

## 'Promises are Meant to be Broken' : An Oicotype Study of Two Tales

G. Badaiasuklang Lyngdoh Nonglait, Rimika Lanong  
and Desmond L Kharmawphlang

Following the arguments of Stith Thompson, it has become clear to us that in order to arrive at any valid statements about folktales in general, it is necessary to study folktales in particular.<sup>1</sup>

While acknowledging that the principle and spirit of comparison is what drives the Finnish method, we also believe that this approach could yield valuable results in the study of narratives of North-east India. It would be ideal to work with numerous versions but the exercise of grouping for the purpose of study has not received the required impetus. Prof. Prafulla Datta Goswami in 1960 attempted a tale type analysis of the narratives of Assam and this work has established itself as a template for comparative analyses of later dates.

This paper will concern itself with an oicotype investigation in that it will try to study two tales from two different parts of North-east India to prove that there is a tradition of tales that are in currency in an area within certain geographical limits that share popular patterns. To be sure, the investigation needs to establish the tale-type and motif respectively codified as *Ordaining the Future* and 'Bargain and Promise' (M 200 - M299) in Stith Thompson's seminal work.<sup>2</sup> It would not be possible at this time to take up tale type and motif studies in respect of these tales in the present paper due to constraints of time and space. Two versions of this tale-type so far have been collected although there are four others that may be said to share certain analogous characteristics in the beginning, which would be more relevant in the study of frames than in the present one.

The first tale which henceforth shall be called Tale I is an Angami Naga tale collected by Zanou Thakro<sup>3</sup> and the other called Tale II is a tale, which exists on tape recorded format, was collected by Desmond L Kharmawphlang at Pahambir in the Bhoi area of

Khasi Hills on 31 July 1999. The outline of both the tales are given here: -

### Tale I

Once upon a time, there lived a man called Rhio who was married but had no children. One day while he was taking bath in a stream, a ghost came and covered his eyes from behind with his hands. Rhio pleaded to be released. But the ghost told that if Rhio did not allow his daughter to marry him, he will not let him go. Rhio told the ghost that she had no children yet. But if his wife gave birth to a baby girl, the girl would be given to the ghost in marriage. The ghost agreed and unclasped his hands. Rhio went home and forgot all about it. After a few years, his wife gave birth to a baby girl who grew up into a beautiful girl. She used to go out with her friends.

One day while returning home, the young woman disappeared and her friends informed her parents about it. After a few years she returned to her parent's home. On reaching there, she called out to her mother to open the door when she did so; she was shocked to see the daughter standing in front of them. Her parents asked her, where she had been. She replied that she was already married to the ghost whom her father had promised even before her birth.

Hearing her, he wanted to visit the ghost. But he did not know the way. The daughter then told him that she would drop husk from her basket as she went, so that he will find the way to her house.

The father followed her instructions and finally reached his son-in-law's house. Before taking leave, his son-in-law gave him a bamboo container. The son-in-law warned his father-in-law not to open the container till he reached home. Further, the father-in-law was instructed that on reaching home, he was to close all the doors and holes before opening the container.

At first the container was light, but later it became heavier and heavier and this aroused the curiosity of the man. At last, he opened it before reaching home and as he opened the container, outcame some animals, but he quickly closed the container again. When he reached home he sealed all the holes and opened the container and outcame different animals that later on became domesticated.

Those that were let loose on the way became wild animals. In fact to this day wild animals are regarded as men's animals and domesticated animals are regarded as women's animal.

## Tale II

Another version of this tale type is Tale II. In this tale a pregnant woman went to dig wild tuber. While working she felt very thirsty. She searched everywhere but could not find any water. She detected, however, that her dog's fur was wet. She went searching again and found a stream guarded by a snake. The snake demanded that she should give her unborn baby girl to him. Being desperate for water, she agreed and eagerly drank from the stream. With the passage of time, the baby grew into a beautiful girl.

The mother never allowed her daughter to go anywhere as she still remembered her promise to the snake. But one day, while she was busy, the snake came to take the girl and started swallowing her. He took her to his place and married her. Five years after marriage she gave birth to five children. The woman now decided to pay a visit herself.

One day she visited her mother's house but the woman did not open the door. After repeated attempts the old woman did and was astonished to see her own daughter and her husband. The next morning before returning the daughter asked her mother to visit them asking her mother for mustard seeds so that she will throw them on the way. When the seeds start to grow and flower the daughter advise her to follow the vegetables till she reaches her place. The woman followed this instruction and finally reached her daughter's house. She enquired about her son-in-law. She was told that he was out for hunting. Suddenly there was a commotion and the daughter then asked her mother to hide herself in the storing place for implements near the ceiling.

The daughter pleaded with her husband to shed his snakeskin because it frightened her mother. The next morning before she returned home her son-in-law gave her a box warning her not to open it till she reaches the bank of a river. The old woman left their

place and carried it with her. As she walked the box became heavier and heavier till she could not carry it anymore. She was very curious to see what was there inside the box, so she opened the lid of the box. From within the box something comes out flying. These were the elephant, the stag, the bear, the bull, the buffalo, the mithun and other animals. The old woman hurriedly closed the box with some of the animals still trapped inside and went home, rearing only the animals remaining in the box. These were the pig, cow, duck, chicken and the goat. These became domestic animals while those she let out on the way became wild.

Below is given a table identifying the differences inherent in Tale I and Tale II:

Tale - I	Tale - II
1. Father bargains with ghost.	Mother bargains with snake.
2. Father went to take a bath in the river.	Pregnant woman searches for water.
3. The ghost unclasped his hands on the condition that the man give his daughter's hand in marriage	The snake provides water on condition that the woman gives her daughter's hand to the snake.
4. Father totally forgets the promise he made to the ghost because he allowed his daughter to roam about freely with her friends	Mother still remembers her promise and never allows her daughter to go out of her sight.
5. The ghost and the girl has no children	The girl and the snake has five children.
6. The girl asked for husk	The girl asked for mustard seeds.
7. There is no instruction given as to when the father is to come to the daughter's place	Instructions given to the mother to come when the mustard seeds start flowering.
8. Father visits his daughter	The mother visits her daughter

and son-in-law.

9. The gift was a bamboo container.

10. There was no feeding instruction, given by the son-in-law to his father-in-law, and so it does not really indicate anything about what was inside the bamboo container.

11. The ghost son-in-law instructed his father-in-law to open the bamboo container inside the house.

12. The domesticated animals are known as women animals while the wild as male animals.

and son-in-law.

The gift was a box.

There was feeding instruction given by the son-in-law to his mother-in-law, which gives us an idea about the nature of the creatures contained within.

The snake son-in-law instructed the mother-in-law to open the box after she has crossed a certain river.

There is no distinction made of the animals on the basis of gender.

### Similarities

Differences sharply highlight similarities and these too can in turn be highlighted for analysis. We have stated that both these versions are told and independently perpetuated among the two tribes i.e. Khasi and Angami Naga and despite the overt differences, the tales conclude on a keynote - the categorization of wild and domestic animals. The appellation of women and men animals with respect to the domestic and wild animals respectively in Tale I is a further assertion of the social position division sanctioned by traditional Angami practice for the female as domestic caretaker and the male as hunter. The hunter role, in Tale II, is provided by the story itself when we find the girl's husband coming back from a hunting expedition dressed in his snake-skin, which scares his mother-in-law.

The similarities of these two versions are significant for analysis. First of all, we find the encounter of the woman and the man with the unusual characters in the tale as the snake and the ghost. This encounter leads to the demand by these unusual beings for the unborn baby girls' hand in marriage, and the promise is made by the parents in both the tales.

When the girls have grown up, the snake and the ghost come to make good the claim attached to the promise they had with the parents and the girls are forcibly taken away to their places where marriage takes place. While staying with their husbands, the girls remember their parents' houses, and both the girls visit their parents' houses respectively.

Again, both the parents went to visit their daughter's place by following signs set out for them by the girls. On reaching their respective places, both the parents of each girl get a gift from their sons-in-law. They were both warned not to open their gift (a box, bamboo container). In both tales, the parents try, at first, to refrain from opening the box.

Lastly, we find that both these gifts i.e. the box and the bamboo container had animals in them. Those animals that were let out on the way took to the wilderness and became wild, while those let out at the respective instructed places became domesticated. We can see both these tales ending with the categorization of wild and domestic animals.

The appearance of the dog at the beginning of the story in Tale II is no way contradictory to the denouement, which provides for the collective appearance and classification of the animal world. In Khasi folk traditions, the dog and cat, each have detailed individual explanations about their domestication and therefore they do not figure at all in the dispensation of feeding instructions and classification that is found at the end of Tale II.

While it could be tempting to draw an analogy between both the tales and the story of Pandora and her box in Greek mythology, the similarities are flimsy. Pandora, regarded as the Greek Eve or primeval mother was created by Hephaestus, on Zeus' orders, as a punishment to men. She was responsible for letting loose all evils afflicting mankind from a box. Both the tales under study, however, show us that the containers were gifts containing useful living creatures that prior to the "gifting" were not classified in a systematic manner. The tales, therefore, offer a significant folk taxonomy.

Tale II could be interpreted as a commentary on the imbrications of the matrilineal system on a society, which, probably, was going through a testing period, as it were, about its acceptability, application and efficacy. The old woman's daughter is borne away by the snake to his dwelling and she bears him five children who are apprehended by the old woman as little snakes. The snake's wife tells her children to go and visit their grandmother and they go only to be rewarded by thrashing of some kind. Viewed in the Khasi socio-cultural context, visiting the grandmother is a very significant and auspicious event but it carries with it also certain requirements and implications.

*Ka Jngoh Meikha* is an extremely solemn event and the performance of certain ceremonies are involved during the visit. What we see happening in Tale II is that the visit is not actually *Ka Jngoh Meikha* because this term actually means 'visiting the paternal grandmother' (bold ours) which the old woman is not. She is the maternal grandmother whose presence is virtually presumed to be with the grandchildren in a common home together with their parents. This is the essence of matriliney and the tale possibly shows us how the code has been abrogated. The visit is also made at the behest of the mother who herself does not accompany her children. When she does, later, there is no mention of her children accompanying her though her snake-husband, in full human form, does.

One detects a certain tension when the old woman refuses to open the door of her house to let the couple in. The matter of the girl being taken away is brought up again and the door acts as a metaphor of denial. Finally, through pleas, the crisis is resolved and we discern a small degree of acceptability coming into the scenario. In the second half of the tale, this acceptability is once again tested. The old woman is frightened out of her wits when she sees her snake-son-in-law in his snake-skin. So much was her fright that she hides herself and involuntarily urinates.

We find that the relationship the old woman had with her son-in-law is tension-ridden although the son-in-law is seen as donor

in at least two critical periods, by letting her drink water from the stream and at the end when he presents her with the box.

In the Bhoi area of Khasi Hills, there are proliferations of tales about snake-humans or humans using snake-skin making the process of metamorphosis reasonably physically credible. The tales, obviously, are spun by generations of people living and working in close contact with nature. Moulting is a phenomenon they are acquainted with and very easily understood by them. The physical shedding of an outer garb by a beast in order to be succeeded by a new growth is both fascinating and inspiring. It probably provided the appropriate folk metaphor for rebirth, attainment of maturity, sexual prowess and a host of other attributes apprehended by the folk as being special and even totemic.

The abundance of narratives in the male-animal conflation of identities<sup>4</sup> are a pertinent reflection on the way the Bhoi folk determine their cognitive and emotional make-up taking examples from the surrounding environment and relating them to their own experiences. The snake-skin, like any abstract symbol, has its own operative value as a code for conveying messages, which can be transposed into other codes to express and receive messages through an intrinsic system of communication.<sup>5</sup> Even if we associate 'old skin' with death, it is presented to us as alive and moving, with a very energetic man inside it. This 'old snake-skin coming to life' metaphor is a recurrent one which has many parallels all over. In one tale, the snake-skin actually turns into a ruby when held in hands of a grass cutter and later, in the hands of a queen it turned into a baby boy<sup>6</sup>.

Universally, snakes are considered as symbols of fertility and in many cultures, the phallic association with the snake is common. Tale II begins with a pregnant woman who encounters a snake (fertility) and the two negotiate over water, another fertility symbol. The beginning prepares us for a recurrence of fertility acts and metaphors that run through the entire tale. This includes, by the way, the casual dispersing of mustard seeds and their flowering, which marks the way to the abode of the snake-man and his wife. Mustard oil is a necessary component of a ritual of welcome to the new bridegroom

upon his arrival at his wife's house, and its role finds a place in the tale although it functions as a symbolic device of conflict resolution between two seemingly opposites.

It would be difficult to assess the ghost in Tale I in psychoanalytical terms without knowing the Angami Naga's position on the supernatural. It is also possible that the ghost as recorded in the tale could have been morphed in the sanitization process, which will be taken up a little later for discussion. However, it must be said that had the collector recorded demon instead of ghost as the main character in Tale I, then the scope of applying Freudian deconstruction would be limitless. Freud as well as his student C G Jung (and a host of other writers) have affirmed the role of the demon in sexual symbolism. There exists voluminous data on the subject obtained from hieroglyphics, old manuscripts, biblical texts, and writings from medieval to modern periods.

When we look at the above-mentioned difference and similarities of both the tales, we also detect that in Tale I a process of sanitization had taken place. We do not mean to contend that sanitization has been applied through documentation, but in our experience with folk narratives, we can say that a process of sanitization has been employed in the oral and the telling. This perhaps happened because of the influence of Christianity. Had it been the woman who encountered the ghost, the story would have been different. Adding the ghost could be an attempt to add dimensions of the horrific in the tale, especially if it was told repeatedly to an audience comprising largely of children. On the same lines, in these two versions, we find a strong possible example of role reversal, which is engendered, again, by the factors of the matriline and the patriarchy. In Tale I we see it is the father who bargains with the ghost while in Tale II it is the mother who bargains with the snake. The wife of the man in Tale I does not figure at all in it just as the husband of the old woman finds no mention in Tale II.

In the tale, the ghost may not be truly a ghost, but it may have been a human being or an animal. It appears here as the donor for the man. In its archetypal form, the tale could have had a situation

that the man was infertile and in the encounter and negotiation process, he asked for a boon to be able to have a child. When the boon is given he conveniently forgets it leading to the claiming of the girl by the ghost.

In Tale II, the process of sanitization is not detected. As we see in the story, the woman was already pregnant at the time she encountered the snake. Also, the snake characteristics exist as a parallel to the human and as we visualize the story, we see both these characteristics in evidence. The character assumes both forms easily and at will. This process of transformation from man to serpent or serpent to man is a common theme of folk narratives. This motif falls under No. D 191 as given by Stith Thompson in his *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*.

#### Conclusion :

This paper, as mentioned above, has to concern itself only with investigation of the oicotype. The broad based analysis of these tales like motif and tale type studies could not be undertaken due to time constraints. Though there are five version of these tale types which have been collected so far which we may say share certain analogous characteristics in the beginning and also throughout the movement of the stories, there are strains of intersection with each other in all the five tales (magic of transformation). It would be more interesting if proper investigation is undertaken to analyze all the five tales but due to time constraints it is not possible. So only two versions have been considered for analysis here as they are closest to each other and share certain similar traits and characteristics from the beginning till the end.

Another interesting feature is that both the tales contain references to accepted economic activity landmarks of the march of civilization. These are food gathering, hunting and animal husbandry. The use of mustard seeds and the pounding of rice by the girl is also mentioned in Tale II. We may assume that agriculture was known during that period. People had certain knowledge about cultivation. Lastly, animal husbandry which is very important for the growth of civilization

found a very prominent place in both Tale I and Tale II as both the tales conclude with the domestication of animals.

Endnotes :

1. Thompson, Stith : 1953 *The Star Husband Tale*, *Studia Septentrionalia*, 4, 93-94.

2. ----- *Motif Index of Folk Literature*: 1957 Bloomington, Indiana. *The Folktale* 1951 New York

3. Ed. Kharmawphlang D L, 2000 : *Narrative of North-East Vol. II*, pp 36-37.

4. Kharmawphlang D L, *Note from Ri-Bhoi* (Manuscript) 1999.p32.

5. Levi - Strauss C, *The Savage Mind* 1972, pp 75-76.

6. Mukherjee, T: 1999 *Desire as the Subtext in Folktales*, Ed. Jawaharlal Handoo and Anna-Leela Siikala: Mysore, p171.