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SACRED ECOLOGY AND RITUAL PRACTICES OF THE THADOU KUKIS OF MANIPUR

Abstract

The Thadou Kuki society's reverence for nature is reflected in the sacred space it occupies in the society as also in the accompanying rituals attributed to it. Besides the agricultural rituals, the primeval religion, mythologies and folklores reflect their worldview and close attachment to nature. The study deals with the intersection of traditional religion, culture and the ecology in the practice of shifting cultivation by analysing the folk narratives and approaching these issues through the ethnographic and socio-linguistic lenses. In doing so, it explores the following questions: What kind of power relation and meanings does the social discourse between humans and spirits portray? What does it reflect about the human-land relationships, human and non-human relations and therefore, land and identity relationships in the society? The curtailment of shifting cultivation via the various forest laws of the state and the advent of Christianity has impacted the knowledge systems of the community; thereby altering Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and ushering in changes in the community.

Keywords: *Sacred Ecology; Ritual; Folk Narratives; Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK); Religion.*

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Introduction

Shifting cultivation is deeply rooted in the Kuki psyche, having evolved through generations, and being rooted in customs, belief and folklore. It influences the community's mindset and the cultural ethos of its agrarian society. This is evident from the various nature-based ceremonies and the accompanying rituals observed by them during the process of cultivation. They have been given due respect and appreciation from the dwellers for it is the provider of their sustenance and livelihood. Their traditional way of living and

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the tribal mindset have given them respect for environment (Sitlhou 2011: 314). Being an agricultural society, they are known to weave around their soil, traditional legends, belief system, and mystical values, thereby transforming the soil from a merely physical entity into a culturally determined object. They revere nature and made it occupy a sacred space in their worldview and institutions. This is evident in their agricultural rituals, primeval religion, mythologies, legends etc. To them, the landscape is a culturally complex site in which the natural world and human practice, conceptual and material are dynamically linked and constantly interacting.

As given in the abstract, the study deals with the intersection of traditional religion, culture and the ecology in the practice of shifting cultivation by analysing the folk narratives and approaching these issues through the ethnographic and socio-linguistic lenses. In doing so, it explores the following questions: What kind of power relation and meanings does the social discourse between humans and spirits portray? What does it reflect about the human-land relationships, human and non-human relations and therefore, land and identity relationships in the society? The curtailment of shifting cultivation via the various forest laws of the state and the advent of Christianity had impact on the knowledge systems of the community; thereby altering Traditional Ecological Knowledge and ushering in changes in the community.

The Context and the Methodology

'Kuki' refers to an ethnic group spread out in a non-contiguous region in Northeast India, Northwest Burma, and the Chittagong Hill tracts in Bangladesh (Sitlhou 2011: 54). The origin of the word Kuki, first appears in Bengal in the writing of Rawlins entitled 'Cucis or mountaineers of Tipra' in Asiatic Researches in 1792 (Shaw 1929: 11). An attributed meaning of the term is 'hill people' (Haokip 2002). The word Kuki is a generic term, which includes a number of tribes and clans. The Thadous¹ are the most numerous branch of the Kuki group. The use of the term 'Kuki' in different places will mainly emphasise the 'ThadouKukis' or the Thadou language-speaking group of the Kuki community in Manipur. As per the 2011 Census, the Thado (Thadou) language is spoken by 2,29,340 people making it the largest scheduled tribe group in the state.²

The study is based on ethnographic field studies conducted during 2008-2010 in three areas that fall within the Sadar Hills Autonomous District Council Area of Senapati District: TujangVaichong village, Motbung Village and Kangpokpi Urban town³. Senapati District is one of the sixteen districts of Manipur and lies in the North West of the state. The tribal areas of Manipur are not covered under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India, but under a state legislation, the Manipur Hill Areas District Councils Act, 1971.⁴ The Sixth Schedule provides for the administration of autonomous tribal districts and regions in Northeast India.

Oral history and folk narratives on land-based rituals and cultural specificities predominant in these selected regions were documented by interviewing the older populace, village elders and cultural specialists using unstructured interview method. The secondary sources for the paper are published monographs of Colonial Ethnographers, Anthropologists, Historians and local writers' accounts.

Theoretical Framework: Sacred Connections with the Environment

According to Fikret Berkes (1999: 8), sacred ecology is, 'a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment.' Berkes approaches traditional ecological knowledge as a knowledge-practice-belief complex that examines four interrelated levels: local traditional knowledge, resource management systems, social institutions and worldview. Hence, the study explores the relationship between some aspects of ecology⁵ or ecological infrastructure: land, pattern of land utilisation, forests, symbolism of land, certain agricultural practices, and some aspects of social structure; social institutions and practices like the chieftainship system, priesthood, rituals and traditional forestry management in the Thadou Kuki society.

For Adam Dunstan, 'many indigenous groups are connected to their environment, not only through direct resource use but also through sacred beliefs and practices...these sacred connection with the environment may remain vital parts of indigenous community life, even when these communities have experienced technological or other forms of cultural change (Dunstan 2012: 1)'. Throughout the history of the land tenure system in human communities, a need was always felt as regards the conformity of linkage between human and land or the ecological landscape. Thus, there was a trend in the traditional communities to make some positive arrangements to support the linkage by magico-religious sanctions (Sarkar 2006: 5). Land is a part of Mother Earth, which in the understanding of the people is something they have inherited from their remote ancestors. Thus, it is to be regarded as a sacred soil with which the descendants are connected through spiritual significance. 'Many native nations "have specific codes and instructions for taking care of the earth" and "land-based spiritual practices" ...rooted in an understanding of culturally and ecologically specific creation stories and oral histories (as documented in Dunstan 2012: 2)'.

Like many communities, the ThadouKukis believed in the sacredness of all creation, whether it is trees, rivers, grasses, stones, hills, forests or water springs etc. Though they do not worship them, they treat '...both their land and the non-human denizens occupying their lands as persons to be related to as cognizant and communicative subjects rather than as inert or insignificant

objects' (Tiedje et al. 2008: 6). This reverence and personification of their surroundings engender conscious conservation thought and practice. Plants and animals are thought to possess a right to life equal to that of humans (ibid). Tiedje and Snodgrass (2008: 12) make an interesting distinction between 'cultural ideas' and 'collective agreement' which is relevant in the context of our study. Cultural ideas are those that are widely shared by many individuals inhabiting a given community. A good example would be the animist models or the conservation values and ideas that are shared and agreed upon at the level of individual commitment. On the other hand, there are institutions that create and implement rules, regulations and sanctions related to land and resource use, which express the joint will of the collectivity or the community. They are formed on the basis of collective agreement of the community.

Another concept that is widely used in this paper is the concept of 'reciprocity' given by George E. 'Tink' Tinker. In the American Indian cultures, there is no privileging of human beings over the rest of the other creations in the scheme of things in the world (Tinker 2008: 66). It begins with the understanding that everything that humans do has effect on the rest of the world. Therefore, there is a need for a built-in compensation or some act of 'reciprocity' (ibid: 68). Maintaining harmony and balance requires that even necessary acts of violence be done 'in a sacred way'. Thus, nothing is taken from the earth without prayer and offering (ibid: 70).⁷ Just as Tinker has concluded in the American Indian case, we can state that the rituals of the ThadouKukis reflect the tribal worldview of a sense of reciprocity and respect towards the other creations in the cosmos. In a similar vein Savyasaachi (2001: 87) writes, rituals facilitate a discourse between humans and spirits to prevent a crossing of their paths. It is a clear demarcation and marking of each other's separate domains of existence or 'space' and an essence of respect for the other.

Ecological Sensibilities in the Pre-Colonial Period

a) Belief Systems and Modes of Worship

The traditional worldview of the ThadouKukis was a religious one and they attributed the existence of the cosmos to the supernatural. They believed in the existence of *Chung Pathen* who rules the universe and gives life to everything (Shaw 1929: 71). For them, *Indoi*⁶ usually kept in one corner of the house is the symbolism that affirms the ever presence of *Pathen* (God) at all times (Chongloi 2008: 5). They also perform rituals for appeasing evil spirits of numerous types, not out of reverence for them as is the case of the *Pathen*, but for fear of the evil they can inflict on them. Some of the common disembodied spirits were:

- 1) *Gamhoise*, the evil spirit of the jungle and his *Inmunse*, the evil spirit of the house (Shakespeare 1975: 199);⁷

- 2) *Joumi*, the spirit which is said to be as tall as trees. *Jou* denotes 'a densely forested region', and *mi* means 'human' or 'dweller' (Chongloi 2008: 139);⁸
- 3) *Kulsamnu*, a female spirit which attacks the soul of the dead person and tries to possess it;⁹
- 4) *Chomnu*, another female spirit but it rarely causes any trouble to humankind (Singsit 2010: 97);
- 5) *Gamlahlen* and *Gamkao*, the spirits of the jungle who cause serious sickness to any person that they meet (Gangte 2010: 31);
- 6) *Kaomei* is another spirit which flies at night like a firefly (Singsit 2010: 97);
- 7) *Lhangnel* is a supernatural element which is capable of transforming itself into various animals such as big serpent, a small snake, wild coke, elk, etc (Chongloi 2008: 139).

b) Ecology and Culture

The centrality of ecology in the cultural life of the Thadou Kuki society is evident from ecological sensibilities that are ingrained in their cultural practices and their understanding of the universe. For instance, the naming of the twelve months of the year for this community is in accordance with the seasonal changes in nature and the position of the moon in the sky. They were already familiar with the idea of systematic naming of the month even before the advent of the missionaries. For instance, the month of January was known as *Tolbol*, 'tol' meaning ground and 'bol' meaning 'dusty'. This is the time of the year when there is ample dust everywhere due to the dryness of the season.

The twelve months are named according to changes in nature and positions of the moon in the sky. The divisions into days, weeks, months, years, etc., correspond to the periodical recurrence of rites, feasts and public ceremonies. A calendar expresses the rhythms of the collective activities, while at the same time its function is to assume their regularity (Durkheim 1915: 10-11). The counting of month-days is not based on a certain number of fixed days for a particular month, but from new moon to new moon. The stages of marking the moon as follows: (1) *Lhathah* (new moon) (2) *Achol-ke* (oval-shaped moon), (3) *Avoni-lu-tai* (almost full moon), (4) *Alihtai* (full moon), (5) *Ahehsuh tai* (waning commences), (6) *Avom-lu-tai* (waning 1st stage), (7) *Acholketai* (half waning) and (8) *Nisa-to-kilhon-tai* (goes along with the sun) (Gangte 2010: 36).

c) The Human-Nature Middlemen: The 'Thempu' (priest) System and the 'Haosa' (Chief) System

The institution of priesthood and chieftainship are two important roles

in traditional Thadou Kuki society that play an important role in mediating between nature and humans. E.E. Evans-Pritchard has studied the Spirit and human relationships amongst the Nuer, a cattle-herding people in Sudan. Similar to the Thadou Kukis, amongst the Nuer, the priest acts as the intermediary between men and God; the virtue, which gives efficacy to his mediation, resides in his office rather than in himself (Evans-Pritchard 1962: 299). Weber (1978: 440) wrote, the priests (and magicians) lay claim to authority by virtue of their service in a sacred tradition. William Shaw (1929), a British Administrator, documented the diverse role played by priests in dealing with sickness; life cycle rituals like marriage, birth and death; and in activities like hunting, wars or setting up a new village or a cultivation site in a virgin land. The priest plays a central role in the rituals conducted at the selected site for cultivation or harvesting. He is the only person who knows the incantation necessary for communicating with the spirits and gods. In terms of his role in the field of land related rituals, the '*village thempu*' (village priest) of the Thadou Kukis is most similar to the '*garden magician*' of the Trobriand Islanders in New Guinea (Malinowski 1966: 59). Today, the *Thempu's* role has been taken over by the Christian pastors.

In villages that are still under the chieftainship system, the allocation of jhum land, site for settlement within the village, access to forest area¹⁰ and the regulation of the use of rocks, water, soil, woods, grass and other non-timber forest products are done by the chief assisted by the council of ministers. This is where the institution of governance in the village plays an important role in regulating and mediating between humans and nature (Sitlhou 2011: 103). It is obligatory for any hunter to offer to the chief the head and the right hind-leg of any animal killed by the hunter. The villagers are obligated to give the chief a basketful of grains of rice called '*chang-seu*' at the end of the year (Devi 2006: 52). This is done as an act of acknowledgment that the chief is the overseer of all the lands and all the produce that comes of it (Sitlhou 2011: 108). The second obligatory function of the chief as a leader is at the time of the performance of rituals. The chieftainship system is a ritual and also a moral structure, which epitomizes the unity of the Thadou Kuki society. The chief officiates at all the major rituals in the village alongside the priest (ibid).

d) Land Rituals: Symbolic Meanings and Significance

The Thadou Kuki society in the past and to some extent today, performed several ceremonies such as purification of the forest when choosing a site, purification of the soil after slashing and burning down the forest, dedication of seed just before sowing seeds and during the weeding season, thanksgiving or the harvest festival (Sitlhou 2018: 5). Therefore, each stage in the agricultural calendar has its own accompanying rituals. Malinowski (1984) suggested that magic provided psychological encouragement and greater group cooperation in those activities where the primitives lacked knowledge or

technical ability to ensure success. In order to comprehend the local people's understanding of the relationship between humans and the environment, it is necessary to delve deeply into historical tradition and mythological foundations. The common understanding of the purpose of ritual and ceremony is rooted in cultural identity, as also in superstitious and spiritual beliefs (Sitlhou 2011: 111-112).

i) Rituals for Purifying Land: The *Lou-Mun-Vet*¹¹ *Lou* means 'field' and *mun-vet* means 'choosing a suitable site' and *Daiphu* Ritual

A representative from each household of the village would go to the jungle to locate a site for cultivation within the area earmarked for a particular year by the village chief (Gangte 1993:191). Jhum cultivation is practised on the slopes of the hills. Markings of a site are done by making a mark on trees and these markings are locally termed '*Lou Chan*'.¹² During the month of March, the chief fixes a date for clearing the jungle by burning so as to prepare the jhum site. The preparation for this begins in the months of January and February. The jungle is cleared, trees and twigs are cut down and dried under the sun after which they are burned. This stage is known as '*Chap-Phou*'. When the time comes to 'slash and burn,' the chief takes into consideration the degree of sunlight (*nisat dan*), rain and dew drops frequency.¹³

On the appointed date, villagers go to the fields and set fire to the jungle. The women of each house would clean and sweep the front courtyards (Goswami 1985: 88). It is customary for all the villagers to remain inside their houses the whole next day, that is, after the day in which the forest is put on fire (ibid). This tradition of remaining inside the house is called '*Vam-Nit*'.¹⁴ '*Vam*' means ashes and '*nit*' means observance. This observance of curfew is done as a symbolic expression of condolences for all the animals and insects that have perished in the jungle fire (ibid). In order to maintain harmony and balance in the universe, it is required that necessary acts of violence to the earth be done with prayer and offering, i.e. in a sacred way (Tinker 2008: 70).

This observance is associated with the belief, which has passed down through generations, that whenever there is fire in the forest, the relatives of the animals, the wild cats and spirits that reside in the forest, would come to search for the missing relatives. The touch of these forest spirits was believed to have a fatal impact on the health of the person, leading to their death most of the time. In order to appease the spirits and relations of the animals that had died in the fire, and for the blessings of a rich harvest, a ritual is done through the priest who acts as the mediator between humans and spirits. These forest spirits are known as '*GampiGampa*' (the owner of the jungle) (Gangte 1993: 192). The priest visits every cultivator's plot of land. Along the boundary lines of each plot, the priest arranges some articles in a circular formation beneath a tree. The priest then utters the following incantations sprinkling drops of wine near the materials in between his recitation:

O you wine which is prepared from the paddy and seeds.
 May you propitiate the god of heaven and Nunjai, the god of the spheres.
 I offer you ten mithuns.
 I submit before you with a set of gongs.
 I surrender before you with beads.
 I offer you in tribute the eggs of my black hen and grey hen.
 Calm the evil that comes to destroy the paddy.
 My prayer is for the souls of paddy.
My prayer is for good health (Gangte 1993: 193).¹⁵

The priest then takes out the egg, holds it in his hand, and chants the following incantation:

O, you egg! Your heart is clean and shining.
 As my grandfather and my father asked before me.

I too now ask you whether during this year the owner of this plot of land would be afflicted with diseases which might even cause death to him.

If it be so, as an indication of it may the liquid inside you turn black and red.

If it is not to be, may the liquid inside you ooze out in all its freshness (Goswami 1985: 90).¹⁶

After uttering the above words, the priest makes a small hole in the egg shell and peeps through it. If the inner liquid is fresh, shining and full, it presages good harvest and good health for the landowner. However, if it is black and red, it portends a bad harvest and possibilities of eventual death of the owner of the land. It is up to the discretion of the landowner to abandon cultivation because of such ill omen (ibid). In case a natural water-spring happens to exist in a particular plot of land, the owner is required to perform the *twikhuhthoina* ritual¹⁷ in addition to the *daiphu* on the same day (ibid: 91). '*Twikhuh*' means water-spring and '*thoina*' means rites (ibid). In the ritual, the priest negotiates with the spirits of the water-spring. He presents them with objects and then requests them to remain seven steps under the earth as they would not like to smell the bad odour of urine and excrement (ibid: 92-93).

ii) Ritual to Invoke Blessing and Good Fortune: The *Chang-Nungah* Ritual or the Ritual of the Maiden deity

A similar ritual, but one that is done after harvesting, is the *Chang-*

Nungah ritual. The '*Chang-Nungah*' is a name given to the rice plants which remain without bearing grains. Rice is the staple food of the Kukis and is therefore highly valued. The stalk of grain remains in that form, refusing to change to the tunes of the changing times, unlike its counterpart which had moved on to the next stage by bearing grains of rice. When such a rare paddy is found in one's field, it symbolizes the presence of the sacred and it was believed that a proper reception of it will augment the harvest manifold in the future. Therefore, an elaborate ritual reception is arranged in which the village priest and representatives of relatives of the ritual performer all participate (Chongloi 2008: 168-169).

The *Chang-Nungah* is a peculiar variety of rice stalks and was compared to an unmarried woman and in the literal sense it means a 'maiden lady'. In the lore of the Kuki people, *Chang-Nungah* has an interesting significance. It was considered a harbinger of good fortune and harvest. Accordingly, it was revered and adorned as if it were a woman and the priest or *thempu* performs a special ritual to appease it to bless the harvest and the field owner's family. Legend has it that this practice originated from a story which involved an old lady and two orphaned siblings. In the story, an old woman visits the village of the two siblings. The children were kind to her and accommodated her in their house. The old woman was actually the spirit of the rice paddy.¹⁸ With her blessing, the children became wealthy. They no longer had to struggle for a living and they lived comfortably. They affectionately named the old woman grandmother *Chaiching* or *Pi Chaiching*. One day, grandmother *Chaiching* instructed her grandchildren, 'My grandchildren, when you are tending the field, do not let any weed grow unattended, because when you do that there will be something stuck in my teeth and I cannot sleep at night due to the pain.' Legend has it that the grandchildren disobeyed her request not just once, but many times. This led to a fall-out between them and the old woman could no longer stay with them. Before she left, she taught them a technique by which they could still enjoy a bountiful harvest. Whenever the harvesting season begins, she would appear as a *Chang-Nungah* or maiden deity. If they heed her biddings and follow her instructions, then they would always be rich and prosperous but would become poor otherwise.¹⁹ Then, she told them how to tend the special paddy stalk or *Chang-Nungah*. *Pi Chaiching* named the possibilities of her appearing in the form of different types of paddy stalks. According to the type of paddy stalk, either a pig or a rooster would be used in the ritual.²⁰

iii) Ritual for Appeasing the *Chang-Nungah*

The *Thempu* or the priest selects a robust rooster meant for the sacrificial ritual. The ritual would include a drama in which the scene between the old woman and the children is re-enacted.²¹ This dramatised conversation will be repeated three times. This is an attempt by them to revive the past by

enacting scenes.²²

(Tehsepi) Hepi; Na inn nahunglhunginkate?

(Old lady) Will you let me rest in your house?

In asel-le (Jesung²³ ahi). Koima ka-in na hung lhungtheiponte. Jinphanahim; jinsenahim?

(Villager) It is an auspicious day. Nobody is welcome in this house as there is no place to accommodate a guest. Are you a good guest or are you a bad guest?

Jinhakahi-e; Changlhakapoi; mimlhakapoi; mitphatkapoi; hamphatkapoi; Chanulhakapoi; Chapa lhakapoi; Sumlhakapoi; SellhaKapoi; Ti-dam kapoi; Lu-dam Kapoi; Valpabungakon-nakahinvetleh; hilajahinmeiakhu-in; Sihmilamjot; Khongbailamjotkahintho-a; kahin jot ahi.

(Old lady) I am a good guest; I carry with me the spirit of the paddy; the spirit of Job's tears; I bring you blessings; I carry the spirit of the daughter; I carry the spirit of the son; I carry the spirit of wealth and money; I carry the spirit of the mithun; I carry with me good health; health in the head; when I look down from the sky, I could see smoke in this place. So, I have come here by imitating the walk of the ants and grasshoppers.

Hicheng po chubakahol ahi; hunglutin; ati-a lampi-a thingtoi khat; kotkxah ding banga akoi chu alah doh peh a phol la chu alhalutding ahi.

(Villager) I have been on the lookout for such a guest who has all those traits. Come in.

Then, the person playing the role of the villager will lift a small wooden log meant to be a make-belief door and lead the guest to the place where harvest is kept.

The most common cause of affliction is the neglecting or 'forgetting' of the spirit. So, the most important aspect of the process of placation is to bring it back to memory, 'to make it known before many people and to mention its name in their hearing' (Turner 1996: 295).

The *Thempu* now takes the rooster and mumbles slowly the following lines of incantation: 'if the following year brings forth with it health and wealth for the family, give us a sign by your right leg, if it is not going to bring the family wealth and health, show us by your left leg.' Then, the priest be-heads the rooster and unleashes it inside the barn. Only the priest knows which hind leg emerges victorious. This decides the fate of the family in the following year. Then, the priest proclaims aloud to the gathering including the landowner's family, 'we shall be prosperous; we shall be healthy'.²⁴ The *Chang-Nungah* ritual is considered to be the visible evidence of the existence of the spirits of the paddy who are endowed with the power to bestow prosperity on

humans. The rituals facilitate a social discourse between humans and spirits. This, in a way, reflects the belief that spirits, humans and animals share a common space, and thereby share ownership rights to it.

The Civilising Processes in the Colonial and Post-Colonial Period

a) Regulations on Shifting Cultivation and Forest Use

The various forest regulations and laws of the colonial state alienated them from the forest as they were introduced with the intention of curbing and finally eradicating shifting cultivation. The debates on shifting cultivation or jhumming posited them under two main perspectives, either as 'the natural way of life of the tribal people' or as 'detrimental to the forest economy'. The supporters of jhumming are of the view that it is more than sustenance; rather it reflects the reason for existence. Jhum cultivation has special significance in the ethos of tribal society and their social relationships, cultural values and mythical beliefs are directly linked with it (Singsit 2010: 158). The Kangpokpi Urban Town Committee chairman opined that, as Jhumming constitute an important lifeline for the ThadouKukis, an alternative need to be set-up if the government plans to do away with it.²⁵ Even in Kangpokpi district, which is urban, and not under chieftainship system, jhumming is done in the neighbouring hill called *T.Khullien*. Those who want land for cultivation have to pay tax or '*gam-pan*' or 'land tax' to the Town Committee, which is set up under the District Council of Manipur.²⁶

In Manipur, the soil conservation and land use programmes which are initiated to control or reverse the deleterious consequences of Jhum are carried out by two agencies, viz., the Department of Horticulture and the Forest Department.²⁷ The voice from the educated section of the locals also resonate the ecological consequences of Jhumming and its irrelevances today since existing population density far exceeds the carrying capacity.²⁸

Colonial land revenue settlements and forests laws were intended to curb and in swift stages and finally eradicate shifting cultivation (Sharma 1994: 143). Prior to the advent of the Britishers, the forest rights of the locals were governed by customary norms (Kulkarni 1987: 2143). The Forest Act of 1865 issued by Lord Dalhousie was the pioneering initiative of the colonial government to regulate forest exploitation, management and preservation. It curtailed the collection of forest produce by the forest dwellers via legal laws (ibid). The same regulation had sought the complete prohibition of shifting cultivation in the Central provinces (Sharma 1994: 143). The Indian Forest Act of 1878, 'allowed the state to expand the commercial exploitation of the forest while putting curbs on local use for subsistence. Under the Act, the forests were divided into (1) reserved forests, (2) protected forests, and (3) village forests (ibid). These regulations were formally initiated in 1894 (Anderson, et al., 1988: 36)'. The 'reserved forests' were exclusively for the use

of the Forest Department. In the 'protected areas', the local villagers had partial rights over the forest and its produce. The 'village forest' was however the communal property of the villagers (Anderson, et. al., 1988: 37). Till today, the Forest Department has exclusive rights over the 'reserved forests' in villages in Manipur and as per the Conservation of Forests and Natural Ecosystems Act, the Centre is vested with the power to direct any state government to classify any area of the forest under the category of 'reserved forests' (Sitlhou 2016: 111-113).

The power of the Forest Department was gradually strengthened via subsequent Acts like the Indian Forest Act of 1927. The National Forest Policy issued in 1952 changed the concept of 'rights' of the tribals over their forest lands to mere 'rights and concessions', and finally to 'concessions' (Roy Burman 1992: 143). Power over forests was transferred from the control of the state to the centre and the Government of India in the Forest Conservation Ordinance promulgated this in October 1980, that later became a bill (Kulkarni 1987: 2144). The Indian Forest Bill, 1980 besides including a provision for curtailing the rights and benefits of the local people over the forests prescribe severe punishments for forest offences (ibid). 'The signposts in this history are provided by the forests acts of 1878 and 1927, the Forest Policy of 1952, the National Commission on Agriculture of 1976, which inaugurated social forestry, the Forest Conservation Act of 1980, the 1988 Forest Policy, and the GOI Joint Forest Management Resolution of 1990, followed by different state resolutions (Sundar, et al, 1999: 27).'

The reason for the waning of the practice of shifting cultivation today cannot be solely attributed to the decline in accessible forest lands. In the context of the three field areas studied, the following points were also prominent for the decline of shifting cultivation. Firstly, permanent cultivation was introduced alongside jhum cultivation around the 19th century. The dependency on agriculture and the pressure on land were lessened by occupational diversification in villages. There was a move towards the tertiary sector and a shift towards non-farm enterprises and most households (as is common in contemporary rural societies), live from a mixture of livelihood strategies. Finally, there were large-scale migration of villagers to urban town to seek better employment prospects (Sitlhou 2018: 477).

b) Cultural and Ideological Changes due to Christianity

The Thadou Kukis were the second tribe to accept Christianity in the hills of Manipur and the first church amongst them was established at Tujang Vaichong village in 1916 (Downs 1971). The conversion to Christianity in the nineteenth century not only changed their religious ideology and worldview, but also many aspects of their customs and culture. The advent of colonialism and the introduction of Christianity largely undermined the authority of the chief as also the influence of the priest. 'The chief had to share his rights to

authority with the colonial administrator and the missionary. Many chiefs also had serious issues against the new religion, which they felt was a threat to the village community life and beside his influence (Sitlhou et al. 2021: 219). The Church as an institution replaced the functions of traditional institutions like priesthood, *Indoi* or the primeval religion, and participated in the village administration. The discourse with the spirits was no longer encouraged in any form in the new religion. The concept of the 'sacred' is transposed and translated across a different belief system in which the traditional ritual is replaced by the Christian prayer. People still pray before each stage of agriculture production or before choosing a site for cultivation but they do so to a different god. The new religion caused a re-definition of their identity which was earlier defined by their close relation to the other creations in the cosmos (Sitlhou 2018:478).

Taking the case of the American Indians, George E. 'Tink' Tinker (2008) wrote that the 'anthropocentrism' that dominated western culture is due to Christianity, and this was responsible for the subsequent diminishing of the traditional ideologies and institutions in all colonised societies. Scholars like Lynn White Jr. argued that environmental degradation was the indirect product of Christianity. "The idea that humans are given "dominion" over creation has been, so it is argued, foundational in forming the typically western "instrumentalist" view of nature: that the natural world exists solely to meet human needs' (Moo et al. 2018: p. 29). Douglas J. Moo and Jonathan A. Moo (2018) have however, refuted the theory by proposing that it is not Christianity or the Bible that foster a narrow focus on humans as causing the detriment of the created world, but rather it is due to a narrow and superficial readings of the Christian story. In fact, a careful reading of Biblical text educates one on the responsibilities towards the other creations in the cosmos, viz., towards the other created beings.

Conclusion

The first section of the study focussed on the man-land relationship in the pre-colonial times. It highlights the relationship between ecological infrastructure like land, pattern of land utilisation, forests, symbolism of land, agricultural practices on one side, and social institutions and practices like chieftainship system, priesthood, rituals and traditional forestry management on the other side. The various land-based rituals, ecological sensibilities, cultural specificities and particularities are a reflection of the Traditional Ecological Knowledge of the Thadou Kuki society. Their worldview provides an inbuilt mechanism for environmental protection (Sitlhou 2016: 114). This mark of respect for land is reflected in the socio-cultural lives of the people, which in turn determine the way the society is organised (Sitlhou 2011: 286). So, it is evident that it is not only the culture of humankind that influences the conceptualisation of ecological relations but also nature or ecological relations

that exerts influences on the social structure of the society under study.

This sacred connection with the environment remains a vital part of their community life and identity even as the connection is being challenged by technological, religious, structural or other forms of cultural change (Adam Dunstan 2012). The various forest regulations and laws by both the colonial and post-colonial state, in limiting their accessibility to the forest and its produce, alienated and altered the nature of their relations with the environment. The acceptance of Christianity resulted in ideological changes, affecting their worldview and attitudes towards the practice of agricultural or land rituals, the beliefs in spirits and the institution of the village priest. The curtailment of shifting cultivation via the various forest laws of the state and the advent of Christianity had impact on the knowledge systems of the community; thereby altering Traditional Ecological Knowledge and ushering in changes in the community. Today, it is only on the occasion of the *Kutor* the Harvest Festival celebrated on the 1st of November every year in Manipur that one can see remnants of a tradition of the past, depicting the linkages between humans and ecology in bygone days. The various cultural dances in this festival were inspired by agricultural techniques and hunting practices, thus reflecting the close relationship of the ThadouKukis with their surrounding nature.

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Notes

1. The section on forest regulations in this article may be similar to that in my article 'Forest Conservation and Land Rights in Manipur' published in the book *Identity, Contestation and Development in Northeast India*. The section on the land rights rituals of the Thadou Kukis was also mentioned in brief in my article 'The Shifting "stages" of performance: A study of "Chavang Kut" festival in Manipur' published in the journal *Asian Ethnicity*.
2. The term Thadou literally means 'to kill' (Tha) and 'to resist' (dou).
3. Census of 2011, Data on Language and Mother Tongue, Statement 1 (Abstract of Speakers' strength of languages and mother tongues-2011). https://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011Census/Language_MTs.html. (accessed date: 19th November, 2020).
4. Kangpokpi has been pronounced as a full-fledged district from December, 2016.
5. The Sixth Schedule provides for the administration of autonomous tribal districts and regions in Northeast India.
6. The term *oekologie* (ecology) was coined in 1866 by the German biologist, Ernst Haeckel from the Greek *oikos* meaning "house" or "dwelling," and *logos* meaning

“science” or “study.” Thus, ecology is the “study of the household of nature.” Haeckel intended it to encompass the study of an animal in relation to both the physical environment and other plants and animals with which it interacted. (Who coined the term “ecology”? http://www.answerbag.com/q_view/41808. access date 19th May, 2011).

7. A slanted mother pig skull, a piece of a he-goat's curved horn, bracelet, dao, a jar made from gourd, etc., are the various components that constitute an *Indoi*.
8. As explained by the Kuki historian T.S. Gangte, these evil spirits are the souls of persons meeting unnatural death or *thi-se*. They are supposed to inhabit the densest forests on the highest mountain tops.
9. They are reportedly very fond of chicken, which they kill by throttling the neck and sucking its blood. The mere sight of them is enough to make people die out of fear.
10. The Thadou Kukis in the past believed that after death, the spirits of men and women, great and small go to *mi-thi-kho* (the abode of the dead). *Kulsamnu* sits on the roadside and seizes all wandering souls except those who had slain men and beasts or had given feasts in their lifetime.
11. The forests in the villages are clearly shared between the villagers and the forest department. The villagers with the permission of the chief can access the forest, which does not fall within the ambit of the 'reserve area' marked out by Forest department of the Government of India.
12. *Lou* means 'field' and *mun-vet* means 'choosing a suitable site'.
13. Lhouvum, Kailal, Cultural Specialist from Motbung Village, interviewed on 12th October, 2008.
14. Lhouvum, Satkholal, Cultural Specialist & aged group of Motbung Village, interviewed on 12th October, 2008.
15. Vumkhopao, S.L, Village authority member of Motbung Village, interviewed (with discussion) from 15th to 18th November 2008 and again on 17th June, 2009.
16. Re-interpretation and correction of Goswami's data was done by Luntinsat Kipgen, Cultural Specialist from Myanmar and settled in New Delhi. Not only did I interview him but I also had ongoing discussions with him during 2008-2010 on the cultural life and lore of the Kukis.
17. *ibid.*
18. Kilong, Helthang, Cultural Specialist, Motbung Village, interviewed on 14th October, 2008.
19. Singson, Tongkholam, Cultural Specialist & aged group, interviewed on 13th October, 2008.
20. Same as xviii above.
21. *ibid.*
22. Kilong, Helthang, cultural specialist and aged group, interviewed during 15th -18th October, 2009. (The translation was done with the help of Tongthang Kipgen, a retired forest officer with the Government of India.)
23. Sitlhou, Neikim, cultural specialist and aged group, interviewed on 21st November, 2008.
24. Same as xix above.

25. Guite, Haokholien, Chairmen of Kangpokpi Urban Town Committee, interviewed on 26th November, 2008.
26. *ibid*
27. Land Rights Autonomy and Conflict in Manipur (Chapter 17), Planning Department Government of Manipur, Draft Manipur State Development Report, http://manipur.nic.in/planning/DraftMSDR/Default_DraftMSDR.htm
28. Kipgen, Enoch, Asst. Head Master, L.K. Junior High School, Tujang Vaichong Village, interviewed on 9th November, 2008.

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