



Revitalizing Indigenous Knowledge for a Resilient Future

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Abstract: As the world grapples with the challenges of sustainability, the burgeoning discourse on sustainable development has underscored the significance of indigenous knowledge systems in addressing the complex challenges of environmental degradation, and cultural erosion. This article contends that the revitalization of indigenous knowledge practices is crucial for fostering resilient and sustainable communities, particularly in Ukhrul District, Manipur where modern scientific paradigms often prove inadequate or unaffordable. By foregrounding the epistemological and ontological assumptions underlying indigenous knowledge practices, this article challenges the dominant development paradigm and advocates for a nuanced understanding of the complex relationships between traditional knowledge, culture, and modernity. By reviving and reusing these knowledge practices, Tangkhul communities can develop innovative solutions that are in sync with the modernity and their unique cultural, social, and environmental contexts. This paper contributes to the growing body of literature on indigenous knowledge and sustainability, highlighting the imperative of preserving and promoting traditional knowledge systems. The paper explore the potential of indigenous knowledge systems in promoting community resilience and sustainable development among the Tangkhul communities in Ukhrul District, Manipur, informing culturally responsive social work practice. This descriptive paper employed a qualitative research approach, utilizing a constructivist paradigm to explore the experiences and perspectives of Tangkhul community

members. Data was collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation, and was analysed using thematic analysis.

Keywords: *Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Sustainable Development, Community Resilience, Tangkhul community.*

1. Introduction

In an era marked by escalating environmental crises, the global discourse on sustainability increasingly recognizes the indispensable role of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), often referred to as Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) (Berkes, 2012). These systems, representing a holistic understanding of environmental dynamics, where humans are perceived as integral components rather than detached observers, offer a compelling alternative to the often reductionist approaches of modern scientific paradigms. By exploring the traditional ecological knowledge and practices of the Tangkhul Naga community of Ukhrul District, Manipur, it presents the potential of revitalizing TEK. The community that endowed with a rich tapestry of agricultural and hydrological practices deeply rooted in their cultural and spiritual beliefs, has historically demonstrated remarkable adaptability to environmental fluctuations (Grove, 2010). However, the rapid pace of modernization and urbanization has led to a concerning neglect of these ancestral practices, particularly among the younger generation. This paper posits that the revitalization of Tangkhul TEK is not merely a matter of cultural preservation, but a critical strategy for fostering resilient and sustainable futures, both for the community and for broader global efforts to address environmental degradation.

The value of IKS in addressing contemporary environmental challenges cannot be overstated. These systems offer invaluable strategies for sustainable resource management, biodiversity conservation, and ecosystem health. For instance, the 'Three Sisters' agricultural technique employed by Amerindian communities—intercropping corn, beans, and squash—demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of ecological interactions, enhancing soil fertility and maximizing crop yields (Warrick, 2009). Furthermore, collaborative initiatives that integrate IKS with modern scientific techniques have yielded significant ecological restoration outcomes, as exemplified by projects in the North-West Pacific region, where indigenous fishing practices have been instrumental in restoring ecosystem health (Wilkins, 2018). It is important to note that

the incorporation of TEK, does not mean the rejection of modern science, but the merging of both in a respectful way. In the Tangkhul context, this integration is essential to navigate the unique environmental and socio-economic challenges faced by the community.

Historically, indigenous communities have demonstrated remarkable adaptability to environmental fluctuations, employing sophisticated observation and management techniques (Grove, 2010). These practices, often rooted in ethical frameworks that emphasize the interconnectedness of all beings, have shaped landscapes and fostered biodiversity. The concept of stewardship, deeply embedded in indigenous cultures, underscores the responsibility of humans as guardians of the land (Nakashima et al., 2012). This adaptability, informed by generations of accumulated knowledge, provides crucial insights for contemporary environmental management. For the Tangkhul, this deep connection to the land is reflected in their agricultural practices, seed preservation, and water management systems, all of which are interwoven with their cultural and spiritual beliefs.

2. Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts an epistemological pluralism framework, recognizing the inherent validity of diverse knowledge systems and advocating for their integration in addressing complex environmental issues. It draws upon constructivist epistemology to understand how Tangkhul knowledge is socially constructed through interactions with the environment and cultural practices. Furthermore, examining the Tangkhul ontology, which emphasizes the profound interconnectedness of all living beings and the intrinsic spiritual significance of natural resources. This ontological perspective, deeply embedded in their cultural narratives and ritualistic practices, informs their sustainable practices, highlighting the ethical dimensions of environmental stewardship. By grounding the analysis in these theoretical frameworks, it seeks to decolonize knowledge production and promote a more inclusive understanding of sustainability, challenging the dominance of Western-centric paradigms.

3. Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative research design, utilizing in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation to explore the lived experiences and perspectives

of Tangkhul community members. The study adopts a constructivist paradigm, recognizing that knowledge is context-dependent and shaped by cultural interpretations. Data collection occurred over a period of 2 months, allowing for a nuanced understanding of Tangkhul practices and beliefs. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling, ensuring representation from diverse segments of the community, including farmers, elders, and community leaders. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and themes in the data, employing rigorous coding and interpretation procedures to ensure validity and reliability. Ethical considerations were prioritized, including obtaining informed consent and ensuring anonymity.

3.1 *The Tangkhul Naga community*

The Tangkhul Nagas, like other Naga tribes, are ethnically affiliated with the Mongoloid group. The Mongoloid population is believed to have dispersed across Asia and into the Americas via the Bering Strait in the ancient times, with the Eskimos being one of the more recent migratory groups. It is hypothesized that the Mongoloid and Caucasoid groups intermingled and expanded throughout Asia from the Neolithic period onwards, resulting in significant genetic and cultural exchange. Ethnographic and historical accounts suggest that the Naga populations migrated through the mainland and the Irawadi and Chindwin valleys during the Palaeolithic or Neolithic period, eventually settling at Hsawngsup (also known as Thangdut or Samsok in Tangkhul dialect) in present-day Burma. From this location, they subsequently migrated to their current habitats. The north–westward migration route of the Nagas is reconstructed through oral traditions, including legends, stories, and folksongs, which provide valuable insights into their ancestral movement.

The Tangkhul population is predominantly concentrated in Ukhrul district, with significant diasporic communities in neighbouring districts, including Senapati, Thoubal, Chandel, and Kangpokpi in Manipur, as well as the Somra tract in Myanmar. The Tangkhul community can be broadly categorized into distinct Sub-groups based on geographical distribution : the Raphei (northern Region), Kharao (Western region), Kamo (Eastern and Southern region), Kathor (Central region), and Khaorui (villages in Senapati and Kangpokpi districts bordering Ukhrul district). The Tangkhul village is governed by a chief, known as the ‘Awunga’, who is supported by a village council, referred to as the ‘Hanga’, comprising clan

chiefs/ leaders. The village priest, or ‘Khanong’, holds a revered position, particularly during festivals, although their role in administrative decision-making is limited. Notably, each Tangkhul village operates as an autonomous political and administrative entity, with its own system of local governance, which may take the form of traditional structures or modified adaptations.

The Tangkhul Naga village council, known as ‘Hanga’, continues to perform executive, administrative, and judicial functions. The ‘Riyan’, an unwritten constitution, outlines a comprehensive framework for governance, emphasizing equality before the law to protect vulnerable groups. The Riyan comprises:

- I. Shaiyan (tribute collection).
- II. Khayan (Village Administration), encompassing regulations such as – “Mewun” (agricultural practices, festivals, and communal activities); “Seihomphung” (designated grazing grounds, prohibiting cultivation); “Shimsak”(Communalhouse-building, promoting collective labor and cost-effectiveness); “Chanrei” (Maintenance of Naga paths/footpaths, ensuring accessibility and safeguarding forest ecosystems).
- III. Longyan (Tangkhul tribal constitution, outlining broader governance structures).
- IV. Luiyan (Land regulation, governing land use and management).
- V. Shiyan Chikan (Public regulations, ensuring community adherence to norms).

The Tangkhul Nagas, residing in the northeastern Indian region, exhibit a complex socio-cultural system grounded in deeply rooted traditional practices. Their cosmology, centered on the creation narrative of “Vari-Vara”/“Zinghungleng” (the supreme being/divine entity), provides a foundational framework for understanding their relationship with the natural world. Central to this framework is the concept of “Sharra,” a normative system of cultural traditions and principles that regulates social interactions and resource management. This system is characterized by stringent regulations, with specific laws imposing fines for infractions such as:

- i) Intentional or unintentional damage to vegetation planted by another household.
- ii) Harm or killing of domestic animals with penalties including replacement with an equivalent animal or compensation equivalent to its value.

To mitigate conflicts and protect crops, domestic animals are closely monitored, particularly during the month of April-October period when paddy and vegetable cultivation is critical.

Owners are held accountable for their animals' actions, with fines levied for negligence, thereby reinforcing the importance of responsible resource management within the community.

The Tangkhul community's adherence to Sharra exemplifies a paradigmatic instance of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) in action, wherein stringent regulations and collective accountability have facilitated the preservation of natural resources and promoted environmental sustainability. This indigenous knowledge system demonstrates a nuanced understanding of ecosystem dynamics, underscoring the efficacy of locally-specific approaches to resource management.

Subsistence strategies are inextricably linked to the socio-ecological context. The utilization of firewood, serving both utilitarian and symbolic functions, underscores the community's dependence on natural resources. Social stratification is evident in the attribution of status to households possessing abundant firewood and rice reserves, reflecting a culturally specific valuation of material wealth. The seasonal cycle dictates agricultural practices, with "Sharra" dictating a temporal cessation of land clearing and cultivation activities during the spring months, reflecting a nuanced understanding of ecological rhythms.

The cultivation of kitchen gardens serves as a vital component of domestic subsistence and social reproduction. These gardens, maintained as integral extensions of the household, provide a consistent source of dietary resources. The practice of soil enrichment through the incorporation of biomass reflects an indigenous understanding of sustainable agricultural practices. The absence of a kitchen garden carries social implications, signifying a perceived deviation from normative social expectations.

Indigenous knowledge systems are manifest in the Tangkhul's traditional food preservation techniques, which eschew chemical additives. The utilization of locally sourced flora in food processing highlights the community's reliance on traditional ecological knowledge. The unique practice of employing wood ash in soybean fermentation exemplifies the sophisticated application of traditional techniques, demonstrating a nuanced understanding of microbial processes and thermal regulation.

Historically, community-based activities, such as collaborative house construction, reinforced social cohesion. Kinship and communal solidarity form the bedrock of Tangkhul social organization. The contemporary shift towards individualism poses a challenge to these

traditional forms of social organization. Traditional practices, including inter-household food sharing and communal meals, served to mitigate resource disparities and foster social solidarity. The historical absence of begging within the community underscores the effectiveness of these traditional support networks. The Tangkhul Naga's traditional practices constitute a complex socio-cultural system, reflecting a nuanced understanding of ecological dynamics and social relations. The study of these practices provides valuable insights into the resilience and adaptability of indigenous communities in the face of socio-economic change.

3.2 Traditional Seed Preservation

Seed preservation within the Tangkhul community is not merely a practical agricultural technique; it is a profound cultural practice that safeguards biodiversity and ensures food sovereignty. The Tangkhul have developed sophisticated methods for selecting, storing, and exchanging seeds, reflecting a deep understanding of plant genetics and ecological adaptation. Varietal selection is meticulous, focusing on seeds that exhibit resilience to local environmental conditions and possess desirable traits for cultivation. Storage methods, such as drying, wrapping in cloth, and storing in traditional containers, are designed to protect seeds from pests and moisture. The ritualistic integration of seed saving into community practices, such as the 'SHAR' ceremony (a ritual to the deity of the land before conducting any agricultural activities), underscores the spiritual significance of agriculture and the interconnectedness of humans and nature. The 'SHAR' ceremony, conducted by the village chief, is a testament to the community's deep-rooted respect for the land and its deities, initiating the agricultural cycle with a sacred act. This ritual highlights the Tangkhul's holistic approach, where agricultural practices are inextricably linked to spiritual well-being.

The practice of seed exchange is critical for maintaining genetic diversity and ensuring crop resilience in the face of environmental uncertainties. This communal sharing network mitigates the risks associated with monoculture and promotes adaptive capacity. Furthermore, the Tangkhul's rich oral tradition, including songs and tales related to plants and crops, serves as a repository of agricultural knowledge, transmitted across generations. For instance, the farmers sing, 'O my life, O this year, may you grow, may you grow, may my crops grow long,' a heartfelt prayer for the growth of their crops. This oral tradition not only preserves agricultural knowledge but also reinforces community bonds and cultural identity.

The role of women in seed preservation is particularly significant, highlighting their expertise in agricultural practices and their contributions to food security. Women are often responsible for the selection, storage, and management of seeds, ensuring the continuity of ancestral knowledge. This gendered division of labour reflects a sophisticated understanding of agricultural processes and the importance of preserving traditional practices. Traditional pest management techniques, such as the use of herbal remedies and winter ploughing, demonstrate the Tangkhul's reliance on ecological knowledge to maintain agricultural sustainability. The careful storage of seeds in jute bags, cloths, and bamboo containers, often placed above the hearth to utilize smoke as a natural preservative, further exemplifies their sophisticated understanding of natural preservation methods. Specific crops, like beans, are noted for their difficulty in preservation, while others, like rice and Job's tears, are recognized for their ease. This nuanced understanding of crop-specific needs is crucial for maintaining agricultural diversity and resilience. This study argues that Tangkhul seed preservation practices represent a form of epistemological resilience, demonstrating the community's ability to adapt and thrive in dynamic environments.

3.3 Hydrological Management

The Tangkhul's hydrological management practices reflect a deep understanding of their hill ecosystem, characterized by limited water resources and seasonal variations. The community has developed sustainable methods for water conservation, irrigation, and watershed management, ensuring equitable access to water and minimizing environmental impact. Traditional water management practices emphasize the importance of maintaining natural watercourses and avoiding disturbances that could lead to water scarcity. The Tangkhul's belief in the interconnectedness of water, land, and community informs their practices, promoting a holistic approach to resource management.

Residing on hilltops to protect themselves from wildlife and external threats, the Tangkhul face unique challenges in water procurement. Their primary water sources are springs, streamlets, and rainwater. Daily water collection, typically occurring in the morning and evening, is a communal practice that minimizes large-scale water storage and conserves resources. This practice reflects a deep understanding of water scarcity and the importance of equitable distribution. The Tangkhul community who has a deep respect for water believes that water is

the “life giver.” They have traditionally avoided disturbing waterways (riverbed) such as streamlets and rivers for agricultural or other purposes, and instead used canals, bamboos, or carved woods to supply water from the mainstream. This practice not only conserved water but also minimized damage to the surrounding vegetation. The Tangkhul’s belief that disturbing natural watercourses leads to water depletion highlights their ecological awareness and respect for natural systems.

Community-based irrigation systems, which are carefully designed to minimize water loss and maximize efficiency, are integral to Tangkhul agriculture. The selection of crops, particularly paddy rice, is aligned with local water availability and soil conditions, reflecting a deep understanding of ecological dynamics. The Tangkhul's understanding of the relationship between water, soil, and climate directly influences their agricultural decisions, ensuring sustainable crop yields. This practice reflects a sophisticated understanding of microclimates and soil conditions.

Furthermore, the Tangkhul’s practices of minimal water storage and daily water collection contribute to water conservation and prevent wastage. This study demonstrates that Tangkhul hydrological management practices represent a sustainable model for water resource management in hill ecosystems, emphasizing the importance of community-based governance and ecological knowledge. The emphasis on maintaining natural water courses and a firm belief that, disturbing the water courses will leads to water scarcity is a key part of their water management. The Tangkhul’s intimate knowledge of their environment, coupled with their communal approach to resource management, ensures the sustainability of their water resources.

3.4 Sustainable Forest management

One notable practice is their approach to forest management. Historically, the Tangkhul Community’s livelihood was intricately linked with forest-based resources, relying on firewood as a primary source of fuel for cooking, warmth, and protection. To sustain their needs, they adopted a nuanced approach to forest management. Notably they practiced seasonal logging, restricting tree cutting to the dry season and ceasing forest clearance when natural springs began to flow, signifying the return of “ZINGRU”(Life). This traditional practice facilitated forest regeneration and maintained ecosystem sustainability. Furthermore, when harvesting firewood, they employed a conservation-oriented technique, leaving a substantial portion of the stem intact

(approximately 3-4 feet from the ground), thereby enabling the tree to regrow in subsequent seasons. This approach not only conserved forest resources but also ensured a sustained supply of firewood.

Shifting cultivation, also referred to as swidden farming or slash-and-burn agriculture, is a prevalent farming system in tropical and sub-tropical forest regions globally, practiced by various communities, including the Tangkhuls. The agricultural practice involves a cyclical pattern of short-term cropping followed by extended periods of fallow. The process commences with the clearance of natural forest or bush vegetation through cutting and burning, which prepares the land for cultivation. The resulting ash adds essential nutrients to the soil, enhancing its fertility. In the context of Naga Agricultural practices, shifting cultivation fields are typically planted with upland rice, maize, millet, and other cereals, alongside root crops and vegetables. After a brief cultivation period of one to three years, the fields are left to fallow, allowing the natural regeneration of forest or bush vegetation. This fallow period, which can last between five to ten years, enables the restoration of soil fertility, thereby ensuring the long-term sustainability of the agricultural system (Luithui S and IWGIA,2001)

3.5 Fire Management

The Tangkhul community's traditional relationship with fire exemplifies a sustainable and culturally embedded approach to resource management. Fire is revered as sacred, and its utilization is subject to careful regulation. During household construction, fires are ignited using dry wood and "Kapa" (dry bamboo strips), and subsequently maintained with diligence. The community adheres to "Meiyan" (fire law), a customary practice that involves covering the fire hearth with ashes when not in use, thereby conserving embers and minimizing unnecessary fuel consumption. Fire is only uncovered during designated cooking periods, typically in the morning and afternoon.

Furthermore, the Tangkhuls employ additional fire management strategies, including:

- i) Planting trees near village entrances as a firebreak measure.
- ii) Assigning village guards to protect against fires and other hazards.

This traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) highlights the community's resourcefulness in managing fire in a sustainable manner, offering valuable insights for contemporary fire management practices.

3.6 Integrating Indigenous Knowledge into Contemporary Sustainability Frameworks:

The findings of this study highlight the sophistication and relevance of Tangkhul Indigenous Knowledge for contemporary sustainability challenges. By adhering to the Riyan, the Tangkhul Naga Community demonstrates a profound understanding of governance, social responsibility, and environmental sustainability. The Riyan's significance lies in its ability to promote collective responsibility and community participation, ensure sustainable resource management and environmental stewardship, foster social harmony and equality before law and preserve traditional practices and culture heritage. The community's resourcefulness in managing fire in a sustainable manner, practices of seed preservation and hydrological management demonstrate a holistic approach to resource management, emphasizing the interconnectedness of humans and nature and offer valuable insights for contemporary fire management practices. Integrating these practices into mainstream environmental governance frameworks requires a shift towards epistemological pluralism, recognizing the validity of diverse knowledge systems and promoting collaborative approaches. Addressing the challenges posed by Western epistemological biases and the marginalization of indigenous voices requires institutional reforms that respect indigenous sovereignty and promote intercultural dialogue. Furthermore, the Tangkhul's practices offer valuable insights for developing culturally responsive and epistemologically pluralistic social work practices, which prioritize community-based solutions and empower indigenous communities to manage their own resources.

The Tangkhul case study illustrates the importance of preserving and revitalizing IKS, not merely as historical relics, but as dynamic and adaptive strategies for sustainability. Future research should focus on exploring the potential for integrating Tangkhul IKS with modern scientific techniques, fostering collaborative partnerships that promote mutual learning and knowledge exchange. Additionally, longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term impacts of Tangkhul Indigenous Knowledge on community resilience and environmental sustainability.

4. Conclusion

This paper underscores the critical role of indigenous knowledge systems in fostering sustainable communities and addressing contemporary environmental challenges. By examining

the epistemological foundations and practical applications of Tangkhul seed preservation and hydrological management practices, we have demonstrated the sophistication and relevance of Indigenous Knowledge System for contemporary sustainability discourse. The Tangkhul's holistic approach to resource management, grounded in their ontological understanding of interconnectedness, offers a valuable model for sustainable development. Moving forward, it is imperative to promote epistemological resilience by integrating Indigenous Knowledge Systems into mainstream environmental governance frameworks and fostering collaborative partnerships that respect indigenous sovereignty and promote knowledge exchange. By doing so, we can create more inclusive and sustainable futures for all.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the Ukhrul For Sustainable Development (UFSD) for sharing the accumulated knowledge regarding the seed keeping. I would also like to thank the respondents for the valuable information regarding the traditional practices of the Tangkhul Naga tribe.

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