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ETHNO-BOTANICAL PLANTS IN THE RELIGIO-CULTURAL REALM OF THE MEITEIS IN MANIPUR

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Abstract

Within the ambit of religio-cultural context, the ethno-botanical plants play a significant role that ramifies to man-nature-spirit interrelationship. There are sacred plants which the indigenous people value much and take care to maintain sustainably while the biologists attempt to analyse the specific characters of the plants. The present interdisciplinary study of plant and ethnic group attempts to document the ethno-botanical plants used in the religious domain of the Meiteis, an autochthone of Manipur in India. An intensive survey of these plants which are domesticated as well as grown in religious sites along with interview from key informants including *Maiba* (medico-religious man), *Bamon* (Hindu priests), *Arangfam* (attendants of rites and rituals), and *Piba* (head of lineage) and scheduled methods of data collection were used. The love and affection of the people to the world of plant is found very much influenced with the fear and loyalty to spirits and gods who dwell in plant ecology. In addition, specific plants corresponds to the unique identity of the people concerned.

Key Words: ethno-botany, endemic plant, Meitei, rites-de-passage, conservation

Introduction

When the term 'ethno-botany' (ethnos = inhabitants, botany = science of plants) was introduced by John William Harshberger, an ardent conservationist to mean the plants in ethnographic and prehistoric cultures it specifies the interrelationship between plant and

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indigenous folk (Harshberger 1896). Though this branch of plant science was neglected at times, the re-emerging frontier plays a crucial role specially in non westernised societies for obtaining an earlier undervalued awareness of local ecology maintained by ethnic groups through their cultural heritage. Indeed, human-plant relation plays a crucial role in socio-religious ecosystem of the people concerned (Saraçi et.al. 2023). Culture of a particular people is closely related to their ambient nature from which specific plants are used specially in their religious actions. Certain plants are considered sacred and offered to particular God during different religious occasions (Hedge and Bhat 2012). Again, considering certain plants and animals to be incarnations or symbols of the supernatural beings, these are commonly worshipped (Niroula and Singh 2015). It brings out the religious plants to be spiritually valued; on the other hand, it preserves biodiversity that reflexes the society to a sustainable cultural setting. In fact, in nonwestern cosmovision, real world is understandable in terms of three inter-related and inseparable domains of natural world, social world, and spiritual world (Haverkort 2009). Plants are important natural resources in this cosmovision. The present study has been conducted to discuss the religious plants of the Meiteis along with the entrenched ethics to preserve plants.

Review of Literature

In Indian subcontinent, from literatures such as Rigveda, Atharva, Uanishads and Purans regarding the use of plants in worship, medicine, food, fuel, etc., the documented ethno-botanical evidences can be traced back up to 4000-1500 B.C. (Jain and Mudgal 1999). Truly, various plants have been mentioned related to different religions. *Phoenix dactylifera* (date palm) is an important plant in Islam. Christianity and Judaism also honour it in festivals such as Passover and Palm Sunday (Marwat et.al 2016). In Buddhism, *Saraca indica*, *Ficus religiosa*, *Shorea robusta*, *Nelumbo nucifera*, etc., are important floras (Upadhyay and Prasad 2011). Robinson and Johnson (1970,14) mentioned about an episode of offering food to Buddha mistaking him as the spirit of a sacred tree. In Hinduism, *Aegle marmelos* is used to worship lord Siva, *Oryza sativa* is the plant of goddesses Laxmi and *Anthocephalus cadamba* is associated with lord Krishna (Sarma and Devi 2015). In other tropical areas *Cynodon dactylon* is the commonest ground cover grass of lawns and roadsides, but in India it is one of the essential ceremonial items of worship and rituals (Jain 1995). Plants which enrich the religio-cultural contents of the concerned people need to be documented (Singhal et.al. 2017, Pangging et.al. 2018, Jigme and Yangchen 2022). Contrary, religious plant and forest has positive impacts on ecological and biodiversity balance (Niroula and Singh 2015). So, plant-religion relationship in culture and sustainability is academically an important area of study.

Methodology:

The study was conducted on the ethno-botanical plants of the Meiteis who inhabit mainly in Manipur, the north-easternmost state of India. It adopts intensive survey of plant and associated cultural site of ethno-botanical interest along with scheduled and in-depth interview methods from key informants as *Maiba* (medico-religious man), *Bamon* (Hindu priests), *Arangfam* (attendants of rites and rituals), and *Piba* (head of lineage). In addition, archival scribe works called *Puyas* were referred as important secondary sources.

Result and discussion

Endemic plants for unique ethnic identity

The endemic plants play an important role in the identity formation and religious offerings of the Meiteis having seven exogamous clans - Mangang, Angom, Sarang Leisangthem/ Chenglei, Kha-Nganba, Luwang, Khuman and Moirang. The uniqueness and solidarity of the Meitei clans is still expressed in worshipping their ancestors known as *apokpa* by offering specific items in particularistic manner which include specific plants (Meetei 1996). The indigenes of Manipur state use certain flowers, leaf, fruit, fire wood to be offered and shoot to be used for sanctification purpose as well as taboos of the clans in their patrisystem (Rabikanta 2022, 73-77) as given in Table 1.

Table 1: The Meitei clans and their specific plants

Clan	Offering				Shoot for Sanctification	Plant taboo
	Flower	Leaf	Fruit	Fire wood		
Ningthouja/ Mangang	Red lotus (<i>Nelumbo nucifera</i>)	Lotus leaf	Lotus fruit	Sahi (<i>Pasania dealbata</i>)	Urung	Sabot lilmanbi (<i>Trichosanthes cucumerina</i>)
Angom	White water lily (<i>Nymphaea alba</i>)	Larong (<i>Dillenia pentaphylla</i>)	Heiba (<i>Ficus sp.</i>)	Upal (<i>Quercus sp.</i>)	Tairen (<i>Toona ciliata</i>)	Angom yensil, (<i>Polygonum chinense</i>) Tharam (<i>Polygonum molle</i>)
Luwang	Melei (<i>Dendrobium thyrsiflorum</i>)	Larong (<i>Dillenia pentaphylla</i>)	Pineapple (<i>Annamus comosus</i>)	Heikru (<i>Emblica officinalis</i>)	Ukhok (<i>Alhizzia stepulata</i>)	Water hyacin, (<i>Eichhornia crassipes</i>)
Khuman	Leisang (<i>Lycopodium squarossum</i>)	Kwakla (<i>Pterospermum accrifolium</i>)	Fig (<i>Ficus slomerata</i>)	Chaokhong (<i>Polygonum orientale</i>)	Pungphai (<i>Dactyloctenium aegyptiacum</i>)	Tera (<i>Bombox malabaricum</i>)
Moirang	Yerumlei (<i>Dendrobium ochreatum</i>)	Khangla (<i>Butea minor</i>)	Kangrou	Kuhi (<i>Pasania pachiphyla</i>)	Naohing	Moirang khanam (<i>Clerodendrum serratum</i>)
Kha-Nganba	Leisang (<i>Lycopodium squarossum</i>), kwaklei (<i>Vanda coerulea</i>)	Leihoula (<i>Amomum sp.</i>)	Heibung (<i>Garcinia xanthochymus</i>)	Chingyensil (<i>Antidesma diantrum</i>)	Napu Nasel (<i>Berberis manipurana</i>)	Keisumla
Sarang Leisangthem	Leikhram (<i>Sesquipedalus guniothalamus</i>)	Lotus leaf (Thamna Thayai)		Nongleisang (<i>Xylosma longfolia</i>)	Napi, Singbi	Changkhak (<i>Dryopteris pilixmass</i>)

Plants in the Religious sphere:

The majority of the Meiteis are believers of Hindu faith while a large section of them are increasingly follow the traditional cult known as Sanamahism. They are the people who regard plants as beings with soul and worship some plant species like tulsi (*Ocimum sanctum*), tairrel (*Toona ciliata*), etc., which are believed possessing the attribute to cleanse from social defilements and wipe out miseries. Besides, they even worship the spirit of big trees before cutting down. Tylor (1958, 58) finds the idea of plants having souls and partaking phenomena with humans in certain societies. They also use certain species of plants found in their environment as essential items in their initiation rites and rituals to mark the transition of an individual from one social status to another. Some of plants also remain interlacing the oral tradition and consequently, they have become essential items in ritual part of cultural universals as any individual never possess every scrap of knowledge to control challenges and anxiety of life. Just before the delivery of a child, there needs fumigation of leaves of khoiju (*Plectranthus sp.*) and leikham (*Goniothalamus sp.*) to keep the incoming baby free from evil eyes. In the final engagement of marriage, the boy's party would have never failed to bring heikru (*Embilica officinalis*) and certain indigenous fruits to the house of the bride-to-be. In marriage, the husband-wife bond is publicly marked by adorning in exchange a wreath of kundo (*Jasminum sambae*) by each other. Again, in case of death ritual, if the dead body is missing, cremation is carried out with a piece of pangong (*Butea frondosa*) representing the corpse. In such ways, the cultural life crises of the Meiteis have unavoidable relationship to the plant world. The numbers of essential plants for the rites-de-passage are given in tabular form.

Table 2: Essential Number of Plants in the Life Crisis Rites of the Meiteis

Crisis rite	Total no. of plants	Hindus (p.c.)	Traditionalists (p.c.)	Common plants (p.c.)
Birth rite	37	34 (91.9)	22 (59.5)	18 (48.6)
Solid feeding rite	11	9 (81.8)	9 (81.8)	6 (54.5)
Ear ring ceremony	29	29(100)	-	-
Thread donning rite	26	26 (100)	-	-
Rite of initial avowal	11	9 (81.8)	8 (72.7)	6 (54.5)
Marriage	34	29 (85.3)	28 (82.4)	22 (64.7)
Death	24	20 (83.3)	15 (62.5)	9 (37.5)

In the present study, 61 species of plants used by the Meiteis living in the valley of the state for various life crises ritual ceremonies are documented. It is revealed from the above table that out of the total 61 plants, 60.6 percent of plants are used in birth rites followed by 55.7 percent of them are included in marriage. Again, despite the differences in religion, the Hindu Meiteis and Traditional Meiteis use many plants commonly in their rites-de-passage. The common plants comprise 48.6 p.c. in birth rite, 54.5 p.c. each in solid feeding and initial avowal

rites, 64.7 p.c. in marriage, and 37.5 p.c. in death rite. The religious plants despite question of different faiths are closely related to the local environment.

. Some of the dominant families of the plants are Poaceae (15 p.c.), Moraceae (8.3 p.c), and Fabaceae (8.3 p.c.) (cf. Table 3). The essential plants are given below.

Table 3: Essential Plants used in the Rites-de-passage of the Meiteis

Local name	Botanical name	Family	Parts used
Angkot	<i>Calotropis gigantea</i>	Asclepiadaceae	stem
Aprajita	<i>Clitolea ternata</i>	Fabaceae	flower
Awathabi	<i>Carica papaya L.</i>	Caricaceae	fruits
Bhujapata	<i>Betula alnoies Buch-hem</i>	Betulaceae	leaf
Bokul	<i>Mimusop elengi L.</i>	Sapotaceae	leaf
Boroi	<i>Zizyphus jujuba</i>	Rhamnaceae	fruits
Chandan	<i>Santalum album</i>	Sataceae	stem
Cheng	<i>Oryza sativa</i>	Poaceae	husked seed
Chu	<i>Saccharum officinarum L.</i>	Poaceae	stem
Hangam	<i>Brassica campestris</i>	Brassicaceae	seed
Heibi	<i>Meyna spinoso roxd.</i>	Rubiaceae	leaf
Heibong	<i>Ficus glomerata</i>	Moraceae	stem
Heijang	<i>Citrus medica</i>	Rutaceae	fruit
Heikhagok	<i>Aegle marmelos correa</i>	Rutaceae	fruit
Heikru	<i>Embilica officinalis</i>	Euphobiaceae	fruit
Heining	<i>Spondias pinnata</i>	Anacardiaceae	fruit
Heinou	<i>Mangifera indica</i>	Anacardiaceae	leaf
Heirit	<i>Ficus senicordata</i>	Moraceae	fruit
Heitup	<i>Microcros paniculata</i>	Rosaceae	fruit
Heiyai	<i>Elaeagnus latefolius</i>	Elaegnaceae	fruit
Hidak-mana	<i>Nicotiana tabaccum</i>	Solanaceae	leaf
Itunglei	<i>Hibiscus mutabilis</i>	Malvaceae	flower
Kabo khaji	<i>Acacia catechu</i>	Fabaceae	stem
Khoiju	<i>Plectranthus ternifolius</i>	Lamiaceae	leaf
Khongnang bot	<i>Ficus bengalensis</i>	Moraceae	leaf
Khujumpere	<i>Achyranthus aspera</i>	Amaranthaceae	stem
Kiyamlei	<i>Gleditsea tracathos</i>	Ceasalpineceae	flower
Kona	<i>Borassos flabellifer</i>	Arecaceae	leaf
Kouna	<i>Schaenaplectices lacustris</i>	Cyperaceae	stem
Kundo	<i>Jasminum multiflorum</i>	Oleaceae	flower
Kush	<i>Desmotachya bipinata</i>	Poaceae	leaf
Kwa	<i>Areca catechu.</i>	Arecaceae	seed

Kwa mana	<i>Piper betle</i>	Piperaceae	leaf
Kwaklei	<i>Vaanba coerulea</i>	Orchidaceae	flower
Langthrei	<i>Eupatorium birmanicum dc</i>	Asteraceae	leaf
Laphu	<i>Musa paradiasica</i>	Musaceae	Leaf, Veins of leaf, fruit
Lashing	<i>Gossypium sp.</i>	Malvaceae	Fiber (hair)
Leikham	<i>Goniothalamus sesquipedlis</i>	Anacardiaceae	leaf
Leishang	<i>Lycopodium squarossum</i>	Lycopodiaceae	stem
Manahi	<i>Terminalia citrine roxb.</i>	Combretaceae	fruit
Mangan	<i>Pishum sativum</i>	Fabaceae	seed
Mekruk	<i>Canarium bengalensis</i>	Bromeliaceae	lac
Nageshwor	<i>Mesua ferrea</i>	Clusiaceae	flower
Pangong	<i>Butea frondosa</i>	Fabaceae	stem
Phou	<i>Oryza sativa</i>	Poaceae	unhusked seed
Pungfai	<i>Dactyloctenium aegyptium</i>	Poaceae	stem
Sagolhawai	<i>Phaeolus radiatus L.</i>	Fabaceae	seed
Sanakhongnang	<i>Ficus religiosa</i>	Moraceae	stem
Sing	<i>Zinziber officinalis</i>	Zingiberaceae	rhizome
Tairen	<i>Toona ciliate M. roem</i>	Meliaceae	leaf
Theibong	<i>Artocarpus heterophyllus</i>	Moraceae	stem
Thoiding	<i>Sesamum indicam</i>	Pedaliaceae	seed
Tingthou	<i>Cynadon dactylon</i>	Poaceae	stem
Tulsi	<i>Ocimum sanctum</i>	Lamiaceae	leaf/ stem
Uchan	<i>Pinus khasiya</i>	Pinaceae (Coniferae)	stem
Wa	<i>Bambosa nutans</i>	Poaceae	stem
Wa	<i>Dendrcalamus brandisii</i>	Poaceae	Stem
Yaingang	<i>Curcuma domestica</i>	Zingiberaceae	rhizome
Yendem	<i>Colocasia giganteahook</i>	Araceae	stem
Yubi	<i>Cocos nucifera</i>	Arecaceae	fruit
Yam (Ata)	<i>Triticum aestivum</i>	Poaceae	seed (flour)

World view on spirits and natural conservation:

The Meiteis have their own world view for the conservation of the plants which link to their sacred groves – the site for deities called *umanglai*. For the Meiteis in Manipur, gods, spirits, ancestors, leaders, sacred groves, lands and shrines, fertility, ritual crops, animals, and food items are all interrelated. In their cosmovision, the natural world provides the habitat for the spirits who send message to the human world. The habitat of the supernatural beings ensures

conservation of plant diversity from human hands whereas supernatural powers protect humans from unexpected troubles herewith depicting an interlocking chain of spirit-human-plant.

Again, the performance of socio-religious activities with the use of plants points to the domestication and conservation of sacred plants despite the question of biological and ecological values. *Terminalia arjuna* is conserved from extinction because of sacred grove. Plants like betel, coconut, etc., are increasingly grown. In addition, they do not disturb the ecology of plants on certain days by proscribing social taboos. For instances, trees and bamboos are not cut down on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Again, leaves of tulsi cannot be plucked on Sunday and *akadasi* that is, the 11th and 26th day of a lunar month. Above this, no part of any plant is touchable at night.

Conclusion:

It may be concluded from the above discussion that the world view of the Meitei regarding love and affection for plants is immense. And, their normative culture under-carry the conservation of indigenous plants. Rituals are a must in the life of a Meitei identity and coercion in peace. But, in order to complete the rituals plants are essential requirements. Their cultural ways, in turn, arrange to preserve these plants. So, many flowers and fruits are conserving with great normative value. In cultural ecological enclave, biodiversity is preserving as well as the culture in context is self-aggrandized to sustainability as per their cosmovision.

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