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Rooted in Nature: Ecological Ethics in Traditional Vietnamese Folklore

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Introduction

The global ecological crisis demands scientific innovation and a fundamental reevaluation of humanity's moral frameworks. Scholars and environmental thinkers increasingly recognize the necessity of drawing upon diverse sources of knowledge—scientific, philosophical, religious, and traditional—to construct more sustainable and ethical ways of inhabiting the Earth.[1] Among these, folklore represents a vital, though often underexplored, storehouse of ecological wisdom and moral imagination across cultures. Far from mere entertainment, these narratives offer profound insights into humanity's relational entanglement with the natural world, portraying nature not as inert matter but as a sentient, ethically significant presence.[2]

Within this global tradition, Vietnamese folklore offers a distinctive relational cosmology, shaped by millennia of wet rice cultivation, ancestral veneration, and spiritual intimacy with the land.[3] In the Vietnamese folk tales, animals, rivers, trees, and celestial bodies are depicted as active participants in human affairs, capable of

[1] Cf. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim (eds.), *Worldviews and Ecology: Religion, Philosophy, and the Environment* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994); Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, *Ecology and Religion* (Washington: Oriland Press, 2014).

[2] Stith Thompson, *The Folktale* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 13-14; Jack Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 1–5.

[3] Lan T. N. Nguyễn, "The Moral Concepts of Vietnamese People through Stories about People in Animal Forms," *International Journal of Advanced Scientific Research and Management* 9, no. 5 (May 2024): 8-9, https://ijasrm.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/IJASRM_V9S5_1941_07_10.pdf; Quỳnh D. Bùi, "Vietnamese Folklore Seen from an Adult's View," *SSRN*, October 3, 2019.

rewarding virtue, punishing hubris, and imparting principles of balance and reciprocity. Through allegorical storytelling, Vietnamese folktales have historically played a crucial role in moral and ethical formation, embedding values of humility, gratitude, ecological restraint, and communal solidarity within cultural memory.[4]

Beyond preserving cultural identity, Vietnamese folklore holds enduring potential for transmitting ecological values across generations. Its narratives cultivate an ethical vision wherein human flourishing is inseparable from ecological health—a vision highly relevant to contemporary debates on sustainability and environmental ethics. Situating itself within broader discourses on folklore, ecological ethics, and moral imagination, this chapter examines four foundational Vietnamese tales—*Ăn Khế Trả Vàng*, *Sự Tích Trầu Cau*, *Sự Tích Bánh Chưng Bánh Giầy*, and *Sự Tích Chú Cuội Ngồi Gốc Cây Đa*. Through an ecocritical reading, it argues that traditional Vietnamese storytelling offers critical eco-ethical resources capable of informing contemporary efforts to restore humanity's sacred bond with the Earth.

Narrative Analyses

Ăn Khế Trả Vàng (The Golden Star Fruit Tree)

Narrative summary

The tale is about two brothers who divide their inheritance after the death of their parents. The elder brother claims all the wealth, leaving the younger with nothing but a humble star fruit tree. One day, a magical raven comes to eat the fruit and, in return, promises to repay the younger brother with gold from a secret location known only to the bird. Content with this modest but steady reward, the younger brother prospers. When the elder brother learns of his sibling's newfound fortune, he becomes jealous and takes the tree for himself. Driven by greed, he demands more gold than he can carry. As the magical raven attempts to fly him home, the weight becomes too great. Unable to stay aloft, the bird loses balance, and the elder brother falls into the sea.

Symbolism of nature and embedded ecological ethics

The star fruit tree, modest in size and unremarkable in taste, embodies an ethic of humility and sustainable living, thriving modestly within natural bounds rather than in excess. It offers a model of ecological balance, where nature provides abundantly but only within limits. The younger brother's respectful engagement with the tree reflects a harmonious, reciprocal relationship with nature, in contrast to his elder sibling's extractive greed.

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[4] Ngân T. K. Nguyễn, "Vietnamese Religion, Folklore and Literature: Archetypal Journeys from Folktales to Medieval Fantasy Short Stories," *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 7, no. 1 (2020): 2. doi:10.1080/23311983.2020.1847769; Quý T. T. Quý Ngô, "Exploring Culture through Vietnamese Legends," *International Journal of Religion* 5, no. 11 (2024): 4997–5004.

The magical raven is not merely a supernatural element but an ethical force of nature, responding to human character. It rewards gratitude with generosity and punishes greed not out of vengeance, but as a natural consequence of imbalance. The elder brother's fall is not divine retribution, but the logical outcome of violating ecological limits.

Thus, the tale encodes a worldview in which moral and ecological balance are intertwined. Its lesson extends beyond folklore: its warning against overextraction remains relevant in today's climate crisis and environmental degradation.

Relevance to contemporary ecological ethics

The collapse of the elder brother serves as a chilling parable for modern environmental destruction. His downfall, driven by greed and overextraction, mirrors the trajectory of contemporary capitalism, where unlimited consumption is pursued despite its catastrophic costs.[5] This critique echoes Jason Hickel's argument in *Less is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World*, challenging the modern myth that progress depends on perpetual expansion.[6] The younger brother's ethic of *biết đủ* (knowing enough) offers an alternative vision that values moderation, gratitude, and ecological balance over endless accumulation.

This relational model of sustainability also resonates with Robin Wall Kimmerer's call to re-situate humans within nature's circle.[7] Like the magical raven, the natural world responds to human engagement, offering abundance when treated with care but withdrawing when exploited.[8]

Revisiting *Ăn Khế Trả Vàng* today is not merely an act of cultural preservation; it is a moral imperative. In a time of planetary boundaries and ecological overshoot, the tale's call for restraint, reciprocity, and humility grows increasingly urgent, offering ethical wisdom and urging a renewed relationship with the living Earth.

Sự Tích Trầu Cau (The Legend of the Betel and Areca)

Narrative summary

The legend tells of two orphaned brothers who once bonded sincerely and affectionately. After the elder brother marries, the younger senses emotional distance and quietly leaves to avoid disruption. Lost and heartbroken, he dies beside a river and is transformed into a limestone rock. The elder, searching in sorrow, also dies at the spot

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[5] Francis, *Laudato Si' Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), no. 18.

[6] Jason Hickel, *Less is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World* (London: William Heinemann, 2020).

[7] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 179.

[8] Vandana Shiva, *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2005), 22.

and becomes an areca tree. Finally, the grieving wife follows and dies at the same site, becoming a betel vine that lovingly entwines the areca tree. The villagers later seek them but do not find them. Instead, they discover the betel vine clings to the areca tree, standing next to the limestone. They mix three elements, and the mixture becomes red like blood. Moved by the sacred transformation of grief into life, the custom of chewing betel with areca and lime began and eventually became the ritual sanctified by the king to symbolize unity, love, and fidelity in Vietnamese life.

Symbolism of nature and embedded ecological ethics

Sự Tích Trầu Cau is a poignant tale of familial love, quiet grief, and sacred transformation. At its core lies a deep ecological vision: nature does not merely reflect human sorrow—it absorbs, transforms, and sustains it. The limestone, areca tree, and betel vine are not simply symbols of remembrance, but interdependent agents of healing. These three elements, emerging from the characters' deaths, illustrate the interconnectedness and reciprocity inherent in both emotional and ecological systems. The vine depends on the tree to climb; the tree grows beside the stone; the stone anchors them all. This natural triad reflects the ecological ethic of mutual support, where survival and meaning arise not from individual strength but from relational interdependence.

The transformation of human love and grief into natural forms suggests a worldview in which the earth participates in human emotion, offering sanctuary and renewal. This mirrors Indigenous and Vietnamese cosmologies where the landscape is spiritually alive, capable of moral and emotional resonance. The tale reveals that rituals grounded in nature, like betel chewing, are more than cultural traditions: they are acts of ecological remembrance, connecting body, land, and story into one living system.

In this sense, the legend articulates a form of moral ecology: nature is not merely a witness to human life but a memorial, a participant, and a guide. The sacred triad—rock, tree, and vine—embodies the values of love, loyalty, and fidelity not through abstraction but through material, interdependent existence. The chewing of betel becomes a living ritual that reaffirms these values while sanctifying our bond with the earth.

Relevance to contemporary ecological ethics

In an era of ecological fragmentation, climate anxiety, and social disconnection, *Sự Tích Trầu Cau* offers a radical alternative. It portrays nature as a relational presence, capable of holding human memory, sorrow, and love. The tale suggests that ecological healing and emotional restoration are not separate paths but part of the same relational ethic—a worldview in which sustainability is as much spiritual and emotional as it is material.

Robin Wall Kimmerer's notion of a "grammar of animacy"—where landscapes are perceived as active participants in moral life—aptly captures the ethos of this tale.[9] The characters' transformation into plants affirms that human experience is inseparable from the ecosystems surrounding and sustaining us. Traditional rituals such as

[9] Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass,* 54.

betel-chewing thus become ecological acts, embodying fidelity to human kinship and nature.

In contrast to industrial and technocratic worldviews that alienate people from place and reduce nature to a resource, the legend exemplifies a place-based ecological consciousness. David Abram critiques modern societies' detachment from local landscapes, warning that ethical awareness arises only from intimacy with the living land.[10] In this way, *Sự Tích Trầu Cau* offers just such intimacy: the riverbank becomes a sacred site, a moral landscape, and a space of transformation.

The story challenges dominant ecological paradigms by proposing that emotional fidelity, ritual continuity, and environmental interdependence are at the heart of sustainable life. Victor Turner has noted that ritual encodes moral values in bodily practices; chewing betel during weddings or ceremonies is not a nostalgic reenactment but an embodied ecological ethic.[11] It makes love, memory, and nature inseparable.

Far from being a relic of the past, *Sự Tích Trầu Cau* reminds us that true sustainability arises not from domination or innovation but from remembrance, relationship, and reverence. Through its quiet grief and sacred transformation, the legend offers a timeless sustainability vision rooted in the living Earth.

Sự Tích Bánh Chưng Bánh Giầy (The Legend of the Square and Round Cakes)

Narrative Summary

In this Vietnamese legend, the sixth Hùng King challenges his sons to prepare a dish that best expresses gratitude to Heaven and Earth and demonstrates filial piety. While most of the princes pursue rare and exotic ingredients, the youngest son, Lang Liêu—living in poverty—turns to humble, agricultural staples: rice, mung beans, pork, and green leaves. From these, he crafts two symbolic cakes: *Bánh Chưng*, square-shaped to represent the earth, and *Bánh Giầy*, round to symbolize the sky. Impressed by the sincerity and cosmic symbolism of his offering, the king names Lang Liêu his successor. Since then, these two cakes have become central to Vietnamese Lunar New Year traditions, expressing gratitude, ecological balance, and ancestral reverence.

Symbolism of nature and embedded ecological ethics

At the heart of *Sự Tích Bánh Chưng Bánh Giầy* lies a profound ecological vision. Nature is not abstracted or ornamental—it is embodied, honored, and made sacred through food. The cakes created by Lang Liêu are not merely offerings, but cosmological expressions: the square *Bánh Chưng* represents the nurturing earth, and the round *Bánh Giầy* symbolizes the encompassing sky. Their geometric symbolism draws from

[10] David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 22.

[11] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 13.

Vietnamese cosmology and Daoist influences, reflecting a universe governed by balance and relational harmony between Heaven (*Trời*) and Earth (*Đất*).

The Ingredients—glutinous rice, mung beans, pork, and green leaves—are everyday agricultural staples, not rare delicacies. Lang Liêu's choice of these humble items signals a shift in value from extravagance to sufficiency. His cooking is an act of ecological gratitude, where food production honors the land, the seasons, and communal labor. This contrasts sharply with his brothers' pursuit of luxury, mirroring a broader critique of extractivist thinking and overconsumption.

The legend articulates an *ethic of sufficiency*—a principle resonant with the Vietnamese concept of *biết đủ* ("knowing what is enough"). Lang Liêu's culinary creativity is rooted not in domination over nature, but in listening to the land, respecting its rhythms, and offering back with care. His cakes are not crafted for indulgence, but for meaning. Food becomes a sacred medium that binds heaven, earth, ancestors, and the living into a single cycle of reverent exchange.

This symbolic system reframes food not as a commodity, but as cosmology: the making, offering, and eating of *Bánh Chưng* and *Bánh Giầy* are not only festive acts but ritual expressions of ecological ethics. Preparation is slow, communal, and intentional. Consumption is symbolic and seasonal. Therefore, the tale promotes a worldview where sustenance is grounded in gratitude, moderation, and spiritual reciprocity.[12]

Relevance to contemporary ecological ethics

In today's context of environmental degradation, global food injustice, fast food culture, and disconnection from place, *Sự Tích Bánh Chưng Bánh Giầy* offers a compelling critique of industrial food systems and extractive consumption. Lang Liêu's modest yet meaningful offering is a counter-narrative to global consumer culture, often equating value with rarity, speed, and abundance. His actions align with ethical food movements such as agroecology, food sovereignty, and the "Slow Food" movement, emphasizing sustainability, local knowledge, and cultural resilience.[13]

Against the global industrial food chains, Carlo Petrini, founder of the Slow Food Movement, advocates for food systems rooted in ecological and cultural limits.[14] Similarly, Emily A. Frison's research highlights how industrial agriculture, through monocultures and excessive synthetic inputs, leads to pollution and biodiversity loss, including "dead zones" in aquatic systems.[15] Lang Liêu's localized, relational ethic

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[12] Hoa H. Nguyễn and Thương T. H. Nông, "Cultural Code in the Legend of Vietnamese Rice Cakes," *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 27, no. 5 (May 2022): 14.

[13] Miguel A. Altieri, "Agroecology, Small Farms, and Food Sovereignty," *Monthly Review* 61, no. 3 (2009): 102–113. DOI: 10.14452/MR-061-03-2009-07_8; Kyle Powys Whyte, "Indigenous Climate Change Studies: Indigenizing Futures, Decolonizing the Anthropocene," *English Language Notes* 55, nos. 1-2 (Fall 2017): 158.

[14] Carlo Petrini, *Slow Food Nation: Why Our Food Should Be Good, Clean, and Fair, trans. Clara Furlan and Jonathan Hunt* (New York: Rizzoli Ex Libris, 2007), 9.

[15] Emile A. Frison, *From Uniformity to Diversity: A Paradigm Shift from Industrial Agriculture to Diversified Agroecological Systems* (International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems [IPES-Food], 2016), 8-9; 28-30.

thus offers a necessary reimagining: one that values proximity over prestige**,** humility over excess**,** and ritual over commodification**.**

The continued making and sharing of *Bánh Chưng* and *Bánh Giầy* during *Tết* is more than tradition—it is eco-cultural resilience in practice. It sustains *ecological memory*, reaffirms kinship with the land, and embeds environmental ethics into celebration. Echoing this "kincentric worldview," Enrique Salmón reminds us that human beings are not separate from nature but belong to a living community of mutual care.[16] The story affirms that ecological stewardship is technical, spiritual, relational, and embodied.

In contrast to industrialized paradigms that promote consumption and control, *Sự Tích Bánh Chưng Bánh Giầy* offers an ethic grounded in gratitude, ritual, and reverence for the gifts of nature. It reminds us that sustainable living begins with how we eat, remember, and relate—with humility and simplicity.

Sự Tích Chú Cuội Ngồi Gốc Cây Đa **(The Legend of Cuội Sitting at the Banyan Tree)**

Narrative summary

The legend tells of Cuội, a kind-hearted woodcutter, who discovers a miraculous banyan tree with healing powers capable of curing illnesses and reviving the dead. Cuội brings the tree home to help his village, carefully instructing his wife to water it only with pure, clean water. One day, in Cuội's absence, his wife forgets and uses dirty water. The distressed banyan tree uproots itself and begins to ascend to the sky. Cuội rushes to save it, grabbing onto its roots, but he is lifted with it into the heavens. Ever since, Cuội remains eternally with the banyan tree on the moon, gazing down at the Earth he left behind. The story is traditionally retold during the Mid-Autumn Festival (*Tết Trung Thu*), when families look at the full moon and remember Cuội's devotion and longing.

Symbolism of nature and embedded ecological ethics

The banyan tree holds deep cultural, spiritual, and ecological significance in Vietnamese cosmology. Traditionally seen as a communal and sacred center, the banyan embodies stability, continuity, and spiritual vitality.[17] In *Sự Tích Chú Cuội Ngồi Gốc Cây Đa*, the banyan tree becomes more than a miraculous plant— it serves as a sacred agent of healing, moral witness, and ecological vitality.

The tree's extraordinary powers—to heal and revive—position it as a living symbol of nature's abundance and generosity. Yet it is not immune to mistreatment: when

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[16] Enrique Salmón, *Eating the Landscape: American Indian Stories of Food, Identity, and Resilience* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012), 29-30; 32.

[17] Tarangini Sarvagyam, "Banyan Tree: Cultural Roots and Community Spaces," *LinkedIn*, accessed April 25, 2025, https://www.linkedin.com/posts/tarangini-sarvagyam-b781294b_banyantree-culturalroots-communityspaces-activity-7290979646299394050-1SgL.

disrespected through polluted water, the banyan retreats, lifting itself away from human hands. This dynamic relationship portrays a moral ecology in which nature responds ethically to human conduct, rewarding care with life and abundance, withdrawing in the face of negligence.

Cuội's eternal presence on the moon beside the banyan adds further symbolic depth. The moon becomes a celestial repository of longing, memory, and ecological exile. Cuội's fate illustrates that broken relationships with nature are physical losses and emotional and spiritual wounds. In this view, the legend frames ecological stewardship not as technical management but as relational attentiveness, grounded in ritual, purity, and humility.

Nature here is alive, spiritually animated, and morally intertwined with human action. The banyan's sensitivity to pollution emphasizes the ethical imperative of careful, reverent coexistence. Through the symbolic imagery of the banyan and the moon, the legend articulates a vision where ecological disharmony results in environmental degradation and profound human alienation.

Relevance to contemporary ecological ethics

The story of Cuội offers a profound allegory for today's unfolding environmental crisis, where the vitality of ecosystems depends precariously on human care. The miraculous banyan tree, capable of sustaining life, parallels today's imperiled ecosystems—forests, wetlands, and soils—whose vitality depends on human reverence and responsible care.[18] The tree's ascent to the heavens following mistreatment echoes the irreversible consequences of ecological neglect, resonating with modern fears of species extinction and environmental collapse.

Cuội's sorrowful exile on the moon symbolizes a more profound spiritual dislocation—what scholars such as Glenn Albrecht term *solastalgia*, the pain of witnessing environmental loss without the ability to prevent it. His longing toward Earth mirrors our growing awareness of what is being lost through unchecked industrialization and ecological exploitation.[19]

The tale challenges modern assumptions that nature is infinitely resilient and mechanically regenerative. Instead, it portrays nature as morally sensitive, responsive to care, and capable of departure when abused. This worldview demands ethical partnership with the living world, recognizing that relational attention, ritual respect, and gratitude are prerequisites for ecological flourishing.[20]

Cuội's enduring presence on the moon is both a warning and a quiet call to remembrance. It reminds contemporary societies, increasingly consumed by technological acceleration and extractive economies, that sustainability is not merely a technical project but a moral and relational practice. As David Orr suggests, sustainable living

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[18] Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass,* 36.

[19] Glenn Albrecht, "Solastalgia: The Distress Caused by Environmental Change," *Australasian Psychiatry* 15 (Supplement 2007), S95-96, doi: 10.1080/10398560701701288.

[20] Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 22.

requires a profound moral imagination—an ability to envision futures rooted in harmony, humility, and ecological reverence.[21]

Sự Tích Chú Cuội Ngồi Gốc Cây Đa is not only a story of sorrow but a timeless reminder that the Earth's gifts, like the sacred banyan, can only flourish when met with care, reverence, and loving attention. In forgetting this, we risk drifting into an ecological exile, a loss not easily repaired, if it can be repaired at all.

Ecological Ethics Rooted in Vietnamese Folklore

Nature as a Moral Agent, Not a Passive Background

Vietnamese folk tales consistently portray nature as an active and ethical presence, not a neutral background for economic purposes or an object of scientific research.[22] In *Ăn Khế Trả Vàng*, the magical bird is more than a fantastical being—it becomes a custodian of cosmic justice, rewarding the humble younger brother and punishing the greed of the elder. Similarly, in *Chú Cuội Ngồi Gốc Cây Đa*, the sacred banyan tree withdraws into the sky when polluted, symbolizing nature's capacity not only to heal but also to depart when disrespected.

These stories challenge the mechanistic worldview of nature as objectifiable or inert. Instead, they reflect a spiritual ecology, where the natural world is ethically and emotionally responsive.[23] The banyan tree grieves, the moon remembers, the betel vine binds—these are not mere poetic metaphors, but cultural expressions and personifications that reflect a deep belief that moral life is entangled with natural life. This ethical sensitivity of nature creates the foundation for a reciprocal relationship, where mutual care becomes essential to sustaining balance.[24]

The Principle of Reciprocity and Relational Ethics

A central moral theme across Vietnamese folktales is reciprocal ethics: how we treat the Earth and one another directly affects the quality of life and well-being. In *Sự Tích Bánh Chưng Bánh Giầy*, Prince Lang Liêu's respectful offering of simple, agricultural ingredients—rice, mung beans, and pork—reflects an intuitive understanding of the Earth's generosity. His success is not born of conquest, but of attunement to natural rhythms and gratitude for local abundance. In contrast, *Chú Cuội* loses access to the healing banyan tree after his wife disrespects it, illustrating how even unintentional violations of nature's sanctity can lead to lasting rupture. These tales suggest that the right relationship with the Earth is not about control but mutual care.

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[21] David W. Orr, *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect*, 10th Anniversary ed. (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2004), 17, 19.

[22] Berry, *The Great Work*, 22.

[23] Kimmerer argues that in Indigenous worldviews, plants, animals, and landforms are moral agents and teachers, not resources, demanding a different moral relationship than seeing it as inert matter. Cf. Kimmerer, 322.

[24] Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 49.

This ethos of reciprocity does not stop with the environment—it extends to community, ancestors, and the divine. Vietnamese eco-ethics is inherently relational, shaped by the belief that harmony must be maintained across multiple planes of existence. Humans are not autonomous individuals acting in isolation; they are deeply embedded in interdependent kinship, memory, and place networks. Life flourishes when those bonds are honored through ritual, humility, and ethical behavior.[25] But when they are violated—through arrogance, exploitation, or forgetfulness—imbalance emerges, often with profound spiritual and ecological consequences. These stories serve as moral warnings and cultural teachings, reminding us that sustainability is not merely a matter of environmental practice but of ethical awareness, relational sensitivity, and cultural continuity. Thus, reciprocity is portrayed not as an optional virtue but a necessary condition for communal and ecological flourishing.

Ritual, Memory, and Cultural Continuity

Rituals in Vietnamese folklore are far more than symbolic performances—they serve as living vessels of ecological memory and cultural continuity. In *Sự Tích Trầu Cau*, chewing betel and areca nut during weddings is not merely a custom, but a reenactment of a moral and ecological narrative. It recalls the transformation of human love and sorrow into plant life, where the limestone (the younger brother), the areca tree (the elder brother), and the betel vine (the wife) continue to coexist in a natural triad. Each ritual gesture—chewing, offering, sharing—affirms a sacred bond between people and the land, reinforcing values of fidelity, grief, unity, and the interweaving of human and ecological life.

Similarly, the annual preparation of *Bánh Chưng* and *Bánh Giầy* during *Tết* functions as a ritual of cosmic gratitude and ethical remembrance. These traditional rice cakes, shaped to represent the earth and sky, are not just festive foods but edible cosmologies that connect families to agricultural rhythms, ancestral traditions, and the moral significance of sufficiency. Through hands-on cooking, wrapping, and offering, participants embody lessons in humility, care, and respect for natural cycles. These rituals are not taught through abstract principles but communal practice, weaving sustainability and sacredness into the daily and ceremonial life fabric.[26]

The legend of *Chú Cuội Ngồi Gốc Cây Đa*, retold each year during the Mid-Autumn Festival, offers yet another dimension of moral and ecological instruction. As children look up at the full moon and hear the story of Cuội's sorrowful exile with the banyan tree, they are reminded to behave respectfully toward others and treat nature with awareness and care. The tale's retelling becomes an educational ritual that links lunar beauty with ethical behavior, nurturing a sense of wonder and responsibility in the younger generation. In this way, storytelling becomes a form of ritualized ecological teaching, reinforcing that our relationship with nature is not transactional, but sacred and enduring.

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[25] Shiva, *Earth Democracy*, 8.

[26] Turner, *The Ritual Process,* 97, 202.

The Fragility of Ecological Bonds

Although nature in Vietnamese folktales is often portrayed as abundant, healing, and benevolent, it is also depicted as profoundly sensitive and morally responsive. These stories remind us that nature's generosity is not unconditional but contingent upon human reverence, ethical behavior, and relational care. One of the most poignant examples appears in *Chú Cuội Ngồi Gốc Cây Đa*, where the sacred banyan tree, capable of curing the sick and reviving the dead, floats away into the sky after being watered with polluted water. This moment captures more than mythic loss; it dramatizes the idea that nature does not passively endure mistreatment. When its sanctity is violated, even unintentionally, it may withdraw its presence entirely, leaving behind irreversible absence and longing. The loss is ecological and spiritual, representing a severed relationship that cannot be easily restored.[27]

This theme is relevant in our contemporary moment, as the world faces accelerating environmental collapse. From vanishing forests to polluted waters and mass extinctions, modern society witnesses the daily consequences of indifference and exploitation. Vietnamese folklore offers a contrasting ethical framework in which ecological relationships are moral, governed by attentiveness, humility, and respect. The tales suggest that the Earth is a partner in a reciprocal covenant. And once that covenant is broken, restoration is not guaranteed. In this sense, the story of Cuội and the lost banyan becomes a prescient metaphor for the current climate crisis, warning that the damage we do to the Earth may result not only in environmental loss but in a profound cultural and existential estrangement from the very systems that sustain us.

Visions of Sustainability and Ethical Living

These traditional Vietnamese folktales offer a distinct vision of sustainable living, conveyed not through technological solutions or policy frameworks, but through moral imagination, symbolic storytelling, and embedded cultural practices. In *Ăn Khế Trả Vàng*, the younger brother's quiet contentment with a small plot of star fruit trees and his willingness to share with the magical bird contrast sharply with the elder brother's insatiable greed. The tale affirms the value of knowing what is enough—a principle known in Vietnamese as *biết đủ*. Rather than idealizing accumulation or dominance, the story critiques overreach and glorifies moderation, humility, and sufficiency. It suggests that the Earth provides for those who live in alignment with its rhythms, but punishes those who exploit without restraint.[28]

In *Sự Tích Bánh Chưng Bánh Giầy*, the ethic of sustainability is again centered on gratitude, simplicity, and reverence for nature. Prince Lang Liêu's decision to craft his offerings using humble, locally available ingredients—glutinous rice, mung beans, and pork—reveals a deep ecological sensitivity. He wins the king's favor not through extravagance, but through a symbolic honoring of the Earth (with the square *Bánh Chưng*) and the sky (with the round *Bánh Giầy*). This tale teaches that true prosperity emerges from living respectfully with the land, not from extraction or conquest.

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[27] Albrecht, Solastalgia, S97.

[28] Hickel, *Less is More,* 11-18.

Both stories invite a reevaluation of modern assumptions about progress and success. They propose that a good life flows from balance, reciprocity, and care, where the flourishing of the human community is inseparable from the health of the ecosystems that sustain it.

Taken together, these folktales do more than offer ecological parables; they articulate a moral ecology rooted in relational existence, ritual remembrance, and ethical restraint. They call us to see sustainability not as an external project to fix nature but as an internal transformation of values, relationships, and cultural memory. In these traditional narratives, environmental ethics is inseparable from spiritual life, ancestral gratitude, and cosmic belonging. Thus, Vietnamese folklore offers warnings and enduring wisdom for reimagining humanity's place within the living world, living ethical frameworks for ecological renewal.

Conclusion

Vietnamese folklore, like the broader corpus of world traditions, preserves an ancient ecological wisdom: the understanding that human flourishing is inseparable from the flourishing of the natural world. The tales explored in this study—*Ăn Khế Trả Vàng*, *Sự Tích Trầu Cau*, *Sự Tích Bánh Chưng Bánh Giầy*, and *Sự Tích Chú Cuội Ngồi Gốc Cây Đa*—reveal a relational cosmology where nature is a moral agent, reciprocity is essential, and sustainability arises through ethical restraint rather than domination. These narratives portray nature not as a passive resource but as a living, sentient participant in human destiny. The star fruit tree's quiet generosity, the entwined loyalty of the betel vine, the rice cakes' cosmic symbolism, and the banyan tree's grieving flight—all encode profound lessons in ecological care, communal responsibility, and relational humility.

In this, Vietnamese folklore resonates with other global traditions: the sacred tree Yggdrasil of Norse mythology, the stories of Turtle Island among Native Americans, and the Dreamtime cosmologies of Indigenous Australians all articulate similar visions of a morally animate Earth. Across diverse cultures, traditional narratives affirm that ecological sustainability depends not on human mastery but on reverence, reciprocity, and the renewal of sacred relationships with the more-than-human world.[29] As contemporary societies confront the escalating crises of climate collapse, ecological degradation, and cultural alienation, the environmental imagination embedded in Vietnamese folklore offers vital guidance. These tales call us to restore broken bonds, to remember our ethical interconnection with land and life, and to live not as conquerors but as grateful participants in the Earth's rhythms.

To promote environmental safeguarding in the modern context, the ecological wisdom of Vietnamese folktales must be actively revitalized and integrated into education, cultural programming, and community practices. Folktales can be incorporated

[29] Thompson, *The Folktale,* 5-6; Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 5-7.

into environmental curricula at schools, offering young generations a relational understanding of nature beyond technical knowledge. Community storytelling festivals, public performances, and media adaptations can further rejuvenate these narratives, reconnecting urban audiences with ancestral ecological values. Academic collaborations between folklorists, educators, and environmental advocates can also cultivate new pathways for embedding traditional ecological ethics into contemporary sustainability initiatives.

Ultimately, these ancient tales affirm the enduring wisdom of the Vietnamese proverb: *"Thuận thiên giả tồn, nghịch thiên giả vong"*—those who align with Heaven endure; those who defy it perish. By honoring and reanimating these sacred teachings, we may find ways to live and flourish, repair and renew our broken covenant with the living Earth.

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