of late have assailed the romanticized notions of gender-egalitarianism in the matrilineal societies of the Northeast. We have come to realize that when contested by globalization and incursions from mainstream India, indigenous matriliney gets circumscribed by severely subordinating forms of patriarchy. Has the production of bambooshoot followed a similar trajectory? How have globalisation and tourism interacted with this industry, and how has this played out on the register of gender?

DK: The notions of gender justice in Northeast India are indeed romanticized and a far cry from reality. Except a handful, indigenous tribes are predominantly patriarchal to the core. Even for tribes that are matrilineal, a little probe would reveal how men still hold access to and control of property. The misconception of a gender egalitarian society amongst the Northeast communities is perpetuated from within as well as without.

A majority of the state legislatures in the region do not have even a single woman MLA. The women's reservation protests in Nagaland in 2017 furthered the patriarchal agenda to preserve power and decision-making authority for men only. In 2017, I remember furiously writing,

Like many nationalist societies around the world, the issue of gender justice and rights have remained marginalised for a long time... Naga male bodies have acquired the language of justice to retain the order of Naga male heritage and patrimony.⁵

³ Dolly Kikon, 'Terrifying Picnics, Vernacular Human Rights, Cosmos Flowers: Ethnography about Militarized Cultures in Northeast India' (2017) 1(1) *E-Journal of the Indian Sociological Society* 48.

⁴ See Dolly Kikon, 'The Predicament of Justice: Fifty Years of Armed Forces Special Powers Act in India' (2009) 17(3) *Contemporary South Asia* 271.

⁵ Dolly Kikon, 'Gender Justice in Naga Society – Naga Feminist Reflections' (*Raiot*, 22 February 2017) <<https://www.raiot.in/gender-justice-in-naga-society-naga-feminist-reflections/>>.

In the last three years, little has changed since then. We have not made any progress in any of the states in regard to the constitutional guarantee of women's reservation. We deny women political power under the guise of protections of customary law.

Globalization and market economy extrapolate gender-based violence as well as other challenges. The three women in my documentary—Tsumungi, Pithunglo, and Yanchano—all support their household incomes. They literally run their families with little or no support from outside. Foraging, fermenting, and selling bamboo shoots have become women-driven enterprises. However, these processes are all self-driven without government assistance for storage, market linkages, transport and sale. None of the three women I interviewed benefited from any of these.

Since we have raked up culinary sensibilities, we cannot help talking about two relatively recent films: Amis and Axone. Amis is an Assamese film which chronicles the burgeoning relationship between a doctoral student in gastronomic anthropology and a married paediatrician. The foreclosed desire of sexual gratification in their illicit relationship vents out as lust for forbidden meats. They begin with country chicken and then venture into more stigmatized foods like beetles and bats, until the structure of desire turns against their own bodies and they cannibalistically start eating each other. In a sense, this is a film about subverting the taboos about desire and culinary preferences—especially those foisted repressively. Axone, on the other hand, is mostly catered to the outsider's gaze; the film is less about what people in the Northeast eat than what others think of Northeasterners' food habits. Tell us something more about the imperialistic politics of food.

DK: *Aamis* and *Axone* are two different films for me. Food is as real as it gets in our lives. Ask a Dalit or a tribal from Nagaland whether food is a metaphor and they will laugh at us. For tribal people and Dalits, their humiliation and the violence are often about what they eat. Or ask a Muslim whether beef is a metaphor, it surely is not. Coming to your question about what constitutes food, not food, forbidden food etc. are categories laid down by human beings themselves. While the boundaries of food and desire is explored in *Aamis* (an excellent film which I really enjoyed watching), racism and the migration experience is showcased in *Axone*.

My own work on food from my essay “Fermenting Modernity: Putting Akhuni on the Nation's Table in India”⁶ to “Tasty Transgressions”⁷ and “Making Pickles during Ceasefire”⁸ showcase how we are keenly aware about the importance of food in our lives. Food is deeply political, and as much as we disguise it with terms

⁶ Dolly Kikon, ‘Fermenting Modernity: Putting *Akhuni* on the Nation's Table in India’ (2015) 38(2) *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 320.

⁷ Dolly Kikon, ‘Tasty Transgressions: Food and Social Boundaries in the Foothills of Northeast India’ (2013) 54 *Anthropology News* 15.

⁸ Dolly Kikon, ‘Making Pickles During a Ceasefire’ (2015) 50(9) *Economic and Political Weekly* 74.



like taboo/stigma/prohibition/ban/transgression, the more apparent it becomes how dominant communities and groups dictate what certain groups can/cannot eat. Food is so political in India that the increasing criminalization of certain food practices on the basis of religion, morality, compassion, or based on civilizational ground needs to be interrogated.

Recently, Nagaland banned the sale of dog-meat. Do you see this as another incident of legally legitimating the stigmatization of certain culinary choices—especially amidst the prevalent volatility of beef nationalism in India—or is this interdiction borne out of genuine animal-rights concerns?

DK: This is an excellent question. Everyday practices of food shaming and humiliation in India is rooted in a caste logic. So, engaging with food cultures in India also means reflecting on the prevailing casteism and racism in the country. What defines what is safe or hygienic? Paneer or akhuni? Dog meat or chicken? Is beef or pork inedible because it is sacred/taboo for particular religious groups? So, as I write in my recent essay “The politics of dog meat ban in Nagaland”,⁹ everyday food choices reveal broader issues of caste violence and nationalism in India. This is a topic I have earlier dealt with too.¹⁰ For me, the issue of animal rights and care in India is entangled with caste and class politics. Unlike the beef issue, the dog meat is about the civilizational and savagery discourse. That is the reason why the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) Regulation, 2011 has been invoked to note how dog meat is not safe for human consumption. This is not the case with cow meat.

Perhaps this is good note to end. When we say that JLHR will serve as a platform for voices from South Asia, we are aware of the historical silences that we must reckon with. The Northeast continues to remain absent from the legal discourse of India. For instance, our imagination of legal pluralism stretches only to religious and customary laws but not tribal laws. I doubt if any top law-school in the country teaches a course on indigenous jurisprudence or tribal laws. As someone who has seen both the bar and academy, how can modest student-led ventures like ours aspire to make sustainable and long-lasting changes in our bureaucratized institutions? Is legal anthropology a way to illuminate what law has chosen to ignore or will it trap indigenous juridico-legal cosmologies in the persistent divide between core-law subjects that constitute the inside and the interdisciplinary soft-law fields that cluster the outside?

DK: Congratulations on this initiative. The fact that you are aware of the existing challenges both in terms of legal pluralism and the dominant discourse in India shows

⁹ Dolly Kikon, ‘The Politics of Dog Meat Ban in Nagaland’ (*Frontline*, 14 August 2020) <<https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/the-politics-of-dog-meat-ban-in-nagaland/article32082833.ece>>.

¹⁰ Dolly Kikon, ‘Barking up the Wrong Tree: Why the Debate on Eating Dog Meat in India (and Globally) is Hypocritical’ (*Scroll.in*, 3 September 2017) <<https://scroll.in/article/849123/barking-up-the-wrong-tree-why-the-debate-on-eating-dog-meat-in-india-and-globally-is-hypocritical>>.

the integrity of this project. The questions you raise about disciplinary boundaries of law as profession, anthropology, and jurisprudence stem from how knowledge and practice are framed in our lives. Human beings shape what ought to be considered as intellectual and rational knowledge, or what is justice and rights. All practices and disciplines tend to obscure language (what is known as high theory) to maintain and reiterate power. If we are unable to break the boundaries of disciplines and reach out in solidarity as anthropologists, poets, lawyers, jurists, and indigenous elders, what good is all these texts, arguments, high theory? We are wasting our time because we only validify subjugation and inequality.