

Jhum as Indigenous Governance: Decolonial, Multispecies, and Sustainable Relations in the Naga Hills of Myanmar

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Abstract

This paper examines jhum (shifting cultivation) among Naga communities in Layshi Township, Myanmar, focusing on its significance for customary tenure, Indigenous rights, and community well-being. Often portrayed in dominant development discourses as outdated or destructive, jhum emerges here as a resilient and adaptive system that sustains biodiversity, food security, and cultural identity while facing pressures from land concessions, conservation programs, and armed conflict. Using qualitative and participatory methods, the study foregrounds the voices of farmers, elders, customary leaders, women and youths to show that jhum is more than an agricultural technique – it is a multispecies practice grounded in reciprocity, responsibility, and collective governance. Anchored in multispecies theory, decolonization theory, and sustainable development theory, the research situates jhum sustainability within interconnected dimensions – land and forest relations, climate change, culture and livelihood, commodification, policy and law, and Indigenous governance systems. Through this framework, jhum is understood not merely as cultural endurance but as a living model for just and sustainable ecological governance in the Anthropocene. Protecting it requires legal recognition of customary tenure, Indigenous-led advocacy, and participatory approaches that strengthen local governance. Ultimately, the study repositions jhum not as a relic of the past but as a forward-looking indigenous system that embodies decolonial, multispecies, and sustainable development values – inseparable from land, self-determination, and identity – and as an alternative paradigm for building more just and sustainable futures.