

AN ECO-COSMOLOGY OF FLOURISHING: TELEOLOGY, RITUAL AND THE NATURAL WORLD IN LOTHAGA NAGA INDIGENOUS RELIGION

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ABSTRACT

*This study investigates the teleological framework of the Lotha Naga people, contending that its ultimate aim lies not in a transcendent union with the divine but in the immanent realization of *khora-benta eküm* (harmonious life) and *pvülyua eküm* (prosperous life). Viewed through an ecocritical lens, this teleology manifests as a symbiotic engagement with the environment, mediated through ritual, spirit propitiation, and agricultural practice. The analysis foregrounds the Lotha conception of *Potsow* (Supreme Being) and the community's ritual interactions that sustain well-being across human and non-human domains. It argues that Lotha cosmology envisions human fulfillment as a collaborative process among community, cosmos, and divinity, encapsulated in the maxim *kvüthüng echüa sana tothüngti eliyung thakala* ("man is not created once and for all, but only in death is the creation of man complete"). This indigenous epistemology challenges salvation-centric paradigms and articulates a sustainable, earth-centered teleology in which human prosperity is inseparable from the health and agency of the natural world.*

KEYWORDS: *Lotha Nagas, Teleology, Eco-cosmology, Khorabenta eküm (harmonious life), Pvälyua eküm (prosperous life), Potsow (Supreme Being), Ritual Practice, Animism, Pväiti (Village Priest)*

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INTRODUCTION

Philosophical and theological inquiries into teleology - the study of ends or purposes - have traditionally gravitated toward transcendent objectives such as salvation, enlightenment, or union with a supreme deity. In contrast, the indigenous religious framework of the Lotha Naga people presents a markedly different paradigm. For the Lotha Nagas, a Tibeto-Burman community inhabiting the Wokha district of Nagaland, India, teleology is firmly grounded in the tangible realities of earthly existence. Their central aim is the attainment of *khora-benta eküm* (a harmonious life) and *pvülyua eküm* (a prosperous life), characterized by the absence of "evils, accidents, sufferings, and unnatural deaths," and the presence of "fertility of land, bountiful crops, many offspring, and numerous livestock" (Lotha, *World-view*). From an ecocritical standpoint, Lotha cosmology constitutes a compelling illustration of what Greg Garrard conceptualizes as an "environmental ideology" - the tacit framework through which a culture articulates its relationship with the natural world, shaped by the interdependence of ecological perception and cultural expression (14). Consequently, the Lotha pursuit of harmony is not a metaphysical abstraction but a lived ethic embedded in the material and ritual practices of agrarian life. This orientation challenges the entrenched anthropocentric dualisms of Western intellectual traditions and aligns with Glen A. Love's advocacy for a critical discourse rooted in humanity's "biological and ecological embeddedness" (3). The Lotha

teleological vision thus emerges as a pre-colonial, place-based ethical paradigm in which human flourishing is conceived as inseparable from the vitality of the local ecosystem - an understanding that resonates with Cheryll Glotfelty's foundational definition of ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the "physical environment" (xviii). This paper elucidates this eco-cosmological system by examining the Lotha spiritual ecology, its ritual manifestations, and its unique eschatological vision, arguing that it constitutes a sophisticated indigenous model for sustainable human-environment interaction.

The Lotha Nagas: Place, Identity, and Ecological Grounding

The cultural identity of the Lotha Nagas arises from a profound symbiosis between people and place. Inhabiting the distinct bioregion of the Wokha district's mountainous terrain, their social structures and ritual practices are deeply informed by the ecological conditions of this landscape. This intrinsic interdependence is epitomized by their self-designation as *Kyong* ("people" or "man") - a term that, while anthropocentric, situates humanity within a specific ecological and social matrix rather than above it. The Lotha worldview thus exemplifies a foundational ecocritical principle: that identity is shaped in dynamic relation to a particular locale (Glotfelty xix). A pivotal historical shift occurred with the codification of previously oral traditions following British contact. This process effectively transformed a dynamic, practice-based, and sensory engagement with the environment into a textualized system, fossilizing fluid ecological relationships into a static record. From an ecocritical perspective, this transition represents a movement away from immediate, adaptive interaction with the land - characteristic of indigenous ecological knowledge systems - toward a more mediated and potentially distanced relationship. The Lotha case thereby underscores how colonial epistemic interventions can disrupt the reciprocal flow of meaning between people and their environment, yet the enduring vitality of oral and ritual traditions continues to reassert ecological consciousness within communal life.

The Lotha Spiritual Ecology: The Enchanted Landscape

The Lotha religious system constitutes an anthropocentric synthesis of animistic and theistic elements, unified by its orientation toward earthly flourishing. Central to this structure is the belief in *Potsow* (Supreme Being), conceptualized through a rich taxonomy of attributive names that signify its diverse relationships with the community. These include *Limha Potsow* (God of the Earth), *Liyingsvüü Potsow* (Creator God), and *Ehungpvüü Potsow* (Witness God). As K. N. John Patton notes, elders also invoke *Sükhying Sa evamo Potsow* (God who rules over destiny) or *Echungren Echungren yi evamo Opo Potsow* (God of all generations), suggesting an intimate and multifaceted divine presence (Patton). The prevalent invocation of *Apo Potsow* (Father God) reflects a personal and relational theology that directly contests early ethnographic mischaracterizations - such as J. P. Mills's claim that the Lothas believed in "no Supreme Being who rewards the good and punishes the evil" (113). The Lotha conceptualization of *Potsow* thus functions not as an abstract deity but as a participant in ecological reciprocity, aligning with ecocritical understandings of religion as a system regulating human behavior within an ecosystemic order.

Interwoven with this theism is a pervasive animism, wherein the Lotha landscape is inhabited by a pantheon of spirits - including *Omon* (soul/ghost), *Sityingo* (Lord of Wild Animals), *Ngazo* (Lord of the Forest), *Tsüngrham* (devil), *Jüpüo* (Lord of the Waters), and *Nongomü* (imps) - believed to dwell within "mountains, valleys, rivers and unusually large stones or trees" (Patton and T. T. Ezung). These entities, capable of both benevolence and malice, imbue the natural world with sentient agency. In Garrard's terms, this constructs an "enchanted landscape," wherein nature possesses consciousness and volition, thereby establishing a cultural logic for environmental responsibility (121). The imperative to

propitiate such spirits - through sacrifices intended to “secure their protection or ward off their afflictions” - creates a system of ecological reciprocity and moral constraint, discouraging exploitative interaction with natural resources (Patton and T. T. Ezung). This symbiosis between divine, spiritual and ecological domains exemplifies what may be termed a “spiritual ecology,” in which religious practice functions as both cosmological narrative and environmental ethic. Through ritual attention, the Lothas maintain equilibrium between human prosperity and ecological vitality, reaffirming that to live harmoniously is to live responsibly within a sentient and sacred environment.

Ritual as the Conduit of Teleology: Ritual Mediation and Agrarian Ethics

The teleological imagination of the Lotha Nagas is realized through a complex ritual system embedded in the agrarian cycle. As Orenimo Ezung observes, “we as an agrarian society, agriculture has been always part and parcel of our life, culture and traditional practices” with ceremonies designed to invoke rain, ensure fertility and safeguard communal prosperity (O. Ezung). Within this cosmological order, the *Pvüti* (Village Priest) serves as the indispensable mediator between the community and the divine, performing sacrificial rites that maintain equilibrium between human and spiritual realms. The process of communal propitiation typically involves the selection of a healthy rooster, which the *Pvüti* houses temporarily within his home as a living conduit of blessing (Lotha, *World-view*). Veprari Epao records that, this rooster is later sacrificed on an appointed day in a ceremony intended not only to “ensure good health of the people and to avert demonic affliction” but also to forecast the fortunes of the coming year (3). Each ritual act thus constitutes both a pragmatic and symbolic negotiation with the forces that govern fertility, disease, and seasonal balance.

Lotha prayers - rich in agrarian and meteorological imagery - reveal a refined ecological literacy. A marriage prayer petitions, “O *Apo Potsow*, let your blessings fall on them like the sun’s rays,” while a communal invocation pleads, “O *Amotsü Potsow*, let your blessings fall like dew drops and let sickness and evils be like water falling on yam leaves” (Lotha, *World-view*). Such expressions collapse the distinction between metaphysical blessing and natural process, translating cosmological faith into ecological idiom. These performances embody Love’s call for a criticism rooted in “biological and ecological reality” (19): they are performative acts intended to influence the material environment and sustain collective vitality.

A critical dimension of this ritual complex is omen reading. The *Ratsen* (village seer) interprets portents from the entrails of sacrificial animals, from dreams or from other natural phenomena to divine outcomes ranging from warfare to agricultural success (O. Ezung and R. Ezung). This epistemology of signs positions the environment as an intelligible text, wherein the community’s future is inscribed in the behavior of living and elemental agents. Prosperity is thus contingent upon the correct reading of these ecological messages. The practice exemplifies a dialogic relationship between human and non-human forces, where knowledge is not extracted from nature but elicited through reciprocal attention. The annual ritual cycle culminates in *Tokhü Emung*, the great post-harvest feast of thanksgiving that renews kinship ties and reconciles the living with the ancestral dead (Lotha, *World-view*). This celebration marks the material realization of *khora-benta* and *pvylyua*: the communal affirmation that harmony and prosperity have been achieved, if only temporarily, through mutual respect between people, spirits and the land. In the cyclical rhythm of ritual renewal, teleology is not projected toward a distant eschaton but continually actualized in the ecological present.

Eschatology and the “Living Dead”: Continuity and Cosmological Balance

Lotha eschatology reinforces this world-affirming teleology through a vision of the afterlife that mirrors and extends earthly social relations. As J. P. Mills records, the dead are believed to inhabit *Echüli*, the “Land of the Living Dead,” a realm entered through *Tiyuenung* on the eastern slope of Wokha Hill, where existence continues in parallel to that of the living (118–19). Crucially, the condition of the deceased is determined not by transcendent judgment but by the diligence with which their kin perform funerary rites (T Yanthanand Kikon).

This belief system institutes a network of reciprocal obligations: the living ensure the comfort of the dead, who in turn safeguard the vitality of the living community. This cosmological reciprocity is dramatically apparent in responses to *apotia* - unnatural deaths caused by drowning, childbirth, lightning, or similar events - which are perceived as ruptures in *khora-benta eküm*. Families touched by such deaths are temporarily segregated, reflecting the community’s recognition that cosmic equilibrium has been disturbed. These occurrences are not construed as random misfortunes but as warnings that the relationship between humans and the potent agencies of nature requires restoration. Through ritual containment, order is re-established, reaffirming the delicate balance between mortality and environment.

The Lotha philosophical maxim *kvüthüng echüa sana tothüngti eliyung thakala* -“man is not created once and for all, but only in death is the creation of man complete” - condenses this worldview (Lotha, *World-view*). Humanity is conceived not as a finished entity endowed with dominion but as a participant in an unfinished process of becoming, whose completion depends on collaboration with both the living and the more-than-human world. This principle resonates with ecocritical rejections of hierarchical dualisms, proposing instead a participatory ontology in which humans are co-creators within an ongoing cosmogenic process. The ultimate purpose, then, is not to transcend the world but to engage it ever more fully, guiding creation toward equilibrium and mutual flourishing.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary Resonance and the Enduring Significance of an Eco-centric Teleology

The teleological vision of the Lotha Nagas offers a compelling paradigm in which human purpose is synonymous with living in balanced reciprocity with the cosmos. Their eco-cosmology - interweaving the sovereignty of *Potsow*, the presence of nature spirits, and the rhythm of agricultural ritual - renders prosperity and harmony attainable only through active, reverent engagement with the natural world. This orientation stands in sharp contrast to salvation-oriented religious models, privileging communal and ecological well-being as the ultimate ends of human endeavor. The contemporary relevance of this worldview is profound. Amid escalating ecological crises, the Lotha understanding of the world as a sacred, animate continuum provides a viable ethical counterpoint to extractive paradigms of modernity. It articulates an epistemology of humility and interdependence in which true prosperity (*pvülyua*) arises not from technological mastery but from sustained, dialogic coexistence with the more-than-human community. This indigenous teleology therefore anticipates modern discourses on sustainability and environmental justice, situating ecological care at the very center of human purpose.

Beyond its ethical implications, the Lotha eco-cosmology forms the cultural foundation of community resilience. Rituals surrounding *Potsow*, the omen readings of the *Ratsen* and the communal feasts such as *Tokhü Emung* are not merely functional mechanisms ensuring harvests; they are performative acts through which society reproduces itself, transmitting ecological knowledge, reinforcing kinship and inscribing a sacred geography upon the land. The maxim

kvüthüng echüa sana tothüngti eliying thakala thus operates not only as a philosophical axiom but as a cultural script for a life lived in conscious collaboration with ancestral, communal, and ecological forces. In the context of globalization and cultural homogenization, preserving and interpreting this intricate teleological system is imperative. The recovery of Lotha eco-cosmology is not a nostalgic endeavor but an act of intellectual and cultural sovereignty - an affirmation of indigenous epistemology as both historically grounded and globally resonant. This study therefore concludes that Lotha teleology constitutes a living tradition of ecological wisdom, whose continued vitality is essential not only to the cultural endurance of the Lotha people but also to the global search for a sustainable, harmonious future.

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