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# TRADITIONAL USES OF FLORA AND FAUNA BY THE KUKI TRIBES OF MANIPUR: A CULTURAL AND RITUAL PERSPECTIVE

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## ABSTRACT

*Through their unique cultural and ritual activities, the Kuki tribes of Manipur vividly reflect their deep-rooted relationship to nature. This essay investigates the ways in which Kuki festivals, rituals, and belief systems are entwined with different plant and animal species. The study emphasises the religious and symbolic functions that plants and animals play in festivals, healing ceremonies, rites of passage, and community government. It does this by drawing on anthropological fieldwork and conversations with elders and cultural leaders. The results show that Kuki society's traditional ecological knowledge is not only practical but also has spiritual meaning, making it a vital component of social cohesiveness and cultural identity. Such intangible cultural treasure must be preserved in the face of swift socio-environmental change.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Kuki tribe, flora, fauna, rituals, culture*.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nature is profoundly woven into the cultural and spiritual life of the indigenous groups in Northeast India, who have long maintained symbiotic relationships with their surroundings. The Kuki tribes of Manipur are one of these groups that has a particularly deep respect for nature, where plants and animals are seen as sentient beings with spiritual qualities rather than just resources. A vital component of the Kuki worldview and religious rituals, animals, plants, rivers, and woods are seen to have life forces and ancestral importance (Devi, 2020; Kipgen, 2016). The ecological landscape of the Kuki is inextricably linked to their traditional rites and rituals. Every ritual act is a spiritual engagement with nature as well as a cultural expression. For example, it is said to be easier to communicate with ancestor spirits or deities when animals like *Mithun* (Bos frontalis), pigs, or chickens are sacrificed during rites of passage or agricultural celebrations. In addition to being useful resources, plants like bamboo, ginger, turmeric, and sacred trees are also employed as sacred mediums for symbolic expression, offerings, and spiritual purification (Haokip, 2019). In accordance with their belief that nature is alive and sacred, the Kukis have developed a unique ritual ecology in which cultural customs are used to maintain and restore human-nature interactions. Seasonal celebrations, ceremonial hunting, and sacred trees all serve to uphold moral behaviour towards biodiversity. This philosophy is similar to Bird-David's (1999) definition of animism, which views non-human species as sentient beings with the capacity for social interaction.

Research on the ceremonial aspects of plants and animals in indigenous civilisations is still rather lacking, despite the fact that scholarly works have frequently focused on the economic or therapeutic applications of biodiversity in these groups. Although biodiversity plays a vital role in forming indigenous environmental ethics, its spiritual value is sometimes downplayed in conservation discourses, as noted by Sinha and Singh (2011). For the Kukis, these ceremonial interactions with nature reinforce seasonal cycles, resource constraints, and the passing down of knowledge from generation to generation while also fulfilling religious purposes and acting as ecological stewardship mechanisms.

In order to present a comprehensive view of indigenous ecological knowledge, this paper will examine the ritual uses of flora and wildlife among the Kuki tribes of Manipur. It clarifies how sustainable interactions with the environment are influenced by the symbolic and spiritual connotations ascribed to biodiversity. This strategy is in line with new paradigms in ethnobiology and conservation research that highlight the significance of cosmological viewpoints and cultural values in preserving biodiversity (Posey, 1999).The Kukis provide a powerful illustration of how native cosmologies and ceremonial customs can function as models for ecological resilience. Their customs are part of a comprehensive worldview that upholds and honours the sanctity of life in all its forms rather than being discrete cultural acts.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative ethnographic approach was employed, with a focus on lived experiences and cultural interpretation. The study was carried out in Manipur's Churachandpur, Kangpokpi, and Tengnoupal districts, which are inhabited by Kuki. In addition to having a wide variety of plants and animals, these areas are the site of lively customs that are connected to the cycles of nature.Interviews with Thempu (Priest) and cultural guardians from the Kuki community were conducted in-depth to gather data for this study. Participatory observation at festivals and ceremonies such as funeral rites and *Chavang Kut*

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was also a part of it. Additionally, oral histories, mythologies, and folk songs pertaining to the ceremonial use of plants and animals had been reviewed.

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

In ethnographic and ecological studies, there has been an increasing interest in the complex relationship between indigenous peoples and their natural surroundings. The fact that biodiversity is a spiritual and cultural reality rather than just a material resource for many indigenous civilisations is becoming more widely acknowledged by academics (Posey, 1999). This worldview is best illustrated by the Kuki tribes of Manipur, which are in Northeast India. Their ceremonial usage of plants and animals reflects a deep awareness of ecological balance, spiritual belief, and sociocultural identity. Bird-David (1999) argue that the animistic worldview, which holds that non-human entities like plants, animals, and landscapes are sentient or spirit-inhabited, is one of the fundamental ideas in comprehending indigenous ritual uses of biodiversity.

According to the Kukis, this concept is expressed in ceremonies where animals are honoured as messengers to the spirit world in addition to being slaughtered for pacification. The *Mithun* (Bos frontalis), for instance, is more than just a prestige animal; it represents fertility, abundance, and ancestral favour and is essential to ceremonies like feasts of merit and marriages (Kipgen, 2016). The idea of ritual ecology, which refers to the way that cultural rituals both reflect and govern human-environment relationships, is intimately related to such behaviours (Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1976). Plants with significant cultural meaning are frequently chosen for their symbolic qualities, according to studies on their use in ceremonial contexts throughout Northeast India.

For example, bamboo is used extensively in Kuki ceremonies as a sacred element that symbolises social peace and continuity as well as a construction material (Haokip, 2019). As a symbol of life, prosperity, and seasonal rebirth, rice (Oryza sativa) is sacrificed to the gods and eaten communally during celebrations like *Chavang Kut* (Devi, 2020). Indigenous pharmacological knowledge with spiritual applications is highlighted by the use of medicinal plants like ginger and turmeric and sacred trees like *Ficus religiosa* in purifying rites (Sinha & Singh, 2011). Ethnographers contend that through chants, songs, and performances, indigenous rituals transmit important ecological knowledge orally between generations (Toledo, 2001). Kuki celebrations like *Chang-Ai* and the Feast of Merit have both religious and environmental purposes. In order to ensure that resource extraction is carried out with ritual moderation and reciprocity, the community's seasonal sense of abundance and scarcity is reflected in the choice of sacrifice animals and plants during these rites (Nongkynrih, 2007). Therefore, these rituals serve as unofficial institutions that control the utilisation of biodiversity. Despite these realisations, little research has been done expressly on the ritual ecology of the Kuki tribes. Although tribal belief systems in Northeast India, such as those of the Meitei, Naga, and Mizo communities, have been extensively documented in anthropological works, the Kukis are still under-represented in scholarly publications (Haokip, 2021).

Furthermore, the majority of research focusses on the therapeutic or economic applications of plants rather than their symbolic meaning in culture or religion. In order to fully comprehend the significance of ceremonial flora and fauna among the Kukis, interdisciplinary approaches that incorporate ethnobotany, anthropology, and environmental studies are conspicuously lacking.

## 4. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

### 4.1. Ritual Use of Fauna

Animals are seen in Kuki cosmology as occupying a rich symbolic and spiritual realm rather than just being providers of food or financial resources. These animals are used in many rituals as vital intermediaries between the human world and ancestral or supernatural worlds.

The highest level of ritual significance among the Kukis is held by the *Mithun* (Bos frontalis). In addition to being a sacrifice animal, the *Mithun* is a symbol of fertility, wealth, social standing, and ancestry. Its sacrifice in ceremonial settings serves to reinforce familial bonds, social standing, and collective identity, particularly during marriages, naming rituals, and the seldom but magnificent feast of merit. After being removed, the animal's horn is either kept as a treasured family heirloom or publicly displayed in the common house (*Semang*) as a permanent spiritual relic that symbolises the connection between ancestry, spirit, and humanity (IOSR, 2023; Sitlhou, 2020). Pigs and chickens are more frequently used as domestic and daily ritual sacrifices, and they are essential to protection, healing, and purification ceremonies. To fend off evil spirits and purge spiritual impurities, animals are killed and their blood is ceremoniously sprinkled around altars, doorsteps, or hearths in rites like *Chang-Ai* (post-mourning purification) and *Lunglai* (healing rituals). Pigs and chickens, in contrast to *Mithun*, have a more personal domestic function in reducing supernatural dangers and re-establishing peace in the home or hamlet.

Dogs are rarely sacrificed, but they nevertheless hold a special place in the Kukis' pre-Christian ritual system. Dogs are offered as sacrifices to maintain mental boundaries in uncommon but solemn events like curse-lifting rites. They represent faithfulness, devotion, and defence against spiritual intruders. Their symbolic presence in older oral traditions emphasises their once-potent spiritual importance, even though they were mostly cut out of ritual practice when Christianity became widely accepted. Symbolic significance is strong for creatures with feathers, particularly hornbills and jungle fowls. The hornbill is linked to warrior identity and martial courage because of its impressive plumage and beak. Hornbill feathers, which stand for courage and group pride, are frequently seen in traditional headdress worn during festivals and rites of passage.

Offerings of jungle fowl are said to bring luck in hunting trips, inter-village disputes, and military planning—basically, calling upon ancestors' assistance in human undertakings (Sitlhou, 2020). Prior to headhunting expeditions or clan-level confrontations, wild animals like deer and barking deer were ritually sacrificed in older, mostly historical customs. These sacrifices, which were part of a spiritual regimen in which

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hunters carried out rites to invoke spiritual safety and efficacy, sought ancestor protection for victory in battle or retribution.

These ceremonial uses of animals create a multi-layered symbolic ecology, with wild game serving as an invocation of ancestor spirits, pigs and chickens as purifying agents, dogs as boundary defenders, birds as symbolic mediators of spiritual and martial might, and *Mithun* as riches and social sanction. This ritual fauna system underlines a worldview that privileges reciprocal relationships among humans, animals, spirits, and the land.

### 4.2. Ritual Use of Flora

In Kuki ceremonies, plants play equally symbolic and ceremonial roles. They are chosen for their cultural significance and active spiritual purposes rather than for their aesthetic value. In ceremonial life, bamboo (*Bambus spp*.) is perhaps the most adaptable plant. It is utilised to weave offering vessels, build sacrificial platforms, and provide structural support during burial ceremonies. Bamboo poles are also utilised to mark graves. The traditional bamboo wine (ju), which represents continuity, adaptability, strength, and life-energy, is served to ancestral spirits and distributed among participants at marriage ceremonies (Sitlhou, 2020). The fundamental symbolism of life, fertility, and wealth is represented by rice (Oryza sativa). In practically every significant ritual ceremony, uncooked rice grains are delivered to spirits and deities.

Rice beer and rice offerings are the ritual centre of *Chavang Kut*, the harvest festival, which honours agricultural abundance and invokes blessings for future fertility. The leaves and bark of some sacred trees are employed in protection and cleansing rituals. While Terminalia chebula bark is used in water purification ceremonies, ficus religiosa leaves are knotted at altars or doorsteps to invoke blessings. As symbols of holy friendship and covenant, betel leaves and areca nuts are especially important in marriage ceremonies and in mediating societal conflicts (Sitlhou, 2020). For purification and protection, ginger, turmeric, and other medicinal roots are burned as smudges or placed close to new-borns and pregnant women. Their fragrant smoke is thought to ward off evil spirits and cleanse the surrounding area, providing both useful antibacterial and symbolic protection. During the *Chang-Ai* and *Kut* festivals, wildflowers are used as more than just decorations; they are incorporated into head wreaths or sacred garlands, which connect the seasonal flora's natural beauty to spiritual invocation and ancestral memories.

### 4.3. Ritual Festivals, Oral Literatures and Ecological Linkages

*Chavang Kut*, a communal thanksgiving to the harvest deity, is observed every November. Bamboo dances, rice beer, and animal sacrifices—typically pigs and *Mithun*—are also part of the rituals. To maintain continuous fertility for the upcoming agricultural cycle and to placate woodland spirits are important goals (Sitlhou, 2020). The ceremonial display of plants and animals reinforces the concepts of soil fertility and collective management while embodying the goal of reciprocity between people and the land. Sometimes a richer person throws a feast of merit, when he sacrifices a *Mithun* and feeds the whole village. Through this ceremony, the host receives societal approval to create a monument made of stone or a bamboo pole that has been carved and decorated with rice, flowers, and animal hides. In addition to affirming social ties and reasserting hierarchical rank, it symbolically harmonises human, animal, spiritual, and cosmic links. The symbolic ecology of sacred plants and animals is encapsulated in Kuki folk songs, proverbs, and oral histories. Frequently occurring allusions to tigers, hornbills, rice, and bamboo emphasise their symbolic meanings: tigers stand for fierceness and independence, hornbills for high social status, rice for sustenance and purity, and bamboo for tenacity and ancestry. By strengthening taboos against overexploitation and promoting care for ritually protected species, these oral traditions pass forward ethical values and ecological understanding.

## 5. DISCUSSION

According to this study, the Kuki people's interactions with plants and animals extend well beyond their need for sustenance. In their elaborate cultural displays, natural species act as go-betweens for people and the spiritual realm. In these situations, the choice of plants and animals is based on cosmological implications, cultural values, and ancestors' beliefs rather than being arbitrary or ornamental. Social standing, kinship structures, and spiritual debts are all reflected in the ceremonial use of animals like *Mithun* and pigs. In addition to placating spirits, the blood sacrifice reinforces the connection between humans, animals, and the earth. Similar to this, plant species that provide continuity, protection, and life force, such as rice and bamboo, are endowed with several levels of meaning.

Furthermore, ecological behaviour is frequently regulated by these ceremonial acts. Overexploitation is prevented by taboos against killing specific species outside of ceremonial circumstances. Spirit-related forest patches, are unaltered and serve as unofficial protection areas. Many of these customs are currently in danger of being lost, though. Several animist customs were abandoned when Christianity arrived in the area, despite the fact that it improved healthcare and education. Only shards remain now, frequently reinterpreted in cultural celebrations rather than in actual spiritual activities.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Indigenous people and the environment have a deep cultural and symbolic affinity, as seen by the Kuki tribes of Manipur's ceremonial uses of plants and animals. These customs are a living legacy that instils values of care for the environment, balance, and reverence. It is crucial to make an effort to record and bring back these customs through cultural education, neighbourhood museums, and cooperation with conservation initiatives. The ritual ecology of indigenous groups like the Kukis offers priceless insights as the world looks for inclusive and sustainable ways to practise environmental stewardship.

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