

# Traditional Ecological Knowledge Of The Thadou-Kuki Of Manipur

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## **Abstract:**

*Traditional ecological knowledge refers to the accumulated bodies of knowledge that indigenous or local communities have developed over generations as a result of their interactions with the natural environment. These bodies of knowledge are manifested in the belief system and cultural practices of a particular community. There are only a few or limited scholarly works on traditional ecological knowledge of the Thadou-Kuki that warrant an investigation. The paper aims to understand how the belief system and cultural practices of the Thadou-Kuki aid in their adaptation to their natural environment. The work is based on an ethnographic account, available vernacular and secondary sources. Information is also obtained by interviewing knowledgeable village elders and cultural specialists of the said people. The work is exploratory in nature and is open for further improvement and investigation.*

**Keywords:** *Cultural practices; Exploratory research; Traditional ecological knowledge; Thadou-Kuki.*

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## **I. Introduction:**

Human beings in their quest for survival interact with the natural environment and develop a distinctive understanding rooted in a cultural experience that guides relations among humans in a specific environment. This understanding and relations constitute a system broadly identified as indigenous knowledge or traditional ecological knowledge. The Thadou-Kuki people are one of the numerous Kuki-Chin ethnic groups living in the area bounded by the Angami of the Naga hill district in the north, the Province of Burma in the East, Chin and Lushai Hill in the south, and the district of Cachar in the west (Shaw:1929:1). The Thadou-Kuki, in their interactions to the natural environment, developed certain understanding and knowledge towards their natural environment in their quest for survival. This knowledge and understanding of their natural environment can be seen in their belief system and cultural practice, which can be termed indigenous knowledge or traditional ecological knowledge and it is being passed down from generation to generation. Though their practice of traditional ecological knowledge is very old little research is known on the Thadou people's relationship with their natural environment. Further, how their belief systems and cultural practices are entrenched in their adaptation to the environment warrants an investigation. This paper is an exploratory research work based on an ethnographic account, vernacular and secondary sources, and interviewing knowledgeable village elders

Though the terms traditional knowledge and traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) are used interchangeably and the word "traditional" implies that the concepts are of the past and unchangeable and may not be relevant to the contemporary world. However, there are several beliefs and practices of the Thadou which can be considered as a result of scientific curiosity about their natural environment. The term traditional ecological knowledge became widespread in the 1980s. The earliest studies on traditional ecological knowledge were carried out by Anthropologists as ethnoecology; an approach that focuses on the concept of the ecological relationship held by people or cultures. (Inglis:1993).

Fikrets Berkes (1999:8) "Sacred ecology" is a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and beliefs, evolved by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission about the relations of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment. Berkes approaches traditional ecological knowledge as a knowledge-practice-beliefs complex that examines four interrelated levels: empirical knowledge or practical knowledge; paradigmatic knowledge; institutional knowledge; and world view (Ibid: 1999:18).

Raymond Peirotti (2011) opines that traditional knowledge as local base knowledge of individual people which emerged from careful long-term observation of natural phenomena. Pierotti defines traditional ecological

knowledge as the “sum of the data and ideas acquired by a human group on its environment resulting from group usage and occupation of a specific region over generations”.

### The traditional worldview of the people:

The Thadou-Kuki people are considered to be an animist by scholars and colonial ethnographers though they believed in the existence of one powerful god called *Chung Pathein*, who is considered omnipotent and omniscient and the creator of the universe and all living beings apart from their belief in the existence of lesser known benevolent and malevolent spirits who necessitated constant pacification. This question on being an animist is because of the practice of symbolic worship of *Chung Patthen* in the form of a household god or *Indoi*, where various articles of plants and animals such *Vohipi maikem* or slanted skull of a mother pig, *Kelcha Kiheh* or a twisted horn of a He-goat, *Peng/ Um* or gourd, *Chaovei pha* or a bangle made from bamboo, *Chemkol* or a knife, *Teng* or a spear made of bamboo, *Miluh/Pohtul/Pocha* or a small basket made from bamboo species called *Gopi*, and *khaopi* or a cord made from wild fibre tree are bound together in certain manners are worshipped symbolically. (Chongloi: 2008). They believed that the whole world including trees, forests, mountains, stones, and rivers was the manifestation of paramount power called *Chung Patthen*. To the people, the world was the land they lived in and associated many supernatural elements of believed with it. Any bloodshed arising out of disputes and quarrels was considered to be a defilement of the soil. In such cases, the priest would perform the cultural rites of cleansing the soil or *Tolthe*. Their preferable site for settlement would be in a suitable location where there is an available water source. Before establishing a new settlement, the proposed site would be subjected to prior divination where a cock would be left behind in the proposed site for a night for observation. Such a divination is done to seek permission from the spirits residing in the proposed site. If the cock crows, then the proposed site would be inhabited, if not then they would be considered another site for settlement. The water source would be sanctified by the priest by erecting a pole which is sharpened at the bottom end near the water source which would be followed by the priest invocation (Haokip:2009).

“*Pidamte Pudamte, tunia kipatna hiche tui  
keihon kaneh diu ahitai, neithet peh un*”

Free translation:

“*Pidamte Pudamte, from today we utilize these water source  
Do acknowledge it*”

They would maintain a reserved forest called *khotu* or *Gamkheh*, near the village surrounding, which would be left untouched till the trees are fully matured to be felled. They would also make ‘*meilam*’ or fire way, which functions as a buffer zone against turbulent wildfire and the village settlement and this area are preserved for procuring wild fruits, vegetables, and dead woods (Haokip:2006:49). Beyond the reserved forest was cultivating zone called *lougam* and at the outer circle was the hunting zone. This part of the forest is believed to be the dwelling place of malevolent spirits and is held as a sacred grove by the people wherein any harm caused to it would increase the likelihood of the wrath of the supernatural spirit upon the whole village community and it was for this reason that the village *thempu* or priest had to constantly make sacrifices to ensure the safe and successful return of the hunters (Kipgen & Haokip:2021).

In agriculture operations, the selection of a field site would be followed by the seeking of positive affirmation through their dreams or *Mangsan* from the spirits of the land known as *Gampi* or *Gampu*. If a water spring is available on the proposed field, the owner of the field would neatly clean the surroundings and before leaving the field would go to the spring or *Shi Twikhuh*, washing his face in the water would utter the following words:

*Tukum hilai munna hi; loumun inmun a kanei ding u ahitan  
Chang le mim kanei nading uva;athi amang umlouva ;kati kalu adam nading le  
Tujang kamang tengleh; neihin seipeh un*

Free translation:

*We intend to cultivate this particular field this year;  
If we are to have a bounty harvest and good health  
reveals to us in dreams.*

The next day the owner of the field and the village priest would set free a white or black cock near the water spring and perform a ritual known as *Twikhuh Thoina* which is basically a rite of appeasing the spirits of the water bodies. To strengthen the soil fertility, they would practice of what is known as *Louchul Thoat*, where the repetition of jhum cultivation in the same site is restricted and a heavy fine in the form of Mithun or pig is imposed on those defaulting it. After the field is slashed and burnt, they would practice what is known as *Vamnit*, *Vam* means “ashes” and *nit* means “observance, by abstaining from daily work and remaining inside their

respective houses. Which is a symbolic condolence to the departed souls and spirits of animals and insects that die when the field is set ablaze<sup>1</sup>. (Sithhou:2020).

Natural landscapes with enormous sizes and unique structures such as a mountain, rocks, and large trees are held sacred by the people and before undertaking any activities in and around it they have the practice of asking permission verbally. Some folk stories are also associated it. Few places which are held sacred by the Thadou-Kuki people are identified as *Koubru Mol*, *Kolkang*, *Karot Kol*, *Kaineng Kol*, *Vangai Lhang*, *Makoi Lhang* (Lhouvum:2023). They prefer water that is drawn from streams, rivers, and subterranean aquifers. However, they have reservations on water sources such as 'Shi' or marshes and swamps and 'Tuisam' or water springs as they believe that malevolent spirits reside in these water bodies. To pacify these spirits, they adhere to certain do and don'ts in such water sources. For example, they abstain from defecating and polluting these water bodies and restrain themselves from raising certain vegetables such as taro, chilly, arum and so on nearby by these water bodies which they believed would anger the spirits dwelling in the water bodies.

#### **Understanding of the natural phenomenon:**

Thadou-Kuki people's ecological sensibility can be seen in their understanding of their natural surroundings, which is evident in the naming and understanding of the different natural phenomena such as the different months of the year, changing seasons, and the lunar phases. They conceived these natural phenomena on what they have experienced in their natural surroundings and accordingly agricultural operations, rites, feasts, and cultural ceremonies are carried out. (Sithhou: 2020). For instance, months are named according to their understanding and the changes that they have experienced in their natural surroundings. Such as *Tolbol* (January)- *Tol* means "land" and *Bol* means "dusty", thereby depicting the dusty natural surroundings of the month; *Bulte* (February)-The month is named after the flowering of a particular tree called "*Bul thing*"; *Lhakao* (March)- This is the time when a small insect called *kaojang* begins to come out in a menacing number and even enters human clothes thereby causing discomfort to human. The morning dew in this particular period is believed to have contributed to the dryness of the surroundings; *Lhatun* (April)-The month is named after a particular bird called "*tun tun*" which sounds while chirping as "*Muchi tun tun*", which mark the beginning of seed-sowing season; *Lhapul* (May)- *Phul* means sprout, it is the time when shrubs, trees and other greeneries begin to sprout or germinate. The period is also marked by the shedding of leaves as a result of heavy winds; *Lhadou* (June)- *Lha* means "month" and *dou* means "to endure hardship". This is the time when bamboo shoots and wild turmeric began to grow and bloom all over places where people endure hardship while working due to heavy rain; *Lhamul* (July)- at this time of the year all the trees and greeneries began to grow in plenty thereby making the surrounding appear woolly or *mul*; *Lhajing* (August)- *Lha* means month and *jing* means darkness. At this time all the trees and greeneries begin to attain a certain height and maturity resulting in the darkening of the natural surroundings. During the period the remains cloudy and the moonlight is also faintest; *Lhalam* (September)-harvesting or *changlam* commences during this period. The sky becomes clear and the moonlight is the brightest, where girls can pass a thread through the eye of their needle under the bright moonlight; *Ellha* (October)- This period is considered to be the best time of the year around. The people become healthy, active, jovial and frolic-loving or *El* in local parlance as the winter begins to set in; *Phallha* (November)- the period is marked by the collection and arrangement of paddy stalk or *changphal* after harvesting; *Ollha* (December): *Ol* means "rest" and *Lha* means month. This is the time when people take respite after a long year of hard labour and toiling (Gangte:2012).

The naming of the different lunar phases is based on the appearance of the moon and according some works are also carried out. Such as *Lhathah*- new moon; *Lhakongkeh*- half-moon; *Lhalih*- full moon; and *Lhaman*- no moon. When the moon is in increasing phases from new moon to full moon it's considered an auspicious time for conducting cultural ceremonies such as marriage and so on. The period is also considered a favourable time for felling trees because it is believed that trees that fell during this period are thought to be more durable, sturdy, and not easily rotten. Subsequently, the seasons are also named according to what they have experienced in their natural surroundings such as *Nipi lai* or summer: since the weather is hot, *Chawang lai* or autumn: since the weather is neither hot nor cold, *Chuh lai* or rainy: surroundings are wet, *Phalbi* or winter: since it is cold, *Khal lai* or spring, since the season is cold and dry. They don't have specific knowledge about counting of days within a week. However, during the seed-sowing agricultural rites known as *Hun* we can see instances of counting of the days within a week such as *Doikhom Lahni* - the day of collecting sacred posts /Monday; *Zulhoh ni* -wine preparations day /Tuesday; *Ah Kang Lhani* - white cock sacrificial day /Wednesday; *Bohjalni* cleanliness day/Wednesday; *Belpang Khopni*- wine jar collections day /Friday; *Moulsel lhani*- sacrificial day for Mithun/Saturday; *Choul doni* -rest day/Sunday (Haokip:2019).

**Indigenous health practices:**

Indigenous health practices are those traditional healing methods that have been passed down through generations within specific indigenous communities and cultures. These practices often involve the use of plants, herbs, rituals and other natural remedies to treat and prevent illness, promote overall health and maintain a spiritual connection to the natural world. The people considered themselves not to be sick or associate them with illness unless they were incapable of doing normal work assigned to their respective age and sex and their concept of health is basically a functional one. The local term for health is called *damthei* or *tahsa pha*. When a person is called *damthei*, he is tension-free, physically active, mentally undisturbed and financially well-off (Haokip:2014). Causes of diseases is believed to be of two types one which is associated with malevolent and evil spirit and the other diseases or ailments caused by physical body condition or unhygienic lifestyle (Burman: 2003:8). The term “*dam lou*” in local parlance is used to denote sickness irrespective of its causes. Treatment of diseases is based on symptoms shown by the patient and how that symptom is perceived or understood by the people. The treatment of the disease can be further classified into the ritualistic treatment of disease, in which the traditional priest or *Thempu* and sacrifice of animals mostly dominated the treatment process. This ritualistic treatment of diseases is known as “*Kithoi*” and the priest used mostly animals and its products such as pigs, dogs, fowl and Mithun in the treatment of disease believed to be caused by malevolent and evil spirits. However, in herbalist treatment of diseases medicinal plants are used in the treatment of diseases. The knowledge of medicinal plants is believed to have been acquired through trial-and-error method, as a result of their long-term interactions with their natural environment). Some known medicinal plants and it uses of the Thadou-Kuki are listed below,

Medicinal plants	Its uses
Guava leaves	Used in the treatment of loose motion
East Indian glory	Used in the treatment of diabetes and blood pressure
Phlogacantus thyriformis	Used against cough and cold
Chinese chives	Used in the treatment of kidney
Ash gourd and Tamarind seeds	Used against snake bite
Garlic	Oil extract of garlic is used in ear infections
Cucurbits	Boiled leaf and fruit are used in the treatment of liver
Goat weeds	Its leaf is used as an antiseptic and clotting blood
Turkey berry	Its pounded fruit and seed is used for headache
Toothache plant	Its leaf and flower decoction is orally consumed against hookworm and piles
Great plantain	Steam is inhaled against sinus problems (Haokip)
Black eye pea	Its young twig is taken against loose motion and rhizome is applied in rheumatism
Gooseberry	The fruit mixed with oil and salt is used against toothache
Beautyberry tree	Its barks and young twigs in stomach ache
Fisher clerodendrum	Leaf extracts are used in ear infections

**Women health care practices:**

Studies on traditional health practices of the Thadou-Kuki would be incomplete without investigating the women's health care practices. Their concept of health and ailments is based on their outward physical

appearance and their ability and inability to work. They consider themselves to be healthy as long as they are able to work in their field, carry out their daily chores and are in good shape. They also practice certain dietary reservations with regard to reproductive health whereby encouraging certain diets for reproductive health while restrictions are being imposed on the consumption of certain diets for reproductive health. Some of the encouraged and restricted dietary habits are mentioned below (Chanu & Kumar:2015).

**Items for Reproductive health:**

Name	Common name	Method of preparations
Ash gourd	<i>Maipong</i>	Soaked-in milk is consumed daily to reduce white discharge
	<i>Sundari mana</i>	Boiled with water is used to reduce vaginal itching
Gooseberry	<i>Sohlhu</i>	Mixed with red sugar and drank before food to reduce vaginal discharge
Indo-Malayan Taro	<i>Yendem</i>	Cooked as curry to initiate and increase blood discharge
Taro	<i>Bal</i>	Cooked as curry for easy delivery
Ginger	<i>Thing</i>	Boiled with water is consumed to regulate menstrual disorder
Pig or cowl tail	<i>Voh mei/bong mei</i>	Cooked as curry without oil is good for the womb and increase blood post delivery
Honey	<i>Khoiju</i>	Applied in nipples after delivery to initiate lactation
Water rice	<i>Bu twi</i>	Drink before food for a healthy womb

**Restrictive items for reproductive health:**

English	Local name	Purpose of restriction
Black rice	<i>Chakhou</i>	Restriction in consumption during menstruation for skin darkening
Fruits	<i>Thei- ga</i>	Consumption of fruits is prohibited as it would lead to abdominal pain and disorder
Banana flower	<i>Motpah</i>	Consumption led to less blood during mensuration
Red meat	<i>Sa</i>	Restriction in consumption of meat during mensuration as it would lead to body pain vaginal itching
Crab	<i>Ai</i>	Consumption of crab is prohibited as it would lead to miscarriage during marriage
	<i>Vailu</i>	Prohibition on consumption as it would lead to miscarriage during the early stage of pregnancy and caused vaginal discharge problem
Beehives	<i>Khoibu</i>	Believed to have caused complications during delivery
Pumpkin	<i>Mai</i>	Prohibition on the consumption of pumpkin as it would to less lactation
Papaya	<i>Thing Chiangmai</i>	The slippery elements in the fruit is believed to have caused the problem during childbirth

**II. Conclusion:**

The Thadou- Kuki in their quest for survival, interact with the natural surroundings. In the process, they acquire a huge body of knowledge and understanding regarding their natural surroundings and passed on from one generation to another. This knowledge and understanding of their natural surrounding can be seen in their belief system and cultural practices. To them, the world was the land they lived and everything beyond human comprehension was attributed to be the works of God or *Chung Pathein*. They also believed in the existence of lesser-known benevolent and malevolent spirits, associated these spirits with their natural surroundings did everything in their own capacity to pacify or not to anger them. In the process developed cultural practices that are closely related to their nature. Their understanding of the natural phenomena such as lunar phases, seasons, months and so on are based on what they have seen and experienced in their natural surroundings. They associate most of the sicknesses or ailments with the supernatural. In an attempt to recover from sickness and regain health, they began practising ritualistic treatment of ailments and also explored flora and fauna of their natural surrounding for remedial measures through a long process of trial-and-error method. Since the paper is an exploratory research work and scholarly work on traditional ecological knowledge of the Thadou-Kuki further additions and investigation on the said area will be highly appreciated

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