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ECOLOGICAL ETHICS THROUGH CUSTOM: THE CASE OF KUKI SHIFTING CULTIVATION IN MANIPUR

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores shifting cultivation practices by the Kukis of Manipur. It argues that the practices is not merely an economic activity; it is a cultural practice deeply rooted in ecological ethics and indigenous knowledge systems. The customary knowledge embedded in agriculture reflects a harmonious relationship with nature, guided by principles of sustainability, reciprocity, and respect for the environment. It also highlights how customary norms regulate land use, conserve soil fertility, and prevent resource over-exploitation. Agricultural festivals, taboos, and authority of the village institutions further reinforce these ethical practices. The institution of the village chief (Haosa) and his councils regulate the cultivation cycles, fallow periods, and collective responsibilities, reflecting an indigenous form of ecological governance. Sacred rituals performed during land clearing or harvest embody an ethical relationship between humans and nature, reinforcing respect for the environment. The findings demonstrate that Thadou-Kuki agricultural knowledge represents a holistic system where custom and ecology converge to sustain both community and environment.

KEYWORDS: *Customary Knowledge, Ecological Ethics, Manipur, Shifting Cultivation, Thadou-Kuki.*

INTRODUCTION

Shifting cultivation or slash and burn method of cultivation is one of the most ancient systems of farming practices mainly in South Asia, South-East Asia, South America, Central and West Africa. It is an indigenous and primitive practice type of cultivation practices in all states of North-east India viz. Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. As the cultivation is practiced by numbers of people and diverse as they are practices, there is no universal definition to define shifting cultivation. However, it is defined as "swidden cultivation which is a form of land use system that employs a natural or improved fallow phase which is longer than the cultivation phase of annual crops sufficiently long to be dominated by woody vegetation and are cleared by means of fire" (Mertz et al., 2009). The pattern of this cultivation involves clearing jungles, burning forest, sowing the seed and harvesting the crop. The tools used were mainly of simple like dao, axe, and hoe, therefore not requiring many or modern implements. Tribal people were involved as it is a labour intensives method and its less use of capital, inputs and equipment etc., and mainly because of lack in alternative work. This cultivation is the primary sources of income for the tribal people in the hilly areas.

Shifting cultivation, locally known as *jhum*, has long been a central agricultural practice among the tribal peoples including the Kukis of Manipur, where it functions not merely as a means of subsistence but as an embedded socio-cultural and ecological institution that shapes community rhythms, knowledge systems, and land use patterns. Traditionally, Kuki shifting cultivation involves clearing forest plots, allowing natural regeneration during long fallow periods, and cropping for a brief period, a cycle that historically maintained soil fertility and supported biodiversity within upland ecosystems. When practiced with adequate fallow periods, jhum has been shown to enable forest regeneration and sustain ecological balance, reflecting an indigenous understanding of land stewardship and adaptive environmental management.

Beyond its ecological dimension, shifting cultivation among the Kukis is deeply tied to customary authority and communal ethics; land is allocated annually by village chiefs and councils, and the practice is intertwined with seasonal festivals, customary calendars, and collective labour, signifying a worldview in which human actions are embedded within cyclical relations with nature.

However, contemporary pressures such as population growth, shortened fallow cycles, and external environmental policies have challenged these traditional systems, leading to debates about sustainability and the need to reconcile customary ecological ethics with modern conservation imperatives. Therefore, the study examines how ecological ethics understood as the moral principles that guide human interaction with the environment are expressed through the customary practices of Kuki shifting cultivation, and how these ethical frameworks contribute to ecological outcomes in the hill landscapes of Manipur.

Conceptual Framework

Ecology, the term was coined in 1869 which deals with interaction between various living organism such as plants, animals, and human beings (Sharma, 2019: 40). However, human beings in their quest for survival interact with the natural environment and develop a distinctive understanding rooted in a

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cultural experience that guides relations among humans in a specific environment. By drawing on Steward (1955) theory of cultural ecology, customary practices can be understood as adaptive strategies forming part of a society's cultural core. Among the Kukis, customs relating to land use, shifting cultivation, and ritual taboos illustrate this ecological adaptation, embedding environmental ethics within cultural norms. He introduced the idea of 'cultural core' which refers to the practices and institutions most closely related to subsistence and resource use. He states that cultures adapt to their environment and evolve according to their needs and availability of the resources and further emphasized that culture is shaped by the environment. Roy Rapport (1979) argued that ritual and custom are not merely symbolic but function as a regulatory mechanism that sustain the balance between human societies and their environments that reveals how customary norms embody ecological ethics. He also emphasizes the role of ritual in maintaining ecological balance and regulating human-environment interactions. Berkes (1999) emphasizes that indigenous knowledge systems represent more than technical practices of resource use; they embody worldviews, values, and ethics that link people to nature in a relational and moral way. This traditional ecological knowledge integrates ecological observations, cultural beliefs, and spiritual values, thereby producing what Berkes terms 'sacred ecology'.

The word 'culture', comes from the Latin word 'Colere' meaning 'to cultivate' or 'to till the soil'. In medieval times, the term refers to the progressive refinement of crops, hence the term agriculture for the art of farming. However, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the term was applied to the refinement of people as well, so that persons who are refined and well-read were considered to be cultured. According to Geertz (1973), culture including customs is a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms. It is a practice or usage which has become established by long habit or tradition which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (Tylor, 1871; Bodley, 2011). Malinowski (1926) defined customs as 'the body of technical, legal, moral, and religious rules which govern the behaviour of the members of a society.' It is something that human species have and others species lack. According to Blumer (1969), culture consists of the shared symbols and meanings. In this regard, symbols such as words, gesture, and objects carry meanings that are shared by individuals within a culture. At the simplest level, it is everything learned and shared by men.

With this background, the paper would explore to what extent do customary practices enforce ecological ethical norms in jhum cultivation? And how beliefs, rituals, and values embedded in jhum practice reflect ethical commitments to land, nature, and ecological balance?

Kuki Shifting Cultivation: Cultural and Ecological Context

The Kukis belong to mongoloid race and speak the Tibeto-Burman language (Grierson, 1904). The village is the highest political unit and its administrative system is based on chieftainship governance model wherein the chief along with his *Semang-Pachong* (council of ministers) are the administrative and political leaders. As land is central to all kinds of human activities, it holds a fundamental share in the economy of the people. Generally, the land is divided or used for residential site, playground, cemetery, reserved forest and site for jhum cultivation. According to Srikanth, land is not only a primary source of livelihood, but is also something that carries cultural and religious meanings and identities (Srikanth, 2011). Sharma (2019) rightly stated that, human history cannot be understood without the idea of the continuing interaction between soils, plants, and animals, on the one hand, and humans, on the other. Thus, the power and authority of the chief is reflected on his ownership of land and natural resources within his geographical jurisdiction.

The chief hold vast land for shifting cultivation and foliage and there is no public and lease land system among the Kukis. He also regulates the distribution and use of the land, and must ensure that every married man receives private holdings for residence and cultivation (Schapera, 1963). Thus, in chieftainship, land ownership is the exclusive right and prerogative of the chief where he reigns supreme with absolutism and dealt with land use system under the shifting or *jhuming* cultivation (Gangte, 2010). Therefore, the villagers cultivated and utilize the land as per requirement and in return, they pay a tribute called *'changseo'* (basketful of paddy) to the chief. The theory behind this is that the land on which any Kuki cultivates belongs to a chief. This *changseo* is not taken by the Haokip chiefs, instead they take *belpeng*, a jar of rice-beer (Crawford, 1984). It is also an obligatory to offer the right hind leg (*samal*) of wild animals killed by the hunter. The penalty for failure to pay *samal* to chief is one *Mithun* (Crawford, 1984). The chief is also entitled to receive tax like *vohkai (pig tax), ahkai (hen tax), selkotkai* (tax on buying mithun), *selgam-potman* (tax on selling *mithun*).

The main source of livelihood for the Kuki is jhum cultivation since time immemorial. The story of how the Thadou-Kuki began rice cultivation, as narrated by Shaw (1929), is that they found a grass growing on the right bank of Chindwin River, and a king of rats called *Ju-thel* used to collect the grass along with the seeds to build his nest and, at the same time eat the seeds. The Thadou tried it and found it of excellent quality and so they became paddy growers. He further mentioned that their forefather Chongthu came out of the earth with millet and Job's tears only to eat. McCulloch (1859: 58) wrote that they (Kukis) were originally not migratory but have assumed this character latterly. Since their expulsion from their own hills, the different tribes have become mixed up together in villages situated in positions selected with reference to convenience of cultivation. The Thadou people practices jhoom and grow rice, and as they have to jhum fresh yearly, they constantly move the village site and therefore content

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themselves with living in bamboo huts thatched with grass, bamboo leaves or split bamboo stems, and make no attempt to improve the village by planting trees, cutting paths or making compounds (Carey & Tuck, 1983: 174). They constantly change the sites of their villages to suit the exigencies of their cultivation.

For the Kukis, time was not rigidly measured in abstract units such as days, weeks, months, or years. Instead, temporal divisions were closely tied to the cyclical return of agricultural rites, feasts, and community ceremonies, so that the calendar itself came to reflect the collective rhythms of social life and ensured their orderly recurrence (Durkheim, 1915). In this system, the Kukis named months according to observable changes in the natural world and the moon's position in the sky. As the annual cultivation season approached, every household were allocated each site with the assist of the village chief and his council of minister called '*loumun-chan',* by February. After locating their jhum site, each one of them should put '*dang*', in which, bark of a tree is cut and fixed one stick across, a kind of symbol to signify the plot is already selected in their selected site (Sitlhou, 1995). After selecting the plot, trees, bamboos and other plants and shrubs are cleared called '*louvat'*. As the months of February and March are rain free the rubbishes are left for getting dried up under the hot sun and in that way, it is made free of moisture called '*chapphou*'. The second phase of operation falls in the month of April when it is dried up, it is burned down in the cultivation portion while the ashes served as a manure to the soil, mostly in the kind of potash. The next day, it is customary for all to remain inside the house which is known as *Vamnit*. According to their belief, many creatures that have been burnt alive, their relatives came in search of them and that due to anger of those spirits who are searching their relatives in the field may harm or curse if any cultivator is in the field. Therefore, this was done as a symbolic expression of condolences for all the animals and insects that were perished in the jungle fire. This is followed by a ceremonial rite called *'daiphu'* which is done to please and pacify the unseen evil spirits that may reside in and around the cultivated sites. The priest and the man who select the land goes to the cultivation site in order to appease the spirits abode in the jungle for good health and bountiful harvest. The priest visits every cultivator's plot and performed '*daiphu*' ritual and chants the following words:

Kham-min Kham-min;
Gulse kahna kham-min; Tangse kahna kham-min;
Pam jetna kham-min; Pam veija kham-min;
Sithang Bolthanga kham-min (Kilong, 2012: 20).

Free translation

Heal the cultivators from the curse of the various creatures burnt alive during burning the forest for jhum field; Also heal them from the curse which come from every path of the field, heal them from the curse.

Then, they began gathering and burn the residue of logs and shrubs which was not burn properly on the day of burning the field. This process is called '*mangse'* or '*mangchom'*. The third phase is waiting for the rain in the months of May and June, the plot of land is made free from the debris and heavy logs. In monsoonal rain, the soil is made soft and muddy. Shovels and hoes are used to dress up the field at that time. After this the field is ready for sowing, the fourth phase is the seeding. Shaw noted that unlike the Nagas, the Thadou do not broad-cast the seeds but with the help of a small hoe called *tucha* digs small holes and puts in it a few seeds and then covers them up (1929: 87). This is done with a small container called *kongvoh* hung on the left waist, using the left hand for taking out the seeds and the right for hoe (Sitlhou, 1995). The weeding operation takes place in the month of July and harvested in November where the thrashed paddy is brought home by the males in basket.

The Kuki generally practiced two forms of jhum cultivation such as *Changlei* and *Joulei*. *Changlei* is a big paddy field in which large area of plot is cultivated only for one year after which a land is left for fallow. In some cases, crops like *butun* (millets), *mim* (Job"s tear) is also cultivated. *Joulei* is a kind of cultivation widely practiced where multiple crops like maize (*kolbu*), cucumber (*changmai*), ginger (*thieng*), turmeric (*ai-eng)* banana (*mot*), beans (*be*), sesame (*si),* chili and so on, and various vegetables are grown in suitable places. The agricultural tools used by the Kukis in cultivating jhum field are manufactured locally with the local raw material, while some are purchased from a local market. A village blacksmith made all the necessary agricultural tools for the villagers. He is either elected or entrusted by a village chief for a certain period to manufacture and repair the villager's agricultural tools. The post of village blacksmith is under the village chief council of minister or *Semang Pachong*. Thus, a village blacksmith plays an indirect role in shaping the village economy since he is the only responsible person who looks after villagers' tools and implements. In return, villagers usually repay the service of a blacksmith through paddy, monetary or in free labour.

Socio-Religious Dimensions in Shifting Cultivation

In the cultivation of Jhum, both male and female are required. Males are involved in cutting trees, clearing jungles and burning etc., while females are more involved in sowing seed and removing the weeds. The use of human labour is the key input in shifting cultivation system and the practice of mutual exchange of labour amongst these shifting cultivator communities is also common. Perhaps, it is for this reason that the institution of '*lawm*' begun among the Kuki society. In sociological terms, institutions comprise shared norms, values, traditions, beliefs, religion, rules, regulations, laws, civil society organizations, and government agencies (North, 1990). Thus, as man do not live alone and in order to meet his needs, food and shelter, companionship and love, recreation and play, they form associations and build institutions through which such needs are satisfied. It has both financial and cultural benefits and has great significance in rituals and festival of the tribal people.

Gangte defined *'lawm'* as an informal labour organization in a simple and corporate life of the Kukis, where in all the able-bodied young boys and girls are members (Gangte, 2003: 132).

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The village chief/*Haosa* summons a highly capable and faithful young person and entrust him with the task of organizing the *'Lawm'* or labor corps (Goswami, 1985: 95). *Lawm-Upa, Lawm-Upanu, Tollaipao,* and *Lawm-Pengkulmut,* are the important portfolio in the lawn institution. *Lawn-Upa* maintains discipline and harmony in the group and supervises the members in learning the methods of cultivation and various other types of handicrafts. If any member of the village requires the help of the group, they must first seek the permission of the *Lawm-Upa.* It is only with the permission of the *Lawm-Upa* that the *Lawm* extend its help. The role and functions of *Lawm-Upanu* is to keep a strong vigilance on the proper wearing of dresses by the female *Lawm* members. She also sees that no one gets intoxicated or develops improper liaison with any boys of the *Lawm*. *Lawm Pengkulmut* or trumpeter acts as the timekeeper of the village *Lawm* group. He sounded the *Pengkul* (trumpet) as a signal to wake up, to have food, to rest, to work etc.

Regarding *Lawm*, Lenthang (2013) noted that *lawm* members are all busy working all year round, benefiting the strong and the weak and the rich or poor. And, while engaging in the paddy fields, two experience persons are posted at both end of the field to lead the work force comprising both men and women. Therefore, weaker individuals are made to work in between two stronger so that the losses can be made up. The members work in each other's fields in rotation regardless of the capability of each individual. Thus, it is a collective social service aimed at developing a sense of responsibilities among the youth. Ater harvesting and to relief from all works in the month of January, the *lawm* member performed a festival called *lawm-kivah* in which *lawm-sel* (*mithun*) was killed. It is customary for the *Haosa* to bear the burden of feeding the boys and girls of the *Lawm* every morning and evening at his house during all the days of *Lawm-kivah* festival (Goswami, 1985). It is one of the joyous celebrations for the entire village that strengthens the bond among the villagers. The celebration also shows that shifting cultivation is not just an economic activity but a way of life as it reflects many social, cultural, and religious celebrations and conduct.

However, the life of the tribal in every aspect of it are intimately interwoven with *jhuming*. *Chang-Nungah* is a kind of paddy which never sprouts flowers or fruits which is grown sparingly in the field. The Kuki believed that this type of plant help increase fertility of the fields, and also augments production. If by chance such a plant grows, it is worshipped or properly treated. The priest or soothsayer performs certain ritual to appease the deity in charge of paddy for rich harvest on the day of harvesting. When the harvest is good and more than sufficient, a ritual called *chang-ai* (victory over paddy) was celebrated. Literally, *chang* means paddy and *ai* means subjugation thus meaning victory over paddy. This ritual is connected with harvesting of paddy and spiritual well-being of the housewife after death. If she performed the ritual, she would be then blessed and honoured in the land of *mithikho* or the land of the dead. Hunting is also very much practised mostly by means of traps and snares but the Kukis are also quite good at shooting with the matchlock guns, which are also used in warfare (Meerwarth, 1980: 31). For the hunter, a ritual called *sa-ai* is performed by man to subjugate and gain complete dominance over the spirits of the animals killed.

The purpose of agricultural rituals usually is to improve crops and livestock or poor growing conditions such as drought or famine. This purpose is usually accomplished by appeasing or gaining the favour of deities and other spirits. Hence, many agricultural rituals form part of a reciprocal arrangement between the worshiper and the deity that must be maintained in order to ensure favourable crop and livestock production (Salomane, 2004: 26-27). For instance, after seed sowing, a rite called '*Hun'* marking Thadou-Kuki New Year, and a thanksgiving to god for sowing the seeds and praying for good harvest) is organized under the supervision of the village priest. If any households are yet to finish seed sowing, all the villagers help such family because *hun* rite is to be performed collectively by the whole villagers. The socio-religious, customs, their songs, tales and also other leisure activities are intimately and organically related to their *jhuming* operation. Chavang Kut is an annual post-harvesting festival of the Kukis, celebrated on 1st November and was declared as a state holiday by the Manipur state government. It is an occasion to enjoy a time of recreation from work and to show gratitude for their successful harvest to the god they worship. It is a festival of merry making, singing folk songs, dancing, drinking of '*zu'* (rice-beer), and playing traditional games. Mim Kut is a post-harvest festival celebrated every year in the later part of December after the *mim* or job's tear crop is harvested. The festival expresses exhilaration and triumphant over the harvest of *mim*, which is the last harvest crop for the season. The Kukis strongly belief that during this festival, the souls of their deceased ancestors rise from their graves and visit their family homes. The people therefore, offer tribute to the dead souls in the form of wine that is naturally prepped from rice in every home. They also offer fresh vegetables, maize, bread and the dead souls are also worshiped by the villagers. The whole process is accompanied by song and dances and a lot of merry making (Saigal, 1978: 128). Thus, various stages of jhum cultivation from clearing the jungle till harvesting go along with many social, cultural and religious celebrations. In such celebration and activities, the two head of the village '*haosa*', the chiefs and '*thempu*', the village priest occupy an important place.

CONCLUSION

The Kuki practice of shifting cultivation from being a mere subsistence activity represents an intricate system of ecological ethics grounded in customary values and cosmological beliefs. Through rituals, taboos, and communal decision-making, the Kukis have historically maintained a balanced relationship with their environment, ensuring that cultivation cycles respect the regenerative capacities of nature. Customary norms governing land use, forest access, and the sharing of produce embody a moral code of restraint and reciprocity. However, external pressures from state interventions, market forces, and ecological degradation have increasingly disrupted these indigenous systems

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of regulation. As a result, the ecological wisdom embedded in Kuki customs risks erosion under the influence of modern legal frameworks that often overlook the moral and spiritual dimensions of land stewardship. In addition, Christianity and modernity has affected animist culture and custom both in religious and non-religious way. For instance, *Chavang Kut* (post-harvest festival) was historically rooted in religio-cultural practice, with dances and rituals inspired by animals and agricultural techniques that reflected a close relationship with ecology, its performance has undergone a significant transformation over time; traditional dances that once took place within villages have increasingly been presented outside the village and in secular public spaces, repurposed to suit contemporary social contexts, including state-level events aimed at promoting unity, and have also become arenas for socio-political contestation rather than solely sacred observances tied to harvest and community life (Sitlhou, 2018).

The transition in shifting cultivation has largely been driven by a shift from traditional rural livelihoods to alternative income opportunities. This change has occurred due to shortage of land, resource degradation, low productivity, lack in agricultural technology and employment opportunity for youth in urban centres or in the coast and inability of the farmers to depend only on shifting cultivation for livelihood. In spite of this change, the tribals in hill village still practice shifting cultivation along with hunting and gathering in the same manner as in the past. Despite the fact that shifting cultivation is a well understood socio-economic ill in Manipur, the people concerned have no alternative to abandon it under the existing circumstances (Gangte, 2010). Thus, it has been the way of life that is an integral part of the socio-cultural system of the tribal people.

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