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TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE OF THE MEITEIS AND ITS HARMONIOUS RELATIONSHIP WITH NATURE

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the complex connection between the traditional knowledge of the Meiteis and their natural environment, emphasizing the sustainable practices inherent in the culture of Manipur, India. It examines how generations of environmental care and ecological understanding have influenced the community's relationship with nature. The study does assess different traditional methods, such as farming practices, the use of indigenous plants for medicinal purposes, and spiritual beliefs that endorse environmental respect. By focusing on the Meitei people's harmonious relationship with their surroundings, the article throws light on the importance of protecting indigenous knowledge systems amid contemporary challenges. The consequences indicate that merging traditional ecological insights with modern sustainability initiatives can improve environmental management and conservation, fostering a more balanced relationship between humanity and nature.

KEYWORDS: Meitei traditional knowledge, nature, harmonious relationship, contemporary challenges

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INTRODUCTION

There are diverse Indigenous communities/ethnic groups living all over the world. They preserve complicated systems of environmental knowledge which they developed over many centuries. Our survival on earth depends on the co-existence with environment. The Meiteis are one of the ethnic groups inhabiting the state of Manipur in Northeast India. They are no exception on this matter of environmental knowledge. Their cultural practices, rituals and social norms have clearly shown their deep connection with the natural world. They have distinct Traditional knowledge which they practiced and preserved through the ages. The traditional knowledge of the

Meitei consists of ecological wisdom, conservation strategies, ethno-medicine, agronomy and cosmological explanations of nature. The concept of worldview among the Meiteis is, they do not put man above nature. Instead they have the idea of mutual dependence (Singh 1988). This ecological philosophy will remain vital for enduring living and contemporary environmental discourse.

COSMOLOGY AND SACRED ECOLOGY

Historical ecology does deal with time and space. It consists of the human and social environment, man's continuous relationship with nature and the environment (Kamei 2015:8). According to Puya, ancient scriptures, Meitei cosmology does identify nature as a living entity filled with divinities. There was prevalent of worship of fire, water, wind, and big trees in Manipur during the reign of Khagemba (Kamei 2015:261). The divinities of the Meiteis are *Lainingthou Sanamahi*, *Leimarel Sidabi* and *Umang Lai* (Devi 2011:136). J. Roy (1958: 174) writes, they used to worship many kinds of gods, among them the four became prominent viz. *Lamlai*, god of the country side, controlling the rain the primal necessity of an agricultural community, *Umanglai*, god of the forest, *Imunglai*, the household deity and ancestor of each clan. Besides them, there are spirits of the mountain passes, spirits of the lakes, rivers etc. These faiths have promoted a sense of respect towards landscapes, rivers, forests, animal etc. The preservation of *Umang Lai*, deities of sacred groves among the Meiteis is a clear example of the strongest manifestations of Meitei ecological ethics. The literal meaning of *Umang Lai* according to Saroj Nalini Parrat and John Shakespeare is sylvian god or forest deity. In early time, the abode of these deities was in the grove which was believed to be holy site free from abnormal things. It formulates the idea that as the site was so much thick just like a forest; the deities came to be known as the so called *Umanglais* (deities of forest) (Devi 2011:128). Since these sacred groves are considered as the abodes of guardian deities, they are protected through stringent customary laws and no one is allowed tree felling and hunting in the area. In other words, the beliefs and taboos associated with *Umanglais* in the forest patches are restricted to any sort of disturbance of flora and fauna. These social boundaries help to conserve the entire organism as a whole, which stand the concept of sacred groves (Devi, Khan & Tripathy 2005) TC Hodson mentions that there are 363 *Umanglais*. According to Gangmumei Kamei, there are more than 400 *Umanglais* in Manipur (Kamei 2015:141). As a matter of fact, they not only serve as biodiversity hotspots, but also preserve plants that are essential for medicine and rituals. They carry on sustaining the stability of climate. These groves provide shelter of exceptional species such as orchids, medicinal plants, and birds (Khuraijam 2015). This gives a clear picture how the spiritual values transform into preservation of ecology.

For instance, four groves such as *Konthoujam Lairembi*, *Mahabali*, *Langol Thongak Lairembi* and *Heingang Marjing* represent a rich vegetation of economic and medicinally important plant species which have been conserved and protected imbued with the religious beliefs and taboos of the local people. The four sacred groves are least disturbed and protected by regulating the human interferences through religious prohibition and prescription (Devi, Khan & Tripathy 2005).

Inanimate things like trees, stone, water were phenomena possessed with supernatural powers. In the agrarian society, tools, the means of production were important objects of worship. *Tairen* (cedrela toona) and *Langthrei* plants were inseparable objects for all rites and rituals. Worship of trees was quite familiar with the Meiteis. In *Hijam Hirao*, there is an episode of rites held on the eve of cutting the trees. This tree cult prevailed since very early time. According to *Naothingkhong Phambal Kaba*, *Naothingkhong* and his colleagues who were

sent by *Luwang* chief to cut down a tree from *Phamang* village performed the ritualistic function before cutting down the tree. Totemism was also one of the aspects of the religious beliefs of early Meiteis. Such beliefs reflected in many sources including myths. Pakhangba himself was worship in the form of Pafal (snake). Hence, snake was believed to be possessed with divine power (Devi 2011: 139-140).

As scripted in the Meitei ancient texts, the kingdom of *Kangleipak* (Manipur) is in the form of a human body: *Koubru* in the north, the abode of God is said to represent the head while *kangla*, the capital site in the region of Imphal valley is the navel and *Loktak* Lake in the south is the *Phambi-ikom* (the eternal source of progeny) while *Chingnunghut* in the far south is the evacuation place (Laiba 2022:28-29). In this faith, the people conserve these abodes/sacred sites as like the different organs of human body because one of the organs is effected means the man feels pain or injury.

TRADITIONAL AGRICULTURAL SYSTEMS

Agriculture is the backbone of the Meiteis economy. They practice wet rice cultivation with the help of plough drawn by the bullock. Wet cultivation requires the construction of permanent fields in which a cultivator has to put his energy and resources to make the cultivation productive (Devi 2011:152). There are two fundamental forms of cultivation, i) *Punghul*, in which seeds were directly sown in the ploughed fields and ii) *Lingba* in which transplantation of seedlings from the nurseries (Singh 1998: 10). In addition, they practice floating agriculture and terrace farming at the foothill areas. They mainly depend on the monsoon for their agriculture activities. All the agricultural practices they employed have adapted to hydrological systems of the Manipur valley. In Loktak Lake, there is lot of floating biomass locally known as *phumdi*. These *phumdis* are used for agriculture and fishing. It also enhances water purification. Moreover, it supports fish breeding and maintains nutrient recycling. Such eco-friendly techniques are employed by them since ancient time. These are some of the instances of indigenous sustainable innovation.

INDIGENOUS ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND SOCIAL NORMS

The Meiteis have their own customary laws and rituals. They strictly enforce and maintain them in the larger interest of the society. So, these rituals and laws play significant role in maintaining the peaceful co-existence between man and his surroundings. The *Lai Haraoba* traditions, clan taboos and ritual prohibitions are some of the rituals regulating community interactions with nature. *Namungba*, meaning taboo was an important part of religious life of the people. Many animate and inanimate objects were forbidden as these were taboos. For instance, reed was under taboo of the *Ningthouja* clan while buffalo was that of *Moirang*. Many herbs and plants were also under taboos of different lineages. So, they do not touch or destroy the herbs and plants (Devi 2011: 140). “There are taboos for all clans. The taboed things are: *Mangang/Ningthouja* clan-*Sebot linmanba* (a kind of vegetable creeper), *Luwang* clan-pigeon, water hyacin, *Khuman* clan-*Tera* (bombax malabricum), *Moirang* clan-*Moirang Khanam* (a kind of plant), sparrow, *Kha-nganba* clan-*Keisumla* (a kind of thorny climbing plant) and *Sarang Leishangthem* clan-*Chongaraba* (myna), *Changkhak* (*Dryopteris pilixmass*)” (Rabikanta 2019:47-48). Each of the seven clans had its separate usual place of abode (Jhalajit 1965: 13). In socio-cultural life of the people, *Lai Haraoba* festival re-enacts creation myths, providing a picture on the harmony between humans and environment. *Heikru Hidongba* is a festival of boat race. This particular festival does express gratitude to water bodies. The ritual of *Heikru Hidongba* was performed on the 11th of the lunar month, *Langban* (September). Two

boats were ready for the boat race. Offerings containing the items of *Konyai*, towel and *Langthrei* were placed to the boats. A garland of 108 *Heikrus* (amblic milobram) and that of 108 rice were offered to deity and the competitors. Then, the race started (Devi 2011:143). The boat race is not a fair race, but a struggle between the rowers on either sides, in which those who can deal hardest blows are usually the victors. The boats are about 90 feet long, out of one tree, and broad enough for two men to stand abreast, using their oars or paddles (McCulloch 1980: 23). Moreover, they have seasonal rituals which are related to agricultural activities. These rituals dictate agricultural rhythms, ensuring sustainable harvesting cycles. These rituals and social norms act to maintain environmental discipline in their daily life.

There are rich flora and fauna in Manipur. The most distinguished flora is the famous *Sirohi Lily* (*Lilium macklinii* named after the maiden name of the wife of its discoverer F. Kingdom Ward). Among the fauna, the Indian hornbill and rarest of them all, the brow antlered deer known as the *Sangai* may be mentioned (Kamei 2015:14).

Culturally, the *Sangai* is profoundly rooted into the myths, folklore and ancient tradition of Manipur. In one of the folk legends, the *Sangai* is interpreted as the binding soul between man and the nature. The slaughtering of the *Sangai*, an unforgivable sin, is envisaged as the collapsing/breaking up of the cordial relationship between man and the nature. When men love and respect the *Sangai*, it is honoring the nature. In the *Sangai*, therefore, man does find a way of communicating his love for the nature. According to Pryobor Singh (2004), “A strong belief that *Sangai* at *Keibul Lamjao* was to nature out of transformation from a human being made the animal attached more to the sentiment of the Manipuris.” Socially, the *Sangai* is the symbol of a prized possession of Manipur. It is one of the rarest animal species in the whole world; *Sangai* is the apple of the eye for the people.

McCulloch (1980:29-31) writes, the principal wild animals found in the valley at all seasons, are the tiger, wild-hog, hog-deer and a large species of deer peculiar to the country, which frequents the swamps in the south. The tiger and wild hog are at times very destructive to human life. The *Loktak* is rich in aquatic plants, two of which bear edible fruit. It is also the resort of aquatic birds which is covered with floating islands.

TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE OF MEDICINE AND BIODIVERSITY

Like other indigenous groups, the Meiteis also practice herbal medicine and healing in treatment of illness. There are traditional healers locally known as *Maibas* and *Maibis* in Meitei society. They possess extensive knowledge of herbal medicine and spiritual healing. So, they are regarded with honor and respect in the society. These healers treat different kinds of illness with the help of locally available medicine. In the opinion of Gangmumei Kamei (2015:150), “The *Maibas* of Manipur were actually shamans and but they acted as priests and medicine men. *Maibas* of 101 families were assigned duties of healing sick, performing rites, offering sacrifices and preparation of birth and death ceremonies.” There are more than 300 plant species used by them for healing purpose (Devi and Singh, 2001). They know the importance of the herbal medicine and this knowledge is transmitted to their sons/daughters or persons who are interested in the field. Herbal medicine is indispensable in their lives; this knowledge is interwoven with cosmology, ritual, and ecological understanding. The *Maibas* try to diagnose the cause of illness based on environment factors. Sometimes, they also find out the cause of sickness by examining the pulse of the patient. Accordingly, they give herbal medicine to cure the illness. In other cases, they

perform rituals invoking to get rid of the sickness. Keeping in view the importance of these medicinal plants, they preserve them in home garden and sacred groves. Out of veneration and fear, people did not cut down trees of the groves (Jhalajit 1965: 24).

CHALLENGES TO TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Despite the importance and resilience of traditional knowledge, Meitei Traditional Knowledge has now faced threats from different forces. With the changing time and space, there are rapid growths of urbanisation and this led to deforestation because people cut down trees for economic gain and mining and industry. The number of wild animals in the forest decline, which also contribute to extinction of rare species of plants. At one time, men do not roam in the groves because of fear of wild animals. Now, it is gone and man freely moves inside the forest. Another factor is the loss of sacred groves due to encroachment. Men started construction of road and other infrastructure for the purpose of material gain and development. “Man’s encroachment on the ecosystem for fulfilling his needs for survival and to be prosperous by exploiting the environment for which men built up social, economic and political structures” (Kamei 2015:8). Because of the above factors, there is climate change. This has great affect on agriculture and wetlands. The youth do not take interest in such traditional knowledge and they move away from their forefathers’ tradition and culture. The people give more attention to modern time developmental works and this reduces reliance on indigenous practices. Everyone on this planet wants to be part of the clean and healthy environment, but with the uninterrupted development taking place around us, we may be forced to take back seat in the long history of evolution unless protection and conservation of the environment becomes priority of the day (Yengkokpam 2018). Traditionally, the abode of Umanglai is filled with big and old trees, plants and herbs. The *Umanglais* traditions play crucial role in maintaining the ecological balance. This traditional knowledge needs to be imparted to the younger generation to sustain the tradition (Ruhichand 2025: 30). Therefore, it is urgently demanded academic efforts to document systematically, revive and incorporate traditional systems with modern sustainability models.

CONCLUSION

Meitei traditional knowledge is practiced and preserved by our forefathers through the ages without any disturbance. So, we can conclude that it represents a precious cultural and ecological heritage. They have continuous communion with nature. This is expressed through cosmology, rituals, agriculture and social norms. This un-interrupted interactions offer sustainable models for environment management. Therefore, one must recognize and preserve the traditional knowledge not only for our cultural identity, but also for global ecological wisdom.

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