IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Ethnozoology In Pre-Colonial Mizoram: Cultural Interactions With The Animal World

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Abstract

This article explores the complex cultural interactions between humans and animals in pre- colonial Mizoram, focusing on the significance of ethnozoology within Mizo society. It examines how various wild and domesticated animals played vital roles in shaping the social, economic, and spiritual fabric of the community. Revered species such as tigers, elephants, and mithun, along with domesticated animals like dogs, pigs, and chickens, were integral to Mizo cultural practices, from hunting and rituals to trade and status symbols. The study highlights the nuanced relationships between the Mizos and the animal world, where animals were not only sources of sustenance and ritual objects but also cultural markers that defined community identity and cohesion. Through a comprehensive analysis of historical and oral sources, this article sheds light on the diverse nature of human-animal relationships in the traditional Mizo context, demonstrating their profound impact on the socio-cultural and spiritual life of the people.

Keywords: ethnozoology, pre-colonial Mizoram, human-animal interactions, Mizo cultural practices, indigenous knowledge.

Ethnozoology

There have been extremely close connections of dependence and co-dependence between humans and animals throughout history. Research suggests that humans evolved from a vegetarian life style to the one including meat in their diets around 2.5 million years ago (at the dawn of the genus *Homo*,) though just how much of the prehistoric diet included animals is difficult to tell from archaeological evidence. Up until around 12,000 years ago, humans derived food and raw materials from wild animals and plants. Other evidence of ancient human-animal relationships can be seen in rock paintings that depict wild animals such as bison, horses and deer with human figures hunting them. This sort of evidence corroborates the observation of Marques that human-animal interactions have constituted basic connections in all societies throughout history (Romulo &Wedson, 2011).

The variety of interactions (both past and present) that human cultures maintain with animals is the subject matter of Ethnozoology, a science that has its roots as deep within the past as the first relationships between humans and other animals. Relationships between humans and animals were and are highly close. One of oldest known human activities is hunting which people exhibited for utilitarian reasons mostly. Products made from animals were utilized for food, clothing, tools, and medicine as well as for magical and spiritual purposes (Romulo &Wedson, 2011).

Ethnozoology emerged from the field of ethnosciences, and seeks to understand how the world's different people have perceived and interacted with faunal resources throughout history. The first publication with an ethnozoological orientation was that of Stearns, who discussed "ethno-conchology" the study of the use

of shell money (which would now be placed within the sub-area of ethnomalacology). The term ethnozoology, however, first appeared in 1899 in an article by Mason entitled *Aboriginal American Zoötechny*, considering it as a branch of Zootechnology. Apparently, the term ethnozoology was then essentially forgotten until the 1920s. Henderson and Harrington considered Ethnozoology to be a discipline, referring to it as the study of existing cultures and their relationships with the animals in the environments surrounding them (Romulo &Wedson, 2015).

Other definitions of the term ethnozoology were gradually refined over time. Overal viewed ethnozoology as the study of human knowledge of the uses of animals. Marques considered it as the transdisciplinary study of the thoughts and perceptions (knowledge and beliefs), sentiments (affective representations), and behaviors (attitudes) that intermediate the relationships between human populations and the species of animals in the surrounding ecosystems.

Ethnozoology is a hybrid discipline structured with combinations of elements from both the natural and social sciences. Ethnozoologists and other researchers are currently concentrating their efforts on research areas that include: (a) cultural perception and ethnozoological classification systems, (b) importance and presence of animals in stories, myths and beliefs, (c) biological and cultural aspects of animal use by human societies, (d) methods of obtaining and preparing organic substances extracted from animals (for cosmetic, ritualistic, medicinal, or food uses, etc.) (e) domestication, examining the cultural bases and the biological consequences of long-term faunal resource management, (f) biological heterogeneity and the cognitive processes involved in the management and conservation of natural resources, and (g) collection techniques and their impacts on animal populations(Romulo &Wedson, 2015).

Pre-Colonial Mizoram

The origin of the Mizos, like those of many other tribes in the North Eastern India is shrouded in mystery (Mizoram NIC,2024). Regarding the origin of the Mizo tribe, there are various theories. *Chhinlung* is where the Mizo tribes originated, according to the majority of Mizo historians. Though the most widely accepted theory places *Chhinlung* in southern China, the exact origin of the region is unknown. It was thought that Mizo tribes first arrived in the Chin Hills in the 14thcentury, and they remained there until the late sixteenth. From then on, they spread-out all-over Mizoram, Chittagong, Manipur, Assam, and Tripura during which it was believed that most of the Mizo Tribes settled in the Lushai Hills (present Mizoram) during the 17th century. Chieftainship was believed to be first introduced among in the Mizo tribes during the period of 1600-1650 AD. They settled in different villages under a village chief who had the sole power in all the affairs of the village (R. Vanlalhmangaihsanga, 2020).

The pre-colonial Mizo society was stratified into groups that have their own differences, importance, and duties vested upon them. When each member of the group carried out their duties efficiently, there was order and peace in the society. This was how the pre-colonial Mizo society was organized.

In pre-colonial Mizo society wild animals, from small to large game, were hunted for various purposes. Each animal had significance, not only as a food source but also for ritual purposes. Hunting was a primary source of meat, supplementing domesticated animals. The society revered successful hunters, known as *pasaltha*, and boys were often blessed to become skilled hunters. The community celebrated their achievements through songs. Successful hunters were highly esteemed, motivating young men to strive for similar accomplishments (R.LThanmawia, 2007).When hunters succeeded, they were required to offer the chief a portion of their catch, typically the left foreleg of the animal(Parry, 1928).

In pre-colonial Mizo culture, certain wild animals like tigers, elephants, and wild mithun were referred to as *sapui* and held in high respect, possibly even feared. According to Mizo beliefs, a spirit called *lasi* was considered the guardian or owner of all wild animals, suggesting a deep reverence for the natural world and the creatures that inhabit it (Parry,1928). The success of a hunt in pre-colonial Mizo society was believed to depend partly on the blessing of the spirit *lasi*. Game meat was a valued addition to their diet, and a wide variety of animals were hunted, from field rats to elephants, using traps and guns. However, Mizo women were selective eaters and would often decline certain meats, including bear, domestic dog, deer, and tiger. Interestingly, tiger meat was only consumed by the young men of the *zawlbuk* (bachelors' dormitory). In addition to its meat, the tiger's tooth was also used in a traditional ritual to heal a patient from their illnesses (Mc Call, 1949). According to A.G. McCall, there are images depicting the use of monkey skulls in Mizo

culture. One picture shows a monkey skull stuffed with cotton, hung on the wall of a jhum (shifting cultivation) camp house, believed to ward off evil spirits. Another image shows a successful hunter wearing a monkey fur skull cap, suggesting that this headgear played a significant ceremonial role, possibly symbolizing the hunter's status, power, or spiritual connection.

Now we will look at the *sapui* among wild animals that the pre-colonial Mizo society had interactions with. In pre-colonial Mizo society, elephants were highly valued and interacted with in various ways. As the largest animal encountered by the Mizos, elephants required a collective hunting effort, involving many people to hunt and butcher. They were primarily hunted for their tusk and meat (Sangkima,2004). In a hunting party, the person who first climbed onto the carcass and sat on it was credited with the kill(Parry,1928). In addition to group hunting, the Mizos also used traps to capture elephants. These traps consisted of large pits covered with leaves and twigs, which would ensnare the elephant. Once trapped, the hunters would finish it off with guns or spears (Dokhuma,1992).

The tiger, known as *sakei* in the Mizo, was deeply revered and feared by the people. It is interesting that they referred to it as *sapui* rather than by its true name, which conveys dread and respect for this formidable predator (Dokhuma, 1992). As previously mentioned, A.G. McCall claims that only the young men of *zawlbuk* eat tiger meat, as it is not typically consumed by the general public. When a tiger was slain, the village leader or the hunter had to perform a ceremonial ritual on the animal called *ai*.

When a village is much troubled by a tiger systematically waylaying its live stocks, a general hunting party is organized (Shakespear,1975) and hunted in what is known as *sapuihual.* When hunting for tiger, certain practices were thought to bring adversity. For instance, climbing a tree was considered an unlucky act, and hunters would also refrain from packing lunch, fearing that doing so would invite misfortune upon themselves (Dokhuma,1992).The tiger was both feared and respected in the community, where killing one demonstrated a hunter's bravery and strength.

Wild mithun (*tumpang sial)* is one of the wild animals that must be killed in order to attain *Ram lama thangchhuah.*(Lalnunmawia,2019).When a *tumpangsial*is killed a special ceremony called *arhnuaichhiah*has to be done inorder to be counted as part of *thangchhuah.* The head of the *tumpang* along with a chicken is placed on the foot of the bed and covered with a large plate, the person who shot it will sit on top of the plate and drink alcohol afterwards the chicken would be slaughtered for consumption by the priest (Dokhuma,1992). Sometimes a large hunting parties would make lengthy expeditions into uninhabited part in search of it, (Shakespear,1975) the wild mithun is considered as one of the *sapui* by the pre- colonial Mizo because of its rarity and relatively important role in their culture.

Human-Wild Animal Interactions

During the pre-colonial period in the Lushai Hills, human-animal interaction was frequent as they were both searching for food and other resources. These encounters were mutually beneficial, with both humans and animals gaining from their repeated interactions. To have a better understanding of how Mizos in the pre-colonial period interacted and exploited the wild animals living in the thick black jungle forest, the concept of *Thangchhuah* needs to be studied.

According to K.Zawla, the term *Thangchhuah* is a portmanteau consisting of two words- *Thang*` which refers to "fame" and *Chhuah* which signifies "accomplished."(Malsawmdawngliana& R. Lalsangpuii,2024).There are two types of *Thangchhuah* known as *In Lama Thangchhuah* (within the village) and *Ram lama Thangchhuah* (outside the village by killing prescribed wild animals.) Sangkima argues that it was not an easy task to be a *Thangchhuah* for a man whether it was *In Lama Thangchhuah* or a *Ram Lama Thangchhuah* as it needs wealth, bravery, and good health. So, for a poor and unhealthy man, it was an impossible task to perform wither of the two(Sangkima,1992).The early Mizos tried to earn the *Thangchhuah* title mainly for three reasons: i)To enter *Pialral*[4] after death and enjoy eternity without the need to do any jhuming and be supplied with husked rice along with meat and *Zu* (rice beer) ii) To escape from being shot by *Pawla*[5]on

[4]A realm beyond *Mithi Khua*(the village of the dead for the common people) which was accessible only to those who achieved the status of *Thangchhuah.*

[5]*Pialral*(Paradise) gatekeeper.

their way to *Mithikhua* iii)To gain honor and respect from others during their life time. James Dokhuma also added that the Chief of the village often selects elders from *Thangchhuahpa* to assist in governing the village.

To study the human-animal interactions and exploitations we will shift our focus on *Ram lama Thangchhuah* as it is an achievement related to the wildlife or forest in the traditional period. *Ram lama Thangchhuah* was a formidable task for a skilled hunter. To achieve this status, one was required to hunt and kill particular set of animals in which many renowned scholars argue about which set of wild animals are needed to be hunted in order to achieve the status of *Ram lama Thangchhuah*. According to James Dokuma, one must kill particular set of animals included the barking deer (*Sakhi*), sambhar deer (*Zukchal*), bear (*Savawm*), wild boar (*Sanghal*), and *Sele-te*/*Tumpang.* Healso added that one must also kill king cobra (*Rulngan*) and a crested serpent eagle (*Muvanlai*) to gain morehonour (Dokhuma,1992). In addition to these, the colonial ethnographer John Shakespear also noted that the hunter needed to kill a flying lemur (*Vahluk*) to gain greater honour(Shakespear,1975). Achieving *Thangchhuah* in this regard was challenging as the hunting and killing of smaller animal species did not count. It required the successful hunting of specific animals listed, necessitating an exceptional combination of skill, courage, perseverance, and fortuitous circumstances, as tracking and locating these animals was exceedingly rare.

Now, let us talk about how the wild animals exploited or should we say disturbed the human life in the pre-colonial Mizo society. Since there are no written records about the traditional period of the Mizos, many of the history needs to be constructed through oral history and oral traditions. For humans around the world, animals have always been 'an essential part of our history, culture and existence'(Pachuau,2022). Animals also engaged with humans in a number of ways- first, animals frequently entered human settlements in search of food, it is said that those animals who entered human settlements in search of food were either wounded or of an old age as they were not able to hunt and provide their own food for survival, second, as pre-colonial Mizos depended on agriculture and cultivating their jhum crops, wild animals used to enter their harvesting fields and destroy their agriculture products. Also, in certain instances, although not commonly observed, it is believed that some wild animals seek refuge near human settlements when fleeing from their predators. These interactions were not merely incidental but formed a complex web of reciprocal engagements, wherein animals adapted to human presence and activities, influencing and being influenced by human behavior, territorial boundaries, and resource use. Such interactions underscored a dynamic coexistence where both humans and animals continuously negotiated their shared environment, contributing to the ecological and cultural landscape of the period.

Another instance where human-animal correlation can be seen in the pre-colonial Mizo society is in the functioning of *zawlbuk* (bachelor's dormitory) as all the young men took shelter there during the night, they are always available for any urgent work. If a leopard or tiger comes into the village and kills a pig or a wild cat comes and kills fowls, all the inmates of the *zawlbuk* rush out as soon as the hue and cry is raised and pursue the intruder (Parry,1928).

This section provides an investigation on the complex and dynamic nature of human- animal interactions in pre-colonial Mizo society, specifically focusing on the concept of *thangchhuah* and its relation to wildlife exploitation. It also gives a detailed understanding of the concept of *thangchhuah* and its significance. The section acknowledges the use of oral history and oral traditions to construct the history of the Mizos. Of the two *thangchhuah* types: *In Lama Thangchhuah* (within the village) and *Ram lama Thangchhuah* (outside the village), *Ram lama Thangchhuah* required hunting and killing specific animals, such as deer, bear, wild boar, and certain bird species. Achieving *thangchhuah* was challenging and required exceptional skill, courage, and perseverance. Wild animals also exploited or disturbed human life in pre-colonial Mizo society by entering settlements in search of food, destroying agriculture products, and seeking refuge near human settlements. Human-animal interactions formed a complex web of reciprocal engagements, influencing each other's behavior, territorial boundaries, and resource use.

Human-Domestic Animal Interactions

Domestication can be defined as the man's activity of taming the wild animals and to control the breeding, feeding and care (management and health control) of animals (Sulabh &Bayan, 2017). All definitions of domestication, whether dealing with plants or animals, recognize that domestication involves a relationship between humans and target plant or animal populations. It can also be said that other definitional approaches portray domestication as a mutualistic relationship in which both partners, human and domesticate, reap benefits(Zeder, 2012). The domestication of animals is one of the few relics of the past whence we may reasonably speculate on man's social condition in very ancient times. We know that the domestication of every important member of our existing stock originated in pre-historic ages, and, therefore, that our remote ancestors accomplished in a variety of cases, what we have been unable to effect in any single instance (Galton, 1865).

In pre-colonial Mizo society, animals played a vital role. Domestic animals were valued as currency and wealth, not just for food, and were only slaughtered on special occasions (McCall,1949). In the Mizo traditional society, there existed a mutualistic relationship between humans and domesticated animals which played a significant role in their social, economic, and cultural life. In the following paragraphs, we will attempt to understand what kind of animals were domesticated and the roles played by those domesticated animals.

It is said that dogs were the first animal to be domesticated by humans more than 15,000 years ago (Ahmad et al., 2020). In the pre-colonial Mizo society too, dogs have been domesticated since time immemorial. It is said that the Mizo ancestors used to kill dogs for sacrificial purpose. The Mizos have been eating dog meat and it was regarded as a delicacy. The dog was also useful as a companion to his mater on a journey, or when he camped in the jungle or spent the nights in his jhum hut (B. Lalthangliana, 2005).

According to N.E. Parry, hunting dogs were much more highly valued than ordinary dogs but if one gets shot by accident while out for hunting the owner can claim no compensation. He also wrote that fierce dogs generally have his tail and ears clipped and if a dog was always caught stealing food, it can be killed and no compensation can be claimed by its owner. Also, if during a dog fight a small child gets mixed up in it and bitten to death, the owners of the dogs must kill a mithun for the *thlaichhiah* and provide a *puandum* for the burial. For an ordinary dog bite, no compensation can be claimed (Parry, 1928). All in all, the early Mizo ancestors found dogs to be great companions and is said that dogs also possessed the *thianchhanthihngam* (faithful to a friend even to the point of death) quality which the Mizos greatly valued (B. Lalthangliana, 2001).

To the Mizos, the Mithun (gayal) was the most valuable domestic animal. It was brought by their ancestors to Mizoram when they migrated from the east. In the olden days the mithuns were used for barter. Wealth was measured according to the number of mithuns a man possessed. It was not milked like the cow and was never used as a beast of burden. However, it played a significant role in the Mizos' past lives in a variety of ways.

Sial also played a significant role in the economic life of the people. It was the chief measure of wealth and a wealthy man was one who possessed a good number of *Sial*. Similarly, the girl's price was fixed in terms of *sial*. When anyone committed a crime, the greatest fine he had to pay was a mithun. Also, when a baby girl was born, she was blessed as *se (sial) man tur* meaning "she would cost mithun" as its economic implication was that the girl would bring wealth to the family (Sangkima,2004). It was regarded as an honour for a man to kill many mithuns for a '*khuangchawi*' public feast (B. Lalthangliana,2001). John Shakespear also noted that the mithun was the most valued domesticated an animal and it played a very important role in the customs, and traditions of the Mizo (Shakespear, 1975).

The chicken has been reared and bred by the Mizo since ages. Chickens were useful to the Mizo in many ways, it was offered as a sacrifice to the spirits. When a bride was led away to the groom's house, her parents had to give a chicken which was part and parcel of her dowry.

Chicken eggs also hold a great significance in the Mizo society. In the traditional era eggs were not consumed by adults, it was set aside entirely for children. Also, eggs were given great value as giving

someone a boiled egg was regarded as a great honour. Eggs were also eaten during their festivals like *Chapchar Kut* which was usually held during the month of March, this process of eating and chasing someone with boiled eggs and shoving into their each other's mouth is known as *chhawnghnawh* (B. Lalthangliana, 2005).

Like the chicken, pigs were bred by every family in a Mizo village. It could be regarded in some ways as part of a Mizo family. Pork was popular and could be eaten by almost everyone. Pigs were the scavengers of the village, but were generously fed on a species of arum and rice husks boiled together (Shakespear, 1975). It was the first animal to be used as a sacrifice and was important in all their religious rites. The killing of a pig signified relationship and friendship. It was considered the highest honour one person bestowed on another. It may not be mistaken that the Mizos eat every part of the pig, to make their food delicious, Mizos also produced *sa-um* (fermented pig fat). Also, the only cooking oil they possessed was pig's fat (B. Lalthangliana,2005). Pigs also played an additional role in maintaining village sanitation by consuming human feces.

It is believed that the goat was and has been a domestic animal of the Mizo since long age, because it was used often as a sacrifice in their religious rites. In the old days, they never milked the goats and women never ate its meat (B. Lalthangliana, 2005). The goat is also used in a sacrificial ritual called *kelkhal*, and for a goat to be used in the ritual the tail of the goat has to be white. After the goat is slaughtered and cooked, the tail of the goat is used as a necklace for the man whom the ritual is performed (Parry, 1928).

According to the colonial ethnographers like A.G. McCall, the cat has escaped all envy, for none would eat this animal. The cats origin in the Lushai Hills cannot be traced. B.Lalthangliana argues that it was only in the late pre-colonial period that cats were domesticated. When ownership of a cat is changed, it is arranged without a price (McCall, 1949).

This portion highlights the significance of various domesticated animals in the social, economic, and cultural life of pre-colonial Mizo society. By using of multiple sources, including colonial ethnographers and Mizo authors, the text provides a comprehensive understanding of animal domestication and brought into light the significance of various domesticated animals.

Human-Animal Relationships: The Intangible and Spiritual Aspects

The primal religion of the Mizos, known as *sakhua*, was broadly categorized as animism by colonial writers in their descriptions of Mizo religious practices. Regarding the Mizo primal religion, Rev. Liangkhaia argued that offerings to spirits aimed at appeasement and healing rather than constituting benevolent spirit that provided protection which was explored in the practice of *sakhua* (Liangkhaia, 1975). Rev Saiaithanga on the other hand expressed a straightforward belief that the Mizo religion essentially involved the worshiping of demons (Saiaithanga, 1981).

Exploring the primal religious practices of the Mizos, there existed acts of appeasement or sacrifice, appeasement involves trying to satisfy someone's desires to maintain peace, while sacrifice means giving up something valuable for a higher purpose or others' well-being (Malsawmdawngliana & R.Lalsangpuii, 2024). In Mizo society, animals were also believed to possess spiritual significance; specific animals were often revered, and their spirits were thought to require rituals or sacrifices to ensure balance and harmony, reflecting the Mizos' belief that their relationship with the animal world was integral to the well-being of both humans and nature.

There are many sacrifices offered for the village community which involves the use of animals for this purpose. The *kawngpuisiam* ritual was performed to seek blessings for hunting success, trapping wild animals, and defense against enemies. The sacrifice offered was a pig or a chicken, alternating each year. Village elders took turns providing the animals for the sacrifice. The ceremony was attended by three, five, or seven individuals, selected especially for their names containing *mal sawm* which means 'blessings.' The ritual occurred in the evening on the main path outside the village's southern entrance. The *fano dawi* is another annual village ritual to protect young rice crops from diseases. *Fa* means rice, doing so ensures the

villagers have a plentiful and healthy rice harvest. Every year, a respected elder in the village contributes a black chicken for this ceremony on a rotational basis (Dokhuma 1992). *Khawkhengthawi* ritual was performed to invoke rain during prolonged droughts. Many small clay models resembling mithuns, a bovine animal, were created and placed along the main path at the village entrance. The *ramarthih* ritual is another traditional practice seeking protection from accidents when clearing the forest for cultivation, during this ritual, *puithiam* (a priest) sacrifices a red cock at the village entrance.

Another form of offerings was performed for the blessings of their household like the *ar-khal* ritual which is performed for newlyweds, with the bride and groom participating in separate ceremonies as a red rooster is offered near the *khumpui* (master bed). Feathers above the tail, known as *"fep"* are hung over the parents' sleeping area. Specific parts of the sacrifice's animal are placed in a basket and thrown away the following day. *Vawk-te-khal* is a ritual in which small pig is offered near the head of a sleeping platform. The pig's flesh is cooked inside the house while its skull is placed above the sleeping area. *Kel-khal* is when a goat is offered near water tubes, and its meat is cooked inside the house. Parts of the goat, such as the head, liver, feet, and legs, are hung on a cane in the front veranda. These three rituals are usually performed soon after a wedding but poor individuals may delay them until illness occurs. In *van chung-khal* ritual, a white rooster is offered near the *sumhmun* (a place where rice is ground), and its flesh is cooked inside the house. *Khal-chuang*, this ritual is akin to *kel-khal* offering a goat with similar treatment of relevant parts, however, the flesh is not cooked until the next day. *Bawl-pui* is a traditional ceremony which involves the creation of clay figures that represent a man and a woman, known as "*ram-chawm*." The female figure's mouth contains the pig's liver, while the male figure is decorated with a pipe and a necklace made from the pig's liver that was offered. A small bamboo platform is constructed, and clay models of household items are placed on it. The pig is killed by slitting its throat, and the blood is allowed to flow over the platform. The pig's meat is cooked in the spot and many people join in on the feast. If the person who is the reason for the offering does not pass away during or after the ceremony, it is believed that they will recover, this ritual is rarely performed and is only considered after all other methods have proved futile. These *khal* sacrifices are an essential part of the Mizo culture and reflect specific beliefs and practices, they are performed based on a variety of circumstances and dreams (Malsawmdawngliana& R.Lalsangpuii, 2024).

There were several appeasements performed for healing and preventing illness and sickness like *ui-hring* which was performed when a man appeared lethargic or unhealthy. During this ritual, a fully grown dog or bitch was chosen and offered on the entrance platform of the house. *Hring-ai-tan* is a performed when someone is suffering from tuberculosis or had difficulty form recovering form illness, this ritual involved a procedure like *ui-hring* but with the added element of chanting a unique charm and consuming the heart of a sacrificed animal. After the ritual, the household would observe a day of *serh* which was a period of ritualistic purity. Another ceremony performed is *khuavang-hring* which address *chho-hah vei*, which causes debility, loss of strength, weakness, or anemia, particularly noticeable during the uphill movement. In this ceremony, the *puithiam* selected the sacrificial animal. The animal's flesh was cooked outdoors, while the heart, liver, fat (*serh*), and head were presented on a post and placed inside the basket (Malsawmdawngliana&R.Lalsangpuii, 2024).

Certain offerings were also made to address female infertility and fostering healthy childbirth like that of *chhim*, if a woman fails to conceive a child in the first year of her marriage, the *chhim* ritual is performed to aid her in getting pregnant. The process involves the capturing of a white hen immediately after it has laid an egg. Also, a white hen is caught and placed in a nest basket along with an egg, and they are captured together. *Arte-pum-phel* ritual is performed when a woman faces complications during childbirth. During this ritual, a chicken is sacrificed partially burned in a fire, and cut into two halves lengthwise. One of the halves is wrapped in a leaf and placed outside the lower entrance of the village, while the other half is wrapped and placed outside the upper entrance. This ceremony aims to facilitate a smoother childbirth process for the woman facing difficulties. In the past, ritual was performed on the day a baby was born to protect the child from evil spirits, during this ceremony, a small chicken is tied by its neck to a bamboo stick and placed on the thatched roof over the front veranda. This is typically done on the side where the *archhiar* is present. The belief behind this ritual is that the offspring of such a chicken will be of better quality when compared to other fowls. After the ceremony, the neighbors often rescue the chicken, hoping it will produce better offspring, and nurture it alongside their poultry. Another ritual known as *arte-lui-lam* is conducted a week after giving birth, this ritual included sacrificing a rooster and a hen. During this period, the mother was forbidden from visiting the *tuikhur* (a water source) (Malsawmdawngliana&R.Lalsangpuii, 2024).

The human-animal relationship in pre-colonial Mizoram was deeply interconnected with the spiritual and ritualistic practices of the Mizo people. Animals were not merely seen as physical entities but were believed to possess spiritual significance that required rituals, sacrifices, and appeasements to maintain balance and harmony within the community. These practices reflected a worldview where humans and animals were connected through a network of spiritual exchanges that impacted health, prosperity, fertility, and overall well- being.

The primal religion of the Mizos, with its intricate rituals such as the *Kawngpui Siam*, *Fano Dawi*, *KhawnkhengThawi*, and many others, highlights the role of animals as essential participants in ceremonies aimed at ensuring successful hunts, abundant harvests, rain, healing, protection, and other critical needs. Each animal chosen for sacrifice was believed to hold a specific spiritual meaning and purpose, underscoring the notion that animals were viewed not just as resources, but as vital elements in maintaining cosmic equilibrium.

Furthermore, rituals like the *Chhim* and *Arte-pum-phel* ceremonies, aimed at addressing issues of fertility and childbirth, further demonstrate the depth of this relationship. They reveal a reliance on the spiritual qualities attributed to animals for resolving human concerns. The use of animals for appeasement, healing, and prevention of illness, such as in the *Ui-Hring* and *Khuavang-Hring* rituals, also points to a belief system where human health was closely connected to animal spirits and their ritualistic treatment.

Overall, the pre-colonial Mizo society maintained a complex and reciprocal relationship with the animal world, where animals were revered, sacrificed, and integrated into the social and spiritual fabric of the community. This relationship was rooted in a belief that the well-being of both humans and nature was mutually dependent, necessitating continuous spiritual engagement through rituals and offerings. This interconnectedness reflects a unique perspective on the human-animal relationship, one that transcends mere utility and embodies a deep respect and acknowledgment of animals' spiritual roles in maintaining harmony and balance in the natural world.

Conclusion

The intricate relationships between humans and animals have been a cornerstone of human society throughout history. From the emergence of meat in the human diet 2.5 million years ago to the development of ethnozoology as a scientific field, humans have continually interacted with and relied on animals for various purposes. Ethnozoology, with its transdisciplinary approach, offers a comprehensive understanding of these interactions, encompassing cultural, biological, and ecological aspects. By exploring the diverse ways humans have perceived, used, and managed animals across cultures and time, ethnozoology provides valuable insights into the complex dynamics of human-animal relationships. Ultimately, this knowledge can inform strategies for sustainable coexistence with animals, promoting a harmonious and mutually beneficial relationship between humans and the natural world.

This exploration of human-animal interactions in pre-colonial Mizo society highlights the fundamental role that animals played in shaping social structures, cultural practices, and economic activities. From the revered *sapui* animals in the wild, such as the tiger and the mithun, to domesticated animals like the dog, chicken, and pig, these relationships reflect a complex web of mutual dependence, respect, and exploitation.

The cultural practices surrounding hunting, domestication, and ritualistic uses of animals revealed a deep-seated reverence for wildlife, while also illustrating the importance of animals in maintaining social status, economic exchange, and spiritual beliefs. The exploration of human-animal interactions in pre-colonial Mizo society underscores the essential role animals played in shaping social, cultural, and economic structures. Rituals such as *Kawngpui Siam*, *Fano Dawi*, and *KhawkhengThawi* highlight the integration of animals into spiritual practices aimed at ensuring success in hunting, harvests, and protection. These ceremonies, along with those addressing fertility and healing, like *Chhim* and *Arte- pum-phel*, reflect the belief in the spiritual significance of animals and their integral role in maintaining harmony between humans and the natural world.

Furthermore, the sacrificial practices aimed at appeasement and healing, such as *Ui- Hring* and *Khuavang-Hring*, illustrate the deep connection between human health and the treatment of animal spirits, affirming that the well-being of both humans and animals was seen as interdependent.

Overall, this study reveals that the relationship between humans and animals in pre- colonial Mizo society was characterized by mutual dependence, respect, and spiritual engagement. The complex practices surrounding animals not only supported subsistence and economic exchange but also reinforced social status and community cohesion, demonstrating the centrality of animals in the cultural and spiritual worldview of the Mizo people. Through this lens, human-animal interactions were crucial to the maintenance of cosmic equilibrium, health, prosperity, and the overall well-being of the community.

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