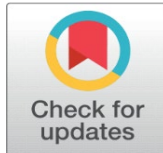


METAMORPHOSIS AND THE ARCHETYPAL WOMAN: MORALITY AND MYTH IN THE TALE OF TSUIPU AND KHAULIPU

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Received 09 February 2025

Accepted 10 March 2025

Published 30 April 2025

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DOI

[10.29121/granthaalayah.v13.i4.2025.6278](https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v13.i4.2025.6278)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore the Sumi Naga Folktale “Tsuipu and Khaulipu” from the perspective of gender, morality and mythic transformation. Examining on the main characters, Tsuipu, Khaulipu (the fairy wife) and Muchupili (the witch), the narrative highlights cultural norms around femininity, beauty, betrayal, loyalty and supernatural justice. The tale conveys cultural values, drawing on the themes of renewal, metamorphosis, and sacred femininity to examine and reinforce the Sumi community norms. Exploring cyclical patterns, through the character of Khaulipu and contrasting her with the envious witch Muchupili, the study explores the symbolic meaning and moral principles inherent in traditional indigenous narratives. As the tale unfolds in a mystical realm, it shows a series of transformative events, featuring magical shifting, renewal and rebirth, exemplified by a fairy who turned into ‘Aghugha lho’ (Waxen Figure), trees growing from her grave and a wife returning through the fruit of a tree. These motifs symbolise moral consequences, feminine endurance and cyclical renewal, giving the narrative deeper meaning. The tale critiques moral shortcomings, highlighting how disobedience and misunderstandings can lead to loss and tragedy through the character of Tsuipu. Ultimately the tale reveals the transformative and redemptive power of the feminine, restoring balance through its true nature. This paper based on folklore studies and gender theory, examines how myths transmit social values, gender roles and ancestral belief system, arguing that the myth functions as a cultural narrative where feminine power is both celebrated and circumscribed, mystified through transformative processes.

Keywords: Sumi Naga Folklore, Metamorphosis, Archetypal Woman, Morality, Ancestral Beliefs

1. INTRODUCTION

The Sumi Nagas has rich oral traditions with its own unique customs and beliefs offering an insight into their socio-cultural beliefs, spiritual worldview and symbolic imaginations. The tribe is enriched with different forms of folktales, of which “Tsuipu and Khaulipu” stands out as a popular myth that deals with the themes of metamorphosis, morality and gender archetypes. This tale is deeply rooted in Sumi culture and traditions, making it more than just a mere folktale. This paper analyses the tale through a critical folkloric and gendered lens, interrogating how the transformations in the story reflect societal values about feminine power, loyalty and morality. Basing from the folklore theory and archetypal criticism, the paper

argues that the tale conveys rich and meaningful values where the archetypal woman varies between divine ideal and disruptive forces.

2. MYTH, TRANSFORMATION AND WORLDVIEW

Folktales are a store house of cultural knowledge, beliefs and system and the tale of “Tsuipu and Khaulipu” is no exception. The tale recounts the adventure of Tsuipu, a brave young man who encounters the charming fairy Khaulipu from another village. After the family agreed to their union, Khaulipu’s parent imposed a condition for their marriage. Tsuipu had to carry Khaulipu home in a bamboo cradle without her touching the ground (it applies a condition where a groom has to carry a bride in a bamboo cradle to his home). The motif of a taboo or conditional union with a supernatural bride is a recurrent theme in global folklore, [Thompson \(1955\)](#) indicating the complexities of human relationship with the divine, magical or unknown. At the same time, the tradition remains deeply rooted in the everyday lives of the Sumi people. A salient example of this is Tsuipu playing ‘Akhetsu’, a traditional top spinning indigenous game with village children. This scene reinforces his role as an approachable and humble individual within the community. It shows how the tale effectively intertwines the mythical and the everyday, facilitating the reinforcement of cultural values and communal identity.

The repeated transformation in Khaulipu highlights the ancient belief that nature endowed with animating spirit where souls can transmigrate across forms. Khaulipu’s body turns to water, plants grow on her grave, and she is reborn through a lemon mirrors the cyclical nature of life, death and rebirth, a common thing in mythologies in various traditions. This metamorphosis aligns with the animistic traditions of the Nagas, where spirits inhabit natural object and flora, and the natural world is a living, moral weakness to human actions [Ao \(2000\)](#).

3. THE ARCHETYPAL WOMAN: KHAULIPU AND MUCHUPILI

As [Butler \(1990\)](#) argues, gender is not a fixed identity but a performative act, continually reproduced through cultural norms. In the tale of “Tsuipu and Khaulipu”, the contrasting figures of the fairy bride and the witch dramatize the boundaries and expectations of normative femininity within Sumi society. It reveals a complex portrayal of the archetypal woman through Khaulipu and Muchupili, both highlighting the dual sides of feminine power –creative and destructive, nurturing and vengeful, divine and demonic. This theme is common in myths from different cultures, where woman often navigate between the divine and the ordinary, embodying both mystery and transformation.

Khaulipu, the fairy bride represents the figure of beauty, kindness and domestic competence. She’s a symbol of womanhood’s nurturing and fertile aspects. Marina [Warner \(1994\)](#) notes how fairy tale heroines often embody contradictory roles: they are idealized and objectified, radiant and silenced. Khaulipu, the fairy bride, reflects this archetype – granted power through otherworldliness, yet ultimately silenced through abandonment and loss. After agreeing to the marriage, her father imposes a condition that she should be carried in a bamboo cradle without letting her feet touch the ground, emphasizing her divine and untouchable status. Furthermore, an aged widow, upholding traditional norms imposes another condition: Tsuipu must bring a pounding table and a pole made from “Shohusu” tree. These challenges function as symbolic of traditional trials that test the groom’s readiness and respect for tradition. Such conditions foreground the social contract involved in marrying a

sacred or archetypal woman and reaffirm the communal role in regulating access to the divine feminine [Leach \(1984\)](#), [Turner \(1969\)](#).

Her condition that she must not be exposed to the hot sun reflects the sensitivity of divine gifts that require reverence and gentle handling. Her metamorphosis-turning into water evokes the elemental power of the feminine to shift between forms both literally and symbolically. The idea of heirophany, as described by Mircea Eliade, applies well to this context, highlighting the sacred's presence in physical reality. Khaulipu is not merely a character but a personification of sacred femininity whose violation leads to loss and transformation [Eliade \(1957\)](#).

In contrast, Muchupili may be seen as a distorted mirror of the wild woman-what Estes terms "the predator within", a psychic force that destroys rather than liberates [Estes \(1992\)](#). Her envy and interference exemplify how feminine power becomes destructive when disconnected from instinct and love. She embodies a darker feminine archetype, marked by jealousy, revenge and manipulative power. She's not just a fearsome figure, but a narrative counter point the fairy bride's radiant beauty, highlighting societal anxieties about female rivalry, aging and power dynamics. The Jungian "shadow" archetype is evident here: Muchupili is the repressed projection of what society fears in unregulated female agency [Jung \(1968\)](#). Her action spark transformation and from the sites of violence, new life emerges, symbolised by plants like "Thumsubo" (Sumac tree) and "Axipibo" (Tobacco plant) indicating that even destructive forces can give rise to new growth.

Khaulipu and Muchupili, who represent the dualities of the archetypal woman in the tale, serve as moral reflections, highlighting the rewards of loyalty, love and virtue, while warning against the destructive consequences of envy, defiance and deceit. The metamorphic imagery symbolises not only physical transformations but also the profound changes in identity and empowerment that woman undergo in the Sumi Nagas narrative imagination.

The tale's cycle of death and rebirth highlights women's dual roles as life givers and death bringers. Khaulipu's transformation into a lily, a lemon tree, and the bamboo mirrors mythological themes of goddesses. This cycle as noted by Joseph Campbell illustrate the monomyth of transformation where the feminine is central to the renewal life cycles [Campbell \(1949\)](#). Moreover, the tale emphasises on the value of domestic work, showing Khaulipu's kindness and dedication through household work. Her selfless service reflects cultural ideals of a hardworking woman.

4. MORAL LESSONS THROUGH METAMORPHOSIS

Metamorphosis functions as a moral allegory that reflects ethical failures and loss, embodying virtues like loyalty, gratitude and devotion to the feminine divine within the narrative itself. Khaulipu symbolises purity and devotion undergoes several transformations – first into "Akhau bo" (Bamboo), "Mushuthi" (Lemon) then into water and "Lapuxamunu" (Lily). Each transformation is deeply symbolic, representing both her continued presence and the consequences of human action. The bamboo plant (Akhau bo) that grows from Khaulipu's grave after she is murdered by the jealous witch Muchupili became a symbol of her enduring love and quiet labor. Tsuipu's lack of knowledge about the tree's origins and significance highlights his deficiency in moral perception. His disobedience and loss align with the mythic theme where the masculine fails to honor the sacred feminine, resulting in spiritual fragmentation [Estes \(1992\)](#). The lemon is consumed without reverence leading to the deterioration of symbolic significance. More ambiguous and even

harmful vegetation like the 'Axipibo' and 'Thumsubo' emerges. This transformations reflect what [Eliade \(1957\)](#) called the 'mythic consequences', where nature itself responds to moral disparity.

Khaulipu's final metamorphosis into "Aghugha lho"(Waxen figure) was transformed into water upon exposure to sunlight highlights the vulnerability of virtue in a hostile world. Here water is symbolic of both purifying and vanishing, marking a spiritual and a quiet resentment of betrayal and thoughtful realisation. The tale explores how individuals, particularly women, adapt and transform in response to violence and societal changes. This can be seen in the characters' evolving roles, relationships, and understanding of themselves and their place in the world [Ao \(2000\)](#). Khaulipu's disappearance stands as a poignant indictment of the chronic neglect to appreciate and protect what is valuable and sacred. The connection between metamorphosis and morality echoes the story telling conventions of Sumi Naga oral traditions where tales often end with the transformation of characters into flora or fauna to signify closure, continuity or a moral lesson [Sema \(2012\)](#). The plants sprouting from her grave serve as a poignant reminder, triggering memory and imparting cautionary wisdom.

5. GENDER, DEATH AND REGENERATION

Gender, death and regeneration reflect a deeply symbolic moral structure in the tale "Tsuipu and Khaulipu". As a mystical figure, the fairy bride Khaulipu exemplifies the nurturing and mysterious aspects of the feminine, wielding a spiritual influence that both directs and tests the male protagonist. The tale subtly critiques male irresponsibility, suggesting that heroic identity is not merely about bravery but about constancy and moral discernment.

Tsuipu goes on a headhunting mission, a traditional practice that once signified masculine bravery in a Sumi Naga society. Upon his victorious return, the villagers instruct Khaulipu to brew wine and wait for his arrival, highlighting her role as a supportive partner and celebrator of men's achievements. The scene embodies profound cultural meaning, as the warrior return from deadly trial, the woman's role is to provide a nurturing welcome reinforcing her position within the domestic sphere and underscoring her vital role in sustaining life and tradition. The atmosphere of jubilant expectation is suddenly overshadowed by tragedy as Khaulipu sustained a fall from the ladder while attempting to collect grains stored in 'Abi' (large basket).

Death, in this tale is not final but a passage to metamorphosis. The grave becomes a generative site resonating with ancient traditions that view the earth as a source of life and death. Khaulipu's departure does not mark an end, but signals a profound transformation from a living presence to a lasting moral and mythic symbol. Khaulipu's rediscovery through the lemon tree symbolised how reintegration into domestic life, reinforcing traditional gender roles that dictate women's responsibilities even in the narratives of rebirth. However, the repeated transformations highlights the unyielding strength of femininity and the transcendent power of love that outlasts physical decay. Through this, the tale contributes to a broader pattern in folklore and morally potent [Campbell \(1949\)](#). The tale affirms the cyclical connection between loss and renewal, where the feminine remains central to moral and mythic regeneration.

6. CONCLUSION

The narrative of Tsuipu and Khaulipu is more than a love story, unfolding as a profound exploration of morality marked by themes of transformation, loss and redemption. Through the themes of metamorphosis, the tale embodies the Sumi Naga perspective, where the supernatural coexists with and influences daily life and moral principles are rooted in the natural world. The portrayal of woman character such as Khaulipu and Muchupili in the tale reveals societal expectations and anxieties surrounding femininity, highlighting the complex and often contradictory role assigned to women.

Through a folkloric and gender archetypal perspective, the study reveals how indigenous narratives function as rich cultural texts that convey values, challenge social norms, and envision a universe where the feminine principle continues to shape, nurture and transform reality.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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