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Ethnobotanical Traditions And Noble Firewood Selection: The Royal Household Of Phungcham And The Luita Phanit

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Abstract: The Luita Festival is a beacon of cultural heritage in Phungcham Village, embodying centuries of tradition and communal celebration. Central to this festivity is using tree species for firewood, a practice deeply intertwined with the village's ethos and survival. This paper delves into the intricate tapestry of ethnobotanical wisdom, shedding light on the cultural significance of the Luita Festival and the pivotal role played by tree species in its rituals. Through meticulous analysis, it explores the types of trees traditionally employed for firewood, unraveling their properties, availability, and sustainability within the village ecosystem. Furthermore, it examines the custodial role of the village chief, whose ritual authority and ecological stewardship ensure the preservation and perpetuation of this biocultural legacy.

Keywords: Luita Festival, Phungcham Village, Firewood, Folk traditions, Forest resources, Socio-cultural heritage, Indigenous Knowledge, Ethnobotany.

I. INTRODUCTION:

Phungcham village, perched in the northern reaches of the Tangkhul Naga–inhabited hills of Manipur, occupies a privileged position in both the historical memory and contemporary cultural life of the Tangkhul people. Scholars who worked on the ethnography can cite Phungcham as a "cultural keystone settlement," a term reserved for communities whose ritual repertoires, oral historiography, and environmental stewardship practices exert normative influence well beyond their immediate geographical boundaries. In the Tangkhul imagination, the village is remembered not merely as an ancient habitation site but as a crucible of ancestral wisdom—where cosmogonic narratives are still recounted beside hearth-fires and customary rites continue to structure quotidian social relations. Among the village's many public rites, the *Luita Phanit* (alternatively Luirą Phanit) stands pre-eminent. Celebrated annually at the cusp of the agrarian cycle, the festival orchestrates a complex liturgy of renewal encompassing seed consecration, symbolic ploughing, communal feasting, and ancestral veneration. Anthropologically, *Luita Phanit* may be read as a performative condensation of Tangkhul cosmology: it aligns human labor with seasonal rhythms, negotiates the moral economy of reciprocity, and reaffirms the authority of ritual specialists—most notably the village chief (Āyanga) and his household—whose offices are simultaneously political, sacerdotal, and ecological.

A pivotal yet understudied component of the festival's dramaturgy is the selective use of ethnobotanically salient tree species as firewood. While lay households employ a wide spectrum of fuelwoods—including *Thingjangthing* and *Shirimthing* (both local members of the Aok sub-family), *Ngavaithing* and *Thingchithing* (indigenous hardwoods), and *Kapaithing* (Pyrus pashia)—the chief's hearth is ritually restricted to just three: *Kapaithing*, *Thingjangthing*, and *Ngavaithing*. These woods are valued not only for their combustion profiles—density, low smoke yield, ember longevity—but also for their semiotic carga. *Thingjangthing* represents the enduring strength of the royal lineage; *Kapaithing* signifies prosperity and the high regard in which the royal family is held; and *Ngavaithing*, known for enhancing the taste of food and producing clean

smoke, embodies the ideal of benevolent and nourishing leadership. Thus, the triad functions as a vegetal lexicon through which the chief publicly declares cosmo-political intentions for the coming agricultural year.

Situating Phungcham within wider debates in political ecology, ritual studies, and indigenous science, this article interrogates how firewood selection mediates the intersection of ecological knowledge and ritual authority. Relying on ethnographic fieldwork, oral-historical reconstruction, and comparative dendrological data, the study argues that the chief household's exclusive use of these three species constitutes a form of "ritual eco-governance": it materializes social hierarchy, encodes resource management norms, and sustains a moral ecology that binds humans, trees, and ancestral beings into a single seasonal praxis of renewal. In illuminating this nexus, the paper contributes to emerging scholarship on how indigenous communities leverage non-human actors—here, culturally differentiated trees—to negotiate power, identity, and environmental sustainability in rapidly changing socio-ecological landscapes.

II. FINDINGS:

The royal—or chiefly—household of Phungcham village possesses what ethnobiologists call a "core corpus" of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK): a systematised, orally transmitted body of insights that couples cosmology, resource governance and social hierarchy into a single normative framework (Berkes 2012: 48). Within this system, the exclusive deployment of *Thingjangthing* (Aok species), *Ngavaithing* (an endemic hardwood) and *Kapaithing* (Pyrus pashia) during *Luita Phanit* (first day) functions simultaneously as (i) a rite of renewal marking the agricultural year, and (ii) an act of political legitimation affirming chiefly authority (Posey 1999: 112).

Mechanisms of knowledge transmission:

The intergenerational transmission of the Phungcham firewood canon is orchestrated through a highly situated, oral tradition that privileges embodied engagement and direct participation over formal instruction. Knowledge is passed down through word of mouth, observation, and lived practice, often within the chiefly lineage. Adolescent members of the chief's household are gradually inducted into this system by shadowing experienced elders during seasonal forest excursions. These "forest circuits" function as both ecological survey and ritual rehearsal, where young participants are expected to listen, watch, and eventually replicate each phase of the ceremonial process. Instruction takes the form of contextual guidance—through storytelling, casual commentary, and ritual chants—rather than didactic teaching. Initiates first learn to differentiate tree species by subtle indicators such as bark micro-textures, sap viscosity, and seasonal leaf phenology, which signal a tree's readiness for ritual use. Only after several years of observation and verbal guidance, they are entrusted with the ceremonial axe and allowed to perform the sacred incision (Hunn 1993: 18). This long-form, participatory learning process reflects what Lave and Wenger (1991: 29) describe as legitimate peripheral participation, where newcomers build competence through engagement in culturally meaningful practices grounded in community and tradition.

Although Tangkhul cultural norms permit any able-bodied boy or girl to enter the forest and harvest timber for household needs, ritual woodcutting remains firmly elder-directed. Youths must first seek authorisation, accompany a senior relative, and meticulously adhere to species-selection protocols before felling even a single sapling. This oversight by elders ensures that the cosmological and ecological criteria governing firewood selection—such as the avoidance of immature trees, those struck by lightning, or trees considered profane due to past ritual violations or associations with taboo spaces—are upheld across gender and age groups. In this way, forest access remains broadly inclusive, yet the actual practice of tree selection is tightly choreographed by senior custodians, who serve not only as ritual gatekeepers but also as ecological stewards, preserving the integrity of both sacred tradition and the living forest.

Such pedagogy reinforces tacit, sensorimotor ways of knowing (Polanyi 1966: 4) that are difficult to capture in written form; the "feel" of correctly seasoned wood or the sound of a hollow core is conveyed by gesture, touch and auditory cues, not by verbal description. As Ingold (2000: 65) argues, this mode of transmission constitutes an "enskilment" process in which environmental perception and practical action co-evolve, allowing ritual specialists to refine their ecological acuity in lockstep with their ceremonial authority. The result is a living archive of eco-semiotic literacy—an ability to read the forest as a text of fluctuating signs—encoded directly in the bodily repertoire of practitioners. UNESCO's Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage defines such embodied tutorials as intangible cultural heritage (ICH) precisely because they "are passed from generation to generation, constantly recreated by communities" and provide them with "a sense of identity and continuity" (UNESCO 2003: Art. 2). In Phungcham, the orally transmitted,

embodied learning process functions as a biocultural conduit, ensuring that nuanced ecological heuristics—such as optimal felling phases or ethical limits on extraction—are embedded in day-to-day practice rather than consigned to static archival memory.

Socio-ecological functions:

Restricting the ceremonial firewood list to *Thingjangthing*, *Ngavaithing*, and *Kapaithing* during *Luita Phanit* (first day) fulfils a triad of mutually reinforcing socio-ecological functions that anchor the festival in both symbolic and material landscapes:

- **Symbolic differentiation**. The selective triad of firewood species used by the chief's household during *Luita Phanit* exemplifies what Turner (1967: 18) describes as a ritual taxonomy. This classificatory grid partitions the tangible world into hierarchically ranked domains of the sacred and the profane. While the broader Phungcham community is permitted to use a wide range of tree species for firewood, including those reserved for ritual, it is the chiefly household that imposes a self-restriction, using only *Thingjangthing*, *Kapaithing*, and *Ngavaithing* for cooking ritual and ceremonial meat (M. Horam, personal communication, May 20, 2025). This voluntary constraint renders the festival hearth a spatial and symbolic manifestation of social order, distinguishing the sacred fire of the chief from everyday domestic flames. In this way, performative boundary work is enacted: authority is not just stated but materialised, reminding participants that access to the cosmological centre is mediated by chiefly intermediaries (Gadgil, Berkes & Folke 1993: 152). The fire itself becomes a visual grammar of power, signalling that the cyclical renewal of agricultural time is inextricably tied to the legitimising performance of political and ritual authority.
- **Conservation by prescription**. From an ecological standpoint, the protocol functions as a rule-based harvesting filter that reallocates pressure away from slow-regenerating canopy taxa toward species with robust coppicing capacity and clumped population structure. Such ritual restrictions constitute what Colding and Folke (2001: 585) term "taboo systems" that generate de facto protected niches. By confining intense demand to three fast-recovering species, Phungcham forgoes opportunistic exploitation of rarer trees, thereby sustaining structural heterogeneity and response diversity—key attributes of social-ecological resilience.
- **Ecological monitoring**. Following the completion of the annual harvest, every household in Phungcham enters the forest to collect firewood for the coming year. Once this firewood is brought home, it is customary for each household to offer a tribute of to the chief's household (S. Pheirei, personal communication, June 21, 2024). This post-harvest practice is not merely a social obligation, but also a form of distributed ecological surveillance, wherein villagers collectively observe tree maturity, coppice regeneration, and species abundance. Through this embedded process, the community accumulates real-time ecological knowledge without relying on formal scientific infrastructure. Crucially, only five tree species—*Thingjangthing*, *Shirimthing*, *Ngavaithing*, *Kapaithing*, and *Thingchithing*—are ritually sanctioned for use by the chief's household (M. Horam, personal communication, April 26, 2024). Any wood offered that falls outside this sacred quintet is deemed ritually valueless and therefore unsuitable for use in the chief's hearth. Such wood is not discarded but graciously redistributed to extended kin and neighbours (N. Pheirei, personal communication, June 17, 2024), reinforcing both the chief's ritual purity and his role as a benevolent redistributor of resources. In Ostrom's (1990: 94) terms, this mechanism exemplifies "graduated sanctions," linking ecological feedback to adaptive cultural regulation. Thus, what begins as routine firewood gathering culminates in a community-led forest inventory and a ritual reaffirmation of both cosmological order and environmental stewardship.

Analogous systems elsewhere underscore the analytical significance of the Phungcham case. Among the Yucatec Maya (Mexico), ritual fires preferentially employ pine struck by lightning, believed to be ritually "self-sacrificed" and therefore ethically harvestable; this cosmological filter curtails felling of live pines and maintains stand age diversity (Dussol et al. 2016: 64). In the Navajo Nation, oak designated for Night Chant ceremonies is felled only under lunar conditions deemed propitious, intertwining cosmological timing with selective cutting (Magargal et al. 2023: 505). In Toraja (Sulawesi, Indonesia), Buffalo-funeral rites demand ara wood harvested only under ancestral sanction, effectively creating sacred groves that double as carbon reservoirs (Waterson 2019: 211).

Such cases illustrate a wider Indigenous logic: ritual restriction is not a residual "superstition" but an adaptive strategy for stewarding forest mosaics across multigenerational horizons. By encoding ecological heuristics in liturgical form, communities ensure that ecosystem governance is co-produced with cultural identity, thereby lowering the transaction costs of compliance and enhancing collective action (Berkes 2008: 235).

Custodianship and Social Order:

Within the highly stratified political-ritual economy of Phungcham, the chiefly household's deliberate exclusion of *Shirimthing* (an Aok species) and *Thingchithing* (a locally prized endemic hardwood) from the *Luita Phanit* hearth operates as a form of formal sumptuary regulation. By foreclosing two otherwise valued fuelwoods, the chief inaugurates a controlled scarcity that amplifies the ritual centrality of a sanctioned triad—*Thingjangthing*, *Kapaithing*, and *Ngavaithing*. In effect, the restriction narrows the material repertoire available for sacrificial cookery, thereby transforming the hearth into a curated arena where political authority and ritual purity converge. Anthropologically, such a restriction exemplifies what Parry (1985) terms the "ritual redistribution of value." The fact that all five species are renowned for their calorific efficiency, yet only three are ritually admissible, reveals a managed inequality in resource access. While the broader populace may collect any tree—including the full quintet—for quotidian use, the royal hearth enjoys a ritual monopoly over the triad on the calendrical threshold of the agricultural year. This controlled access to prestigious fuel thus demarcates sacred from profane space and indexes the chief's prerogative to orchestrate cosmological order at the moment of seasonal renewal.

The preparation of ritual meat under these conditions follows an equally stringent code of culinary asceticism: no salt, no chili, ginger added only (M. Horam, personal communication, April 26, 2024). The absence of flavour enhancers underscores what Douglas (1966) calls the "purifying exclusion" of sensory excess in sacrificial contexts, ensuring that the offering remains unalloyed by mundane gustatory desires. It is consumed only by the high priest during the ritual proceedings. Any leftover meat is either discarded or given to children who are still considered morally immature—that is, those who have yet to distinguish between good and bad (M. Pheirei, personal communication, June 22, 2024). This restriction not only preserves the sanctity of the offering but also reinforces the ethical and spiritual framework within which ritual consumption is regulated. Taken together, these practices convert the *Luita Phanit* hearth into an axis of governance. The chiefly household, as ritual custodian, exercises what Sahlins (1981) might frame as "cosmocratic" power: the capacity to define and police the material preconditions of sacred efficacy. The triadic firewood prescription, the austere seasoning regime, and the tightly scripted consumption order co-produce a moral economy in which social rank, ritual privilege, and cosmological legitimacy are co-implicated. Through this meticulously bound choreography, the political order of Phungcham is rendered sensible, tangible, and combustible—quite literally—in every stick of wood placed upon the new-year hearth.

III. DISCUSSIONS:

The ritual firewood triad employed by the royal household of Phungcham village during *Luita Phanit*—comprising *Thingjangthing* (Aok species), *Kapaithing* (Pyrus pashia), and *Ngavaithing* (a local indigenous hardwood)—exemplifies a refined taxonomy of wood selection grounded in both practical and symbolic criteria. Each species embodies a distinctive set of physical, ecological, and sensory properties that align with the functional demands and cosmological significance of the festival.

Properties and Characteristics of Selected Tree Species:

Thingjangthing (commonly identified as Aok) is widely recognized for its structural integrity and high thermal yield, qualities that render it indispensable in both ritual and architectural contexts. As a hardwood species with a dense core, its combustion results in sustained and intense heat, with embers that retain their thermal energy far longer than other local species. This characteristic is particularly valued for the prolonged cooking of ceremonial meat during *Luita Phanit*, where heat consistency and ember longevity are essential. Moreover, *Thingjangthing* is integral to the construction of enduring material culture within the Tangkhul built environment. It is used to carve *Tarung* (sacred monoliths), *Petkhok* (beds), and foundational house pillars—all of which require resistance to decay, soil acidity, and high precipitation levels typical of the hill climate. Ethnobotanical observations suggest that the heartwood can resist rot for over a century, positioning it not only as a utilitarian resource but as a symbol of permanence and ritual durability.

Kapaithing, the Himalayan wild pear or *Pyrus pashia*, occupies a unique place in both ecological aesthetics and thermal functionality. Its florid seasonal bloom transforms mountain slopes into expanses of white, visually marking seasonal change and agricultural readiness. From a utilitarian perspective, the wood of *Kapaithing* is known for high heat output and efficient combustibility, making it a preferred choice for sacred hearths. Its use affirms a fusion of aesthetic reverence and pragmatic value, consistent with indigenous frameworks where beauty and utility are not dichotomous but interdependent.

Ngavaithing, though less dense than *Thingjangthing*, is highly esteemed for its environmental compatibility and culinary virtues. It is particularly valued for its clean-burning properties, emitting minimal acrid smoke and producing a steady, moderate flame that is easy to ignite—a trait critical during ritual observances that require timed ignition sequences. Community oral traditions affirm that food cooked over *Ngavaithing* firewood acquires a superior taste, underscoring a localized understanding of biophysical interaction between fuel and food. Beyond its use as firewood, the tree is also known to produce organic humus or natural fertilizer of exceptional quality, which plays a significant role in maintaining soil fertility within swidden plots and home gardens. This ecological role positions *Ngavaithing* at the intersection of ritual purity and agroecological functionality, making it indispensable within the village's sustainability matrix.

Taken together, these three species demonstrate a nuanced system of ethno-forestry and ritual ecology, where wood is not merely selected for calorific value, but for a combination of thermal, architectural, sensory, and symbolic properties. Their curated use by the chiefly household during *Luita Phanit* affirms a cultural logic in which material durability, spiritual resonance, and ecological sensitivity are held in dynamic balance. This culturally embedded classification system not only guides practical decisions but also encodes the moral and cosmological order that defines Tangkhul indigeneity.

The Symbolism and Significance of Firewood Usage by the Royal Family of Phungcham Village during Luita Phanit:

The ostensibly mundane act of stoking the hearth during *Luita Phanit* is, within the Phungcham royal household, a meticulously scripted liturgical performance that mediates between cosmology, polity, and ecology. Situated at the intersection of what Victor Turner termed "dominant" and "instrumental" symbols, the triadic firewood canon—*Thingjangthing*, *Kapaithing*, and *Ngavaithing*—constitutes a semiotic repertoire through which the chiefly lineage inscribes its authority upon both social and biophysical landscapes. Each species, selected according to inherited ethnobotanical criteria, functions as what Pierre Bourdieu would call an objectified form of symbolic capital: it naturalises the chief's prerogative to monopolise ritual power while rendering that prerogative legible, and therefore acceptable, to the wider community.

From a cosmological vantage, the triad encodes the Tangkhul tripartition of the cosmos (sky–earth–underworld) and thereby materialises the chief's mediatory role across ontological planes. *Thingjangthing*, a tree species renowned for its exceptional hardness, structural resilience, and capacity to generate intense heat when used as firewood, occupies a privileged position within the ritual landscape of Phungcham village. Its selective use by the chief's household during the *Luita Phanit* festival transcends mere utilitarian considerations and is deeply embedded in a semiotic system where material properties become conduits of moral and political values. Within this symbolic economy, *Thingjangthing* is not simply combustible matter but a vegetal emblem of the ideals historically ascribed to the chieftaincy—namely endurance, unyielding strength, and institutional stability. By invoking these attributes in the very fire that prepares the ritual meat, the royal household performs a deliberate act of ancestral remembrance and value transmission. The combustion of *Thingjangthing* thus functions as a socio-cosmic mediation, wherein the physical transformation of wood into fire becomes coextensive with the metaphysical reaffirmation of the chief's moral authority (M. Horam, personal communication, April 26, 2024). Through this act, the fire is sacralised not merely as a cooking agent, but as a vessel for continuity, whereby the temporal order of leadership is renewed and legitimised with each festival cycle. The ritual fire, fuelled by *Thingjangthing*, becomes a living archive of hereditary ethics, a means through which the foundational virtues of governance are symbolically reignited, and the moral backbone of communal leadership is performatively reaffirmed.

Kapaithing, a tree distinguished by its profuse blossoms during its seasonal zenith, is imbued with layers of aesthetic and symbolic meaning within the ritual framework of *Luita Phanit* as practiced by the royal household of Phungcham village. The visual spectacle of the tree in full bloom, marked by its vibrant floral display, has rendered it a potent symbol of beauty, popularity, and the affectionate regard of the community. Its incorporation into the ritual firewood assemblage is far from incidental; rather, it constitutes a deliberate aesthetic and ethical choice that encodes the villagers' aspirations for the continuity of a socially admired and morally resonant leadership. When *Kapaithing* is burned during the ceremonial preparation of meat by the chief's household, the act becomes deeply metaphorical—transforming the firewood into an expressive medium through which ideals of charisma, grace, and public esteem are ritualistically materialized (M. Horam, personal communication, April 26, 2024). The fire, in this context, serves as a liminal space wherein the virtues signified by the tree—its visual allure, its seasonal popularity, and its ability to draw collective admiration—are transferred onto the figure of the chief. In the ritual economy of symbolism, *Kapaithing* thus acts as a

botanical surrogate for the chief's symbolic flourishing, much like the tree's own moment of floral exuberance. This performative burning can be read as a communal invocation—an aesthetic and spiritual projection—that the chief, like *Kapaithing* in bloom, will continue to embody the qualities that render him beloved and respected by his people. The ritual consumption of this firewood thereby reinforces the expectation that leadership is not only to be strong and enduring (as symbolized by Thingjangthing), but also to be adorned with moral beauty, social appeal, and an inner radiance that elicits voluntary affection and esteem from the governed. Through this ritual act, the villagers and their chief participate in a shared cosmology wherein nature, leadership, and aesthetics are mutually entangled.

Ngavaithing—celebrated both for its ability to impart exceptional flavor to meat and for burning with a notably clean, minimally irritating smoke—occupies a distinct niche in the semiotics of firewood selection practiced by the royal household of Phungcham during *Luita Phanit*. Its material properties are read as palpable indices of an idealized political dispensation: one that nourishes without inflicting collateral harm, and that governs through service rather than coercion. In local idioms of meaning, the "flavor" generated by *Ngavaithing* becomes an edible analogue for the qualitative experience of benevolent rule, while its "clean" combustion is simultaneously framed as a metaphor for transparency, moral probity, and the absence of oppressive residue (M. Horam, personal communication, April 26, 2024). The ritual deployment of *Ngavaithing* thus operates as an embodied political theology. When the royal hearth is stoked with this wood, the act is not merely culinary but performative, articulating a normative model of kingship rooted in ethical caretaking. The sensorial dimensions of the meal—the savory taste, the unobtrusive smoke—are deliberately aligned with civic virtues such as justice, compassion, and accountability. The transformation of raw meat into a palatable dish, effected by *Ngavaithing's* unique combustion qualities, figures leadership as a process of moral alchemy: converting potential raw power into a form digestible, sustaining, and non-toxic to the polity.

Comparative Perspectives:

The selective use of firewood species by the royal household of Phungcham during *Luita Phanit* finds meaningful resonance across a broad spectrum of Indigenous societies globally, where firewood selection is rarely a utilitarian matter alone, but rather one deeply embedded in ritual symbolism, ecological ethics, and cultural law. Such comparative cases underscore the Phungcham firewood protocol as part of a wider Indigenous logic that aligns cosmological order with ecological stewardship.

Among the Maya of the Yucatán Peninsula, ritual firewood usage reflects an intricate cosmological rationale. Specific species of Pinus, especially P. caribaea and P. oocarpa, are ritually preferred due to their resinous smoke, believed to attract ancestral spirits. Importantly, extraction is often restricted to lightning-struck trees, a practice that interprets natural phenomena as signs of spiritual permission. This selective harvesting limits the felling of healthy, mature pines and maintains old-growth pine savanna ecologies (Dussol et al., 2016: 64). In Aotearoa New Zealand, the Māori consider certain woods ritually "pure" for ceremonial cooking. Mānuka (Leptospermum scoparium) is traditionally preferred for its aromatic properties and sacred associations, particularly in hāngi (earth oven) cooking. Its ritual use simultaneously aligns with ecological sustainability, as mānuka is a fast-regenerating species that grows abundantly in post-disturbance environments. By contrast, larger native trees such as totara or kauri are reserved for carving or construction, thus safeguarded from regular harvest (University of Otago, 2010: 5). The Navajo (Diné) of the American Southwest similarly demonstrate firewood differentiation along ceremonial lines. Quercus gambelii (Gambel oak) is the preferred species for sacred Night Chant and Enemy Way ceremonies. Its felling is dictated by lunar calendars and ritual timing, integrating cosmological rhythms into environmental governance. Recent studies indicate that approximately 68% of firewood collected by Navajo families serves ritual rather than domestic purposes, illustrating the extent to which cultural needs guide ecological decision-making (Magargal et al., 2023: 503). Meanwhile, the Palawa people of lutruwita (Tasmania) maintain traditional fire stewardship through "cool burns"—low-intensity fires using selected hardwoods such as certain species of eucalyptus and acacia. These fires are not simply for land management, but part of a spiritual contract with the land, renewing Country and encouraging the growth of culturally significant plant species like murnong (yam daisy). Fire, in this context, becomes a vehicle for both ecological renewal and ritual continuity (Aboriginal Heritage Tasmania, 2024: 2).

What unites these examples—and the Phungcham case—is the role of firewood not merely as fuel but as a medium of cosmological communication and socio-ecological governance. Each community enacts a form of ritual restriction that results in sustainable harvesting, forest renewal, and community cohesion. These restrictions are not static laws, but dynamic, often negotiated through seasonal assessments, spiritual consultations, or ecological observations. As Berkes (2008: 239) observes, such traditions form part of a

"sacred ecology," where natural resources are managed not through formalized conservation frameworks but through culturally embedded systems of taboo, privilege, and obligation. In this sense, the Phungcham firewood canon—particularly the triadic restriction during *Luita Phanit*—can be understood as a living template of Indigenous biocultural heritage, one that parallels and reinforces similar patterns observed among the Maya, Māori, Navajo, and Palawa peoples. These cross-cultural affinities validate the analytical significance of the Phungcham practice and further demonstrate that Indigenous firewood protocols are neither incidental nor nostalgic. They represent enduring and adaptive forms of ecosystem management anchored in ritual cognition, ecological observation, and community ethics.

IV. CONCLUSION:

The royal household's calibrated choice of *Thingjangthing*, *Kapaithing*, and *Ngavaithing* for the *Luita Phanit* hearth reveals how a seemingly mundane act—selecting firewood—operates as a sophisticated ethnobotanical code. Within the festival's ritual economy, each species simultaneously mediates thermal function, sensory experience, political symbolism, and ecological ethics, making the hearth a fulcrum where environmental knowledge and social order converge. This practice demonstrates that ethnobotanical expertise is not ancillary to ritual life but constitutive of it: without the correct woods, the meal would still cook, yet the cosmological narrative of benevolent, enduring, and aesthetically resonant leadership would collapse. More broadly, the Phungcham case underscores the indispensability of Traditional Ecological Knowledge in sustaining both cultural vitality and ecosystem integrity. Preserving the *Luita* firewood repertoire, therefore, demands twin forms of guardianship: the conservation of the tree species themselves and the continuance of ceremonial authority that stewards their ritual use. Protecting one without the other risks severing the socio-ecological feedback loop that has long balanced resource use with communal values. As such, the study affirms that safeguarding intangible cultural heritage—stories, rites, and taxonomies—is as critical to long-term environmental resilience as conserving the tangible biodiversity upon which those practices rest.

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