

A Proppian Structural Analysis of the Folktale 'Kungawrhi'

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Abstract:

This article examines the indigenous Mizo folktale 'Kungawrhi' through the lens of Vladimir Propp's structuralist framework as outlined in his book Morphology of the Folktale. It explores how the deep structural patterns connect to universal traditions of storytelling. By mapping the tale's sequential functions, the analysis reveals a complex three-move structure where the narrative systematically escalates through distinct threats, such as, a supernatural beast (Keimi), subterranean spirits (Khuavang), and ultimately, human betrayal. The paper also highlights fluid actantial shifts, notably the hero's evolution from an active Seeker-Hero to a Victim-Hero. Even though the narrative omits several of Propp's thirty-one functions, it maintains strict sequential integrity throughout its progression. The study concludes that the tale of Kungawrhi adheres strictly to Proppian syntax while embedding unique Mizo cosmovisions, proving that structural universality and cultural specificity coexist seamlessly within indigenous oral literature.

Keywords: Mizo Folklore; Vladimir Propp; Structuralism; Kungawrhi; Narrative Functions; Typological Unity; Oral Literature; Animism; Mizo Cosmology.

The study of folklore was revolutionised by a Russian and Soviet folklorist and scholar, Vladimir Propp, with his structural approach. This shifted the analytical focus away from the thematic contents of a tale to its underlying morphological structure. Indigenous folktales, particularly those from the Mizo culture of Northeast India, are rich with localised animistic beliefs, unique social hierarchies, and distinct ecological landscapes. The epic narrative of 'Kungawrhi' stands out as a complex narrative bordering on fantasy. Interestingly, while Kungawrhi is often treated as the human protagonist of the tale, Lalthansangi Ralte claimed she "was also a supernatural creation born from a man's festering wound on his thumb, a story similar to the tale of Thumbelina" (80). Her story takes place in a mythological landscape where humans regularly interact, converse, and clash with a variety of sentient non-human entities, featuring supernatural beasts, subterranean spirit realms, and heroic rescues.

Propp analysed large numbers of Russian fairy tales to understand how traditional stories are built. In his research, he looked beyond the outer layers of the stories, such as who the hero was or where the journey took place. Instead, he stripped the stories down to their simplest parts, most basic actions, and smallest structural elements. Through his analysis, he came to the conclusion that all the fairy tales he studied rely on a predictable series of plot events, which he termed "functions" and identified thirty-one of them. Function, according to Propp, "is understood as an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of

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the action” (21). He notes that this definition of function must proceed from two distinct points of view: (1) the definition of a function should never depend on the one who carries out the action. It will mostly be given “in the form of a noun expressing an action (interdiction, interrogation, flight, etc.),” and (2) “an action cannot be defined apart from its place in the course of narration,” in other words, an action cannot be defined in isolation from its specific place in the narrative flow (21). The meaning or consequence the action has for the plot must be looked at since identical physical acts can have entirely different morphological meanings depending on when and why they happen.

It must be noted that not every story has all these thirty-one functions, but the functions that do appear often follow the exact chronological order Propp proposed.

Additionally, Propp’s concept of move (*xod*) is utilised in this study. A move is defined as any sequence of actions that originates from an act of Villainy (Function VIII) or a Lack (Function VIIIa) and culminates in a resolution, such as Wedding (Function XXXI) or Liquidation of Lack (Function XIX). Since “each new act of villainy, each new lack creates a new move” (92), a single tale may have several moves. Therefore, complex tales often intertwine multiple moves to build a larger narrative. This study maps the sequential functions of ‘Kungawrhi’ to isolate these moves and analyse their structural progression.

Proppian Structural Mapping of ‘Kungawrhi’

‘Kungawrhi’ is a narrative featuring three distinct moves. The hero of the tale, Phawthira, must overcome three separate acts of villainy, which are the *Keimi* (Move 1), the *Khuavang* (Move 2), and finally his own treacherous younger brother (Move 3).

Rather than detailing the Proppian functions of this story in long descriptive paragraphs, this article presents the findings in a table as shown below. This format provides a clearer, more structural detail of the narrative. For the purpose of clarity in mapping the narrative structure, Propp’s thirty-one functions are referred using their sequential Roman numerals as outlined in the third chapter of his text.

Table 1

Proppian Structural Mapping of the Folktale ‘Kungawrhi’

Function #	Function Name	Action in the Tale	Move/Phase
I	Absentation	Kungawrhi is out in the streets playing <i>inkawibah</i> with her friends, making her vulnerable to observation.	Move 1: Preparation
VI	Trickery	The <i>Keimi</i> steals her footprint and manipulates it over a fire to cast a spell and trick her family into needing his help.	Move 1: Preparation

VIII	Villainy	The <i>Keimi</i> deceptively wins Kungawrhi in marriage by making her sick with a spell and then curing her. He takes her away to his village, revealing his true form, a tiger, while crossing the river, prompting her father to call for a rescue.	Move 1: Complication
IX	Mediation	An old lady witnesses the entire incident and informs Kungawrhi's father. Horrified that his daughter is married to a weretiger, the father proclaims a reward for her rescue.	Move 1: Complication
X	Beginning Counter-action	Phawthira and his younger brother Hrangchala accept the quest to rescue her.	Move 1: Complication
XI	Departure	The two brothers set out on their journey.	Move 1: Complication
XV	Spatial Transference	The brothers navigate to Vangchhe Tlang to locate the <i>Keimi</i> 's hut.	Move 1: Spatial Transference
XXI	Pursuit	After they flee with Kungawrhi, the <i>Keimi</i> discovers their escape, transforms into a tiger, and aggressively chases them.	Move 1: Escape
XXII	Rescue	Guided by a heavenly god and goddess who watch from above and warn them of the <i>Keimi</i> 's approach, Kungawrhi and her rescuers throw their magical seeds to create insurmountable geographical barriers.	Move 1: Escape
XVI	Struggle	Phawthira directly ambushes and fights the <i>Keimi</i> in physical combat.	Move 1: Culmination
XVIII	Victory	Phawthira delivers a fatal blow and kills the <i>Keimi</i> .	Move 1: Culmination
VIII	Villainy	While Hrangchala cowardly keeps guard, the <i>Khuavang</i> abduct Kungawrhi while Phawthira sleeps.	Move 2: Complication
XV	Spatial Transference	The brothers descend through a hole in the ground into the subterranean village of the <i>Khuavang</i> .	Move 2: Spatial Transference

XVI	Struggle	Phawthira battles the <i>Khuavang</i> by throwing down his comb and hairpin, causing destructive landslides.	Move 2: Culmination
XVIII	Victory	The <i>Khuavang</i> surrender and return Kungawrhi to prevent their village from being destroyed.	Move 2: Culmination
VIII	Villainy	Hrangchala cuts the <i>kawi</i> vine, betraying his brother and leaving Phawthira trapped underground.	Move 3: Complication
XXIV	Unfounded Claims	Hrangchala returns home with Kungawrhi, falsely claiming the glory of the rescue to marry her and become chief.	Move 3: False-Hero Complication
XXV	Difficult Task	Phawthira must escape the underground realm. He plants a <i>kawi</i> vine and must trick his <i>Khuavang</i> children (by boiling a stone mortar) to climb out undetected.	Move 3: False-Hero Complication
XX/XXIII	Return/Unrecognised Arrival	Phawthira finally escapes and returns to his village in the midst of a <i>Khuangchawi</i> feast.	Move 3: Escape/False-Hero Complication
XXX	Punishment	Phawthira attacks and kills his treacherous brother, cutting him into three pieces.	Move 3: Resolution
XXVIII	Exposure	Phawthira narrates the true story of the <i>Keimi</i> , the <i>Khuavang</i> , and the cut vine to the aghast villagers, exposing Hrangchala's deceit.	Move 3: Resolution
XXXI	Wedding	Phawthira is recognised as the true hero, marries Kungawrhi, and ascends to the chieftainship.	Move 3: Resolution

Source: Narrative functions adapted from Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*. Primary text actions derived from Cherrie Lalnunziri Chhange's translation of the tale of Kungawrhi.

From the table above, it can be seen that this indigenous Mizo tale aligns with the chronological progression of Propp's structural theory. The underlying sequence of Lack/Villainy to Struggle to Victory to False Hero to Exposure to Wedding remains constant. However, a close reading of the narrative reveals that 'Kungawrhi' does not contain all thirty-one functions, a common occurrence noted by Propp, who argued that the absence of certain functions does not violate the sequence of those present. Apart from the table drawn above, the narrative structure of the tale of Kungawrhi can also be mapped as below:

1. Move 1 (The *Keimi*): Absentation (I) → Trickery (VI) → Villainy (VIII) → Mediation

- (IX) → Beginning Counteraction (X) → Departure (XI) → Spatial Transference (XV) → Pursuit (XXI) → Rescue (XXII) → Struggle (XVI) → Victory (XVIII).
2. Move 2 (The *Khuavang*): Villainy (VIII) → Spatial Transference (XV) → Struggle (XVI) → Victory (XVIII).
 3. Move 3 (The Human Betrayal): Villainy (VIII) → Unfounded Claims (XXIV) → Difficult Task (XXV) → Return/Unrecognised Arrival (XX/XXIII) → Punishment (XXX) → Exposure (XXVIII) → Wedding (XXXI).

Morphological Analysis and Narrative Dynamics

Mapping out the structure of ‘Kungawrhi’ reveals a story that follows strict traditional rules, while maintaining dynamic cultural significance. Instead of moving in a straight line from start to finish, the tale achieves its grand scale by weaving universal story patterns together with unique Mizo cultural elements. To truly understand this complex narrative, it is necessary to examine it on three connected levels: (1) how the plot builds step-by-step, (2) how the hero’s role changes over time, and (3) how Propp’s traditional character categories blend with local Mizo spiritual beliefs. The following sections will explore these three areas in detail.

The Escalation of Villainy and the Three-Move Structure

The structural complexity of ‘Kungawrhi’ lies in its highly ambitious three-move sequence. Rather than presenting a cyclical conflict, the narrative utilises Function VIII (Villainy) to systematically escalate the threat level across different existential planes.

In Move 1, the Villainy is enacted by a *Keimi*, a weretiger representing a supernatural, monstrous threat from the physical wilderness. The hero, Phawthira, resolves this through physical combat (Function XVI). As soon as this conflict is resolved, Move 2 is initiated by a new Villainy (VIII)—the abduction of Kungawrhi by the *Khuavang*. This shifts the threat from a physical beast to ethereal, subterranean spirits, requiring a descent into another realm (Function XV). Finally, Move 3 shifts the paradigm entirely. The final Villainy is enacted not by a monster or a spirit, but by Phawthira’s own younger brother, Hrangchala, who severs the *kawi* vine. This final move represents a psychological and social threat, human betrayal, which Propp structures seamlessly through the False Hero sequence (Functions XXIV to XXVI).

The Evolution of the Heroic Paradigm

Propp generally divides protagonists into Seeker-Heroes, those who actively depart on a quest, and Victim-Heroes, those who suffer villainy directly and reactively. The structural mapping of ‘Kungawrhi’ reveals a sophisticated evolution of the hero archetype within a single narrative.

During the first two moves, Phawthira is a textbook Seeker-Hero. He hears the call for help (Function IX), consents to counteract (Function X), and actively departs (Function XI) to hunt down the *Keimi* and later the *Khuavang*. However, the structural pivot at the beginning of Move 3 transforms Phawthira into a Victim-Hero. Trapped in the underworld by his brother, he is no longer the active seeker but the victim of Villainy (Function VIII). He must overcome a Difficult Task (Function XXV), tricking his *Khuavang* children to climb the *kawi* vine, merely to escape and reclaim his rightful possession.

This fluidity of character function is best understood through A.J. Greimas’ actantial model, which refines Propp’s spheres of action into relational binaries. Greimas posits that narrative syntax relies on a Subject aiming at an Object of desire, situated as an object of com-

munication between a Sender and a Receiver. This central quest is further “modulated in projections from the helper and opponent” (207). In the tale of Kungawrhi, these actantial roles are quite unstable, highlighting the narrative’s psychological depth. Hrangchala begins the tale structurally positioned as a Helper, functioning as a magical agent or source of power to the Subject. However, by severing the *kawi* vine in Move 3, Hrangchala abruptly shifts across the actantial axis to become the primary Opponent. This structural betrayal transforms a traditional man-versus-monster epic into a complex commentary on human greed and social treachery, demonstrating the dynamic nature of Mizo storytelling within rigid structuralist formulas.

Cultural Specificity within a Universal Framework

While the syntactic structure of the tale is universally Proppian, the semantic elements, the flesh covering the structural skeleton, are deeply rooted in Mizo culture and cosmology. As Claude Lévi-Strauss observes, “Myth is language, functioning on an especially high level where meaning succeeds practically at ‘taking off’ from the linguistic ground on which it keeps on rolling” (210). In the tale of Kungawrhi, this “high level” of meaning is achieved by embedding indigenous cosmovisions into standard narrative functions. The initial Trickery (Function VI) and Villainy (Function VIII) rely on the indigenous belief that stealing a footprint and drying it over a fire can cast a fatal spell. This aligns with what Kimthianvak Vaiphei describes as indigenous occult practices, where a victim is harmed after a piece of their physical belonging is manipulated to summon a spiritual attack (7). The Spatial Transference (Function XV) to the underworld relies on the *kawi* vine, a culturally significant plant featured in the opening of the tale during the traditional game of *inkawibah*.

Furthermore, the adaptation of the magical Obstacle Flight mentioned by Propp during the Pursuit and Rescue (Functions XXI and XXII) is uniquely localised. Instead of receiving magical agents from a traditional European donor figure, like a wizard or fairy godmother, at the moment of crisis, Kungawrhi and her rescuers already possess the magical seeds (seeds of fire, water, thorns, and rocks). However, the Proppian Helper sphere is fulfilled by a heavenly god and goddess who observe the pursuit from above. By warning the heroes of the *Keimi*’s proximity and instructing them exactly when to cast the seeds, these deities provide supernatural guidance rather than physical artifacts. This division of the Rescue function, where human characters provide the physical elements but cosmic deities provide the omniscience to activate them, reflects a deeply animistic and interconnected Mizo worldview. Finally, the resolution of the narrative (Function XXXI) is achieved through the restoration of traditional Mizo social order, that is, Phawthira exposes the imposter during a *khuangchawi* feast, marries the lady, and ascends to the chieftainship.

Conclusion

Through the application of Vladimir Propp’s morphological framework, this paper establishes that the Mizo folktale ‘Kungawrhi’ is not merely a collection of ethnographic motifs, but a highly structured epic narrative. The tale validates Propp’s assertion of typological unity; despite lacking several functions, it maintains strict sequential integrity across its three complex moves. By analysing how the narrative utilises Mizo cosmological elements, such as the *Keimi*, *Khuavang*, and *kawi* vine, to fulfill universal structural spheres, it becomes evident that structuralism does not erase cultural identity. Rather, it highlights how the Mizo oral tradition effectively adapts universal human anxieties and heroic archetypes to reflect its own unique indigenous worldview.

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