**THE DEATH OF AN ENDING: WHAT MOTIVATED A STORYTELLR TO ALTER THE ENDING OF THE FOLKTALE ‘*ANIMOSITY BETWEEN COBRA AND POLANGA’*?**

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**INTRODUCTION**In addition to being a mode of entertainment for the „common folk‟ folklore is also a  
potential site for cultural diffusion. Folktales, a genre of folklore and the focus of this paper,  
are understood by Kirk (1984) as narratives with “high factual and low fantastic content.” Martin Wickramasinghe, Sri Lanka‟s foremost Sinhala novelist, who demonstrated a keen interest in Sinhala folklore, seemingly agrees with Kirk when he suggests that folktales were “born out of people’s real-life experience” (Wickramasinghe 1975) where they constructed a “real approach” (Wickramasinghe 1975) to life by restricting elaborate descriptions on the setting and characters unlike in a novel. Both these views blur the distinction between fact and fiction of an imaginative tale and posit that a folktale as a  
modality that re-enacts a “reality‟ for those who could not experience it. Both the above  
scholarly assumptions act as working definitions for this paper which sets out to understand  
the parameters of a “reality‟ which motivated a late nineteenth century raconteur  
to seek a different ending for a popular Sinhala folktale. The folktale under consideration is  
popularly known as *Nai-Polong Vairaya*, or “Animosity between Cobra and Polanga.” The  
very first to record this story from rural Lanka[[1]](#footnote-1) was the 15th century British prisoner of the  
Kandyan kingdom, Robert Knox and it appears in his book *An Historical Relations of the  
Island of Ceylon*, published in 1680. Another British colonial irrigation officer, Henry Parker  
also recorded this story in his three-volume collection of southern folktales titled *Village Folk Tales of Ceylon*, which were published in 1910. In the 210-year interval between these two published books, the version published by Parker had different ending. It is the difference in the ending that motivates this study. Narrative tales in the public sphere, tend to reproduce or reflect the material conditions of its surroundings.

As the folklorist Dundes (1984) argues, folklore is an “autobiographical ethnography—…people‟s  
own description of themselves” (pg.17). Folktales, research indicates, are not static entities that retain their plot, structure or even themes over time. A tale could undergochanges to suit the social conditions of a time-space dimension. As Dundes (1984) argues,since folklore is disseminated by means of personal contact, an item of folklore could be “changed by different individuals in accordance with their own individual needs, the demands of a particular social context…”(pg.22). Among the factors that could affect such changes are: gender and age of the audience and “requirements of a new age” (Dundes 1984). It is the phrase „requirement of the new age‟ that concerns this study as it sets out to understand the possible motive/s behind a radical change to a popular folktale within a space of 210 years. What could have motivated the 20th century narrator to prefer a different ending? What could have been the individual needs or social conditions that could have motivated such a difference? Undertaking a close motif-analysis of the two folktales in question and their possible conditions of production this study attempts to answer these questions.

**METHODOLOGY**This study will undertake a close reading of motifs present in the two folktales to locate the  
possible point of reference where the diversion had occurred. A motif is the “smallest element in a  
tale having a power to persist in tradition,” (Thompson, 1977). To possess such power to  
persist, Thompson argues, a motif must be “unusual” or “striking” (Thompson 1977). Thus,  
he categorizes motifs into three different types: Actors, Objects and Single Incidents. Actors  
in a tale are its major protagonists, be they human, animal, supernatural or preternatural.  
Objects are items in the background of the action which are unusual and play a prominent role  
in the tale. Single Incidents are the most common motifs in a tale and usually comprise of  
important incidents/conflicts/action in a tale. This study intends to break down the two tales  
under consideration to these three categories of motifs to undertake a close reading. It will also undertake a close reading of the background to the two tales which are supplied by the two tale collectors, Knox and Parker. Knox was only recapturing or remembering his perceptions and views of the Kandyan kingdom and his own text would be used to understand the material conditions of this tale. Parker offered a lengthy Introduction to his tales in order to inform his (western) readers of the surroundings that gave him the folktales. That Introduction would serve as the background to this study.

A general version of the tale *Nai-Polon Vairaya* as it is heard in the present context is given below for reader comprehension.

*During a period of prolonged drought, a thirsty Cobra was able to quench his thirst from  
a bowl of water where a child had been left to play, and he was patient enough to endure  
the playful behavior of this child. Polanga too was thirsty; Cobra pointed out the location  
to him, but with a condition—Polanga was expected to tolerate the child. Cobra spied on  
Polanga as he went to drink water. The excited child’s acts were too much for Polanga  
to bear, and he attacked the child causing his death. Angry Cobra attacked Polanga and  
killed him. Since then the two have been at loggerheads with each other.*

This tale’s motifs could be identified as follows:

a) Snake, Polanga, Child (Actors)  
b) Drought (Incident)  
c) Child in a bowl of water playing (Object, Actor & Incident)  
d) Child plays with the cobra (Incident)  
e) Cobra tolerates the child (Incident)  
f) Cobra offers conditional information to Polanga (Incident)  
g) Cobra spies on Polanga (Incident)  
h) Death of the child (Incident)  
i) Cobra and Polanga fight (Incident)  
j) Beginning of sustained hatred (Incident)  
All these motifs are present in the tale versions copied by Knox and Parker, though there were differences in h), i) and j). Table I lists the them.  
**Table I: Motif Differences in Knox’s and Parker’s versions of Animosity Between  
Cobra and Polanga**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Central Motif** | **Knox’s version** | **Parker’s version** | **Difference** |
| h)Death of the child (Incident) | “…in his hasty humor bit him on the hand and killed him…” | “…it bit the crown of the child‟s head…” | In Knox‟s version, the child dies; in Parker‟s the child lives. |
| i)Cobra and Polonga fight (Incident) | “…Noya…fought him so long till he killed him and after that devoured him.” | “Having joined the Polonga it bit and killed it.” | Knox‟s version offers a different ending for Polanga |
| j)Beginning of sustained hatred | “…to this day…always fight…Conqueror eats the body of the vanquished | “From that day the Cobra and Polonga are opposed.” | Knox‟s version says Cobra devoured Polanga. Parker‟s tale plays it down. |

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Knox and Parker differ in the way they have recorded the ending of the tale. In Knox’s  
version, the child dies, and in Parker’s, the Cobra heals the child. In  
terms of literary appraisal, Parker’s version smells of histrionics and melodrama; and it is  
seemingly a version narrated to make the faint-hearted happy—there is a tendency to accept  
death as a fact of life when the elderly or ill dies, not when a happy toddler dies. Parker in his lengthy Introduction to his folktales, comments that the tales were presented as authentically as he had collected them: “The stories…are practically literal translations of the written Sinhalese originals…perhaps too literal” (Parker 1910). Having said this Parker also says elsewhere that he did “modify” (Parker 1910) some of the “objectionable expressions” in three or four stories—he does not elaborate on what modifications, why he modified them, where and the exact number of modifications. Knox on the other hand, in a separate section of his book mentions the event of a snake bite as follows: “They are often  
times stung with venomous Serpents, upon which sudden death follows without speedy help”  
(Knox 1680). In other words, tragic encounters with reptiles were common in the Kandyan  
Kingdom of ancient Lanka and the survival depended on timely medical intervention. Knox’s  
does not seem to have a problem acknowledging such hard facts of life. Parker‟s version, in  
terms of folkloric motifs, treads uncharted territory. This needs explanation. In the 266  
folktales collected by Parker from southern villagers, (the tale under focus here is one),  
Cobras are featured in roles that range from protectors, helpers and facilitators. Yet, they  
never appear as reptiles who could challenge mortality; sucking out poison to prevent a sure  
death was never a motif ascribed to a Cobra in Parker’s tales. It looks as if Parker’s tale collector might have ‘modified’ this tale and added an ending to make Parker happy. Also one cannot help but  
reflect that the British colonials’ notions of modern science-driven medicine in their colonies  
might have resulted in a belief of the human ability to challenge mortality. The tale under  
focus might have undergone changes owing to such patterns of thinking.

**CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS**Folklore scholars quoted at the beginning of this study located folktales as narratives that  
mimic life. If those definitions are anything to go by Knox’s version seemed close to material  
sphere of the tale than Parker’s. Yet, a folktale also responded to the “requirements of the new  
age,‟ and Parker’s folktale is one such example. Knox’s version of the tale captures a human  
universe where vagaries of weather and attacks by reptiles were common place and death was  
an inevitable event. Parker’s, on the other hand, locates a universe where there were  
destructive natural events, yet there was hope that human beings could mitigate them—even  
death could be evaded. Yet, this radical change to an imaginative story suggests that even the  
human imagination responds to changes in the material sphere, and that no story can resist  
those changes—death even visits a folktale.

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1. The nation state would be referred to as Lanka, since „Sri Lanka‟ was a post-independent identity. For  
   Knox, Sri Lanka was known as Zeilon, and for Parker, „Ceylon.‟  
    [↑](#footnote-ref-1)