

## PAPER PRESENTED AT CASA 2012

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Title: Can *jhumming* preserve the landscape  
and sustain the Kukis of Manipur?:  
Interlinkages between social and cultural  
sustainability.

Ngamjahao Kipgen  
National Institute of Technology Rourkela, India.

# Introduction

- The Northeastern hill region of India is inhabited by different ethnic group, each having culturally distinct identity.
- Each one of these ethnic groups has created around itself a cultural identity of its own through distinctive cultural landscapes.
- What all these imply is that there is a vast reservoir of ‘traditional knowledge’ system, more specifically ‘traditional ecological knowledge’ (TEK), in the local communities.
- Like any other ethnic communities in the Northeast, the Kuki communities mainly confined in the hills of Manipur have been utilizing the nature without any hindrance for the past centuries.

# Dualism between Kukis and Nature

- There is a symbiotic relationship between the Kuki people and nature – this has also led to the development of diversified myths and folk stories, past narratives highlighting the perpetual connection between them and nature/non-human.
- The Kukis also possess practical experience-based knowledge on the different objects constituting the surrounding ecology. For example, the practice of *jhumming* or shifting cultivation is based on their indigenous knowledge.



# Central Theme of the Paper

- The paper seeks to examine the traditional beliefs and practices connected with the age-old practice of *jhumming* (shifting cultivation) among the Kuki tribes living in Northeast India.
- I explain how their beliefs and practices are a form of “traditional ecological knowledge” (TEK) which has had a great functional value for them and conserved nature.
- Ideas of nature and rootedness in the forest economy are central to the Kuki imaginary and their cosmology.
- The ecological landscape of the Kuki tribes demonstrates a close interconnection between their *jhumming* practice, religious beliefs and their social organization.

# forms of relationship

- The most important factor of Kukis in respect to 'land use system' is to maintain subsistence of their life, based on *jhumming* cultivation.
- *Jhumming* or shifting cultivation is not just an agricultural activity to produce food stuffs for consumption or subsistence to livelihood.
- the Kuki life is guided by the agriculture cycle of *jhumming*; for instance, festival and ceremonies revolving around it.
- The Kuki beliefs and culture centres around the practice of *jhumming*. The '*jhum* land' area may be considered as the 'centre of activities' for the Kukis.
- They are emotionally attached to it and depend on it for meeting their basic needs as well as social and cultural practices. Therefore, the practice of *jhumming* is deeply integrated into their social, cultural, and economic life styles.

## Theoretical Premises

- Tim Ingold, a leading scholar within ecological anthropology strongly propagated a dwelling perspective, a perspective that situates the human being in an active engagement with the constituents of his or her surroundings (Ingold 2000: 5).
- According to Ingold, the environment of human beings is culturally constituted – it consist both animate and inanimate things, such as ‘nature’, which also has to be understood as an artifact of cultural construction.
- Ingold had stressed on “skills” that develop through the “performance of particular tasks” (2000: 41).
- The traditional Kuki communities for centuries have perceived themselves as involved in an intimate relationship of interdependence with the plants, animals and spirits (*thilha*) that inhabit their world.
- Rituals were usually performed to please the spirits and the whole community participates in these activities. Magico-religious beliefs are associated with agricultural practices among the Kukis.



# Text and Context

- Following Ingold, it can be argued that this type of dwelling has great bearing on peoples' way of being-in-the-world, and thus on how the Kukis relate to their environment.
- The Kuki people acquired specialized knowledge of the particular ecological niche they inhabit. The natural indicators, their magico-beliefs, rituals, myths and folktales also conditioned their land and resource use.
- The entire gamut of their socio-cultural life is thus woven around *jhum*, which are not merely an 'agricultural activity' but a 'cultural practice' and a 'way of life'.
- The Kukis for the past generations have cultivated a bank of knowledge which they derived from their everyday dialectics with the 'nature'.
- The nature in its original form is preserved within the Kuki imaginary in the form of TEK that partly constitutes their ontological root and their epistemological expose.

# Kuki Cosmology

- ❖ Our ethnographic study inform us that the traditional Kuki indigenous culture see 'nature' as sacred because they perceive it as having a close relation to their 'Spirit World'.
- ❖ This concept of 'sacredness' was embedded in their ancestral belief system. It is such beliefs and practices that had led to sustainable management and conservation of natural resources for the past centuries.
- ❖ Rituals have always remained an integral part of Kuki *jhum* cultivation and these activities are integrated with their belief and socio-cultural life.
- ❖ The Kuki culture is embedded with ceremonial and ritual practices, which are usually performed to please the gods and ward off evil spirits and the whole community participate in these activities.
- ❖ Magico-religious beliefs are associated with agricultural practice among the Kukis.



# Conclusion

- ✓ The socio-cultural practices of the Kukis cannot be separated from their traditional religious beliefs and practices.
- ✓ The indigenous Kukis have for centuries maintained a very unique relationship with their environment including the protection of the environment which is essential for their livelihood.
- ✓ Is it possible to state that the ecosystem and biodiversity are best protected by the local people themselves?
- ✓ How do we conserve the forests and ensure sustainable agriculture in the hills of Manipur?
- ✓ This requires further in-depth studies from the ecological sciences.
- ✓ The Kukis are today reviving the past rituals in asserting their identity and affirming their indigeneity and belongingness.