

Integrating Folklore and Traditional Ecological Knowledge: Insights from the Ao Community of Nagaland

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Abstract

Folklore in the Ao Naga community, passed down through centuries, contributes to helping its people recognize the various ties they have with the natural world. It serves as the chief source of information to tell the unique culture and history of the people. In contemporary society, it continues to play a significant role in imparting traditional knowledge. This paper establishes a connection between Ao folklore and its role in sustaining the ecology in the community. It explores the beliefs of the community's residents and how these impact the behavior and attitudes towards the environment, ultimately perpetuating environmental consciousness. The paper delves into the realm of folklore and the traditional practices and their association with beliefs and also brings out the nuances of women's relationship with nature. Moreover, the problem of sustaining folklore which has become a ground reality due to its oral legacy and meagre efforts in tribal literature are analyzed and the potential role of Ao Naga youths in adopting ingenious measures to sustain this legacy is elaborated further. Recently, the body of churches in these tribal communities additionally practises eco-theology, and this is evident in some of the initiatives they implement to support the tribal aspect of their culture that gives them the inherent part of their identity.

Keywords: Folklore, Ecology, Sustainability, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, Environment Conservation, Tribal Community

Introduction

Within the social confines of the Ao Nagas, understanding folklore entails far more than just oral narratives that are empty entertainment. It consists of myths that detail the history of their beliefs, dances for occasions that are important for them, storytelling to pass on the legacy of their tribe, and tales that combine to form a complete belief system for a social group. The Ao Naga Folklore, passed down through generations, continues to help its people comprehend the various ties humans have with the natural world, as well as how a society has formed and can continue to develop sustainably using this traditional knowledge (Sema, 2018).

Indigenous Knowledge has been a means of survival for indigenous people in developing meanings, purposes and values deeply associated with their land, which determines their own identity (Yacoub, 1998). This knowledge is passed down orally, deeply rooted in the history and context differing from conventional scientific methods that prioritize empirical data. Various indigenous cultures have organized this knowledge into systems according to their own geographical, cultural, sociological, and ideological contexts. These systems are represented in sustainable activities that reflect their profound ecological awareness. The concept of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) is also closely associated with this, which informs about the relationship with the environment in a spectrum of ways and further offers invaluable knowledge on sustainability. By serving as a living archive of cultural information, values, and social conventions, folklore plays a crucial part in advancing people's understanding. Along with helping to preserve history, it also helps to shape identity and ensure that a community's way of life continues. Through a range of oral traditions, including myths, stories, songs, dances, and rituals, folklore captures the experiences of

generations and provides valuable insights into human relationships, the natural world, and social systems. This study will identify how folklore in the Ao community helps share ancient knowledge that consequently contributes to ecological sustainability.

Methodology

This research employs a grounded theory methodology to explore Ao Naga folklore and its ecological implications, using qualitative data collected through in-depth, unstructured interviews in selected villages of Mokokchung, Nagaland. Non-probability sampling, specifically purposive sampling, was used to select participants who could provide rich, detailed insights into the topic, with data analysis based on inductive coding to identify emerging themes. The study focused on understanding how folklore is linked to the community's cultural practices and ecological knowledge, analyzing both primary interview data and secondary literature to support the findings.

Traditional Practices and Their Association with Beliefs – Traditional Ecological Knowledge

“There are stories, rituals, sacrifices in every step” (L. Jamir, personal communication, January 15, 2023).

In many facets of life, Ao communities are rich in traditional knowledge, which has served as their most authentic and fundamental source of knowledge and helped strengthen the community into what it is today. Because of their reliance on the forest and its resources, they see it as their provider, guide, healer, and protector. Utilizing the resources effectively for their purposes and methods is therefore part of the relationship with nature. This led to the development of well-organized, albeit oral, ecological knowledge and usage, which in turn led to the sustainable use and management of the forest and its resources (Zingkhai, 2015).

Traditional approaches apply in farming, which is the basic means of employment for those in villages. The traditional aspects can be seen in the narrative, ceremony, and sacrifice of the various steps in farming. In some village communities, the process of selecting agricultural land, also known as *Pok*, involves dreaming, while in others, the selection process involves looking for a pile of earthworm faeces to evaluate the quality of the soil and whether it can be used for agricultural purposes. *Pok* is an alternative name for land selection in these communities. The phase of the

moon also plays a role in determining whether the land is productive. After establishing productivity, the selected *Pok* are chosen. *Pok* is an alternative name for land selection in these communities. The phase of the moon also plays a role in determining whether the land is productive. After establishing productivity, the selected *Pok* are chosen. This is how farmers gain understanding by paying attention and using the ways of the natural world to supplement their endeavour of planting. In the series of traditional ceremonies involved, one involves the sacrificial killing of animals to bless the process, after which they continue with the process of creating the *jenti* (granary). Following that, they pray over the seeds, plants, and various forms of flora and fauna. These steps are adhered to secure blessings of harvest, convinced that without, they would be cursed, hence speaks of the supernatural beliefs that are associated with each step in farming. They take precautions to avoid causing any harm to the environment in the areas surrounding their farms because of their agricultural practices. They make efforts to preserve the environment by learning modern methods but additionally, by maintaining the integrity of the traditional

agricultural system through the utilization of the ancestral knowledge that is inherently an integral part.

Traditionality is seen in methods like communal fishing as well, which does not include the use of any pesticides. This method is still followed in some communities, such as the village of Longjang, although it is becoming less common. It is generally agreed that this approach is not harmful to the environment. With the availability of knowledge in regards to sustainability, it would be beneficial for initiatives that promote this ecologically safe means of fishing. In this traditional method, fish are rendered comatose for a few minutes at a time by using the bark of a specific tree (unnamed) that is added into the water bodies. The effect lasts only a few minutes at a time, without causing long term detriments to the ecosystem of these water bodies. Because the remaining fish are unaffected by the substance that is employed, they can go back to their thriving environment without being completely eradicated. This prevents the species from going extinct, while maintaining the integrity of the water body as well. Using *jangpet*, local long wild leaves, as a form of pesticide is a traditional approach that may be carried out

more easily in the home. They would grind it up and then distribute it around the field. It is an extremely potent powder that drives away insects and other unwanted critters. The method that is used to disseminate it also includes a type of worship and prayer before making use of the leaf. Killing *tewa* that was used as soap, and *jangpet* were also utilised in the process of eliminating curses. People used to cast them across bodies of water with the phrase “let all the curses imposed be flown away by the waters”. These plants were also thought of as peace plants at the time since the resulting chant meant negativity dissipating.

In all these accounts about the relational symbiosis of sorts between communities and nature, we see a balance that has survived hundreds of years and the influence of westernization. The ecological knowledge explicitly plays a vital role in ensuring a sustained relation between the people in these communities and the nature that they gatekeep inadvertently.

Women’s Relationship with the Natural World

“Tesangwala asked a big stone, rolling down, to pause while she was passing by and it obeyed her” (M. Imchen, personal communication, January 15, 2022).

As is the case with most tribal women, Ao Naga women have long held the belief that they have a special relationship with the natural world. A result of their great capacity to appreciate nature in its most complete form, Ao Naga women are able to benefit from the abundance of pleasures and advantages that nature has to give (Bhattacharya, 2022). This intrinsic connection can be seen in stories in which the presence of female characters serves to create an atmosphere that is warmer and more affectionate.

In the story of *Tesangwala Alung*, a pregnant woman gave an order to a giant stone as she passed by, and the stone obeyed her by rolling down and stopping as she approached. Her name has been given to the stone that can be found to this day in the exact same location, defying gravity as it had done in the lore. Another tale about two orphan sisters, *Rusangla* and *Rutula* tells how they were visited by the creator of nature, *Aolichaba*, who was disguised as a human and had tested the sisters. After hearing about how compassionate and generous they were even though they had nothing, he blessed them twice over.

The perspective of the relationship between women and nature are not

just told in tales but also practised. The communities of the Ao tribe believe that if a pregnant woman's husband goes hunting or fishing in the forest, the mother or unborn child will suffer or die; or if the husband kills an animal, the child will be born with the features or traits of that animal/with the same wound as the slaughtered animal. This myth is commonly spread in Ao households to discourage hunting. Another intriguing factor is the alignment of fertility and abstinence from hunting, inadvertently protecting the animals that may be procreating during such seasons and preserving the population of those species. Hence, the destruction of the fauna which is a vital part of the ecosystem is protected with this belief that it will hurt the hunter's wife and child. This also presents a very distinct image of how women and nature are intertwined. Women and the natural world are inextricably linked, and as a result, women are subject to the same consequences as males when they act selfishly and harm the natural world.

Another popular myth describes a childless woman who, in her desperate attempt to conceive, surreptitiously raises a caterpillar away from her husband. Soon after her husband departs for work, she

conceals the caterpillar in a wooden box and breastfeeds it as if it were her own child. After discovering the box one day when he gets home, the spouse becomes inquisitive. The caterpillar, which is the size of a typical baby when he opens it, shrieks out to him, “Aba,” or “Father,” as soon as he does. He kills it out of sheer horror and contempt, leaving his wife in deep sadness. Today, that caterpillar is known as the *Aba Mese*n in Ao dialect, and it is stated that it squeaks if it detects a female presence. Although this narrative may appear to be rather unpleasant to some, it cannot be ignored that it talks about how women can be more affectionate towards nature and men’s blindness in comprehending this link, which led to his violent act.

This intrinsic relationship is also seen in present day Ao women. While collecting data, a female respondent recounted how males routinely visit her home and discuss their hunting adventures. She claimed that it broke her heart because she realized that they hunt them for enjoyment rather than necessity unlike during her forefather’s time. The tribal mindset across the world (for example, the Inuit from Canada) share this value that life should mean something and thus when that life is taken, it

should be for necessity/survival. The noted claim of this woman, like many from her community, roots itself in a need for preserving the natural world without ruining the struck balance created between the community and the ecosystem. She also notes how her husband is the one who hunts, thus implying that it is not normally practised amongst women. It is possible that the fact that she is a woman makes her more sensitive to how these creatures are treated. Though traditionally patriarchal and patrilineal, like most Naga tribes, the Ao Naga people have held women in high regard for their ability to produce new life and for being the custodians of significant cultural information and spiritual values within the community from pre-colonial times. Ao Naga women, with their sympathetic connection to nature, have been the flag-bearers of this “responsibility” towards the region’s flora and fauna (Sengupta, n.d.). Thus, we see a clear link between women and nature that seems to have been dictated or narrated in the tradition of these communities as well.

Sustaining Folklore and the Consequent Conflicts

While it is common knowledge that Ao Naga folklore is still expansive in its body, and rich in its subject matters, there is undeniably a risk

that it will become less prevalent in the generations to come. A vast majority of today's youth are oblivious of the implications that come with knowing such myths and truths, and they continue to be ignorant of them. Few people have recorded the local folklore, which has only been passed down orally from generation to generation, and even fewer people are trying to do so. The complexities of sustaining Ao folklore is multi-pronged and there are many aspects to consider.

The nature of how these folklores are recorded and disseminated also plays a role in its lack of preservation in the modern day, despite technological advancements (which are not being used efficiently). A large part of folklore comes from the oral accounts of elders, especially in villages, many of whom continue to pass on their knowledge in this oral manner. Considering the current scenario, limited attempts are being made and few worries about the need of resuscitating the rich information that comes through folklore. In light of this, hearing such claims from locals who believe it to be so is upsetting. In this sense, what options are available? "We ought to write songs that are heartfelt, down-to-earth, and patriotic about the environment" (T. Ao, personal communication, February 20, 2022).

As a result of exposure to folklore in the form of tales, songs, and dances, the elderly have gained a profound appreciation for the natural world, and they regard this knowledge as their most valuable and priceless wealth. Even through more modern means, such as the use of social media and content creation, an appreciation for the natural world will still be imparted or recorded for the younger generations.

Conflict of religion

Westernization has the cost of whitewashing narratives into binary of good and evil, wherein the tribal practices that were considered savage or barbaric were forced to disappear almost entirely.

Conflict emerges among different perspectives of the different individuals and groups on their traditional way of life. Many people believe that while Christian missionaries had a tremendous impact on Naga society, they also had a role in the loss of certain important aspects of Naga custom and culture. The customs and culture of the Naga were largely unknown to the missionaries. The disappearance of *morung* suffered immense social, cultural and architectural loss. Naga folk music, folk-lore, folk-dance, festivals and many other social activities were considered to be part of the

animistic society and purposely undermined (Nukshirenla & Dhanaraju 2019). Now, with their conversion to Christianity, their forefather's way of worship has ceased but the villagers still hold some of these beliefs and revere the sacred places. And till date, the land and forest surrounding such areas is still maintained and preserved by the villagers. They believe that they are historical relics, traces of who they were in the past. Although they are still Christians, others keep these ideas because they are subconsciously embedded in them and feel obligated to respect them. It is crucial to point out that Christianity itself incorporates nature as a very important factor which has been created by the God almighty and demands human beings to co-exist with the natural world. "Theologians generally argue that humans and the world around us share equal values because we were created by the same God/designer and we need each other to survive, this is where the idea of coexistence comes in" (C. Kichu, personal communication, January 23, 2023).

The concept of Eco-theology assists us in respecting the values of the created environment around us as an undivided body created by God and strongly supports the idea that humans were created to coexist

with all living things rather than to dominate them. Church leaders today incorporate specific activities into their church calendars to promote the importance of ecology. For example, the entire month of June is designated as World Environment Care Month in the Mokokchung Town Baptist Church yearly calendar. There is also *Tetsü Oshi Terenlok* (mother tongue) day, and sometimes youth service programmes include Cultural Sundays, both of which aim to promote the AOs cultural identity.

As a result, we can see the efforts of the once animistic people, who are now Christians in majority (about 93.44% of Mokokchung population as per the 2011 census and population data of 2023) to instill Christian ideals in their action towards nature while simultaneously revitalizing components of their cultural past that support their identity today.

Conclusion

Ao Naga folklore contains valuable traditional ecological knowledge that has contributed to the community's ecological sustainability, with sacred forests and areas still preserved amidst modern towns. Despite the early influence of Christian missionaries who sought to abandon old customs, Ao people have recognized

the importance of their cultural heritage, especially the narratives that emphasize fear and respect for nature, ensuring a harmonious relationship with the environment. These stories highlight ecofeminism and the nurturing connections between women and nature. The ongoing preservation of folklore, particularly through literature, church efforts, and education, is

crucial for sustainability. In-depth studies on the integration of folklore with ecological sustainability can help global understanding of ecological phenomena, and the promotion of folklore through modern means, like audiobooks, school curriculums, and eco-theology, can engage a greater appreciation for ecological harmony.

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