COMMON MOTIFS IN INDIAN AND THAI FOLKTALES

BY

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Traditionally the study of folklore in general and folktales or narrative in particular has, in one way or the other, remained diachronic, rather than synchronic. "The emphasis has clearly been," writes Alan Dundes, "Upon the genesis and development of folkloristic materials rather than upon the structure of these materials" (1975:61). This was perhaps true with other disciplines as well, particularly social sciences until recent times when "synchronic structuralism" was born. The philosophy of synchronism, as is well known, came to folkloristics (anthropology, literature, and other related areas) from linguistics. Consider the following remarks of piaget =

"Linguistic structuralism in the narrower sense goes back to Saussure, who showed that diachronic development is not the only process to be taken notice of in the study of language and that in fact the history of a word may give a seriously inadequate account of its meaning. In addition to its historical aspect, language has a "systematic" aspect Saussure did not use the term "structure"); it embodies laws of equilibrium which operate on its elements and which, at any given point in history, yield a synchronic system" (1971:76)
There is no doubt that Saussure, in elaborating on this point was inspired partly from "equilibrium Theory" in economics. (1) By diachronic studies saussure meant studying relations between successive terms that are substituted for each other in time. While synchronic studies remain concerned with the "logical and psychological relations that bind together coexisting terms and form a system in the collective minds of people". (Saussure, 1959:40). Saussure's these and other findings changed the course of linguistic studies and established what is known as "synchronic structuralism" in linguistics.

Folklore scholarship of the late nineteenth century was undoubtedly diachronic in its all aspects and much more concerned with how folklore came into being, diffused from one area to another, than with what really it was. Under such circumstances genetic and evolutionary explanations were considered sufficient to define the nature of folklore. Thus Solar Mythologists explained the bulk of folkloristic materials in terms of primitive man's poetic translation of celestial phenomena, such as the rising and the setting of the sun, the contention of sun and night, the thunder storm and the morning sky, the dawn and the dew. (2) The founders and the followers of the anthropological school were convinced that folklore evolved from historical facts and primordial customs (3) Similarly the most modern method of folklore study, the so-called Finnish or historical-geographical method, (4) also aims at delineating the "complete life history of a particular tale" (Thompson, 1946:430) or any other item of folklore. The users of this method attempt to determine the paths of dissemination and the process of development of folklore materials and thereby seek to reconstruct the...

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hypothetical, original or "proto" ("ur") form of the tale or any given item of folklore, particularly folk literature. Scholars who follow Finnish methods eschew the question of ultimate origin of the item or items. Unlike their predecessors, folklorists who followed Finnish methods did not champion much theoretical concepts, instead believed in the application of a sound methodology to the available data. Therefore one does truly find the germs of synchronism in by and large diachronic studies of such folklorists. Thus," writes Dundes, there has been a moment away from the early interest in genesis and cause towards an interest in the process of transmission and evolutionary development. But in any case, the study of folklore has remained diachronic " (1975:61)

It is argued and perhaps rightly, that the traditional folklore theories, always and everywhere, irrespective of their origin and applicatin had, in one way or the other germs of devolution(5) in them. Such theories lack "progress" and reveal an unquestionable basic premise that the golden age of folklore occurred in the past in most cases especially the far distant past.

Closely related to, or perhaps dependent upon this devolutionary tendency, responsible for the lag in the advancement of folklore theory was the inadequacy of the analytical (even classificatory) unit devised in accordance with the prevalent theoretical assumption and mostly used in the comparative study of folktales. As is well known, the entire diachronic era of folktale research is based upon two analytical units i.e., tale "type" and "motif", the former being associated with Antti Aarne and the latter with stith Thompson. (6) Before
we examine "motif" and prove its inadequacy as a classificatory and analytical unit even for the comparative study of oral narrative, we must have some idea as to what any kind of a basic unit should consist of. As Dundes points out:

"Units are utilitarian logical constructs of measure which, though admittedly relativistic and arbitrary, permit greater facility in the examination and comparison of the material studied in the natural and social sciences. It is important that units be standards of one kind of quantity (e.g. units of heat, length and so forth). Units can be conceived as being abstractions of distinct entities which may be combined to form larger units or broken down into smaller units. There is an infinitude of units since they are man-made categorical attempts to describe the nature of objective reality. With a relativistic prospective, one can see that no matter what units one considers other smaller subunits may be postulated. Historically this is what has happened in the development of the neutron from the atom which in turn developed from the molecule. A minimal unit may thus be defined as the smallest unit useful for a given analysis with the implicit understanding that although a minimal unit could be subdivided, it would serve no useful purpose to do so" (1975:62) (Emphasis added).

Having defined summarily the essential requirements of a minimal unit, let us examine if "motif" really fulfills these requirements of a true analytical unit.

Thompson defines "motif" in the following manner:

"In folklore the term ("motif") used to designate any one of the parts into which an item of folklore can be analysed. ..... the area in which motifs have been most studied and most carefully analysed, however, is that of folk narratives, such as folktales, legends, ballads and myths.

"Narrative motifs sometimes consist of very simple concepts which continually find their place in traditional tales. These may be unusual creatures like fairies, witches, dragons, ogres, cruel step mothers, talking animals or the birds. ..... A motif may also be essentially a short and simple story, in itself, an occurrence that is sufficiently striking or amusing to appeal. ..... 

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