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Tribal Tragedy and Gender Ethics in "Inakha and Ghonili": A Study of Sümi Naga Folk Narrative

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Abstract

This paper examines the Sümi Naga folktale Inakha and Ghonili as an example of tribal tragedy shaped by gender ethics, drawing primarily on folklore theory. While Sümi folktales have been widely preserved and narrated, their analytical interpretation—particularly through the lenses of tragedy and gender ethics—remains largely unexplored by Sümi scholars. This study addresses that gap by situating the narrative within the conceptual framework of tribal tragedy, where suffering arises not from divine fate but from ethical failure within socially regulated relationships. Inakha's moral lapse and its consequences illustrate a tragic trajectory marked by social decline rather than physical destruction. Central to this tragedy is the ethical agency of Ghonili, whose dignity, wisdom, and maternal responsibility challenges patriarchal norms embedded in tribal customs. Through coded songs, symbolic actions, and principled resistance to marital subordination, Ghonili emerges as a moral authority who mitigates tragedy and ensures social continuity. By foregrounding female agency and maternal ethics, the folktale redefines heroism beyond masculine valor and warfare. This article argues that Inakha and Ghonili represents a gender-ethical tribal tragedy in which moral intelligence, rather than power or fate, determines justice and survival, contributing to a broader understanding of indigenous narrative traditions within folklore studies.

Keywords: Sümi Naga Folktale; Tribal Tragedy; Gender Ethics; Female Agency; Feminist Folklore Theory

INTRODUCTION

Sümi Naga folktales constitute a rich repository of cultural memory, ethical values, and social norms transmitted orally across generations. These narratives are not merely stories of the past; they function as moral texts through which communal ideals, gender relations, and social structures are negotiated and preserved. Among such narratives, Inakha and Ghonili stands out as a complex and emotionally layered folktale that intertwines love, betrayal, moral failure, and ethical resilience. While the tale has often been retold as a story of romance and domestic conflict, its deeper dimensions as a tribal tragedy shaped by gender ethics have received little sustained scholarly attention.

Existing studies by Sümi scholars have largely focused on the preservation, transcription, and cultural significance of folktales, with limited analytical engagement using established folklore theories. In particular, the tragic structure of Sümi narratives and their ethical treatment of gender relations remain largely unexplored. This absence is significant, given that Sümi folktales frequently encode sophisticated

moral reasoning and social critique, especially through female characters. The present article addresses this critical gap by examining Inakha and Ghonili through the dual lens of tribal tragedy and gender ethics, drawing primarily from folklore studies rather than literary or historical paradigms.

Unlike classical tragedies where downfall culminates in death or divine punishment, Inakha and Ghonili presents tragedy as ethical decline and social loss. Inakha's moral transgression destabilizes familial harmony and results in emotional, economic, and social impoverishment. In contrast, Ghonili emerges as a figure of moral clarity, dignity, and agency. Her refusal to accept a subordinate marital position, her maternal concern for her daughter Visheli, and her repeated interventions to save Inakha's life collectively foreground women as ethical agents within tribal society.

By situating the folktale within the broader discourse of folklore theory—particularly concepts of hamartia, communal ethics, and gendered moral authority—this article argues that Inakha and Ghonili exemplifies a gender-ethical tribal tragedy. Such a reading not only enriches the interpretation of this specific Sümi narrative but also contributes to expanding the analytical scope of Sümi folklore studies, inviting future scholarship to engage more critically with indigenous narrative traditions.

The Folktale - Inakha and Ghonili

In the distant past, there lived a renowned warrior named Inakha in a Sümi village Shenaküsa. He was famous for his courage and leadership. There also lived a woman of remarkable beauty and wisdom called Ghonili**.** Inakha was the son of Ghüqhe, while Ghonili was the daughter of Shena. Among all the women of her village, Ghonili was admired as the most beautiful, morally upright, and industrious, a woman whose dignity and character were acknowledged by everyone.

Inakha and Ghonili grew deeply attached to one another, and their affection soon turned into a strong and mutual love. Inakha married Ghonili, and together they lived a life of happiness, abundance, and mutual respect. In time, their union was blessed with a daughter, whom they named Visheli. The child became the centre of their world, cherished deeply by both parents.

In a nearby village called Sükomi, Inakha had a close friend named Hoshepu, who had a daughter named Chevili. During those days, raiding and headhunting were common practices, and Inakha often led his fellow villagers on such expeditions. On one such occasion, while passing through cultivated land, Inakha noticed Chevili working alone in a field. Chevili was an intelligent and cunning woman, and she deliberately drew Inakha into an illicit relationship. Inakha, unable to resist temptation, gradually became entangled in an affair with her.

Eventually, Chevili revealed this secret relationship to her brothers. Fearing disgrace and social shame for their sister, the brothers decided to confront Inakha. As planned, they went to the field where Chevili worked and waited at a distance. As was his habit, Inakha stopped at Chevili's field while heading out on a raid. While the two were together inside the field hut, her brothers, who had been watching secretly, moved forward and surrounded the hut.

Sensing immediate danger, Inakha reacted swiftly. To save himself, he called out, **"**My brothers-in-law, what has brought you to this place?**"** By addressing them as "brothers-in-law," Inakha cleverly implied his intention to marry Chevili. Hearing this, the brothers abandoned their plan to kill him and instead sat down to negotiate calmly. During the discussion, Inakha realised that refusal would mean instant death. Left with no choice, he agreed to marry Chevili and promised to come to her house after nine days to discuss the bride-price.

With a burdened heart, Inakha returned home and confessed to Ghonili, saying, "Ghonili, I spoke

wrongly only to save my life." Ghonili responded with composure and wisdom, "Oh Inakha, do not trouble yourself. Humans err; that is the way of the world." Inakha then tried to console her by suggesting that Ghonili remain his Akuchou (elder wife) while Chevili would become the Amishiu (younger one). Ghonili firmly rejected this proposal, declaring, "An iron bangle and a lead armlet can be worn together in one hand, but an ivory armlet cannot be worn simultaneously in one hand. Therefore, I must leave." Through this metaphor, she asserted her dignity, making it clear that as the proud daughter of a village chief, she would not accept a subordinate position.

Despite her decision to leave, Ghonili began preparing diligently for the arrival of Chevili. She spread out Ayephu (cane/bamboo mats), dried the paddy under the sun, pounded the grain, cooked rice, and brewed rice-beer for the guests. She worked tirelessly day and night, barely resting, determined that every responsibility be fulfilled before Chevili's arrival.

As agreed, on the ninth day, Inakha went to Sükomi to settle the bride-price. During this period, Ghonili gathered her treasured belongings and ornaments and placed them into an Azühukughupo (a broken bamboo water carrier), sealing it with cotton. Each day she locked the house using this vessel before leaving for the fields.

On the day Chevili was to be brought home, Ghonili cleaned the entire house and kept the front, side, and back doors open. When Inakha arrived with the marriage party, he called out, "O Ghonili, I have brought her. Take whatever you wish and leave the house." Ghonili objected, replying, "Inakha, why should I take anything when our child Visheli stands between us?" She asked only to take the Azühukughupo to secure her solitary hut.

As she attempted to leave through the front door, Inakha blocked her path. When she tried the side door, he blocked that as well. Finally, Ghonili exited through the back door. From that moment, she lived the life of a widow, though her husband still lived.

Later, a great warrior named Sümixi from Phili village sought Ghonili's hand in marriage. However, because he did not arrive dressed as a warrior, she refused him, saying that he did not match Inakha's stature. Sümixi returned adorned in full warrior attire, and this time Ghonili accepted him, believing he resembled Inakha. They married and lived prosperously, while Inakha and Chevili fell into poverty.

Ghonili and Sümixi cultivated fields on the hills of Ahochoto, while Inakha and Chevili worked on Aholibato, facing each other. Often, they worked alone and exchanged calls across the fields. At midday, when Ghonili and Sümixi ate, Inakha and Chevili pretended to eat despite having nothing. Discovering their empty food bundles one day, Ghonili was deeply saddened. Out of lingering love, she secretly prepared extra food, meat, and rice-beer and left them in their field hut.

When Inakha and Chevili found the food, Chevili was puzzled, but Inakha knew intuitively and said it was Ghonili's doing. They ate with gratitude. Later, Inakha urged Chevili to challenge Ghonili in Aküküpüxa, a jumping game. Hidden nearby, Inakha watched as Chevili exhausted herself while Ghonili moved gracefully and won. Overcome with regret, Inakha lamented, "Why did I abandon my beloved Ghonili?"

During harvest, Sümixi reaped abundantly, while Inakha's harvest failed. His empty **ayephu** were concealed with branches. Hence arose the song, "Athi Apukito lu küsü ghami aphichighi no apo khapu", meaning those who harvested at Apukito tied their stomachs with twisted cloth.

Later, conflict arose between Philimi and Shenaküsa villages. One day, Inakha set out to attack Phili village, but before he could reach Philimi, the villagers learned of his plan and lay in wait to ambush him. When Ghonili discovered this, she joined a group of women pounding rice, instructing them to sing

loudly. The song carried across the hills, and its lyrics held a secret message for Inakha: "If you are going, go from the hill of the Asüphalito (cotton field) and not the other route." Recognising that the warning came from Ghonili, Inakha followed her guidance and avoided the trap, thus escaping the enemy's hands. Despite the bitterness of their divorce, Ghonili chose to protect him, not wanting their daughter Visheli to be left an orphan. Each time Inakha led raids, Ghonili warned him through coded songs. Hearing her voice, Inakha turned back, thus saving his life. Eventually, peace returned.

In peaceful times, Inakha came to barter an Amghüchi (small axe) for paddy. Ghonili replied, "Let this rice be our child Visheli's food," giving him paddy and returning the axe. On another visit, Sümixi secretly watched as Inakha pleaded, "Ghonili, sip from your bamboo mug and give me some; eat a little and feed me the rest." Ghonili answered firmly, "If you are naked, others are naked too; if you possess manhood, others do as well," and sang, "If you are hungry, eat your share; if you are thirsty, drink fully." Knowing Sümixi was listening, she left Inakha alone.

Broken-hearted, Inakha reproached himself again, asking, "In what way did I fault Ghonili that I lost her?" In time, Inakha and Chevili continued to decline, while Ghonili and Sümixi flourished.

Analysis through the lens of Tribal Tragedy and Gender Ethics

When the folktale "Inakha and Ghonili" is examined through the perspectives of tribal tragedy and gender ethics, numerous narrative elements emerge that invite critical discussion and interpretation.

The narrative exemplifies a tribal tragedy narrative such as conflict and social norms. The story is set in a Sümi tribal society where raiding, headhunting, and inter-village rivalry are normalised. Inakha, a warrior, participates in these acts, reflecting the collective cultural ethos of honor, bravery, and masculine prowess. Tragic conflict arises not only from external threats (raids, ambushes) but also from personal choices that contravene tribal codes, such as Inakha's affair with Chevili. His moral lapse brings suffering upon himself and disrupts the domestic order.

There is inevitability of suffering as the tale follows a tragic trajectory: Inakha's initial success in love and marriage with Ghonili is undermined by temptation, societal pressures, and his own weaknesses. Even though he survives physically (thanks to Ghonili's interventions), he suffers emotional and social losses, notably the loss of Ghonili's exclusive love and respect. This mirrors classic tragic structure, where human flaws (hamartia) and external circumstances converge to create unavoidable suffering, reminiscent of Aristotle's definition of tragedy (Aristotle, Poetics, trans. 1996).

Another significant feature is the embedding of communal and ritualised elements. The folktale integrates communal actions, such as Ghonili coordinating women pounding rice and singing coded messages. These practices highlight the interplay between individual agency and collective tribal culture. The tragedy is amplified because survival depends not only on personal valor but also on wisdom, social cunning, and communal collaboration—key motifs in tribal narratives.

The folktale "Inakha and Ghonili" also provides a rich site for examining tribal gender ethics. The element of female agency and moral authority is ample. Ghonili exemplifies wisdom, foresight, and ethical integrity. Despite being wronged, she prioritises the welfare of her daughter Visheli and the life of her estranged husband, demonstrating moral courage beyond personal grievances. Her decisions are guided by both principled ethics (refusing to accept subordination to Chevili) and maternal concern, which reflects the complex negotiation of gendered roles in a patriarchal society.

The element of negotiation of marital hierarchy is strong in this folktale. The distinction between Akuchou (elder wife) and Amishiu (younger wife) reflects a structured gendered system where women's

status within marriage is codified. Ghonili's refusal to occupy a subordinate position asserts female dignity and autonomy, challenging the patriarchal expectation that women should accept polygamous arrangements without resistance.

The motif ethical wisdom versus masculine failure is also displayed in this narrative. Inakha's ethical lapse—his affair and coerced promise to marry Chevili—contrasts sharply with Ghonili's moral clarity. The folktale critiques male impulsivity and reliance on physical prowess as insufficient for ethical life, emphasizing that women's intelligence and foresight are equally central to communal survival. Through Ghonili, the tale models gendered ethical responsibility, showing that women navigate structural oppression while exercising autonomy and shaping outcomes.

It also has embedded maternal ethics. Ghonili repeatedly acts for Visheli's protection and wellbeing, even when it requires personal sacrifice. Her actions highlight the centrality of maternal ethics in tribal society, where female agency ensures continuity of family, lineage, and social harmony.

The folktale "Inakha and Ghonili" also has interplay between tragedy and gender ethics as these two elements are deeply intertwined:

Aspect	Example in Folktale	Analysis
Tragic flaw (hamartia)	Inakha's affair with Chevili	Personal weakness triggers social and emotional consequences, typical of tribal tragedy
Fate and societal norms	Raids, headhunting, and bride-price negotiations	Cultural practices set limits on individual choice, creating structural inevitability
Female moral agency	Ghonili's wisdom, coded warnings, protection of Visheli	Women exercise ethical authority within social constraints, mitigating tragedy
Loss and exile	Ghonili leaving Inakha	Tragedy is compounded by emotional and social dislocation
Restoration and justice	Ghonili prospers with Sümixi; Inakha declines	Moral order reasserted, reflecting ethical consequences of actions

This folktale reinforces communal values such as loyalty, prudence, and maternal care. It also critiques gendered power imbalance, showing how women assert agency and ethical leadership even within patriarchal norms. As a tribal tragedy, it emphasises that suffering arises from both personal flaws and social structures, while also highlighting the potential of ethical foresight (Ghonili) to avert complete disaster.

Feminist folklore analysis of "Inakha and Ghonili"

The folktale Inakha and Ghonili offers a compelling lens for feminist folklore theory, highlighting women's agency, moral authority, and subversion of patriarchal norms within a tribal society. Ghonili as a feminist protagonist consistently demonstrates strategic and moral agency. She refuses to accept the subordinate role of a second wife and negotiates her position on her own terms, exemplified when she declares: "An iron bangle and a lead armlet can be worn together in one hand, but an ivory armlet cannot be worn simultaneously in one hand."

There is also an element of ethical intervention. Despite her divorce and personal hurt, she protects

Inakha's life through coded songs, showing that women's ethical responsibility extends beyond personal grievance. In doing so, she also secures the safety of their daughter Visheli, asserting maternal ethics as a form of social agency.

Subversion of patriarchal expectations is also visible in this narrative. Inakha, as a warrior and husband, represents traditional male privilege and authority. However, his moral lapse and susceptibility to Chevili's seduction reveal the limits of male power.

Ghonili's actions challenge the patriarchal structure: she sets conditions for her departure, ensures her daughter's wellbeing, and even later influences community survival by mediating and distributing resources. Through these acts, the tale reflects a feminist critique: ethical authority and social wisdom are not exclusively male domains, and women can exercise power in subtle but consequential ways.

A nurturing dimension, encompassing motherhood and ethical responsibility, is also evident in this well-known folktale. Maternal care is central to Ghonili's ethical framework. She repeatedly acts to safeguard Visheli—whether through preserving Inakha's life or later regulating resources. Feminist folklore theory interprets this as maternal labor as political action: by prioritising her child's survival and social stability, Ghonili enacts agency that reshapes family and community outcomes.

As in many folk traditions across the world, the narrative embodies a form of resistance articulated through cultural knowledge. Ghonili uses folk practices—songs, coded messages, and traditional rituals—to assert control. This reflects how women in tribal societies navigate social constraints creatively, employing cultural knowledge to influence events without overt confrontation. Her strategy embodies the feminist concept of "agency within constraints", emphasizing that subaltern voices can shape outcomes even in male-dominated structures.

The folktale also contrasts Ghonili's emotional intelligence and ethical foresight with Inakha's impulsive decision-making. Feminist analysis highlights that moral reasoning and ethical vigilance are valorized through the female character, questioning the assumption that heroism and wisdom are inherently masculine traits.

A careful feminist analysis reveals a particularly interesting and striking element in the folktale: its reframing of tribal tragedy. While Inakha's actions trigger the narrative tragedy, the resolution and survival are facilitated by Ghonili. This reframes the tragedy: it is not only a male-centric narrative of heroism and downfall, but a story where a woman mediates the consequences of male error, ensuring social and familial continuity. The folktale thus aligns with feminist folklore scholarship, which emphasizes women as ethical agents, preservers of knowledge, and arbiters of justice, rather than passive subjects.

Inakha and Ghonili, Greek Tragedy, and Indian Folk Tragedy

Although the folktale Inakha and Ghonili is distinctive in its own right, a comparative reading alongside Greek tragedy and Indian folk tragedy reveals numerous converging elements, particularly when examined through the lenses of tribal tragedy and feminist folklore ethics. The comparative frameworks presented below are intended to facilitate a clearer understanding of these parallels.

Structural Comparison of Tragedy

Category	Inakha and Ghonili (Sümi Tribal Tragedy)	Greek Tragedy	Indian Folk Tragedy
Nature of	Ethical and social tragedy rooted	Cosmic and moral	Social and moral tragedy

Category	Inakha and Ghonili (Sümi Tribal Tragedy)	Greek Tragedy	Indian Folk Tragedy
Tragedy	in kinship, marriage, and tribal customs	tragedy shaped by fate (moira)	shaped by caste, honor, and destiny
Tragic Hero	Inakha (warrior with moral weakness)	Oedipus, Agamemnon (noble but flawed men)	Dharmic hero often undone by desire or fate
Tragic Flaw (Hamartia)	Sexual transgression, ethical failure in marriage	Hubris, ignorance, defiance of fate	Desire, moral lapse, violation of social norms
Outcome	Moral decline and social loss, not death	Death, exile, or irreversible downfall	Social death, exile, or symbolic destruction
Resolution	Ethical order restored through female wisdom	Catharsis through suffering	Moral lesson reinforced through suffering

Gender Ethics and Female Agency

Aspect	Inakha and Ghonili	Greek Tragedy	Indian Folk Tragedy
Female Role	Central ethical agent (Ghonili)	Often marginal or disruptive (Antigone, Medea)	Often virtuous sufferer or devoted wife
Moral Authority	Female wisdom surpasses male heroism	Mostly male-centric moral reasoning	Morality aligned with chastity and sacrifice
Resistance	Subtle, strategic, cultural (songs, metaphors)	Open defiance or revenge	Endurance and self-sacrifice
Maternal Ethics	Central (saving Inakha for Visheli's sake)	Rarely foregrounded	Strong but idealized
Outcome for Woman	Flourishes ethically and materially	Often punished or destroyed	Often sanctified or mythologized

Unlike Greek and Indian traditions, Inakha and Ghonili does not punish female autonomy**.** Instead, it rewards ethical intelligence, positioning Ghonili as the moral axis of the narrative.

Tragedy, Ethics, and Power

Dimension	Sümi Folktale	Greek Tragedy	Indian Folk Tragedy
Source of Power	Ethical wisdom and social intelligence	Political authority and divine order	Moral duty (dharma)
Masculinity	Warrior ethos shown as insufficient	Heroism questioned by fate	Masculinity tied to honor
Femininity	Ethical regulator and cultural mediator	Threat or anomaly	Idealised virtue
Justice	Moral causality (actions → consequences)	Divine justice	Karmic justice

From a feminist folklore perspective, Inakha and Ghonili significantly reconfigures the tragic form. Tragedy is not resolved through death, but through ethical differentiation; the morally upright prosper,

the ethically flawed decline**.** Female agency does not destabilise society; rather, it preserves lineage, peace, and continuity. Ghonili functions as what feminist theorists describe as a "moral subject", not merely a relational figure (wife/mother), but an independent ethical actor. This aligns with A.K. Ramanujan's observation that Indian and tribal narratives privilege contextual ethics over absolute fate, and with feminist folklore scholarship that emphasises women as culture-bearers and moral historians. It also in a way suggests that women in Sümi society occupy a relatively stronger and more respected position compared to those in other Naga tribes.

Inakha and Ghonili stands as a distinctive example of tribal tragedy shaped by gender ethics, where: the tragic hero survives physically but is ethically diminished; the female protagonist emerges as the custodian of justice, memory, and continuity; and feminist folklore theory reveals how women's subtle agency corrects masculine excess, offering a counter-tradition to classical tragic paradigms. This makes the tale not merely a local folklore, but a theoretically significant tragic narrative, contributing to global discussions on tragedy, ethics, and gender.

Conclusion

This study has sought to demonstrate that Inakha and Ghonili is not merely a romantic or domestic folktale but a sophisticated example of tribal tragedy governed by gender ethics, embedded deeply within Sümi cultural consciousness. By reading the narrative through folklore theory, tragedy, and feminist ethics, the article has foregrounded the ethical depth and narrative complexity that Sümi oral traditions possess—complexities that have often been overlooked in descriptive or preservation-focused scholarship.

Unlike classical tragic paradigms that culminate in death or divine retribution, Inakha and Ghonili articulates tragedy as a process of ethical erosion and social displacement. Inakha's downfall is not marked by physical destruction but by moral diminishment, economic decline, and the irreversible loss of relational dignity. His tragic flaw—sexual transgression and ethical indecision—initiates a chain of consequences that unravel domestic harmony and social stability. This form of tragedy aligns closely with tribal narrative logic, where survival alone does not signify success; ethical conduct and social responsibility define true worth.

Central to this tragic structure is Ghonili, whose character decisively reshapes the narrative's moral axis. Far from being a passive victim of patriarchal arrangements, she emerges as an ethical agent, cultural mediator, and moral authority. Her refusal to accept a subordinate marital position challenges the normalization of polygamous hierarchy, while her continued care for Inakha—despite separation—demonstrates an ethics grounded in responsibility rather than resentment. Through culturally embedded practices such as metaphor, ritual labor, and coded songs, Ghonili exercises power subtly yet effectively, illustrating what feminist folklore theory identifies as "agency within constraint."

The repeated motif of maternal ethics further reinforces the gendered moral vision of the folktale. Ghonili's actions are consistently oriented toward the protection of Visheli, revealing motherhood not as sentimental attachment but as a political and ethical force that safeguards lineage, memory, and social continuity. In saving Inakha's life repeatedly, she ensures not only the survival of an individual but also the emotional and social security of the next generation. In this sense, the folktale positions women as custodians of communal survival and moral order.

Comparatively, when placed alongside Greek tragedy and Indian folk tragedy, Inakha and Ghonili offers a distinctive model. Female autonomy is neither demonised nor punished; instead, ethical intelligence is

rewarded with prosperity and stability. Masculine heroism rooted in warfare and physical prowess is shown to be insufficient without moral discipline, while feminine wisdom emerges as corrective rather than disruptive. The tragic vision, therefore, is not fatalistic but ethical and pedagogical, reinforcing the principle that actions bear consequences within a moral economy shaped by gendered responsibility.

Inakha and Ghonili stands as a powerful example of gender-ethical tribal tragedy, where women are not marginal figures but central architects of justice, survival, and meaning. Recognising such narratives as theoretically significant rather than merely ethnographic enriches Sümi folklore studies and contributes to broader global discussions on tragedy, ethics, and gender in indigenous narrative traditions. This study thus invites future scholarship to move beyond documentation toward critical engagement, allowing tribal folktales to speak as dynamic texts of moral philosophy and cultural critique.

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