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Forest Symbolism in the Relationship Between Nature and Culture: A Study in the Oral Traditions of Ethnic Groups in the Central Highlands of Vietnam

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Abstract

In the perception of most modern people, the forest is a natural entity, either coexisting with culture or standing in opposition to it – a concept that is understood to involve human factors influencing nature. From this, notions about forests and nature arise, accompanied by rules governing human interactions with nature, which are perceived as either egalitarian or hierarchical. When examining the oral traditions of the ethnic groups in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, we find that these communities consider themselves "the forest eaters" (G. Condominas, 2003), not only due to their economic activities, settlement, and the reckoning of time within the human life cycle, but also because all their beliefs, rituals, customs, and spiritual practices are deeply intertwined with the forest. The theoretical distinction that villages are associated with rituals while forests are not may not hold true for these indigenous communities. By applying discourse analysis theory (Foucault) and ecocriticism, this study examines myths, epics (khan), folktales, proverbs, and customary law texts of ethnic groups such as the Ede, Jarai, Mnong, and Raglai in the Central Highlands of Vietnam to redefine the concepts of forest, village, humanity, and the social space of the residents inhabiting these regions. The findings reveal that the forest functions simultaneously as a natural space parallel to social space, a sacred domain bound to spirit-world beliefs, and an essential source of livelihood and aesthetic inspiration. The study concludes that Central Highlands communities maintain a non-dualistic worldview in which nature and culture are inseparable, offering an alternative ontological perspective to the Western nature – culture dichotomy and contributing new insights to ecocritical and anthropological scholarship on indigenous ecological knowledge.

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Introduction

In recent decades, with the development of technology and artificial intelligence, humanity has increasingly asserted its intellectual power, aspirations, and experiments in conquering and mastering the world, repositioning and elevating human status within the natural and social realms. However, major climate changes on Earth, natural disasters, and hazards once again raise questions about the relationship between humans and nature, examining the prospects and capabilities of humans in that relationship. Are science and human intellect the sole criteria that distinguish the human world from nature, or is there a need to return to folk traditions to reflect upon ourselves?

The Central Highlands of Vietnam is home to around forty ethnic groups, including the Ede, Jarai, Mnong, Ba Na, and Xo Dang, whose material and spiritual lives have long been closely connected to the forested landscape. Many of these communities traditionally practice swidden agriculture and organize social life around forest-based ecological cycles. Their rich oral traditions – myths, epics (such as the Ede khan), folktales, proverbs, ritual incantations, and customary law—encode deep ecological knowledge and cultural values.

Recent scholarship has increasingly explored the intersection of ecocriticism, indigenous oral traditions, and nature–culture relationships. Huggan and Tiffin (2015), in the foundational work on postcolonial ecocriticism, argued that Western dualistic thinking systematically obscures non-Western ecological ontologies, providing a critical framework for examining how indigenous peoples articulate environmental relationships through literature. Within Southeast Asia, Sultoni et al. (2023) applied ecocritical analysis to Indonesian folklore, identifying themes of respect for nature, harmony, and wise resource use—values closely parallel to those encoded in Central Highlands oral traditions. Concerning Vietnam, McElwee (2022) conducted a landmark review of indigenous environmental knowledge across ethnobiological studies, customary law, and resource management for ethnic minorities including Central Highlands groups (Ede, Mnong), identifying significant gaps in existing scholarship. Most directly relevant to the present study, Nguyen (2024) analyzed folk narratives about forest spirits (Yang and Malai) among highland ethnic minorities—including the Ede, Mnong, Ba Na, Ma, and Kho—examining how such legends manifest the unique metaphysical worldview of these communities. Additionally, Kieu (2023) addressed the preservation of Central Highlands oral epics—the Ede khan, the Mnong ot ndrong, and the Ba Na hmon—distinguishing between "living epics" performed in communal settings and "text epics" existing only in written form. These studies collectively demonstrate growing scholarly interest in the ecological dimensions of oral traditions; however, none has systematically examined how forest symbolism operates across multiple oral genres—from myths and epics to proverbs and customary law—to construct a unified worldview among Central Highlands ethnic communities. This constitutes the principal research gap that the present study addresses.

This study is is based on the theoretical frameworks of the theoretical premises of cultural anthropology and ecocriticism. In "Beyond Nature and Culture", Philippe Descola critiques the opposition between nature and culture—what he term the naturalist ontology. Focusing on the Achuar people of the Amazon, he investigates human relations with non-human entities (plants and animals), thereby emphasizing that these societies maintain highly distinctive relations with the natural world and that their social life genuinely extends beyond the boundaries of human community. Descola's intellectual trajectory amounts to a re-examination of the very modes of thought and ontological foundations by which Western scholars produce knowledge. He surveys the differences between the modern Euro-American world and other societies through an analysis of a series of basic concepts and relational forms—*wild and domesticated; forest and garden; landscape, nature, culture; us and the other; animism, totemism, naturalism, analogism; gift exchange and production; hunter and prey*—and from there proposes a new frame of reference for repositioning the human–nature relationship by means of four ontologies: animism, totemism, naturalism, and analogism. Each corresponds to different ways in which the characteristics of a social

collective, together with its moral identities and knowledge systems, are formed. Descola's four ontologies are intended to encompass the principal modalities of human relations with nature and, in so doing, to open a new worldview for redefining and repositioning the human in relation to the more-than-human world.

Descola's perspective—studying the human–nature relationship in order to locate and redefine the human—converges with the stance of ecocritics. Ecocriticism, a literary-critical approach that connects literature and the environment, emerged in the United States in the 1990s. First, ecocriticism seeks to elucidate the relationship between nature and culture; in developed countries, nature is often encroached upon and swallowed up by culture, and therefore the protection of nature entails constraining the expansion of culture or actions undertaken in the name of culture that damage the environment. Second, ecocritics question anthropocentrism, long regarded as a hallmark of the Western tradition. Humans are now understood as components of ecosystems; nature has its own voice and its own rights, rather than being merely an object for human conquest, exploitation, and value imposition. Ecocriticism also stands apart from structuralism, pursuing new questions in the human–nature nexus and using nature as a lens through which to redefine the human—and vice versa (Barry, 2017). Thus, ecocriticism foregrounds human responsibility toward nature and urgently calls for the protection of all beings in the natural world and the maintenance of ecological balance (Nguyet, 2018).

From these theoretical premises, it is evident that modern and contemporary scholars of literature and culture have been increasingly concerned with the human-nature relationship and with seeking new cognitive values regarding the human. Drawing on these approaches, we examine the symbol of the forest in relation to the ethnic communities of Vietnam's Central Highlands—communities whose lives have been bound to the forest from past to the present. The forest is a natural entity and simultaneously a living space and a sacred space. It is a composite, polysemous symbol, not easily delineated. Forests and villages in the Central Highlands have generated models of the world. Perceptions of nature in relation to humanity have never grown old in either Western or Eastern traditions; the nearer we come to the present, the more urgent our anxieties about the human become, demanding new insights to determine appropriate modes of human conduct toward nature and toward ourselves.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach combining secondary–source analysis with ethnographic fieldwork, framed by ecocriticism and cultural anthropology.

Secondary-source analysis: We examine collected verbal and textual materials of folk literature from ethnic communities in Vietnam's Central Highlands in order to identify the lexical layers denoting the forest and the symbolic repertoire of sacred rituals associated with it. The secondary sources comprise the following principal corpora: the Ede epics (khan) Dam San (Nguyen, H. V., 1988) and Xing Nha (Nguyen, H. T. T., 2003); Jarai oral traditions—including myths, ritual incantations, proverbs, and customary practices—as documented by Dournes (2018); Mnong ethnographic accounts and the concept of "eating the forest" as recorded by Condominas (2003); Mnong folktales compiled by Nguyen, H. V. et al. (2006); Raglai folktales compiled by Le, C. K. et al. (2006); Mnong proverbs and sayings collected by Dieu Kau (2010); ethnographic studies of Mnong ritual and musical practices by To, D. H. (2003); descriptions of Ede festivals and rites of passage by Le, V. T. (1995); Xo Teng community rituals documented by A (2018). These data are subjected to symbolic and archetypal analysis so as to elucidate the multiple semantic layers of forest symbolism.

Ethnographic fieldwork: We conduct interviews with members of ethnic communities in the contemporary Central Highlands regarding human–forest relations in everyday life, resource use, and religious practice, as well as the interplay between customary norms and state law in culturally mediated interactions with the forest. Through a cultural-anthropological lens, we clarify how

the relationship between humans and the forest, between culture and nature, is conceived, thereby reconstructing Central Highlands peoples' conceptualizations of the forest.

All translations from Vietnamese sources are the author's own.

Result and Discussion

1. The Forest as a Natural Space Parallel to Social Space

In an ethnography of the *Montagnards* (Thuong people) of the Central Highlands, G. Condominas defined social space as "he ensemble of the systems of relations characteristic of the group considered" (Condominas, 1997, p. 15). In his writings on swidden (shifting) cultivation among Central Highlands groups, including the Mnong Gar—one of the two pillars of Southeast Asia's plant-based civilization—Condominas (1997) recognizes the role of the forest as a factor shaping both material and spiritual life, such that inhabitants identify themselves as "forest people". The habitus of "eating the forest", combined with the terrain, leads to a socially bounded space for these "primitive Indochinese" (here, Central Highlands peoples), with highly specific features of kinship and communal relations. Condominas (1997) demonstrates this across concrete domains: cultivation techniques, house-building, epics, folk songs, kinship terminologies, systems of taboo, and symbolic architectures.

For the Jarai (and other Central Highlands peoples), the forest is a double, ambivalent reality. People here live in the forest, with the forest, attached to the forest–indeed, dissolve into it (Dournes, 2018). Settlements are at the foot of mountains, in valleys and along streams. People hunt, fish, gather fruits and forest vegetables. The principal production method is swidden agriculture with fire: slopes are cleared and burned to make fields. After slashing and burning, ash leaches into the soil as natural fertilizer; crops are planted; wildlife is lured for hunting. These scattered fields interweave with forest patches, yet the scale is small and does not gravely harm the environment because customary law regulates burning and forbids encroachment upon old-growth forests. Over time, intensive cultivation emerges; settlements become more fixed; larger clearings (ku) are created. Permanent fields grow perennials, upland rice, maize, and cassava. Thus, while subsisting on natural resources from forest, rivers, and streams, these peoples simultaneously venerate, fear, and befriend these natural spaces. Such two-sided comportment forms the basis for a deep communion between Montagnards and the surrounding wilderness—a way of life displayed daily.

Early twentieth-century French ethnographers observed relations between natural (forest) and social spaces (fields, villages): "Fields and villages are portions carved out of the forest, taken from it by axe and by fire. Everything in the village comes from the forest. The forest envelops human beings; it enters their very bones and blood—indeed, it constitutes part of their originary being. After death, the *'abandoning of the grave'* ceremony returns humans to the forest." (Dournes, 2018, p. 12). The forest is not only space but also time: years are reckoned by the seasons of "eating the forest," i.e., burning to make swiddens. Seasons and years are counted by the field cycle.

Yet fields, villages, and forest are not clearly demarcated; one part of the forest may become field or village and vice versa. Consequently, oral narratives tend to be deterritorialization, what Condominas terms "bounded social space". The underlying reason is the pervasive practice of "eating the forest": "Everywhere, in the middle valley of the Srepok tributary, one finds the same tools, agricultural calendars, houses, kinship systems, patterns of affinal relations, political organization, legal rules and customs, worldview, rituals, oral literature—all alike; and also one language with closely related dialects; and though faces vary, there is a 'family resemblance' in physique, especially in bodily gesture… Daily life unfolds within the territorial bounds of each village. In that life, each person clears and cultivates swiddens with fellow villagers, migrating seasonally; they live in a longhouse built with others at a

site to be abandoned after a few years (never more than seven), shifting within the same region where there is game, fish, forest vegetables, timber and firewood, and raw materials for crafts. Grave dangers may be encountered when seeking these resources beyond village limits" (Condominas, 2003, p. 55).

In the epics, depictions of forest as living environment abound. The forest is the natural setting of the Central Highlands and the repository of a desire to shake hands with nature, join forces with nature to build a better, more prosperous life, while also expressing an Eastern sensibility of quiet attunement to nature, wherein the human bond with nature is dialogic and communicative; equilibrium and harmony among all beings constitute a spiritual need in the cosmos (Tran, 2001, p. 111). This is what Tran Tu terms "Highland humanism". This perspective resonates with Descola's (2021) observation that animistic societies extend social relations to non-human entities, treating plants, animals, and natural phenomena as interlocutors rather than mere resources.

Within the symbolic system of the forest, trees recur not only with high frequency but also as polysemous symbols. In the Ede epics (khan), the cosmic tree is emphasized as a towering axis linking sky and earth (Dam San once ascends to the heavens by climbing a great banyan and fig tree; Xing Nha searches for a giant tree to fashion a shield: "*he reaches the region of Mrs. Ho But and Mrs. Ho Tang weaving cloth; he sees the house of Mother Dung and Mother Dai; he sees the tall kopa and the great kolong whose tops touch the sun*"). Most prevalent is the "life-tree." The Smuk sacred tree in "The Epic of Dam San" holds the life of the sisters Ho Nhi and Ho Bhi. In "The Epic of Xing Nha", the life-tree appears more implicitly, suffusing speech and thought. The Ede view human growth as akin to the growth of a tree; indeed, they often identify the human with the arboreal. A mental world of trees and forest shapes language and symbolism: *I have lost my mother and my father/ Like a tender lotus drowned by flood*; *My lot now is like a banana fruit/ They are puckodang, kopang-fruits with bitter hearts* (i.e., bad-hearted people); *I will follow the road where the banyan lies fallen/ Where the bamboo has snapped - the trodden path of ruin*" (i.e., repeat others' mistakes, meet with failure).

In Homer's "Iliad", Achilles' martial dance with a finely wrought metal shield contrasts with the Ede epics, where shields must be made from mighty trees–virtually "cosmic trees", axes of a three-tiered cosmos. Hence, in the shield duel between Xing Nha and Gia Ro Bu, the latter's metal shield splinters the moment it is raised. Xing Nha's line, "*You are old; then your shield and blade are old*", conveys the vital force believed to inhere in forest-timber weapons, from shields to blades

Thus, arboreal symbols entwine with space; the biological properties of trees correlate with the sacred mystery of the "tree of life".

Beyond reckoning time by "eating the forest", the Ede identify themselves as children of the forest. In the Mpuh festival—a rite of passage for youth—ritual actions bear the imprint of the forest. At daybreak, the young man rises, dons his finest *aokirnut* (traditional men's shirt), ties his most beautiful *kopikotet* (loincloth), and wraps the softest *kopankin* (headscarf). He wears buffalo-hide sandals—the very pair used by ancestors to traverse forest and cut thatch—and slings a water gourd over his shoulder. After bathing at the village spring, he returns to the house and approaches the stair. Two banana trees have been planted there; he slices through the right one with a single stroke of his sword, then the left (bananas here symbolize the enemy's life). His blade is sharp; his hand, steady. He ascends the stair. Waiting is his mother—the mother of the swidden. She greets "the son of the fields" returned from afar and asks: "*Greetings, my son! From where do you come? Have you fought eastward and danced shields westward and returned victorious?*" He replies: "*Greetings, Mother, mother of the Ede forested land. As you say: I have tested my sword; the big trees have fallen; the small trees have toppled. I have danced the shield from west, wielded the sword from east. I bring glory to you*". All hear the good words between the mother of the forested land and the son of the swidden. In the unique "abandoning of the grave" ceremony—rich in spiritual meanings—the household

summons people to fell trees, carve, and sculpt to build the grave house and the kut, klao posts. All is done in the forest and carried straight to the grave (Le, 1995, pp. 43–78).

The forest's dual aspect appears in the human distinction between inhabited land and forest, inside and outside, even though boundaries are flexible and reversible: village can become forest and vice versa. The forest appears in the house itself—in all utensils, in the timbered house, in the firewood hearth. This is a vegetal civilization. Women collect firewood at the forest's edge; children herd buffalo a bit farther out; men hunt in the deep forest. The forest belongs to no individual; it belongs to the community, although the first person to discover a tree may fell it but must perform a thanksgiving rite. Things taken from the forest are imbued with sacredness and must be ritually "de-sacralized." Oral tales recount maidens lost in the forest being nurtured by an old couple—who are tigers. Here, women do not simply reside "in" the forest; rather, the forest is the setting of human life. The maiden lost in the forest meets tiger and deer and ultimately marries the sun—subjugating and mastering nature. Dournes explains: "When a person is in the forest—whether in reality or imagination—if physically strong, he is a hunter; if psychically strong, he is a shaman. If physically weak, he dies by tiger; if psychically weak, he may become ordinary or die. At times he couples with a girl/sister—the oblique evocation of incest—drawing him near to mythic heroines; 'pregnancy in the forest' may conceal incest, in any case suggesting a biological bond between woman and forest. As for women, we see them in the forest only in myths, and then we know what will occur: if aggressive, she is devoured; if sensitive, she befriends the powers" (Dournes, 2018, p. 287).

2. The Forest as Sacred Space Bound to Belief in the Spirit World

First, the forest is the abode of spirits. In the myths of many groups, deities who create the world are forest gods—differing from Western myths of God or Zeus in the heavens. "From the forest, the Forest Deity brought forth the Dakbin and Hang Krong streams. From the sky, Giang sent down the Krong Na and Krong No rivers. A man named Hgiang Ye Kon Tang, seeing villagers in dire hardship, devised an offering of a chicken and a jar of rice wine. He led everyone into the forest to sacrifice to Giang with a chicken, a jar of wine, and a fire-stone. All prayed while burning trees to make fields… From then on, people had rice to eat. But abundance depends on each person: those who 'sacrifice big' (i.e., work much) have much rice; those who 'sacrifice little' have little; and those who do not sacrifice have nothing to eat" (Nguyen, H. V. et al., 2006, p.21). "When a suitable site is chosen, land-seekers pray to the Earth Deity and invoke the ancestors—Grandfather Spirit, Grandmother Spirit, Father Spirit, Mother Spirit, the Forest Spirit, and the Great Tree Spirit" (To, 2003, p. 160).

The forest is not only the sacred domain of beasts and plants but also the dwelling of yang (spirits), as real as trees and tigers. Spirits may manifest of a rock, a tree, or a tiger. Humans generate terrors and deities to warn themselves not to stray too far, while devising propitiatory means to appease spirits and exorcise forest demons (Dournes, 2018, p. 30). When illness, possession, or madness is attributed to forest spirits beyond the remedies of diviners or herbalists, shamans are called to summon deities to converse with the afflicted; the spirits then prescribe offerings and rites for healing. The people hold reverent faith toward the forest and its resident deities: "Highlands residents live in close relation with mountains and forests; thus, their environmental norms revolve around that relation. Life bound to the forest yields deep knowledge of, respect for, and sustainable use of forests without destruction or sacrilege. One may say Central Highlands culture is a mountain-forest culture" (Nguyen, 2005, p. 168). Condominas notes the Mnong phrase "*hii saa bri*" ("we eat the forest") describing a year in which semi-nomadic swiddeners have no way to break the flow of time except by spatial markers–the tracts of forest they cut, burn, and sow each year (Condominas, 2003, p. 11); "the high, dense forest is the abode of spirits, where the swiddeners' axes never fall" (Condominas, 2003, p. 19). Among the Xo Teng of Tu Mo Rong district (Kon Tum province), young men periodically perform a "forest-shooting" rite in

a sacred grove, firing arrows into the roots of great trees–affirming sacred protection. Like other groups, after four or five years of cultivation, they move to new forest to open fields; after about ten years, they may return—the cycle enabling forest regeneration. When burning fields, they guard the fire to prevent spread to the forest. Living with the forest, they exploit and conserve its bounty. Within it dwell both benevolent and malevolent spirits. The Mnong recognize evil spirits such as Ndu in the mountains, who raises whirlwinds and seizes buffalo souls; and Ntoch in springs and waterfalls. If a burn inadvertently ignites a grove inhabited by malevolent spirits, thereby offending them and incurring sickness or misfortune, propitiatory rites are required (To, 2003, p. 269).

Second, faith in forest spirits appears not only in myth but also in customary law and practical comportment toward deities: "Grandparents Po Xebadiec and their Raglai descendants: The Cham are skilled traders; the Kinh excel at study and calculation; the Raglai toil on swiddens and do not know how to build houses–so they seek counsel from Po Xebadiec, creators of all things. The grandparents instruct them to cut forest trees to build houses. The Raglai go and fell all trees, small and large, crooked and straight. Hearing the noise, the grandparents tell them to cut only large and straight trees, leaving the small and crooked ones" (Le et al., 2006, p. 18). Consequently, a rich trove of proverbs and sayings functions as sub-legal customary codes for instructing descendants in forest conduct: "*Do not consort with another's spouse/ Do not cut old or sacred forest"* (Dieu Kau, 2010, p. 44); "*Do not clear fields in sacred groves/ Do not poison fish in streams with guardian spirits/ Do not fell trees on mountains with guardian spirits"* (Dieu Kau, 2010, p. 84); "*Do not go alone into old forest/ Do not cross unfamiliar streams alone"* (Dieu Kau, 2010, p. 85).

In any undertaking, they announce and invoke forest deities:

"Where lurks the evil forest spirit?
Where lurks the evil stream spirit?
Where is the sacred banyan spirit?
The evil forest spirit we pierce with a spear,
The evil stream spirit we poison with the deng plant,
The evil Briang spirit we bind with young rattan."

(Dieu Kau, 2010, p. 12)

In a harvest rite, they pray to the forest spirits:

"O you Ji, Jung, Mium, Miam, and Kram!
We also pray to the mothers of Ju and Black, to Hdla and Hkra!
You who are far away, let it pass! Forget it! Do not regret!
Here are a wine jar and a chicken we offer you, in this forest; let it pass – do not withhold!
Eat the chicken's heart; drink this jar of wine!
Be generous to the Jarai! Do not harm them; do not be angry with us; do not be enraged!
Take pity on our households and grant us rice and maize!"

(Dournes, 2018, p. 293)

(Ji and Jung are tiger deities – the tiger identified with the forest spirit).

In the *epics-khan*, gods may dwell above (in Xing Nha, the deity Gon is in the sky), but to reach that realm, heroes must pass through the forest. Dam San is famed for his ascents to the heavens. The first time, pursuing Ho Nhi's elephant, "*it keeps going into the forest. It goes until it stops beneath a banyan and fig tree*", Dam San grasps a vine whose blossoms shoot skyward; he grows weary and dozes upon the branch, and his soul flies up to Heaven. In his final quest to seize the Sun Goddess, he traverses the black-earth forest of Lady Sun Y Rit and dies there on his return. In *epic-khan* "Xing Nha", the house of Gon is "in the kopang forest." The *epic-khan* "Xing Nha" strongly embodies the fusion of divinity with nature–the identification of deities with the natural world. Thus Xing Nha's spinning-top wreaks havoc in the divine realm as in the human: "*The top flies to the house of god Điu Điê, past the house of a husbandless widow; it snaps the breasts of the long-breasted woman; when it slides under the house of Bora Tang, it hushes a spot.*"

Folktales likewise position the forest as a locus of rites, as V. Propp observed. In most Ede tales, the forest initiates the heroes' adventures (e.g., Ho Kung and Y Du; Go Ran Do

Hong; Bun Lo and Tac Ty; Seven Brothers and ARe; Y Tan and Y Man). But if the folktale follows an individual of humble, unfortunate origin seeking happiness, the epic narrates the deeds of a heroic figure embodying communal strength–endowed with extraordinary mobility through horizontal and vertical spaces. Hence, in epics the forest is less a barrier, as in folktales, than a symbol of the sacred. Even in folktales, reaching the divine realm requires the forest: "*Ngo leads her husband through many forests and mountains to the domain of Mother Dung and Mother Dai – with long breasts and big ears–who guard children's souls. The couple enters the dwellings of the deities Motao Tolua and Kobua Lan*" ("Ngo and Rit"). "*Y Tan and Y Man, half-glad and half-afraid, seek the eastern forest. That is a sacred forest—a forest of deities—where none has dared to go*."

We may conclude that the sacralization of forest space—its spiritual valence—reflects how Central Highlands peoples (and ancient peoples generally) conceive space. As V. Propp noted in probing the historical roots of the folktale: characters "wandering everywhere" inevitably enter dense, dark forests. The forest is a fixed attribute accompanying Baba Yaga. Even in tales without Yaga, male or female protagonists rarely avoid the forest. Whether prince, disowned daughter, or clever soldier—the adventure begins there. The forest is never near; it is dense, shadowed, and uncanny. It is almost impassable. In folktales, the forest functions as obstacle while also preserving memories of ritual sites and serving as passage into the underworld.

3. The Forest as Livelihood and Source of Life

As noted, the Central Highlands' civilization is vegetal; the forest is bound to livelihoods and sustenance. Unlike Western epics where battlefields dominate heroic action, Central Highlands epics depict quotidian social spaces—heroes embedded in everyday labor. In *epic-khan* "Dam Di", *epic-khan* "Dam San", entire villages venture into the forest to cut cane and rattan: "A hundred clear the way in front; a thousand follow behind – some bearing torches, others carrying machetes and hooks. They go from afternoon to morning, from dense thickets to sparse woods" (Nguyen, 1988, p. 197). The forest is where heroes and villagers hunt and gather. Dam San captures Ho Nhi's elephant deep in the forest. In Dam Di's village, "people scatter across mountains and forests…some gather vegetables in hollows, some catch fish in streams, some shoot birds in the woods" (N. A., Y. D., 1967, p. 101).

L. Sabatier—the first to collect and introduce the Ede epics—was fascinated to find "many episodes and lyrical qualities that shape the beauty of primitive epics" in "the occupation of swiddening and the Ede's solicitous care for their fields, for they live by and for their fields" (as cited in Nguyen, 1988, p. 38). Condominas describes swidden agriculture: "For forest people, rice production occupies nearly the entire year, with periods of arduous labor—such as clearing (moih), leaving land fallow for ten to twenty years to allow large trees to grow and produce much ash—or especially strenuous tasks like burning the felled forest (chuu ntoih)". Hence swiddens grow not only rice but also maize, beans, vegetables, and tubers—especially the yam, cultivated before rice and still used in rites of field possession. Partially burned trunks become principal firewood. Another cultivated space is the old village site, now reforested—more a place where former crops (chili, eggplant, etc.) regrow than a formal garden. He stresses the forest as pantry: "People usually gather in groups, going into the forest for half a day, in numbers to ensure safety on the road… In any case, gathering and fishing trips are always cheerful occasions. The aim is to find food—but to do so enjoyably" (Condominas, 2003, pp. 191–192).

The epics memorialize livelihoods through merry expeditions to cut rattan with heroes and villagers. Phrases evoking labor in the forest are ubiquitous:

"Clear field borders, fell big trees
Feet in the forest, hands in the field
Chili and pepper like forest weeds
Banana groves like forest trees
Gather leaves and collect firewood
Work the fields in the morning, snare birds in the evening."

The teeming biodiversity of the forest

supplies a rich repertoire of imagery for epic aesthetics.

The natural world and forest produce become aesthetic standards in epic description. In *epic-khan* "Xing Nha", Bora Tang beholds Xing Nha: "*skin of bronze-brown, hair black as a coal snake, eyes sparkling like the eyes of a honeybee, stride powerful and undulating like waves*." Xing Nha gazes at Bora Tang: "*calves round as taro petioles, thighs white as ivory, waist slender as a golden ant's, breasts like swelling pots, buttocks like birds' eggs, fingers plump as feathers, gait more measured than a tusked bull, more supple than a cow's curling trunk*." The beauty of Hobia Blao enthralls Xing Nha: "*Her breasts incline, arching her back, gentle as a sugar-cane frond… Her glossy black chignon is lovelier than a koʼđơn bird's egg falling upon that cane-arched back; her pot-curved breasts upon an ant-slender waist. Her neck is dewy and sleek, fairer than the bronze ring on a knife's hilt. Hobia Blao circles the field to shoo grain-eating birds; upon returning to the hut, her breasts are wet with morning dew, fresh as the newly risen sun*". Epic figures embody the vigor of people laboring amid nature, carrying nature's vitality. Forest imagery also saturates inner life and feeling. Self-descriptions of girls: "*Feet in the forest, hands in the field/ Girls carry baskets; elders carry panniers/ My skin is black as a burned field stump.*" Tokens of wooing and quarrel: "*Wait for me by the leaning kope, the tall koring, when Dam Di's kapok blooms red/ The coop hen leaves the village; the wild hen leaves the cave; the epang blossoms have come– will epang and ering wither in the sun? Is your heart truly mine?"*–all redolent of a civilization of gathering and hunting.

In folktales, cultural life is steeped in the mountain-forest atmosphere of the Central Highlands: the ringing of gongs, the mystery of festivals and ancestral customs—sacrifices at the village spring, rites to Giang, basket weaving, wood-splitting, rattan cutting (e.g., the hero Wild Buffalo). In "Y Tol Len and Ho Bia", Ho Bia selects a husband via a mango-shooting contest; Y Tol Len wins and gives the mango to Ho Bia, who conceives. Accused of fornication, Ho Bia's family is confined in a drum. In "Ndrok and Ok", a tale explains sibling marriage—a vestige of primitive exogamy: the younger brother drinks water from a bamboo tube in the forest and a pregnancy ensues; the village condemns incest; the child is a calf by day and human by night; later he helps his parents become wealthy. These lives—unlucky individuals on the quest for happiness—display fine moral qualities and yearn for transformative destiny, expressing the people's humane and optimistic outlook. Beneath the marvelous adventures lie communal norms, customs, and comportment—lending depth and interest to Mnong folktales.

Conclusion

In their relations with the natural world, the Central Highlands ethnic communities articulate a worldview and ethos embodied in a corpus of myths, folktales, epics, proverbs, and customary law. At the core lies an understanding of the parity of human and nature; no rigid opposition between civilization and wilderness, house and forest, human and deity. A mode of conduct that is at once harmonious and symbiotic—familiar yet reverent, exploitative yet protective—marks the cultural beauty of these indigenous peoples. This inheres not only in everyday behaviors, habits, and productive practices but is also transmitted through folklore, generating indigenous knowledge, experience, and tradition.

The study contributes to existing scholarship in three ways: it demonstrates that the Western nature–culture dichotomy does not apply to Central Highlands indigenous communities; it provides a comprehensive, cross-genre analysis of forest symbolism—spanning myths, epics (*khan*), folktales, proverbs, ritual incantations, and customary law—that previous single-genre studies have not achieved; and it offers empirical support for Descola's (2021) framework of non-dualistic ontologies by showing how animistic conceptions of the human–nature relationship are systematically encoded in these oral traditions.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The analysis relies primarily on published compilations rather than original fieldwork recordings, which may introduce

interpretive layers. The study focuses predominantly on the Ede, Jarai, and Mnong traditions, with less attention to other groups such as the Ba Na, Xo Dang, and Co Ho. It also does not address how contemporary socioeconomic changes—deforestation, resettlement, urbanization—are transforming living oral traditions in real time.

Future research should pursue fieldwork-based studies collecting oral performances in their living contexts, comparative analyses of forest symbolism across Southeast Asian indigenous traditions, and interdisciplinary work combining literary analysis with ecological science to explore how indigenous knowledge encoded in oral traditions might inform contemporary forest conservation policy in Vietnam's Central Highlands.

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