

Between Beast and Man: *Sakei* and *Keimi* in Mizo Cosmology

Zirnuntluanga¹ , Lalngurliana Sailo^{1,*} 

¹ Department of History & Ethnography, Mizoram University, Aizawl, Mizoram, INDIA- 796004

* Correspondence: msailo35@rediffmail.com

Received:6 October 2025 ; Accepted:19 March 2026 ; Published: 29 April 2026

Abstract: This study explores the multifaceted relations between the Mizo and the sakei (tigers), and to a further extent, the were-tiger called keimi. Focusing on Mizo ethnic groups, the research employs fieldwork interviews as well as re-reading of secondary sources and re-interpretation of oral traditions through a hybrid theoretical lens to examine and reconstruct the human-sakei-keimi interaction and relationship and to examine the Mizo perspective towards such animals. Traditionally, the tiger is regarded as a majestic and merciful creature while also being judgemental towards wrongdoers. The study also explores how the Mizo further strengthen the human-tiger relationship through were-tigers and claims to be a close kin and ancestral lineage that further strengthens the taboos and superstitions as well as their emotional attachment with the tiger, which was different from all other animals. Through its analysis of symbolism, customs, and entanglements, this study underscores the tiger and were-tiger's role in shaping Mizo cosmology and their perception of the animal world.

Keywords: Mizo; Lycanthropy; Sakei; Keimi; Human-Animal Interaction; Symbolism

1. Introduction

In the traditional Mizo¹ cosmology, the forest (*ram*) and the village (*khua*) are ontologically separate realms yet constitute a single “contact zone” where humans and non-humans entangle. Colonial administrators often considered tigers as mere vermin to be exterminated, while traditional Mizo people often understand the *sakei* as a social actor possessing agency, judgement, and kinship ties - in short, as sentient being. Because of this status, *sakei* is addressed only by honorific names such as (*Sapui*, *Bengtawia*, etc.), and never called out casually, as the Mizo maintain a diplomatic etiquette of respect. Even in folklore and oral tradition, accounts persist that the *sakei* may spare a humble trespasser, while it was judgemental towards wrongdoers, especially those who commit adultery [1].

Crucially, the boundary between human and animal is liminal in Mizo cosmology. This permeability is embodied by the figure known locally as *Keimi* (were-tiger), a being that dissolves the distinction between human and animal by straddling both categories. In contrast to Western narratives of werewolves or other therianthropes, which often depict these beings

¹ Mizo is an umbrella term encompassing numerous related ethnic groups bound by shared cultural practices, linguistic affinities, and a common origin myth of emergence from a primordial cave (variously called Chhinlung, Sinlung, Khul, etc.). These communities inhabit the Eastern Himalayan Triangle across Tripura, Manipur, Cachar, and Mizoram in India, as well as Myanmar and Bangladesh, historically designated by multiple ethnonyms including Chin, Kuki, Mizo, and Halam, and so on. Throughout this article, "Mizo" is employed as a unifying term to refer collectively to these ethnically and linguistically related groups who share overlapping cultural traditions and mythological narratives.

as cursed or pathological, the Mizo *Keimi* is understood as an ontological reality; a human capable of transforming into *sakei*, or vice versa. It is not seen as a fantastical aberration but as part of the community of beings who wear a different somatic envelope or clothing [2], and must be negotiated with as one would with a neighbouring village.

For this article, we propose three broad questions to illuminate the space that *sakei* (tiger) and *keimi* (were-tiger) occupy in traditional Mizo society: (1) How, and in what ways, are the *sakei* and *keimi* connected with the Mizo?, (2) How did real-world interactions between the Mizo and *sakei* unfold through taboos, rites, and stories? and (3) Symbolically, what space do *sakei* and *keimi* occupy in Mizo cosmology?

2. Methods

Qualitative research was undertaken in the Chin Hills of Myanmar in March 2023, Khawzawl District of Mizoram and Noagang District of Tripura in January 2025, and Saitual District in February 2025. The first author undertook Ph.D. research on human–animal interaction, and under the supervision of the second author, interviews were conducted to develop an understanding of human-non-human entanglements. During the fieldwork, open-ended interviews were conducted with village elders. Since liminal knowledge bounds the topic-related to a single person, the snowball sampling method was adopted to find new informants. Aside from the interviews, discussions were thoroughly recorded to establish connections between testimonies.

Since there is limited knowledge, the drawing required information on *sakei* or *keimi* was challenging, therefore a thorough reading of secondary sources, including colonial accounts and accounts and histories adopted by indigenous writers, was also conducted. Since oral traditions hold significant accounts, folk songs and folktales were thoroughly re-read and re-visited.

3. Discussion

Traditionally, the *sakei* (tiger) has never been merely a dangerous predator for the Mizo. In oral traditions and daily life, the tiger exists as a ‘non-human person’, a being capable of judgement, mercy, and kinship. This relationship is further complicated by *keimi* (were-tiger) entities that possess a dual nature-simultaneously man and tiger, which further blurs the boundaries between the human and animal worlds.

To fully grasp the depth of Mizo-tiger relationships, traditional historical approaches are insufficient. Instead, this article employs a hybrid theoretical lens. We draw upon multispecies ethnography (Haraway 2008; Kirksey & Helmreich 2010; Ayadurai 2016) to analyse the tangible ecological entanglements between Mizo villagers and tigers. Simultaneously, we utilise the ontological turn- specifically perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro 1998) to acknowledge the Mizo claim that the *keimi* is not a mythical metaphor but a reality in which the boundaries between human and animal are fluid, relational, and situational rather than fixed or ontologically stable. We also apply an anthrozoological perspective to re-read myths and taboos as meaningful texts that encode indigenous ontology. In the citations below, Mizo terms (italicised) are followed by translations or explanations in brackets.

3.1. Tiger and the Mizo People

Comparative ethnographic studies across South and Southeast Asia reveal that tigers frequently occupy a position that exceeds that of a mere wild animal and instead assume roles as kin, moral agents, or guardians within indigenous cosmologies. In his analysis of the Idu Mishmi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, Ayadurai (2016) notes that tigers are believed to be the tribe's elder brother; killing a tiger is strictly taboo, and it is said that a true Mishmi would only kill a tiger as an absolute last resort when it poses a direct threat [3]. Further, in her analysis of the Sundarbans region, Anna Jalais (2010) posits that the tiger plays a pivotal role in the local cosmology. The Sundarbans islanders, who live in a mangrove forest alongside man-eating tigers, have developed a rich narrative in which humans and tigers seen as sharing the land under a protector. The forest deity, Bonbibibi, is believed to mediate between humans and tigers, ensuring a pact of mutual respect: villagers entering the tiger's domain for honey or fish must do so with pure hearts and take only what they need. If a villager is killed by a tiger, it is often interpreted as a failure of the human to honour the terms of this sacred contract, rather than mere animal aggression [4].

These comparative examples place the Mizo were-tiger beliefs in a broader perspective across South and Southeast Asia, where the tiger often occupies a special position in folk beliefs as an almost-human creature, whether as kin, guardian, or avenger. The tiger, in these indigenous cosmologies, is not a distant wild beast but a *kinsperson* or an alter ego living a parallel life.

Within the Mizo cultural realm, tigers hold a particularly intimate and revered status. Unlike other wild creatures, tigers are often considered kin, chiefs of the forest, and a figures comparable to the *pasaltha*, the traditional huntsman. Both are admired as skilled hunters; the tiger as the fierce ruler of the forest and the *pasaltha* as a brave warrior who hunts animals and foes alike. Despite its fearsome image, the tiger is believed to possess compassion toward humans, attacking only when provoked, hungry, or confronted by someone deemed impure or morally corrupt.

Historical accounts and folktales reveal a deep reverence for the tiger. Historical and ethnographic accounts of the Mizo suggest that the Mizo were often reluctant to hunt tigers. J. Shakespear (1912) documented the Fanai clans' reluctance to kill tigers. He cited an alternative tradition wherein a Fanai ancestor, having lost his way in the wilderness, was guided safely back to his village by a benevolent tiger, who allowed the man to hold its tail for guidance. This event, preserved in oral tradition, further underpins the Fanai's enduring reverence for the tiger. The Hnaihleu clan of Saiko also avoided killing or harming tigers, as it was believed to be befriended with their ancestors. All members show special reverence to tigers, and it is ana for them to do any injury to a tiger. To even look at a dead tiger or to partake in a ceremony was ana. They even observe the *Nangtha Hawkhei* sacrifice to show their veneration for the tiger by giving it flour cake and meat, and they consider the tiger on the same level as *Khazangpa* (supreme god of Mara) [5]. Besides, the Darlong of the Hmar clan also claimed the tiger as their ancestor [6]. These traditions function much like totemism, where an animal species is intertwined with a clan's origin and identity.

These totemic bonds align with Radhika Govindrajan's (2018) concept of animal intimacies [7], where interspecies ties form through emotional entanglement and porous bodies. Because of their totem, consuming tiger meat equates to cannibalism that with violates kinship mutuality among the Mizo. Adopting Cohen's monster theory [8], *sakei* acts as a harbinger of category crisis, a being that refuses to participate in the classificatory order of things, blurring

human-animal divides. Yet, Mizo cosmology integrates them as revered relatives (not horror), challenging human exceptionalism in a pluriverse of co-actors.

The physical presence of the tiger in the Mizo society created what Haraway (2008) terms a contact zone [9], a space where species become with one another. The Mizo moral landscape was shaped by the presence of *sakei*. *Sakei* is not a passive backdrop to Mizo history but an active agent that shaped human spatial behaviour. For instance, the Mizo belief that *sakei* is “judgemental towards wrongdoers,” suggests that the forest is a moral landscape. Drawing on Annu Jalais’ (2010) ethnography of the Sundarbans, we can view *sakei* as a “citizen” of the forest who enforces the unwritten laws. Jalais observed that forest-dwellers view tiger attacks not as random accidents, but as retribution for greed, arrogance, or the violation of forest taboos [10]. Similarly, the Mizo viewed *sakei* as a cosmopolitical agent. This resonates with Eduardo Kohn’s (2013) assertion in *How Forest Think* that non-humans possess semiotic agency [11]. When a Mizo hunter or person encounters a tiger, it is a semiotic exchange; the tiger perceives, judges, and reacts to the hunter’s or person’s intentions. Thus, to kill a tiger without just cause is not merely hunting; it is a political transgression against a powerful forest dignitary. Thus, Mizo tiger reverence reveals a dynamic personhood, anticipating posthumanist insights into shared ethical worlds.

3.2. *Keimi in Mizo Oral Tradition: Between Kin and Beast*

Tigers are widely regarded as majestic creatures that rule over the thick forests of Northeast India, yet the human connection to the tiger runs deeper than simple fear or admiration because in many communities, tigers are considered kin or clan totems. For instance, belief in tiger-men (or women) is widespread among certain Naga tribes [12] and the Khasi people of Meghalaya. Among the Khasi people in Meghalaya, the concept of *Khla phuli* refers to humans (often members of a particular lineage) transforming into tigers [13]. Likewise, the Nagas have recorded accounts of individuals whose souls can leave their human bodies and temporarily inhabit a tiger’s body. The Mishmi tribes of Arunachal Pradesh regard tigers as literal kin- an elder brother of the tribe [14]. These parallels suggest a Northeast Indian pattern of multispecies identity. Among the Mizo, the *keimi* represent a similar pattern yet differ fundamentally from Western lycanthropy. The *keimi* in Mizo oral tradition is fundamentally understood as a mythical tiger-person (from “*kei*” meaning tiger and “*mi*” meaning person) possessing the inherent capacity to traverse human and tiger form at will. The transformation is not forced upon individuals as retribution, nor is it a delusional state, but rather an actual ontological condition. So, a *keimi* is a mythical tiger-man/woman, possessing the magical ability to transform himself/herself at will into a tiger and back again into a human being [15]. While European lycanthropy was historically viewed as a curse or pathological aberration, the *keimi* is not inherently evil nor subject to transformation through affliction. Rather, transformation constitutes an ontological possibility through lineage, and *keimi* are encountered with a complex mixture of fear and respect. The *keimi* are thus not distant wild beasts but alter egos inhabiting parallel existences.

Two popular Mizo folktales illustrate these themes while illuminating the theoretical implications of multispecies personhood. The first concerns Keimingi, from a *keimi* clan, and Hualtungamtawna, a renounced *pasaltha* (warrior-hunter). Their romance ends tragically owing to fundamental misrecognition of kinship. Hualtungamtawna kept the skulls of slain

animals (including tigers) as hunting trophies. When Keimingi's relative visited and recognised their slain kin's skulls on his wall, they sang a mournful lament.

*“Ka aw nger ngur,
I dam laia ramsa i hawl a;
I thih hnua laibang i mawi
Ka u aw nger ngur;
Thingthu aw tlum zuk,
Hualtungamtawna seh nan”.*

This mournful song loosely translates to, “Oh my brother, when you lived, you hunted the wild; now that you are gone, your skull adorns the wall. Oh, my brother, let the torch die out, so we may devour Hualtungamtawna.” Upon hearing their sorrowful lament, Hualtungamtawna was deeply disturbed and spent a sleepless night in anguish. The following day, while preparing for the feast, he asked Keimingi's brothers to help capture a pig. In a tragic accident, he shot and killed them with his bow while chasing the pig. Keimingi, devastated and enraged over her brothers' deaths, sought vengeance. She gave her husband an impossible task: to retrieve the tusk of *Nghalphusen*, a legendary wild boar. With his dog, who was, in truth, a wolf, Hualtungamtawna set out to fulfil the mission. However, he failed in his quest and ultimately lost his life [16].

This narrative encodes what Viveiros de Castro terms ontological perspective [17], in which the body is like clothing, and what matters is the perspective that inhabits it. To Hualtungamtawna, the tiger skull represented a trophy from dangerous prey. To Keimingi and her kin, those same remains belonged to their (*keimi*) relative, whose true essence had been concealed beneath a tiger's skin. The tragedy emerges from the hunter's failure to recognise the personhood within the tiger form. When the *keimi* clan identifies the skulls as kin, the narrative ruptures the assumed boundary between human and beast. The lament “Oh my brother” asserts that the line between human and animal was only apparent. From the hunters' perspective, they saw a predator; from the *keimi* clan's perspective, they saw a kinsperson. It reinforces the prohibition against indiscriminate tiger killing, for harming a tiger may constitute killing a human in an alternate form. This narrative sacralises the tiger by embedding it within human genealogy, transforming it from an external beast into a potential relative. It further cautions against broken trust because Keimingi's marital bond shatters precisely when her husband fails to acknowledge the person within the tiger.

The second *keimi* tale recounts the story of the three brothers- Hlawndawhthanga, Laicherhnawma, and Zahrama who had undergone transformation into *keimi* after consuming water from a hollow in a tree near their jhum fields. Following their metamorphosis, the brothers initially remained within their community. However, as they began to prey on domesticated animals, the villagers ostracised and ultimately killed Laicherhnawma and Zahrama. Hlawndawhthanga retaliated through systematic violence, attacking both animals and humans across multiple settlements. During his wanderings, he encountered a woman with whom he fathered a child. The descendants of this union, the Fanai clan, thus claim tiger ancestry and maintain that killing a tiger constitutes homicide.

The concept of animal intimacies, used by Radhika Govindrajan (2018) is useful to describe how intimate relations can cross species lines. Govindrajan's work in the Himalayas describes people forming kin-like bonds with animals (such as cows or bears), treating them as part of the family through shared substance and affection [18]. In Hlawndawhthanga's case,

the most extreme form of animal intimacy occurs (literally interbreeding), producing a new kinship category that is both human and tiger. This radically extends what kinship means; a shared essence and obligation between humans and tigers. The Fanai clan's belief that killing a tiger is homicide, and the mourning rituals of the Fanai women, who weep for a slain tiger as if for a human relative, are acts of what one might call kinship maintenance. These practices reinforce the idea that the bond is real and must be honoured, even though it transgresses the ordinary human-animal divide.

Simultaneously, the narrative demonstrates perspectival ontology. The brothers' ingestion of enchanted water signals that the forest environment itself possesses transformative power. After transformation, the brothers continue to perceive themselves as villagers, yet the human community increasingly sees them as tigers. The fatal clash thus results from a collision of perspectives. Only retrospectively, when Hlawndawhthanga's descendants are integrated into human society, does reconciliation occur. The Fanai clan's eventual acceptance of tiger kinship validates Castro's insight that what constitutes human versus animal depends entirely on one's ontological standpoint [19]. The story thus is not just an origin myth but also a folktale about understanding the "other".

Furthermore, as Arhem (2016) notes in his studies on Southeast Asian animism, in animist societies, human-animal relationship is characterized by intersubjectivity- essentially social relations rather than purely ecological ones [20]. The Mizo relationship with the tiger acts as a sophisticated mechanism of conservation. This is not the conservation of modern science but a communitive conservation based on social exchange. The Mizo spare the tiger not to save the species, but to avoid a blood feud with a powerful relative. Thus, their belief system in this regard functions as a check on human overexploitation of the forest, maintaining an ecological balance through the language of kinship.

Thus, Mizo *keimi* narratives perform multiple functions- they encode moral imperatives (not to harm tigers indiscriminately for clan totems), preserve clan genealogies linked to tiger progenitors, and demonstrate the perspectival flexibility within Mizo cosmology. These tales also constitute sophisticated encoding of an entire philosophy of interspecies relations. They exemplify what multispecies ethnographers recognize as the entanglement of human and nonhuman agents in mutual becoming, wherein species boundaries remain permeable and negotiable. The next section demonstrates how these relational principles move beyond narrative into concrete ritual and taboo practice, governing the lived interaction between Mizo communities and *sakei*.

3.3. *Taboos and Rituals: Negotiating Human-Tiger Relation*

Mizo cosmology does not just render *sakei* and *keimi* as kin in myth, it also establishes concrete symbolic practices that uphold and negotiate this special relationship. Throughout history, the Mizo developed a complex of taboos, rituals, and customs aimed at both protecting humans from tigers and protecting tigers from humans. These practices can be understood as a form of interspecies diplomacy [21], a deliberate engagement between human societies and nonhuman animals or plants with the aim of mutually beneficial coexistence and resolution of shared ecological challenges. They recognize *sakei* as a sort of counterpart with whom one must maintain peace, respect and, when necessary, make amends.

Within Mizo cosmology, *sakei* is not regarded merely as a dangerous beast roaming the dense forests but is revered as the sovereign of the jungle; an expert hunter who commanded a

deep, mutual respect with human beings. It is considered a breach of custom, or *thianglo*, to refer directly to the tiger by its given name, *Sakei*, especially when venturing into the forest or during hunting expeditions. Instead, the tiger is addressed with honorific euphemisms such as *Sapui*, *Bengtawia*, or *Hmaibiala*, etc. This linguistic courtesy treats the *sakei* as if speaking to a chief, reflecting the Mizo belief that the tiger itself hears and comprehends human speech. Conversely, insulting or demeaning the tiger verbally was feared to invite misfortune. In this way, Mizo grant *sakei* dignity through language, a practice that extends beyond mere courtesy to constitute a form of diplomatic protocol between species.

Eduardo Kohn's (2013) concept of semiotic agency illuminates this linguistic practice. Kohn argues that animals and forests themselves possess forms of representation and communication- what he terms as forest thinking [22]. For him, the forest is not a silent backdrop but an active semiotic field wherein nonhuman beings perceive, interpret, and respond to human actions. When a Mizo hunter or person encounters a tiger, the encounter constitutes a semiotic exchange; the tiger perceives, judges, and reacts to the hunter's or person's intentions. To kill a tiger without just cause, therefore, is not merely hunting; it is a political transgression against a powerful forest agent or dignitary. In Mizo cosmopolitics, *sakei* functions as a moral authority within the forest's own system of justice, where it enforces unwritten laws of proper conduct. This belief finds expression in oral traditions that remark how a tiger would kill (only) the impure-hearted [23], especially those who had committed adultery or breached serious taboos, suggesting that *sakei* itself judges human moral failings.

The *Sakei Aih* or *Sapui Vui* ritual, performed upon the rare slaying of a tiger, demonstrates the gravity with which the Mizo regard their relationship to *sakei*. The ritual required that the slayer and the individual who severed the tiger's tail (*sakei mei satthlatu*) abstain from sleep the preceding night, while all able-bodied men remained confined within the village as the collective ritual was performed. A striking feature involved a symbolic inversion of gender roles: the slayer, often a renowned *pasaltha* (warrior-hunter), donned a woman's cloth, smoked a woman's pipe, carried a small basket, spun a cotton spindle, wore ivory earrings, let his hair down, and wrapped a mottled cloth [24]. This performative transformation aimed to deceive any surviving tigers into believing that their fallen companion had been defeated not by a man, but by a woman, thereby diminishing the blow to the tiger's honour and discouraging retaliatory vengeance.

During the ceremony, the slayer was forbidden to laugh, symbolizing the gravity of taking the life of such a noble adversary. A porcupine quill (*sakuh*) was placed under his arm so that any accidental laughter could be attributed to the porcupine rather than the slayer. This complex precaution underscores the Mizo recognition of *sakei* as a being of near-human stature deserving profound respect and solemnity. The ritual exemplifies what Philippe Descola (2013) identifies as animism: a cosmological framework in which humans extend recognition of interiority to animals, treating them as possessing intentionality and personhood. Traditional Mizo society deliberately attributed agency and personhood to *sakei*, engaging with it not as an object of domination but as a sentient social agent worthy of ritual acknowledgement and moral consideration.

This ontological stance finds a parallel in Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's (2012) perspectivism, which proposes that across different cosmologies, what varies is not the body but the perspective; the "soul," or interiority. In the Amazonian context Castro describes, all beings possess an internal human perspective regardless of their external form, a clothing.

Similarly, when Mizo villagers recognize the human consciousness within the tiger, they avert potential tragedy and maintain relational equilibrium. The tiger thus is not merely a beast but a potential person- a shift in perspective that fundamentally restructures the ethical terms of human-tiger entanglement.

Besides these, the physical presence of *sakei* itself within Mizo society also created what Haraway (2008) terms a contact zone; a space of encounter where species “becoming-with” or encounter one another while shaping each other through their coexistence. Rather than serving as a passive backdrop to Mizo history, *sakei* functions as an active agent whose presence fundamentally shapes human spatial imagination and reasoning. The Mizo conceptualization of *sakei* as “judgemental towards wrongdoers” reveals it as a moral landscape- a space where human and nonhuman beings negotiate shared ethical norms. Through this sustained coexistence, the two species engaged in what Haraway calls becoming-with; a reciprocal, iterative process wherein human and nonhuman agents continuously remake each other through their entanglement. The forest, in this sense, is not a stage for human action but a relational field wherein multiple forms of agency meet, contest, and ultimately, constitute one another.

4. Conclusions

Revisiting the questions posed at the outset of this study, we find answers in the foregoing discussion. First, the connection between *sakei* and the Mizo, as well as that between *keimi* and the Mizo is characterized by an intimate kinship. *Sakei* are historically regarded as kinsfolk- in some cases literally claimed as ancestors of certain clans, and *keimi* are an extension of this idea, an entities that embodies both human and tiger identities and thus strengthens the bond between human and tiger. The human-tiger relationship among the Mizo goes beyond predator and prey; it is reframed as kin or clan-mate. This identification restructures their ecological worldview and reinforces taboos and ethical norms regarding the tiger.

Second, the interactions between Mizo people and tigers are governed by respect, caution, and ritual. In practice, Mizo people try to avoid killing tigers unless absolutely necessary, and there are norms such as never speaking the tiger’s true name in the forest. Upon rare occasions when their interaction turned into conflict, as when a tiger had to be hunted, it was accompanied by ritual ceremonies to ensure that the spiritual balance is maintained. Folktales of friendship and kinship (as in the case of Fanai) and of enmity (as in Hlawndawhthanga’s revenge) serve as cautionary paradigms instructing the Mizo on how to properly treat their neighbours (tigers). Even the existence of *keimi* in folklore can be considered as a way of conceptualizing their closeness: living side by side with tigers, sharing language, emotions, and even intermarriage in folktales. Thus, everyday interactions are framed by an ethic of mutual respect.

Third, in the symbolic realm of Mizo cosmology, the tiger occupies a lofty position. Symbolically, the tiger, as the chief of the jungle, was often equated to the village chief, and it was also regarded as an agent of moral order (based on the belief that it would attack individuals who transgress ethical norms). In the Mizo conceptualization, the tiger stood at the threshold between the human and animal realms, functioning as a guardian while retaining the capacity to traverse this boundary, a privilege otherwise attributed solely to the *keimi*. Through oral traditions, the Mizo people sustained the notion that humans are not alone in possessing

personhood. In essence, for the Mizo, the tiger functioned both as a mirror through which human traits were reflected and as a guardian enforcing the laws of nature and society.

From an analytical perspective, the Mizo case exemplifies a classic animistic worldview in which the sharp division between humans and animals is collapsed. It resonates with the idea that human and animal histories are deeply entangled and that indigenous cosmologies often grant non-human beings an equivalent or integrated role in social life. In Mizo cosmology, tigers and humans are part of a shared community of beings, capable of moving into each other's roles under extraordinary circumstances. The cultural institution of *keimi* and various taboos surrounding the tiger further uphold a worldview in which personhood is not exclusive to human beings.

In conclusion, the relationship between the Mizo, *sakei*, and *keimi* demonstrates a profound form of human-animal entanglement. The research questions guiding this study may be answered as follows. (1) Mizo conceptions connect tigers and humans as kin, and, in certain contexts, as interchangeable beings through the *keimi*, thereby embedding the tiger firmly within the social fabric of Mizo society; (2) interactions between humans and tigers are managed through respect, taboos, and ritual practices that treated the tiger as an honoured yet potentially dangerous kinsman, maintaining a delicate balance between co-existence and self-preservation; and (3) symbolically, *sakei* was a multivalent figure in Mizo cosmology- as chief, guardian, judge, and ancestral spirit. *Keimi*'s narrative reinforce these symbolic roles and brought them to life through oral traditions that articulated and enforced Mizo ethical values. Through the continual retelling and re-enactment of these narratives in story and lore, Mizo culture affirmed that personhood extends beyond *Homo sapiens*. Finally, viewed within a wider comparative framework, these beliefs situate the Mizo within a broader Southeast Asian (specifically Northeast Indian) cultural landscape that reveres big cats and consistently blurs the boundary between human and animal worlds.

Multidisciplinary Domains

This research touches on multiple academic domains, including (a) human–animal studies (anthrozoology), (b) multispecies ethnography (c)perspectivism (d) sociocultural anthropology/ethnography, and (e) Northeast India regional studies (folklore and indigenous religion).

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgment

We would like to thank Pu Reuben Ranglong and Pi Rotei, Noagang, Tripura, for their hospitality and guidance during our stay at Tripura. We would like to thank Pu Huatzabia and Pu Kama, Ngaizawl Village, for their guidance during our stay in Ngaizawl Village. We also thank Pu Liandova Letpanchaung and Pu Lalaua, Bochung Village, Myanmar, for their invaluable support during our fieldwork in the Chin Hills of Myanmar. Finally, we would like to thank the family of the late Pu C. Rokhuma(L) for allowing us to browse his archival materials.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Declaration on AI Usage

The authors declare that the article has been prepared without the use of AI tools.

References

- [1] Dokhuma, J. *Hmanlai Mizo Kalphung*; R. Lalrawna: Aizawl, India, **2023**; p. 438.
- [2] Viveiros de Castro, E.; *Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism*. *J. R. Anthropol. Inst.* **1998**, 4 (3), 469–488, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3034157>.
- [3] Aiyadurai, A. ‘Tigers are Our Brothers’: Understanding Human-Nature Relations in the Mishmi Hills, Northeast India. *Conservation and Society*, **2016**, 14, 305–316, <https://doi.org/10.4103/0972-4923.197614>.
- [4] Jalais, A. *Forest of Tigers: People, Politics and Environment in the Sundarbans*; Routledge: New Delhi, India, **2010**; pp. 146–176
- [5] Parry, NE, *The Lakhers*, Macmillan & Co., London, **1932**, pp.110-111.
- [6] Hrangchhuana, H.B, *Hmar History*, Hmar Students' Association Joint Headquarters: Aizawl, India, **1987**; p. 18.
- [7] Govindrajan, R. *Animal Intimacies: Interspecies Relatedness in India's Central Himalayas*; University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, USA & UK, **2018**.
- [8] Cohen, J.J., *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, 3rd ed.; University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN, USA, 1996; pp. 154–196, <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.cttsq4d>.
- [9] Haraway, D.J., *When Species Meet*; University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN, USA; London, UK, **2008**; pp. 205–246.
- [10] Jalais, A. *Forest of Tigers: People, Politics and Environment in the Sundarbans*; Routledge: New Delhi, India, **2010**; pp. 146–176
- [11] Kohn, E. *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*; University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, USA; London, UK, **2013**.
- [12] Sutter, R. Collective Imagination or Intimate Knowledge of Other Worlds? Tiger men in Nagaland. In Proceedings of the Workshop “Performing Identity: Ethnicity and Ethno-Nationalism in Northeast India,” Göttingen, Germany, 15–17 December **2011**.
- [13] Aye, K. *Human-Animal Transitions: A Case Study of Sümi Lycanthropy*, **2022**, <https://dialog.puchd.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/1.-Human-Animal-Transitions-A-Case-Study-of-Sumi-Lycanthropy-Khesheli-Aye.pdf>
- [14] Aiyadurai, A. “Tigers are Our Brothers”: Understanding Human–Nature Relations in the Mishmi Hills, Northeast India. *Conserv. Soc.* **2016**, 14, 305–316, doi:10.4103/cs.cs_14_305.
- [15] Ralte, Lalthansangi, Mizo Myths and Folklore: A Posthumanist Study, *Literary Oracle – Vol. 7, Issue II, December 2023*, pp. 7786; Available online: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/380519688_Mizo_Myths_and_Folklore_A_Posthumanist_Study, (accessed May 2024)
- [16] Tribal Research Institute. *Mizo Thawnthu*. Tribal Research Institute: Aizawl, Mizoram, **1997**; pp. 46–49
- [17] Viveiros de Castro, E. Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4 (3), Wiley on behalf of Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland: 469-488, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3034157>
- [18] Govindrajan, R. *Animal Intimacies: Interspecies Relatedness in India's Central Himalayas*; University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, USA & UK, **2018**.

- [19] Viveiros de Castro, E. Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4 (3), Wiley on behalf of Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland: 469-488, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3034157>
- [20] Århem, K. Southeast Asian Animism in Context. In *Animism in Southeast Asia*; Århem, K., Sprenger, G., Eds.; Routledge: London, UK, **2016**; pp. 3–30, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315660288-2>
- [21] Fougner, T. Animals and Diplomacy: On the Prospect for Interspecies Diplomacy. *International Relations* 37, no. 3, **2023**; pp. 449–474, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178231191292>.
- [22] Kohn, E. *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*; University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, USA; London, UK, **2013**.
- [23] Jalais, A. *Forest of Tigers: People, Politics and Environment in the Sundarbans*; Routledge: New Delhi, India, **2010**; pp. 72-73.
- [24] Shakespeare, J. *The Lusei Kuki Clans*, Macmillan & Co., London, **1912**, p.79.