



“FOOLISHNESS OF THE TOM-TOM BEATERS”: FOLKTALES OF THE CEYLONESE DRUMMER CASTE AND A MISPLACED (?) COLONIAL OPINION

*Lal Medawattegedara**

Department of Language Studies, The Open University of Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

“It is said that in the Southern Province that all tom-tom beaters are fools. In the North-western Province the same opinion is held regarding some of them.” (Village Folk Tales of Ceylon, Henry Parker 1910).

Thus begins an anecdote by the colonial (British) irrigation officer Henry Parker where he recalls an encounter with a southern drummer-caste male while clearing a stretch of jungle for an irrigation project during an unspecified time in the late 20th century. A close examination of this quote reveals that while those living in the southern province have written off the drummer caste as ‘fools’, those in the north-western province have been somewhat discreet about their judgments—only “...some of them” hold that opinion. Yet, in the subsequent sentence Parker himself (wittingly or unwittingly) participates in the native opinion: “To what extent it is justified I am unable to say, but an example which supported the general notion fell under my own observation” (Parker 1910). Firstly, the sentence is self-contradictory: while suggesting, in the first part, that he is unable to ‘justify’ the accuracy of a character trait attributed to the drummer caste, in the next phrase he goes on to say how he had found a case in point which supported the same notion that he himself could not ‘justify.’ Secondly, Parker is seemingly too willing to subscribe to the notion that tom-tom beaters are ‘foolish’ as evident by his urgency to introduce an example to support a biased view shared among the locals. Parker is Ceylon’s first folktale collector and he went on to collect 17 tales from this same caste which he and some natives considered ‘foolish.’ It is uncertain what Parker exactly meant by the generalized term ‘foolish’ and he does not explain himself. If one assumes that being ‘foolish’ suggests “lacking forethought” or being “trivial”¹ it would be interesting to locate such idiosyncrasies in the folktales that the tom-tom beaters have told Parker. For, according to folkloristics, there is a close connection between folktales and their creators/tellers/listeners. As a folklorist puts it, folkloric speech acts are “autobiographical ethnography” (Dundes 2007) of a group of people, or a group of people’s description about themselves. Do the tom-tom beaters see themselves as “trivial” and “lacking forethought” in the folktales they have offered Henry Parker? How did the folktales of the drummer caste respond to the notions of ‘foolishness’ attributed to their caste by other people? By undertaking a folkloric reading of the tales of the tom-tom beaters collected by Henry Parker, this study aims to locate answers to these questions for cultural comprehension as well as to understand the roles a folktale play in the lives of those who create/tell/listen to them.

Henry Parker, Ceylon’s pioneering folktale collector

Henry Parker was an irrigation engineer who also collected a large number of folktales that were in circulation among southern people. He collected, annotated and organized the folktales he had collected into the caste of the tellers and published them in three volumes under the title *Village Folk Tales of Ceylon*. This 266-folktale collection features thematics ranging from marital strife to internecine power struggles alongside a prolific cast of ‘male’ and ‘female’ characters representing various castes, classes, communities, supernatural beings and anthropomorphic animals. During the early twentieth century when the colonizers of the world were publishing the folktales of their colonies, Parker’s folktales were a timely publication that put Ceylon in the folkloric map of the world—despite the disciplinary

¹ Both definitions taken from the online site, Dictionary.com on 28 May 2022 at 1:03 pm



concerns related to mode of collection of the tales, their classification and even translation (issues which are beyond the scope of this paper). According to local folklorist Ratnapala, Parker's collection is the "only worthwhile collection of folktales available to us in any language" (*Folklore* xi), despite the questionable methodology of collection, caste classification, and Parker's lack of understanding of the Sinhala folk idiom. The anecdote introduced above appears in Volume I of the *Village Folk Tales of Ceylon* and serves as an introduction (questionable though it is)

to the 17 folktales told to Parker (and his tale collectors) by the tom-tom beaters.

Parker and the Ceylonese caste system²

The British colonial officers offered mixed reactions to the Ceylonese caste system. Davy saw the caste system as "wretched and humiliating in all its details" (100). Skinner, while declaring

that the supposed evils of the caste system were exaggerated, prescribed that the system should

be upheld until "education and civilization" (144) could eradicate it. The "institutionalized inequality" (Amarasekera 9) attributed to the caste system as a whole, did not prevent Parker from subscribing to the specific superior/inferior dyads upheld by the Ceylonese version. In his

lengthy *Introduction* to the Volume I of the folktales, he pays elaborate attention to the lower castes while eschewing attention to the higher. Parker's "silence [on the superior caste] is on alert" (Foucault 54) as he identifies the tom-tom beaters as "drunkards", people of the rodi caste as "thieves" and those of the kinnara caste as "ordinary looking." It could be surmised from this Introduction that Parker himself was a subject of the caste system that some of his own countrymen saw as a questionable mode of categorizing people.

METHODOLOGY

With this information as its backdrop this paper would undertake a close reading of the tales of the tom-tom beaters for the 'folk ideas' inscribed in their tales. According to Dundes, 'Folk Ideas' are "traditional notions that a group of people have about the nature of humanity, of the world, and of life in the world" (Dundes, 2007, p. 185). However, Dundes also argues that 'folk ideas' need not be openly apparent in folkloric material and they could be "unstated premises" (Dundes, 2007, p. 185) which could underlie the thought and action of individuals. The present study takes this argument into consideration as it re-reads the tom-tom beaters tales for the 'folk ideas' to locate if the people who created/told/heard those stories were 'intellectually challenged' as their tale collector suggests.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The 17 folktales that Parker features in the Volume I of his folktales immediately after his anecdotal introduction in which he tacitly supports the notion that the tom-tom beaters are 'fools' can be categorized thematically as follows: I) stories whose primary thematic is the lack of basic common sense among the tom-tom beaters; II) lengthy and complex tales involving the royalty and rulers III) tales—one involving human protagonists and the other animal—inscribed with maxims related to life. Each of these thematic-driven categories of tales could be read for their inscribed 'folk ideas' as follows:

I) Lack of common sense among the tom-tom beaters

² There are discrepancies in Parker's caste classification of the 266 tales. A lengthy discussion on the subject is beyond the scope of this paper.



There are seven (07) folktales whose fictitious universe represents the tom-tom beaters as lacking in experience, knowledge, skills and common sense required for hunting and trading. Thus we find one potential hunter from the caste losing his prey of hairs simply because he did not know the post-hunting requirement of securing one's prey. Tom-tom beaters who go on trading journeys return empty handed owing to their lack of commercial experience. Even 12 men of this caste find it difficult to find the 12th person as they take a count of themselves in the jungle, thus denying the tom-tom beaters basic life skills such as counting. The primary folk idea of these tales is that the tom-tom beaters are unable to ply a trade and live ordinary lives. These tales are humorous accounts of the tom-tom beaters where they laugh at themselves by creating extremely (and impractical) humorous situations for themselves. Thereby, one needs to be cautious when rushing to interpret such tales as those representing the drummer caste as 'fools'. Firstly, Parker's arrangement of these tales—immediately following his anecdote about tom-tom beaters being 'fools'—is questionable because this arrangement goes on to strengthen the opinion in his anecdote. There are more complex and sophisticated tales from this caste which Parker had decided to present to his readers later. Also humour directed at oneself can be interpreted as a sophisticated form of response to one's environment. Medawattegedara (2022) in a study of humorous tales about the nation state of Lanka argues that laughing at the nation is a way of neutralizing intense criticism aimed at the nation. The tom-tom beaters seeming use the same strategy to neutralize the insults, affronts and abuses aimed at their caste by laughing at themselves.

II) Royalty and rulers

The eight (08) tales that feature this thematic create a universe of aggressive kings, passive and compassionate queens, females who are pretenders to the throne and princes who suffer injustice from the royal court. The stories represent the lives of royalty as those involving expulsion, adventure, violence and hard work. Majority of the tales are lengthy and involve long-drawn and sophisticated plots. At the same time, they refer to complex ideas such as royal measurements and math and interpretation of dreams. Thus a monkey who faithfully serves a royal prince in disguise convinces a king to lend him the royal measuring instrument for gold, and uses imagined measurements to mislead the king about the wealth possessed by the prince in disguise. If one assumes that the tales told by tom-tom beaters were heard mostly by their fellow caste persons (since the caste might have been a serious issue when it comes to entertainment like listening to tales at home at late evenings³) such an audience would require a certain kind of sophistication to understand, absorb and be entertained by the tales of royalty and rulers, which has direct bearing upon Parker's suggestion that tom-tom beaters are fools.

III) Stories with maxims related to life

The two stories with maxims related to life offer the educative notions of the dangers of day-dreaming and illusionary identities which could lead one into trouble. Thus a fox who imagines himself a lion is violently killed by an elephant and a man who takes two oil pots home loses them on account of his day dreaming. The 'folk idea' in the tales is that there is no substitute to hard work and that one ought to know one's limits as one lives in the world. The second maxim might be relevant to an oppressed caste like the tom-tom beaters since their identity in a world of caste hierarchy might be called into question more frequently than not. Being in a lower caste would call for industrious action for survival, thus day dreaming would be a notion the story tellers wanted to discourage. Also then storytellers suggest to their audience that a rigidly caste-based society requires persons of the lower castes to know their limits (unlike a fox) and stay within those limits.

³ Parker suggests in his *Introduction* to the folktales that storytelling was usually a late evening event among family and extended family members, which was usually segregated by gender.



CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The 17 stories that Parker collected from the supposedly ‘foolish’ tom-tom beaters seemingly write back to Parker about the creators/tellers/hearers being “lacking in forethought.” They (tom-tom beaters) boldly draw in the notion of ‘fools’ into their imaginative narratives and create fictitious worlds where they could use humour of those tales to neutralize the invectives. By making humour out of a negative comment attributed to their caste, they ‘silently’ laugh at the upper caste (and Parker!) about taking such opinions seriously. Though Parker, his readership and even the high caste natives might have rushed to interpret these tales as proof of their opinions of the tom-tom beaters, the drummer caste has seemingly had other ideas as they used these tales as means of alleviating their oppressive condition in the material sphere. At the same time, the tales that they narrate among themselves with royal thematics demonstrate not only their ability to create stories that thrive on political administration and political intrigue but also the power of their audiences to understand and appreciate those ideas. Tom-tom beaters also use their folktales as means of moral edification suggesting that Parker has been too fortuitous in jumping into conclusions about the tom-tom beaters. Parker had committed a Nietzschean error: the philosopher warns us that by staring at a vacuum for a lengthy period of time, one becomes a part of that vacuum. Parker’s anecdotes about the tom-tom beaters and his questionable arrangement of their tales do not necessarily make the drummer caste ‘foolish,’ but it does make Parker, a colonial master, a subjective Ceylonese native who subscribed to the caste system. If anything that could make the drummer caste ‘foolish’ is their sustenance of the casteism in their tales. In the stories of moral edification by warning the persons of their caste about having delusions about one’s limit, perhaps they are blocking social progress. If sustenance of the status-quo is a position that the tale creators and narrators took then that itself is an act that supports the caste system and their oppression—perhaps an act which could be considered “lacking in forethought.”

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