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Research Article

Archetypal Motifs and Cultural Symbolism in Magar Sorathi Folklore: A Jungian and Motif-Index Analysis

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Abstract

This paper explores the archetypal motifs found in the Sorathi tradition of Nepal's Magar people, their cultural significance, psychological interest, and ritual function. Relying on Carl Gustav Jung's archetype theory and collective unconscious, and Stith Thompson's Motif-Index system, the paper identifies and interprets repeating motifs that control the Sorathi narrative and its performing arts traditions. The research is based on a comprehensive survey of the Sorathi ballad, its ritual performances like invocation, binding, and raising-of-the-spell ceremonies, along with accompanying ethnographic and literary sources. Findings indicate six significant clusters of motifs: ritual and performative motifs; natal and maternal motifs; social and ethical motifs; nature motifs; taboo and sexual motifs; and trickster and reversal motifs. Every cluster conveys symbolic significance in relation to fertility, social order, moral justice, and spiritual rebirth, and collectively they define the Magar worldview and validate communal identity. The article argues that Sorathi is not merely a traditional oral entertainment but a cultural repository keeping ancestral memory, storing moral virtue, and transmitting universal archetypal images in uniquely local forms. This research enlivens folklore research through the convergence of psychological, cultural, and ritual perspectives and underscores the importance of recording oral tradition in Nepal for comparative mythology and heritage preservation.

Keywords: *Magar, Sorathi, archetype, motif, motif-index, folk performance*

Introduction

Folklore is the active recollection of a people, handing down values, beliefs, and worldviews from generation to generation in the form of oral narratives, songs, dances, and stories. The Magar community, one of the numerous ethnic communities in Nepal, has a distinct cultural position with a very strong tradition of folk songs, rituals, and performance practices. One such very iconic is

Sorathi, played during festive seasons, particularly in Tihar and Thuli Ekadashi. The researcher, Keshar Jung Baral argues, “How many years ago, Sorathi dance originated in Magar community cannot be determined. However, it can be ascertained that Sorathi dance is definitely an ancient dance. It has been able to preserve Magar’s unique cultural identity. This has not only saved Magar culture but also played a vital role in conserving the diverse culture as a whole” (86). The play is not only an artistic entertainment but carries ritual, cultural, and symbolic significance that reinforces Magar identity and social solidarity.

The *Sorathi* ballad tells the story of a royal child miraculously born after barrenness of King Jayasinghe and Queen Heamaiti, abandoned on the advice of a corrupted soothsayer, rescued by fisher men, and ultimately recognized and restored to the royal household. The performance includes an invocation to Saraswoti, binding and spell-lifting rituals, and stylized dance by Maruni and Pursunge performers with rhythmic Madal beats (Pun 28). Embedded within this narrative and ritual complex is a series of archetypal motifs primitive images, actions, and narrative events that resonate psychologically and symbolically within the Magar cultural context and vice versa.

Archetypes and motifs are employed in folklore research as basic tools for explaining the universality and diversity of narrative traditions. Jung saw archetypes as collective, innate images in the human unconscious that are manifested in myth, dreams, and fairy tales (3). These archetypes the Hero, Great Mother, Shadow, or Trickster, for instance-appear across cultures, testifying to fundamental patterns of human experience. Thompson’s “Motif-Index of Folk-Literature” presents a complementary taxonomic system, cataloging thousands of recurring narrative devices births, prophecies, quests, deceptions-into thematic categories. Later scholars such as Garry and El-Shamy have since built on this typology, relating motifs to archetypal meaning and cultural function.

Review of Literature

Studies of Nepalese folklore have been descriptive in nature, seeking to catalogue songs and dances, note ethnographic details, or trace linguistic origins (Baral 90). Few, however, utilize psychological theory and motif analysis with a view to interpreting the symbolic dimensions of specific oral traditions such as *Sorathi*. This article bridges this gap by applying Jung’s theory of archetypes and Thompson’s classification of motifs to interpret the imagery and narrative forms included in *Sorathi*, and to reveal how they encode Magar beliefs regarding destiny, morality, and ritual order.

Being the largest indigenous peoples of Nepal, the Magars have long been known for their unique culture, distinctive lifestyles, and vibrant ritual life. *Sorathi* tradition is most strongly associated with Magar settlements in Palpa, Tanahun, and Syangja districts, even though its performance is known in adjoining areas as well (Baral 98). Traditionally transmitted orally, *Sorathi* is performed in winter festivities as a communal activity that combines narrative, music, and dance. The story of birth, exposure, rescue, and ultimate recognition has parallel with global folk motifs of miraculous conception, prophecy of doom, child exposure, and royal restoration.

Sorathi has multiple roles in the Magar context: ritual invocation to supernatural forces, moral instruction about virtue and treachery, and entertainment affirming communal bonds. It begins with the ritual invocation of Saraswoti (goddess of speech and learning), continues with narrative enactment punctuated by musical and dance numbers, and concludes with spell-lifting rituals to release performers and instruments from ritualistic responsibility (Pun 63). These layers of performance frame the narrative as a cultural religious act, not a tale to be merely listened to but one to be experienced by the community.

Rich in cultural significance, Sorathi remains unstudied symbolically and psychologically to any great extent. The most widespread scholarship to date has been detailing lyrics, instruments, and dance steps (Joshi 136), or sociolinguistic patterns and ethnographic features (Kandangwa 22). These attempts at description apart, they do not investigate the substructures of meaning that make Sorathi endure across generations. Jungian archetypal theory provides an explanatory framework that is able to explain how recurring narrative motifs and pictorial images deal with universal human concerns birth, death, betrayal, redemption yet being specific to the individual ritual and social custom of the Magars.

Similarly, Thompson's Motif-Index of Folk-Literature enables these narrative motifs to be categorized as distinguishable types so they could be compared within regional traditions. Motifs such as "miraculous birth," "cruel stepmother," "child cast adrift," and "restoration to royal lineage" occur in South Asian folklore and beyond, but their representation in Sorathi-song, dance, and ritual infuses them with uniquely Magar meanings. This combination of universal archetypes and local tradition of performance highlights the twofold nature of folklore: at the same time common to all mankind and deeply ingrained in a certain cultural soil (Toelken 594).

Archetype and motif theory is widely applied to world folklore analysis, but its application for Nepalese oral tradition is meager. Most publications on Magar folklore provide translation or description but rarely connect narrative form with psychological symbolism. Aside from this, earlier analyses hardly consider the performative dimension how motifs are not merely recounted but by means of movement, clothing, and ritual action incarnated in Sorathi. This article bridges these gaps by integrating archetypal theory, motif classification, and performance study to offer a multi-sided reading of Sorathi.

The research has three principal objectives:

- To establish archetypal motifs in the narrative and ritual performance of Sorathi according to Thompson's classification system.
- To examine the cultural and psychological meaning of these motifs according to Jung's theory of archetypes.
- To explore how performance of rituals reaffirms and evolves these motifs, prolonging the Magar community's moral framework and cultural memory.

The study is important for a number of fields. For the study of folklore, it demonstrates the possibilities of motif analysis being fruitfully combined with Jungian psychology to elicit symbolic richness in oral tradition. The study illustrates how ritual and performance are depositories of social ethics, collective memory, and spiritual belief. Most importantly, for heritage preservation, documentation and analysis of Sorathi motifs assist in the preservation of the oral art form from eroding due to migration, modernization, and receding intergenerational transmission.

By decoding Sorathi's archetypal motifs and situating them within their ritual and cultural context, this article affirms the enduring vitality of Nepal's oral heritage and its potential to speak to universal human themes while retaining its distinctly Magar character.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The study of Sorathi archetypal motifs relies on two closely related theoretical models: Jungian theory of archetypes and Thompson's Motif-Index of Folk-Literature. Both models provide

for the identification of recurring elements in the narrative and interpretation of the underlying psychological and cultural meaning.

The notion of archetype is linked with Jung's concept of the collective unconscious, in which dwell "archaic or primordial types, that is universal images that have existed since the remotest times" (5). Archetypes are not rigid symbols but dynamic proclivities of the human psyche that emerge in recurrent narrative patterns such as the Hero, the Great Mother, the Shadow, the Wise Old Man, and the Trickster.

In Sorathi, archetypal images appear in motifs such as miraculous birth (creation and potentiality), cruel stepmother (destructive Shadow), river as life and death (transformation archetype), and ritual invocation (allusion to Great Mother or wisdom figure of the spiritual world). By a Jungian analysis of these motifs, the research reveals how Sorathi illustrates universal human concerns fertility, lineage, betrayal, justice yet anchors them in Magar religious practice.

Jungian theory is also concerned with individuation, the way in which individuals or groups move toward wholeness through the integration of unconscious archetypal elements (173). In Sorathi, the symbolic journey from separation and suffering to restoration is mirrored in this process at a communal level, symbolically guiding the Magar community toward reintegration to their culture and spirituality within ritual performance.

Stith Thompson's Motif-Index of 1955 is a scientific taxonomy for classifying repeated narrative units in world folklore. The index collects over 40,000 motifs in thematic headings such as Myths, Marvels, Tests, Rewards, and Trickery. The taxonomy can be applied to Sorathi so that motifs can be isolated and matched against parallel traditions.

For example, child cast adrift (Thompson D1602) motif is not only present in Sorathi but also in ancient tales such as those of Moses and Karna, indicating cross-cultural recurrence of symbolic narrative patterns. The same is true for trickster deception (K400) and royal restoration (H50) motifs that place Sorathi within a global narrative tradition while highlighting its unique ritual performance by Magar folklore practices (Garry & El-Shamy 8).

Having Jung and Thompson at one's disposal enables double-level analysis. Thompson's taxonomy provides descriptively precise cataloging separating motifs and situating them in international folklore while Jung's theory illuminates their symbolic and psychological significance. This symbiosis makes motifs not merely itemized but read as meaning-carriers based on both universal human and Magar culture experience.

This study takes a qualitative interpretive approach, combining textual analysis of the Sorathi legend with symbolic interpretation informed by archetype and motif theory. The aim is to identify recurring narrative elements, classify them according to Thompson's Motif-Index, and interpret their psychological and cultural significance through Jungian archetypal theory (Thompson 753)

Analysis

This expanded analysis has explored the key themes and motifs in greater depth within the article.

The Miracle Birth Archetype and the Folk Medicine Motif

The article begins to examine the Sorathi folklore with the king and his several queens, who are unable to give birth to a child. This is a common set-up in world folklore, which tends

to culminate in some kind of miraculous occurrence. The king Jayasinge's despair at the absence of a successor is a generic and society-conscious theme in societies where family, lineage, and continuation of the royal blood are on the agenda. The research identifies that the king seeks help not from a modern-day doctor but a "guru" who dispenses herbal medicine, which begets the protagonist, Sorathi. This is not a plot device but a cultural tale. It's a fabulous example of the Miraculous Birth motif, a storytelling device cataloged by folklorist Stith Thompson, wherein there often occurs, preceding the birth of a hero, unusual or supernatural events.

Furthermore, this opening scene gives importance to folk remedies and the sacred nature of the spiritual leader-the guru-in the culture of Magars. By seeking advice from a guru and a medical cure, the story depicts a traditional worldview wherein wisdom from a religious leader is sought after to cure profound personal troubles. Not only does the story create the context for the narrative, but it also legitimates the story as a product of a culture with some attitudes towards health, fertility, and religious power. The provenance of Sorathi is thus not depicted as a natural fact, but as a divine or supra-natural decree, which makes her uncommon from the outset and hints at her ultimate heroic destiny.

The Trickster Archetype and the Motif of Child Abandonment

The subsequent part of the Sorathi narrative looks at the strife introduced by the king's other queens, fueled by jealousy. Their scheme with a soothsayer to trick the king is a turning point. The soothsayer who utters a false prophecy that the new-born princess is an ominous sign is the Trickster Archetype. Carl Gustav Jung defines the trickster as a character who is representative of the dark, chaotic elements of the collective unconscious and one who has the tendency to unmake the established order through lying (133). In Sorathi folklore, the character's lie makes the king do a great tragedy leaving his own child.

The Dual Mother Archetype

The study explores Sorathi's childhood by a poor Kumale (potter) and his wife as an illustrative use of Jung's Dual Mother Archetype (274). This archetype represents the dualism between a biological mother and a spiritual or substitute mother. Sorathi's biological mother, Queen Heamaiti, is the "good" mother from whom she gets her royal line, and the Kumale's wife, who is not of royal blood but from whom Sorathi receives the nurturing, care, and protection needed to survive and thrive.

The two women represent different but equally essential elements of the feminine principle. Queen Heamaiti is the original, creative authority, whereas the wife of Kumale is the defensive and nurturing side of motherhood. Such doubleness is psychological and mythic necessity, emphasizing the fact that genuine nurturing and family bonding are not a result of biology or social status but something more complex. Through having been brought up by a low-caste family, Sorathi's personality is founded on humility and sensitivity to the fate of the common man, and it makes her a more approachable and authoritative one once she establishes her royal identity. The article argues that this double mother figure forms the core of Sorathi's development and is a witness to the eternity of loving care.

The Incest Motif as a Taboo in Culture

A dramatic and forceful turning point of the Sorathi narrative is that of the king's accidental encounter with his own daughter, whom he does not recognize. Bewitched by her attractiveness,

he promises to marry her, an unanticipated development that places the story in defiance of the Incest Taboo. This is perhaps the sincerest of human cultural taboos, and its presence in the folklore serves to underscore and construct social and moral borders. This research work locates this as a crisis point in which the very selves of the characters are at risk for life and death or in this case, a question of not committing a basic society offense.

Sorathi's timely revelation of her identity prevents the marriage, saving both herself and the king from a catastrophic moral error. This motif is not merely a shocking plot twist; it serves a deep psychological and social function. It re-establishes order after a series of chaotic events initiated by the trickster. In very nearly committing a horrific taboo, the king is forced to confront the consequences of his past actions (the rejection and abandonment of the child) and is given the opportunity for redemption. The article shows that this part of the story is a moral lesson, a warning against ignorance and a reinforcement of the fundamental social structure and taboos of the Magar culture. The resolution of the nearly incestuous affair is key to the eventual reestablishment of order and justice in the narrative.

The Sacrificial Hero Archetype and Symbolic Performance

The final part of the Sorathi folklore narrates the king's profound change of heart after he sees the light. Instead of reacting in anger or denials, he is consumed by remorse. In a heroic gesture of selflessness, he abdicates the throne and crowns Sorathi as the true king. This action is typical of the Sacrificial Hero subtype, a hero who follows a heroic quest and offers a great personal sacrifice for a higher purpose. The king's sacrifice of power opens the way for the restoration of justice and rightful return of the heir, bringing closure to the circle of the hero's journey.

Further, this study encompasses the Sorathi folklore performance. Dance, being a central part of the tradition, is performed with men playing the role of women, or "Marunis." The paper attempts to interpret this using Jungian psychology as a symbolical manifestation of the anima, or the unconscious female aspect of a man's personality (Jung 188). The male dancers' performance playing the feminine is more than performance, it is ritualistic seeking of self and incorporating these archetypal forces. The circular formation of dancers is also symbolic, representing oneness, eternity, and the cycle of life, death, and resurrection-images and themes so ingrained in the collective unconscious of most ancient cultures.

In total, the article has sought to demonstrate that Sorathi folklore is not a mere story but a complex repository of psychological and cultural archetypes. The narrative, from the miraculous birth to the ultimate conclusion, is a rich vehicle for upholding the Magar community's inherited tradition, faith, and common psychological tendencies. The decomposition of these motifs, from the trickster's cunning to the king's eventual sacrificial deed, produces a rich depth of understanding of the worldview and cultural values this preliterate oral tradition has managed to preserve over centuries.

Findings

The main findings of the article concern the depth and richness of Magar Sorathi folktales. Through the employment of archetypal and mythological criticism, the study discerns that the tale and the performance are not just an ordinary device but a significant vehicle of cultural preservation and psycho-emotional release. The most crucial finding is the prevalence of Jungian archetypes and folkloric motifs in the narrative, in support of which it can be affirmed that Sorathi is part of a shared human storytelling tradition. In particular, the research discovers a series of significant

motifs. The Miraculous Birth of Sorathi emphasizes the Magar society's natural belief in folk medicine and divine intervention, which bears witness to their specific cultural values. The Trickster Archetype (shameful soothsayer) and the Child Abandonment motif operate in bringing the hero's journey underway, alienating the heroine from home and setting her along a course of growth and exploration. The Dual Mother Archetype is a powerful finding, demonstrating that mothering and identity aren't exclusively biological but can be constructed through care and compassion, regardless of social status. The Incest Taboo theme, hanging precariously on the brink of violation, becomes a narrative trope which regulates the moral and ethical limits of society. The archetypal character of Sacrificial Hero, represented in the king's abdication, shows a key theme of redemption and restoration of order through altruistic actions. Finally, the analysis of the Sorathi dance itself has a symbolic performance. The male dancers performing female characters (Marunis) and the round choreography are important observations, symbolizing the anima and the circular nature of life, which are deeply rooted in the shared unconscious of Magars.

Conclusion

The research concludes that Magar Sorathi folklore is a rich and complex cultural heritage. It goes beyond a linear, causal narrative to become a living repository of the worldview, beliefs, and psychological patterns of the Magar community. The research comes out with a convincing argument that the oral tradition has retained not only a record of history but a very rich texture of universal motifs and archetypes. The study theorizes that the myth of Sorathi serves as a cultural mirror, reflecting the society's understanding of good and evil, betrayal, redemption, and the importance of social order. The fact that the dance of Sorathi is still performed ensures that such deep-seated archetypes and cultural values are passed down from generation to generation, safeguarding the cultural identity of the Magar people.

The article provides a valuable model for the study of other indigenous folklore traditions, particularly in Nepal and South Asia. It demonstrates how the application of modern analytical models, such as Jungian psychology and folkloristics, can bring out deeper levels of meaning in oral traditions that might otherwise go unnoticed. It challenges future researchers to look beyond the literal text and probe the symbolic and archetypal dimensions of local myths and legends.

The study highlights the immense importance of folklore as a means of intangible cultural heritage preservation. By documenting and interpreting the deep meanings within the Sorathi tradition, the dissertation underscores the importance of actively promoting and preserving such traditions. During an era of hardcore globalization and cultural assimilation, this research serves as a powerful reminder of the reasons why these traditions matter. It also provides an academic basis for the argument that Sorathi dance and storytelling need to be preserved as more than just historical artifacts, but as living and dynamic expressions of Magar identity. The study can be used to make the Magar community itself more aware of the profound meaning inherent in their own traditions, so that younger generations will be proud of and continue the traditions.

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