

**Eco-Sustainability and Orality: A Study of Nzanmongi  
Jasmine Patton's *A Girl Swallowed by a Tree***

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***Abstract***

*Nestled on the central hills of the Northeast Indian state of Nagaland, the indigenous ethnic group, the Lotha Naga, is renowned for its colorfully rich tapestry of folktales, passed down through generations. A Girl Swallowed by a Tree: Lotha Naga Tales Retold (2017), the first published English collection by Nzanmongi Jasmine Patton, exhibits the Lotha-Naga culture, the profound reverence for nature, and the enduring connection to the environment. Patton's compilation of thirty folktales not only portrays the complexities and richness of daily Lotha life, but also unveils their ecological philosophy. This philosophy holds potential for practical solutions to environmental challenges and promotes a holistic approach to sustainability. This paper delves into the Lotha Nagas' ecological values as reflected in their oral traditions. It argues that such knowledge presented in literature offers valuable insights into sustainable solutions. The research explores the Lotha Nagas' ecological wisdom embedded in their oral tradition, a knowledge base often overlooked despite its potential for sustainable solutions. Furthermore, the study highlights the significance of literature in presenting sustainability narratives, a theme often under-examined within literary scholarship.*

**Keywords:**

Eco-sustainability, sustainability, indigenous culture, oral tradition, folklore, Lotha Naga

## الإستدامة البيئية والشفهية: دراسة لمجموعة الكاتبة نزمجي جاسمين باتن فتاة

### ابتلعها شجرة: إعادة روي لحكايات لوثا ناجا ( ٢٠١٧ )

#### المستخلص

تعيش لوثا ناجا المجموعة العرقية البارزة في التلال الوسطي في ناجالاند، وتحافظ بنسج غني من الحكايات الشعبية التي تنتقل عبر الأجيال. وقد قامت الكاتبة نزمجي جاسمين باتن بنشر أول مجموعة من هذه القصص الشعبية باللغة الإنجليزية بعنوان فتاة ابتلعها شجرة: إعادة روي لحكايات لوثا ناجا الشعبية في عام ٢٠١٧.

وتعرض القصص التي أعادت صياغتها باللغة الانجليزية ثقافة مجموعة لوثا ناجا العرقية وتظهر احترامهم العميق للطبيعة وارتباطهم الدائم بالبيئة. وقد قدمت باتن ثلاثون حكاية شعبية توضح ثراء حياة المجموعة الأثنية وتكشف فلسفتهم البيئية. وتتطوي هذه الفلسفة علي حلول عملية للتحديات البيئية وتعزز قيم لوثا ناجا البيئية والتي تنعكس في مورثها من الحكايات الشعبية والتي تقدم رؤي قيمة رغم قدمها، وعادة ما يتم تجاهلها علي الرغم من قدرتها علي إيجاد حلول مستدامة. ويسلط البحث الضوء علي أهمية الأدب في تقديم سرديات الإستدامة وهو موضوع لا يتم مناقشته في الدراسات الأدبية بشكل كافي.

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Literature with all its genres plays a crucial role in promoting eco-sustainability. Through vivid descriptions of nature's beauty and fragility, it fosters a deeper appreciation for the environment. Literary products can explore the consequences of environmental degradation, sparking empathy for the natural world and the creatures affected by human actions. By prompting readers to question their relationship with the planet, literature can inspire a shift towards more sustainable practices and a desire to protect our shared environment.

Patton's *A Girl Swallowed by a Tree* unlocks the ecological wisdom hidden within the Lothian folktales, offering valuable lessons for sustainable practices. Patton decides to write these stories in English to preserve these stories in written form, shed light on the tribe's oral tradition, which has long served as a vessel for ecological wisdom, and show how Indian tribes are cultured differently. These folktales weave ecological principles into narratives, demonstrating the deep connection between the Lothas and their environment and reflect the deeply-rooted philosophy of practicing sustainability via honoring and preserving nature.<sup>1</sup> Through fantastical elements like talking trees and animal helpers, the stories implicitly promote respect for nature and the consequences of imbalance. *A Girl Swallowed by a Tree* thus becomes a testament to the power of orality in transmitting valuable knowledge about eco-sustainability across generations.

Nagaland, a land of stunning beauty and rich cultural diversity, is home to sixteen major tribes and numerous sub-tribes. Among these, the Lotha Nagas, residing in the Wokha District, are a prominent indigenous group. According to Jamir (1999), Nshoga (2009), and Sanyu (1996), the Nagas, including the Lothas, are believed to be of Mongoloid origin. D'Souza (2005) suggests their migration from a densely populated ancestral homeland in Central China. However, lacking a written language, the Lotha Nagas themselves have no documented explanation for their arrival.

The first extensive documentation of the Lotha Naga culture came in 1922 with J.P. Mills' monograph "The Lhota Nagas". This anthropological study, a landmark in their history, portrays them as a nomadic group with a deep connection to nature. Their traditional way of life as hunters and gatherers fostered a profound understanding of their environment and its inhabitants (Agarwal 32). The Lotha Nagas possess a vast knowledge of local plants and animals, reflecting their close relationship with the natural world (Archibald Q'um Q'um Xiem 20).

This ecological awareness and reciprocal relationship with nature are central to the Lotha Naga cultural identity. Their traditions and practices are deeply entwined with the environment they inhabit. The Lotha Naga culture is fundamentally environmental (Sema 12). This philosophy was not written in textbooks, but rather woven into the very fabric of their culture – stories whispered around crackling fires, songs echoing through the mountains, and dances that mimic the movements of animals (Sinha 23). These traditions, passed down through generations, form an intricate oral library, a rich tapestry of folklore that unlocks the secrets of the Lotha Naga past. Their customs and rituals, vibrant expressions passed down through word of mouth, paint a clear picture: a relationship of respect and reciprocity with the natural world. It is not just about taking from the environment, but about existing in harmony with it, ensuring its continued bounty for future generations. The oral products are treasured as they contain the sum of human experience and explain the essence of the present day. Culture is transmitted from one generation to the next in the form of memories and folktales (Vansina xi).

The Lotha Naga community's eco-cultural landscape has undergone a fundamental upheaval throughout antiquity. Lotha Naga folktales are more than just entertaining stories. They act as threads woven through time, reconstructing the history of the tribe. These tales offer a glimpse into a past where seclusion was not just a choice, but a response to a complex world. A world that constantly challenged the Lotha Naga identity, forcing them to question who they were and where they belonged. These folktales are not simply chronicles of isolation, but testaments to the enduring wisdom of the Lotha people. Today, Lotha Naga community members carry within them a vast repository of ancient ecological knowledge (Gomez, van Vliet, and Canales 3). This knowledge, passed down through generations in stories, holds remarkable relevance for our modern understanding of sustainability. The Lotha

Nagas, through their folktales, offer us not just a window into their past, but a path towards a more sustainable future (Harari 185).

The arrival of British rule in the Wokha District significantly impacted their way of life. The Lotha Nagas, who traditionally held an organic understanding and deep connection with their natural environment, faced an existential crisis as their cultural distinctiveness came under threat (Phukon 23; Warren 17). The colonizers' intrusion first fractured the community's political structures, and their influence later reached the core of Lotha Naga faith (Philip 21). Misra (2011) underscores the Lotha Naga religious reverence for the environment, noting, "Their religion is only a matter of certain rituals and observances to appease the spirits" (23). This potential clash underscores the importance of understanding the Lotha Naga belief system on its own terms. Their emphasis on appeasing spirits aligns with Misra's observation of a religion centered on rituals and practices (23). However, viewing these solely through an outsider's lens risks underestimating their depth. Terms like 'customs' might downplay the profound spiritual connection inherent in these practices. True reverence, for the Lotha Nagas, may not be expressed through the same language or outward displays expected by other cultures. Ezung (2014), citing Philips (1976), highlights this danger with the argument that labeling their beliefs as "shallow and unsophisticated" stems from misinterpretations arising from cultural differences (24).

The introduction of modern missionary marked another turning point in the Lotha Nagas' way of life. The shift to a written-based education system, while valuable, unfortunately sidelined the rich tapestry of Lotha Naga oral tradition, potentially creating a cultural disconnect (Sangma 45). Misra (2011) describes young people "poised at the crossroads between a traditional way of life and a metropolitan modernity with its alluring temptations that can sweep away the ground beneath their feet" (xvii). This shift led to a gradual decline in the transmission of oral tradition, potentially severing the community's connection to its natural and cultural roots.

The disconnection from these roots can be linked to the imposition of a new religion and way of life through colonial education. However, a critical response emerged. Recognizing the importance of preserving these forgotten tales, the state's literary community took on the responsibility of capturing the Lotha Nagas' environmental philosophies

and cultural narratives. According to Tewari (2021), Naga folklore serves as 'keepers of their vibrant culture and great past,' acting as repositories of history, culture, and philosophy (18). Tewari further argues that these tales function as 'educational hubs,' potentially bridging the community to its past. This recognition of their value led to a cultural revival among the Nagas, who found inspiration for artistic expression in their oral stories (Tewari 18). Temsula Ao, Charles Chasie, Monalisa Changkija, Easterine Kire, Vishu Rita Krocha, Abraham Lotha, and Nzanmongi Jasmine Patton are just a few of the contemporary literary writers from this region who have tried to preserve their rich cultural heritage through literary works (Tewari 21).

This paper analyzes how eco-sustainability is transmitted in oral literature via analyzing Patton's collection of folktales, *A Girl Swallowed by a Tree: Lotha Naga Tales Retold* (2017). The paper examines the environmentally sustainable practices of the Lotha Nagas via the eco-critical lens, revealing insights into how these people may inspire new approaches to environmental protection. A landmark in literary preservation, Patton's *A Girl Swallowed by a Tree* is the first-ever English-language collection of Lotha Naga folktales. Through thirty captivating stories, Patton offers a window into the dynamic cultural landscape of the Lotha Naga people. Standing at the intersection of oral tradition, written records, and historical research, this landmark work of modern Naga literature serves as a powerful testament to the enduring legacy of storytelling in the community. The collection unearths and offers fresh perspective on Lotha Naga folktales vividly portraying their customs, ecological awareness, and the relevance of orality in passing knowledge. Patton underscores Nagaland's role in Northeast India as a compelling illustration of oral tradition's lasting effect. Nagas, like their African and Native American counterparts, have used storytelling to make sense of the universe and preserve their culture and identity (Patton, *Girl Swallowed* v). The state of Nagaland is home to more than sixteen different ethnic groups, and each of these groups has its own set of stories that are similar in some ways but also distinct in others (Saikia 27).

Patton serves as a vital bridge between the Lotha Naga community and its rich tradition of oral storytelling. Her dedication to preserving this legacy in *A Girl Swallowed by a Tree* reflects a deep connection to Lotha Naga culture. This commitment is further underscored by Easterine Kire, a renowned Naga writer, who writes the Foreword of the book and enforces that the book serves as a model for future works on oral histories



(Patton, *Girl Swallowed* vii-viii). However, Patton's achievement also highlights a critical issue. Mainstream publishing has historically stifled literature from the North East by pressuring authors to conform to a narrow style and form (Patton, *Girl Swallowed* vii-viii). Patton's groundbreaking collection stands as a testament to the importance of amplifying diverse voices and storytelling traditions. Patton aims to produce fiction that does not appropriate the Lotha Nagas' culture but instead recognizes and celebrates the group's distinctive beliefs and social order.

Patton's *A Girl Swallowed by a Tree* transcends storytelling. It serves as a tribute to the Lotha Naga people's unique ecological knowledge. These folktales, passed down through generations, represent the collective ecological perspective of the community, functioning as a practical almanac of wisdom. As Patton explains in the book's introduction, folktales serve a dual purpose. They act as narratives that educate about one's roots and societal duties, offering moral lessons without overt preaching (Patton, *Girl Swallowed* 15). Through each story, Patton offers insights into the Lotha Naga way of life, reflecting the thoughts and beliefs embedded within the community's collective psyche.

The folktale "Arilao" tells the tragic story of a young man ostracized for his skills and ultimately murdered by jealous villagers. The folktale carries a deep message of cherishing collaboration and being aware of one's jealousy. As Patton explains, the story serves as a reminder of the traditional Lotha Naga way of life, where men and women worked together during harvest, "to glean out the grain and crops" (*Girl Swallowed* 30). This emphasis on cooperation reflects the enduring importance of the village unit in Naga identity. Both Naga academics and the general public acknowledge the village as the cornerstone of Naga culture. Wettstein describes how Nagas historically thrived in "self-sufficient village-republics" that maintained relationships and trade with neighboring villages, sometimes even those far away (214).

The Lotha Naga folktales, as presented by Patton, paint a picture of a society deeply connected to the land. These stories depict a transformation into an agricultural society, one built on cooperation. Patton describes a time when "people never constructed any fences" and "theft was so rare that even doors weren't locked" (*Girl Swallowed* 23). This sense of shared responsibility extended beyond human neighbors. In

the tale, “Longtsarhoni and the Snake Man” Patton shows the custom of young men helping women gather firewood – a practice that likely fostered sustainable resource management. These communal activities, woven into the fabric of the folktales, highlight the Lotha Naga emphasis on environmentally responsible behavior (48-50).

Patton effectively brings back these stories, reminding the community of their roots and the importance of ecological awareness. The recurring theme throughout these narratives is the vital connection between adhering to environmental practices and the long-term well-being of the tribe. Patton’s collection unveils sustainability through storytelling and reflects ecological wisdom. The book offers a treasure trove of insights into the Lotha Naga people’s relationship with the environment. These folktales, passed down through generations, function as a repository of indigenous knowledge on resource management and responsible stewardship woven into the stories are intricate details of human interaction with trees, animals, and the natural world (Kikon and Tamma 250).

Patton’s understanding of the Lotha Naga ecosystem is evident in her vivid descriptions. Readers are transported to a world where the community relies heavily on its surroundings for survival. By analyzing these folktales, readers learn valuable lessons about sustainable practices that have been honed over centuries. All of the tales take place in the rural communities of the Lotha Naga, whose way of life is rooted in agriculture, “in the hills of Nagaland, home to the azure bright blue sky, inhabited by innumerable varieties of fauna, and surrounded by the aged mighty Banyan trees” (Patton, *Girl Swallowed* 23). These practices often involve deep respect for the natural world (Ganguly 11). For instance, some indigenous communities employ controlled burns to maintain healthy ecosystems, while others rely on intricate planting cycles to ensure biodiversity and prevent soil depletion.

Highly reliant on the forest, the Lotha Nagas’ very livelihood hinges on readily available resources. This deep connection fosters a cultural understanding, ingrained in their traditions, of the intricate systems and processes that govern their local environment (Tucker 27). As a result of their bio-centric worldview, the Lotha Nagas’ ethno-botanical knowledge runs counter to the dominant scientific environmental pedagogy. Nevertheless, this knowledge is capable of engaging in an alternative eco-critical discourse that can effectively



contribute to restoring ecological balance on a larger scale (Schultes 32). Traditional knowledge is spiritual and does not differentiate between the empirical and the sacred, while Western science is positivist and materialist. Unlike traditional knowledge, which is commonly passed down verbally from seniors to younger generations, Western science is founded on a literate and academic transmission (Pratt and Gladue 105).

Patton's collection opens with "Arilao," a story that perfectly exemplifies this concept. Patton describes the protagonist's home as "a quaint ordinary thatched hut, built of a stretch of matted bamboos" (23). The protagonist lives with his widowed mother Nongkhungru in a remote part of a hamlet surrounded by forest and hills. The Lotha Naga dwellings, constructed from readily available materials, showcase their deep understanding and appreciation for the natural world. This connection extends beyond shelter, as evidenced by their diverse use of various natural resources. The folktale "Longtsarhoni and the Snake Man" exemplifies this resourcefulness. Here, the community's reliance on the forest is clear, with women venturing deep within to gather firewood "for the family" and collecting essential "minor forest produce" for everyday needs (Patton, *Girl Swallowed* 45). This story highlights the intricate relationship between the Lotha Nagas and their environment, where nature provides not just shelter, but also the materials and resources vital for their way of life.

The Lotha Nagas' self-sufficient lifestyle, termed a "non-monetized, biomass-based subsistence economy" by Agarwal, is deeply intertwined with their environment (49). Their traditional knowledge informs every aspect of their lives. This is evident in their use of bamboo for crafting everyday tools like "phariis", sturdy baskets for carrying essentials, and the larger "ophyak" baskets (Patton, *Girl Swallowed* 50). As Langthasa, Narzary, and McDuie-Ra (2018) enforce this intricate dependence on the local ecosystem allows the Lotha Nagas to thrive without modern conveniences (17). Patton's folktale collection reinforces this connection and serves as a testament to the wealth of practical knowledge embedded in the natural world. For instance, the story "The Tale of Tchupvuo and a Man" describes the use of "ono," a local fish poison derived from a specific jungle plant. This traditional technique, called "pyozhulo", demonstrates their ingenuity in utilizing natural resources for sustenance (Patton, *Girl Swallowed* 146). "Tchuthi", or the bamboo tube used for carrying water, and "khantsiing", "a kind of patio, an appendage made out of wood and knitted bamboo," are all examples of

the Indigenous people's ethno-botanical expertise (Patton, *Girl Swallowed* 62). Similarly, "dried leaves and twigs, especially the big banana leaves to plug the holes" are used to seal cracks in homes (Patton, *Girl Swallowed* 32).

This deep understanding of their environment extends to their dietary and medicinal practices. Chili peppers are a cornerstone of the Lotha Naga diet, valued not just for their flavor but also for their medicinal properties. The folktale "How Chilli Was Discovered" does not only recount the origin of a commonly used spice but weaves a deeper connection, revealing the Lotha Nagas' intimate understanding of their environment and their resourceful use of local plants to heal common ailments. The Lotha Nagas are famous for their expertise in harnessing the power of local plants. This isolation from modern medicine has fostered a deep understanding of the natural world's curative potential. Traditional healers, drawing on generations of knowledge, play a vital role in community healthcare, utilizing a rich arsenal of medicinal herbs to treat various ailments (Chakraborty 12).

Deep within Lotha Naga villages, tradition holds strong. Patton reveals that diviners, acting as intermediaries between the living and the dead, remain active in some rural areas ("Contemporary"). As such, within her folktales, medicine men and women, wielding their herbal remedies, emerge as central characters. These healers, revered members of the community, possess an astonishing knowledge of medicinal plants, acting as walking encyclopedias (Patton, "Contemporary"). They serve as the frontline defense against common ailments, a vital role in any community lacking modern medicine. Patton's story "Rhonthunglo" illustrates this perfectly: with no access to doctors or hospitals, the villagers rely on the diviner for diagnosis and herbal treatments (Patton, *Girl Swallowed* 58). Similarly, "Longtsarhoni and the Snake Man" showcases the deep understanding of plant properties, with characters using both beneficial and poisonous plants for their needs. Even leprosy finds a potential cure in "Ranphan, the Brave" through the mystical knowledge of plants possessed by Ranphan (Patton, *Girl Swallowed* 54).

By highlighting these figures, Patton emphasizes the profound role traditional healers play in Lotha Naga society. Their knowledge of medicinal plants goes beyond mere healthcare; it is a cornerstone of their cultural identity, their understanding of the environment, and their approach to community well-being. Lotha Naga healthcare goes beyond

physical remedies. Their practices are deeply rooted in spirituality, reflecting a belief that wellbeing encompasses both body and soul. As noted by Dayer-Berenson, indigenous tribes often combine “religion, spirituality, herbal medicine, and rituals” in their approach to healing (295). This rich tradition of knowledge, honed through generations of trial and error, has garnered global recognition for its cultural and medicinal value (Jamir, Takatemjen, and Limasemba 47-48). Patton’s collection places particular emphasis on this “ethno-medical knowledge,” driven by a concern for its protection against biopiracy. The potential of Lotha Naga herbal remedies is significant. Patton’s focus on their application suggests a belief that these practices can rival, and perhaps even surpass, the effects of Western pharmaceuticals. By documenting and promoting this knowledge, Patton underscores the importance of studying, practicing, and preserving this valuable cultural heritage from the Lotha Naga perspective.

Patton includes extensive discussion of the Indigenous people’s practice of imbuing inanimate objects with life in her modern retelling of the classic tales. Patton delves into the heart of the Lotha Naga worldview – animism. This belief system, rooted in a spiritual connection to the natural world, sees everything – from animals and plants to mountains and rivers – as imbued with life. As Selvamony notes, the Lotha Nagas hold a deep respect for their “nonhuman kin” (7). This connection extends beyond mere respect. Animals and spirits are often portrayed with human characteristics, blurring the lines between human and natural worlds in folktales like “The Tale of Tchupvuo and a Man,” “Rapvuthung and the Tsungrhamvu,” and “Shoshamo and the Longkumvu”. These stories paint a picture where “man and animals could communicate with each other”, reflecting a bygone era where humans felt a deeper connection to the natural world (Patton, *Girl Swallowed* 57).

This animistic faith, as Mamang Dai (2006) terms it, revolves around maintaining harmony with the environment. Events like “Tokhu Emong” celebrate this interconnectedness. Legends, like the one about the vital mountain rock in Patton’s “The Tiylong Legends” collection, further illustrate this belief. Once revered as a deity and symbol of strength, this rock was believed to be conscious and capable of communication (Patton, *Girl Swallowed* 169, 170). Sadly, with the arrival of Christianity, this direct connection waned (Karlsson 51). Patton’s retellings serve to revive this rich heritage (Eidinow 48). She highlights the Lotha Nagas’ concept of “cosmic harmony between nature and

humans” and their belief in the inherent life force of all things (Patton, *Girl Swallowed* 6). This animistic tapestry, woven into their folktales and traditions, reflects their unique eco-spiritual connection to the world around them.

Patton’s collection weaves together the fantastical and the real, offering a window into the Lotha Naga worldview. Legends abound, brimming with supernatural creatures and tales of the spirit realm (Brady 25). Patton delves into this rich tapestry, using myths and archetypes to illuminate the inherent connection the Lotha Nagas feel with the unseen. One such figure is Apvuho, the famed trickster from “Apvuho and the Emi”. This mischievous character fools a widow, highlighting the unpredictable nature of these beings. Trickster figures, like Apvuho, appear across cultures, each with unique meanings (Brady 38). As Brant and Hill note, these characters embody the resilience and adaptability of Indigenous traditions (15). Often portrayed as rule-breakers and pranksters, they challenge societal norms and provoke laughter (Sangma 47). In Western storytelling, tricksters defy easy categorization, blurring the lines between clown, fool, and even ogre. Their presence in folktales underscores the playfulness and complexity inherent in these narratives (Wilson 21).

Patton’s folktales further reinforce this image of the trickster. In “Apvuho and Mesa: Four Mini-Tales”, Apvuho is described as a “very famous hoodwinker” whose reputation precedes him throughout Lotha Naga territory (Patton, *Girl Swallowed* 189). Legends depict him as invincible due to his cunning, highlighting his ability to outsmart others. This portrayal aligns with the broader concept of the trickster figure, who disrupts established norms and blurs the lines between being heroic or wicked (Brady 26). Through Apvuho’s antics, Patton’s stories suggest a world where identities and perceptions are constantly in flux.

The trickster’s outside-the-box behavior is a major factor in amplifying the difficulties of others. Its disregard for social norms is itself a demonstration of superhuman fortitude and ability to endure adversity. It is unclear if he is acting defiantly for the sake of himself or the culture at large. Part of the trickster’s charm lies in its ability to be both hero and villain. This allure was constructed primarily through verbal transmission. One interpretation of the trickster’s chameleonic nature is as a metaphor for the excluded “other’s” marginalized status and discourse. Apvuho can be read as a metaphor for the colonizers or the dominant culture of the

Indian subcontinent, reflecting the oppressive hierarchical institutions that destroy the life of the Indigenous communities. However, the trickster has also emerged as a potent literary instrument for confronting internalized oppression—such as that based on ethnicity, gender, geography, politics, or identity—and for dismantling the discourse of authority. In contemporary storytelling, the trickster persona serves a role beyond its traditional mythological one. Patton’s use of the trickster is an attempt to undermine the dominant cultural and political structures of the twenty-first century by highlighting how “cleverly manipulated language can dismantle a restrictive hierarchy” (Warren 122). There are paradoxes, but it also provides lessons in cultural, social, ethnic, and political survival, so it is not all bad. For many people, but notably those of Indigenous descent, the trickster comes to symbolize subversion and deconstruction in all its forms as a multifaceted character.

The Lotha Nagas’ centrality of land treatment and management to their social order elucidates the animistic concept at the heart of their culture. Land is essential to the community’s way of life in many ways beyond just providing food and shelter. Family, clan, and community are all bound together by a common bond to the land they call home. The indigenous Lotha Nagas revere their land as a spiritual portal to the Divine, their forebears, the spirits of the land, and all of creation. Everything in their culture revolves on the land and who owns it. Land has economic, political, and symbolic significance for the Lotha Nagas, making it the most highly prized type of property. It is an asset that can generate income and keep the lights on. The folktale “The Tiger Bridegroom and the Human Bride” exemplifies the Lotha Nagas’ deep connection to their land.

Land was plentiful in the distant past, yet no one ever considered it a possession. Everything belonged to everyone. The world was at peace because men were not trying to claim land as their own. There was plenty for everyone, so farmers could move to where they discovered superior soil. If there was still some vegetation on the land after harvest, the owner might keep it (Patton, *Girl Swallowed* 147). For the Lotha Nagas, land transcends mere ownership. It is a coveted symbol of social standing, a source of enduring power, and a source of immense pride, aptly described as “inestimable wealth” (Patton, *Girl Swallowed* 155). Unlike other possessions, land fosters a deep sense of belonging and roots one firmly in place through its permanence and enduring nature.



This cherished connection to the land is a cornerstone of Lotha Naga culture, traditionally passed down through a rich tapestry of oral traditions. However, the absence of a documented history creates a risk – younger generations may struggle to learn from their elders, potentially leading to a decline in this invaluable tradition. In reality, the lack of enthusiasm shown by today's youngsters is bringing the special folk traditions of the area dangerously close to oblivion. Sharing the cultural heritage through the written collection in English, reveals Patton's reverence for the Lotha Naga indigenous identity. Patton "allows the reader to visualize the socio-cultural life of the people and their environmental landscape" via retelling the "multiple histories and undiscovered narratives" of the Lotha Nagas in this book (Patton, *Girl Swallowed* 6,15). Patton's retelling of the ancient tales serves a significant purpose. It highlights the empirical awareness and resourcefulness of the Lotha people in a time when vast scientific and technological advancements are predictably wreaking havoc on ecological systems worldwide. It also sheds light on the changing urbanized mind-set of the contemporary generation within the heterogeneous composition of settlements, where a concerning negligence towards preservation of nature is evident. *A Girl Swallowed by a Tree* delves into the profound wisdom of the Lotha Nagas, exploring how their cherished oral traditions, enduring sense of community, and deep understanding of their environment offer a blueprint for an alternative way of life. Even selectively adopted, these practices hold the potential to significantly benefit humanity navigating the complexities of globalization.

Patton's effort to document her village's environmental practices serves as a timely reminder of the critical importance of preserving folk tales. These tales capture a history of the imagination and are themselves an irreplaceable asset on the verge of disappearing. By placing her trust in the veracity of folktales, Patton offers a voice to those who have been marginalized for generations. She explains, "The knowledge in folklore is the result of experience of not a person, but of the community or the society at large" (*Girl Swallowed* 16). Driven by a desire to ignite a flame of curiosity in future generations, Patton's stories beckon them to delve into the rich tapestry of their family histories and unearth their ancestral roots. Through the captivating world she weaves, steeped in the essence of Lotha Naga culture, these tales not only illuminate the Lotha Naga people's belief systems, values, and traditions – their myths, customs, and very way of life – but also act as a bridge, fostering a deeper



connection between cultures. This crystallization of ideas paves the way for a profound realization: the interconnectedness of ecological sustainability, global development, and the vital preservation of indigenous knowledge (Walling 195).

Patton's retelling of folktales aims at exploring the reciprocal relationship between people's senses and imaginations and folktales. Examining the folktales unveils the profound role orality plays in shaping a community (Islam 55). By delving into these narratives, readers gain a deeper appreciation for the rich tapestry of Lotha Naga customs and the enduring legacy of their ancient traditions. In essence, these tales are timeless, each one carrying the weight of countless stories and holding immense significance. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie writes, "Stories have been used to dehumanize and disenfranchise people, yet they may also be used for good. Stories have the power to damage or restore a people's sense of worth" (15).

Lotha Naga culture thrives on an enduring oral tradition, where tales and myths weave their way through generations. These stories share a striking resemblance to myths found in classical mythology. Patton explains this connection in her book's preface enforcing that Lotha Naga folktales, rich with timeless themes, weave together a world populated by gods, spirits, and demi-gods, echoing figures like oligarchs and heroes found in classical mythology. These stories explore universal virtues and vices, akin to the Greek concepts of Kleos (glory), Kalos (beauty), Eros (love), Ekdikesis (justice), Hubris (arrogance), Menin (wrath), and Arete (excellence). The social structures depicted even share striking parallels with Homer's portrayal of ancient Greece, particularly the Minoan period (Patton, *Girl Swallowed* 16-17).

As such, Lotha Naga folktales transcend their specific cultural context, their connection to classical mythology highlights the shared human desire to explore themes of divinity, morality, and social order through storytelling. Lotha Naga folktales act as a multifaceted lens, revealing not only the community's evolution but also its remarkable capacity to adapt naturally. This inherent adaptability strengthens their resilience in the face of ever-changing challenges. They provide a glimpse into the people's past, present, and future, while also acting as an outlet for their hopes, dreams, and aspirations. Scholar Anshah Nshoga (2009) emphasizes that Lotha Naga folktales stand as a testament to their

history, preserving the values that have been central to their way of life for generations (19).

Indigenous ecological knowledge has the potential to bring about substantial changes in environmental studies, and formal recognition of this knowledge can be gained through the community's reflection of the thoughts and beliefs embedded in their collective unconscious through a project of retelling. Patton's work offers a compelling case for the enduring value of oral tradition in the face of modern challenges. By retelling Lotha Naga folktales, she not only sheds light on a rich cultural heritage but also highlights the potential of these stories to inform sustainable practices. The Lotha Nagas' deep connection to nature and their resourcefulness, evident in the folktales, provide a model for a more harmonious relationship with the environment. These traditions, threatened by modernization, can serve as a wellspring of knowledge for a future focused on ecological balance. Furthermore, Patton's emphasis on the power of storytelling reminds us of the importance of passing down knowledge and values through generations. In a world increasingly reliant on technology, oral tradition offers a sustainable way to maintain cultural identity and foster a sense of responsibility towards the natural world. Patton's *A Girl Swallowed by a Tree*, then, is a powerful testament to the ability of stories to bridge the gap between past and present, offering valuable guidance for building a more sustainable future.

**Notes:**

In the Preface of the book, Patton explains how the Lotha-Naga community is structured and gives the readers an overview of the Lothas' customs and beliefs. She provides a glossary at the end of each story, defining the terms she uses.

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