

Ecology and the Thadou of Manipur: An Indigenous Reading of Nature

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Abstract

Natural environment has always been the single factor that determine the course human history. Communities around world depend upon their natural environment for their continue survival, in the process they developed their own understanding of the natural world an accord several beliefs system and cultural practices to it. The Thadou imbued the nature with sacred and this sacredness is revealed in the way they understand their natural environment. The paper seeks to investigate the ecological understanding of the Thadou of Manipur, their sensibility towards the happening in their natural surround and the beliefs system and cultural practices associated to it.

Keywords: Belief system, Cultural Practices, Nature, Thadou, Manipur

1. Introduction

The term ecology or “*oecologie*” was first coined by German biologist Ernest Haeckel in 1866 and is derived from two the Greek words, ‘oikos’ meaning ‘house’ or ‘habitat’, and ‘logos’, which means ‘study’ (Arnold & Guha, 1995) The terms ecology and environment are often used interchangeably; however, there exist some distinction between them. Environment is the sum total of all conditions and influences that affect the development and life of all organisms on earth, including all their physical, biological and their interactions(Kumar De, 2009) whereas ‘ecology’ is a science that studies the interdependent, mutual reactive and interconnected relationship between organism and their physical environment on the one hand and among the organism on the other (Singha, 1995).The modern usage of the term ecology came to prominence in the 18th century when it emerged as a more comprehensive way of looking at the earth's fabric of life; viewing all living organisms of the earth as an interacting whole (Worster,1985). Human have always imbued nature with religious significance and perceived the cosmos as the quintessential works of God and the natural world permeated with sacredness. This sacredness is manifested in the different modalities of the structure of the world and cosmic. The different cultures around the world anthropomorphise nature with their belief system, where the sky would reveal the infinite transcendent deity, as seen in the case of Greek god *Uranus*, *Tengri* of the Mongols, *Puluga* of Andaman Island inhabitants and *T'ian* or God of sky of the Chinese (Eliade,1959). In this light, the research paper seeks to make a serious academic inquiry into the ecological interaction of the Thadou of Manipur.

2. Methods and Materials

Thadou are one of the numerous Kuki-Chin groups of people¹ living in the areas between the Naga Hill

district in the north, the province of Burma in the east, the Chin and Lushai Hill in the east, and the district of Cachar in the west (Shaw.1929). Presently, they are found inhabiting areas in northeast India with predominant settlement in the present state of Manipur. Like any other tribal communities, they looked upon the world as a balance and harmonious relationship between multiple variables like that of nature, supernatural forces and others. These worldview shapes and form the core of their thought thereby manifesting their identity, social structure and way of life. Primarily, studies on the human-nature interface with regard to the said people are limited to religious and theological scholarship. However, the people perception of the natural world and the vast traditional knowledge acquired as result of ecological interactions are inherently entwined with the belief system and socio-religious and cultural practices of the people and it have remained a lacuna that barely received an academic attention. The paper seeks to present an ecological understanding of the Thadou with regard to their belief system, the happening in their natural surrounding and natural environment. Information is gathered through colonial ethnographic accounts, scholarly academic discourse along with personal communication with aged and those well versed with the Thadou culture, belief system and way of life.

3. Nature & Spirituality

The Thadou though considered as ‘animist’ clearly belief in the existence of a supreme being called “*Chung Pathein*”, who is considered to be an omnipotent and omniscient judge of man's actions, who rewards and punishes a man as per their deed in this world and the world to come. There exist close association between the nature and the spiritual belief system of the people. This is evident in the worship of *Chung Pathen* in the form of symbolic magic box known as ‘*Indoi*’, where various articles plants and animal products signifying various meaning like that of longevity, having the ability to blessed and cleansed are bound together in a certain manner are used in the symbolic worshipped. These includes *Vohipi maikem*- slanted skull of a mother pig; *Kelcha Kiheh*- twisted horn of a He-goat; *Peng* or *Um-gourd*; *Chaovei pha*-bangle made from bamboo; *Chemkol*- a knife; *Teng*- spear made of bamboo; *Pocha* or a small basket made from bamboo species called *Gopi*; *Khaopi*- a cord (Chongloi, 2008). Besides, the existence of supreme being, they also believed in the existence of lesser-known benevolent and malevolent spirits in their natural surrounding who necessitated constant pacification. The traditional priest ‘*thempu*’ plays a crucial role in pacifying or dealing with these unseen spirits through incantations ‘*thimthu*’ and sacrificial rituals known as *Kithoi*. Transmigration and immortality of souls in the form of rebirth in certain cases of unnatural death ‘*thise*’ and their believed in the existence of the land of dead ‘*mithikho*’, which one have to journey to occupied a pivotal place in the belief system of the people. Accumulation of agriculture surplus along with hunting of numerous wild games such as Tiger, Bear, Boar, different kinds of deer and others have become as means for ensuring a smooth passage to ‘*mithikho*’ in life after death. As for such several notable socio-cultural ceremonies such as feast of merits ‘*Chon*’, *Sa-ai* or hunter rite, *Chang ai* or agriculture rite, and *Gal-ai* or warrior rite began to emerged. These socio-cultural ceremonies are performed by those only who have amassed agricultural surplus and killed a numerous wild game in their lifetime. A man performing such ceremonies was considered not to be devoured or disturb by an immortal female spirits ‘*Khulsam-nu*’, who guarded the enroute to the land of the dead ‘*mithikho*’ (Doungel,1992).

4. Sacred Landscape

The natural world including trees, forests, mountains, stones, rivers and others are believed to be the mani-

festation of the *Chung Pathen*. They believed that both malevolent and benevolent spirits reside in these places. Several folk tales and legend are attributed to these places. have a habit of asking permission verbally before undertaking any activities in and around these places. Natural landscapes with enormous sizes and unique structures such as a mountain, strange cliffs, caves, and rocks are held sacred by the people. They firmly believed that strange and dreadful cliffs and caves '*Kolse leh themkho*', were the dwelling place of supernatural entity and were revered by the people. Few such natural landforms revered by the Thadous identified as Koubru Mol, Kolkang, Karot Kol, Kaineng Kol, Vangai Lhang, Makoi Lhang (Lhouvum, Personal communication). An unusual mound that sprouted between two hills or mountains, also known as *Moullukim* in local parlance, was believed to be the home of *Gamhoise*. when encountered with such a structure, they would entreat by bowing their head in affirmative or make a sacrificial offer with fowl, pig, goat and so on. (Haokip,2019). The folk legend and sacred charms of the people have a strong reference to the Barak River '*Tuiluong*' and the Imphal river '*Gun*' (Vaiphei, 2024). They prefer water that is being drawn from streams, rivers, and subterranean aquifers but have reservations about water taken from sources like that of *Tuisam* or water springs, *Shi* or marshes, swamps or damp areas, which are collectively called *Silah-Boulah*. They believe that malevolent spirits reside in these water bodies and could capture a person's soul which may even cause death. To pacify these spirits, they adhere to certain dos and don'ts in and around such water source.

5. The People understanding of Natural Phenomenon

The ecological sensibility of the people is also seen in the way they understand the happening in their natural surroundings. The different months of the year are conceived on the basis of what they have experienced in their natural surroundings. For instance, January is named as '*tolbol*' where '*tol*' means land and '*bol*' means dust, thereby depicting dry and dusty nature of the surrounding (Sitlhou. 2022). In the same manner the different seasons are also named as per their experience in temperature, day and night differentiation in their nature surrounding. To illustrate summer season in local parlance is named as '*Nipi lai*'i, denoting the longevity of day to night and higher temperature at time of the year. The different lunar phases are named on the basis of their appearances as viewed from the Earth. These understanding of the happening in the natural world would not only determine their yearly affairs but also usher for harmonious relations with their natural environment. Accordingly agricultural operations, cultural rites and ceremonies, feast would be performed and carried out. The period from new moon to full moon is regarded as auspicious time for arranging marriage and other socio-cultural ceremonies. Trees would be fell during the said period as it is believed that the tree remains more durable, sturdy and not easily decayed.

6. Beliefs and Practices surrounding Plants and Animals

Plants and its products occupied a significant place in the life of the people. Aside from its functional utility as food source, timber, materials for building houses, firewood others. They are also central to the socio-religious rites and cultural practices of the people. In their religious rituals practices and beliefs system the '*Se*' plant constitutes one of the main components of *Indoi* or household god. The same is used as a sacred post in religious rite known as *Sekon tun*, which is a family ritual to attain good health and fortune. Similarly, a particular bamboo species knowns '*Gopi*' was widely used in socio-religious ceremonies. A skewer made from '*Gopi*' bamboo was used as tool to kill an animal while performing household rituals. In socio-cultural ceremonies such as feast of merits '*Chon*' and '*Seldinglhuh*' the usage of this skewer also termed as *Chon tul* have several socio-cultural connotations as only the eldest male

member within a family or clan was supposed to possess it. An individual would perform such ceremonies and rites only after obtaining prior permission by acquiring the skewer. This cultural practice convey seniority in lineage within the patrilinear set up thereby strengthening the patrilinear relationship. In mortuary custom, it would be used to prepare the scaffolding in which the was deceased body was to be laid during funeral ceremonies. The same would be also be erected as funeral post, in which a number of 'Khongma' (Rhus chinensis) would be inserted between the spilt top of the funeral post. Here the fruits denoted of the numbers of animals hunted by the deceased during his life time. Erection of the funeral post is done as mark of showing the status and prestige of the deceased individual (Lhouvum, 2016).

The Thadous associates trees with strange and unique appearances, trees without leaves and branches 'Thinglubul' and trees with extended roots in nearby streams and rivers referred to as 'Thingjungkai' with supernatural entity that can cause harm to a person. As for such they avoid undertaking any activities in and around it and such places are usually revered. The people held in a belief that raising of certain trees within the house vicinity was considered to be a bad men that might bring ill fate and misfortune to the family. Here are few such trees in local dialects and the reasons why they are forbidden are: *Mongthing*- the trees have widespread roots covering up a large area of the house compound. *Longlhi* – the name of itself bears human corpse and tears as 'long' would denote 'corpse' and 'lhi' as 'tears'; *Thing hang*- the tree cause irritation to human body when it came into contact; *Mot saiso* - belonging to a banana species the trees a strange sound; *Lamkhong* (jackfruit tree)- its widespread roots spreading towards human settlement is foreseen as a sign of ill fate and misfortune (Lhouvum, 2016).

Hunting was considered as manly trait and a man hunting numerous wild games was highly respected within the community. Acquisition of animals was considered as a form of wealth and social status and was integral to their belief system and cultural practices of the people. The Thadou sees hunting of animals as a way for ensuring a smooth passage to afterlife by those performing feast of merits 'Chon', in which only an individual who have killed a number of wild games in lifetime was able to performed such ceremonies. Domesticated animals like those of mithun, fowl, dog and pig were believed to be the manifestation of sacred power and are frequently being used in socio-religious rites and cultural practices. For instance, a fowl would be used as a means to ascertain positive affirmation from the spirits of the lands while constituting a new village and jhum fields for cultivation (Lhouvum, Personal communication). In marriage occasions and mortuary custom mithun served as a form of bridal price 'man' and corpse price 'Longman' respectively. In case of breach of the existing social norms within the community customary disputes and conflicts settlement like those 'doulut satha' seeking of pardon, 'hemkham' reconciliation, and 'Salam-sat' is done either by killing or imposing a pig or mithun as a form of punishment and penalty. The people count shedding of one's blood as defilement of soil and in circumstance where bloodshed is involved a cleansing ritual known as 'tolthe' would be performed by killing a pig, in which the pig blood would be spill over the ground as marks of cleansing the soil. Among the Thadous, animals also acted as ways and means for social bonding and fulfilling family customary obligations. If an individual performs any social occasion, there are certain norms of distribution of its meat referred to ask 'Sakinlah'. The different parts of the slain animals in an occasion are set apart for different categories of relatives of the performer. To illustration, the neck portion 'Sangong' is given to the performer maternal relative referred to as 'Pute'. The spinal portion of the slain animal 'sating' goes as eldest brother share. However, the customary practice of distribution of meat is prohibited on animals slain for the purpose of religious rites and those that account for customary fines and punishment (Haokip,2009). The Thadou in their effort to alleviate themselves from illness they look upon nature for its remedial measures. They beliefs in both

naturalistic and personalistic ailments and their notion of health and wellness is based on their ability and inability to their normal daily work. Both plants and animals by products are used in therapeutics treatment of ailments, in which sacrificial rituals ‘*kithoi*’ dominate personalistic treatment process (Haokip, 2014). Domesticated animals such as mithun, pig and fowl are widely used as sacrificial offering depending upon the gravity of the illness. Whereas in naturalistic ailments medicinal plants and herbs and sometimes in combination in animals by product are widely used. The traditional priest ‘*thempu*’ along with traditional herbalist plays a significant important role in treatment of ailments. Though the trait of traditional medicinal practice is not customarily hereditary however it’s generally transmitted from father to son within a family

7. Conclusion

From the above discussion, nature was not merely as a resource of exploit, but was also considered sacred that is inalienable to their life and cultural practices. Natural environment including landforms with unique size and enormous structure such as mountain, valley, cliffs, water source were associated with supernatural entity and are revered by the people. They have the cultural practice of seeking asking verbal permission and adhering to certain dos and don’ts before undertaking any activities around these places. Besides, certain things found in nature like those of *Se* tree, wild creeper, he-goat, sow and others are believed to be the manifestation of the sacred are widely used in their religious and ritual practices. Ecological sensibility of the Thadou can be seen in their naming seasons, lunar cycle and the different month of the year base on their experiences and accordingly ceremonial and agricultural activities would be carried out. Plants and animals apart from being a source of livelihood are intrinsic to their socio-cultural practices. In their belief system, hunting of animals was seen as a way for securing afterlife and means for fulfilling societal and family cultural obligations. In addition, both plants and animals and its products are widely utilised in therapeutic treatment of illness be it as sacrificial offering in personalistic illness or as a medicinal product in naturalistic ailments. Thus, we find a close cordial and sustainable relations between the people and their nature environment.

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