

Louboldan: The Processes of Jhum Cultivation in Kuki Society

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Abstract: This paper explores Louboldan commonly referred to as Jhum cultivation as a deeply embedded socio-cultural and economic practice among the Kuki community of Northeast India. The term 'Lou-boldan' comprised of two words 'Lou' means Jhum or agricultural land and 'Boldan' means the processes or methods of jhuming. Far beyond a mere agricultural technique, Jhum cultivation forms the basis of the Kukis' traditional lifestyle, influencing their economic sustenance, cultural expression, religious practices, social organization, and community rituals. By documenting the various stages of the Jhum cultivation cycle and their associated practices, this study highlights how this indigenous method encapsulates the Kukis' sustainable living, community bonding, and cultural preservation.

Keywords: Jhum cultivation, Louboldan, Kuki Community, Traditional, Socio-Cultural Practices, Northeast India, Sustainability

1. Introduction:

Jhum Cultivation is an age-old agriculture practice of the tribal people living in the hilly areas. It is the mainstay of the tribal economy. This practice is extensively prevalent in Assam and in other parts of the North-East India. Jhum cultivation, known locally among the Kukis as Louboldan, is a slash-and-burn method of agriculture that has been practiced for generations. While often dismissed as primitive by modern agricultural standards, Jhum cultivation in Kuki society is a highly ritualized and organized process integral to the community's way of life. This paper seeks to present a comprehensive ethnographic account of jhum cultivation among the Kukis, analysing how each stage of the cycle reflects traditional knowledge systems, environmental ethics, and social cooperation.

2. Methodology

This research is primarily based on ethnographic and qualitative data collected through participant observation, oral history, and interviews with Kuki elders and cultivators. Secondary sources include traditional folktales, songs, and previous ethnographic studies on Kuki agricultural practices.

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3. Jhum Cultivation in Kuki Society:

Jhum cultivation is an integral part of Kuki society. Jhum cultivation is more than a means of subsistence for the Kukis. It is the cornerstone of their tribal economy and the backbone of their socio-economic, religious, cultural, and political life. Many tribal songs, folktales, rituals, and festivals such as Chapphou Kut, Mim Kut, etc. originate from this agrarian practice. The cycle of cultivation not only ensures food security but also defines community rhythms, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and symbolic interaction with the natural world.

4. Different Stages of Jhum Cultivation:

Jhum cultivation involves several distinct stages. These stages and practices may vary across societies, locations, and depending on the types of crops cultivated. However, this paper confines itself to the general and commonly observed practices of Jhum cultivation among the Kuki tribal society. In Kuki society, Jhum the traditional mode of cultivation—is not undertaken whimsically but follows a systematic and orderly process, beginning with Louvet (the selection and allocation of a site) and culminating in Changlhoh (carrying home the produce). Traditionally, the Kuki tribes have several recognised stages of jhum cultivation. From the initial clearing of vegetation (Louvat), through the drying (Chapphou), burning (Lhouhal), sowing (Changtu), and successive rounds of weeding (Changham Lho and Lousem Lho), to the harvest (Chang-at), threshing (Changvoh), and storage (Changlhoh), every phase reflects the community's respect for nature, their collective labour, and ancestral knowledge. Each step is not only an agricultural task but also a cultural event marked by rituals, festivals, and cooperative spirit, making Jhum cultivation a holistic process that sustains both the land and the life of the community.

4.1 Loumun Chan/Louvet: Loumun Chan or Louvet is the first step towards jhum cultivation. Once a suitable site is identified, the owner marks the area with a label of sign known as dang- tah, signifying their claim over the Jhum plot for cultivation. The customary practice of dang- tah serves as a visible indicator to others in the community, informing them that the area has already been claimed and prompting them to seek other locations for their farming needs. It must be noted that the first step mentioned here is preceded by an annual meeting of the village in the beginning of the year including, which is convened by the Haosa (Chief) and his cabinet (Semang-Pachong), wherein each head of the family member participates to discuss all important matters of the village including the selection of areas for cultivation.

4.2 Mato-Sat, Angahna ding le Alhahna ding sattoh masah: This marks the first practical step in the process of Jhum cultivation. Being a form of slash-and-burn agriculture, the process begins from the base

or starting point of the proposed cultivation area, traditionally referred to as Mato-Sat. This involves the clearing of trees and forest vegetation to prepare the land for cultivation.

4.3 Louvat: This refers to the full-scale process of clearing the designated Jhum area, starting with Mato-Sat (the starting line) and continuing until all forest vegetation in the selected site has been cut down. The series of activities involved in slashing the jungle are collectively known as Louvat.

4.4 Chapphou: The phase that follows Louvat in the Jhum cultivation process is known as Chapphou. The term 'Chapphou' means to expose the cut-down forest vegetation to the sun, allowing it to dry thoroughly in preparation for burning. After the labour-intensive phase of clearing the jungle, this stage offers a brief period of respite for the cultivators, as they wait for the vegetation to dry completely. During this short period of rest, the villagers take time to observe and celebrate their ritual festival called Chapphou Kut. The festival derives its name from this specific phase of jhuming, Chapphou, and serves as a prayer for blessings upon their jhums.

4.5 Louhal: Lhouhal is a combination of two words: Lhou and Hal. Lhou means jhum, and Hal means to burn. Thus, Lhouhal literally translates to "burning the jhum." This event is carried out with meticulous preparation. Before burning the jhum, a six-foot-wide strip surrounding the jhum area is thoroughly cleared to prevent the fire from spreading beyond the designated jhum plot. This cleared boundary, known as Meilam, acts as a protective barrier. The act of Lhouhal is a significant community event, involving the collective effort of all able-bodied men in the village. Together, they ensure the controlled burning of the jhum, carefully preventing the fire from spreading to nearby areas and causing damage to the forest.

4.6 Vamnit: Following the burning of the jhum, it is customary to refrain from visiting the site immediately the next day. This is observed as a day of mourning, reflecting a sense of solemn respect for all that has been reduced to ashes. The burning process not only consumes the Chapphou (dried vegetation) but may also inadvertently lead to the destruction of various reptiles, insects, and other living organisms inhabiting the area. This period of abstention symbolizes an acknowledgment of the natural life sacrificed during the process, serving as a moment of reflection and reverence for the interconnectedness of all living beings. It is a reminder of the delicate balance between human subsistence and the surrounding environment. Through this observance, the community pays homage to nature's resilience and expresses gratitude for the land that sustains them.

4.7 Buhsah–Construction of small temporary hut: Buhsah is the term is derived from two words: ‘Buh’, meaning hut, and ‘Sah’, meaning to build—together signifying the construction of a jhum hut. These huts are an essential feature of jhum cultivation, as the fields are typically located far from the cultivators' homes. Built to serve as temporary shelters. Buh provides a space for rest, protection from wild animals, and refuge against adverse weather conditions, such as heavy rain or scorching heat. In essence, the Buh functions as a substitute for a house, ensuring the safety and comfort of cultivators during their work in the remote jhum fields.

4.8 Mangse, Mang nung thet/Mangchom: This is another crucial stage in the Jhum Cultivation cycle. This step involves clearing the leftover debris or remains after the initial burning of dried vegetation. The remnants are gathered into piles and subjected to a secondary burn, ensuring the jhum field is thoroughly cleaned and prepared for the next phase of cultivation. This stage is essential for maximizing the field's readiness, as it removes all unwanted residues and creates a more suitable environment for planting. Mangchom highlights the meticulous effort and traditional knowledge embedded in the jhum cultivation cycle.

4.9 Changtu/Poitu: The Sowing Stage in Jhum Cultivation: Changtu is a significant stage in the jhum cultivation cycle, marking the point where rice seeds are sown into the prepared soil. This phase symbolizes the beginning of the cultivation process and alongside rice, which is the primary crop, other crops are commonly intercropped to maximize the yield and diversify the harvest. These include maize, cotton, chilies, yams, and a variety of other seasonal crops that complement the cultivation cycle. The practice of multi-cropping during Changtu not only ensures efficient utilization of the land but also provides nutritional and economic benefits to the cultivators. By planting a mix of staple crops and cash crops, jhum farmers secure food for sustenance while generating additional income from marketable produce. This approach also supports soil fertility, as the variety of crops grown together helps maintain a natural balance in the soil.

Changtu reflects the ingenuity and sustainability inherent in traditional agricultural practices, as it combines food security, resource optimization, and cultural heritage into a single, well-organized stage of cultivation.

4.10 Poinung Lho: This is the initial clearing phase in Jhum Cultivation. Poinung Lho marks the first phase in preparing a jhum field, where unwanted plants, weeds, and undergrowth are cleared to make the

land suitable for cultivation. This stage is critical, as it lays the foundation for the entire jhum process by removing obstacles and creating space for further preparation.

During Poinung Lho, cultivators use tools such as machetes and sickles to cut down the dense vegetation. The cleared plants are often left to dry under the sun, preparing them for the subsequent stages, such as burning and soil preparation. This meticulous clearing process not only improves accessibility to the jhum field but also ensures that harmful weeds and invasive plants do not compete with the crops for nutrients during cultivation.

As the initial and labor-intensive step, Poinung Lho demonstrates the effort and precision involved in traditional jhum cultivation, setting the stage for a successful agricultural cycle.

4.11 Changham lho: Since a single round of clearing unwanted weeds is insufficient, this Changham lho marks the second phase of weeding in the jhum field. Another round will follow to ensure the field is thoroughly cleared of all unwanted vegetation. This is the second and another round of clearing the Jhum field from unwanted weeds.

4.12 Lousem lho: The casual weeding of the Jhum field just before the harvesting season is known as Lousem Lho. This marks the third and final round of clearing unwanted weeds from the field. Unlike the earlier, more intensive weeding stages, Lousem Lho is a lighter and selective process aimed at ensuring that the crops mature without competition from residual weeds. This final stage helps in maximizing yield, preventing pest infestations, and making the harvesting process smoother.

4.13 Chang-at: Chang-at is the specific term used for harvesting rice paddy in traditional Kuki agricultural practices. The term is derived from two words: "Chang", which refers to standing paddy, and "at", meaning to cut. Thus, Chang-at literally signifies the cutting down of ripe paddy stalks during harvest. Traditionally, harvesting is done using sickles or other hand tools, with family members and community members often working together.

4.14 Phol Bol/Sem: Phol Bol or Phol Sem refers to the preparation of a designated area specifically meant for harvesting activities, particularly threshing. Phol simply refers to the threshing floor, where grains are separated from the stalks. In addition, Pallam, a raised stage structure is also constructed for winnowing, allowing for the removal of chaff from the grains. This stage of preparation is crucial in traditional Kuki

agricultural practices, ensuring a clean, organized space for community participation and efficient grain extraction.

4.15 Changvoh/Changchil: Changvoh or Changchil refers to the traditional practice of threshing paddy, an essential harvesting activity in rice cultivation. The day begins with great enthusiasm, as family members, neighbours, and sometimes the entire village come together to participate in this labour-intensive yet festive occasion. The process involves separating the grains from the stalks using various traditional techniques that have been passed down through generations. Traditionally, threshing is done by beating the paddy stalks against a hard surface, trampling them under the feet, or using wooden flails, depending on the area and available resources. Beyond its agricultural significance, Changvoh/Changchil also fosters a sense of community and cooperation. It is often accompanied by songs, folk chants, and a shared meal, reinforcing the cultural and social bonds among the people.

4.16 Changlhoh (Louva kon inlanga kipoh): This marks the final stage in the year-long cycle of jhum cultivation. It involves transporting the harvested grains from the temporary storage site in the jhum field to the designated barn at home, ensuring their safe preservation for future use.

5. Conclusion:

Jhum cultivation, or Louboldan, summarizes the Kuki community's adaptive resilience, ecological consciousness, and socio-cultural vibrancy. As modernization and external developmental pressures challenge the relevance of shifting cultivation, it is imperative to reassess and appreciate the traditional knowledge systems it embodies. Future policies and research should engage with indigenous practices like Louboldan not merely as economic activities but as holistic worldviews that can inform sustainable development.

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