History Research Journal

ISSN:0976-5425
Vol-5-Issue-4-September-October 2019

History of the Last Born/ Lesser One through the 'Trickster' in the Select Indigenous Oral Historical Narratives of India

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Abstract

This article, based on the oral historical narratives of the Lepcha and Limbu communities of Darjeeling and Sikkim regions of India, is a search for alternative indigenous knowledge and ethno-philosophy that one obtains from the tribal folktales through their alternative use of the younger/lesser ones as trickster, confronting the 'mainstream' notion of the character. This study is aimed at emphasizing how the alternative histories of the tribal communities manifested through the tribal tales provide alternatives, which violate the dominant ethos of the 'mainstream' in two major ways: firstly, in providing importance to the younger/lesser one unlike the 'mainstream's' obsession with the eldest among the royals; and secondly, in an alternative reading of the 'trickster' as a model for emancipation through which the indigeneity seems to subvert all the attempts that have been programmed by the 'mainstream' to impose majoritarian values and statist cultural standards on them. This socio-cultural reading of oral histories tries to validate that the notion of 'evil' in the form of a 'criminal

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trickster' is a rather motivated construct of the 'mainstream' in order to ostracize the nonconformists who are situated in and rebelling against the 'mainstream'.

Keywords: Indigenous History, Tribal Culture, Oral History, Lepcha, Limbu

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Introduction

The 'mainstream' in India is preoccupied with the privileges and the responsibilities of the first born, usually expected to be a male. The eldest male among the siblings, with his right to perform the major rituals after the death of the parents, almost become the father figure for the younger ones. In the 'mainstream' family discourse, the youngest one is hardly left with any authority but has to suffer the hegemonic dictate of the eldest brother. In the 'mainstream' epics and legends of India the central figure who gets all the power and the glory is none but the first born. Unlike this 'mainstream' norm, in the folktales of the indigenous communities one comes across the reverse formulation where the youngest becomes the protagonist of the folktales. One also finds alternatives in the tribal folktales where, as a sharp contrast to the 'mainstream' sagas of the kings and the princes, the lesser one in the form of the poor and the unprivileged becomes the central figure of the folktales. And most importantly, the means by which the younger or the lesser one moves from depravity towards prosperity is chiefly that of playing a trickster—a role which is customarily condemned by the 'mainstream' as malevolent. This study is aimed at highlighting how the

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folktales of the tribal communities—the Lepchas and Limbus of Darjeeling and Sikkim in India—provide alternatives, which violate the dominant ethos of the 'mainstream' in two major ways: firstly, in providing importance to the younger/lesser one unlike the 'mainstream's' obsession with the eldest among the royals; and secondly, in an alternative reading of the 'trickster' as a model for emancipation through which the indigeneity seems to subvert all the attempts that have been programmed by the 'mainstream' to impose majoritarian values and statist cultural standards on them. Ronald Paulson by his conviction that evil is "in the eye of the beholder", has concluded that, "evil is a cultural construct" (Paulson, 2007:xiii). The 'mainstream' notion of evil that gets attached with a trickster is essentially the cultural imperialistic design of the state for whom the trickster represents the indigenous wisdom of disclosing its essential neo-colonial functioning. According to C. Fred Alford's claim evil is "not a state of mind, but a state of world."(Alford, 1997:15); for him evil is "no-thing" (ibid.:ix), that is, "the nothingness we dread" (ibid.:15)—the nothingness that results from "the loss of self, loss of meaning, loss of history and loss of connection to the world itself" (ibid.:ix). This existential conceptualizing of evil shows how evil is more experiential in the sense that to exist as per one's notion of being human is to keep up a correspondence with evil: "doing evil is an attempt to transform the terrible passivity and helplessness of suffering into activity" (ibid.:3). Engaging the indigeneity on paranoid-schizoid locus where the tribal community dreads of its "doom at the hands of malevolent external persecutors who seek to destroy" (ibid.:40) them, the performing of the trickster by the underprivileged protagonists of folktales confirm how the tribal people choose to be party with the 'mainstream' notion of evil, and as an evildoer the indigeneity tries to claim its authority over the presence of the gaze of the other[1].

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Disfavored as the Trickster

The youngest son of the king and his younger wife in the Limbu folktale *Son of the Youngest Wife* represents the alternative youngest-hero of the tribal folktale unlike the 'mainstream' lore where hardly one comes to know much about the younger ones[2].

Son of the Youngest Wife (Limbu Folktale)

There was a king with two wives. The elder wife lived in a beautiful palace while the younger one was given a horse stable. The elder wife had lots of children with whom she enjoyed all good food and costly things. The younger wife had only one son with very little food and no good clothing. Calling all his sons, the king one day announced: "I want you all to travel and bring a treasurable jewel. Whosoever will be able to bring the most precious jewel for my crown at the earliest will become the heir to my throne". The elder wife had lots of food items which she packed for each of her sons. All her sons went in various directions to collect valuable stones and jewelleries for the king. The younger wife hardly had anything to provide to her son. She asked her son to stay back home. But the son said, "Let me try my luck, mother. In case I succeed in getting something nice for father, then he might start treating us well." His mother then managed to prepare five *rotis* from the grain that were given to the horses. The boy packed the five *rotis* and began to walk in search of something valuable that would make the king feel happy. After walking throughout the day, he felt tired and sat on the rocks on the top of a cave. He was very hungry but looking at such less number of *rotis* he felt sad. He started counting them one by one and said, "Only five to eat. But I am so hungry!" In the cave below, there were five witches. They thought that the boy was thinking of eating them. The witches got scared. The boy again repeated, "How can I sustain with just five!" The witches started pleading,

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> "Please don't eat! Please don't eat" But the boy thought that they were asking him not to eat the *rotis*. So he went on saying, "I am hungry. I have to eat." The witches them said, "We will give you whatever you want if you stop eating". The boy immediately said, "Give me ten beautiful diamonds." The witches threw out ten costly diamonds from the cave. The boy took them and went back to his horse stable. He showed the diamonds to his mother. She was very pleased. Next morning the son of the youngest wife went to meet the king. The king at first did not pay much heed to him. But when he showed the ten beautiful diamonds his father, the king, became very happy. The king then realised that he shouldn't had maltreated his youngest wife and the youngest son. Out of remorse and contentment he declared the boy to be the next king.

The folktale begins by imitating the stereotyped 'mainstream' narratives where the elder wife of the king lives with her children in a beautiful palace full of good food and costly clotheswhile the younger wife and her only son stays in a horse stable with very little food and no good clothing. However, at the end of the folktale it is the youngest son of the disfavoured wife who manages to bring the diamonds for the king's crown before the sons of the elder wife succeed to bring anything precious for the father and accordingly has been declared as the future king of the land.

The aged kings in folktales usually become the tyrannical patriarchs who try to turn every other as his slave[3]. But unlike the Oedipal plot of the folktales where the patriarchal father is often despised by the competing/confronting son, the youngest son of the king and his younger wife tries to please his displeased father despite the dissuasive mother who prefers him not to compete with his other step-brothers. The disfavoured son acquires his treasures by performing a trickster. By chance he sits on the top of a cave—counting his *rotis*[4] and

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trying to figure out how many he can eat—under which the witches who have been staying think that the youngest son wants to eat them. Again, as opposed to the usual pattern where human beings get scared of the witches here we have the witches who get frightened by the king's disfavoured son. The trick that the son plays on the witches, while negating the 'mainstream' notion of evil (such as the use of trickery) suggests that "evil is due to human freewill" (Mackie, 1990:33). The free will that has provoked the maltreated son to begin his quest in search of a gift for his father has also prompted him to play a trickster before the frightened witches. Offering a vision of empowerment for the disfavoured son, the role of a trickster according to this tribal folktale seems to be portrayed as a 'post-heroic' performance, in the sense that it can be performed by"men who have mastered the hero's way [and, thereby,] can deal with the primordial energies of the unconscious and the deep masculine" (Chinen, 1993:19) by wandering at an outer realm beyond that of a stereotyped warrior hero or a patriarchal dominator. Although the youngest son's fulfilling of his aspiration by becoming the future monarch might appear to be an enactment of the shadow of the patriarchy, yet the alternative that he provides by his unheroic depiction of a trickster is that of a nonconformist monarch with 'deep masculinity'[5].

Underprivileged as the Trickster

The striking feature of *The Clever Man* is the depiction of a queen as opposed to the king-centricity of most of the folktales, where the queen is always a secondary character or is dead.

The Clever Man (Limbu Folktale)

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> There was a queen who would change lovers each day, by appointing a man as the king for the day and next morning that man would be found dead. To be appointed as the king became the saddest event of a man's life and everyone thought that in near future there would be no single living male left. Eventually a very poor man got appointed as the king. Since already his life was full of hardships he was rather happy to take the challenge. At night he wrapped a banana tree in a blanket and placed it on the bed, while hiding himself only to eyewitness how a snake came out of the queen's nose and bit the banana tree. He repeated the trick the very next day and the moment the snake emerged out of the queen's nose to bit the banana tree, he killed it with his khukuri, the small curved sword. Thereafter, none of the kings got killed.

The presence of the queen as one of the central characters is the consequence of the Yumanism[6], where Tagera Ningwaphuma as the only supreme Goddess is the icon of cosmic consciousness and eternal 'Motherhood' who gives rise to all other creations, and thereby, asserts the feminine principle as the principium reality. The hierarchical Yumanist Trinitarianism—where both the First Reality, Tagera Ningwaphuma, and Yuma Sam, her daughter cum heir and the second Person in the Trinitarian order, are females only to be followed by the third Person, Thoba Pa-Sam or Hang-Sam, the masculine component originating out of the primordial womanhood—exposes the radical component of Yumanism unlike the 'mainstream' androcentric religions of India. Yumanism provides the feminine principle with the foremost agency of even defying the grip of the masculine exigency.

This Limbu folktale describes the alternative circumstance where the males are the victims of the female queen. Although the beginning of the folktale on one hand, seems to be almost a parody of the king-centricity as the usual pattern followed in the folktaleswhich also rejects the use of Otherized female bodies like that of the witches, yet on the other hand, the

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association of the snake with that of the queen underlines the tactful warning of danger about the female body beneath its apparent grandeur. However, the poor man's killing of the serpent that comes out of the queen's nose, thereby, turning the 'abject' body into a 'normatized' desirable body for the male, reveals the alternative 'sublime terror'[7] of the poor man in sharp contrast to the dreadfulness of other men who have been killed by the serpent. The poor man is the underprivileged person who is, nevertheless, gifted with an unbounded faculty of imagination that stimulates him to wrap a banana tree in a blanket and place it on the bed, while hiding himself only to eyewitness how a snake comes out of the queen's nose and bites the banana tree. The poor man as a trickster, repeats the same in the next night and successfully kills the snake with his small sword. The fact that the poor man's 'trick' is in reality a mode of procuring agency by the underprivileged often gets overlooked by the element of 'wonder' that is produced by the folktale. Contributing a fairly-tale-like feature to this 'wonder folk tale', the poor trickster reveals the paradox of trick: that the magic obscures the struggling interests which produce it[8]. The folktale thus reveals how the performance of a trickster by an underprivileged man enables him not only to empower the self but also permits him to sanction the feminine as not being a mere 'abjection'. The poor man as the trickster, indicating a 'sublime terror', rather resolves the boundary between himself and the serpent-queen, often projected as the Other of a hypermasculine self.

Unheroic as the Trickster

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The clever younger brother of *Two Brothers and a Tiger*, with all his unheroic lean and weak features, plays a trickster as one who"emphasizes healing instead of heroism, communication rather than conquest, and exploration over exploitation" (ibid.:19-20).

Two Brothers and a Tiger (Lepcha folktale)

There were two brothers once upon a time. The elder one was very strong and hefty but almost an idiot, while the younger one who was very short and timid, yet was very clever. One day both of them started walking for Tibet with a bag full of maize in order to exchange it with a bag of salt. Soon it became dark. They decided to sleep under a tree. The younger brother felt thirsty. He requested the elder brother to fetch him some water. The elder one went inside the forest where a tiger was hunting a deer. The idiotic elder brother who thought that it was a huge cat, came running to the younger brother to show him how a big cat was eating a deer. When the younger brother along with the elder one reached the spot, the deer was lying dead on the ground but no other animal was there. The younger better suggested, "Let's take the deer and roast it for our dinner". The elder brother was delighted. He collected some pieces of dry wood from the forest and made a fire. Then he started roasting the deer. Soon the tiger got the smell of the meat. It came right in front of the younger brother. The younger brother understood that it was the same tiger whom the elder brother had mistaken for a cat and that it came to take back the deer that it had successfully targeted. The thin and weak brother shouted at his elder brother for help. But the idiotic brother who was busy in roasting the deer said, "Why are you afraid of a cat? Don't disturb me now". The younger brother cleverly replied, "See how the tiger is

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> touching your meat". Listening to this, the elder brother became very furious. He turned back and lifting the tiger by his hands he tossed it far away. The tiger ran away into the forest.

The younger brother's mode of combat with the tiger through the use of a trick on one hand, emphasizes how a trick can serve as a mode of empowerment for the unheroic, and on the other hand, it exposes the element of 'wonder' that is often produced by the folktales as mere trickery. The younger brother provides a stark contrast to his elder brother who appears to be heroic by his stoutness and fearlessness. The folktale satirises the conventional notion of heroism by depicting the elder brother, who lifts a tiger with his hands and throws it far away almost like a ball, as an idiot who even fails to differentiate a tiger from a cat. Perceived bythe standards of the patriarchal 'mainstream',the younger brother has nothing heroic about him. He can be easily labelled as feminine due to his lack of boldness. He is scared to go in search of water into the dark forest and has to depend on his elder brother. It is the elder brother who arranges dried up wood for the fire and handles the deer on his own in order to roast it well for dinner. The frail younger brother is rather clever enough to play an effective trickster. Despite himself being unheroic so far his physicality is concerned, the clever younger brother efficaciously gets rid of the tiger by playing a trick on his elder brother through misinforming him that the tiger is stealing the roasted meat of the deer. Performing a trickster thus compensates for the unheroic trait of the younger brother. Rather in a way of mockery the folktale renders 'mainstream' notion of a macho heroism as idiocy and favours a trickster over a daring male. The weak younger brother as a trickster justifies that Chinen has been correct in stating that as the role of a trickster "helps men break free from traditional male roles, but [due to that] it also provokes the enmity of patriarchal culture. Society

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therefore supresses the Trickster, calls him criminal… This is why the Trickster suffers from a bad reputation and why his wisdom is not immediately obvious. Patriarchal society rejects him, forcing him to hide. The Trickster represents a positive…spirit behind the wild man and the deep masculine" (ibid.:91).

Conclusion

The last-born folks in all these tribal tales are the embodiments of the 'little traditions'[9] that the 'first nations' represent. As opposed to the 'mainstream's' obsession with the bigger/advantagedones, these tribal folktales, by focusing on the younger/lesser ones, provide resistance to the 'mainstream' disciplines vis-à-vis the 'mainstreaming' of the indigenous knowledge under the plea of a majoritarian modernitywherethe scientific state seems to strategically encourage "the only kind of relationship that could exist in the context of domination,between so-called modern science and so-called traditional knowledge,where the latter is either marginalized or, better still, *eaten* by the former" (Hountondji, 1995:4).The alternative use of performing a trickster also underscores the "ethno-philosophy"[10]of the indigenous people that differs drastically from the 'mainstream' perspective. It is true that what is known as the archaic/traditional societies of the indigenous people is neither static, nor homogeneous. The First Nations denotes varying heterogeneous groups of ethnic communities whose notions of alternatives differ from one tribal society to another as well as from what gets labelled as the 'mainstream'[11]. However, certain commonalities that have emerged out of the folktales of Limbu and Lepcha communities, in their favoring of both the

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lesser one and (or as) the trickster, can allow us to conclude about the diffusion of 'endogenous'[12] knowledge among the intra-ethnic communities. The alternative endogenous knowledge endorsed by these diverse tribal communities, that provides an antithetical perspective regarding the lesser-one and the trickster, makes us remind of Laclau[13] that since an exclusive politics of pure difference would be self-defeating, indigenous people of differences as the markers of depravity need to belong intimately with other different tribal groups who are equally marginalized by the majoritarian state and governmentality.

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Yaoundé: CLE.

[1]The Gaze of the Other, according to Sartre, is "a limit of my freedom […] it is given to me as a burden which I have to carry without ever being able to turn back to know it, without even being able to realize its weight" (Sartre, 1989:262). One has to invalidate the active gaze of the other for asserting the existence of the self. Sartre has further argued that "the Other has to make my being-for-him bein so far as he has to be his being" (ibid.). This establishes the fact that the autonomy and subjectivity of others demands the loss of integrity of the self. Sartre's notion of the Gaze of the subject, finds its correspondence in Alford's idea of the evildoer who exercises the authority of the self for claiming power over the other.

[2]In the *Ramayana*, one hardly gets to know much about the youngest brother Shatrughna and same holds true for Nakula and Shahadeva in the *Mahabharata*.

[3]For details see Campbell (1968).

[4]*Roti* is a flat, round, hand-made bread, chiefly consumed by the South Asians.

[5]First used by Robert Bly (1990), 'deep masculine', according to Chinen, refers to "the part of the male psyche that is normally buried under conventional male roles, heroic ideals, and patriarchal ambitions" (Chinen, 1993:14).

[6]The way of life of the aboriginal Limbu tribes based on the traditional faith is termed as Yumanism. For a detailed study of Yumanism see Subba (2012a; 2012b).

[7]Connolly has categorized 'sublime terror' as "an 'unlimiting' of the imagination, an increase in consciousness and a capacity to accept ethical guilt about our abject desires" through which the self resolves the boundary between the 'monster' or the devil, seen as the self's Other, by recognizing that "the perverse and psychotic desires of the monster are a mirror

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image of our own perverse desires and the perversity of our own community and culture, based as they are on mechanisms of sacrifice and of scapegoating" (Connolly, 2003:419–20).

[8]"When I reflect on the continuity between the 'wonder folk tale' and the fairy tale", writes Christina Bacchilega, "I find I want to emphasize the ideological paradox or 'trick' which in its multiple performances informs both: that magic which seeks to conceal the struggling interests which produce it" (Bacchilega, 1997:7).

[9]Robert Redfield (1956) has coined the term 'Little tradition' while Milton Singer (1972) has used it in Indian context.

[10]The word "ethno-philosophy"in a polemical sense has been used by Hountondji and Marcien Towa. For details see Hountondji (1970) and Towa (1971).

[11]My conscious recurrent use of 'mainstream' is mainly influenced by AkeelBilgrami who has also considered 'mainstream' to be an important route to nationalism as "a modern state of mind in which the very ideal of 'nation' has built into it as a form of necessity the ideal of nation-state, with its commitment to such things as development, national security, rigidly codified forms of an increasingly centralized policy, and above all the habit of exclusion of some other people" (Bilgrami, 1998:383). It is the dominant mainstream culture that, under the plea for 'culturalism', appropriates the *tribalism* by distortingly fitting the nonconformist indigeneity within the frame of national discourses and institutions.

[12]Replacing the word "traditional" which would mislead the reader to think that the society and its knowledge is permanent, unchallengeable and unchanging, critics have used the word 'endogenous' to "dwell on the origin of a cultural product or value that comes from, or at least is perceived by people as coming from inside their own society, as opposed to imported or "exogenous" products or values"(Hountondji, 1995:7).

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[13]"To assert one's own *differential* identity involves…the inclusion in that identity of the other, as that from which one delimits oneself. But it is easy to see that a fully achieved differential identity would involve the sanctioning of the existing *status quo* in the relation between groups. For an identity which is purely differential vis-à-vis other groups has to assert the identity of the other at the same time as its own and, as a result, cannot have identity claims in relation to those other groups. Let us suppose that a group has such claims—for instance the demand for equal opportunities in employment and education…In so far as these are claims presented as rights that I share as a member of the community with all other groups, they presuppose that I am not simply different from the other but, in some fundamental respects, equal to them" (Laclau, 1996:48).