



OPENING MINDS:
RESEARCH FOR SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT

***‘God of the Betel Creeper’*: Betel as an Object of Folkloric Imagination and Biodiversity in Sri Lanka**

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1 INTRODUCTION

Though folkloric texts like folktales, folk songs, folk poetry and folk drama might be neglected cultural spaces for empirical research, one should not neglect what folklore scholars and scholars of other disciplines, such as history, ethno-botany and anthropology have to say about these speech acts. Man (2011), a historian specializing in Chinese and Mongol empires, relies on folklore whenever his objective historical research hits a dead end. Wickramasinghe (2002), a historian, offers ‘oral history’—“...history written with evidence gathered from a living person, rather than from a living person” (Wickramasinghe 2002)—as one of the modalities of writing history. The anthropologist Obeyesekera (2002) has recreated an alternative history of King Kasyapa’s demise by collecting folktales from the Sigirya region. And the geologist Madduma Bandara (2008), while establishing a powerful link between Sri Lanka’s biodiversity and folkloric narratives (and other ancient literary texts) encourages researchers and activists to exploit the link between biodiversity and culture in Sri Lanka in their environmental preservation initiatives. Madduma Bandara’s research inspires the present study which attempts to undertake a close reading of the representation of the popular Sinhala folk motif, the betel creeper, both in the modern scientific discourse and the folk imaginations of southern Sri Lanka. The study attempts to

locate and analyze the discourse of science and the folkloric thoughts related to the betel creeper. The folktale sample under consideration are sourced from Sri Lanka’s very first collection of southern folktales collected, annotated and published by the colonial (British) irrigation officer Henry Parker under the title *Village Folk Tales of Ceylon*. This collection appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century in three volumes featuring a total of 266 folktales. In that collection, the betel creeper plays critical role in the primary plots of two tales, namely *The Gamarala’s Son-In-Law* and *How a Tom-Tom Beater Got a Marriage*. Parker’s folktales were Sri Lanka’s first collection of folktales and this study, which is a preliminary version of a much larger study currently under way, sees his work as a suitable starting point.

The vernacular name betel refers to the botanically well-established plant species, *Piper betle* (Fig. 01), which is native to South East Asia. In the Indian traditions it is believed that betel was brought from heaven by a semi-divine character called Arjuna and the celestial origin of betel is reproduced in many South Asian cultures, including in Sri Lanka. Thus betel is valued highly in South Asian nations, especially among the Indian and Sri Lankan communities. At southern Sri Lankan marriage ceremonies for example, the bride and bridegroom exchange betel



leaves with the belief that this ritual brings divine blessings and prosperity.



Figure 1: Photograph of fertile shoot of Piper betel

2 METHODOLOGY

We undertook an analytical reading of the two tales by fore-grounding the betel creeper to locate how this plant could have aided the meaning-making endeavors of the story tellers. In other words, rather than taking the betel creeper as a static/background motif in the fictitious space of a tale, we treated it as a living/participating motif which carried known information to an interested listener. The scientific discourse located around the betel creeper and the meaning-making endeavors of the folk story tellers form the basis of this paper's conclusions.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the both tales under study here, the betel creeper is located around the act of marriage. In *The Gamarala's Son-In-Law*, one of the critical tests devised by the Gamarala (the village headman) to ascertain the physical strength and efficiency of potential sons-in-law is the ability to water twelve betel creepers. Many potential suitors fail in this endeavour—suggesting that it is difficult work or that the younger males do not consider this act to be a worthy task. However, in the Gamarala's worldview, a betel creeper holds a special place and he

expects a potential son-in-law to understand and be sensitive to his point of view. One of the men who seeks the hand of the Gamarala's daughter, instead of watering the plants, uproots the betel creepers and feeds them to young calves—a clear act of sabotage and lack of respect—prompting Gamarala to devise means to kill this young man. Gamarala, it could be argued, would kill on behalf of his betel creeper. Further, in this tale, working men are seen munching betel while engaged in tilling the soil.

In the tale, *How a Tom-Tom Beater Got a Marriage*, a wealthy man from the devalorised drummer caste seeks a marriage for his son from a Gamarala who has fallen on hard times. The caste-conscious and proud Gamarala rejects the man's offer outright—his main argument being that he is unable to entertain the possibility of 'caste pollution.' After twilight, this low caste man climbs a tree that supports a betel creeper, which is situated in front of the Gamarala's house. The man mimics a deity and demands that the Gamarala give his daughter in marriage to the tom-tom beater's son. The Gamarala accepts this order, offering the strong suggestion that the betel creeper has sacred connotations for him. In other words, the Gamarala is willing to violate caste rules to propitiate a deity from the betel creeper.

In both these stories the following betel-creeper-related motifs are prominent: a) for the cultivating adult male, betel is an important sacred plant; b) the ability to nourish and sustain a betel creeper is a unique trait of masculinity and could be rewarded with a bride; c) the betel creeper is planted in front of the house; d) males tend to munch betel leaves when engaging in physical labour; and e) the uprooted betel creeper can be used to feed calves.

The discourse of science on the betel creeper suggests that: though chewing betel leaves leads to habituation and withdrawal symptoms of psychoactive



effect, it increases the capacity to exercise physical and mental functions for a longer duration (Chu, 2001; Garg and Jain, 1996). In addition, it has recently been reported that betel leaves and roots possess aphrodisiac properties and may also function as a contraceptive.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Indian folk belief surrounding betel as a sacred plant in all probability has been absorbed by the common folk of Sri Lanka. Thus, the Gamarala, locates this plant as scared, and considers it worthy of nourishment and sustenance. He expects younger males to follow such traditions. The sacrosanct nature of the betel creeper is so established that a low-caste male exploits this notion to achieve the near-impossible task of gaining access to a higher caste for his son—a process known as hypergamy. The scared nature of the betel creeper might have promoted the Gamarala to plant it in front of the house, so that the creeper is the first thing he sees in the morning—an auspicious sight.

Closely bonded to the sacrosanct nature of this plant is the idea of masculinity and sexuality. Modern research connects the betel plant with sexual prowess. Perhaps, the Gamarala's motive of testing a younger male's ability to nurture this plant is a symbolic representation of their sexual prowess—an important role in a marriage necessary for cultivating family and producing offspring, specifically males, who could provide more labour to sustain cultivation. For the Gamarala, the 'maleness,' or the 'masculinity' of a son-in-law resides in his ability to be fertile and strong. Thus, watering twelve betel creepers—an act of sustenance—could be interpreted as an act that represents the idea of male sexuality. Those males who failed to water the betel creeper could be

considered sexually inactive or impotent; and the one who uprooted the betel creeper could be a male whose sexuality was aggressive and out of control—perhaps the reason why the Gamarala attempts to kill him. We read this act of killing as a metaphoric act, whereby the killing of the 'male' represents the attempt to moderate his aggressive and reckless sexuality.

Munching betel leaves in the midst of physical labour under the harsh sun, could offer physical and mental strength—the possible reasons why the male working on the Gamarala's field also took betel and the equipment needed to munch them. Perhaps, feeding a young calf with the betel creeper could be connected to the idea of strength.

All in all, there are striking resemblances between the representation of betel in the folkloric imaginations and the scientific discourse. This finding reminds us of the folklorist Dundes's assertion of folklore as the "autobiographical ethnography...people's own description of themselves" (2007). Further research is needed to fully understand this connection and the present work, as mentioned earlier, is the beginning of such an effort.

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