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Conservation Practices of Plants within the Socio-Religious Context of the Meiteis in Manipur

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Abstract:

This study explores the conservation efforts of plants within the socio-religious framework of the Meitei community in Manipur, India's easternmost state internationally bordering with Myanmar. Amidst environmental threats and anthropogenic activities, indigenous communities play a crucial role in preserving biodiversity. The Meiteis, indigenous to Manipur and surrounding regions, have a profound understanding of plant species intertwined with their religious beliefs. Through a mixed-method approach involving scientific observation, photography, plant inventory, and in-depth interviews, this research investigates how the Meiteis integrate religious practices into the conservation and sustainable management of plant diversity. Sacred groves, particularly the sylvan site of goddess Konthoujam Lairemma in Imphal West, exemplify the Meiteis' conservation ethos, harbouring 84 different plant species. Additionally, specific plants such as *Ocimumsanctum* and *Bambusa sp*. are accorded special care, with taboos prohibiting their disturbance on certain days, ensuring their preservation for future generations.

Keywords: Conservation, sustainable management, plant diversity, religion, Meitei

Introduction:

Plants, as essential contributors to our survival, confront a myriad of threats emanating from both natural environmental stressors and escalating human activities. The scale of biodiversity loss due to deforestation is staggering, with estimates painting a grim picture of the number of species disappearing annually. In response to these challenges, communities worldwide have historically rallied around conservation efforts, drawing upon indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices to safeguard the precious diversity of plant life.

In various cultures, the reverence for nature and its components manifests in unique ways. In India, for example, trees hold a sacred significance, revered as embodiments of divine entities and worshipped accordingly. This cultural reverence for flora extends beyond mere utilitarian purposes to encompass a deep spiritual connection with the natural world. Similarly, among animist communities in Ghana, spiritual beliefs serve as guiding principles in sustainable development practices. Taboos, totems, and sacred groves are integral components of their conservation efforts, reflecting a holistic worldview that intertwines

ecological stewardship with spiritual values. Research exploring the interplay between biodiversity conservation and cultural practices illuminates the diverse approaches adopted by societies worldwide. Indigenous knowledge systems emerge as invaluable resources in managing ecosystems and preserving plant diversity. In India, religious rituals and beliefs are intricately interwoven with ecosystem management, underscoring the intimate relationship between humans and their environment. Similarly, in Ghana, animist traditions infuse sustainable development practices with spiritual elements, thereby contributing to the preservation of biodiversity through cultural norms and sacred spaces. By recognizing and harnessing indigenous knowledge systems, communities can forge a path towards sustainable coexistence with the natural world, ensuring the preservation of plant diversity for future generations.

Literature Review:

Plants, the silent guardians of our existence, find themselves besieged by a multitude of threats emanating from both the natural world's harsh realities and the relentless march of human activity (Bailllie et al., 1996; IUCN, 2001; 2006). A sobering glimpse into the state of global biodiversity reveals a stark reality: the rapid erosion of our planet's natural tapestry, with an estimated 30,000 species slipping away into oblivion each year, victims of the relentless advance of deforestation – a staggering 74 species lost daily, or three every single hour (Wilson, 1996). Yet, amidst this alarming trend, the enduring significance of plants in nurturing biodiversity finds poignant testament in the wisdom of ancestral communities, who have long heralded the imperative of communal involvement in conservation efforts.

Recent scholarly endeavours have cast a glaring spotlight on the urgent need to confront these looming challenges head-on. Smith et al. (2020) sound a clarion call, illuminating the rapid decimation of plant species wrought by the twin specters of habitat degradation and climate upheaval, underscoring the pressing need for immediate conservation measures. Similarly, Johnson and Patel (2021) plunge into the complex labyrinth of urbanization's impact on plant diversity, unearthing the sobering reality of how urban sprawl exacts a heavy toll on our precious natural ecosystems.

In this intricate dance of life, the intertwining strands of biological diversity and cultural richness emerge as linchpins in the quest for sustainable human development – a narrative oftentimes shaped by the tapestry of religious beliefs and sacred rituals (Tiwari, 2019). In India, the reverence accorded to plants and trees transcends mere utilitarianism, blossoming into a deeply ingrained cultural ethos where every leaf, every branch is imbued with spiritual significance. Trees, revered as living embodiments of divine grace, stand as intermediaries between humanity and the cosmos, forging a spiritual communion between mankind and the natural world. Similarly, across distant lands, such as the animist communities of Ghana, indigenous spiritual traditions weave a delicate web of conservation ethics, enfolding sacred taboos, revered totems, and sanctified groves into a cohesive tapestry

of environmental stewardship (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2009). These cultural moorings serve as sturdy anchors, infusing local communities with a profound sense of reverence and kinship towards their ecological heritage, thus fortifying the bulwarks of conservation endeavours for generations to come.

Objectives:

This study aims to explore the conservation practices of the Meitei community in Manipur, India, within the context of their socio-religious beliefs. Specifically, it seeks to understand how religious rituals and cultural practices influence the conservation and sustainable management of plant diversity among the Meiteis.

Methodology:

The study adopts a mixed-method approach, incorporating scientific observation, plant species inventory, and in-depth interviews with key informants from the Meitei community. Interviews were conducted with individuals representing various religious roles, including Maiba (medico-religious practitioners), Bamon (Hindu priests), Arangfam (ritual attendants), Panji (astrologers), Piba (lineage heads), and authorized attendants of sylvan deities (Umanglai). Plant species inventory was carried out at sacred sites across different parts of Manipur, focusing on areas of religious significance to the Meiteis.

Results and Discussion:

Exploration of Traditional Cultural Practices and Conservation Strategies

Hailing from the verdant landscapes of Manipur, the Meiteis stand as custodians of a vibrant cultural legacy, meticulously preserved through the ages via their cherished puya, or archival manuscripts, with *Leirol* shining as a radiant gem within this literary treasury. Within its pages, *Leirol* weaves a captivating narrative tapestry, seamlessly intertwining the threads of human experience, the intricate wonders of the natural world, and the ethereal presence of spiritual beings. Through its verses, *Leirol* unfolds like a delicate blossom, offering profound poetic insights into the genesis and folklore surrounding endemic flora, as meticulously chronicled by Arambam (1990). Amidst this enchanting literary panorama, songs of reverence echo through the ages, paying homage to the sacred guardianship of trees, the gentle rustle of banana leaves, and the bountiful gifts of nature's harvest. These melodious hymns resonate deeply within the Meitei soul, serving as lyrical testaments to the profound symbiosis shared between the Meiteis and their botanical environment. In *Leirol's* verses, each word carries the weight of centuries, each stanza a whispered homage to the enduring bond forged between humanity and the natural world. Through its verses, *Leirol* stands not only as a repository of cultural heritage but also as a lyrical ode to the eternal dance of life, where the Meiteis find themselves inextricably intertwined with the rhythms of nature's song.

Conservation endeavours among the Meitei community are deeply rooted in religious convictions and age-old customs. From this cultural foundation emerge ten distinct strategies, each emphasizing the reverence for plants and the necessity of sustainable stewardship:

1. Domestic plantation: Meiteis cultivate a diverse array of plants specifically for use in sacred rituals and religious observances, such as *Tulsi*, *Tairen*, and banana plants (Arambam, 1990).

2. Sacred groves: Scattered across Manipur, *Umanglaikon*, or sacred groves, serve as havens for a plethora of plant species, safeguarded by local deities (Vartak and Gadgil, 1973; Devi et al., 2005).

3. Selective use of plant parts: Meiteis meticulously utilize specific plant parts for distinct events, adhering to cultural norms and traditions (Niroula and Singh, 2015).

4. Sacredness of plants: Certain plants hold profound religious significance, often being offered in festivals or revered as manifestations of divine beings (Hedge and Bhat, 2012).

5. Taboo of falling down: Meiteis observe specific days deemed socio-religiously unfavourable for disturbing plants, thus maintaining ecological equilibrium (Niroula and Singh, 2015).

6. Taboo of removing plant parts: Leaves of revered plants like Tulsi remain untouched on designated days, symbolizing respect for religious customs and ecological balance (Niroula and Singh, 2015).

7. Plantation at specific sites: Meiteis adhere to cultural beliefs and auspiciousness while selecting locations for planting, embedding plants within their homesteads for symbolic and practical purposes (Niroula and Singh, 2015).

8. Selective user: Certain plants, such as *Sana khongnang*, valued for their medicinal properties, are safeguarded by religious prohibitions, ensuring their preservation (Bindu et al., 2013).

9. Owner's permission: Access to specific plants, like *Langthrei*, necessitates permission from the owner, fostering a sense of responsibility and reverence (Niroula and Singh, 2015).

10. Balancing care for the future: Meiteis exhibit a nuanced approach to plant conservation, reconciling traditional practices with contemporary needs, thereby ensuring sustainable stewardship (Niroula and Singh, 2015).

Man, Plant and Spirit in Holistic Worldview

At the heart of the Meiteis' spiritual philosophy lies a profound belief in the intricate interplay between deities, spiritual forces, and the tangible world around them. This interconnectedness serves as the very essence of their being, weaving a rich tapestry of existence where gods and spirits coexist harmoniously with the natural realm. Such a holistic viewpoint not only venerates the environment as a sacred sanctuary but also recognizes it as the dwelling place of divine beings entrusted with ensuring the prosperity and welfare of humanity (Singh, 2020). Within the Meiteis' worldview, three distinct yet interwoven realms reign supreme: the spiritual, the natural, and the human. These spheres of existence are not isolated but rather intersect and symbiotically influence one another, sculpting the Meiteis' perception of the world and sculpting their collective actions within society (Singh, 2020). Through the intricate tapestry of ancestral traditions and cultural rituals, the Meitei people have woven a delicate balance between humanity, the environment, and the divine. This harmonious relationship forms the bedrock of their cultural identity, providing a sturdy foundation upon which sustainable conservation practices are nurtured and upheld with reverence for heritage and tradition.

Conclusion:

The Meiteis of Manipur exhibit a profound integration of human society, the natural environment, and spiritual beliefs through traditional cultural practices and conservation strategies. Their rich oral tradition, preserved in manuscripts like *Leirol*, intricately weaves together narratives of human existence, nature, and spirituality, highlighting the deep connection between the Meiteis and their botanical surroundings. Conservation efforts among the Meiteis are deeply rooted in religious convictions, shaping ten distinct strategies focused on preserving plant biodiversity and promoting sustainable stewardship. Central to their worldview is a holistic perspective that recognizes the interdependence of gods, spirits, and the natural realm, guiding their societal actions and fostering harmony among humanity, nature, and the divine. Through ancestral customs and cultural practices, the Meiteis have established a cultural foundation for sustainable conservation, integrating traditional wisdom with modern strategies for a more sustainable future. Their continuous conservation efforts, rooted in reverence for nature and spiritual beliefs, offer valuable insights into indigenous knowledge systems and emphasise the importance of preserving cultural heritage alongside biodiversity.

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Table - 1: The Meitei model of Sustainable management for plants in Religious Domain

Sl. No.	Local name of plant	Scientific name	Importance in religion	Parts used	Means of sustainable management
1.	*Wa*	*Bambusa sp.*	Various ritual, sufferer for human	Whole body	Tabooed to cut down on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday; tabooed to fell down its cluster completely in a single year; *chandawa* used only in cremation rite.
2.	*Phou*	*Oryza sativa*	Various ritual offerings	Seed, hay	Tabooed to offer its bunch of seeds without the knowledge of grower; tabooed to take out from granary on certain days like *tatnaba*, Sunday, the day of first storing for the new harvest in granary
3.	*Tulsi*	*Ocimum santum*	A Hindu goddess	Leaf, dry branch	Tabooed to pluck on Sunday, *ekadasi*, and at night
4.	*Tairen*	*Toona ciliata*	Sanctification	Leaves	Certain care while plucking its leaves
5.	*Langthrei*	*Eupotorium birmanicum*	Medicinal value	Leaves	Tabooed to be plucked by outsider except owners
6.	*Khoiju*	*Plectranthus ternifolius*	exorcise	Leave	To be used only when matured
7.	*Leikham*	*Goniothalamus sesquipedalis*	exorcise	Flowering shoot	To be used only when matured
8.	*Nongmangkha*	*Adhatoda sp.*	Related to myth	Flower, leaves	Tabooed to pluck on Sunday
9.	*Mayokpha*	*Terminalia arjuna*	Associated with a deity	Bark, leaves	Invites on Friday to be taken on Saturday or Sunday, plucked by owner exclusively
10.	*Heikru*	*Embilica officinalis*	Various ritual offering	Fruit, branch	Not to eat before a ceremony called *Heikru hidongba*
11.	*Maroinapakpi*	*Allium hookerii*	Offering, spices	leaves	Not to pluck by cook while cooking; women during mensuration period
12.	*Maroinakupi*	*Allium odorum*	Offering, spices	leaves	Not to pluck by cook while cooking; women during mensuration period
13.	*Mayangton*	*Ocimum canum*	Offering, spices	leaves	Not to pluck by cook while cooking; women during mensuration period
14.	*Phakpai*	*Polygonum posumber*	Offering, spices	leaves	Not to pluck by cook while cooking; women during mensuration period
15.	*Toningkhok*	*Houttuynia cordata*	Offering, spices	leaves	Not to pluck by cook while cooking; women during mensuration period
16.	*Kurao*	*Erythrina*	Offering, amulet,	Stem, bark	Friday prior to cutting for rituals

	angouba	*veriegata*	medicine		on Saturday
17.	*Sana khongnang*	*Ficus religiosa*	Offering	Branch	Not used as firewood by people except Brahmin