

Sial and the Zo: Understanding Human-Mithun Relations in Sialkal Range, Mizoram

Nenggousuan Naulak¹ , Ambika Aiyadurai^{2*} , Krista R Khiangte³ 

¹ Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar; 23310079@iitgn.ac.in

² Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar; a.ambika@iitgn.ac.in

³ Department of Physics, Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar; krista.khiangte@iitgn.ac.in

* Correspondence: 23310079@iitgn.ac.in

Scopus Author ID [36348286700](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9148-2867)

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Abstract: This study explores the multifaceted relations between the Zo people and the mithun (*Bos frontalis*), locally known as ‘sial,’ a culturally significant animal in Northeast India. Focusing on the Sialkal Range in Mizoram, the research employs participant observation, in-depth interviews, and secondary literature analysis to examine the deep integration of the sial in the Zo people’s socio-cultural life. Traditionally, the sial is considered a powerful symbol of social status, wealth, and cultural pride, playing a central role in rituals, marriage negotiations, ceremonial rites, and oral traditions. Its presence permeates daily practices and language, with place names like the Sialkal Range and oral narratives reflecting its cultural significance. The study also highlights the linguistic aspects of human-animal relation, including vocal calls and material interactions like salt offerings that strengthen bonds with the sial. Through its analysis of symbolism, customs, and ecological entanglements, the research underscores the sial’s role in shaping Zo identity and their perception of the natural world.

Keywords: Zo people, mithun (sial); human-animal relation; socio-cultural identity; rituals and traditions; language and ecology; oral narratives; Sialkal Range; Mizoram; Northeast India

1. Introduction

Human existence is fundamentally social and intricately linked to the natural world [1], and this connection is reflected in the varied, complex, and often contradictory, especially the relationships of humans with animals. Many indigenous communities have multifaceted relations, including kinship with other life forms as a fundamental aspect of their identity [2]. The emerging scholarship of multispecies anthropology highlights the ‘entangled lives’ of humans and nonhumans, their interconnectedness and interdependence [3,4]. According to Kirksey and Helmreich (2010), “multispecies ethnography centres on how a multitude of organisms’ livelihoods shape and are shaped by political, economic, and cultural forces” [5] (p.545). Instead of viewing each living being as separate and distinct, this perspective highlights the intricate ‘entanglements’ that bind them together. It emphasizes how all organisms exist in a dynamic and interconnected system, constantly influencing each other. This dismantles the idea of isolated entities and reveals humans and other species as interconnected participants in a shared world [1].

The Zo people, inhabiting parts of northeast India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh, have a deep-rooted connection with the mithun (*Bos frontalis*), a semi-domesticated cattle. Locally known as ‘sial,’ mithun occupies a central role in material wealth and cultural identity, customs,

and traditions of the Zo people. Their significance, in addition to symbolic status, prosperity, and pride, extends into various aspects of social rituals, oral traditions, and even their linguistic expressions. Research on human-mithun relations remains limited, particularly in the context of the Zo people. While studies have been conducted on the human-mithun relationship in Northeast India [3,6-8], specific research on the Zo people is still scarce. This paper seeks to fill that gap by exploring the multifaceted connections between sial and the Zo, keeping the linguistic aspects at the centre. Through an anthropological lens, this study explores the cultural and symbolic significance of the sial in the Sialkal Range of Mizoram, examining how the animal is deeply embedded in the socio-cultural landscape of the Zo society. Moreover, it delves into how language – through place names, oral traditions, and verbal communication with the bovine – captures the complex relations between humans and their natural environment. By analyzing symbolism, customs, oral narratives, and daily practices, the paper reveals how the Zo people perceive and sustain their bond with the sial and how this connection shapes their cultural identity. Finally, through their language, in its oral, written, and symbolic forms, as reflected in folktales, songs, and traditions, the paper offers insights into the intricate human-animal relationship.

The paper explores how language and the non-human world shape the human-mithun relationship among the Zo communities. We identify three broad questions to highlight the central space the sial occupies in Zo society (1) How and in what ways are the mithuns connected with the Zo? (2) Examine the multiple relations of the Zo peoples with the mithuns, and (3) What is the role of language in shaping these relationships?

Keeping mithun at the centre, the paper aims to uncover the entanglements of the species with language, ecology and culture.

2. Methods

Qualitative research was undertaken in July 2024 in the Sialkal Range of Mizoram, India (Figure 1). Methods followed were participant observation and in-depth interviews. The first author (NN) stayed with a Paite family in Mimbung village under the Sialkal Range Development Council. NN belongs to the Paite tribe, and the interviews were conducted in the Paite language. The conversations were recorded using phone after asking for their permission. Informal meetings and casual conversations with the Mimbung Sial Neitu (Owners) Society, especially with the President and Secretary, provided important insights. The Mimbung Sial Neitu Society was created by the Sial owners of Mimbung. Currently, the society has 14 members (sial owners) with a total registration of 186 sials owned. The society is mainly created to mediate with the village council to address their needs and demands or settle fines. Moreover, any help asked for or received from the government/NGOs is received through the society. A sial owners society is not exclusive to Mimbung. Many other villages in the state also have their own sial owners society.

Interviews were also conducted with church leaders, teachers, women, sial owners and elders. In some cases, telephonic interviews were conducted. Extensive secondary research on Zo customary laws, folktales, songs, etc., relating to sial was also conducted. AA, the second author, has been studying human-animal relations in northeast India for the last two decades, with a special focus on wildlife conservation. She has training in wildlife sciences and anthropology. The third author (KRK) is a physicist interested in sociology, religion and

wildlife conservation. He is from Mizoram, owns mithuns, and has in-depth knowledge of forests and mithun rearing.

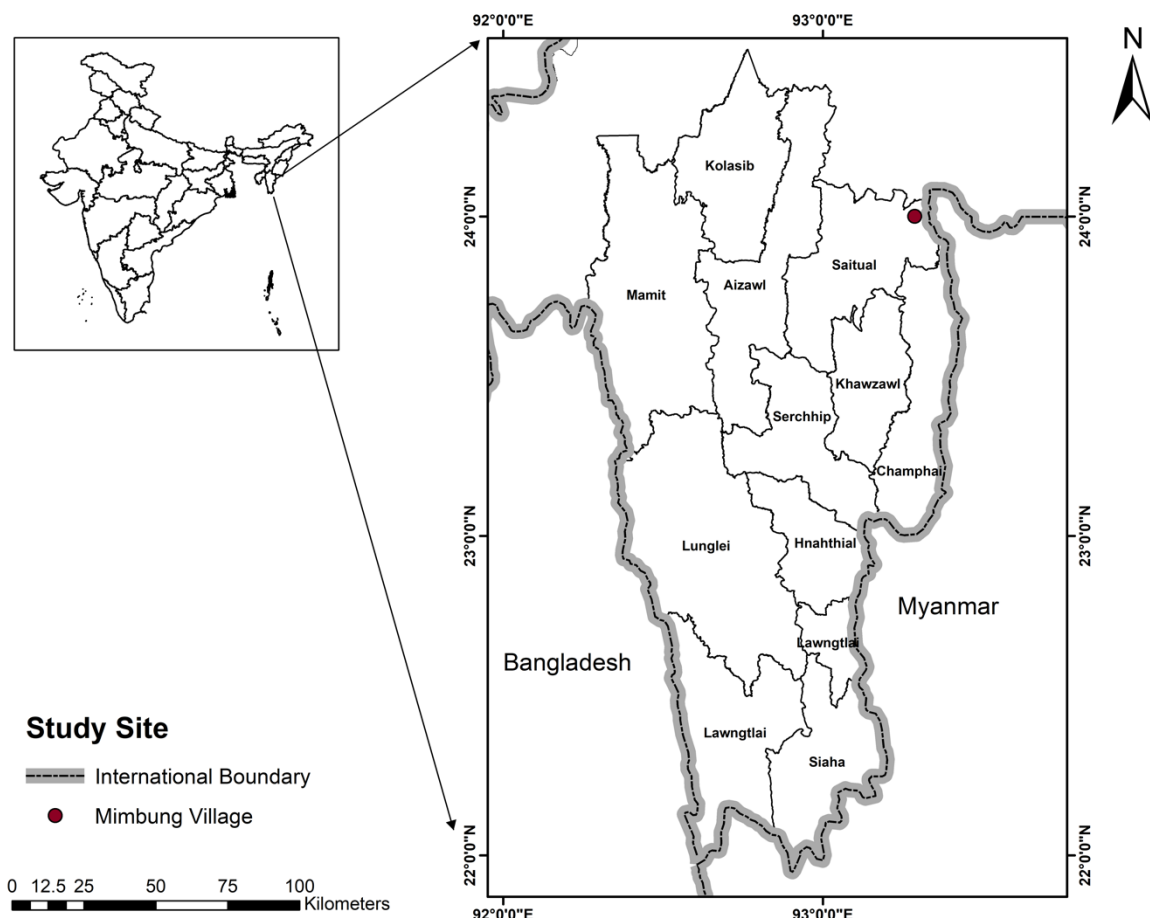


Figure 1. Study site in Mizoram

The Zo people are among the indigenous tribes found in Manipur and Mizoram in Northeast India, as well as in Bangladesh and Chin State in Myanmar. They are believed to share a common ancestor named Zo, though today they are known by names such as Chin, Kuki, Mizo, or Zomi. Despite these variations, they share similar physical traits, have a close cultural affinity, and speak mutually intelligible languages [9]. The Sialkal Tlang (Sialkal Range) occupies the northeastern part of Mizoram under Champhai and Saitual Districts and borders Manipur in the North and Chin State of Myanmar in the East [10]. The Sialkal Range is a geographically significant area, primarily known for its rich cultural and historical importance to the indigenous Zo communities, characterized by its dense forests, rolling hills, and biodiversity. More importantly, the Sialkal Range is tied to traditional practices, such as mithun (sial) herding, which has deep symbolic and cultural significance in Zo society. The Government of Mizoram established the Sialkal Range Development Council (erstwhile Sialkal Tlangdung Development Board) under No.B.12021/1/2010-GAD on February 24, 2012, and was officially published in the Mizoram Gazette on February 28, 2012. Its purpose is to serve as a special administrative body, functioning as a local development authority for the people of the Sialkal Range [10, 11, 12].

3. Discussion

The sial is the largest and most prized semi-domesticated animal among the Zo people, symbolizing social status, wealth, and cultural pride (Figure 2). We provide an example to show how sial is connected to the landscape through the name of a hill range and show two examples to highlight the role of mithuns in ceremonies, rightly coined as ‘the ceremonial ox’ by Simoons and Simoons (1968).



Figure 2. A photograph portraying Sial (Mithun) captured during field visit

The following sections delve into the multifaceted roles of the sial within the cultural, ecological, and social fabric of the Zo people. By exploring its connections to the landscape, ceremonial practices, material wealth, oral traditions, and linguistic relationships, this section highlights the study's novelty in uncovering how the sial transcends its existence as a semi-domesticated animal to become a vital cultural and symbolic figure. Each sub-section provides unique insights into these dimensions, offering a nuanced understanding of the sial's significance. This discussion not only broadens our comprehension of human-animal relations but also illustrates how the sial is interwoven into the identity and practices of the Zo community, making the outcomes particularly relevant for anthropological and ecological studies.

3.1. Naming Sialkal: Landscape and Cultural Meaning

The cultural importance of sial is reflected in the naming of Sialkal Range. During a conversation with Pu Piang, President of the Mimbung Sial Neitu Society, he explained that the Sialkal Range may even refer to the hill range where these majestic animals roam (sial pai na tang dung). This naming of Sialkal Range goes beyond mere geographical knowledge; it reflects a profound cultural and symbolic connection to the sial. In his study of the Western Apache, cultural and linguistic anthropologist Keith H. Basso (1996) describes how the Apache landscape is filled with named places where historical tales intersect with time and space. These places hold significant personal and social meanings, influencing the Apache people's identity

and connection to the land. The landscape serves as a repository of wisdom and tradition, helping guide social norms and cultural values, with its features symbolizing the moral character and way of life of the Apache people [13]. Similarly, the naming of the Sialkal Range serves not only as a geographic marker but also as a reflection of the deep cultural ties between the Zo people, their environment, and the sial. Basso (1996) further highlights that landscapes have symbolic and material meanings, and through language, they are transformed into tools for thought, memory, and imagination. The naming of the Sialkal Range holds deep cultural and symbolic meaning, where landscape features are infused with historical and cultural narratives [13].

Multiple versions of how the Sialkal Range got its name emerged through interviews, each encoding different aspects of social identity, history, and memory. Out of the different versions behind the naming of Sialkal, one such story is narrated by Pa Pau, a village elder of Mimbung, “there is a village called Bung in the Selam territory. The villagers there lived blissfully with their isolated abundance, but outsiders were not welcomed. If any outsider is to live in their community, they must bring a mithun with a ‘bahkhi’ (an opulent traditional amber bead necklace) tied to its tail”. That was why it is named Sial “kal” (go/went). Since the people who wanted to live there were demanded to bring a sial, it was named Sialkal, where “sials go.” He shared a song that encapsulates the story.

A song born of the place goes:

Ka khua Bung khua mi chen nan ka phal lou
A cheng ding changsial lian hin kai aw
A cheng ding chang sial lian hin kai aw
Changsial meiah bahkhi pha hin khai aw.

My hamlet Bung, I do not allow outsiders to settle in my hamlet
Anyone seeking to nestle in my hamlet ought to bring a mithun
Anyone seeking to nestle in my hamlet ought to bring a mithun
In the tail of the mithun, tie a good amber bead necklace.
 (translated by NN, the first author).

Basso (1996) argues that place names hold rich symbolic power, evoking associations of time, history, and personal experiences. These names condense cultural meaning and often communicate much more than they directly state, providing a shorthand for the values and events associated with particular places. This connection between language and landscape is essential for understanding how communities relate to their environment and maintain their cultural identity [13]. Therefore, the multiple interpretations of the naming of the Sialkal Range demonstrate how the Zo people’s relationship with sial, their history, and social norms are embedded in the language and naming practices. The naming serves as cultural markers, linking the community to their environment and past, reflecting their social organisation and historical experiences. This connection between language and landscape, where the names are infused with stories, memory, and cultural values, parallels Basso’s understanding of how language shapes a community’s identity through its relationship to place.

3.2. Sacrificial Bovine

According to Pa Muan, Secretary of the Mimbung Sial Neitu Society, the word “sial” means pride or something that makes others envious. This reflects its esteemed societal position. This symbolism of the sial is not just a marker of material wealth but is deeply tied to customary rites and practices, as seen in the Mizo custom of achieving *Thangchhuah*, which allows a person to enter paradise after death, free from earthly worries [14]. To attain it, a series of feasts are performed, culminating in the grand ceremony of Khuangchawi (see Table 1 for details).

Table 1. *Thangchhuah* and the role of sial [14]

Feasts	Animals sacrificed	Significance
<i>Sakung</i>	A large male pig	Beginning of the <i>Thangchhuah</i> ritual
<i>Chawng</i>	Two male pigs and a female pig	The second feast that continues the series of celebrations
<i>Sedawi chhun</i>	A sial, wild boar, two piglets	A significant ceremony that requires specific sacrifices and rituals. Considered an important feast
<i>Zankhuang</i>	Similar to <i>Sedawi chhun</i>	Follows <i>Sedawi chhun</i> , maintaining similar sacrificial practices
<i>Mithirawp lam</i>	Similar to <i>Sedawi chhun</i>	A ceremony honouring the spirits of deceased relatives
<i>Khuangchawi</i>	At least three sials, two boars, and two pigs	Final and most important feast. Conducted over four days, culminating in the achievement of <i>Thangchhuah</i>

Thus, we can see that sials are sacrificed during important rituals and upon completion, the man earns the title of *Thangchhuah Pa* (*Pa* means man & the title translates to the man who performs *Thangchhuah*). This is a rare honour due to the immense wealth required [14]. This title and feasts could not have been achieved and performed without sial, indicating the crucial place the animal holds in economic status and cultural traditions.

3.3. Mithun as Material Wealth

Sial plays a crucial role in several social customs of the Zo people, particularly during marriages and other practices where certain social norms are observed. Sial is an important material asset, symbolizing “living wealth;” the consolidation of family bonds, particularly during marriage negotiations, is more than mere economic transactions [6,15,16]. The animal, therefore, is a part of a larger social network and relationships as they are part of the bride price (*mou man*) negotiations. For the Paite tribe of the Zo community, a key element of the bride price involves the *sial nuta* (Female mithun and its calf). Accepting the offer of *sial nuta* as the bride price signals their acceptance and acts as a formal introduction between the two families within the community. This is followed by the slaughter of a pig or a cow in a ceremony called *Sialkhumsa*. Portions of the meat are sent to the groom’s family as a formal gesture [10]. As a ‘total social fact’ [16], the sial not only serves as part of the bride price but as a cultural artefact symbolizes the formal union between families, consolidating relationships, redistributing wealth, and maintaining social hierarchies. The exchange of the sial is not merely economic; it carries social prestige and obligations and creates a ceremonial space for reinforcing family ties [16]. Moreover, in the legal tradition of *Nupui man inkhalh* for the Mizos of the Zo community, the sial plays a crucial role in marriage transactions. When a bridegroom cannot pay the full bride price, the bride’s father can claim a sial as collateral, preventing the younger

brother from marrying until the debt is settled. If the bride price remains unpaid, the father may claim a sial from the younger brother's marriage compensation [17]. This practice highlights the sial's significance, not only as a physical asset but also as a symbol of wealth, social status, and familial responsibility, reinforcing marriage as a strategic alliance [16].

3.4. Sial and Oral Traditions in the Zo Society

In the Zo society, one can refer to sial in songs and folktales serving multiple functions – people celebrate the animal's role in community life, codify social norms, and reinforce group identity. Sial is frequently portrayed as a symbol of social hierarchy, with its ownership and exchange marking wealth and status. We present a folktale and a song, *Liandoute Unau* and *Zaangta La*, to illustrate the connection between the sial and the social values of the Zo people as a literal and figurative indicator of one's place in society.

The enchanting folktale of *Liandoute Unau* revolves around twin brothers Liandou and Thanghou. After their father's death, their mother remarried, leaving them to fend for themselves. Struggling with poverty, the brothers survive on a meagre diet of wild berries and leaves, which they share equally [18].

...One day, the two brothers, Liandou and Thanghou were wandering in the jungle. They climbed on a large python, mistaking it for a ladder but soon realized it was a snake when Thanghou noticed its eye. They called the villagers to kill the python and divided its meat, but the brothers were only given the python's stomach as their share. Liandou was upset until Thanghou heard a sound from inside the stomach. Upon cutting it open, they discovered a gong and pearls. The brothers played the gong, and its beautiful sound attracted the villagers, but they hid it and pretended to play with a dried gourd. This came to be the origin of the Zo traditional gong song, 'Daakla'. Enchanted by the gong, the chief of their village offered one of his mithuns in exchange. The brothers accepted and went to choose one but were unsure which to pick. An old woman advised them to choose a sialpi (female mithun), which was the size of a goat. This mithun gave birth to a calf every month, making the brothers wealthy. They married the Chief's daughters and gave a large number of sial as bride price, filling the Chief's compound. Their wealth and prosperity soon became famous far and wide... [19].

(translated by NN, the first author)

This folktale reflects the deep connection between the sial and the social values of the Zo people. The sialpi which miraculously gives birth to a calf every month, symbolizes prosperity and the cyclical nature of wealth, reinforcing its cultural importance as a source of status and economic power. The brothers' decision to give a large number of sial as bride price further highlights its integral role in marriage alliances, echoing its position in real-world Zo customs where the animal serves as a key element in solidifying social and familial bonds. The prosperity brought by the sial elevates the brothers' standing within the community, emphasizing how, in Zo society, wealth and social prestige are intertwined with the ownership of sial.

Zaangta La (Song of Enemy) is sung on various occasions and ceremonies involving killing wild animals or human enemies.

*Saai tuanta'ng saai tuanta'ng,
Ka lamtual saaituan ing e;
Gou tuanta'ng gou tuanta'ng,
Sawmsial lian gou tuan ing e.*

*I repeat the dancing bout,
I repeat the dancing bout in my dancing ground;
I repeat feasting bout
I made feasting bout by killing big mithuns [20]*

Here, we can see that the sial is linked to the triumphs and achievements of warriors, underlining the idea that victory in battle or success in life is associated with owning or offering a sial.

Thus, in the oral traditions of the Zo people, the sial emerges as a powerful symbol of social identity, cultural memory, and collective values. Through songs and folktales, the sial becomes more than just an animal – it embodies strength, wealth, and status within the community. By embedding the sial in their stories and songs, the Zo people have constructed a cultural vocabulary that teaches and reinforces communal values through oral performance. Ong (1982) notes that oral cultures often use “mnemonic patterns” to ensure that essential cultural knowledge is retained and transmitted [21] (p.34), and the sial’s presence in songs and folktales serves this mnemonic purpose, acting as a symbol that recalls broader social truths.

3.5. Linguistic Relations

During the research conducted in Mimbung village, Pu Piang and NN checked on the sials raised outside the village. He called out aloud “Oh la...la.. la... la...” to summon them. As sials arrived, they were fed with salt (Figure 3). Pu Piang said, “Sials are given salt from birth, and over time, they are conditioned to respond to the calls.” Until the 1990s or early 2000s, when sials were kept within the village, a softer call of “hui hui hui...” was used. Now, the sials were moved further into the forests due to the State government’s Animal Control Act of 1980, and the summoning call had to adapt, becoming louder and more pronounced.

The particular vocalization by people to summon the sial can be understood as a form of communication shaped by cultural traditions. The calls are not mere sounds but symbols that carry specific meanings within the community, forming a shared language between humans and animals. These vocalizations can be considered “speech events,” as described by Hymes (2006) [22] (p.52), used for a particular purpose, often governed by cultural norms and expectations. The sial calls serve as functional, meaningful interactions between the human and animal world, where language use is shaped by the social environment in which it occurs. Therefore, in the Zo society, sial owners and their sials can be viewed as a distinct ‘speech community,’ bound by shared norms and expectations regarding language use and possessing a collective understanding of specific vocalizations and their meanings [22].

In the context of the human-mithun relations, salt can be seen as a ‘bricolage’ [23] material used to construct a symbolic bridge between the sial and the Zo. Ambika Aiyadurai (2021) explains that salt serves as a metaphor for loyalty – offering salt to the mithuns is a way to establish a bond and foster loyalty between the owner and the animals. By offering salt at regular intervals, the owner uses it as a bridge between sound (language), material (salt) and action (feeding), embedding it into the ritualized practice of mithun herding [7]. This reinforces

the idea that language is not just verbal but also material, relying on physical objects like salt to create meaning and maintain relationships. It serves both as a reward and a symbolic resource, connecting the sial and its owner through ritualized communication. Thus, the cultural significance and the role of salt in reinforcing the bond between humans and animals highlight the complex ways material objects can function as linguistic and symbolic tools. These relationships are formed through mutual involvement in their environments. Ingold's (2002) concept of 'dwelling' suggests that human and animal relations are not one-sided but are part of a shared world where both species adapt their behaviours to each other and their environment. This idea of mutual adaptation is particularly relevant in the Zo people's practice of using vocal calls like "Oh la la la la..." and "hui hui hui..." to summon sials. Moreover, Ingold (2002) argues that humans and animals adapt their behaviours based on their interactions. He states, "It is through dwelling in a landscape, through the incorporation of its features into a pattern of everyday activities, that it becomes home to hunters and gatherers" [24] (p.76). This reflects that communication is not just about language, but also the shared practices and routines that develop through co-existence. Thus, in the Zo society, the sial responds to the vocal call through conditioning (reinforced by salt rewards) and as part of an ongoing interaction within its environment. In this case, the vocal calls act as a form of ecological communication, reflecting the deep connection between the sial and its owner within their shared environment.



Figure 3. Salt fed to mithuns during field visit by one of the authors

4. Conclusions

This paper highlights that the sial occupies a central position in Zo society, symbolizing not only wealth and status but also serving as a symbol of their cultural identity and deep connections to the natural world. This relationship is intricately woven into the cultural fabric

of the Zo community, expressed through oral traditions, social customs, and linguistic practices. The sial represents the values, traditions, and social structures that define the Zo people, highlighting its multifaceted significance. Language emerges as a vital medium for preserving and expressing this bond, with place names, songs, folktales, and ritualistic calls reinforcing human-mithun relations. The paper addresses the existing knowledge gap by focusing on the Zo people's unique human-sial interactions, especially the role of language in shaping and sustaining these relationships. Fresh insights include the interplay between linguistic expressions and cultural practices, illustrating how the sial serves as a unifying symbol of Zo identity. This paper, we believe, is a valuable academic contribution to the limited research on human-mithun relations, in general and in Mizoram, in particular. Furthermore, it is a contribution to the Zo people to allow for tracing their cultural identity by examining the role of the sial in their traditions, spanning both pre-Christian and post-Christian eras.

This research, while providing valuable insights, has limitations. The study primarily focuses on the Sialkal Range, potentially limiting its scope to capture the diversity of mithun herding practices and their symbolic meanings across various Zo sub-communities. Further research incorporating a wider range of languages and regional variations is necessary for a more comprehensive understanding. The research also recognizes emerging challenges, such as declining interest in sial rearing among younger generations. This underscores the need for further studies on cultural shifts, ecological changes, and historical influences affecting the sial's role in Zo society. By bridging the gap in understanding human-animal relations within the Zo context, this study contributes to broader discussions on multispecies ethnography and the cultural dimensions of conservation.

Multidisciplinary Domains

This research covers the domains: (a) multispecies studies, (b) socio-cultural studies, and (c) Northeast India studies.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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