

Folktales from South East Asia: A Synonym of Ethnographic Document

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ABSTRACT

Folktales are studied, recited, and reinvented ethnographic documents that offer a plethora of information, which supplies moral, cultural, global, and historical perspectives about life. These parables, widespread across the pallets of the Asian sub-continent are likened to tales and morals contained in every holy book and in an interesting way comment on life and its bitter and sweet moments. The customs, traditions and beliefs expressed in folktales link people to their history and root them in their past. Expanded and shaped by the tongues of tellers over time, and passed down from one generation to the next, folktales often reflect the values and customs of the culture from which they come. This ancient form of narrative communication for both education and entertainment offers a window into other cultures. The most assuring way of managing diversity in such a peaceful and sustainable dynamic is learning otherness through the folktales of others. The present paper is an attempt to explore the popular folktales from Southeast Asia as testimonials of an unadulterated ethnographic documentation.

KEYWORDS

Folktales; Ethnography; South East Asia; Culture.

The art of storytelling has been cultivated in all ages of human civilization. The predecessors of every society apply the values and concepts which later are believed to be a guiding “blueprint” in their way of life. One of the means of inheriting values and concepts is folktale, namely fairy tale or folktale produced from human imagination/ fantasy about daily life. As rightly said it is the outcome of an instinct implanted universally in the human mind. In order to know who we are, it is essential that we know who and what we have been. We have been fortunate that many of these stories have been written down and have been preserved in books so that they will be available for years to come. They will often tell us something about the history of a

particular area, the values of the people, and how they lived and what their behaviours and customs were. Folktales have been passed down over generations epitomizing and evolving the values and wisdom that have best endured the test of human experience. The aim of this paper is to explore the genre of folktales from several Southeast Asian countries and the ethnography which is reflected in the unique forum of folktales.

A folktale as the name suggests refers to a story from a culture which has been passed down for generations. These are supposed to communicate the values of the culture to the youth. Folklore (or lore) consists of legends, music, oral history, proverbs, jokes, popular beliefs, fairy tales and customs that

are the traditions of a culture, subculture, or group. It is also the set of practices through which those expressive genres are shared. The study of folklore is sometimes called folkloristics. The word 'folklore' was first used by the English antiquarian William Thomas in a letter published in the London journal *The Athenaeum* in 1846. A sizeable body of the folk tales is more than the literary expression of a people. It is, in a very real sense their ethnography which if systematized gives an incisive picture of their way of life. This reflection of culture is, however, is not the equivalent of a scientific ethnographic description any more than a myth can be considered as an equivalent of written history. Most of the references to the mode of life of the people are an accurate reflection of their habits. The development of the plot of the story furthermore, on the whole, exhibits clearly what is considered right and what wrong. It is interesting to note why human beings have told stories to children since a time before they even remember, why some of the stories have been told for ages, and why some of the stories so passed-down have been shared in a wider community than one of their origins. Let us take a journey into the world of folktales of some Southeast Asian countries epitomizing ethnography with ingenuity.

Burma:

Folktales of Burma (now known as Myanmar) have been preserved for centuries as part of a long folk tradition reflecting Burmese humour, romance, and wisdom. Much of the literature on tales is based on the narrative motifs or contents of the stories (e.g., animal tales, fairy tales, etc.). Through a clear analysis and example of various types of tales, we can come to know how the story structure can be an alternative criterion in categorizing tales, as well as a means of gaining insight into the cultural determination of the narrative

motifs or contents within possibly transcultural forms.

This popular Burmese folktale "The Four Puppets" is about a young man named Aung who leaves his home in search of discovering his future. He is accompanied in his journey by four puppets gifted to him by his father. These puppets represent wisdom, strength knowledge, and goodness. The story is remarkable as it brings prosperity and wealth to Aung with the help of the puppets of knowledge and strength but he is unable to enjoy true happiness and contentment until he is guided by the puppets of wisdom and goodness. He was mistaken as he imagined that wealth brings happiness. But true happiness comes only from goodness. What is important is not what you have but what you do with it. This was in accordance with the advice given to him by his father that each of these virtues can help him on his way. But he should remember that strength and knowledge must always serve wisdom and goodness. This folklore aptly projects the Burmese tradition of puppet art and how the society uses these puppets to represent a broad assortment of values.

In Burma puppet plays have been performed since at least the 1400s. Though no longer as popular today, the tradition is still maintained by a small number of performing troupes. The story retold here features four familiar figures. The king of the gods is Thagyarmin, the Burmese name for the deity called Sakka by Indian Buddhists and Indra by Hindus. (The rest of India's heavenly gods—called *devas*—have been replaced by the Burmese with native gods called *nats*.) For Buddhists, a god is a powerful being still of lower rank than one who becomes a Buddha or Bodhisattva. The figure here called an ogre is more accurately termed a demon—*yaksha* in Sanskrit. But with its great strength and its habit of eating people, it comes closer to the ogre in Western fairy mythology. The

sorcerer—*zawgyi*, in Burmese—is a survivor from pre-Buddhist Burma. The *zawgyi* practices alchemy to attain immortal life, along with lesser attainments such as the power of flight. An almost exact parallel is in the Chinese popular concept of the Taoist “Immortal.” Finally, the hermit is a seeker who lives in solitude and strives for spiritual advancement. Though he is more characteristic of the Hindu tradition—which many Buddhist fables draw on—the puppet is costumed as a Buddhist monk. As with the puppet theater, most of Burmese society and culture is steeped in the dominant Buddhist faith. In Burma, no deed is considered more worthy than to build a pagoda—a towering shrine that typically houses holy relics or a sacred image. Making a pilgrimage to such shrines is also considered a worthy religious act.

Indonesia:

Indonesia is like a giant pot for traditional cultures, there are hundreds of tribes, each with a different language and unique cultures. Even in the same tribe, one can easily find something interesting in the separated community. There are thousands of accents used in each sub tribes; much of them are still unrecorded. Every community has their own folktales. The traditional folktales reflect the local wisdom and transfer knowledge to the future generations. Sometimes, the folktales include some myth and legends, lots of them have been inspired by the nature's structures, disaster or political even in kingdoms periods. Many specific tales also refer to historical persons who have contributed their influence to the society. Here is a popular Indonesian folk tale that throws much light on the practices and cultures embedded in the traditional Indonesian society with its beliefs in magic, and the power of meditation.

The Indonesian tale “Princess and the Monkey” is about two beautiful daughters Purba Rarang Purba Sari of a king in West Java, named Prabu Tapak. The story revolves around the jealousy of the elder daughter for her younger sister who has been offered the throne by her father. The elder daughter casts a spell on her sister and manages to exile her from the kingdom. The younger daughter takes shelter in the forest where she makes friends with a monkey whom she names Lutung Kasarung. The story develops into an interesting tale where the younger sister with the help of the monkey who has meditative powers is transformed back into her former beauty and later manages to defeat her sister in her tricks of jealousy. This story brings into play animals foretelling values like friendship, love faith and meditation which are also found in several folklores of the world.

It can't be denied that Indonesia is known as a paradise for cultural studies since it has approximately 300 ethnic groups who spoke an estimated 650 local languages. It has approximately 17,500 islands that make it one of the largest archipelagos in the world. The considerable number of its islands is inhabited by numerous ethnic groups that also bring about various cultural arts. Indonesia is famous for its multiculturalism as well. The visual imageries reflected in the folktales help us to know the varieties of Indonesian cultures. Several folktales owned by some ethnic groups in Indonesia which were anonymously created and told from generation to generation have been a true testimonial of the ethnography of Indonesian culture. The research facilitated an insight into the variety of unique visions and perspectives about landscape among the ethnic groups reflected through the imageries in the language of each folktale. The inheritance of values and concepts through stories that have been established in such a culture has become a tradition in Indonesian community.

Vietnam:

The people of Vietnam value faithfulness, virtue and intelligence, and this is reflected in the folktales of the land. Family loyalty and duty take precedence over individual concerns. Vietnam is structured from many different ethnic groups and each group has its own social institutions, communal relationships, and traditional customs. However, all groups share the notion of a social contract in the most common sense, that is, "a set of general conventions and standards for every relationship and every social behavior which is self-consciously upheld as custom" Rather than a system of rules enjoining people to do this and not do that, a social contract in Vietnamese society comprises social norms as customary modes of behavior, with special focus on morality and conduct. For example, in Vietnamese culture, there is a traditional custom in the Tết Thanh Minh festival falling in the spring which perpetuates a social contract between the living and the dead. During this festival, all family members visit their ancestors' graves and give honour to the ancestors. People often pray before the ancestors, sweep the tombs, pull up surrounding weeds, and offer food, wine, and joss paper accessories. They not only burn incense at their ancestors' tombs but also at nearby unvisited tombs, thus making the dead feel comfortable. The honour given to the dead by the living is a ritual custom reflecting moral obligation and social value, and by this means "the morality and well-being of the people" is fostered.

The folktale "The Crystal Heart: A Vietnamese Legend" is a unique story about MiNoung the beautiful daughter of a mandarin who falls in love with an imaginary man supposedly singing a melodious song. She falls ill when unable to hear the song. Her father sends his men in the search for the singer and came across Troung Chi a fisherman who used to sing the song. When Mi Noung comes to

know that he was actually a fisherman and not the son of mandarin she laughs on Troung Chi and shuts the door on his face. Troung Chi who had already fallen madly in love with Mi Noung and unable to face this humiliation dies. His heart turns into a crystal. Later she comes across this crystal and the tears from her eyes release the spirit of Troung Chi. This folktale beautifully reflects the culture of Vietnam and the twist that takes place in the life of an ordinary fisherman and his unfortunate death.

Thailand

Thailand literally means "Free Land" or "land of the free people." The country is unique in Southeast Asia in that it was never subjected to European colonial domination. So, the Thai people have been developing and refining their culture for centuries. Thailand's strategic location on the borderline of East Asia and Southeast Asia has, since the past, has given it a unique position as a crossroads of many Asian cultures. Theravada Buddhism, Islam, Mahayana Buddhism, Brahmanism, Christianity, and other belief systems of several ethnic and tribal groups have introduced other ideational and cultural traditions, making Thailand a multiethnic and multi-cultural society. Just as the Indian epic, The Ramayana, "and Chinese novel " The Three Kingdoms," and the Javanese literary hero, Panji, have become parts of the Thai literary and artistic traditions, so are the folklore and folklife of Thailand enriched by the mosaic of these diverse cultural traditions.

The traditional Thai folk tale "Choose A Wife" is based on the belief that a woman is chosen as a wife because she chooses to use "catch of the day" to share with others, so that they may all eat and live to share again. The story goes like this: A man wanted his son to choose a wise, good, and kind wife. So the man told his son to propose this question to any woman he might want in his life. "If you had a big fish, how could you feed your family as

long as possible? So the young man asked many women, "If you had a big fish, how could you feed your family as long as possible?" At last the young man found a girl who gave him this answer to the question. The girl said, "First I would cook the fish with many vegetables to make a great deal of food. Then I would give some to my relatives, some to my neighbours, and some of my friends. Then when THEY had a big fish, they would bring some to share with me. So it would be that one big fish would feed my family for a long, long time." This was the right answer. So they married and lived happily ever after. *The Lady Chang* another Thai folktale is a sensitive story based on the struggles of a rich woman who becomes widow early in life. The story is a beautiful picture of how the Lady teaches a lesson to her son going astray.

In the folk tales that were taken from the different countries of Southeast Asia certain common threads running through each one of them. The principal factors being the role of animals, magic, fate and so on in directing the course of the story. Further, we found traces of multiculturalism visibly prominent as all these folktales emphasized a certain set of values and order which got reflected in the folklore of other countries also. Nowadays, the awareness of the importance of multiculturalism is threatened for the newer

generations so that it is important to do efforts in understanding each other's cultural diversity. The folk tales thus give us an idea about the life, culture practices rituals, customs and how these factors were instrumental in determining, by and large, the ethnography of a region. The story does not only reflect social and cultural values of the society but also function to deliver those values to the recent community. By understanding and retelling folktale to the young generation, the process of inheriting the noble values within the folktale will remain alive and preserve the culture.

Conclusion:

It becomes evident that Folktales are a product of the worldview of a society at a particular point in time. There is also an assumption that "if new tales are composed, the social context must have a certain influence in shaping and determining the content of the new folktale". These folktales, with warmth and high style, demonstrate the broad, imaginative and tutelary talents active within these cultures, today as in a long history of centuries past. The aim of the paper was to emphasize the importance of the cultural context in folklore study, and that to fully understand the lore, one must understand the folk.

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