

Exploring the Kinship Between Man and Animal Through Angami Proverbs: A Critical Study

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ABSTRACT

Proverbs are short and witty traditional expressions that arise as part of everyday discourse as well as in the more highly structured situations of education and judicial proceedings (Abrahams, 1972). According to Taylor (1931), ‘a proverb is wise; it belongs to many people; it is ingenious in form and idea’. They were also educationally useful in two ways: as repositories of wisdom to be learned by the young courtier and (most important) as devices to be learned and used by fledgling orators (Abrahams, 1972). Among the Angamis, proverbs play a vital role in transmitting social values across generations. This paper examines the kinship between humans and animals as reflected in selected Angami proverbs. Through a qualitative cultural analysis of ten proverbs, the study explores how animal behaviour, anatomy, and ecological interactions are symbolically employed to interpret human emotions, deliver moral lessons, social relationships, and communal ethics. The study further reveals that, animals in Angami proverbs are not merely decorative elements but rather function as moral agents, and ecological reference points. The proverbs as illustrated in this study demonstrate a worldview in which humans and animals are interconnected with a shared moral and environmental framework.

Keywords: Angami Proverbs, animal, metaphor, kinship, oral tradition

INTRODUCTION

Proverb is ‘a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation’ (Mieder, 2012). They are among the most enduring forms of oral literature. ‘While proverbs are often used to flavour conversation or oration, they are self-contained units; they have a moral weight of their own and an argument that is virtually self-sufficient’ (Abrahams, 1972). In Angami society as well, proverbs are employed to advice, warn, criticize, console, and instruct, often in situations where direct speech may be considered inappropriate or impolite. In the light of this, Angamis also use euphemism extensively as being polite is an integral part of the culture. A notable characteristic of Angami proverbs is their extensive use of animal imagery. Animals such as birds, pigs, dogs, boar, elephants, bees, and grasshoppers appear frequently in proverbial expressions. The animals used in proverbs are not random, rather, they are chosen based on close observations of their habits, physical traits, and interactions with humans.

This paper focuses on exploring the kinship between men and animals as reflected in Angami proverbs. The term *kinship* here does not imply biological relatedness alone, but a perceived moral, behavioural, and experiential closeness between humans and animals. This study is a thorough analysis of ten Angami selected proverbs to understand how Angami society conceptualizes human nature through animal metaphors.

Proverbs In Angami Oral Tradition

In Angami customary tradition, proverbs are known as *Dievi*. The Angamis have a tradition of passing down knowledge and history through stories, songs, rituals and proverbs. Proverbs, in particular, “...are the simplest of the metaphorical genres of folklore – song, folktale, myth, folk play, and so forth – and the genre which clearly

and directly is used to serve a social purpose” (Seital 140-141). A single proverb can encapsulate complex social truths and life experiences.

In Angami society, proverbs are commonly used by elders during conversation, dispute resolutions, and advice-giving. They function as ‘socially accepted tools’ of correction and instruction. According to Abrahams (1972), ‘Proverbs attack ethical problems: one, in which a proverb is used to direct future activity; and two, in which a proverb is involved to alter an attitude towards something that has already occurred’.

Animal-based or animal related proverbs occupy a significant place in Angami tradition. Given the Angami people’s close relationship with agriculture and hunting, the animal world in its various forms become a source of inspiration through which proverbial imagery is crafted. Firth (1976) mentions that, many proverbs deal with animals, but few if any of the novelistic contexts of proverb use have animals in them... these type of proverbs has been termed the metaphorical proverbs because the relationship between it and the situation to which it is applied may be termed metaphorical.

Conceptualizing Human-Animal Kinship

The kinship between humans and animals in Angami proverbs is shown through the use of metaphors. Basing on the proverbs this study has undertaken, it is seen that humans are understood and judged through comparisons with animals, indicating that both share similar instincts, emotions, and behavioural patterns. This perspective challenges rigid distinctions between the human and animal worlds. Rather than portraying animals merely as inferior beings, Angami proverbs often give animals qualities like intelligence and discipline, strategy. At the same time, animals are often used to expose human weaknesses such as greed, arrogance, laziness, and injustice.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

This study is based on ten Angami Proverbs having explicit references to animals. The proverbs were literally translated and then their figurative and metaphorical meanings were revealed. The paper adopts a qualitative interpretative approach to analysing how animals are used to represent human behaviour and social settings. The proverbs are discussed in relation to their culture and symbolic meaning.

Analysis Of Selected Angami Proverbs

Expectations and Disappointment: The Barred Buttonquail bird and the *Shütsei* plant

The expression *Seimou shütsei pou kerüyachü* captures the feeling of eagerly expecting something unfeasibly, only to be left empty-handed. It literally means like a *Seimou*/Buttonquail adoring the flower of *Shütsei*/Nigella Sativa plant and waiting eagerly for its seeds to fall down, but as the plant matures, the seeds tighten and do not fall, leaving the bird waiting in vain.

This proverb draws a parallel line between the bird’s futile expectation and human experiences of hope unrealised. Just as the bird invest its time and patience only to be disappointed; the proverb draws in the instance of humans, where humans too invest emotionally in outcomes beyond their control. The proverb warns against expecting too much while also acknowledging the pain of unfulfilled expectation and hope.

Boasting and Incompetence: The Grasshopper Metaphor

Kediehou ro kutiü rei telieya mo (If you talk big, you cannot even catch a grasshopper). This proverb cautions against arrogance, boasting or show-off. Grasshoppers are small insects, but they are very fast, so it is difficult to catch them. The meaning of this proverb is that a person who boasts too much often fails to achieve even a small thing (unable to catch even a small insect like a grasshopper). Here the catching of grasshopper is used as a metaphor to suggest that boasting often leads to no accomplishment.

Miserliness: Deer's Bone

Chüzie ru zo (Like a deer's bone) refers to a miserly person. This proverb is used to describe a person who is very stingy. Just as a deer's bones which are small and lean it symbolises a tight-fisted person. This proverb uses physical imagery to compare a stingy person to a deer's bone. The association shows the mapping of physical traits of animals onto human behaviour. The kinship lies in the belief that material and moral insufficiency are interconnected. This proverb is a social criticism, discouraging extreme stinginess and promoting generosity.

Hyperbole and Impossibility: Eating an Elephant's Nose

Tso nyhüca kecütuo (As though eating the nose of an elephant) is a hyperbole proverb used to refer to exaggerated or impossible claims. Elephants are one of the rarest animals in the Naga context and are seldom seen. Therefore the very thought of eating elephant skin (nose) is beyond imagination. This proverb is used when someone says they have done something impossible or describes an experience that cannot happen in real life. It emphasises the human proclivity in exaggerating one's experience or achievement by invoking an animal that is culturally distant and almost mythical. The proverb exposes the illogicality or absurdity of such claims. Here the human-animal relationship serves as a reality check.

Injustice and Misplaced Punishments: The Wild Pig and the Deer

Menyi lie vawa mu Thelou¹ tie shüpie ze (*Menyi* destroyed the field but drags *Thelou's* mouth to the ground). This proverb describes a situation where the guilty escapes punishment while the innocent suffers. *Menyi* is naturally destructive, therefore this destructive wild pig ruins the field, but on the other hand the innocent *Thelou* is punished. This proverb shows social realities of injustice and misplaced blame in society. Through this proverb, we observe that animals are used to represent moral categories of guilt and innocence. The kinship here extends to ethical reasoning, where animal behaviour shows human injustice.

Labour and Exploitation: The Wild Pig and the Dog

Menyi ngeshü mu Tefü bu chü cülie (*Menyi* did the excavation (excavating the soil in search of food) and the dog ate it) refers to situations in which one person does the work, but another person receives the benefits. This proverb reflects the social exploitation and unequal distribution of reward. Animal behaviour observed in daily life becomes a metaphor for human social relations, raising awareness of fairness.

Anger and Aggressiveness: Like breaking open a Beehive

Mefi bou dupha keshüchü (like breaking open a beehive), this proverb is used to describe extreme anger even by a small provocation. Bees, by nature, become fiercely aggressive when their hive is disturbed, likewise, this proverb is used to describe someone who gets extremely angry even with the slightest provocation. By comparing human anger to the instinctive defence of bees, the proverb acknowledges emotional intensity as a natural response while warning against provocation.

Social Withdrawal: *Chümenga* as a Metaphor of Social Isolation

Chümenga puo se nhie nu chazou parya shie (*Chümenga*/ Slow Loris) comes out only on the day of its death) illustrates kinship through behavioural similarities between a timid animal and a socially withdrawn person. *Chümenga* is as a small, kitten-sized creature that always keeps its head down. This nature of the animal symbolises the introverted aspect of human personality. The tragic irony embedded in the saying, which asserts that the creature appears publicly only at the moment of its death, intensifies social warning. Excessive withdrawal from social life is linked with misfortune and social exclusion.

¹ A variant of Deer

Praise, Motivation, and Emotional Reciprocity: The Elephant as a Mirror of Affirmation

Tso zo (like an elephant) draws on the cultural view of elephants as responsive to praise. Here, the elephant is personified as a being that thrives on appreciation, working harder when recognised. This proverb, when applied to humans, implies that some people require praise to be productive. This metaphor creates an emotional bond between humans and animals.

Small Acts/ Minor Contribution: The Hen as a Symbol of Communal Contribution

Merei teiki vükrü mhapie zorei siya shie (in busy times even a small help matters, help as small as a hen carrying food on its beak is noticeable). This proverb emphasises on the importance of small contributions like a hen carrying small amount of food in their beaks. This proverb is used to describe situations in which a small act can make a big difference. It comes from the home environment where even a minor gesture becomes significant during urgent or busy times.

Given below is a Table showing the Human-Animal Kinship in the cited Angami Proverbs:

Sl. no	Animal	Human Trait Reflected	Nature of Kinship	Moral Impact (Negative/ Positive)
1.	Barred Buttonquail	Hope and disappointment	Shared emotional unjustified expectation	Negative
2.	Grasshopper	Empty boasting	Show off	Negative
3.	Deer’s bone	Miserliness	Physical thinness reflected in moral thinness	Negative
4.	Elephant	Motivation through appreciation	Shared emotional responsiveness	Both Positive and Negative
5.	Wild pig	Guilt	Animal behaviour representing human wrongdoing	Negative
6.	Deer	Innocence	Moral innocence portrayed in gentleness	Positive (yet socially vulnerable too)
7.	Dog	Exploiting other’s labour	Animal behaviour representing human dishonesty	Negative
8.	Bees	Provoked to anger	Immediate reaction when angered	Both positive and Negative
9.	Slow Loris	Extreme shyness, social withdrawal	Shared vulnerability	Negative
10.	Hen	Small yet meaningful contribution	Collective effort	Positive

Note: The representation listed in this chart is a result of the ten proverbs and the categorisation of moral impact is purely subjective.

Table 1. Human-Animal Kinship in Angami Proverbs

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT)

The interpretation of proverbs in this study can be further understood through the lens of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), proposed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980). According to CMT, metaphor is not merely a stylistic or literary device but a fundamental mechanism. Under this theory, abstract concepts are understood through more concrete and familiar experiences by establishing mappings between a source domain and a target domain.

The Angami proverbs analysed in this study demonstrates these conceptual mappings. For instance, the proverb about the wild pig and the dog conceptualizes labour and exploitation, illustrating the social reality that one person labours while another enjoys the reward. Another proverbs of similar kind is the proverb in which the

wild pig destroys the field but the deer is punished reflects the conceptual mapping of injustice and misplaced punishment, expressing the universal experience that the guilty often escape while the innocent suffer.

Similarly, several other proverbs map animal characteristics onto human personality traits. The elusive grasshopper represents the consequences of empty boasting – such proverb aligns with CMT’s concept of mapping “concrete source domains to abstract target domains”. The deer symbolizes miserliness, and the elephant represents individual who become productive when encouraged through praise. These metaphorical mappings reveal that the Angami community draws upon shared knowledge to conceptualize human character and social conduct.

CONCLUSION

The study of these Angami proverbs shows that the relationship between humans and animals is not merely decorative or rhetorical, but it is deeply embedded in culture. Across the images of barred buttonquail bird, elephant, hen, bird, grasshopper, deer, wild pig, and bees, a consistent pattern emerge, that is, human experiences are understood through the realities of natural world. Animals are not distant metaphors but moral counterparts that reveal human emotions, strengths, weaknesses, and social tensions.

The barred buttonquail (*Seimou*) waiting beneath the *Shütsei* plant reflects the universal pain of unfulfilled expectation; the grasshopper measures the emptiness of boastful talk; the deer’s bone represents miserliness; and the hyperbole image of eating an elephant’s nose exposes the absurdity of exaggeration. Similarly, the wild pig and *Thelou* reveals injustice, while the pig and the dog represents exploitation. The beehive illustrates the intensity of collective anger.

What becomes evident is that Angami thought does not sharply separate humans from animals. Instead it places both on a spectrum of behaviour, vulnerability, labour, desire and anger. Emotional states like hope and disappointment, social issues such as injustice and exploitation, and moral concerns such as humility and generosity are all expressed through animal life. The kinship lies in the shared moral universe where animals provide a lens for assessing human character in Angami society.

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