

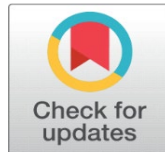
SIGNIFICANCE OF WATER-BODIES IN THE POUMAI CULTURE: A LANDSCAPE ARCHAEOLOGICAL APPROACH

Rex Chawangbou Thiumai¹, Dr. M. Manibabu², Dr. Maringmei Philip³

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Anthropology, Manipur University, Imphal

² Professor, Department of Anthropology, Manipur University, Imphal

³ Guest Faculty, Department of Anthropology, Manipur University, Imphal



Corresponding Author

Rex Chawangbou Thiumai,
rexthiumei@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

There is a well-known fact that there is always a relationship between the physical setting of the environment and the humans, and the interaction between the two components somehow always leaves a significant remark. Each piece of land may it be water bodies, is deeply embedded with culture specific symbolism, understanding these meanings helps one understand nature-human processes and relationships. In every society, may it be great or little, there is often a myth or oral history related with places that surrounds us. The objective of the study is to reconstruct past human life-ways through both the material and non-material remains of a particular landscape.

Keywords: Water-Bodies, Myth, Oral History, Reconstruct, Landscape

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between physical settings and human societies has been a central theme in cultural geography and anthropology. Scholars have long explored how landscapes are not merely passive backdrops to human activity but are actively shaped by and imbued with cultural meanings, symbolism, and significance. This literature review examines key studies and theoretical frameworks that illuminate the dynamic interactions between humans and their environment, focusing on the symbolic significance of landscapes, the role of myths and oral histories, and the reconstruction of past human life-ways.

1.1.CULTURAL LANDSCAPES AND SYMBOLISM

The concept of cultural landscapes, as introduced by Carl Sauer (1925), posits that landscapes are cultural products shaped by human action and interaction with the environment. Sauer's work laid the foundation for understanding landscapes as expressions of cultural values, beliefs, and practices. This perspective has been expanded by scholars who emphasize the symbolic dimensions of landscapes, particularly in relation to natural features such as water bodies. Strang (2004) argues that water is a potent symbol in many cultures, associated with life, purification, and spiritual renewal. Her research highlights how water bodies are central to the cultural identity and spiritual life of communities, reflecting broader human-environment relationships. Strang (2009) emphasizes the integration of cultural and ecological dimensions when analyzing human-water relationships.

Similarly, Tilley (1994) discusses how landscapes are infused with cultural meanings that reflect the identity and worldview of a society. He emphasizes that understanding these meanings requires an analysis of both the physical features of the landscape and the cultural practices that imbue these features with significance. This approach aligns with the idea that every piece of land, including water bodies, carries culture-specific symbolism, which helps to elucidate the complex processes and relationships between nature and humans. Tilley (2008) explores the relationship between the human body, imagery, and landscapes through a phenomenological lens.

1.2.MYTHS, ORAL HISTORIES, AND PLACE-MAKING

Myths and oral histories play a crucial role in shaping cultural landscapes and the symbolic meanings attached to them. Basso (1996) explores how place-names, stories, and myths are not merely reflections of the physical environment but are actively involved in the process of place-making. His research on the Western Apache, for example, shows how stories and place-names are used to transmit cultural knowledge and values across generations, embedding the landscape with cultural and historical significance.

This perspective is echoed by Eliade (1959a), who argues that myths are fundamental to the human experience of place, providing a cosmological framework that links the natural world with human existence. Myths often serve to explain the origins and significance of natural features, such as mountains, rivers, and ponds, thereby imbuing them with cultural and spiritual meanings. In this way, myths and oral histories are essential tools for understanding the deep connections between human societies and their environments. Eliade (1959b) underscores the cosmological importance of myths in linking the natural world to human existence.

1.3. RECONSTRUCTING PAST HUMAN LIFE-WAYS

Reconstructing past human life-ways involves an interdisciplinary approach that integrates archaeology, anthropology, and geography. This process seeks to understand how past societies interacted with their environment, both in practical and symbolic terms. Researchers like Trigger (1989) emphasize the importance of considering both material remains, such as artifacts and structures, and non-material elements, such as myths, rituals, and oral histories, in reconstructing the cultural landscapes of past societies.

Turner (2005) further argues that traditional ecological knowledge, often embedded in cultural practices and oral traditions, provides valuable insights into how indigenous societies managed and interacted with their environment. In their research, Turner and Berkes (2006) further explore how indigenous knowledge systems contribute to environmental conservation through incremental learning. This knowledge is crucial for understanding the sustainable practices that have allowed these societies to thrive in their specific landscapes. The study of such knowledge systems contributes to a more holistic understanding of past human life-ways and the intricate relationships between culture and environment.

1.4.FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

And here the paper elucidates reconstruction with special reference to the water bodies of Liyai Khullen Village inhabited by Poumai Community, namely: *Likhao Dziikhao*(Eagle pond), *Khaodu Dziikhao*(Tiger pond), *Peori Dziikhao*(Elephant pond), and *Khaakhaoh Dziikhao*(Fish pond), which acts as the sources of drinking water for the village. The water bodies are in threat of destruction due to changes in the lifeways of the people. And thus, documenting it will be of immense help for the society as a whole as well as academically.

In the village, there are four significant ponds, each with its own fascinating tale and deep-rooted cultural importance. These ponds are more than just water sources; they are integral to the community's history, spirituality, and daily life.

1. LIKHAO DZIIKHAO (EAGLE POND) - Photo Plate: 1: Likhao Dziikhao, known as the Eagle Pond, is believed to be associated with the majestic eagles that once frequented the area. The pond's name and story evoke the powerful symbolism of the eagle, representing strength and freedom in the village's collective memory.

LIKHAO DZIIKHAO (Literally, *Likhao*: Eagle, *Dziikhao*: Pond): This *dziikhao* is situated in *Zheimai Khel*. It is believed that eagle-considered by the tribal people as the strongest bird amongst bird species comes and drank water from this pond. It is located in a rocky place nearby the main village settlement. The people have a strong belief that water springing out from rocky places has healing power. When a person has skin diseases such as scabies, she/he goes to this particular pond and takes bath early in the morning so that disease is healed without applying any medicine. Wine can be brewed by using water from any source (river, rain ponds) but wine brewed from the water coming from rocky places like *Likhao Dziikhao* tastes much better. This is the reason why villagers generally collect water from this type of ponds to make wine.

2. KHAODU DZIIKHAO (TIGER POND) - Photo Plate: 2: Khaodu Dziikhao, or Tiger Pond, is revered for its connection to the legendary tiger that is believed to guard it. This pond is central to the village's spiritual practices, and the tale of the tiger blessing those who see it adds a mystical aura to the site. It is also closely linked with the ritual activities conducted by the Leemai Duu sub-clan, who are responsible for its annual cleansing and other ceremonies.

KHAODU DZIIKHAO (Literally, *Khaodu*: Big Tiger, *Dziikhao*: Pond): The pond located at Luthrina Khel holds a place of profound importance among the four ponds in the village, both culturally and spiritually. It is revered not only for its historical significance but also for the mystical beliefs associated with it. The villagers believe that this sacred pond is guarded by a powerful tiger, a guardian spirit that protects the waters and the people. The lore surrounding this tiger adds a layer of mysticism, as it is said that those who are fortunate enough to witness the tiger licking water from the pond are blessed with good fortune.

This pond also holds historical significance in the village's settlement. It is believed that when the first settlers arrived, they brought water from the neighboring village of Saranamai (Siifii) for ritual purposes, using it to initiate the village. The Leemai Duu—a sub-clan within the village—is entrusted with the responsibility of overseeing all common rites and rituals, including the annual cleansing of the pond. This ritual cleansing is a deeply rooted tradition that reinforces the spiritual connection between the villagers and the pond.

Adding to the mystique of the area, not far from the pond, there is a stone imbued with supernatural power. This stone is believed to have the ability to reroute the path of enemies who come with ill intentions, particularly those who might harm women fetching water from the nearby Khaodu pond. The stone's protective power is a testament to the deep spiritual beliefs held by the villagers and highlights the importance of these natural landmarks in their daily lives and traditions.

This pond, with its guardian tiger and the powerful stone nearby, stands as a symbol of protection, blessing, and the enduring spiritual heritage of Luthrina Khel. It is more than just a water source; it is a revered site that connects the community to its past, its rituals, and its belief in the unseen forces that shape their world.

3. PEORI DZIIKHAO (ELEPHANT POND) - Photo Plate: 3: Peori Dziikhao, or Elephant Pond, holds historical significance as it is believed that elephants once visited this pond for drinking and bathing. This connection to such majestic creatures adds a layer of grandeur and historical charm, making the pond a cherished landmark in the village.

PEORI DZIIKHAO (Literally, *Peori*: Elephant, *Dziikhao*: Pond): This pond is located at Lurina Khel. It is believed that in the past, Elephants frequented this pond for drinking water and bathing. It serves as an important source of water for the villagers. The pond located at Lurina Khel is steeped in history and cultural significance. It is widely believed that in the past, this pond was a favoured spot for elephants, which frequented the area to drink water and bathe in its refreshing waters. This connection to majestic wildlife adds a layer of historical charm to the pond, making it a symbol of the area's natural heritage. Today, the pond continues to serve a vital role in the lives of the local villagers. It stands as an essential source of water, providing for the community's daily needs, from drinking to irrigation and other domestic uses. The pond not only sustains the livelihood of the people but also represents a link between the present and the past, where the stories of elephants visiting its waters are still told and remembered by the elders of the village. This enduring connection to both nature and history makes the pond at Lurina Khel a cherished and revered landmark in the region.

4. KHAAKHAOH DZIIKHAO (FISH POND) - Photo Plate: 4: Khaakhaoh Dziikhao, known as Fish Pond, is notable for the fish that once inhabited its waters despite the pond's upland location and lack of connection to any river or stream. The presence of fish in such an isolated setting is seen as a natural marvel, contributing to the pond's unique story.

KHAAKHAOH DZIIKHAO (Literally, Khaa:Fish, Dziikhao:Pond): The pond located at Baithrimai Khel is an intriguing natural feature, especially given its unique setting. Positioned in an upland area, it is not connected to any river or stream, making its existence even more remarkable. Despite the absence of a direct water source, the pond has managed to sustain aquatic life, with fish having inhabited its waters in the past. This suggests that the pond may have been fed by underground springs or accumulated rainwater, creating a suitable habitat for fish and other aquatic organisms.

The pond's isolated location and ability to support life despite its disconnection from larger water systems highlight its ecological importance. Over time, it has likely played a significant role in the local ecosystem, providing water and habitat for various species. Its presence in such a remote area adds to the mystery and charm of Baithrimai Khel, making it a fascinating subject of local lore and environmental study.

These four ponds serve as the main sources of water for the villagers, providing for both household consumption and religious ceremonies. Their significance extends beyond their practical uses; they are woven into the cultural and spiritual fabric of the village, each pond carrying its own tale that has been passed down through generations. The stories attached to these ponds continue to be an essential part of the village's identity, symbolizing the connection between the people, their land, and the natural world.

1.5.CONCLUSION

The passage provides a compelling look into how the ponds serve as critical cultural and environmental touchstones within their respective tribal communities. Analysing these ponds from an interdisciplinary perspective—encompassing cultural anthropology, ecology, and spiritual studies—reveals several key insights into the relationship between the people and their natural environment.

Firstly, the ponds represent an intricate blend of natural resource management and cultural heritage. The use of 'Likhao Dziikhao's' water for its perceived healing properties and its superior quality for brewing wine highlights a deep understanding of local ecosystems and their potential benefits. This suggests that the villagers possess a form of traditional ecological knowledge that informs their interactions with the environment, ensuring both the sustainable use of resources and the maintenance of cultural practices.

Secondly, the association of 'Peori Dziikhao' with elephants reflect a historical symbiosis between the community and local wildlife. This connection underscores how natural landmarks can become repositories of collective memory, where the presence of animals in the past has informed cultural narratives that continue to shape the identity and values of the community. The pond's ongoing role as a vital water source demonstrates a continuity in its importance, bridging past and present in the villagers' daily lives.

Moreover, 'Khaakhaoh Dziikhao's' isolated location and its ability to sustain life without being connected to a larger water system challenge conventional understandings of aquatic ecosystems. This pond's existence suggests the presence of unique hydrological conditions, possibly linked to underground springs or rainwater accumulation. The villagers' recognition of its distinctiveness and their preservation of this site indicate an awareness of the ecological nuances that sustain their environment.

'Khaodu Dziikhao' is perhaps the most symbolically rich of the four ponds, embodying the intersection of spiritual belief and environmental stewardship. The lore surrounding the guardian tiger and the protective stone imbues the pond with a sense of sacredness that transcends its practical utility. The ritualistic cleansing of the pond by the 'Leemai' sub-clan reflects how spiritual practices are woven into the community's environmental management strategies. This integration of ritual and ecology suggests a model where spiritual beliefs directly inform conservation efforts, ensuring the pond's sanctity and sustainability.

These ponds collectively illustrate the vital role that natural features play in the cultural and spiritual life of the community. They are not merely sources of water but are deeply embedded in the community's identity, belief systems, and historical narratives. This analysis underscores the importance of understanding indigenous knowledge systems, where natural landmarks are not only physical entities but also carry layers of meaning that are crucial to the community's worldview.

In conclusion, the ponds serve as examples of how cultural practices, spiritual beliefs, and ecological knowledge intersect in indigenous communities. They highlight the necessity of a holistic approach to environmental management, one that respects and incorporates traditional knowledge and cultural significance. Such an approach could offer valuable lessons for broader conservation efforts, particularly in areas where indigenous communities play a key role in preserving biodiversity and maintaining ecological balance.

2. PHOTO PLATES



CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

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None

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