COMMON MOTIFS IN INDIAN AND THAI FOLKTALES

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Traditionally the study of forklore in general and forktale 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 forkloristic materials rather than upon the structure of these materials" (1975=61). This was perhaps true with other disciplines as well, particularly social sciences untill recent times when "synchronic structuralism" was born. The philosophy of synchronicism, as is well known, came to forkloristics (anthropology, literature, and other related areas) from linguistics. Consider the following remarks of piaget =

> "Linguistic structuralism in the narrower
> sense goes back to Sanssure, 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 primodial 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

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 synchronicism 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 trans-
mission and evolutionary development. But in any case,
the study of folklore has remained diachronic " (1975:61)

It is argued and perhaps rightly, that the tradi-
tional folklore theories, always and everywhere, irre-
spective of their origin and applicatin had, in one way
or the other germs of <u>devolution</u>[5] in them. Such theories
lack "progress" and reveal an unquestionable basic
premise that the golden age of folklore occured 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 inadequancy 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 comperison 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 inifinitude 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 occurance that is sufficiently striking or amusing to appeal....

In order to become a real part of the tradition an element must have <u>something about</u> it that will make people remember and repeat it. It must be more than common place. A mother as such is not a motif. A cruel mother becomes one, because she is atleast thought to be unusual" (1975+753) (Emphasis added).

Quite contrary to "type", "motif" certainly is a smaller element and, perhaps, the smallest which if broken down further/smaller units -- a possibility which seems rare -- may not lead to significant results. There-fore, "motif" partly fulfills the criterian of being the minimal unit; but as we shall see soon, it does not fulfill the requirement of being a standard of one kind of quantity." Motif ", according to Thompson, " is the smallest element in a tale having a power to persist in tradition." Here also one must note that in this defi-niti on the crucial differentia is what the element does (i.e., presists in tradition) rather than what the ele-ment is. Obviously the definition is again diachronic rather than synchronic (cf. Dundes, 1975:63). Thompson, as is obvious from the above discussion, used a variety of diverse terms in an attempt to tell us what "motif" really looks like: "parts", "simple concepts,""unusual creatures ", "marvelous worlds", (Some times) "simple story", "occurence sufficiently striking" etc. On looking into these diverse terms, it becomes clear that all these elements which Thompson terms as "motifs" are items, characters, events, objects etc., which occur in tales. None of these elements fulfill the conditions of a minimal analytical unit as all these elements seem to be <u>variables</u> and not <u>constants</u>, because these don't remain constant across vast data of tales. One fails to understand whether one is to measure or analyze tales according to characters or

events or objects or other things. It would certainly
be most unscientific, empirically and theoretically
to consider actor and an item in a given tale as one
kind of quantity. Thompson committed, it seems, the same
mistake which scholars who believe in diachronicism have
been repeatedly committing: they demonstrate the obvious
and neglect the unknown (cf. Le'vi-strauss, 1969:37).
Thompson, it seems, did not go into the deeper structures
of narrative universals, insteed he attempted to classify
or analyse oral narrative on the basis of its surface
features; which obviously lack consistancy. Though,
Thompson through his "motif" inventory claims to have
made an attempt to "reduce the traditional narrative
material of the whole earth to order (as, for example,
the scientists have done with the world-wide phenomenon
of biology)......." (1966:10), but he did not, in principle,
followed the basic postulate of consistancy in the formula-
tion of the unit, be it classificatory or analytical. There-
fore "motif" in the final analysis prov ed to be an in-
adequate unit, both for classification and for analysis:
a reality which was felt, besides others, by Thompson
himself. Consider his following statement:

> ".........But in spite of the danger of
> including material that on strictly critical
> grounds may be unjustified, I have felt that it
> is in general better to list all elements of a
> tale that are likely to have interest to the
> folklorist or the student of literary history"
> (1966:11).

Some scholars[8] argue that since all classifica-
tory system of the oral narrative of the world and the
catalogs of various national archives have been based
upon "motif", it might be inconvenient or even dangerous

to accept the inadequacies of "motif" as classificatory
(and hence analytical) unit, for that will mean changing
the well established cataloging system of the world. This
kind of thinking is dangerous, academically stagnating
and again devolutionary. "In any field of learning if
something is faulty or inadequate and recognized as such
it should be changed. Folklorists are supposed to study
tradition and not be bound by it. Tradition and convenience
are hardly sufficient reasons for scholars to perpetuate
an acknowledged error" (Dundes, 1975: 66).

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As is very clear from the above discussion, despite the
fact that "motif" proves to be inadequate, it has not
been replaced. A variety of reasons has contributed to
its continuence. In the first place, folkloristics
during the past few decades has moved from collection-
orientedness towards high analysis. Motif, as we know
very well, was the given of the "collection era" of folk-
lore studies. Morever, more and more diversification has led
folkloristics into various analytical directions and motif
seems to have been left behind, or tempararily forgotton.
The current global scene of folkloristics is focussed
towards "search of meaning", [9] and therefore all previous
discoveries including formalistic devices have remained
behind. Nor has the motif been very helpful in this new
quest either.

    In the Asian context, we must accept the fact that
most of us working in the area of folklore are still pass-
ing through the "era of collection and classification".
Speaking historically, it is a tragedy that the orient;

which has been very rich in oral traditions, has preserved most of these treasures and is even now functionally using these traditions; should have remained behind in scientifically studying them. The real movement of studying oral traditions, as all of us are aware, began in the West. Therefore, even if the West may be looking forward towards new analytical devices (be these based on the Oriental data; as it happens most of the time), We in the Orient are left with little choice except to stick to certain older devices due to our own weaknesses. Since we are still in the era of collection and classification, motif, therefore, in that sense remains an important unit for classification and indexing of our data. And in fact most of the Asian and African countries are busy building folktale lexicons based on the concept of motif. Therefore, despite the criticism in the above pages. I am myself in the following sections, going to use motif to measure some of the important tale elements, particularly those which I feel are common to India and Thailand. This I am going to demonstrate by a comparison of the following popular Thai tale "Plaboo-Thong" ("The Golden Boby") [10] with an equally popular South Indian tale "The Arecanut Princess" [11] The proceedure followed is to pickup the significant elements or motifs, which I suppose have similarities or have a common origin.

Tale one : "Plaboo - Thong" ("The Golden Boby")

A fisherman named Sethi has two wives, Kanitha and Kanithi. The first wife Kanitha has a daughter named Uay. The second wife Kanithi has two daughters Ay and Ee. Sethi often finds his two wives quarrelling and dislikes such ugly situations. However, he likes his

second wife. One day, as usual he goes fishing and his
first wife accompanies him. He fails to catch anything
and attributes, this bad luck to the presence of his
wife. Seizing the opportunity he strikes Kanitha and she
is drowned. Her daughter Uay grieves for the loss
of her mother. However, one day she notices a strange
little fish (as if made of gold) and discovers that
her mother has changed into a fish. Uay is extremely
happy to find her mother back and immediately rushes home
secretly digs a pond and places the fish (mother) in it
with all care. One day Uay's step mother discovers the
return of Kanitha and removes the fish from the pond and
cooks it. However a favourite duck of Uay hides a scale
while the fish was being dressed for cooking. He narrates
the story to Uay and gives her the scale-the last relic-
to Uay. Grieved and bewildered Uay baries the relic
in the deep forest. Two egg - Plants (Makhena proh) (12)
grow on the spot. However, the stepsisters of Uay discover
the plants and uproot and destroy them. The favourite duck
somehow manages to conceal some seeds of the uprooted
plants and passes them on to Uay. She again buries the
seeds and two sacred Pipal (Papal) (13) trees, one with golden
leaves and the other with silver leaves, grow on the spot.
Soon a king (Thao Phrommathat) on a hunting trip discovers
the trees and orders the trees to be shifted to palace.
He also takes away Uay as his queen.

On hearing that Uay has become a queen, Kanithi,
the step mother schemes to substitute her daughter in
place of Uay in the palace. She invites Uay home on the
pretex that her father (sethi) is seriously ill and
succeeds in killing Uay and sending her elder daughter (Ay)

dressed as Uay to the palace. However Uay is reborn as a parrot and frequents the palace . As a parrot Uay attempts repeatedly to unveil the truth to her husband the king. The false queen immediately attempts to kill the parrot (the real queen) but fails. Finally Uay in the form of a parrot meets a saint who changes her back to her human form and also creates a son for her and names him Lop. Lop grows into a youth and expresses his desire to see his father. He is permitted to travel to palace.

However Uay gives him a garland of flowers with coded message (describing her misfortunes). King reads the hidden message and rushes to forest to meet his queen. Both reunited, return to palace and immediately give punishment to the villians (Ay, Sethi, etc.). They live happily ever after.

Tale Two : "The Areeanut Princess"

A king has five sons. The youngest prince does not marry the princess shown to him. He decides to marry Arecanut Princess. He meets a saint who blesses him with a magical lemon, a stick, coal and some bits of turmeric and advises him to meet his brother (another Saint)on the way. This the prince does and he too gives him the same magical agents and asks him to meet his another brother (another Saint). He too gives the prince the same magical agents and interdicts to use the agents one after the another. He also advises him not to place the Arecanut (in which was the princess) on ground once he acquares it.

The prince leaves, crosses seven seas and reaches the Arecanut King's tree on which hangs the Arecanut with the princess inside it. While attempting to pluck the Arecanut, a Raksasa appears and th e prince throws the magical lemon and the Rakshasa disappears. At this point a lion, tigers and other monstrous beings appear. The prince out of fear throws all the magical agents on them. The animals and monsters kill the prince. The third Saint happens to see the dead prince and brings him to life again.

He gives him a set of magical things again. This time
the prince plucks the Arecanut and returns. The animals
and monesters pursue him but the prince with the help of
magical agents escapes and reaches a town. Feeling
tired he keeps the nut on the ground and retires into a
deep slepp besides a well. While the prince sleeps the
Arecanut princess comes out of the nut and at the same
time a Kumbara girl comes to fetch water. The Kumbara
girl, out of sheer jealousy manages to change the dress and
the jewellery with the princess and pushes her into the
well. The Kumbara girl takes the position of the Princess
and enters the nut. Unaware of the change, the prince takes
the Arecanut home. Some time after the prince happenes
to pass by the well. He sees a beautiful flower grown in
the well. He plucks the flower and presents it to
his "Queen" (the false one). She recognizes the flower-
the real Princess - and orders it to be buried. A Sandal-
wood true grows over the place. She again orders the fall-
ing and burning ofthe tree. The woodcutter, however, hides
a piece of the Sandalwood tree in a huge pot in his
house. After sometime, the woodcutter and his wife are
surprized to see the piece of wood change into a beautiful
maiden. The adopted her as their daughter. Later on, on
hunting expedition, the prince comes to a place and
observes some young girls narrating the story of the
Arcanut princess. He learns the truth and buries the
KUMBARA girl the false queen alive. He marries the real
princess and ascends the throne.

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Before commenting on the similar elements of the
two tales, I would like to make an observation on the

tales itself. The collector in her short introduction
to the Thai tale has the following comment: "This is a
story of Siamese origin, based on the animistic belief of
reincarnation and punishment for sins committed in one's
past life. The story tells of the perpetual feud between
an unfortunate daughter and a scheming step-mother, with
its dreadful consequences".[14] Even if we believe that
the tale has travelled from Siam to Thailand, we have
sufficient evidence to prove that the tale is of Indian
Origin and has, in fact, versions found in many parts of
India.[15] The fundamental deviations which seem to me
most crucial in the Thai version are: (i) incorporation of
religious (Particularly Buddhist) connotations in the
forms of various symbols (Pipal tree for instance) and
at the end of the tale (I have ignored that portion)
which appears in the form of a clear cut religous discourse
commonly found in the Jataka - type tales. There is
however one more inportant change that seems crucial and
has ethnographic dimensions. This change is reflected
in the emphasis we notice in the Thai version on sibling
rivalry, the rivalry between wives in a polygomous marriage
system and its important by-product the step mother's
treatment. That such elements are present in Indian tales
is well known. However, the Thai version of this tale
seems to have underlined these elements. However, I am
sure, that these short comments have their own limitations.
These do not, however, help empirically either in the
reconstruction of the proto type (Ur form) of this popular
tale; nor do they tell us about the place of origin of
this tale. In order to pursue there and other questions,

working on the lines of historical-geogrephical (Finnish)
method[16] would be highly useful and rewarding.

The major common motifs we notice in these two
tales are as follows:

1. <u>The rivalry between wives</u>:

This motif is very wide spreed in Asia, particularly
India. It reflects the medival character of IndianSociety
and usually depicts the drawbacks or pitfalls of an accepted
kiship order, i.e., polygomous marriage system. More often
than not, we see great epic themes (such as that of Ramayana)
raised on this specific motif. In the Thai tale this
motif surfaces very clearly; while as in the Indian version
the motif seems to be present, but in an inverted form i.e.,
the Arecanut Princess and the Kambara girl always try to
eliminate each other.

2.   <u>The elimination of one of the wives</u>:

Closely related with the ab ove motif, this motif
is equally widespreed in Indian tale repertoire. However
the killing of the "undesired wife" has less frequency in
Indian tales. It should be remembered that this task is
often completed by the "other" wife or other character
rather than the husband. More often than not, the wife is
left, abandoned or thrown in wilderness (cf. Ramayana),
but not killed. One might also notice that in the Thai
version perse, the wife is killed symbolically. She
lives in a transformed form and guides the story struc-
ture by her presence.

3. Women and luck:

Women characters in folktales (ev en in myths) are
always associated with good luck or bed luck. One can
draw examples from many Asian cultures where even the
belief systems support this widespread motif. Very frequently
we come across examples in which woman and luck (good or
bad) relationship is shown heirarchical in nature. For
instance, seeing the face of a young girl early morning, might
bring good luck, seeing the face of a widow may bring bad
luck. At least this is very clearly revealed in the
examples of Indian folktales, myths and other forms of
folklore; and it would seem the motif is very much present
in its all menifestations in Thai folklore as well.

4. Transformation of the victim:

There are hundreds of examples available in Indian
folktales, myths and other forms of Folklore in which the
victim (or the non-victim character) is transformed into
an animal, bird, reptile, plant or any other object (some-
times magical or non-magical). In the present examples
this motif is repeated. In the Thai tale for example the
transformations are cyclic in relation and begin from human
to reptile, to plants, trees, birds and end up back into
human form; human = fish = plant = tree = parrot = human.

The Indian version has a similar, if not identical
transformation cycle: human/fruit = Plant = tree/wood =
human. We have many examples in folktales where human
become birds ("the story of Pabet," Manipur), stone ("the
story of Ahitya, Ramayana)", snake ("The story of Himal
and Nagaraya, Kashmir)". However, one thing is very clear

that these transformations, cyclic as they are, have to
return to the original form (i.e., human after having ex-
perienced the other non-human forms. This seems true of
these folktales as well.

5.   Unwise Kings:

The motif of a less wise king seems to be common
to India and Thai Folktales. This however does not mean
that the motif of "wise king" is absent. On the contrary
that motif seems more present than the motif of unwise or
less wise king. However, in these two tales we find the
kings (or princes) are shown less wise and certainly less
wise than their wives or spouses. In the Indian tale, the
King is unable to recognize the deception, cheating and
other villianous acts of the false princess; even the
recognition of the final truth also seems beyond his own
wisdom. Instead children help him to know the truth. In
the Thai tale the motif has similar dimensions. The king
is deceived repeatedly by many characters and he finally
learns the facts with the help of his own victimized wife
or her multiple menifestations.

6. Youngest child's positive role:

Again a widespread motif, not only found Indian
or African folktales, but in the vast Indo-European tale
reportdire particularly the Marchen. In the Thai tale
surprizingly this motif is very nicely repeated. Uay is
shown as the only child and later Lop takes over the role
of the youngest child. We don't have an obvious parallel
of this motif in the Indian tale. However an inverted
form of this motif seems present. The prince (hero) was
himself the youngest son and also at the end it is through

children (young children) that the king (prince) learns the truth about his wife - the real princess.

7. Number three:

Number three seems to have same special meaning and significance in both Thai and Indian folktales. In fact number three seems to be also special to the Indo-European culture as a whole.[17] In the Indian example we find number three being repeated at the level of donors (occur thrice) and their tests (repeated thrice) and the magical characters (in many versions they will be three in number and act three times), transformations of the princess (Arecanut/human = plant = tree). Similarly in the Thai tale this special number occurs in various forms at the following levels: Uay's father casts the net for fish three times, Uay's mother's transformation, just like the Indian tale, has three levels (human/fish = plant = tree). Uay herself takes three forms (human = parrot = human). Furthermore in this example, and other examples too, one can notice number three being repeated in terms of actions, objects or characters.

8. "Holy men" or poor people as helpers:

This motif is very common to Asian folklore. Because of the impact of religion on the lives of people of Asia, particularly India and Thailand, one notices that "holy men" (saints, fagirs, religious persons) often occur as helpers in folktales and other kind of narrative.

An interesting fact is that characters who come from the lower stratra of the society, such as blacksmith, carpenter, a farmer, fisherman etc., have been depicted in

folktales as helpers, Here in these two examples we find there helpers alongside with animals or birds helping the hero or the heroine to resolve their difficult tasks and liquidate the lacks.

At this point I have a couple of suggestions to make. Having done whatever I have done in the above sections, it seems that a thorough motif analysis is inadequate to unveil the real messages of folktales. It does serve the purpose of revealing some basic qualities of the tale, but it does not reveal, as we have seen, the structural paradigms of meaningful elements which could finally be related to the culture as a whole and to the universe of world-view of the culture or cultures. It is high time that Asian folklore is collected, measured and analyzed according to Asian standards so that its relevance to Asian cultural systems is revealed.

Notes :

1. What Piaget is referring to here is in fact Walras' and Pareto' "general theory of equilibrium", according to which, economic crises may lead to radical shifts of value quite independent of antecedent price history. The price of tobacco in 1968 depends not on its price in 1939 or 1941, but on the interaction of current market trends. It is also possible that Saussure night have drawn his argument for the relative autonomy of synchronic laws just as well from biology: an organ may change its function and one and the same function may be exercised by different organs. See Piaget (1971: 77); see also Saussure (1959).

2.   See Max Müller (1872).

3. Members of this group believed that in the course of unilinear evolution of all cultures, there were preserved vestigial remains of the archaic origins which were termed as "Survivals" and folklore countained such "survivals". This was a diachronic attitude. The modern version of this kind of diachronic study is fostered by the advocates of the myth - ritual theory who claim that all myths evolved from ritual. See Dundes (1975:42).

4.   See Krohn (1926), Taylor (1927), Thompson (1953)

5. Traditional folklore theory, whether it concerned trans-mission, dissemination or origin, always took "past" of folk-lore into consideration and did not care to describe its "present". For instance notions like "folklore decayed thoough time", "folklore runs down from higher to lower cultures", "folklore originates due to disease of language" "folktales are the detritus of myth" or the concepts such as "original version being the best", "folklore items move from perfection to imperfection", "reconstruction of proto form" etc., indicates past orientedness of folklore theory or the tendency of moving backwards and hence termed devolution. Se Dundes (1975:23).

6. See Aarne (1920), Thompson (1955, 1961).

7. See Handoo (1978).

8. For example the famous Hungarian folklorist Hans Honti observes: "If tales could be arranged according to a theoretically appropriate morphological system instead of a theoretically inadmissible logical system, it might be

some what easier to work through folktale material,"
(see Dundes, 1975: 66) but at the same time, he thinks
this does not constitute enough reason to replace the
well established Aarne-Thompson system. See Hans Honti
(1939), Dundes (1975: 66,67).

9. The main theme of the 8th congress of the International
society for Folk-Narrative Research held in Bergen, Norway
June, 12 through June, 17, 1984, was "Folk narrative:
the quest for meaning". See Handoo (1984).

10. See Sibunruanga (1976)

11. See Handoo (1978 a : 82)

13. See Sibunruang (1976: 145)

14. Ibid, P. 137

15. See Handoo et al (I.p)

16. See Handoo (1978), Thompson (1953)

17. See Dundes (1975).

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