



REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN MAO FOLK-TALES: A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

A Asani Kashaemei

Department of English
Don Bosco College Maram
asani@dbcmaram.ac.in

Abstract

This paper explores the portrayal and influence of women in Indian folklore, specifically within the Mao society. It delves into myths and folktales, highlighting the significant roles women play in creation narratives and familial dynamics. Through examples like the legend of Dzölimosöro, the text illustrates the intertwining of the spiritual realm, the natural world, and mankind, emphasizing women's central position. It also examines how cultural values are conveyed through tales, such as endurance, forgiveness, and the importance of familial promises. The discussion extends to specific stories like "Bunio and Koshuni" and "Asha," analyzing their moral dimension and societal reflections. Themes of sincerity, betrayal, and the struggle for recognition permeate these narratives, shedding light on the multifaceted roles of women within Mao society. The paper also highlights the importance of oral traditions in preserving cultural heritage, focusing on the Mao village of Makhel as a cultural hub. Furthermore, it addresses the under-researched topic of women's influence in folklore, emphasizing the need for further exploration and analysis. Ultimately, this study aims to shed light on the nuanced representations of women in Mao folklore and their enduring impact on societal values and norms. The abstract concludes with a call for further research into the representation of women in folklore, aiming to uncover latent causes of injustice and misrepresentation in their lives.

Keywords: Indian folklore, Mao society, Women's roles, Cultural values, Folktales, Gender stereotypes.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

"In Indian folklore (Altekar, 1938; Dube, 1997; Radhika, 2023), women were often depicted as being confined to domestic roles due to patriarchal societal norms. However, in Mao and broader Naga societies, scholars like Christoph Von Furer-Haimendorf (The Naked Nagas) and J.P. Mills (The Ao Nagas) documented that woman enjoyed a degree of freedom and autonomy in both social and economic spheres, highlighting their active participation and considerable influence in these communities. Nevertheless, it may be mentioned that they hold a very significant position in the family and society."

Delving into Mao mythology, we encounter intriguing narratives where women play pivotal roles in the very fabric of creation. Take, for instance, the belief that all living beings are the result of the union between Rachü-Madei Apfo (Blue-sky-Father) and Ojü Mashü Apfü (referring to "Mother-Earth") (Mao, 2009). This underscores the essential role of women in the act of creation itself. Another mythological tale features DzüliaMosöro, revered as the first ancestress, who, with the merest touch of a cloud, brings forth man, tiger, and deity alike (Kapesa, 2017; Nepuni, 2010). Such narratives intertwine the realms of the animal kingdom, the spiritual domain, and humanity, depicting a mystical union between earthly women and celestial forces.

Moreover, a rich tapestry of folktales further elucidates the pivotal role of women within Mao society. These tales not only serve as repositories of cultural values but also illuminate the multifaceted lifestyles of Mao women. Stories like those of Katini and Kajiini, Kholia, Choro, Thodou, and Tuopha Chava (the miraculous stone at Tobupfii), as well as the tale of Asha-a (Lee Sonia 1976), among others, frequently cast women as central protagonists. Such stories convey significant social and cultural insights like a warning not to ill-treat the poor, needy and the orphans or that nature rewards them suitably. For instance, the story of Bunio and Koshuni poignantly highlights the steadfast commitment of women to their word, contrasting with the shortcomings of men in fulfilling their obligations. In essence, within the intricate tapestry of Mao folklore, women emerge not only as central figures but as agents of significant influence whose contributions shape the course of narratives and, by extension, the values and norms of Mao society.

In the Indian folklore, women are often depicted as embodiments of divine qualities, revered as goddesses such as Lakshmi, Parvati, and Saraswati, each symbolizing abundance, love and devotion, and wisdom respectively (Altekar, 1938). This tradition of venerating female deities extends beyond Indian culture, as evidenced by the Greeks and Egyptians who similarly held goddesses in high esteem, regarding them with profound respect and sanctity (Jane, 1903, Geraldine, 2002).

However, alongside this reverence, ancient texts like the Rig Veda also portray a more nuanced perspective, suggesting that women were sometimes viewed with skepticism, characterized as lacking discipline and intellect, likened to the heart of hyenas (Aziz, 1993). Despite these varied depictions, women consistently feature prominently in mythologies, often serving as central characters through whom cultural values are imparted. Themes such as endurance, forgiveness, inner strength, and supernatural belief are woven into these narratives, offering insights into the societal ideals of the past.

While these values reflect an idealized vision of society, they also continue to exert influence in contemporary times, albeit perhaps to a lesser extent. Within the context of Mao society, women are depicted as embodying a spectrum of qualities deemed essential by their culture, including empathy, adaptability, understanding, sensibility, and a demeanor characterized by peace and serenity. By exploring the shared values inherent in Mao folktales, we gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences and perspectives of women, providing a window into their way of life and the enduring impact they have on shaping social values, both past and present.

2.0 Unveiling Mao Folklore: Women's Influence in Mao Naga Traditions

The oral tradition has long been the primary medium through which the rich tapestry of Mao literature has been preserved, but recent endeavors have sought to capture these narratives in written form. Thus folktales, folksongs, proverbs riddles, the gennas and the rites and rituals become an important subject of study (William, 1846). The Mao village of Makhel holds a central place in Naga tradition in connection with a belief that the Nagas at one point of time settled here and later dispersed to their present areas of habitation, but not before erecting

monuments that would signify their communion and a pledge to reunite in the future. The village of Makhel and the surrounding areas in the heart of the land of the Maos are an ethnographer's delight and an open invitation to archaeologists too because of the various artifacts present and the never ending stories and legends associated with them (Salew N, 2014). This simply tells the ground where Mao folklore stands when it comes to Naga traditions spread across Nagaland, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Burma besides the Manipur state.

The influence wielded by women in family and societal decision-making processes is a widespread phenomenon across cultures, yet it remains one of the least explored topics in folklore studies. While women have historically played significant roles in both familial and societal affairs, their contributions often receive less attention and emphasis compared to their male counterparts. However, it's noteworthy that women's influence has frequently led to tangible changes in the everyday lives of communities at various points in history. As researchers, there is a pressing need to shed light on this overlooked aspect of folklore, particularly given its prevalence within Mao society. Our fascination lies in delving into the narratives of the people, where the stories of women's agency and impact await further exploration and documentation. While some strides have been made in this area of study, there remains a vast and promising terrain to be investigated, revealing the profound and multifaceted roles women have played in shaping the cultural fabric of societies throughout history.

3.0 STORY OF BUNIO AND KOSHUNI

Once upon a time, in a village nestled near Konii Lake, lived two inseparable souls, Bunio and Koshoni. Their bond blossomed from childhood friendship into a deep love that defined all odds. Despite opposition from their families, their love only grew stronger.

Determined to be together, they made a solemn pact to marry, regardless of the consequences. Yet, on the fateful day they chose to solidify their bond by leaping into the lake, Bunio's resolve wavered. In a moment of betrayal, he severed their intertwined hair with a knife, causing Koshoni to plunge into the water alone.

Haunted by guilt and heartbreak, Bunio began his journey home, only to encounter a pair of Liseto (a small bird where there is believed that it can unfold human fortune) mournfully chirping repetitively to each other.

Their mournful chirping foretelling his tragic fate. Overwhelmed by remorse, he realized the depth of his mistake, understanding that even simple creatures like the Liseto remained faithful to their partners. Tormented by the knowledge that he could never regain what he had lost, Bunio made a solemn decision. Returning to the lake, he joined Koshoni in their final leap symbolizing their eternal unity. From the depths of the water, two bamboo shoots emerged, a silent testament to their love, though they grew apart, never entwining as they had hoped, the bamboos sprouted separately. This was taken as a sign that they were separated since they had not jumped together.

4.0 MORAL AND RELEVANCE OF THE STORY

The narrative intricately weaves together elements of traditional Mao philosophy and societal beliefs, underscoring in every facet of existence. The moral of the story of Bunio and Koshoni is deeply rooted in the importance of sincerity in love and relationships. This resonates with both

the traditional Mao-Poumai beliefs, which emphasize truthfulness in all aspects of life (Athikho, 2018), and with universal symbols such as the Claddagh ring and the Serch Bythol (Kherington, 2024). These symbols emphasize that true love and lasting bonds are not just about emotions but are built on loyalty, trust, and mutual dedication.

The story serves as a powerful reminder that while deceit may momentarily obscure the truth, nature—or fate—will always reveal it. The tragic fate of Bunio, who realizes his mistake too late, underscores the inevitability of consequences when sincerity is lacking in relationships. This message speaks to the need for honesty and commitment, warning against the harm that can come from betrayal or dishonesty. The relevance of this story lies in its call for integrity, reminding us that love, whether in traditional belief systems or in universal symbols, must be sincere and unwavering to endure. The message extends beyond cultural or symbolic boundaries, encouraging the preservation of authentic and truthful connections in all aspects of life. Koshuni emerges as a paragon of virtue, embodying the teachings of her society with unwavering fidelity until her final moments. Her steadfast adherence to principle stands in stark contrast to Bunio's tragic betrayal of their shared promise. Through his actions, Bunio breaches not only their pact but also the sacred trust that underpins their relationship, ultimately paying a heavy price for his lapse in integrity.

Moreover, the tale underscores the enduring struggle to conceal wrongdoing, highlighting the inexorable march of truth towards revelation, even though seemingly unnatural means. The emergence of the Liseto birds as harbingers of fate serves as a poignant reminder that the consequences of our actions, whether virtuous or deceitful, reverberate far beyond the confines of human perception. Embedded within the narrative is a poignant reflection on the rarity and resilience of true love, a force capable of transcending barriers of time and circumstance. Yet, the story also serves as a cautionary tale, reminding us that genuine love is not immune to the corrosive effects of dishonesty and betrayal.

The story, symbolized by the bamboo shoots emerging separately from the lake, represents their love transcending death. The bamboo, often a symbol of resilience and renewal, reflects their enduring spirit despite physical separation caused by betrayal. This aligns with folklore traditions where nature symbolizes the continuation of life beyond. However, the separate bamboo shoots also highlight that while love may persist beyond death, the pain and consequences of betrayal remain. The bamboo's division underscores that spiritual unity doesn't fully heal the wounds caused by past mistakes. This concept mirrors the belief in many traditions that spiritual bonds may transcend physical life but don't erase the conflict or regrets left behind. In line with the idea that nature reveals truth, the bamboo's separation reflects the irreversible impact of life choices. Even when love endures beyond death, the consequences of actions, such as betrayal, may never be reconciled. This emphasizes that sincerity and commitment are vital, not only in life but beyond it (Athikho, 2018).

In short, the tale serves as a multifaceted exploration of the intricate interplay between ethics, love, and destiny, offering profound insights into the human condition and the enduring quest for authenticity in a world fraught with uncertainty.

5.0 STORY OF ASHA

In ages past, there dwelt a maiden named Asha, dwelling with her parents, alongside a stepmother whose treatment often veered towards cruelty. Yet, Asha bore this burden in silence, masking her anguish to maintain an illusion of tranquility. Her father, aware of his wife's harshness, found himself torn between his love for her and his helplessness in the face of Asha's suffering.

One auspicious day, during the villagers' joyous Saleni festivities, Asha ventured into the woods with a companion in search of Olo, a precious herb used for traditional shampoo. Amidst the verdant foliage, she espied a thriving olo bu, its vibrant greenery tantalizingly close to a tranquil lakeshore. Desiring to pluck it, Asha reached out, only for her bracelet to slip from her grasp and vanish into the depths below. Though distraught, she found solace in the company of her friend as they returned home.

Upon revealing the mishap to her parents, Asha received mixed reactions. While her father offered solace, suggesting the acquisition of a replacement, her stepmother's response was one of vehement reproach. With venomous words, she accused Asha of deceit, insinuating that the bracelet's loss was a deliberate act of affection towards a secret paramour. Pushed to her limit, Asha retorted, questioning her stepmother's own youthful indiscretions and the secrecy she might have harbored. Enraged, her stepmother justified such actions as common folly of youth.

Beset by sorrow and longing for justice, Asha implored her father to accompany her to the lake the following day. Tormented by sleepless hours, she hastened the dawn's arrival, rousing her father to join her on the journey. In the quietude of the early morning, they made their way to the lakeside, where Asha pointed out the spot where her bracelet had slipped into the water. With determination in her voice, she beseeched the lake to reveal its true nature, challenging it to either return the bracelet or claim her in its stead.

In a dramatic turn of events, a mighty gust of wind swept across the lake, propelling the bracelet from its watery depths and engulfing Asha in its tempestuous embrace. As her father stood helpless and distraught, she bid him farewell, lamenting his disregard for her warnings. With a final gaze, she urged him to depart before danger befell him, instructing him to revive the bracelet with his tears and present it to his wife as a testament to his daughter's fate.

6.0 MORAL AND RELEVANCE OF THE STORY

Asha's story unveils the painful reality often faced by stepchildren, marked by neglect, alienation, and mistreatment. Despite her innocent longing for familial love, she endures emotional and sometimes physical hardship from those who should provide care and security. Her resilience lies in her ability to withstand rejection, and while she suffers from this unfair treatment, she grows stronger, embodying a silent courage that often goes unnoticed. Through her, we see the complexities of family dynamics and the silent battles stepchildren endure, shedding light on the need for compassion, understanding, and inclusivity in blended families.

Asha's journey mirrors the emotional struggles depicted in *The Step Mother*; Mama Poktabi, where stepchildren face neglect and mistreatment in their pursuit of familial acceptance (Singha, 1999). Both characters demonstrate how stepdaughters, often victims of societal stigma and

cruelty, can rise above their suffering and reclaim their power, ultimately leading to the downfall of their oppressors.

However, the societal stigma against stepmothers, as perpetuated by stories like this, is often unfair and overlooks the reality that many stepmothers provide care and love to their stepchildren. These tales tend to reinforce negative stereotypes, potentially leading to a biased view of stepmothers as inherently unkind or harmful figures, regardless of individual character. The depiction here is a storytelling device that reflects a societal fear or mistrust, but it doesn't universally represent the experience of stepfamilies. The story uses folklore to convey the values of justice, resilience, and ultimately, the triumph of innocence over cruelty. The tale delves into the complexities of maternal bonds, portraying the delicate balance between natural affection and societal expectations. It poignantly portrays how a reflection of the ongoing struggle to reconcile reality with societal ideals of maternal roles.

Within the Mao community's folklore, such narratives serve as vessels for conveying social moral values, with characters assuming roles that align with these overarching themes. From protagonists to villains, helpers to creators, each character is carefully crafted to impart lessons and insights pertinent to the community's cultural ethos.

Amidst the storytelling traditions, legendary tales emerge as a prevalent genre, offering a glimpse into the cultural heritage and collective wisdom of the Mao society. Alongside animal tales, fables, and myths, these legendary narratives serve as enduring testaments to the multifaceted roles and societal dynamics that have shaped the community's identity over generations.

7.0 CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, the folklore of the Mao Naga society offers rich insights into the complex roles and influence of women, revealing their central position in both mythological narratives and everyday life. Through stories like Asha and The Story of Bunio and Koshuni, we see how women are not merely passive figures but active agents of change, embodying values of resilience, love, and justice. These tales, deeply rooted in cultural traditions, also reflect broader societal norms, such as the importance of sincerity in relationships and the power of women in shaping their communities. The narratives not only honor the strength of women but also challenge societal expectations, portraying how their contributions are often crucial to the moral and social fabric of society. As we explore these stories, we gain a deeper understanding of the enduring influence of women within Mao folklore and their pivotal role in shaping the values and identity of the Mao Naga people.

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