



FOLKLORE, LIVED PRACTICES AND CULTURAL IMAGINATIONS AS MULTISPECIES ARCHIVE: AN AO NAGA APPROACH

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Abstract

Folklore is often understood as a vessel of cultural memory. It is a distinctly human cultural practice. Folklore transmits values, beliefs, and collective histories across generations. It is studied as the repository of oral tradition, myths, rituals and lived experiences. A multispecies perspective invites us to reframe folklore as a multispecies archive that documents the complex entanglements between humans and their more-than-human co-inhabitants. Such an approach decenters anthropocentrism. Unlike written archives that give privilege to the human voices, oral traditions capture narratives where non-humans like animals, plants, spirits, and landscapes become active agents, shaping not only the content of narratives but also the cultural imaginations of the community that tells them.

Keywords: Folklore, Lived Experiences, Cultural Imaginations, Decenter, Anthropocentrism.

INTRODUCTION:

Folklore has traditionally been studied as a distinctly human cultural practice, an area of knowledge and subject inquiry, the repository of oral tradition, myths, and rituals. Folklore reflects social values and the collective imagination of a community. Folklore is the traditional expressions of a people.

Scholastic engagements will show that folklore is not a simple fantasy or traditional tales narrated by merry old women. Folklore is a living cultural system that reflects how people understand the world, explain natural and social phenomena and transmit values. In *Folklore and Folklife: an Introduction*, Richard M. Dorson writes, “In recent years, another term, folklife, has vied with and even threatened to dominate folklore. The supporters of folklife studies claim that folklorists are narrowly preoccupied with verbal forms and neglect the tangible products of folk artisans. They maintain that folklife embraces the entire panorama of traditional culture, including oral folklore. Conversely, the champions of folklore stoutly maintain that their term includes traditional arts and crafts” (Dorson 1972, 2)

Folklife and folklore are seen as complementary to each other; that is, one is incomplete without the other. Dorson places the study of folklore and folklife under four large groups- first, oral literature, also called verbal or expressive art. Under this broad domain fall the spoken, sung, and voiced traditional utterances that show repetitive patterns. Then there is folk narrative, which includes tales, anecdotes, proverbs, riddles, and folk speech. There is again another major subdivision, like the folksong or poetry, like rhymes, epics, yodels, hollers, cries, chants, laments, etc. The second aspect is generally called material culture, which is visible to the people and therefore contrary to the aural aspect of folk behaviour. It includes the techniques, skills, recipes, and formulas transmitted across the generations “how men and women in tradition-oriented societies build their homes, make their clothes, prepare their food, farm and fish, process the earth’s bounty, fashion their tools and implements, and design their furniture and utensils and questions that concern the student of material culture”(Dorson 1972, 2-3). The third aspect of the study is called social folk custom, wherein group interaction is of great importance. Customs of this sort include ““telling the bees” of a death in the family by draping the hives in black, or nailing up a horseshoe on the front door to avert witchcraft, or making a wish before tasting the first fruit of the season. These customs are often closely bound up with deeply held folk beliefs, which in themselves constitute a folklore genre. Some customs may be highly specific and local” (Dorson 1972, 3). The fourth aspect of folklore and folklife study is the performing folk arts, such as traditional music, dance and drama.



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Folklore has always been populated by animals, plants, rivers, mountains, and spirits, suggesting that the narratives of the people are deeply ingrained in a more-than-human world. A multispecies reading or examination of folklore questions the anthropocentric understanding, and such an approach invites academic pursuits to recognise non-human beings not merely as symbols or allegories but as co-creators of meaning and as participants in the world of storytelling. Multispecies studies are an interdisciplinary approach that explores the relationships, entanglements, and co-existence between humans, animals, plants, landscapes, and other non-human entities. The scholars of this approach try to decenter anthropocentrism. Human beings are no longer at the centre of the narrative. This approach studies how cultural narratives, practices and knowledge are co-created with other species. Multispecies scholarship has become a significant new wave of study addressing human interactions with animals, plants and other life forms in what scholars once called “nature” or the natural world.

Levi Strauss strongly advocated that animals are “good to think” (Strauss 1971, 89), a slogan that decenters humans. Again, scholarly engagements show how multispecies ethnography started to explore the more intimate “contact zone” (Haraway 2008, 244) where the lives of humans and animals interweave biologically, culturally and politically. Multispecies studies will venture beyond the conventional theoretical domination of animals to totems, representations or forms of passive devices of human world-making. The foregrounding of multispecies assemblage and emergence exhibits coexistence and interactional encounters between humans and nonhumans. New studies have started to explore the complex nature of multispecies inter-subjectivities; thus, there is the emergence of a new reflexive analysis beyond “individual enrollment of animals as human tools” (Tsing 2013a: 36)

Environmental history which is an interdisciplinary approach to ecology, geography, archaeology, anthropology and humanities, believes that the history of humanity and the environment would make sense only if explored and studied together. Multispecies scholars frame such an approach as “human histories within a multispecies field of histories” (Tsing 2013a: 33). Environmental history documents stories not just of humans but of species and societies through the epistemic lens of their relationships with the world about them. Between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, the study of environmental history was primarily oriented in the form of historical geography. Rachel Carson’s *The Sea around Us* (1951) and *Silent Spring* (1962) have an immense impact on new environmentalism, resulting in the emergence of a new, discrete discipline which gradually developed into the concept of the Anthropocene. This formal identification foregrounds that “humanity has become a planetary force, reshaping Earth system in highly consequential and long-lasting ways” (Dooren 2012, 231).

A close study of the folklore of a community living in intimate relation with their environment reveals multispecies encounters where nonhuman beings act, speak and shape the moral universe. This study emphasises that humans do not exist in isolation but within complex webs of interdependence with animals, plants, landscapes and other forms of life. Thus, Folklore, if studied through this lens, becomes an archive of ecological knowledge and relational ethics.

A multispecies approach challenges the anthropocentric lens that has long dominated folklore studies, inviting us to recognise non-human beings not simply as symbols or allegories but as co-creators of meanings and as participants in the world of storytelling. Such an approach is a paradigm shift, especially today, when global ecological crises demand a rereading of the relation between humans and the environment around them. Every community in the world preserves narratives where nonhuman entities are portrayed as active participants or agents who exhibit a mutual coexistence or are in continual negotiation. Reading folklore through a multispecies framework will help to understand folklore as a repository of ecological knowledge and interspecies ethics.

This paper will attempt to study how animals, plants and larger-scale multispecies assemblages mediate social structures and historically inform cultural representations. The study will be confined to some select Ao Naga folklore and traditional practices by situating them within the broad spectrum of multispecies studies. The objective of this study is to dwell on the belief that folklore is a shared narrative space where humans and other beings, real or imagined and spiritual, meet to construct worlds of meaning.



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Non-humans as agents in Oral tradition:

Animals often act with intention, shaping human destiny. In *How Forests Think*, Eduardo Kohn develops a radical argument that forests, and by extension nonhuman beings, possess forms of semiosis, or meaning-making that exceed human language. Kohn's anthropology of life insists that communication is not restricted to human speech. Within this framework, an Ao Naga narrative is discussed, emphasising that humans do not exist in isolation but within complex webs of interdependence with animals. Animals appear prominently in folktales across cultures in various forms and roles. Many times, these stories are read simply as allegories of human morality. Studied from a multispecies lens, these stories embody ecological strategies of survival, adaptation, and resistance.

The narrative unfolds this way: as the sun sets and dusk approaches, every creature that walks on the earth's surface will begin its search for shelter for the night. From the strongest down to the tiniest ant, creatures seek a safe spot for shelter. The cricket and the prettiest of butterflies will seek refuge beneath the shade of a leaf. Likewise, humans, too, journey homeward after a long, tiring day in the field. The narrative tells of how malevolent spirits keep an eye on humans throughout the day. Once the human leaves his field, the neighbours' field spirits will pick up a heavy log lying in the field, carry it on their shoulders and follow him. As long as the human is in his field, he is secure, safe, and guarded by his field or guardian spirit. This is so because from the day the human earmarks a specific spot for his field, he has made sacrifices to appease the field spirit and worshipped it throughout the year. In the evening, as the human leaves his field, the neighbours' field spirits will try to do him harm. When all the peasants returned home, the spider began spinning its web from one side of the road to the other side.

"Kodang alupur ajak temsensepdir, lenmang nungji soraki pa tezü mesanga ki yanglur. Lenmang külen nungi külen tashi sorak jagi pa tezü mesanga ki yanglutsü tenzüker. Mojing jagi iba sorak tezü jagi lenmang mesangdangba ngua sorak gangji "Nisungsangla kidangi tugur kopiga?" ta asüngdang. Idangji sorak jagi, "jogo ki tonger alitsü" ta ashir. Anungji mojing süngtem apuloker alibaji indoker meyiba oadoker" (Senka T 2013, 152)

Translation: *when all peasants return home from their fields, the spider will spin its web on the road stretching from one side to the other side. The malevolent spirit would ask the spider, "How long has it been since the human returned homeward?" The spider would reply, "The human must have reached home by now". On hearing this, the malevolent spirit will throw away the huge log on its shoulder and return to the jungle from where it has come.*

The spider spins its web on the thoroughfare after all humans have returned home at night to save them from 'evil air' or the influence of malevolent spirits. The next morning, when the human finds the spider web in the road on his way to the field, he will not venture to destroy it with his dao or a stick. The Ao people believe that the spider web is a sign of goodwill, a form of safe fortress for humans from impending ill effects. This narrative proposes questions as to why spiders would act as human shields against any untoward or unfortunate incidents. The answer would be found in a traditional belief of the Ao people that, since the times of yore, the Ao ancestors have permitted the spider to be the first to enjoy all the dry meat or fish which they keep in their kitchen, fireplaces, field granaries or stored up on the ceilings above the fireplace. Another interesting aspect of such interconnectedness between the species is revealed through the belief that when the old batch of dry meat or fish is about to be replaced by a new batch, the spider would spin its web downwards to where humans reside. The Ao people also believe that a spider found at home or in the field granary would not bite a human.

This narrative demands that such an idea of human exceptionalism be discarded, an idea that "blinds us to the interspecies connections that make up our own lives within our body and in our surroundings" (Moore 2016, 27).

Again, reading through Anna Tsing's lens, this narrative highlights the spider's role as a survival narrative which instructs communities on how to "live well" with other species amidst uncertainty and vulnerability. A multispecies lens foregrounds the spider as a political actor with agency and wisdom. The story reveals an awareness of animal intelligence and interdependence that resonates with Haraway's notion of "companion species". The spider is an agency or guardian



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protecting humans and teaching a lesson of coexistence. Its behaviour can be understood as a defence from a powerful malevolent field spirit.

The Ao Naga oral tradition tells a story about the beginning of time, when there was no clear and permanent division between light and darkness. All the creatures of Earth held an important assembly to find a lasting solution to this problem. The meeting was dominated by the birds, who shared their different ideas. The owl gallantly declared that if there is darkness, let it be dark, and if there is light, let there be light. The statement sounded so foolish that all the creatures beat the owl severely. In the process, its head was flattened. That is why the Aos say that the owl's head is flat. Finally, the Jenpongno, a bird-like fowl as big as a cock, declared, "Let there be light and darkness at regular, alternate intervals." The proposal sounded wise and reasonable, and all creatures appreciated and admired him. As a result, the Aos claim that the head of the Jenpongno bird diminished. Today, this bird is a small, tiny creature. Thus, light and darkness occurred at regular intervals until such a time came when the sun refused to follow this routine.

The sun went and hid in a cave for a very long time, and a great darkness covered the earth. All animals of the Earth gathered in great fear and worry, so a big conference was held to persuade the sun to come near the Earth. After much discussion, the creatures decided to send a representative to the sun. The cock was chosen as the official representative. Accordingly, the cock underwent a long, dark, arduous journey in search of the sun. The cock finally managed to reach the sun's hiding place and explained the problems faced on Earth. The sun was unmoved despite the persistent appeal of the cock. The cock realised that the sun would not relent through direct negotiations. The clever cock therefore pretended to concede defeat and requested the sun to show him a little light if he signalled his distress by crowing. The mighty, magnanimous sun acceded. The cock set out for his homeward journey, and at regular intervals, he crowed, and the sun was compelled to come a little way to give out his light. This continued, and finally, the sun had to come near the Earth. The sun admired the cleverness of the cock and decided to follow the routine set by the cock. That is why the Aos say, the sun does not show itself until he hears the cock crow. The cock was accorded a special place among the animals. "He became a symbol of valour and even self-sacrifice because he had undertaken the journey at great risk. Other attributes, like strength and handsomeness, also began to be associated with the cock. When a warrior is praised in songs and ballads, he is compared to a full-grown cock and expressions like "swift and handsome like a cock" and "strutting like a cock" abound in the language". (Ao 2012, 86). For the Ao Naga people, the cock holds a prominent place in their traditional practices. The cock was regarded as the fittest of animals for sacrifice when the necessity arose to appease some gods.

A reading of this folktale shows that the cock is a character with agency. The story reflects Ao's indigenous ecological knowledge, where the animals, humans and landscape are inseparable. Multispecies studies reinterpret oral literature as texts where humans, animals, plants and landscapes are co-creators of meaning, revealing ecological wisdom and alternative worldviews. The action of the cock shows that it is not merely symbolic but functions as a teacher of green knowledge; its cunning reflects the unpredictability of living in a multispecies world. This story is again a cosmological narrative which speaks about the predicament of humans and how deeply he is entangled with other species. The story shows humans emerging alongside animals and other creatures, sharing kinship and responsibilities. Such a story cannot be dismissed as simply explanatory fictions but as a framework for understanding human life as part of an interdependent cosmos.

The cock model survival strategies in shared environments, and this is what Anna Tsing calls cultivating attention. This concept is not just about cultivating perception, "the art of noticing" (Tsing 2010, 192) or revealing other worlds that are alive, dense, and dynamic, governed by logics, motivations, and aesthetics that are maybe foreign or invisible to us. Cultivating attention, according to Tsing, is a practice of being in the world, a purposeful and assumed immersion, a practical recognition of the multitude of relationships through which we and others -other species-co-constitute our world semiotically and materially.



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Landscapes and Sacred Ecologies:

Folklore often permeates landscapes and plants with agency, attributing them spiritual presence and moral authority. The Ao people attribute great respect to the sanctity of land. So, it is the belief that if the land is defiled, retribution would follow. An Ao Naga lived experience is discussed to show the retributive action of land or earth thereby supplementing the idea of the entangled existence of humans. When the time approach for a man and woman to be united in marriage, the priest will maintain bodily purity and observe the cleansing ritual when he pronounces the marriage of a new couple. The marriage ritual also involves the sacrifice of some livestock. The Ao Naga ancestors believed that sacrificing blood was of the utmost necessity during auspicious occasions. The newlywed couple will pledge loyalty to each other in the name of their gods. This avowal of loyalty is the basis of a new family. The pledge also encompasses leading a disciplined life by balancing intimacy with responsibility, which is the duty of a responsible human. A disciplined intimate life is sacrosanct for humans, and this is absent in the animal kingdom. If a husband and a wife fail to maintain a balance of intimacy, they are equated to the level of undisciplined animals.

“Parnok dangji “Azü Ak” ta ajar. “Azü Ak’ tetezü shiruru ama khenyongi taaktsümaliba” (Senka T 2013, 48)

Translation:

They will be referred to as “dog pig”. “Dog pig” means as lowly as animals, devoid of shame or ignominy.

In the event of a case of spatial pollution by acts of sexual indulgence between husband and wife, their actions will give rise to many problems. There is an idea prevalent among the Ao people that actions, especially sexual ones, carried out in ‘wrong’ or ‘unsanctioned’ places defile the land and that those who pass through the spot may unintentionally suffer the consequences of that impurity. The innocent victims will suffer from swelling of their bodies, experience unbearable pain within their bodies, become weak and very thin and suffer from fits and seizures. In such cases, the victims will approach the soothsayers, and by interpreting omens and signs, the names of the couple suspected to have inflicted the sickness would be revealed. Once the revelation is made, the couple will become the laughing stock of the entire village. Since the suffering is sudden, the ancestors believed there was no medicine for such suffering. For such a sickness, the Ao people believed that there is only one remedy: to go to a river, throw some leaves of box bean into the water, utter the names of the husband and wife, curse them, and spit simultaneously. The innocent victims will speak in this manner,

“thebokya, jen aser alu among miamena, thi! Thi! Tzüdi tashi punger luang hi” (Senka T 2013, 48-49)

Translation: bypass roads, roads at the back of the house, field and field granary incurred defilement, thi! Thi! May this defilement flow down far off to the great waters.

That the defilement may not cause further suffering to any of the villagers, and also to the husband and wife, the couple will visit the spot where the offence was committed, and in symbolic gestures by using their fingers as a way of engaging in a sexual act, they will throw their spit and curse the spot. The children born to such a couple are called by names such as “street child”, “bypass road child” or “child of the roads at the back of the house”. Thus, for the Ao people, the act of intimacy, even between the husband and wife, was considered holy or sacrosanct and was to be performed within specified spaces.

In anthropological, religious, and folklore studies, such a situation could be described as ritual pollution or defilement. This is a concept common to many traditions where acts like sex, birth, or death, if performed in the wrong space, create spiritual contamination. Again, the idea that the pollution doesn’t stay confined to the actors but can affect innocent bystanders who come into contact with the place is considered as contagious impurity. Such a traditional belief shows how human action is closely intertwined with the earth. The soil is not a mute spectator here, but it is an active agency, pronouncing its verdict if humans err.



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CULTURAL IMAGINATION IN AGRICULTURAL CYCLE:

The Ao Naga society is agrarian. Farming cycles are always linked to rituals that dramatise multispecies relations. From the day a particular jungle is marked for farming to the day the crops and paddy are harvested, the Ao people diligently till their fields. Since agriculture is the main source of livelihood, the success, prosperity, and self-sufficiency of the people were measured by the amount of paddy harvested in one farming cycle. The people have faith in ritualistic beliefs; therefore, the priest would give sacrifices to the presiding deity or the field spirit, invoking an abundance of blessings. On the first day of clearing the field, an egg was sacrificed. This was a gesture of befriending the field spirit. Next, livestock such as cock, a pig, or a dog would be sacrificed to seek blessings. These agricultural rituals reflect strategies for coexistence in dynamic and often precarious environments. Such a form of cultural imagination exhibits how spirits were believed to have shaped the destiny of man. Animals played a very significant role in shaping the lives of humans by acting as an agency to invoke blessings from the gods.

The interdependence of human and plant species is clearly seen in another Ao Naga cultural precept, which is discussed as follows. According to the agricultural cycle, the time of ripening of the paddy or the development of the paddy into mature grains coincides with the sprouting of tender shoots from the bamboo plant. The Ao Naga people collect the bamboo shoots to eat and to make fermented bamboo shoots, popularly known as ‘bastinga’, all over Nagaland. Since the time of our ancestors, bamboo shoots have been a staple food for the Ao community; therefore, it was collected and stored for the whole year. But those who went on this errand were not allowed to pass through the field or rest in the field granary. Such actions were not acts of inhospitality, but adherence to traditional beliefs. The Ao people believed that the bamboo plant and the paddy plant belong to the same family because of the similarity of their leaves, which are long, narrow, and lance-shaped. The Ao people believe there is a living spirit in bamboo and paddy plants. Thus, when the paddy plants witness the tender bamboo shoots cut off from their mother plant, they shed tears of sadness

“parnok kin nung tambusang au nungi lanu zü tsür aruba ngua mo aser tsük jagi kanga mepelai ajeber” (Senka T 2013, 177)

TRANSLATION: *when, from the eldest of their family, the young, tender ones are cut off, the paddy plant and paddy grains weep in deep sadness*”

The bamboo plant has life and to see the human carrying basket loads of bamboo shoots, the paddy plants in sadness will stop eating and become weak, which leads to an agricultural condition called empty panicle or chaffy grains. In this way, the Ao people believed that people carrying loads of bamboo shoots should not be allowed to pass through their field for fear that the paddy plants would become angry and sad, and give a poor, disastrous harvest.

Such cultural imaginations render a perspective of how interdependence between species is integral for survival and ecological balance. Humans have to negotiate for a congenial existence on the earth. The narrative exhibits how folklore is a living archive of interspecies knowledge; folklore is not a static text. Such an approach would contribute to environmental humanities, demonstrating that cultural imaginations become text for a community’s belief system. Such traditional precepts help in navigating shared ecological worlds. They are aesthetic expressions, but most importantly, cultural technologies for sustaining an ecological balance. By treating nonhuman entities as participants in the storytelling process, these traditional precepts highlight a relational ontology that challenges anthropocentric frameworks.

A multispecies approach to folklore reshapes the way we interpret traditional narratives. By acknowledging the agency of animals, plants and landscapes, the multispecies lens challenges the long-standing symbolic or allegorical readings of folklore. Folk narratives are no longer merely human cultural expressions; they become shared spaces of meaning-making, where humans negotiate survival, ethics, and coexistence with other species.



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CONCLUSION:

Reading folklore through a multispecies perspective reveals itself as a vibrant archive of human-nonhuman entanglement. All species emerge not as passive symbols but as active participants in storytelling, ritual, and cultural imagination. This perspective shows that oral literature is not only a mirror to human culture but a multispecies archive. Reviving folklore in environmental education initiatives can bridge the gap between traditional ecological knowledge and modern conservation efforts.

In the Anthropocene, reimagining our relationship with the nonhuman world is now an urgent necessity. Folktales provide imaginative resources for this task, and nonhuman entities become agents to cultivate a practice of reciprocity and humility in the face of interdependence.

A multispecies reading thus demonstrates that folktales are not frozen relics of a “primitive” past, but necessary voices inviting humans to “stay with the trouble” in Haraway’s words in the midst of crises.

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