

Household Serpents, Sacred Groves: Domestic and Landscape Ecologies of the Snake-Taboo in Lithuanian and Malayali Folk Tradition

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Abstract:

This article compares two snake-centred folk traditions that encode ecological restraint through narrative and ritual taboo: the Lithuanian cult of the household grass snake (*žaltys*) crystallised in the wonder tale *Eglė žalčių karalienė* ("Eglė, the Queen of Serpents"), and the Malayali tradition of *sarpakāvu* — serpent-dedicated sacred groves — practised in Kerala, South India. Reading both traditions through Hubert Zapf's model of literature as cultural ecology and Fikret Berkes's concept of traditional ecological knowledge, the article argues that the snake-killing taboo functions in both cultures as a folk-ecological code: a narratively and ritually enforced restraint on human conduct toward a keystone animal, operating at two different scales — the domestic interior in Lithuania, the landscape-scale grove in Kerala. The comparison suggests that "ecological justice," rather than being a modern critical imposition on old material, is already latent in the structuring taboos of both traditions, even where the two cultures diverge sharply in how they resolve the human–serpent bond.

Keywords: ecocriticism, folklore, Baltic mythology, sacred groves, Kerala, cultural ecology, animal bridegroom, taboo

1. Introduction

Few animals occupy as ambivalent a place in the human imagination as the snake: legless and voiceless, moving between the visible world and the hidden crevice, the burrow, the water's edge, it has served across cultures as a figure of the boundary — between life and death, house and wild, human and non-human. That ambivalence has made the snake an unusually productive site for what ecocritics now call "cultural ecology": the study of how imaginative and ritual texts negotiate, and sometimes actively regulate, the relationship between a human community and its environment (Zapf 7-8, 28). This article examines two folk traditions in which the snake is not merely symbolic but load-bearing — where narrative and everyday practice together enforce a taboo against killing the animal, and where that taboo demonstrably shapes the surrounding ecology.

The first tradition is Lithuanian: the household veneration of the *žaltys*, or grass snake, sacred to the sun goddess Saulė, and its narrative correlate in *Eglė žalčiū karalienė*, the best-known tale in the Lithuanian folk corpus, classified in the international tale-type index as ATU 425M, "The Snake as Bridegroom" (Uther 254). The second is South Indian: the *sarpakāvu* tradition of Kerala, in which small forest patches attached to ancestral households are set aside for serpent deities (*nāga*) and protected by a comparable taboo against harming the grove or its inhabitants (Murugan et al. 455-62; Freeman 257-302). Both traditions are frequently mentioned in passing in survey literature on snake symbolism, but they have not, to this author's knowledge, been read together as two structurally related solutions to the same problem: how a culture narrates and ritualises restraint toward a feared and ecologically significant animal. The comparison is worth making because the two traditions operate at different scales — one domestic, one territorial — and because one survives chiefly as narrative memory while the other survives as an active, measurable conservation practice. Held side by side, they let us ask what a "folk-ecological code" actually does, and whether its narrative form (the wonder tale) and its ritual form (the grove cult) are functionally interchangeable or whether the difference in form changes what ecological work the taboo can perform.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Cultural Ecology and the Ecocritical Turn in Folklore Studies

Hubert Zapf's *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts* provides the most influential recent framework for reading literary texts as participants in, rather than mere commentators on, the ecological systems of a culture. Zapf proposes a "triadic functional model" in which literature performs three interlocking operations: a culture-critical metadiscourse that exposes the narrowing and exclusions of a dominant cultural system; an imaginative counter-discourse that gives voice and form to what that system marginalises, including the non-human; and a reintegrative interdiscourse that reconnects the excluded material to the wider cultural conversation (95-115). Although Zapf develops the model primarily through canonical American fiction — Hawthorne, Melville, Chopin, Faulkner, Morrison — its central claim, that imaginative texts can function as a kind of ecological organ within culture, translates well to folk narrative, where the "counter-discourse" of the non-human voice (the talking snake, the speaking animal) is a structural constant rather than a modernist innovation.

Folkloristics has been slower than literary studies to take up this framework systematically, but the animal-bridegroom tale type has recently become a testing ground for it. Per Esben Svelstad's study of ATU 425 tales — including the Grimms' "Das singende springende Löweneckerchen" alongside "Beauty and the Beast" and a Spanish lizard-bridegroom tale — argues that these tales are best read not simply as allegories of psychosexual maturation but as narratives that stage and negotiate the terms of human-nonhuman relation, with the animal bridegroom's body functioning as contested ecological territory rather than mere disguise. Svelstad's corpus does not include Baltic material, which leaves an opening this article addresses directly.

2.2 Baltic Mythology and the Scholarship on *Eglė žalčių karalienė*

The foundational English-language scholarship on Lithuanian mythology remains Marija Gimbutas's archaeological survey *The Balts*, whose chapter on religion documents the material evidence — snake-headed fibulae, snake-headed hoes, amulets — for a widespread pre-Christian serpent cult among the Baltic peoples (179-204). Algirdas Julien Greimas's structuralist study *Of Gods and Men: Studies in Lithuanian Mythology* (originally *Apie dievus ir žmones*) reconstructs the pantheon and its associated narrative logic from the fragmentary evidence of folk song (the *dainos*), chronicle accounts, and tale collections, situating the žaltys cult within a broader Baltic cosmology organised around Saulė, Perkūnas, and the underworld figure Velnias (362). On the tale itself, the Lithuanian folklorist Gintaras Beresnevičius's monograph "*Eglė žalčių karalienė*" *ir lietuvių teogoninis mitas* treats the narrative as a fragment of a lost Lithuanian theogonic myth rather than a simple wonder tale (41-42, 141-143), a reading that has influenced subsequent treatments of the tale's ending — the mass transformation of Eglė and her children into trees — as an origin myth for the forest itself rather than a moralising punishment. What this body of scholarship has not done, and what the present article attempts, is to bring the žaltys material into conversation with the very different, but structurally cognate, literature on Indian sacred-grove ecology.

2.3 Sacred Groves, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, and Nāga Worship in Kerala

The scholarly study of Indian sacred groves as functioning conservation systems begins with Madhav Gadgil and V. D. Vartak's landmark survey of the Western Ghats, which documented groves protected by local taboo across Maharashtra and established the now-standard definition of the sacred grove as a patch of forest in which even the removal of dead wood is prohibited by the presiding deity's sanction (152-60). Fikret Berkes's *Sacred Ecology: Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Resource Management* later generalised this insight into a cross-cultural framework, arguing that traditional ecological knowledge operates simultaneously as species-specific local knowledge, as a practical resource-management system, as a set of social institutions (rules, taboos, codes of conduct), and as a worldview (13-15) — a four-level model that this article adapts below to compare the Lithuanian and Malayali material directly.

Within Kerala specifically, the anthropologist Rich Freeman's "Gods, Groves and the Culture of Nature in Kerala" offers the fullest cultural account of the *kāvu* system, situating the serpent groves within a wider Malayali cosmology of wilderness, ancestrality, and household land tenure (257-302). Karayat Murugan and colleagues' field survey of Palakkad district groves documents the specific taboos, rituals, and ritual calendar associated with *sarpakāvu* (455-62), while an ecological field study by Felix Landry Yuan and colleagues, working across sacred groves in the Western Ghats, found that 96% of visitors who had encountered a snake inside a sacred grove left it unharmed, compared with only 60% of those who encountered a snake outside grove boundaries — a difference the authors attribute directly to the moral force of serpent-deity worship rather than to incidental unfamiliarity with the animal (111-22). Dinu Das and Arumugam Balasubramanian's case study of the Aadimoolam Vetticode Sree Nagarajaswami temple and S. Raju's earlier semiotic study of *nāgam* narratives in Kerala (37-64) round out the picture with material on the ritual performance forms — *sarpam thullal* (serpent-possession dance) and *pulluvan pattu*

(serpent song) — through which the grove taboo is periodically renewed. No study in this literature engages the Baltic material, and no study of the Baltic žaltys cult engages the Indian sacred-grove literature; the comparative gap is the occasion for this article.

3. Theoretical Framework: Reading the Snake-Taboo as Folk-Ecological Code

Bringing Zapf's cultural ecology together with Berkes's traditional ecological knowledge model yields a working definition for what this article calls a *folk-ecological code*: a culturally transmitted rule, backed by narrative sanction and ritual practice, that regulates human conduct toward a specific element of the non-human environment, and that produces a measurable ecological effect independent of whether the community frames its own practice in ecological terms. Three features distinguish a folk-ecological code from an ordinary superstition or narrative motif.

First, it is *dual-channelled*: it exists simultaneously as story (an account of what happened to someone who broke the rule) and as practice (an ongoing set of observances — feeding, avoidance, seasonal restriction). Second, it is *sanctioned*, typically by a threat of misfortune that falls not only on the individual transgressor but on the household or lineage as a whole, which gives the rule a collective rather than merely personal stake. Third, and most importantly for ecocritical reading, it is *asymmetrical in agency*: the non-human party — the snake — is granted a form of narrative or ritual personhood (it speaks, it is addressed, it is fed, it is asked) that momentarily suspends the anthropocentric hierarchy Zapf identifies as the target of literature's "imaginative counter-discourse" (109). It is this third feature that makes the žaltys and *sarpakāvu* material more than incidental animal lore: both traditions stage a relation in which the human party owes something to the serpent, rather than simply fearing or exploiting it.

Where the two traditions differ, and where the comparison becomes analytically productive rather than merely descriptive, is in the *scale* at which the code operates. The žaltys taboo is domestic: it governs the single household, the hearth corner, the individual animal kept and fed by a family. The *sarpakāvu* taboo is territorial: it governs a bounded patch of land, inherited across generations, whose vegetation as a whole — not a single animal — falls under protection. This difference in scale, I will argue in Section 6, has direct consequences for the kind of ecological work each code has been able to perform into the present day.

4. The Household Serpent: Žaltys and Eglė žalčių karalienė

In pre-Christian and long-surviving folk practice among Lithuanians (and, in cognate forms, other Baltic peoples), the žaltys — the harmless grass snake, *Natrix natrix* — was kept within the home, typically in a corner near the stove or where firewood was stacked, and treated as a guest rather than a pest (Gimbutas 179-204). It was fed milk, addressed directly, and on certain feast days invited to share the family table; its refusal to eat was read as an omen of misfortune, its acceptance as a sign of the household's continued favour. The snake was understood as the sacred animal of Saulė, the sun goddess, and killing one — even accidentally — was believed to bring paralysis, the death of livestock, or the loss of a child upon the household responsible. Encountering a žaltys unexpectedly, by contrast, was read as an auspicious sign, portending a birth or a marriage. The fullest surviving eyewitness account of the practice comes from the

Camaldolese monk Jerome of Prague (Jeronimas Prahiskis; c. 1369 – c. 1440), who spent several years proselytising in Lithuania under Grand Duke Vytautas in the early fifteenth century. Decades later, at the Council of Basel, Jerome recounted his experience to Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini — the future Pope Pius II — who committed the account to writing; the head of each Lithuanian household, Piccolomini reports, kept a snake in a corner of the house, fed it, and made offerings to it, and Jerome ordered the snakes seized and publicly burned as part of his mission (Jerome of Prague, qtd. in Beresnevičius 46; see also Young; Baronas 51-81). The broader Christianisation of Lithuania is separately documented in the fifteenth-century chronicle of the Polish historian Jan Długosz (J. Długošas), who recorded that the formal conversion of Vilnius around 1387 included explicit orders to destroy the household serpents that had previously been venerated as *penates* — household gods (Długosz, qtd. in Beresnevičius 62, 65).

This domestic cult finds its narrative correlate in *Eglė žalčių karalienė*, whose most influential source text is the collection assembled by the nineteenth-century folklorist Mečislovas Davainis-Silvestraitis, who gathered several hundred tales, songs, and charms in the Raseiniai region between 1883 and 1890, later published in full as *Pasakos, sakmės, oracijos*. In the tale's most widely collected form, the youngest of three sisters bathing in the sea (in some regional variants, a lake) finds a grass snake coiled in her clothing on the shore; the snake speaks with a human voice and will not return her garments until she promises to marry him. After three days, a procession of serpents arrives to claim the bride, and — following a folkloric sequence common to the wider "search for the lost husband" tale type (ATU 425) — the family's attempts to substitute a goose, a sheep, and finally a heavily dressed cow for Eglė are each detected and rejected before Eglė herself departs with her serpent bridegroom, Žilvinas, to his kingdom beneath the sea. There she lives for nine years and bears four children before asking to visit her family; Žilvinas grants leave only after she completes several near-impossible household tasks (spinning silken thread, wearing out iron shoes, baking a cake with no utensils), tasks she succeeds at only with the help of an old woman she meets along the way — herself a folkloric double for the wise-woman or witch figure common to the type. Before she leaves, Žilvinas teaches her the secret call by which she may summon him from the sea, on condition she reveal it to no one; her sons keep the secret under torture, but her youngest daughter betrays it. Eglė's brothers use the call to lure Žilvinas ashore and kill him with scythes; when Eglė returns to the shore and calls him herself, only a foam of blood answers. In grief, she transforms her children into trees — an oak, an ash, a birch, a trembling aspen — and finally transforms herself into a spruce (*eglė*, which is also her own name), the tale thereby doubling as an origin story for the forest itself.

Two features of the tale bear directly on the ecological reading proposed here. First, the taboo structure of the domestic žaltys cult is transposed, in the tale, from the scale of a single kept animal to the scale of marriage and kinship: the violation is not the killing of a passive household guest but the murder of a fully personified serpent-king, and the punishment falls not on an individual but, again, on the household as a collective — Eglė's own family is permanently deprived of her and her children, who pass out of the human community altogether. Second, the resolution of the tale enacts precisely the "reintegrative interdiscourse" Zapf identifies as literature's third ecological function: the human family, having broken faith with the non-human world, does not simply suffer punishment but is itself reabsorbed into the non-human — Eglė's individual grief becomes collective arboreal memory, and the forest that surrounds every

Lithuanian village becomes, in this reading, a standing reminder of a broken interspecies contract. The tale's continued vitality — it survives in many regional variants across Lithuania and remains, by most accounts, the best-known tale in the national folk corpus — suggests that this reintegrative logic remained culturally legible and worth retelling long after the literal household serpent cult had receded under Christian pressure.

5. The Grove Serpent: Nāga Worship and *Sarpakāvu* in Kerala

Where the Lithuanian material survives chiefly as narrative and antiquarian memory, the Malayali tradition of *sarpakāvu* survives, in diminished but still active form, as lived practice. A *sarpakāvu* — literally "abode of the snake" in Malayalam — is a small patch of forest, typically attached to an ancestral household compound (*tharavadu*), dedicated to one or more serpent deities and governed by a comparable taboo: entry is restricted outside ritual occasions, felling trees or removing vegetation is prohibited on pain of misfortune to the family (traditionally specified as blindness, leprosy, or the loss of progeny), and the grove's serpent inhabitants — whether literal snakes or the deity they represent — may not be harmed (Murugan et al. 455-62). Historically, such groves were near-universal among landed Nair and Namboodiri households across Kerala. A 2015 report by the Kerala State Assembly Committee on Forest and Environment found that the state's roughly ten thousand sacred groves at the time of its 1956 formation had been reduced to approximately twelve hundred, chiefly through land pressure and the breakup of joint-family landholding ("Sacred Groves of Kerala").

The ritual apparatus surrounding the *sarpakāvu* is considerably more elaborate than the Lithuanian household cult, reflecting its territorial rather than purely domestic scale. Offerings of milk, rice powder, and turmeric (*nūrum pālum*) are made to stone or wooden images of *nāga* deities — Nāgarāja, Nāgayakṣi, and a range of regionally named serpent forms — housed within the grove; certain groves suspend worship altogether during the months in which grass snakes lay their eggs, an observance that functions, whatever its stated rationale, as a de facto breeding-season protection measure. Periodic renewal of the grove's sanctity is performed through ritual arts specific to serpent worship, including *sarpam thullal*, a possession dance performed chiefly by women invoking the serpent deity, and *pulluvan pattu*, narrative songs recounting the mythology of the resident *nāga* sung by members of the Pulluvan community, traditionally the ritual specialists associated with serpent worship in central Kerala (Murugan et al. 455-62; Das and Balasubramanian).

Unlike the Lithuanian material, the ecological consequence of the Kerala taboo has been directly measured. Gadgil and Vartak's foundational survey established that sacred groves across the Western Ghats preserve forest vegetation in something close to climax, undisturbed condition, making them, in many regions, the only remaining fragments of pre-clearance forest type (152-60). More specifically for the serpent-dedicated groves, Landry Yuan and colleagues' field study of *sarpakāvu* visitors found that the overwhelming majority of respondents who had encountered a snake inside a sacred grove had left it unharmed, compared with a substantially lower rate of restraint reported for snakes encountered outside grove boundaries — a difference the authors attribute directly to the moral force of serpent-deity worship rather than to incidental unfamiliarity with the animal (111-22). Read against Rich Freeman's account of

the *kāvu* as embodying, within Malayali cosmology, a controlled fragment of primordial wilderness set against cultivated household land (257-302), the *sarpakāvu* thus emerges as a taboo system whose narrative and cosmological content — the serpent deity's residence, its hunger, its capacity for retribution — has continued to do quantifiable ecological work well into the twenty-first century, even as the total area under such protection has sharply declined.

6. Comparative Analysis: Domestic and Landscape Ecologies of the Taboo

Set beside one another, the *žaltys–Eglė* complex and the *sarpakāvu* complex share a structural core that justifies treating them as variants of a single folk-ecological code, while differing in ways that illuminate what scale does to a taboo's ecological reach.

Structural parallels. In both traditions, the serpent is granted a form of address and reciprocity unusual for a feared animal: it is fed (milk, in both cases specifically), it is spoken to, and its response — accepting food, remaining undisturbed — is read as a barometer of the household's standing with the non-human world. In both, transgression is punished collectively rather than individually: the *žaltys*-killer's household suffers the loss of a child or livestock; the *sarpakāvu*-violator's family is threatened with blindness or the loss of progeny. In both, the taboo is renewed through periodic ritual performance rather than left to reflex habit — the Lithuanian invitation to the table on feast days, the Malayali *sarpam thullal* and seasonal restriction on entry. And in both, a foundational narrative — the *Eglė* tale on one side, the *pulluvan pattu* serpent songs recounting a given grove's resident deity on the other — supplies the taboo's justifying myth, so that the ritual practice and the story are, as proposed in Section 3, genuinely dual-channelled rather than merely parallel phenomena.

Structural divergence. The most consequential difference is scale, and it produces divergent fates for the two traditions. Because the *žaltys* cult was pegged to a single kept animal within an individual dwelling, its taboo could not survive the disappearance of the practice of keeping snakes indoors; once Christianisation suppressed the literal household cult, the ecological content of the taboo had nowhere to persist except in narrative, where it survives today only as literary and folkloric memory, with no measurable effect on Lithuania's actual grass-snake population. The *sarpakāvu* taboo, by contrast, was pegged not to an individual animal but to a bounded parcel of land inherited across generations; even as the underlying belief system has weakened under the same broad pressures of modernisation and land fragmentation, the taboo's object — the grove itself — has in many cases physically persisted long enough for its ecological effects to remain measurable by contemporary field researchers (Landry Yuan et al. 111-22). In Zapf's terms, one might say that the Lithuanian tradition retained only the culture-critical and imaginative functions of the triadic model — the tale still stages the cost of broken faith with the non-human, and still asks the reader to imagine the serpent's perspective — while losing the reintegrative function, the actual reweaving of the taboo back into everyday land practice. The Malayali tradition, though eroding, has to a significant degree retained all three.

A second divergence concerns gender and inheritance. The *žaltys* cult and its narrative correlate route the human-serpent bond through marriage and female reproductive labour: it is a daughter who is bound by promise, who bears the serpent-king's children, and who ultimately absorbs the family's guilt into her own

arboreal transformation. The *sarpakāvu* system, by contrast, routes the bond through patrilineal land tenure: the grove belongs to the *tharavadu*, the ancestral house, and its serpent deity is inherited along with the land itself, its worship traditionally maintained by the family's senior women but its territorial claim vested in lineage property rather than individual marriage. This difference suggests that where a folk-ecological code attaches to reproductive kinship, it risks becoming vulnerable to the same forces that erode oral narrative transmission generally, whereas a code attached to land tenure, however eroded, retains a physical anchor — the grove itself — that can outlast the erosion of the belief system that first produced it.

7. Conclusion

Reading the Lithuanian household serpent cult and the Malayali sacred-grove tradition together clarifies something that a single-culture study of either tradition on its own does not fully bring into view: that "ecological justice," in Zapf's cultural-ecological sense, is not a modern interpretive lens imposed retroactively on innocent old material, but a structural feature already at work in how both cultures organised narrative and ritual around a feared, ecologically significant animal. Both traditions grant the serpent a form of personhood — address, hunger, capacity for offence — that momentarily suspends an otherwise anthropocentric relationship to the non-human world, and both back that suspension with collective sanction rather than mere individual superstition. What differs, decisively, is the scale at which the taboo was pegged, and that difference has determined which tradition survives today chiefly as literature and which survives, more precariously but more consequentially, as land.

This comparison opens two directions for further work. The first is textual: a fuller account of Lithuanian *dainos* (folk songs) referencing the *žaltys*, set beside the *pulluvan pattu* corpus, might allow a more granular comparison of how each tradition's shorter ritual-narrative forms — as distinct from the fully elaborated wonder tale — encode the same taboo. The second is comparative-ecological: given that the *sarpakāvu* system has already been the subject of direct field measurement (Landry Yuan et al. 111-22), a parallel ethno-ecological survey of contemporary Lithuanian attitudes toward the grass snake — a species still present throughout the Baltic states — could test directly whether any measurable trace of the historical taboo persists in present-day behaviour, or whether, as this article's scale-based argument would predict, the domestic form of the code disappeared without ecological remainder once the practice of keeping snakes indoors ceased. Either finding would sharpen what is, at present, a primarily textual and comparative claim into an empirically testable one.

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