

Food Meaning and Migrant Identity: A Sociological Analysis of Chakma Ritual Cuisine through the FMD Framework

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Abstract:

This study explores how the migrated Chakma community in New Town, Kolkata, preserves cultural identity and resists acculturation through ceremonial food practices. Drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork and qualitative interviews with forty respondents, it interprets the meanings of traditional dishes such as Pajon, Hebang, and Sidol-based curries through the Food Meaning Dimensions (FMD) framework (Aktaş-Polat & Polat, 2020). The analysis situates food as a “total social fact” that links ritual, memory, and adaptation. Findings reveal that food serves three sociological functions: it embodies consumption as moral and ecological practice, transfer as intergenerational pedagogy especially through women’s labor and identity as symbolic resistance in urban diaspora. Despite migration-induced constraints, the Chakmas practice what this paper terms adaptive conservation, maintaining cultural essence through flexible innovation. Through the lens of Bourdieu’s cultural capital, Mead’s symbolic interactionism, and Appadurai’s gastro-politics, the research argues that food operates as a living archive of belonging, transforming displacement into resilience and everyday cooking into a subtle act of cultural continuity.

Keywords: Chakma community, food and identity, adaptive conservation, diaspora, Food Meaning Dimensions (FMD).

Introduction:

Food, for the Chakma community, is more than sustenance it is memory, identity, and moral geography. For a people marked by displacement, migration, and cultural negotiation, food operates as both a repository of history and a symbolic form of resistance. The Chakmas, one of the oldest Buddhist tribes of South and Southeast Asia, trace their ancestral homeland to the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of present-day Bangladesh, where they lived as agriculturists and forest dwellers for centuries. Historically, they were organized under their own kings and governed autonomously until the British annexation of 1860, when the region was brought under the Chittagong Hill Tracts Manual of 1900, a colonial safeguard restricting non-tribal settlement and protecting indigenous land rights (Jyoti Bikash Chakma, 2013; Kharat, 2003).

However, the politics of partition and postcolonial state formation turned this once-protected space into a site of exploitation and exile. The 1947 Partition of India dealt a major blow to the Chakmas, as the Buddhist-majority CHT was ceded to Pakistan despite their clear ethnic and religious distinction from the Bengali Muslim population (Jyoti Bikash Chakma, 2013). This historical decision initiated a long trajectory of marginalization. Successive governments in East Pakistan and later Bangladesh implemented assimilationist and militarized policies most notably the construction of the Kaptai Dam (1960–1963), which submerged vast tracts of

Chakma farmland and displaced nearly 100,000 people without adequate rehabilitation (Kharat, 2003). These policies not only uprooted their material existence but also destabilized their cultural and spiritual worlds, forcing thousands to migrate to India, especially to Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Assam, and later, to urban regions like Kolkata.

Today, the Chakmas' presence in New Town, Kolkata, represents a quieter yet equally profound phase of their migration story. Here, amid the rapid urbanization of a metropolitan landscape, they sustain fragments of their collective self through the everyday practice of food. Ritual dishes such as Pajon, Hebang, and Sidol-based curries, prepared during Biju, Buddha Purnima, and life-cycle rituals, embody continuity and adaptation a "culinary bridge" linking displaced pasts to uncertain presents. These foods carry within them not only the ecological wisdom of hill cultivation but also moral narratives of loss and belonging.

This study, therefore, pursues two interconnected objectives:

1. To analyze how specific Chakma ceremonial foods sustain socio-religious rituals and collective identity among Kolkata-based migrants.
2. To interpret these practices through the Food Meaning Dimensions (FMD) framework examining how consumption, transfer, and identity interact in the context of migration and urban adaptation.

Viewed sociologically, food among the Chakmas becomes a "total social fact" in the Maussian sense an act through which kinship, religion, and ecology intersect. Drawing on symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934), Bourdieu's (1984) notion of cultural capital, and Appadurai's (1981) concept of gastro-politics, this paper situates the Chakma culinary world within the broader politics of identity and survival. As the Chakmas negotiate their space within Kolkata's multicultural milieu, their ritual foods emerge as acts of cultural resilience a quiet defiance against erasure, where every taste reclaims a fragment of history.

Review of Literature:

Food has long been treated as a nexus where biology, emotion, and society converge. Anthropologists and sociologists agree that food practices not only satisfy hunger but also encode systems of meaning (Mennell, 2005; Mintz & Du Bois, 2002). The Food Meaning Dimensions (FMD) framework proposed by Aktaş-Polat and Polat (2020) identifies three interrelated semantic fields consumption, transfer, and identity that explain how food operates simultaneously as material, communicative, and symbolic practice. Within this model, consumption connects to pleasure, health, and socialization; transfer represents the emotional and cultural conveyance of values through food; and identity highlights the capacity of culinary practices to articulate belonging, status, and differentiation. The Chakma case exemplifies these dimensions vividly. In their daily and ceremonial foodways, the Chakmas do not merely "eat" but perform identity expressing social relationships and collective histories through what, how, and with whom they eat. The ritualistic use of Sidol (fermented fish paste), the bamboo-steamed Hebang, and the communal dish Pajon (multi-vegetable medley) reveal how symbolic continuity is enacted through taste, texture, and setting.

Post-migration life in Kolkata has forced Chakma households to modify their ancestral recipes because of urban constraints, legal bans on rice-wine brewing, and limited access to forest produce. Yet, these modifications illustrate not erosion but “adaptive conservation” a dynamic negotiation between assimilation and resistance. As Ashis Nandy (2004) notes, diasporic cooks often make “compromises” to cope with scarcity, substituting ingredients while retaining symbolic essence. For example, the Kolkata version of Pajon uses market-bought greens instead of foraged ones but retains its ritual function at Biju and wedding feasts. Sociologically, such adaptation mirrors what Stajčić (2013) calls the “cultural elasticity” of food, where recipes serve as vehicles of negotiation between homeland memory and host-culture influence. In diaspora contexts, food functions as “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1984) and a moral vocabulary of belonging, even when recipes evolve. Chakma community kitchens during Buddha Purnima or Biju festivals transform domestic acts into collective rituals of identity performance, allowing younger generations to participate in continuity even as their daily diets align more with Bengali cuisine.

Ritual food preparation, presentation, and offering retain powerful semiotic value within the Chakma community. Serving food on banana leaves, placing it on bamboo Mejang tables, or offering it to monks and ancestors during Saptahik Kriya ceremonies situates eating within cosmological and ethical orders. Such practices exemplify what Appadurai (1981) calls “gastro-politics” the strategic use of food to negotiate social hierarchy, purity, and belonging. Within Chakma society, women occupy the central role in preserving these culinary rites, embodying what Beardsworth and Keil (2002) call the “gendered labor of tradition.” Preparing and serving ritual food becomes a performative act through which women assert continuity, authority, and moral stewardship. The persistence of these roles amid migration challenges mainstream narratives of acculturation, aligning instead with Williams-Forson’s (2006) insight that food can serve as a medium of both cultural defence and autonomy.

By aligning Chakma ethnographic material with the FMD framework, this research bridges empirical and theoretical gaps. Consumption here involves not only the sensory pleasure of indigenous dishes but also their ethical and ecological dimensions minimal oil, seasonal produce, and eco-friendly serving methods. Transfer refers to the intergenerational transmission of recipes and ritual know-how, often conducted through embodied learning during communal feasts. Identity encompasses the symbolic use of taste, smell, and preparation techniques to demarcate the Chakma self from the Bengali other while coexisting within shared urban spaces. These three vectors reflect how food mediates the tension between integration and distinctiveness, confirming Bailey’s (2017) observation that migrant cuisine functions as a “portable homeland.” The Chakma case contributes to global food-migration debates by showing how diasporic minorities use culinary creativity not merely to survive but to re-inscribe cultural autonomy within the multicultural city.

The Chakma example extends existing theory by proposing “adaptive conservation” as a conceptual bridge between acculturation and resistance. Unlike pure assimilation or rigid traditionalism, adaptive conservation highlights incremental adjustments that preserve symbolic cores while embracing material change. It recognizes that identity continuity depends less on the exact reproduction of ancestral ingredients than on the re-enactment of meaning

through food practices. This insight resonates with Murcott (2019), who argues that food defines the boundaries of cultural systems yet allows space for reinterpretation. Through this lens, the Chakma diaspora illustrates how taste becomes testimony a living archive of collective memory, migration, and resilience.

Methodological Framework:

The present study employs a qualitative ethnographic design grounded in interpretive sociology to explore how ceremonial food practices among the migrated Chakma community in Kolkata preserve identity and resist acculturation. Food is approached as a symbolic and sensory system a means through which belonging and continuity are expressed. The research draws conceptually on the Food Meaning Dimensions (FMD) framework (Aktaş-Polat & Polat, 2020), which situates food meanings within consumption, transfer, and identity. Fieldwork was carried out between April and June 2025 in Chakma-dominated localities of New Town, Kolkata, where many Chakma families relocated from the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh during the late twentieth century and other parts of India (e.g., Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura etc.). The site represents a vibrant intersection of migration, urbanization, and cultural adaptation, where traditional Chakma dishes like Pajon, Hebang, and Sidol-based curries are re-created in urban kitchens.

Using purposive and snowball sampling, forty participants were selected ten elders, fifteen middle-aged adults, and fifteen youths ensuring diversity in gender, occupation, and ritual participation. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and participant observation during festivals such as Biju and Buddha Purnima. Interviews (40–60 minutes) explored themes of food memory, adaptation, and generational transmission. Observation documented cooking processes, serving methods, and social meanings, including the continued use of banana leaves and bamboo Mejang tables. Photographs and detailed field notes complemented these records. Data were thematically coded and interpreted through the FMD triad consumption (sensory pleasure), transfer (intergenerational learning), and identity (symbolic resistance). Reflexive notes ensured contextual interpretation following Geertz’s (1973) “thick description.” Ethical protocols included informed consent, pseudonym use, and cultural sensitivity, especially during sacred food offerings. This methodological framework highlights how the Chakmas of New Town practice adaptive conservation, creatively maintaining cultural symbolism within the urban milieu.

Acknowledgment of AI Assistance: The author acknowledges the limited use of OpenAI’s ChatGPT (GPT-5, 2025) for linguistic refinement, formatting, and reference checking. The conceptualization, field data collection, analysis, and interpretation presented in this paper are entirely the author’s own. No generative AI was used to produce primary content or analytical arguments.

Results and Discussion:

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 40)

Variable	Category	Key Observation
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Gender	Male – 32.5% / Female – 67.5%	Women dominate ritual cooking and food-related practices.
Age Group (years)	1–20: 17.5% / 21–40: 50% / 41–60: 22.5% / 61+: 10%	Majority belong to the active working generation.
Education	Secondary & below – 27.5% / Higher secondary & above – 72.5%	High literacy and urban educational integration.
Occupation	Housewife – 35% / Service – 27.5% / Student – 22.5% / Others – 15%	Mix of domestic and urban professional roles.
Migration Status	First-generation migrants – 72.5% / Kolkata-born – 27.5%	Migration experience central to cultural adaptation.
Place of Origin	Mizoram – 20% / Arunachal – 28% / Tripura – 18% / CHT (Bangladesh) – 10% / Others – 24%	Diverse origins across Northeast India and Bangladesh.
Religion	Buddhist – 100%	Religious homogeneity sustains ritual food symbolism.
Marital Status	Married – 57.5% / Single – 40% / Widow – 2.5%	Family life anchors ceremonial participation.
Earning Members per Family	0–1: 57.5% / 2–3: 42.5%	Mostly single-income households.
Person Responsible for Ritual Cooking	Female – 30% / Male – 20% / Both – 50%	Shared gender roles emerging in ritual food preparation.

Source: Primary field work

The study covered 40 Chakma respondents residing in Chakma-dominated areas of New Town, Kolkata. The sample reflected a balanced representation across gender and age, though women (67.5%) outnumbered men, highlighting their central role in household and ritual food preparation. The majority (50%) of respondents were aged 21–40 years, forming the active generation responsible for sustaining both domestic and community-level cultural practices. Educational attainment was generally high: about 70% had completed higher secondary or above, indicating successful integration into the urban educational system. Occupations were diverse 35% housewives, 27.5% in service, and 22.5% students revealing a mix of traditional domestic roles and urban employment.

Migration data showed that 72.5% were first-generation migrants from Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, and the Chittagong Hill Tracts, while the rest were Kolkata-born second-

generation Chakmas. All respondents identified as Buddhist, confirming strong religious homogeneity and cultural continuity. Most families were single-income households (57.5%), reflecting moderate economic vulnerability but high community interdependence. Regarding ritual practices, women (30%) remained the main custodians of ceremonial cooking, though 50% reported shared gender participation, signalling gradual change in domestic roles. Overall, the profile reveals a young, educated, and adaptive community maintaining its ritual traditions amidst urban pressures. The socio-demographic composition underscores the interplay between migration, gender, and cultural resilience, forming the foundation for understanding Chakma foodways as a site of both continuity and adaptation.

Thematic Analysis: After socio-demographic profile, the analysis was organized around four interrelated themes corresponding to the interview questions: Traditional Food Practices and Rituals, Impact of Migration on Food Practices, Cultural Hybridity and Identity Transformation, and Social and Community Engagement. Across these themes, Chakma respondents in New Town, Kolkata reveal how ceremonial food is a language of belonging, negotiation, and adaptation. Their experiences are interpreted through the Food Meaning Dimensions (FMD) model by Aktaş-Polat and Polat (2020), which examines food as a composite of consumption, transfer, and identity. Supporting perspectives from symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934), cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984), gastro-politics (Appadurai, 1981), and structuration (Giddens, 1984) illuminate how taste becomes both social expression and symbolic resistance in diasporic life.

For Chakmas in Kolkata, food practices are deeply ritualized and act as bridges between the sacred and the everyday. Dr. Mrinal Chakma (63) described, “During Biju, our table becomes a temple every item carries memory.” He elaborated on preparing Pajon, a dish of mixed vegetables representing the unity of life, and Hebang, fish steamed in banana leaves, as indispensable during both festive and funerary occasions. Such narratives reflect Geertz’s (1973) thick description of culture: food is not merely eaten but performed, layered with moral, ecological, and symbolic meanings. In the Chakma context, dishes symbolize cyclical life from Biju marking renewal, to the Saptahik Kriya rituals of remembrance for the deceased. Suchorita Chakma (62) emphasized that during Buddha Purnima, she prepares Sidol-based curry “to please both ancestors and guests.” The FMD model’s consumption dimension is evident here eating is not just material nourishment but an embodied act of moral and spiritual communion (Aktaş-Polat & Polat, 2020). When asked about responsibility for cooking, Sakuntala Chakma (65) explained:

“In our house, cooking for rituals is women’s duty. Men can help cut bamboo or fetch banana leaves, but the hand that mixes the Sidol must know prayer.”

This gendered division resonates with Beardsworth and Keil’s (2002) idea of foodwork as moral labor, linking women’s domestic acts with cultural reproduction.

However, generational shifts are visible. Arjit Chakma (21), a student, proudly said, “I can cook Pajon now. My mother insists every son should know it otherwise, how will our taste survive?” His comment indicates an emergent gender egalitarianism in ritual cooking. The transfer dimension of the FMD model thus manifests intergenerationally, as culinary

knowledge passes from women elders to both sons and daughters. Sudipta Dewan (59) observed that the younger generation uses modern cookware but keeps symbolic gestures intact “Even if we use gas stoves, we still cook Hebang inside banana leaves.” This continuity within change epitomizes what this research terms adaptive conservation retaining symbolic meaning while adjusting practice. Food taboos also structure ritual purity. Deyon Chakma (49) noted: “During funerals, no meat is allowed for a week. We eat only boiled rice and salt it reminds us life is fragile.” Such observances express Durkheim’s (1912/1995) idea of the sacred and the profane where food acts as a moral boundary reinforcing collective conscience. For all respondents, food remains the core idiom of being Chakma. Joyshree Chakma (26) said, “When I smell Sidol, I feel my identity it’s not just food; it’s us.” This deep emotional resonance situates Chakma cuisine within the FMD’s identity domain, where taste encodes ethnicity, spirituality, and belonging.

Migration from the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh to Kolkata has profoundly transformed food practices. Many respondents spoke of the struggle to maintain authenticity amid urban scarcity. Nitulmoni Chakma (58) lamented, “We don’t get our forest greens here. We replace them with spinach or bottle gourd the soul is same, but taste changes.” Such substitutions illustrate what Giddens (1984) described as the duality of structure: individuals reproduce culture within constraints, maintaining symbolic forms through practical adaptation. Dibakar Chakma (61) explained, “Earlier, we brewed rice wine for Biju. Now it’s banned, so we make sweet fruit juice instead same ritual, different drink.” His statement demonstrates the transformation of material forms while preserving moral essence, embodying the FMD’s transfer logic continuity through modification. Migration also disrupted collective cooking patterns. Aishwairya Chakma (23) observed, “Back home, the whole village cooked together. Here in New Town, everyone cooks in their own flat.” This loss of communal rhythm reflects what Bauman (2000) calls liquid modernity fragmented togetherness in urban settings.

However, resistance persists through ritual gatherings. Arkid Chakma (46) described how families organize collective Biju Bhoj in community halls: “We rent a place, each family brings one dish we mix, eat, and sing. It feels like home again.” This re-creation of collectivity through food-sharing echoes Simmel’s (1997) notion of meals as moral events, reinforcing solidarity in the diaspora. The substitution of ingredients also carries symbolic negotiation. Silton Chakma (25) said, “We mix Bengali vegetables but still add Sidol that smell keeps us Chakma.” Here, hybridity becomes identity work: adaptation without erasure. The consumption and identity dimensions intersect transforming necessity into symbolic resilience.

For elders like Dr. Mrinal Chakma, adaptation carries nostalgia. He recalled: “In my youth, we roasted pork in bamboo the forest gave flavor. Now gas cooking is convenient but lacks spirit.” His sentiment resonates with Mintz and Du Bois’s (2002) idea of food memory as a form of cultural time-travel. Food substitutes material loss with sensory remembrance, producing what Appadurai (1981) termed gastro-politics a politics of taste asserting heritage amid modernity.

Urban life in Kolkata fosters cross-cultural exchanges, particularly between Chakma and Bengali cuisines. Respondents openly discussed how these interactions reshape tastes and identities. Deyon Chakma (49) said, “My children love Bengali mishti with our Biju feast. It’s strange but beautiful sweet after spicy.” This illustrates a culinary hybridity that is neither

assimilation nor rejection but what Homi Bhabha (1994) would call a third space of negotiation. Sakuntala Chakma (65) explained, “We now make ‘Hebang pulao’ mixing Bengali rice style with our bamboo cooking.” This fusion dish, blending textures and techniques, demonstrates what Aktaş-Polat and Polat (2020) classify as the consumption dimension’s creative adaptation. Arjit Chakma (21) reflected a younger perspective: “I eat momo, pizza, but during Biju, I want only Pajon. That’s when I feel I belong.” His statement encapsulates dual identity global in taste, local in emotion. Bourdieu’s (1984) idea of cultural capital applies here: knowledge of traditional cuisine becomes symbolic prestige, a heritage currency in multicultural Kolkata.

However, Sudipta Dewan (59) warned of generational drift: “Many youths now skip rituals, they order food online. They forget every dish has a story.” Her observation signals what Putnam (2000) might call a decline in social capital where digital convenience weakens communal participation. Yet, countercurrents of revival emerge through education and cultural programs. Joyshree Chakma (26) described participating in online food campaigns promoting Chakma cuisine: “We post photos, recipes, and stories on Instagram. It makes us proud.” Such efforts mirror Castells’ (2004) concept of networked identity, where digital spaces reimagine belonging. Interactions with non-Chakmas also stimulate cultural curiosity. Aishwairya Chakma (23) recalled, “My Bengali friend once asked about Sidol. When she tasted it, she said strong smell, but feels pure!” Her story highlights how difference becomes dialogue rather than exclusion. Through such encounters, food transcends ethnicity, performing what Giddens (1991) terms reflexive identity selfhood constructed through ongoing negotiation.

At the community level, food serves as a powerful unifier. Dibakar Chakma (61) noted that the Chakma Welfare Society of Kolkata now organizes annual Biju Food Fairs, showcasing indigenous recipes to non-Chakma audiences:

“We want people to know our food is not just curry it’s culture, history, religion.”

This aligns with Durkheim’s (1912/1995) concept of collective effervescence ritual gatherings renewing solidarity through shared emotion. Mrinal Chakma (63) added, “When Bengalis or Marwaris taste our Hebang, they see we are not outsiders. Food speaks better than politics.” His statement resonates with Appadurai’s (1981) gastro-politics: food becomes diplomacy, mediating inclusion in Kolkata’s multicultural society. Female respondents highlighted community kitchens as spaces of empowerment. Suchorita Chakma (62) explained, “Cooking together gives us strength we talk, sing, plan. It is our social work.” This aligns with feminist ethnographies that view culinary labor as collective agency (Counihan & Kaplan, 1998).

Comparative perspectives emerged when Sakuntala Chakma (65) compared Kolkata with Tripura:

“There, we still grow our own bamboo shoots. Here, everything is bought but unity is stronger. Maybe distance makes us closer.”

Such reflections affirm Bourdieu’s (1984) idea of habitus that material constraints reshape but do not dissolve social dispositions. Migration produces new modes of belonging, where ritual food practices are recalibrated for urban survival. Community digitalization further expands

cultural preservation. Joyshree and Aishwairya Chakma reported following Facebook pages like “Chakma Cuisine Kolkata” and “Hill Taste of Bengal” to share recipes and event updates. These online initiatives represent the transfer aspect of the FMD framework in a modern register knowledge transmission through digital kinship. Respondents also voiced aspirations for wider recognition. Silton Chakma (25) expressed:

“We want our food in Kolkata’s multicultural festivals not hidden in our homes.”

This reflects a shift from private preservation to public representation, transforming food into cultural advocacy. It parallels what Featherstone (1991) calls aestheticization of everyday life, where marginalized cuisines gain symbolic capital through visibility.

Across narratives, the Chakma diaspora’s foodways reveal an intricate sociological pattern where consumption, transfer, and identity (Aktaş-Polat & Polat, 2020) interact to sustain community resilience.

- Consumption: Beyond biological need, food expresses ethics, ecology, and memory. Ritual meals like Pajon and Hebang embody care, unity, and harmony with nature.
- Transfer: Women and elders act as cultural transmitters, teaching recipes and taboos that transform cooking into pedagogy. Digital spaces now extend this role.
- Identity: Through adaptation, substitution, and hybridity, Chakma cuisine redefines belonging creating an “edible archive” of migration, resistance, and creativity.

Sociologically, this reflects Mead’s (1934) symbolic interactionism meanings arise in shared practice; Giddens’ (1984) structuration traditions reinterpreted through agency; and Bourdieu’s (1984) cultural capital heritage as distinction. In the moral economy of the diaspora, taste becomes testimony. Every bowl of Sidol or leaf of Hebang is a declaration: we are still here.

Conclusion:

This study has explored how the Chakma community in New Town, Kolkata, negotiates cultural continuity through the ritual language of food. What appears as an ordinary act of cooking and eating emerges, upon closer reflection, as a profound social statement an effort to sustain identity, belonging, and spirituality in a context shaped by migration and modernity. Traditional dishes such as Pajon, Hebang, and Sidol-based curries reveal how food practices operate within the intertwined dimensions of consumption, transfer, and identity (Aktaş-Polat & Polat, 2020). These foods embody what Mauss once described as “total social facts,” uniting kinship, religion, and ecology into a living moral economy.

For the Chakmas, ritual food preparation is both a cultural archive and a narrative of adaptation. As women transmit ancestral recipes and symbolic meanings to younger generations, and as urban-born youths reinvent these traditions within the rhythms of city life, food becomes the most enduring bridge between homeland memory and diaspora experience. This process of adaptive conservation where symbolic essence is preserved even when material forms change illustrates how culture lives through transformation rather than in opposition to it. By grounding everyday foodways within the Food Meaning Dimensions model and broader sociological theories from Mead’s symbolic interactionism to Bourdieu’s cultural capital the

study shows that food is not merely a remnant of the past but an instrument of cultural resilience. In every ritual meal shared, the Chakmas reaffirm that continuity is not the refusal of change, but the art of remembering through adaptation.

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