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Nature Worship And Conservation Through The Lens Of Cultural Ecology

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Abstract

This study critically explores the ecological consciousness embedded within the ritual traditions, oral literature, and cultural practices of the Meetei community of Manipur, with particular focus on *Lai Haraoba* and its associated folksongs. Drawing upon the theoretical framework of cultural ecology proposed by Julian Steward, the paper explores how indigenous belief systems, ritual performances, and oral narratives reflect a deeply rooted relationship between human society and the natural environment. The study argues that the Meetei worldview does not perceive nature merely as a material resource but as a sacred and living entity intimately connected to social, spiritual, and cultural existence. Through an analysis of ritual songs such as *Nonglao Ishei*, *Louta Ishei*, *Louyaan Ishei*, and *Phoukou Ishei*, the paper demonstrates how agricultural life, seasonal cycles, rain invocation, fertility rituals, and reverence for forests and water bodies were integrated into the cultural fabric of pre-colonial Manipuri society. The elegiac lament associated with the cutting of a tree in *Hijing Hirao* further reveals an indigenous environmental ethic rooted in empathy, restraint, and coexistence. The study also highlights traditional ecological practices such as taboos on cutting trees during particular seasons and the indigenous systems of rainwater harvesting, which collectively illustrate a sustainable mode of living. At a time of increasing ecological crisis and environmental degradation, the study emphasizes the contemporary relevance of indigenous knowledge systems. This study also argues that Meetei oral traditions and ritual practices offer alternative ecological philosophies capable of contributing meaningfully to present discussions on sustainability, conservation, and environmental ethics. The study employs a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach through textual analysis, oral narratives, folklore studies, and cultural interpretation, supported by secondary sources on cultural ecology, indigenous traditions, and environmental practices.

Keywords: Cultural Ecology, *Lai Haraoba*, Meetei Oral Traditions, Indigenous Environmental Ethics, Sustainable Practices, Ritual Folksongs

Introduction

As this study focuses on cultural ecology, it becomes essential to first understand the concepts of ecology and cultural ecology before engaging further with the discussion. Ecology refers to the study of the interrelationship between living organisms and their surrounding environment, including plants, animals, humans, climate, and natural resources. It explores the intricate networks of dependence and interaction that sustain life and maintain ecological balance. Cultural ecology, a concept introduced by Julian Steward, examines the ways in which human societies adapt to and interact with their environments through cultural practices, belief systems, technology, and social organization. It highlights the intimate relationship between culture and nature, revealing how communities evolve sustainable ways of living in harmony with their ecological surroundings.

Julian Steward introduced the term “Cultural Ecology” in 1937 and later described it in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (1968) as the study of how societies adapt to their environments. Cultural ecology focuses on the changing relationship between people, culture, and nature (Bates, 1995; Everett, 1996). This field is important not only for academic understanding but also because it helps explain present day environmental challenges such as deforestation, loss of biodiversity, food scarcity, and soil erosion. These problems often emerge from the excessive use of natural resources and highlight the need for conservation and sustainable practices.

Cultural ecologists also emphasize the importance of preserving traditional and local knowledge systems. Across the world, indigenous communities have developed practices that promote sustainability and ecological balance. Many medicines used in modern healthcare, for example, were originally derived from traditional healing practices. Ancient crops such as potatoes from the Andes and barley from Tibet are now cultivated and consumed globally. Similarly, long standing agricultural methods from countries like Indonesia and Guatemala, especially multilayered and mixed cropping systems, continue to inspire sustainable farming practices today. The knowledge accumulated by communities over thousands of years remains an invaluable resource in a world increasingly affected by environmental crises.

Zimmermann et al. (2023), in their study published in *Vegetation History and Archaeobotany*, examined agricultural practices in the Chicha Soras Valley. Through archaeobotanical evidence, they demonstrated that pre-Inca and Inca communities cultivated the rugged landscape in ways that worked in harmony with nature. These societies carefully maintained terraces and rotated crops such as maize and native plants to preserve soil fertility and prevent environmental degradation. Their findings show that a deep understanding of local ecology enabled high altitude communities to sustain agriculture over long periods of time.

In India, the traditional practice of jhum cultivation in Tripura provides another example of the relationship between culture and ecology. Bhat et al. (2024), in their study titled “Vegetation Disturbance and Regrowth Dynamics in Shifting Cultivation: A Case Study from Tripura, India,” used Landsat time series data to analyse patterns of vegetation loss and regrowth over three decades. Their study found that although shifting cultivation temporarily reduces vegetation cover, forests are capable of significant regeneration during fallow periods. The research highlights that jhum cultivation can remain sustainable when practiced with proper ecological balance and community management. The authors also stress the importance of combining indigenous knowledge with modern conservation strategies for long term environmental sustainability.

The ecology of Rajasthan has also shaped the cultural practices of its people, especially in relation to water management. Over centuries, communities in the desert region learned to harvest and conserve rainwater by carefully observing the monsoon cycle. In their influential study, “Rethinking Rehabilitation:

Socio Ecology of Tanks and Water Harvesting in Rajasthan, North West India,” Shah and Raju (2001) examined more than 4,600 irrigation tanks across the region. They argued that these tanks are not simply engineering structures but also important social institutions deeply connected to village life. The reservoirs support irrigation, livestock, domestic needs, and ritual activities, reflecting the close relationship between environmental management and cultural values. Shah and Raju further explained that the effectiveness of these systems depends largely on community cooperation, including local councils, caste-based responsibilities, and rituals that reinforce collective care for water resources. Their study illustrates how tradition, cooperation, and local knowledge have enabled communities to survive in a challenging desert environment.

A similar connection between culture and ecology can be observed in Japan through Shinto traditions. In *Sacred Forests, Sacred Nation: The Shinto Environmentalist Paradigm and the Rediscovery of Chinju no Mori*, Aike P. Rots explores how Shinto beliefs contribute to environmental conservation. Shinto, one of Japan’s oldest religious traditions, regards rivers, mountains, trees, and rocks as sacred. Rots explains that sacred shrine forests, known as *Chinju no Mori*, have been protected for centuries because of their spiritual significance. Through historical and contemporary examples, the study demonstrates how religious beliefs and cultural traditions can help preserve biodiversity and maintain ecological balance over long periods of time.

This study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary methodology based on textual analysis, folklore studies, and cultural interpretation. Primary attention is given to Meetei oral traditions, ritual songs, and Lai Haraoba performances to examine indigenous ecological consciousness. The study also relies on secondary sources related to cultural ecology, environmental studies, and indigenous knowledge systems. Through interpretative analysis, the research explores how ritual practices, oral narratives, and traditional beliefs reflect sustainable relationships between humans and nature.

Lai Haraoba: Its Impact on the Environment

The earliest religious systems across the world were deeply rooted in nature, where the sacred was perceived through natural phenomena such as stones, caves, mountains, rivers, trees, and the earth itself. Among the Meiteis of Manipur, trees occupied a position of profound spiritual significance, reflecting a worldview in which nature and divinity were inseparably intertwined. Sacred shrines, locally known as *Laishang*, were traditionally situated within forested spaces or sacred groves, which came to be associated with the divine presence of the *Umang Lai*, literally meaning forest or sylvan deities. Even today, Manipur is believed to possess 365 sacred groves dedicated to these deities, each embodying a living relationship between the community, spirituality, and the natural environment. The worship of these deities finds its most vibrant expression in the festival of *Lai Haraoba*, often translated as the “Merry Making of the Gods.”

Lai Haraoba is not merely a religious festival but a vast repository of the cultural memory and indigenous knowledge of the Meetei people. The festival is deeply embedded in oral traditions consisting of myths, hymns, ritual songs, riddles, proverbs, chants, and ceremonial performances that have been transmitted across generations. The preservation of these oral narratives largely rests in the hands of the *Amaibis* and *Amaibas* (priestesses and priests), along with the *Pena khongbas*’s, traditional performers who sing while playing the *Pena*, the ancient one stringed fiddle of Manipur. Through its sacred use of time, ritual space, music, movement, and symbolic objects, *Lai Haraoba* recreates the cosmology, social customs, and ritualistic traditions of the Meetei community. For scholars and cultural practitioners alike, the festival remains one of the most powerful mediums through which the cultural identity and historical consciousness of the Manipuri people may be understood and interpreted.

The uniqueness of *Lai Haraoba* lies in its role as a living cultural tradition that continues to preserve the authenticity of Manipuri heritage. In this regard, E. Nilakanta Singh observes:

“The Lai Haraoba mirrors the entire culture of the Manipuri people. It reveals its strengths and weaknesses, the beliefs and superstitions, and perhaps also the charm and happiness of the Manipuri people. It reflects the people and their interests.” (Singh, 1961)

Traditionally, the festival is celebrated for a week or longer, usually beginning on auspicious odd dates such as the first, third, fifth, or seventh day of a month. The celebrations generally take place between April and July, following discussions and preparations undertaken collectively by village elders and festival authorities. The rituals of *Lai Haraoba* are broadly divided into three stages: the opening ceremony known as *Ekouba*, the series of daily ritual performances, and the concluding rites referred to as *Lairoi*.

Music and dance form the aesthetic soul of *Lai Haraoba*. Among its many expressive forms are the traditional folksongs of Manipur, known as *Khullak Ishei*. These songs emerge from the lived experiences of the people and have been preserved through oral transmission from one generation to another. Characterized by simple melodic structures and narrative lyricism, these folksongs embody the collective emotions, aspirations, and worldview of the community. They serve not merely as artistic expressions but also as cultural documents that reveal the intimate relationship between the people and their environment. Scholars such as R.K Jhalajit Singh have documented numerous examples of such songs, including those associated with agricultural fertility, seasonal abundance, praise of nature, and devotional hymns dedicated to local deities. Jackson (2019) states that agricultural folk songs reflect the “collective experiences of rural communities” (p. 7243). He further presents 4 folk songs closely associated with the agricultural practices of the valley communities of Manipur, revealing the ecological consciousness embedded in the traditional life and cultural practices of the Meetei people. The songs are as follows:

i. **Nonglao Ishei or Rain making song**

Nong O chutharo
 Lanjing maton thumhatlo
 Patsoi nurabi taotharo
 Wunam pakhang khunjaro
 Koupa kounu nong o
 Loiching loiya nong o
 Yiren yikham nong o
 Thangching koirol nong o
 Wangbrel khanachaoba nong o
 Sampuma harapa nong o
 Chingkhei nongpok nong o
 Haokapchingsang nong o
 Khunpham ngangcheng nong o
 Leirinonglihouro
 Leikhongnongkhongnem o
 Koroukhontumkhonglak o
 Malleleirumpilumkhatlak o
 Laijayithapinangthapirak o
 Laijayikhaipinangkhaipirak o

English Translation:

Pour down O rain
 Submerge the top of Langching
 Wash down the girls of Patsoi
 Collect the young men of Unam
 Rain of the Koubru hills
 Rain of the foothills and hillocks
 Rain of the Iril river
 Rain of the Thangching hills
 Rain of Wangbren Thanachaoba
 Rain of Shambun Maharaba
 Rain of the east
 Rain of the Hill ranges of Haokap
 Rain of the Khunpham Ngangjeng
 Sprout rainclouds in heaven and earth
 Lower the firmaments of the sky
 Bring the roaring thunder
 Make the sky heavier than ever
 Come down, O Laijaethabi
 Pour down O rain.

Nonglao Ishei is a kind of ritualistic folksong supposed to be sung in groups at the time of severe drought in the country, and this is to be done before dawn by the Priest (*Maiba*), Priestesses (*Maibi*), men and women settled in that area. With the pagan background, rhymed lines are addressed to the rain-god to pour down in torrents. As the rain is invoked to come down and submerge the high point of the *Langching Hills*, wash away aged men and women and also young girls of *Patsoi*, so that the boys of *Unam* may pick them up.

According to a personal interview with Guru Nameirakpam (o) Hemolata *Amaibi*, culturally, a story related to *Nonglao Ishei* is narrated orally as when the country or the land is facing a severe drought the Priests (*Maiba*), Priestesses (*Maibi*) and the *Maichous* all went up to the *Langmaiching* hill and from the spot called *Nungbi nungnao khong* where the *Maichous* bring some *nungbi nungnao* (stones/ pebbles) and the ritual worship of *nungbi nungnao* take place at the Iril river for fifteen days and after the rain pours down the *Maichous* again return *nungbi nungnao* back to its original place at the *Langmaiching* hill.

Nonglao Ishei is a ritualistic group folk song traditionally sung during times of severe drought in the land. Performed before dawn, the song is collectively sung by the *Amaiba* (priest), *Amaibi* (priestess), and the men and women of the community as a sacred invocation for rain. Rooted in the ancient Meetei religious tradition, the verses are addressed to the rain deity, earnestly praying for heavy rainfall to restore fertility and life to the parched land. The imagery within the song is deeply symbolic and poetic, invoking rain so abundant that it would submerge the peaks of the *Langching Hills* and sweep away even the elderly and young maidens of *Patsoi*, to be carried towards the plains of *Unam*.

Nameirakpam Hemolata also states that there exists an oral narrative associated with *Nonglao Ishei*. It is said that whenever the land suffered from prolonged drought, the *Maibas*, *Maibis*, and *Maichous* (traditional scholars and ritual specialists) would ascend the sacred *Langmaiching Hill*. From a place known as *Nungbi Nungnao Khong*, they would collect sacred stones or pebbles called *Nungbi Nungnao*. These stones were then ritually worshipped beside the Iril River for fifteen days as part of a ceremonial appeal for rain. Once the rains finally arrived, the *Maichous* would respectfully return the sacred stones to their original place on *Langmaiching Hill*. This ritual tradition reflects the profound ecological consciousness of the Meetei community, where natural elements such as hills, rivers, stones, and rain were regarded not merely as physical entities but as sacred forces intimately connected to human survival and spiritual life.

ii. **Louta Ishei or Tilling Song**

*Poirei Khunja hup
Tayumnaija tin
Yotleinongthangkup
Thpurilisangtoi
Tengpaklallusa
Harunonggafou
Porommata sham
Kaithet marutup
Yupakhuman tan
Yangdoumamei sham
Wahikoktaitup
Lourishundaiyan
Pirenmachikhom
Khaleingamthungle.*

English Translation:

Gathered are the village folks
Attendants are also assembled
Lighting spade strike
Conquering the length of the earth
Crushing the land into crumbles
Grass covered earth is dried
And, the grasses are hewed
Useless plants are destroyed
Digging what is dug up again
Repeating the strikes of the spades
The heads of wahis are chopped off
The edges of the Louri are cleaned
And, the grass are collected and dumped
The earth thus is covered.

Louta Ishei, the folksong is sung on the eve of ploughing the field when the young season sets in. It begins with an effusive outburst of incantatory syllables, followed by the racy enumeration of the glories of the ever-bright Sun. The recounting of the first turning up of earth for sowing by the divine couple, with the help of other divine hands and the concluding lines drawn up with a long-spirited prayer for bountiful blessings.

iii. **Louyaan Ishei**

*Epalouniyalluhe
Hey yanse
Epulouniyalluhe
Hey yanse
Leipakmaratapnabalouniyalluhe
Hey yanse
Ningthoupunsinabalouniyalluhe
Hey yanse
Maheimarongchumnabalouniyalluhe
Hey yanse
Punshinungsanglounidayalluhe
Hey yanse
Shougrimayangbalounidayalluhe*

Hey yanse
 Lombafadigomlounida yalluhe
 Hey yanse
 Singkhasingthumlouniyalluhe
 Hey yanse.

English Translation:

My father's field it is
 Let's till
 My fotrefathers' field it is
 Let's till
 Till the field for a peaceful kingdom
 Let's till
 Till the field for the king's long life
 Let's till
 Till the field for a prosperous kingdom
 Let's till
 Till the field for bountiful crops
 Let's till
 Till the field for soigri and mayangba
 Let's till
 Till it for it is the field for lomba and fadigom
 Let's till
 Till it for the field for phorel and phoujao
 Let's till
 Till it for it is the field for singkha and singthum
 Let's till.

Louyan Ishei reflects a sense of inheritance. It is a structure which is evolved in the course of a long process and a long history in the life of the people. With the passage of time, these practices have been refined and crystallized as a sacred tradition, in such a way that it has become a part of Meitei culture.

iv. *Phoukou Ishei*

O Goddess, *Phouoibi*, the goddess of paddy,
 Come, come, come
 Make for us heaps of ThangyiPhou
 Come, come, come
 Goddess *Phouoibi*
 Come. Come, come.

Phoukou Ishei is sung during the harvesting of the paddy crop. *Phou* means paddy, *kou* means to call up, and *ishei* means song, symbolising the welcoming of the collected harvest. The idea behind the lines is to call on *Phouoibi* (the goddess of paddy) and to venerate her for a good harvest and prosperous production.

One notable example is *Hijing Hirao*, a long narrative which tells of the discovery of the secret of floatation, and the felling of a great tree to make a boat. It includes a moving lament uttered by the mother of the tree, bewailing his fate. There is a reference to the custom of offering the 'redemption price' to the mighty tree before it was cut down to make a boat in the *Uyarol* lyric in the *Lai Haraoba*.

At dead of night
 The mother who begot the tree
 And the mother of all giant trees, the queen of the hill range,
 And the mistress of the gorges.
 Took the tall and graceful tree to her bosom and wailed:

‘Oh my son, tall and big. While you were yet an infant, a sapling,
Did I not tell you...
To be an ordinary tree?
At daybreak, hacked at the trunk,
You will be found lying prostrate.
No longer will you respond to your mother’s call.
Nor a likeness of you
Shall be found, when I survey
The whole hillside.
Who shall now relieve my grief?

The above lines are composed in the form of an elegy, poignantly portraying the sorrowful act of felling a tree. The woodcutters proceed with their task as though the tree’s destiny has already been sealed. Beyond its lyrical narrative, the lament of Mother Nature, Goddess Irok Lai Chanu, on the eve of the tree’s destruction reveals the profound ecological consciousness of the ancient Meiteis. It reflects a deep emotional bond with nature and highlights the community’s enduring concern for environmental preservation and the indispensable role of the natural world in human existence.

In pre-colonial Manipuri society, nature was not merely a source of economic sustenance or physical survival; it was intimately connected to the psychological, spiritual, and cultural life of the people. The Meiteis lived in close harmony with their environment, guided by indigenous ecological ethics that encouraged restraint, balance, and reverence toward the natural world. The idea of sustainable use of natural resources was deeply embedded in everyday customs and social practices, many of which continue to survive even today.

Various taboos regulated the cutting of trees and plants, reflecting an indigenous system of environmental conservation. Bamboo, for instance, was not to be cut on Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays, or on new moon days. Banana trees were forbidden to be felled on Saturdays, while Fridays were regarded as inauspicious for cutting any kind of tree. Likewise, trees and plants were never cut during their flowering season, and the plucking of leaves or fruits at night was strictly prohibited. These customs were not mere superstitions; rather, they embodied a traditional ecological wisdom rooted in the principles of sustainable harvesting and the protection of natural resources.

The pre-colonial Meitei society also practised indigenous forms of water conservation and rainwater harvesting. The presence of ponds in almost every household stands as evidence of a traditional and efficient water-harvesting system. While the inhabitants of the hills relied upon streams, springs, and natural basins for their survival, the people of the valley regions depended largely on rivers, ponds, and freshwater springs. Such practices reveal a society that understood the rhythms of nature and sought to coexist with it through careful preservation, collective responsibility, and ecological sensitivity.

Conclusion

From the above discussions, it can be concluded that the cultural traditions of the Meitei community embody a profound ecological philosophy in which nature is perceived not as an object of exploitation but as a sacred and living presence intimately connected to human existence. Through the ritual performances, oral narratives, and agricultural folksongs associated with Lai Haraoba, the research demonstrates how environmental ethics were deeply woven into the social and spiritual fabric of pre-colonial Manipuri society. Songs such as *Nonglao Ishei*, *Louta Ishei*, *Louyaan Ishei*, and *Phoukou Ishei* are not merely artistic expressions; they function as repositories of ecological memory, preserving indigenous knowledge related to rainfall, agriculture, fertility, and sustainable coexistence with nature.

The lament in *Hijing Hirao* particularly reflects an emotional and ethical relationship with trees and forests, transforming the act of felling a tree into a moment of collective grief and moral reflection. Such narratives reveal an environmental consciousness far more humane and sustainable than many modern approaches driven by unchecked industrialization and consumerism.

At a time when ecological crises threaten both human and non-human life, the indigenous ecological wisdom embedded within Meetei oral traditions offers an alternative framework for environmental thought. The study therefore argues that preserving these cultural traditions is not only essential for safeguarding heritage but also for reimagining sustainable futures rooted in harmony, reverence, and collective responsibility toward nature.

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