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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring Tribal Eco-Theology and Climate Justice: A Constructive Theological Inquiry from the Kukis Perspective

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Abstract

The study is the intersection of tribal eco-theology and climate justice through the lived experiences and ecological worldview of the Kuki people. It is embedded with indigenous ecological knowledge, embedded in cultural practices, rituals, and cosmology, and offers critical resources for rethinking contemporary ecological crises. By examining Kuki understandings of land, the God-human-nature relationship, and traditional ecological knowledge, the study constructs a contextual eco-theology rooted in indigenous wisdom.

The paper further engages with climate justice by situating ecological degradation within socio-political disruptions, including displacement and environmental decline. It proposes that integrating indigenous ecological ethics with Christian theological reflection can contribute to a more inclusive, justice-oriented ecological framework and a critical evaluation toward constructive Ecological Justice. And suggest a new perspective on Mission toward Cosmic or Eco-Mission to advocate for climate justice and Ecological justice from the Kuki perspective.

1. Introduction

Human engagement with the natural environment has always shaped cultural identities, belief systems, and survival strategies. Among indigenous communities, such as the Kuki people, this interaction has produced a rich body of knowledge often described as traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). This knowledge system reflects a deep awareness of the interconnectedness between humans, nature, and the spiritual realm, guiding sustainable practices and ethical relationships with the environment.

However, contemporary ecological crises, compounded by socio-political conflicts and climate change, have disrupted these traditional systems. In the Kuki context, environmental degradation, displacement, and weakening cultural structures have challenged long-standing ecological sensibilities. This calls for a constructive theological response that not only reinterprets Christian theology in light of indigenous perspectives but also addresses the urgent need for climate justice.

1.1. Background of the Study

Indigenous communities have traditionally maintained a close relationship with nature through cultural practices, spirituality, and traditional ecological knowledge. Among the Kuki people, the environment is understood as sacred and interconnected with human life, community, and the divine. Their ecological worldview promotes harmony, sustainability, and respect for creation.

However, environmental degradation, climate change, displacement, and socio-political conflicts have disrupted these traditional ecological systems and weakened indigenous practices. Despite the ecological significance of indigenous knowledge, tribal perspectives remain largely absent in mainstream theological and climate justice discussions. This study, therefore, seeks to explore Kuki ecological wisdom as a resource for developing a contextual eco-theology and promoting ecological and climate justice.

1.2. Problem Statement

Contemporary ecological crises, combined with socio-political conflicts and cultural disruptions, threaten both the ecological integrity and indigenous identity of Kuki communities. Existing theological frameworks often inadequately engage indigenous ecological worldviews.

1.3. Research Questions

How does Kuki ecological understanding contribute to eco-theological reflection? How can indigenous ecological knowledge inform climate justice discourse? How may Christian theology and Kuki ecological traditions be integrated constructively?

1.4. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are:

- To examine Kuki ecological worldview and traditional ecological knowledge.
- To construct a contextual tribal eco-theology.
- To explore implications for climate justice.
- To propose an eco-mission framework.

1.5. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and exploratory research methodology grounded in ethnographic and contextual theological approaches. Primary data are drawn from oral traditions, vernacular sources, cultural narratives, and interviews with knowledgeable elders and community members within the Kuki society. Secondary data include books, journal articles, theological writings, and scholarly works related to indigenous knowledge systems, eco-theology, and climate justice.

The research further adopts a constructive theological method by engaging indigenous ecological wisdom alongside biblical and theological reflection. Through an interdisciplinary approach, the study seeks to develop a contextual and justice-oriented eco-theological framework that reflects the lived realities, spirituality, and ecological consciousness of the Kuki people.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Understanding Eco-Theology

Eco-theology emerged in the late twentieth century within Christian theological discourse as a response to the growing global environmental crisis. The term “eco” is derived from the Greek *oikos*, meaning “household,” and signifies the interconnectedness of all creation within the

household of God.¹ It emphasises that the natural world is a unified and sacred system in which human beings participate as responsible members.

The development of eco-theology is closely linked to the scientific discipline of ecology, a term first coined by the German biologist Ernst Haeckel, referring to the study of relationships between organisms and their environment.² In this light, eco-theology may be understood as a form of constructive theology that critically engages the interrelationship between religion and nature in the context of environmental concerns.

Eco-theology further interprets creation from the perspectives of ecological interdependence and human responsibility. It is fundamentally a contextual theology shaped by the crises of the modern world, including environmental degradation driven by industrialisation, free-market economies, and neoliberal development policies.³ Consequently, eco-theology calls for a renewed theological vision that affirms the value of all living beings and emphasizes ethical responsibility toward the Creator and creation.

2.2. Why Eco-Theology?

The rapidly increasing awareness of the environmental crisis has led to widespread religious reflection on the human relationship with the earth. Such reflection has powerful precedents in most religious traditions in the realms of ethics and cosmology, and can be seen as a subset or result of the theology of nature.⁴ Eco-Theology is an attempt to retrieve the ecological wisdom within Christianity in response to environmental threats and injustices. At the same time, it is an attempt to reinvestigate, rediscover and renew the Christian tradition in the light of the challenges posed by the environmental crisis.⁵

Eco-theology explores not only the relationship between religion and nature in terms of degradation of nature, but also in terms of ecosystem management. Specifically, eco-theology seeks not only to identify well-known issues within the relationship between nature and religion, but also to sketch potential solutions. This is important because many supporters and contributors of eco-theology argue that science and education are simply not enough to inspire the change necessary in our current environmental crisis.⁶ Here lies the importance of eco-theology, which analyses the human space and space of nature in its creation and recognises each other. To make Eco-Theology more relevant for the tribals, we must go through the Tribal Eco-Theology, which will reflect and help the tribals in their experiences and struggles.

¹ Celia Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2008), 5.

² Ernst Haeckel, *The History of Creation* (New York: D. Appleton, 1876), 286.

³ Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 10.

⁴ Solomon Victus, *Eco-Theology, and the Scriptures: A Revisit of Christian Responses* (Delhi: Christian world Imprint, 2020), 9

⁵ Ernst M. Conradie, *Christianity and Ecological Theology* (Stellenbosch, Cape Town: Sun Media Stellenbosch, 2006), 3.

⁶ Victus, *Eco-Theology and the Scriptures*, 11

2.3. Tribal theology

Tribal theology is a contextual and experiential form of theological reflection grounded in the lived experiences, cultural traditions, and spiritual worldviews of indigenous communities. It represents a contextual theological approach that emphasises land, identity, and community as foundational elements of theological reflection.⁷ Nirmal Minz articulates tribal theology as a holistic worldview in which land, forest, and community are not merely resources but sacred entities integral to spiritual life.⁸

Unlike dominant Western theological paradigms, tribal theology is relational and holistic, rooted in oral traditions and communal practices. It affirms that divine presence is encountered not only through written scriptures but also through nature, ancestral heritage, and everyday life experiences.⁹ This perspective highlights the inseparability of spirituality and ecology within tribal contexts.

2.4. Tribal Eco-Theology

Tribal Eco-theology is a field of study that explores the relationship between religion, spirituality, and the environment from the tribal perspective. It seeks to develop theological responses to ecological issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation. Tribal Eco-Theology often draws on tribal religious teachings, scriptures, and traditions to develop ethical frameworks for environmental stewardship and sustainability. It encourages a deeper appreciation of the natural world and promotes actions that reflect a sense of ecological responsibility and care for the Earth.¹⁰ Tribal Eco-Theology is interdisciplinary, combining insights from theology, ecology, ethics, and spirituality to address pressing environmental challenges facing humanity.

2.5. Why Tribal Eco-Theology?

Ecological problems are the real survival issues that affect the whole system of tribal life, culture, and religion. Tribals who live and work close to the soil are the worst-affected community. The natural resources like land, sea, and forest, which were life supportive for centuries, are gradually depleting due to the process of development. The increase in population, urbanisation, and unplanned development activities creates acute problems of space among different communities, leading to ethnic violence.¹¹

⁷ Wati Longchar, *An Emerging Asian Theology: Tribal Theology* (Jorhat: ATEM, 2000), 19.

⁸ Nirmal Minz, "A Theological Interpretation of the Tribal Realities in India," in *Doing Theology with Tribal Resources: Context and Perspective*, eds. A Wati Longchar and Larry E. Davis (Jorhat: Tribal Study Centre, 1999), 112.

⁹ Longchar, *An Emerging Asian Theology*, 20.

¹⁰ Yangkahao Vashum, "Eco-Theology from Tribal/Indigenous People's Perspectives of the North East India" in *Tribal Ecology: A Search for Ecological Values from the Cultures and the Practices of the Tribes of North East India*, edited by Razouselie Lasetso, Marlene Ch. Marak and Yangkahao Vashum (Jorhat: Tribal Study Centre, 2012), 26.

¹¹ Longchar, *An Emerging Asian Theology*, 52.

Tribal Eco-Theology is a belief system that integrates tribal spiritual teachings with environmental stewardship. It emphasises the interconnectedness of all living beings and the sacredness of nature. Tribal communities often view the land as a relative, deserving respect and care. This perspective contrasts with mainstream Western views that often prioritise human dominance over nature. Tribal Eco-Theology offers a holistic approach to environmental issues, recognising the intrinsic value of the Earth and advocating for sustainable practices that honour the Earth's resources. It seeks to promote harmony between humans and the natural world, fostering a deep sense of responsibility for future generations.

3. Biblical and Theological Foundation for Eco-Theology

3.1. Creation Theology

Christian environmentalism, which has developed recently, emphasises that ecological concern must move from theological reflection to concrete praxis, both locally and globally. The contribution of Christian theology has been to highlight that environmental problems are not merely scientific; they stem from the human heart and mindset.

Early critiques, such as those of Lynn White, argued that the Judeo-Christian tradition, particularly Genesis 1:28, promoted a dominion-oriented view of humanity over nature, inadvertently fostering ecological degradation.¹² Margaret Barker has sought to recover more ecologically affirming perspectives, notably the concept of stewardship: humans are called to care for creation as God cares for humanity.¹³ Stewardship, while a central motif, is limited by human epistemic constraints; as Clare Palmer notes, successful stewardship requires understanding that humans often lack regarding complex ecosystems.¹⁴ James Lovelock similarly critiques stewardship as presumptuous, equating human authority over the Earth with the hubris of “goats as gardeners.”¹⁵

Richard Bauckham emphasises that humans are formed from the soil (*adamah*), are intrinsically part of creation, and that their God-given dominion is bounded by the prior call of other creatures to “be fruitful and multiply.”¹⁶ Genesis 9 further underscores interdependence, as the Noahic covenant encompasses both humans and animals. Barker highlights that in Wisdom literature and the Psalms, creation itself praises God (Psalm 148; Isa 42:10), and that human sin can directly harm the environment, as seen in Hosea 4:1-3.8.¹⁷ Thus, a robust creation theology situates humans within, rather than above, the ecological order, emphasising both moral responsibility and the intrinsic value of all creation.

¹² Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science*, 155, no. 3767 (March 10, 1967): 1203.

¹³ Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God* (New Delhi: SPCK, 1992), 54.

¹⁴ Clare Palmer, *Animal Ethics in Context* (London: Routledge, 2010), 45.

¹⁵ James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 98.

¹⁶ Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2010), 23.

¹⁷ Barker, *The Great Angel*, 55.

3.2. Nature in Biblical Tradition

Biblical Eco-theology expands beyond stewardship to recognise the intrinsic worth of the natural world and its capacity to reflect God's holiness. Paul's reflection in Romans 8:19-23 illustrates that creation suffers under human sin, implying that ecological concern is intimately linked with moral and spiritual accountability.¹⁸ This perspective challenges purely anthropocentric interpretations, affirming that ecological degradation is a violation not merely of natural law but of divine intention.

3.3. Nature in Prophetic and Liberative Perspective

Prophetic and liberation-oriented theological traditions foreground the interconnection of social justice and ecological care. Sean McDonagh and Leonardo Boff link environmental degradation to systemic oppression, particularly of marginalised communities, highlighting a dual exploitation of people and land under capitalist and post-colonial structures.¹⁹ Indigenous and Aboriginal traditions similarly emphasise the sacredness of the land, though contemporary scholars caution against idealising pre-modern practices.

Eco-feminist theology draws parallels between the domination of women and the exploitation of nature, critiquing patriarchal dualism. Sallie McFague conceptualises the earth as "God's Body," framing creation as God's self-expression and extending salvation to all creatures.²⁰ Anna Primavesi incorporates the Gaia hypothesis into ecological theology, while other scholars recover the biblical motif of Woman Wisdom (Sophia) to highlight the feminine dimension of God's creative work.²¹ These perspectives collectively advocate for ethical, relational, and justice-oriented engagement with the environment, situating ecological concern within broader theological, social, and economic frameworks.

4. Kuki Cosmology and Ecological Worldviews

4.1. Kuki's Understanding of Land

The Thadou-Kuki people, part of the broader Kuki-Chin ethnic groups residing across the Naga Hills in the north, Myanmar (Burma) in the east, Chin and Lushai Hills in the south, and Cachar district in the west, have developed a distinctive understanding of land shaped by survival within their environment.²² The Kuki people perceive land as a sacred, living entity deeply interwoven

¹⁸ Romans 8:19-23 (NRSV).

¹⁹ Sean McDonagh, *To Care for the Earth: A Call to a New Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986); Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 112.

²⁰ Sallie McFague, *Models of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 150-155.

²¹ Anna Primavesi, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (London: SCM Press, 2000), 27.

²² J. Shaw, *Ethnography of the Kuki-Chin* (London: Macmillan, 1929), 1.

with spiritual significance. The land, rivers, forests, and mountains are seen as manifestations of *Chung Pathen*, the supreme deity. Bloodshed or disputes are believed to defile the soil, necessitating purification rituals (*Tolthe*) performed by the village priest.²³ Settlements were carefully chosen through divination practices, such as observing a cock left overnight on a proposed site to seek the approval of resident spirits.²⁴

The Kuki maintain reserved forests (*khotu or Gamkheh*), which are left untouched until the trees reach maturity, alongside buffer zones called '*meilam*' to prevent wildfires and preserve resources.²⁵ Beyond these areas, they cultivate fields (*lougam*) and designate outer zones for hunting, often considered dwelling places for malevolent spirits, necessitating sacrificial rites for protection.²⁶ Such practices reflect a holistic understanding of land stewardship, rooted in both spiritual and ecological awareness.

4.2. God-Human-Nature Relationship

The Kuki worldview is often classified as animist, yet it recognises a supreme deity, *Chung Pathen*, as creator of the universe and all living beings, alongside lesser spirits requiring appeasement. All natural elements, forests, mountains, rivers, and trees are perceived as manifestations of *Chung Pathen*'s power. Rituals, including symbolic worship of household gods (*Indoi*) incorporating objects like bamboo, gourds, and animal parts, demonstrate humans' relational participation in creation.²⁷

Agricultural operations were guided by spiritual consultation. Field selection was followed by seeking affirmations from the spirits of the land (*Gampi or Gampu*) through dreams (*Mangsan*) and ritual offerings (*Twikhuh Thoina*).²⁸ Fertility and sustainable use of soil were observed through cyclical practices such as *Louchul Thoat*, restricting repeated cultivation in the same site, with fines imposed for noncompliance.²⁹ Seasonal and lunar cycles also structured human activity, from sowing to feasts, reflecting an embedded ecological knowledge that integrates natural rhythms with spiritual and social obligations.³⁰

4.3. Traditional Ecological Knowledge

The Kuki possess extensive traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), accumulated through centuries of interaction with their environment. Fikrets Berkes characterises TEK as a cumulative

²³ N. Chongloi, *Kuki Indigenous Beliefs and Practices* (Imphal: Tribal Research Institute, 2008), 45.

²⁴ Thangkhai Haokip, *Kuki Settlement and Divination Practices* (Churachandpur: Tribal Research Institute, 2009), 25.

²⁵ Thangkhai Haokip, *Traditional Forest Management among Thadou-Kuki* (Churachandpur: Tribal Press, 2006), 49.

²⁶ Thongkholal Kipgen and Thangkhai Haokip, "Sacred Groves and Hunting Practices in Kuki Communities". In *Kuki Ethnography Journal*, 12/2 (Churachandpur: Kuki Ethnography Journal, 2021), 23.

²⁷ Lal.Gangte, *Kuki Cosmology and Animism* (Imphal: Cultural Heritage Press, 2012), 65.

²⁸ Johnson Sithlhou, "Agricultural Rituals among Thadou-Kuki," in *Kuki Research Journal*. 15/2 (Imphal: Kuki Research Journal, 2020), 45-58.

²⁹ Sithlhou, *Agricultural Rituals among Thadou-Kuki*, 46.

³⁰ Thangkhai Haokip, *Calendrical and Lunar Knowledge among the Thadou-Kuki* (Imphal: Kuki Research Journal, 2020), 68-80.

system of knowledge, beliefs, and practices transmitted across generations concerning the inter-relations among humans, other living beings, and the environment.³¹ This knowledge includes empirical observations, paradigms, institutional practices, and worldviews.

Kuki names months, seasons, and lunar phases based on ecological phenomena. For instance, *Tolbol* (January) signifies dusty land, while *Lhatun* (April) marks the seed-sowing period initiated by the calls of local birds. Lunar phases guide cultural and agricultural practices, such as tree felling during increasing moon phases for optimal wood quality. Seasonal knowledge directs agriculture: *Nipi lai* (summer), *Chuh lai* (rainy season), *Phalbi* (winter), and *Khal lai* (spring).³²

Reserved forests, sacred groves, and water sanctification practices exemplify an integrated approach to ecological management. Streams, rivers, and aquifers are preferred water sources, while marshes and swamps are restricted due to perceived malevolent spirits, highlighting a nuanced understanding of ecosystem functionality and human impact.³³

Indigenous health practices are intertwined with ecological knowledge. Herbal remedies derived from guava leaves, East Indian glory, and turkey berry treat various ailments, while ritualistic interventions (*Kithoi*) by priests address spiritually caused illnesses.³⁴ Women's reproductive health is regulated by dietary prescriptions and restrictions, reflecting an integrated understanding of ecology, nutrition, and spiritual care.³⁵

5. Ecological Crisis and Climate Change in the Kuki Context

5.1. The Causes of Ecological Crisis

With the arrival of Christianity, the traditional way of life was suddenly disrupted through evangelisation. Traditional worldview with a new way of life is concerned with spiritual new birth, denunciation of life here and now, eschatological hopes, and the salvation of the lost souls. The identity, culture, rites and rituals, and Land centered on belief were considered unholy, devilish, and sinful and must be removed. This sought a complete change in one's life from a Human-Land-God-related worldview. In this way, their new faith, as understood and practised, failed to prepare the people to address the concerns of their Land.³⁶ However, poppy cultivation and deforestation have caused severe ecological crises. The construction of the dam and the overuse of the resources had caused threats to the ecology. Today, Kukis face land exploitation, illegal

³¹ Fikrets Berkes, *Sacred Ecology: Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Resource Management* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1999), 8.

³² Gangte, *Kuki Cosmology and Animism*, 56.

³³ Thongkholal Kipgen and Thangkhai Haokip, "Sacred Groves and Hunting Practices in Kuki Communities." In *Kuki Ethnography Journal* (Churachandpur: Kuki Ethnography Journal, 2021), 33.

³⁴ T. Haokip, *Indigenous Health Practices among Thadou-Kukis* (Churachandpur: Tribal Cultural Center, 2014), 25.

³⁵ L. Chanu, and P. Kumar. "Women's Health Practices among Thadou-Kukis," in *Tribal Health Review* 6/2 (2015), 31.

³⁶ Jangkhoham Haokip, *Can God Save My Village* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Monographs, 2014), 2.

alienation from the State government in the name of wildlife sanctuary, reserved forest, protected forest, etc., and an identity crisis and ecological crisis.

The major causes for the ecological crisis among the Kuki are the misuse of land and its resources to satisfy their thirst for greed, and they ascribed themselves the right to exploit, and due to poverty and negligence from the concern government. The Earth/nature is a God gift to humans for stewardship and livelihood. But human Forget their duties and responsibilities for the well-being and stewardship of all creation.

The Kuki region faces an ecological crisis from both social disruption and environmental mismanagement. The May 2023 conflict between Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities displaced over 60,000 people, destroying homes and destabilising local livelihoods. Traditional ecological knowledge, which once guided sustainable land use, weakened as forests degraded, springs dried, and agricultural practices were disrupted. Relief camps and overcrowding have further stressed ecosystems. Hundreds of people rely on a single pond for domestic needs, creating sanitation issues and polluting water sources. The combination of displacement, governance gaps, and unregulated use of natural resources has accelerated environmental degradation across the hills and valleys.

5.2. The Impacts of Climate Change

Climate change has intensified the vulnerabilities of the Kuki region. Extreme weather events, such as heavy rainfall and landslides, have caused severe damage to lives, infrastructure, and agricultural lands. Between 2024 and 2025, over 20,000 people were affected by floods and landslides, and more than 3,000 homes were damaged, with 47 landslides reported across the state in just four days.³⁷

Agriculture, a primary livelihood source for the Kuki communities, has been particularly affected. Estimates from the Irabot Foundation in early 2023 indicated that over 10,000 hectares of farmland would be inaccessible, a figure later corroborated by the state government, which reported 5,127 hectares of unreachable paddy fields. The anticipated deficit of 15,000 metric tonnes of rice illustrates the direct link between ecological degradation and food insecurity.³⁸

Water security is also compromised, with studies showing that nearly 62% of springs in Manipur had dried or diminished by early 2024 due to siltation, fluctuating rainfall, and neglected watersheds.³⁹ Such stresses on water availability exacerbate rural hardships, leading to increased reliance on forests, springs, and common land resources already under pressure from years of overuse. Household consumption surveys reflect this stress, with urban expenditure growing by

³⁷ "Manipur Landslides Affect Thousands." In *Mongabay-India*, August 2022 (accessed on 10 April 2026). <https://india.mongabay.com>

³⁸ Government of Manipur, Directorate of Economics & Statistics, *Manipur Household Survey 2023-2024* (Imphal: Directorate of Economics & Statistics, Government of Manipur, 2024), 432 (accessed April 19, 2026). <https://desmanipur.gov.in/>.

³⁹ Government of Manipur, *Manipur Household Survey 2023-2024*, 432.

22% compared to 4% in rural areas, signalling economic vulnerability that further strains ecological resources.⁴⁰

5.3. The Socio-Political Dimension

The ecological crisis is inseparable from the socio-religious and political challenges faced by the Kuki communities. Poverty kills environmental consciousness to feed their hunger and greed for wealth. As Gandhiji stated, “the Earth/nature is enough to satisfy every human’s need, but not man’s greed.”⁴¹ Religiously, after becoming Christian, the traditional believed on the sacredness of nature slowly depleted, as the believes of the presence of spirit in nature and the ownership of nature by the spirits. And also, the misinterpretation of the creation story instead of stewardship and ecological care into domination over all creation to sustain human need.

In the socio-political dimension, displacement, community tensions, and weak governance have disrupted traditional ecological stewardship, undermining both social cohesion and environmental care. Long-term peace and ecological recovery are thus mutually dependent. Any sustainable solution must address not only conflict resolution but also ecological restoration and institutional trust-building.

Post-2023 displacement camps exemplify the pressures on already fragile ecosystems. Overcrowding, poor sanitation, and excessive dependence on limited water and forest resources created a feedback loop where social and environmental vulnerabilities reinforced each other.⁴² This situation demonstrates that environmental degradation is not merely a side effect of human conflict but a central concern in ensuring community resilience.

Restoring ecological balance requires a multifaceted approach: replenishing wetlands and springs, stabilising slopes, restoring native forests, and rebuilding social trust between communities and institutions. Such interventions must consider both ecological and socio-cultural dimensions, recognising that for the Kuki people, human well-being is deeply connected to the health of forests, rivers, and the broader landscape. Climate justice, therefore, becomes a framework for reconciliation, resource equity, and sustainable development, bridging environmental repair with long-term peace and resilience.

⁴⁰ Government of Manipur, *Manipur Household Survey 2023-2024*, 433.

⁴¹ M.K Gandhi, Quoted in Pyarelal, *Mahatma Gandhi: The Last Phase*. Vol. 2 (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1958), 552.

⁴² No author, *The Indelible Trauma: The Truth Behind Manipur Mayhem*. Vol.1 (Churachandpur: Kuki Student Organisation General Headquarters, 2023), 145.

6. Constructing Tribal Eco-Theology for the Kukis

6.1. Re-Reading the Bible from a Kuki Ecological Perspective

Re-reading the Bible from a Kuki ecological perspective brings the Noahic Covenant (Gen 6:18; 8:20-9:17) into dialogue with indigenous understandings of land, community, and the sacredness of nature. For the Kuki people, land is not merely an economic resource but a living reality intertwined with identity, spirituality, and communal life. In this light, the universal scope of the Noahic Covenant, embracing humans, animals, and the earth, resonates deeply with the Kuki worldview of interconnected existence. It affirms that God's covenantal relationship extends to all creation, thereby validating indigenous ecological wisdom that emphasises harmony between humans and the natural world.⁴³

From this perspective, the covenant's emphasis on preservation reflects a shared concern for sustaining life and ecological balance. The Kuki traditional relationship with land, marked by respect, stewardship, and communal responsibility, finds theological grounding in God's promise to preserve the earth. Rather than legitimising domination, the covenant calls for responsible care, aligning with Kuki practices that uphold the integrity of forests, water sources, and biodiversity. Thus, the Noahic Covenant can be understood as reinforcing an eco-ethical vision in which humanity participates as caretaker within a broader community of life.⁴⁴

Moreover, the rainbow as the sign of the covenant can be interpreted as a cosmic symbol that resonates with indigenous sensibilities of sacred signs in nature. For the Kuki ecological lens, such a symbol underscores the presence of God within creation and serves as a reminder of the covenantal bond that includes the land itself. This re-reading invites a holistic approach to eco-justice, where faith, culture, and ecology converge, calling for the protection of the environment as an expression of both theological commitment and indigenous identity.⁴⁵

6.2. Integrating Indigenous Ecological Wisdom and Christian Theology

Integrating Kuki Indigenous Ecological Knowledge (TEK) with Christian theology provides a constructive basis for a tribal eco-theology that addresses ecological justice. Kuki spiritual ecology, expressed through sacred groves, rituals, and ceremonial use of natural resources, reflects values of stewardship, reciprocity, and relational harmony with nature. These practices demonstrate that nature is not external to human life but part of a shared sacred community.

When interpreted theologically, these indigenous practices can be understood as expressions of ecological stewardship and sacred relationality. Eco-theologians such as Sallie McFague em-

⁴³ Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God's Unfolding Purpose* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 19

⁴⁴ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1980), 109.

⁴⁵ R. R. Reno, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010), 143.

phasise that creation is the “body of God,” calling for care and responsibility toward the Earth.⁴⁶ Similarly, Leonardo Boff argues that ecological care is inseparable from spiritual and ethical responsibility.⁴⁷

This integration requires recognising indigenous ecological practices as genuine theological resources rather than cultural remnants. It shifts theology from an anthropocentric focus to a relational and ecological vision, where humans are participants within a sacred web of life rather than its masters. As Fikret Berkes notes, traditional ecological knowledge is essential for sustainable and resilient environmental management.⁴⁸

Thus, the dialogue between TEK and Christian theology redefines stewardship as kinship, creation as sacred community, and mission as ecological responsibility. It offers a holistic framework for ecological justice grounded in both indigenous wisdom and theological reflection.

7. Tribal Eco-Theology and Climate Justice among the Kukis.

The urgency for ecological and climate justice among the Kukis calls for the development of a contextual tribal eco-theology rooted in their lived experiences and deep relationship with the land. For the Kuki community, land is not merely an economic resource but a sacred inheritance that sustains identity, culture, and communal life. However, increasing deforestation, extractive practices, and climate change have disrupted this relationship, resulting in ecological imbalance and cultural dislocation. In this context, eco-theology must move beyond abstract reflection and become a praxis-oriented discipline that addresses environmental degradation as an issue of justice. Re-reading biblical traditions, especially creation narratives and covenantal themes, reveals that God’s concern extends to the entire created order, affirming the intrinsic value of the earth and its inhabitants.⁴⁹

The Kuki tribal eco-theology must also recognise that climate justice is inseparable from social and cultural justice. The effects of climate change, such as irregular rainfall, soil degradation, and biodiversity loss, disproportionately affect indigenous communities who depend directly on the land for survival. These realities expose structural injustices that marginalise tribal populations while enabling ecological exploitation. Therefore, eco-theology must adopt a prophetic stance, challenging systems of environmental destruction and advocating for the protection of indigenous land rights. It redefines human vocation as stewardship within an interconnected community of life, reflecting a covenantal relationship between God, humanity, and creation.⁵⁰

Furthermore, constructing tribal eco-theology involves reclaiming indigenous ecological knowledge as a vital theological resource. Kuki traditional practices of sustainable land use, communal responsibility, and respect for nature resonate with biblical principles of stewardship

⁴⁶ Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 72.

⁴⁷ Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 5.

⁴⁸ Berkes, *Sacred Ecology*, 15.

⁴⁹ Reno, Genesis, 143.

⁵⁰ Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 4.

and care for creation. This integration of indigenous wisdom with Christian theology offers a holistic response to the ecological crisis. Consequently, the church is called to participate in an eco-mission that promotes environmental sustainability, supports vulnerable communities, and embodies a vision of justice that includes both people and the earth.⁵¹

8. A Critical Evaluation toward Constructive Ecological Justice

The ecological crisis affecting the Kuki community is not merely an environmental issue but a multidimensional challenge that calls for a constructive framework of eco-justice. A critical evaluation of the present crisis reveals that both ecological degradation and the erosion of indigenous knowledge systems have contributed to the disruption of the harmonious relationship between humans and nature. Therefore, any meaningful solution must move beyond technical interventions and recover the ethical, cultural, and spiritual foundations that once sustained ecological balance.

8.1. Humanity-Nature Relationship

Traditional Kuki worldview offers a profound ecological insight grounded in the interconnectedness of all life. Unlike modern dualistic perspectives that separate humans from nature, ancient Kuki understanding perceives the natural world as an extension of the human community. Non-human element animals, forests, rivers, and landscapes, are not viewed as external “nature” or “wilderness,” but as integral components of a shared social environment.

This worldview is reflected in the myth of *Khokip-Kholjang*, which narrates a time when humans and animals coexisted as close relatives within a single village. Before dispersing due to population growth, both humans and animals are said to have taken a pledge not to harm one another. This narrative conveys an ethical vision of coexistence, mutual respect, and responsibility toward all forms of life.

Such perspectives resonate with ecological philosophy. Arne Næss emphasises that all living beings possess intrinsic value and that humans are part of an interconnected ecological whole rather than its dominators.⁵² The Kuki worldview thus parallels the principles of deep ecology, offering a valuable indigenous framework for ecological restoration.

Traditional practices such as interpreting omens further illustrate this interconnectedness. Natural phenomena are understood as sources of knowledge and guidance. For example, the chirping of a particular bird in April interpreted as “*muchi tun-tun*” is taken as a sign for sowing seeds. Such practices demonstrate a close observation of ecological rhythms and an embeddedness within nature.

⁵¹ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 250.

⁵² Arne Næss, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 28-29.

The decline of these traditions has contributed to ecological imbalance. Recovering such indigenous ecological wisdom is therefore essential. These values also find resonance in the teachings of Jesus Christ, particularly in themes of stewardship and care for creation, which can serve as a bridge between indigenous knowledge and Christian theology.

8.2. Toward Cosmic or Eco-Mission

A critical evaluation of contemporary Kuki Christian mission reveals a predominantly anthropocentric focus, where salvation is often limited to human concerns. In the context of an ecological crisis, such a perspective is inadequate. Mission must be re-envisioned as participation in the restoration of the entire created order.

Eco-theologian Leonardo Boff argues that Christian mission must respond to both the suffering of humanity and the degradation of the Earth, integrating ecological and social justice.⁵³ Likewise, Norman Habel calls for an Earth-centred theological approach that redefines mission as ecological responsibility.⁵⁴ Biblical theology also supports this expanded vision. Colossians 1:15-20 affirms that Christ's reconciling work extends to "all things," indicating a cosmic dimension of salvation. This suggests that humans are restored into a right relationship not only with God but also with the entire creation. Therefore, the mission must move beyond a narrow human-centred approach toward a cosmic or eco-mission.

For the Kuki context, such a shift is essential. A constructive eco-mission would include advocating against environmental exploitation, promoting sustainable resource use, revitalising indigenous ecological practices, and standing in solidarity with communities affected by ecological degradation.

8.3. Constructive Eco-Justice Framework

A constructive response to the ecological crisis among the Kukis must integrate indigenous knowledge, ethical responsibility, and theological reflection. The recovery of traditional ecological wisdom combined with a reimagined eco-theological framework can provide a sustainable pathway forward.

Eco-justice, in this sense, is not limited to environmental protection but encompasses the restoration of relationships: between humans and nature, between communities and their land, and between creation and the divine. It calls for a transformation in worldview, from exploitation to stewardship, from separation to interconnectedness, and from domination to

⁵³ Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 6.

⁵⁴ Norman C. Habel, *Readings from the Perspective of Earth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 14

9. Findings of the Study

The study reveals that the ecological traditions of the Kuki people embody profound environmental ethics grounded in indigenous spirituality, communal values, and traditional ecological knowledge. The Kuki worldview reflects an interconnected relationship between God, humanity, and nature, where the environment is regarded not merely as a resource but as an integral part of life and sacred existence. Such indigenous ecological perspectives promote responsible stewardship, sustainability, and communal harmony with creation.

The findings further demonstrate that traditional ecological knowledge among the Kuki community contributes significantly to sustainable ecological practices and environmental preservation. However, ecological degradation within Kuki areas is closely intertwined with socio-political marginalisation, displacement, environmental exploitation, and cultural disruption. The study also finds that Christian eco-theology can be enriched through engagement with indigenous perspectives that emphasise relationality, interconnectedness, and ecological responsibility. In this context, climate justice emerges not only as an environmental concern but also as a matter of social, cultural, and ethical transformation requiring justice-oriented ecological engagement.

10. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends that churches and theological institutions develop ecological ministries and mission practices rooted in local indigenous cultures and ecological ethics. Such initiatives can strengthen environmental awareness and encourage faith-based ecological responsibility within local communities. The study also emphasises the need to preserve, document, and integrate indigenous ecological knowledge into environmental policies, educational programs, and sustainable development strategies.

Furthermore, the concept of Eco-Mission or Cosmic Mission should be incorporated into theological education and ministerial formation to promote ecological consciousness and climate justice within Christian mission praxis. Finally, ecological restoration efforts should be pursued alongside peacebuilding initiatives, social justice advocacy, and the protection of indigenous communities whose cultural and ecological heritage continue to face significant challenges in the context of environmental and socio-political crises.

Conclusion

According to the study, Kuki's ecological worldview is rooted in sacred understandings of land, interconnectedness of God, humans, and nature, and traditional ecological knowledge offers a

vital resource for rethinking eco-theology and climate justice. It challenges anthropocentric models and affirms a relational, community-based ethic of environmental stewardship.

At the same time, ecological degradation in the context of the Kuki is inseparable from socio-political realities such as poverty, human greed, conflict, displacement, and weakened governance. Climate justice, therefore, must address both environmental restoration and social healing, recognising the lived experiences of vulnerable communities. By integrating indigenous ecological wisdom with Christian theological reflection, this study proposes a contextual tribal eco-theology that is both rooted and transformative. Such an approach underscores that ecological sustainability and human well-being are inseparable, calling for inclusive, culturally grounded, Cosmic or Eco-Mission responses to the climate crisis.

Conflict of Interest Statement

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