



Original Article

MORPHOLOGY AND BINARY OPPOSITIONS IN NAGA AGRICULTURAL FOLKTALES: A PROPPIAN AND LÉVI STRAUSSIAN APPROACH TO TRADITIONAL ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

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ABSTRACT

This article examines agricultural folktales from six Naga tribes. The analyses of agricultural tales were performed using the structures described by Vladimir Propp and Claude Lévi-Strauss. The aim was to identify the role played by traditional environmental knowledge and associated ethical principles of jhum cultivation within the narratives. When dealing with these articles, we attempted to examine them as an organized way of passing on knowledge rather than just cultural products. In this way, all the folktales under discussion were analyzed following the tribe's culture where the story is set and according to its development, paying special attention to the main conflicts represented there- Nature vs. Culture and Individual vs. Community. In each case when analyzing agricultural narratives from these six tribes, it can be seen that there has been some kind of imbalance, shortage, or disturbance in nature followed by ritual intervention aimed to bring harmony both in nature itself and among people. In other words, apart from being an agricultural account, the narrative might actually serve as a guide for tribes during agrarian crisis situations. The bottom line is that all these tales represent the common Naga worldview where sustenance and morality exist together with spirituality. Structural comparative analysis attempts to contribute to the field of ecocritical folklore studies, focusing on the indigenous tales of Northeastern India.

Keywords: Naga Folktales, Structuralist Analysis, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, Propp Morphology, Lévi-Strauss Binary Oppositions, Jhum Agriculture

INTRODUCTION

The Naga ethnic group consists of over thirty ethno-linguistic tribes inhabiting the hilly regions of northeast India. Their lifestyle is predominantly agricultural. Jhum cultivation and terrace farming are not just economic activities, but the basis of social relations, rituals and perceptions of nature. Agricultural activities help build kinship systems, seasonal rituals, and morals. Societies that lacked historical background relied on folktales as a way of passing the information on ecology from one generation to another. From the very beginning, the ethnographers recognized the relationship between agriculture and culture. Hutton (1921) work, for example, entitled *The Angami Nagas*, stated that the Nagas live by the land and for the land Hutton (1921). Farming processes such as planting, weeding, and harvesting are sometimes accompanied by tales where lands, seeds, rains, and spirits were anthropomorphised, depicted as intelligent entities that would respond to negligence, worship, and abuse. These stories were not only entertainment but

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contained information about success and failures in agriculture. Moreover, they reinforced the obligation of the farmers to take care of their lands and neighbours. Folktales are said to be resilient in times when there are social changes. Indeed, research has indicated that since the nineteenth century, the Naga society has undergone significant transformation because of a variety of reasons such as Christian missionaries, policies enacted after independence, market economy expansion, and environmental issues. All these changes have threatened the continuation of jhum farming activities. Nevertheless, agricultural folktales persist. Instead, they adapt, serving as memory banks that continue to transmit Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). During the time of conflict and displacement, storytelling played an essential role in supporting farming practices and tribal identity [Ao \(2006\)](#). Likewise, studies about religious transformation showed that folktale persisted along with religion [Longkumer \(2017\)](#).

Current scholars now recognise that Naga folktales are complex systems of environmental ethics and social control instead of the “primitive superstitions” that colonialists described them as. For instance, ethnographic works such as the [Mills \(1922\)](#) The Lotha Naga, considered folktales as the cultural curiosities. Conversely, recent studies revealed the depth of meanings encoded in folktales where ecology and moral wisdom are conveyed from one generation to another. Thus, for instance, [Patton \(2017\)](#) A Girl Swallowed by a Tree analysis shows to what degree Lotha folktales include eco-sustainability principles by finding the balance between forest exploitation and preservation. It is fully compatible with [Lévi-Strauss \(1963\)](#) theory of myth as a means of solving environmental and cultural contradictions.

Ecocritical interpretations have also revealed the biophilic nature of indigenous stories. In Sangtam folklore, community jhum cultivation was associated with rituals to harvest spirits and encouraged taboos on excessive exploitation, which promoted biodiversity conservation through rituals [Kapfo and Chodongse \(2019\)](#). Drawing on this interpretation, [Patton \(2017\)](#) focuses on the gender aspects of Naga folktales where farm implements and routine labour act as intermediaries between humans and the supernatural. Furthermore, [Assumi and Singh \(2024\)](#) considers the Naga folklore as a key point in cultural identity and ensures collective memory and ethical performance. Modern eco critical studies show that there are also tales in which animals acting as guardians of fields and other agricultural territories are depicted. Experimental studies prove the efficiency of TEK that was included in those stories. Thus, the integrated farm system that involves alder agroforestry and jhum cultivation reflects the folk tale principles of equilibrium and moderate abundance found through cultural heritage (Sumi Naga). Legends of Angami Naga such as Putsolie (2025) reflect the motif of abundance by encoding it in ritual feasts. Epistemologically, legends determine the timing of agricultural activities with the help of bird sounds the same way as it was done in the Sumi tradition of Kashopappu [Jimomi \(2018\)](#). All these findings lead us to the assumption that there are recurrent motifs in the Naga folktales such as supernatural allies, ritual instruments, symbols and binary oppositions such as Nature and Culture and Individual and Community.

Unlike numerous literary sources that analyse every single tribe individually, this paper examines folktales in the six tribes of Nagaland from the perspective of combined morphological structure of [Propp \(1968\)](#) and structuralism of Lévi-Strauss. Using this standardized technique, we were able to find regularities in Naga folktales where human activities are regulated with the help of supernatural powers emphasizing ritual observance, labour discipline, and solidarity. The need for such an investigation appears to be urgent nowadays due to the problems faced by agriculture in Nagaland. Overpopulation, unpredictable monsoon seasons, and government policy promoting the spread of settled farming resulted in the complete eradication of the traditional jhum cultivation system. Under such circumstances, folklore continues functioning as an invisible manual for sustainable agricultural activities that warns farmers not to abuse agricultural implements, neglect rituals and think only about themselves. It has already been noted by many researchers that folklore resurrections suggest a revival of cultural identity among Naga tribes, which is consistent with the indigenous peoples' rights movements worldwide encouraging TEK in climate change discussions. Nevertheless, there are several shortcomings in these researches. Comparative structuralist studies remain rare while connecting folklore themes to universal cultural values across the tribes rarely appears.

As a solution to the problem stated above, the present study makes a methodological contribution by merging the two methods under consideration systematically.

Firstly, from the theoretical perspective, we add to the eco-anthropological literature by interpreting approaches under discussion in the context of Naga culture. In addition to theoretical findings, we offer practical ones in terms of developing culture-related models of sustainable development. Overall, the combination of these folktales supports the main thesis of this research regarding the direct correlation between narrative form and TEK as well as communal identity.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The main function of the Naga folklore is to serve as a cultural memory device in creating and sustaining identities of tribes [Assumi and Singh \(2024\)](#). As mentioned, colonial ethnographies played a vital role in establishing the basis of the stories since they documented the oral cultures that would otherwise be lost to the past if not documented at all. Ethnographic works like J.H Hutton's The Angami Nagas (1921) and The Sema Nagas (1921) and J.P Mill's The Lhota Nagas (1922) primarily focused on cataloguing the oral traditions of these groups. works mainly interpreted the indigenous tales based on the 'primitive' belief systems that included the jhum cycle, spirits, and ritualized interpretations of the causes of drought or abundance. Thus, Hutton discussed the Angami

harvest rituals that were embedded within stories about spirits of the lands. Mills, on the other hand, presented the Lotha folktales that involved the theme of famines. Even though some of the studies were strongly colonized and, in some instances, paternalistic, they recorded a rich oral tradition that was to be studied later with the application of a culturally sensitive eye.

In post-independence literature, the view of the Naga folklore has drastically shifted to consider it a source of identity and resistance. For instance, Temsula Ao's 'These Hills Called Home' (2006) presents folklore as a means of survival during conflicts. Specifically, the use of themes of agrarian labour such as community feasts was a source of affirming clan identities in a time of displacement. In the evolving body of research, the ecocritical literature offers interesting interpretations of folklore in terms of the transmission of Traditional Environmental Knowledge (TEK). For example, in the work 'A girl swallowed by a Tree: Lotha Naga Tales Retold' by Jasmine Patton, the Lotha folklore is interpreted in relation to themes such as tree swallowing, weaving, and weeding. These themes are understood to reflect the symbolic interpretation of women's everyday lives in relation to eco-sustainability. According to [Bhattacharya \(2023\)](#), this interpretation of Lotha folklore reveals how its themes articulate the principles of eco-sustainability. This principle is consistent with [Lévi-Strauss \(1963\)](#) concept of myths as a mechanism for solving environmental and cultural contradictions. Other studies have also enriched this growing body of literature by focusing on tribe-specific issues. For instance, in studies of the Sangtam folklore, it has been noted that the presence of harvest spirits and communal jhum farming encourages cooperativeness and fairness among farmers in agricultural activities, hence enforcing ethical principles via ritual performance [Kapfo and Chodongse \(2019\)](#).

Other scholars have highlighted the way TEK is transmitted through symbols and practices that are specific to particular regions. In the Sumi Naga community, it has been shown in cultural heritage research that there is an integrated farm system involving alder agroforestry, terraced farming in some areas, and jhum farming in most areas. This can be reflected in the seasonal avian signals in the Sumi folklore [Zhimomi and Dutta \(2023\)](#). Similarly, in Angami folklore, the legend 'Putsolie' involves the symbolic representation of agricultural ethics through ritual feasting and regulation of agriculture according to the cycles of rains [Kehie \(2025\)](#). All these examples demonstrate that environmental knowledge is not formally imparted; instead, it is acquired through symbolic storytelling with roots in human experience. The literature on Naga folklore further substantiates the symbolic and ethical meanings in folklore narratives as seen in the creation of myths and harvest taboos [Lkr and Martemjen \(2014\)](#). Also, there are examples of eco critical literature that further emphasize the harmony that exists between humans and nature. Elements in stories such as agricultural implements, rain, and forests acquire moral agency in conserving ethics. Literary works have also expressed this idea. For instance, in Easterine Kire's 'When the River Sleeps' (2014), the mythic realist approach has been used to express how rivers provide a source of agricultural bounty while testing human virtues.

Some scholars have pointed out latent anxieties contained in agrarian folklore. These anxieties involve infertile land, crop failures, and imbalances in the environment. This literature reveals that these tales do not only seek to promote harmony with nature, but they are concerned with risks inherent in the agricultural system. Structuralist theories are useful for unveiling patterns of storytelling. For example, Vladimir [Propp \(1968\)](#) presented his theory of thirty-one folktale functions, which involve interdiction, violation, and supernatural interventions. This theory has been applied in the indigenous context to allow a systematic comparison of narratives. Alongside this is the Structural anthropology of Claude Levi-Strauss, where mythology is viewed as a cognitive system for resolving binary oppositions such as those of abundance vs. scarcity, and those of nature and culture. This theory resonates well with the Naga folklore, where drought, excessive growth, or imbalances are always resolved via ritual actions and supernatural interventions. The cooking-agriculture analogy also explains the symbolic logic in the practices of agriculture. Building on these theoretical perspectives, [Varuni \(2018\)](#) discusses common symbolic patterns in Naga folklore, including those of stones, birds, and rain. The literature also mentions Konyak folktales and rain rituals. This literature shows that there is a continuous flow of symbolic vocabulary among Naga societies. Agricultural knowledge is transferred using intertwined narrative systems and not isolated tribal folklore.

Nevertheless, there still exist gaps in this developing literature base. Most studies are limited to one tribe at a time and miss opportunities for comparison between tribes. In addition, there is no linkage between structural analyses of narratives and ecological or sustainability issues. Finally, there are inadequate discussions about the links between folklore structure and sustainable jhum farming. Indeed, [Bhattacharya \(2023\)](#) called for a more structured analysis of Naga folklore in relation to sustainability issues. In response to these gaps, this current research adopts the Propp-Levi Strauss approach for analyzing agricultural folklore among Naga tribes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study combines an integrative theoretical framework based on Vladimir Propp's formalist theory of folktale structure and the structuralism of Claude Lévi Strauss in order to conduct a thorough analysis of Naga agricultural folktales. By linking together Propp's idea about narrative functions in sequences with Lévi Strauss's structural analysis of binary oppositions, this framework helps to uncover the underlying meanings of agricultural folktales that include the encoding of Traditional Ecological Knowledge. Thus, the framework makes it possible to reveal the core ecological and social values that underpin Naga agricultural folktales.

PROPPIAN MORPHOLOGY: NARRATIVE FUNCTIONS AS AGRICULTURAL SEQUENCES

Vladimir Propp's Morphology of the Folktale (1968) posits that folktale consists of thirty-one functions, which repeat in a relatively fixed sequence despite character, setting, and other cultural variations. These functions, identified by Greek letters, break down narratives into primary actors and actions and allow one to see recurring patterns underneath cultural variation.

Table 1

Table 1 Vladimir Propp's 31 Functions			
Number	Designation	Definition	Example
1	β	Assentation	One of the members of a family absents himself from home.
2	γ	Interdiction	An interdiction is addressed to the hero.
3	δ	Violation	The interdiction is violated.
4	ε	Reconnaissance	The villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance.
5	ζ	Delivery	The villain receives information about his victim
6	η	Trickery	The villain attempts to deceive his victim in order to take possession of him or of his belongings
7	θ	Complicity	Victim submits to deception and thereby unwittingly helps his enemy.
8	A	villainy	The villain causes harm or injury to a member of a family
8A	a	Lack	A member of a family lacks something or desires to have something.
9	B	Meditation	Misfortune or lack is made known; the hero is approached with a request or command; he is allowed to go or he is dispatched.
10	C	Beginning counteraction	The hero agrees to or decides upon counteraction.
11	↑	Departure	The hero leaves home.
12	D	First function of the Donor	The hero is tested, interrogated, attacked etc., which prepares the way for his receiving either a magical agent or a helper.
13	E	The hero's reaction	The hero reacts to the actions of the future Donor.
14	F	Provision of a magical agent	The hero acquires the use of a magical agent.
15	G	Guidance	Hero is led to the whereabouts of an object of search
16	H	Struggle	The hero and the villain join in direct combat
17	I	Branding	The hero is branded
18	J	Victory	The villain is defeated
19	K	Liquidation of Lack	The initial misfortune or lack is liquidated
20	↓	Return	The hero returns.
21	Pr	Pursuit	The hero is pursued
22	Rs	Rescue	Rescue of the hero from pursuit
23	o	Unrecognized arrival	Unrecognized, he arrives home or in another country
24	L	Unfounded claims	A false hero presents unfounded claims
25	M	Difficult task	A difficult task is proposed to the hero
26	N	Solution	The task is resolved
27	Q	Recognised	The hero is recognised.
28	Ex	Exposure	The false hero or villain is exposed
29	T	Transfiguration	The hero is given a new appearance

In Naga agricultural folktales, such patterns consist of ritual observance and hard work that are the prerequisites for ecological stability, as well as the violations of these conditions in the form of taboos neglect that lead to imbalance. For example, stories about a village in drought or starvation usually begin with a violation of agricultural practices or taboo, followed by the appearance of the Supernatural Helper, who restores ecological balance through ritual observance and collective labour. In this sense, Naga agricultural tales work as pedagogical texts about appropriate jhum cultivation algorithms.

From this perspective, character roles in agricultural folktales are linked to the life of rural communities. For instance, while the Villain character might represent communal greed or carelessness, the Supernatural Helper usually stands for ancestral spirits that guide Naga communities to live in accordance with nature. By combining these recurring narrative roles and their patterns in stories, Proppian morphological framework helps one to see that Naga agricultural folktales are not mere myths, but structured guidance for living in harmony with environment.

LÉVI-STRAUSSIAN STRUCTURALISM: BINARY OPPOSITIONS AS ECOLOGICAL MEDIATORS

The structuralist theory of Claude [Lévi-Strauss \(1963\)](#), [Lévi-Strauss \(1955\)](#) perceives myth as a system of thinking where contradictions and opposites are reconciled in symbolic ways. However, unlike Vladimir Propp, who focuses on events sequences in narratives, Lévi Strauss analyses the logic of oppositions that make them meaningful. Applying this theory to Naga agricultural folktales, it becomes clear that they help people deal with the contradiction between the wildness of land and agricultural activities. Rather than presenting the subjugation of nature, agriculture is depicted as a cultural process that implies certain ethical considerations about moderation. In particular, the concept of “culinary triangle” by [Lévi-Strauss \(1955\)](#), in which food passes the stages of being raw, cooked and rotted, can be used for analysis. For instance, folktales show that uncultivated seeds (nature) are transformed into cultivated crops (culture) through ritual, labour and time (cooking process). At the same time, the abundance of harvested crops (cooked food) should be moderate because excess rice leads to ecological imbalance. As in culinary triangle, where rotted food is seen as a negative state, Naga agricultural folktales discourage the consumption of excessive paddy, thus maintaining balance.

INTEGRATED SYNTHESIS: PROPP + LÉVI-STRAUSS FOR TEK ANALYSIS

The novelty of the proposed framework is its combination of syntagmatic Propp’s narrative functions and paradigmatic Lévi Strauss’s oppositions. In particular, this approach employs the four-stage analytical process; Contextualisation, Proppian sequence, Binary oppositions, and Cultural Value extraction, for TEK analysis. While the narrative function model by Propp describes the dynamics of narratives from imbalance to balance, Lévi-Strauss’s paradigmatic structure explains the significance of these shifts in terms of binary oppositions. In this regard, the Naga agricultural folktales embody the concepts of reciprocity, responsibility, restraint, and collectivism. While the work of both scholars is commonly employed in folklore and ecocriticism studies independently, the convergence of Propp’s and Lévi-Strauss’s models is rather uncommon. Therefore, by using this hybrid approach, this study addresses calls for formal ecocriticism [Bhattacharya \(2023\)](#).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative interpretive research approach based on the structuralist literary theory for TEK analysis of Naga agricultural folktales. This study seeks to interpret folktales from a TEK perspective and explore the relationship between the symbolism within the story and the lived experiences in the rural areas of Nagaland. Primary data collection was carried out in Angami, Chang, Kuki, Phom, Lotha, and Sumi tribes of Nagaland. Interviews with elderly people, professional storytellers, and agriculturalists were conducted using a semi-structured format, while stories were collected in the native language.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis used a four-stage protocol for consistent analysis of each tale according to Propp’s morphological model and Lévi Strauss’s structural approach. This analytical framework draws on the narratives of Naga agriculturalists and informs emic perspectives offered by the informants.

The first stage, Contextualisation, locates each folktale in terms of tribe-specific agroecological conditions and determines the narrative trigger of the story, namely lack of agricultural products, drought, or other kinds of shortage of food. These narrative triggers correspond to Propp’s notion of “lack”.

The second stage, Proppian Sequence, analyses selected functions from the set of thirty-one Propp’s narrative functions and determines their movement from disruption to resolution in terms of agricultural practices. Usually, there are four to six functions in each story.

The third stage, Binary Oppositions, identifies paradigmatic pairs of concepts from Levi Strauss's set of oppositions, including those related to nature versus culture, individual versus community, and abundance versus scarcity, etc., and shows how these oppositions help to solve narrative problems.

The final stage, Cultural Value Extraction, synthesises all narrative motifs and structural aspects of the stories and identifies major cultural values, which include reciprocity, ritual responsibility, restraint, and collective action.

By following this four-stage protocol, the analysis produced a comparative framework for identifying recurrent patterns across all studied tribes.

RESULT

This section will provide the unfiltered agricultural folktales collected from fieldwork and apply structuralist analysis to it. Each tale will be analysed using a standard four-step approach of structuralist theory, namely, context, Proppian narrative sequence, binary oppositions, and cultural values. The six tales collected from Angami, Chang, Kuki, Phom, Lotha, and Sumi communities demonstrate similar narrative structure that embeds Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) in relation to jhum cultivation, ethics of communities, and ecological balance. Even though the setting, characters, and symbolic meaning vary in the narratives, they share certain structural characteristics whereby crises in agriculture such as shortage, drought, or imbalance are handled and overcome.

RAW FOLKTALES

The Angami Tale: The Farmer and the Spirits of the Land (Lieciemia puo mu kijü rhouko)

In a small Angami village, there lived a farmer named Kevichü, renowned for his farming abilities and his capacity to talk with the spirits of the land. One day, while Kevichü was working on his fields, he heard a soft voice. It was the spirits of the land telling him to conduct a ritual so that his crops could grow abundantly. The man agreed, and after he performed the ritual, the spirits appeared to him. It was in the forms of the wise old man and the old woman. The spirits blessed his lands with abundance but under the condition that Kevichü would distribute his produce and cultivate the fields responsibly. Kevichü complied with this requirement, and since that day onwards, his field produced more than any other field in the village. Further, Kevichü shared his produce among his fellow tribesmen, and they enjoyed success in their respective lives. It can be said that spirits helped Kevichü to become an excellent cultivator, thereby blessing his village with prosperity. Thus, the above tale illustrates the strong connection between the Angami tribe and nature and their belief in the existence of supernatural forces that govern their cultivation practices.

The Chang Tale- The Rain Stone (Laang Lang)

In the middle of the jungle, distant from Noksen village lied a stone known as Makanglong. Whenever rains do not come for many months throughout the year. People begin to say, "Ah, we have nothing to eat", "All the crops are dried", "Please go to the stone". Then, all the elders visit the Makanglong stone which lies in a mountain. They carry with themselves branches of Okpo, green leaves having white underside and dip them in the river located nearby. As soon as they sprinkle leaves on the stone they proclaim, "It is raining" and call on the spirits for rain and release them from all their sufferings. After returning back, even before reaching their village they are greeted by the rain.

Therefore when there is no rain for many months in a year and even springs dried up and the crops are burnt, villagers visited Makanglong and invoked rain.

The Kuki Tale: The Magic Tool (Doi Manchah Thusim)

Many years ago, there lived a Kuki farmer known as Thang in a small village. He was an honest farmer who worked hard on his plot. However, due to poor equipment he had difficulty making ends meet. While working on his plot, one day he met a mysterious old man who said to be the spirit of land. The spirit congratulated Thang on his hard work and dedication to his land and offered him magic tools. Thang was overjoyed and thanked the spirit for the gift. He immediately began using the magic tools and to his amazement his work became much easier and faster. His crops began to flourish and he was able to harvest more than ever before. As news of Thang's good fortune spread other farmers in the village became curious and asked him to share his secret. Thang happily shared his story and even offered to lend his magic tools to those in need. However as time passed some farmers began to use the magic tools for their own gain, forgetting the spirit's warning to use them with kindness and respect. The tools began to lose their magic and the crops started to wither and die. Thang realised what was happening and called a meeting with the other farmers. He reminded them of the spirit's warning and the importance of using the tools with kindness and respect. The farmers apologised and promised to use the tools wisely from then on.

From that day onwards, the villagers started using these magic tools wisely and respectfully. Thus, the Kuki village thrived and prospered. The legend about Thang and the spirits of the land has been told for generations.

The Phom Tale: (Toubüdoupa)

In the village of Sakshi, there lived a man name Toubüdoupa from Yangji khel who possessed extraordinary powers. He had a sister who married someone from Yangching Village. The married couple had a large field for growing crops, but tending to such a vast area proved challenging and soon weeds overtook the field. The situation got bad that, the couple had to seek help from Toubüdoupa. The sister pleaded with him to assist them for few days in clearing the field. Toubüdoupa listened to her sister plea and gave her instruction.

“Slaughter a pig, cook it, take it to the field and leave it there with some cooked rice and some rice beer and then go home”.

Even though she hadn't thought that he would suggest this, she obeyed him. She asked her husband to kill a pig, cook the meat with some rice and prepare the local drink in a bamboo pipe. She gave the food and drinks to her husband who went to the field, placed everything there and came back home. After some time, Toubüdoupa appeared in the field, ate all the food, drank all the drinks, walked around the field, and defecated here and there. After sometime, the weeds disappeared and his sister and brother-in-law cleared the field to start planting. In the season of harvest, they faced another challenge. They were harvesting lots of fruits from the stalks, and their storehouses were becoming full. She again asked her brother, Toubüdoupa, to come to their assistance.

“It does not seem to end! We are drowning in paddy! Help, what should we do?”

Again he listened to his sister and gave her instruction. He told her to go to the fields and check every corner where she would find pumpkin vines. He instructed her to pluck a leaf from each vine. His sister followed his instruction, walking around the field and plucking leaves from the vines. Once she was done, all the paddy disappeared and the granary was empty. When Toubüdoupa passed away, people prayed that no man as powerful as him would ever be born in the village. They took a large stone and placed it on his grave as a gesture to seal it forever, preventing any spirit from emerging in the village again.

The Lotha Tale: A Tale of Two Kids who Turned into a Monkey

In a past era, there was a man who adored a young woman so much. One day, he decided to ask for her hand in marriage. The family members agreed and they were subsequently married. The lady gave birth to two children- a boy and a girl. However within a short span of time, the mother departed from the earth, leaving her husband and two children behind. The father, out of love and care for his children, chose to marry another woman. However, after the new mother delivered her new child, she subjected her stepchildren to severe distress. One day, the stepmother called the two children and asked them to go to the field while she would prepare the food for them. On the same morning, she sent them off but instructed them not to return home but to spend their days in the field. On the next day, when the children sat down to eat what the stepmother had cooked for them, they realized that the food had the feces of cows, chickens, and pigs. It meant that the stepmother never prepared meals suitable for consumption. The children used to eat the food only to open it up and throw it away. Since a long time, they had stopped eating wholesome food; therefore, they had to depend upon Mother Nature to fulfill their hunger. One day, the father decided to bring cooked food to his children in the field. He called out to his sons,

“I have prepared food from home, come and have it”.

The children responded,

“Father, we have now forgotten the nourishing food that humans consume and we have turned into a monkey”.

With a heavy heart, the father addressed the children, but they did not respond. Subsequently, the father stated,

“If you have become a monkey, then whenever there is an unnatural death in the village and the villagers are confined within it, you both must keep watch for them and consume the fruits and vegetables they cultivate in their fields”.

It is therefore believed and acknowledged that, whenever there is an unnatural occurrence in the village, the monkey interrupts the cultivated fields of the villagers, destroying all the vegetables, and seeds.

The Sumi Tale (Kashopappu)

In the early days when Sumis had not properly determined the right time of the season to sow different kinds of crops, there lived an old man called Kivigho. He is said to have lived at a place called Wokhakusa, an old village near Kitami (a Sumi village). In his death bed, he called his only son Kasho beside him and said, “I will pass away soon, but do not worry, for I shall send you a message through a seasonal bird that will come proclaiming my name as Kashopapu (Kasho's father), so when you hear the bird calling out 'Kashopapu' start sowing seed in your field”. After the death of his father Kasho cleared the jungle for cultivation and waited eagerly for his father to give him the signal. Others have already started the process of cultivation but he waited. He climbed the hills, followed the streams, moved about the forest to hear and see the bird that would give him the message. Finally, one fine day, as he moved about in his field he heard a bird that chirped, “Kasho papu, Kasho papu”. On hearing the bird, he understood that his father had sent the Kashopapu bird to convey him the message, that it was time to start sowing. So, he sowed the paddy seed on his field. It was time for harvest and his villagers had a very poor harvest that year for they sowed the seed too early but Kasho had a very rich harvest and his barns were filled with grains. Kasho went on to have a rich harvest year after year, but the villagers fared poorly in cultivation, so the villagers decided to wait upon Kasho's time of sowing seed, and when they did sow as Kasho did, they too had rich harvest. The villagers then asked Kasho how he knew the right time of sowing and Kasho related the secret of how his dead father used to send the message of sowing the seed through the bird called Kashopapu.

The Sumis till today wait for Kashopapu (Cuckoo) to arrive in their country to announce the time of sowing paddy.

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE FOLKTALES

Table 2

Table 2 Structuralist Analysis of Naga Agricultural Folktales					
Folktale	Tribe	Context	Proppian Sequence	Binary Oppositions	Cultural Value
Lieciemia puo mu kijü rhouko	Angami	A skilled farmer faces harvest uncertainty in jhum fields, invoking land spirits amid potential scarcity.	Interdiction (γ2: ritual neglect); Magical Agent (F14: spirit guidance post-offerings); Liquidation of Lack (K19: fertile harvest after sharing vow). Dramatis: Hero (Kevichu), D12: Donor/Helper (spirits).	Human/Supernatural; Scarcity/Abundance (fields wither vs. prosper).	Reciprocity-agriculture as spiritual contract demanding communal redistribution.
Laang Lang	Chang	Prolonged drought affects jhum fields; elders conduct rain-invoking ritual at sacred stone.	Villainy/Lack (α8A: drought); Difficult Task (M25: leaf-sprinkling); Victory (↓20: rain arrives).	Drought/Rain; Ritual Action/Natural Chaos.	Ecological ritualism-mimetic magic influences weather, ensuring collective survival.
Doi Manchah Thusim	Kuki	Poor tools hinder labour; spirit rewards ethics, but greed triggers reversal.	Lack (α8A: tool failure); Donor (spirit provides F14: magic tools); Secondary Villainy (A8: misuse).	Ethical Labour/Greed; Tool Fertility/Withering.	Moral stewardship-implements as moral extensions, revoked by individualism.
Toubüdoupa	Phom	Excess growth creates imbalance; ritual mediation restores order	Lack (weeds, α8A); Magical Intervention (F14: ritual defecation); Excess Reversal (leaf-plucking).	Chaos/Fertility; Abundance/Equilibrium.	Homeostatic balance-power must be contained to prevent ecological excess.
Tale of Two Kids	Lotha	Stepmother's neglect transforms children into monkeys, who safeguard fields during crises.	Villainy (A8: poisoned food); Metamorphosis (T29: human-to-monkey); Helper Role (D12: monkeys protect crops).	Neglect/Vigilance; Human/Nature Guardian.	Communal protection-marginalized become ecological sentinels enforcing sustainability.
Kashopappu	Sumi	Accidental patricide tests timing; bird signal guides optimal sowing against hasty peers. ₹	Magical Signal (F14: cuckoo call); Liquidation (K19: abundant yield).	Haste/Patience; Early Drought/Timed Harvest.	Observational harmony-nature's cues dictate agricultural precision.

Figure 1

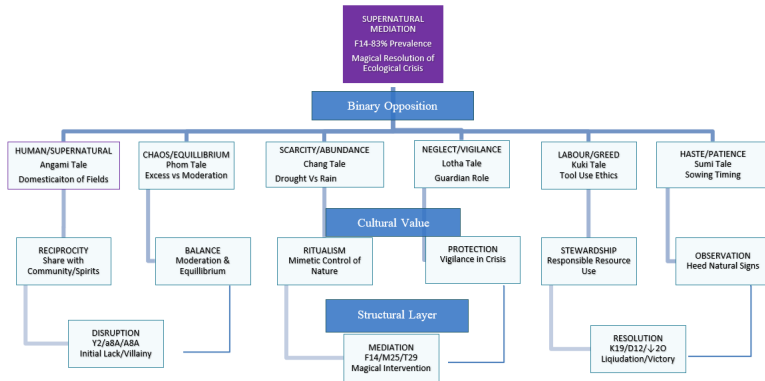


Figure 1 The Narrative Ecology Model of Naga Agricultural Folktales

Figure 1 summarizes the recurring structural movement across six agricultural folktales collected from the tribes discussed in this paper. According to the figure, the story begins with a disruption in the form of lack or harm ($\alpha 8A/A8$), and subsequently, a restoring move takes place through the assistance by a third party (F14), resulting in the resolution (K19/D12). As a result, it can be concluded that narrative forms of agricultural folktales reflect ecological sustainability values of jhum practices.

The Proppian Sequence in the model illustrates the recurrence of narrative elements in specific sequences. Disruptions such as drought, weed, or ritual neglect occur as lack/villainy ($\alpha 8A-A8$). However, the story concludes with assistance in the form of extraordinary help (F14) or victory/liquidation (K19). For example, the Angami story shows a pattern from ritual neglect to the assistance of others and abundance ($\gamma 2-F14-K19-D12$), which resembles a sequence in the Chang rain stone story where drought causes the action and results in rainfall ($\alpha 8A-M25-J20$).

Binary Oppositions of Lévi-Strauss's paradigmatic axis expose the worldview tensions resolved at the centre of the model (Fig. 1). Nature/Culture appears often, for example, the Angami story shows a human-supernatural pact that turns wild fields into farmland. Scarcity/Abundance is seen in the Chang tale (drought-rain), and Individual/Community in the Kuki story (greed-labour). Phom's Chaos/Equilibrium changes excess into moderation, while Lotha's Neglect/Vigilance and Sumi's Haste/Patience highlight the need for careful attention. These oppositions help address the core contradictions in Naga agroecology, turning risks like famine or overgrowth into ethical lessons resolved by the narrative.

Cultural values, drawn from inside perspectives, connect the way stories are told to their purpose, creating the final "output layer" of the model, a shared Naga TEK (Traditional Ecological Knowledge) ethos. Each tribe's folktale highlights a key value:

- **Reciprocity (Angami):** sharing brings spiritual blessings.
- **Ritualism (Chang):** rituals help control the monsoon.
- **Stewardship (Kuki):** tools should not be hoarded.
- **Balance (Phom):** warns against having too much power.
- **Protection (Lotha):** outcasts become guardians of crops.
- **Observation (Sumi):** watching birds helps decide when to sow seeds.

Common themes include interdependence (67%) and equilibrium (50%), which reflect the importance of clan-based land ownership and the fragile nature of jhum farming, where the group's spiritual harmony is more important than individual actions. Figure 1 summarizes the recurring structural movement across six agricultural folktales collected from the tribes discussed in this paper. According to the figure, the story begins with a disruption in the form of lack or harm ($\alpha 8A/A8$), and subsequently, a restoring move takes place through the assistance by a third party (F14), resulting in the resolution (K19/D12). It means that the narrative structure of agricultural folktales reflects cultural values associated with sustainable jhum practices.

DISCUSSION

The results prove the main assumption of the current research regarding the interconnection between narrative structure and ecologically significant aspects along with the communal identification.

Instead of considering agriculture as a purely technological activity, the legends tell about a spiritual experience that includes jhum cultivation along with relations to spirits, ancestors, and community members, thereby reflecting the viewpoint of early ethnographers of Naga people. Since this analysis uses the method of morphological approach to folktales developed by Vladimir

Propp, the narrative patterns become obvious. According to Propp's method, a narrative consists of a succession of events described in terms of functions. For instance, one of the frequent patterns among these tales is the move from disruption to restoring harmony. It allows comparing cultural narratives and understanding their operation in the Naga folklore. Thus, disruption such as drought, crop overgrowing, its failures, and neglecting rituals serves as an initial event leading to the series of actions that restores the harmony of social life as well as cultivation. In this context, folktales function as instruction regarding what will happen if people neglect rituals and what measures should be taken under particular conditions. Consequently, these tales can be considered as "oral manuals" concerning agricultural ethics. Moreover, the function of mediation in these narratives becomes visible, which often takes non-human forms including spirits, stones, magic tools, exceptional people, animal assistants, seasonal birds. All these characters can be considered helpers that are not incidental but rather cultural symbols of a definite value. This interpretation of Naga folktales agrees with the concept of their role in forming the cultural identity of Naga people, especially in displaced communities [Ao \(2006\)](#), [Assumi and Singh \(2024\)](#).

Lévi Straussian approach to structuralism explains the repetition of certain tensions in the folktales. According to this scholar, mythology operates as a cognitive process where contradictions are solved symbolically in a series of oppositions [Lévi-Strauss \(1955\)](#), [Lévi-Strauss \(1963\)](#). In relation to agricultural tales analysed within this research, there are numerous instances when the binary oppositions of nature/culture, scarcity/abundance and individual/community are developed in a series of ritual actions. Hence, jhum cultivation does not imply superiority of man over nature but implies mediations of natural phenomena within the culture, which is the basic principle in the interpretation of cultural transformation. This suggests that nature turns into culture thus obtaining a culturally understandable form. The binary opposition of nature and culture can be seen in the tales where cultivation of lands depends on the respect shown to nature and the ritual procedure and implements. According to eco-critical researches, rituals, symbols, and taboos in these tales are supposed to teach ecological knowledge and promote sustainable practices [Kapfo and Chodongse \(2019\)](#). Moreover, the researches carried out by Patton and Bhattacharya demonstrate the importance of agricultural practice in mediating environmental and social meaning [Patton \(2017\)](#), [Bhattacharya \(2023\)](#). For example, in the Lotha tales, the researcher pays particular attention to agricultural labour and implements as mediators of ecological meaning. Another essential aspect of these tales is the individual/community binary opposition since they contain the plot lines in which failure to perform one's ethical duties causes communal damage. It suggests that there are deeper messages than just negative consequences of one's misbehavior in terms of ethical and ecological disruption. Hence, Naga folktales are not only explanations of nature but social norms that take ecological aspects into account. Timing and observation can be considered as the aspects of ecological competence as exemplified by the seasonal bird in Sumi story. Consequently, the motifs of these tales reflect the link between ecological competence and narrative form.

As a result, the tales examined within this study include numerous pieces of advice about using farming implements, sowing timing, and adaptation. These observations are consistent with the studies concerning Sumi agricultural practices [Zhimomi and Dutta \(2023\)](#) and Angami myths regulating agricultural practices and including seasonal signals [Kehie \(2025\)](#). These findings about the narrative patterns in folktales are useful in multiple ways. Firstly, analysing tales of several tribes together allowed noticing common patterns while taking into account peculiarities of each tribe. It helped to avoid the limitation existing in previous studies on Naga folktales. Secondly, combining two structuralist approaches offered a replicated formal ecocritical approach. These narratives prove that Naga agricultural folktales are structured stories that include moral labour, ritual observance, ecological restraint, and observation of natural phenomena. Thus, the stories examined in the current study still function as the cultural knowledge systems about agriculture and ethics.

CONCLUSION

The structural analysis of Naga agricultural folktales in terms of Propp and Lévi-Strauss methodologies showed that they reflected spirituality, communal responsibility, and ecological balance as the key cultural characteristics of Naga tribes. Within six tribes, folktales used common motifs and patterns along with mediation, ritual performance, and reversal to create a structure of moving from disruption to restoration. In this way, the tales promote solidarity within the community and cultivate land stewardship among people who practice jhum cultivation. These oral stories were found to work as living teaching systems that explained uncertainties such as drought, overgrowth, or untimely cultivation in terms of cultural reciprocity, rituals, and observation of natural cues. With the help of binary oppositions that define the relationships between nature and culture in the community, Naga tales created a moral system of sustainable agriculture and collective possession of land. The structural similarity among the stories indicates the existence of common worldview of Naga people that has survived regardless of religious and economic transformations as well as environmental pressures. Analysis of structure and its cultural function made it possible to see the significance of these folktales as TEK. Notably, Naga agricultural folktales not only preserve culture but also suggest adaptive techniques.

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