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BA English Honours | Semester V | Calicut University

Folk and Oral Tales from Across the World

Course Code: ENG5EJ307 • Module 3 Notes

Unit 9: "The Priest of Kadamattom" – Folk Tales of Kerala

Kadamattathu Kathanar: The Legendary Christian Thaumaturge

The folklore of Kerala holds an extraordinary supernatural figure in **Kadamattathu Kathanar**, a 9th-century Syrian Christian priest (*Kathanar*) affiliated with the ancient Kadamattom Church near Kolenchery. Celebrated in oral legends and codified in Kottarathil Sankunni's monumental *Aithihyamala* (Garland of Legends), the priest represents a unique syncretic fusion of Christian liturgical sanctity with indigenous Dravidian and occult tantric sciences.

Apprenticeship with the Mala Arayan Cannibals and Occult Mastery

According to folk tradition, the young priest was captured and lived for twelve years in the deep, mist-shrouded Western Ghats as an apprentice to the magical forest tribe (the Mala Arayans). Learning their profound occult secrets—mastery over wild beasts, invisibility, transmuting matter, and commanding elemental spirits—the Kathanar returned to his village to perform miracles of healing, protect villagers from demonic curses, and rescue common folk from rapacious feudal landlords.

The Slaying and Taming of the Bloodthirsty Yakshi

The dramatic summit of the Kathanar folklore is his climactic confrontation with the terrifying *Yakshi* (the vampire-like, bloodthirsty female forest spirit) of Kallingal, who seduced travelers at twilight and drained their blood beneath pala trees. Using sacred iron nails, occult incantations, and divine Christian prayers, the Kathanar immobilized the demonic entity, drove an iron nail into her skull, and transformed her into a peaceful household spirit, eventually consecrating her at the Mannarassala shrine. The legend illustrates the triumph of moral spiritual wisdom over subterranean malevolence.

Unit 10: "Sulasa and Sattuka" – Jataka Tales

Buddhist Jataka Fables and Subaltern Female Wit

The Buddhist *Jataka* tales constitute one of world literature's oldest collections of moral fables, chronicling the previous incarnations of Gautama Buddha as he perfected various virtues (*Paramitas*). In the tale of "Sulasa and Sattuka," the narrative focuses upon the extraordinary intellect and presence of mind exhibited by Sulasa, a wealthy, renowned courtesan living in the royal city of Varanasi.

Outsmarting the Murderous Bandit on the Cliff

Sulasa falls deeply in love with Sattuka, a handsome highway robber who has been captured and sentenced to public execution. Moved by compassion, Sulasa pays a massive ransom of a thousand gold coins to bribe the guards and secure Sattuka's release, marrying him and giving him a lavish life. However, the irredeemably treacherous Sattuka plots to murder Sulasa to steal her priceless jewels. He lures her to the summit of the sheer Thieves' Cliff under the pretext of making an offering to the mountain deity, where he cold-bloodedly reveals his intent to fling her to her death.

Female Intellect as an Instrument of Moral Prudence

Sulasa exhibits extraordinary psychological composure: rather than pleading hysterically, she flatters Sattuka, begging to perform a final ritual of circumambulation (*Pradakshina*) around him as her beloved lord. As she walks behind him, she seizes the moment of his relaxed vigilance and delivers a ferocious, decisive shove, flinging the murderous bandit over the precipice to his doom. The fable delivers a

revolutionary moral: intellect and practical wisdom are not the exclusive domain of men; when pushed to the brink of survival, a woman's razor-sharp presence of mind can triumph over brute physical violence.

Unit 11: "Momotaro: The Story of a Son of a Peach" (Japanese Folklore)

The Peach Boy Archetype in Edo Folklore

Momotaro (The Peach Boy) is Japan's most beloved and culturally pervasive traditional folk hero, dating back to the Edo period. The tale begins with an impoverished, childless elderly couple living in a rural mountain village: while washing clothes in the mountain stream, the kind old grandmother discovers a colossal, radiant peach floating down the river.

Miraculous Birth and Filial Devotion

When the old man splits the peach open at home, a healthy, beautiful baby boy miraculously steps forth. Named Momotaro (*Momo* meaning peach, *Taro* meaning eldest son), the child grows with astonishing strength, courage, and loving devotion to his foster parents. Upon reaching adolescence, Momotaro resolves to venture to Onigashima (Ogre Island) to defeat the marauding band of cannibalistic red and blue demons (*Oni*) who pillage coastal villages and kidnap innocent people.

The Animal Alliance and Moral Justice

Momotaro's victory depends upon his generous alliance with the animal kingdom. Armed with his mother's homemade millet dumplings (*Kibi Dango*), Momotaro shares his food and enlists three loyal animal companions: a talking dog, a monkey, and a pheasant. Each animal contributes unique physical skills—the pheasant attacks from the sky, the monkey climbs the fortress walls to unlatch the iron gate, and the dog bites the demons' legs. Defeating the demon king, Momotaro forces the ogres to surrender their stolen treasures, which he distributes back to the impoverished villagers before returning home to care for his aging parents. The tale celebrates filial piety, generosity, teamwork, and heroic bravery.

Unit 12: "The Magic Lamp" (Santhal Folktales – A. Campbell)

Reverend A. Campbell and the Preservation of Santhal Oral Lore

Reverend Andrew Campbell's 1891 compilation *Santhal Folk Tales* provides an authentic, invaluable textual record of the oral narrative universe of the Santhal tribal people of the Chota Nagpur plateau. In "The Magic Lamp," Campbell records an indigenous narrative that mirrors the universal folktale motif of the miraculous wishing object, but infuses it with distinctive Adivasi communal values.

Subverting Feudal Poverty Through Magical Ingenuity

The story follows an impoverished, honest Santhal youth who suffers under the extortionate demands of a cruel village moneylender (*Mahajan*) and the local feudal zamindar. Through an act of kindness toward an injured forest creature, the youth is gifted a magical brass lamp. When polished, the lamp does not summon a terrifying genie of Arabian nights, but rather benign spirits of the earth who provide boundless supplies of rice, fresh spring water, sturdy bullocks, and brass pots. Significantly, the protagonist does not hoard this wealth to build an isolated feudal empire; he shares the bounty with his entire tribal clan, highlighting the fundamental egalitarian ethos that distinguishes indigenous tribal folklore from bourgeois individualism.

Unit 13: "The Fish Prince" (The Magic Bed: East Indian Fairy Tales)

Metamorphosis and the Enchanted Suitor Motif

In "The Fish Prince" (from *The Magic Bed: A Book of East Indian Fairy Tales*), the narrative deploys the universal folkloric motif of the "animal bridegroom" (ATU Type 425), shared with European tales of the Frog Prince and Beauty and the Beast. An enchanted prince is cursed to live in the physical form of a glittering freshwater fish, swimming in a deep forest pool.

Unconditional Love and the Shattering of Enchantment

When an impoverished fisherman captures the extraordinary speaking fish, he brings it home to his compassionate youngest daughter. Recognizing the pure, noble soul hidden behind the slippery aquatic exterior, the young maiden treats the fish with tender reverence, agreeing to marry him despite societal ridicule. The tale explores themes of psychological metamorphosis, unconditional love, and the testing of moral character. When the maiden faithfully burns the fish-skin cast off at night, the ancient curse is permanently shattered, restoring the prince to his radiant human form. The story demonstrates that true beauty is invisible to superficial eyes and can be perceived only through empathetic love.

Unit 14: "Pot of Gold" (Adarsh Chitra Katha)

Visual Folk Didacticism in Indian Graphic Storytelling

The illustrated narrative "Pot of Gold" (featured in the moral didactic graphic book series *Adarsh Chitra Katha*) represents modern India's pedagogical utilization of ancient Panchatantra and Hitopadesha folk fables for moral instruction. The tale explores the explosive consequences of unearned wealth, dishonesty, and greed.

The Moral Geometry of Honesty versus Deceit

Two merchant partners discover a buried pot overflowing with ancient gold coins in a forest grove. The honest partner proposes dividing the wealth equally immediately; the deceitful partner secretly conceals the pot, subsequently accusing the honest partner of theft and dragging him before the village council of elders. Through clever forensic interrogation and moral tests, the council exposes the deceitful merchant's perjury, restoring justice and returning the pot of gold to its rightful honest finder. The graphic narrative functions as a pedagogical instrument reinforcing traditional dharma, communal harmony, and the certainty of karmic retribution.

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 3 Comparative Folklore & Orality Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 1)

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Complementing Propp's formal structuralism, the Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) Tale Type Index provides a massive comparative classification system, proving that folktale motifs—such as the stolen fire, the creation from primordial clay, the animal bridegroom, and the treacherous partner—circulate across vast geographical, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. This universal distribution reflects what Carl Jung termed the "collective unconscious"—primordial archetypes that represent universal human psychological confrontations with mortality, desire, social initiation, and ethical responsibility.

2. Orality, Performance Theory, and Subaltern Resistance

As theorized by Walter J. Ong in *Orality and Literacy*, primary oral cultures possess a distinct cognitive psychology: oral thought is additive rather than subordinative, aggregative rather than analytic, redundant, conservative, and intensely situational. In the performance theories of Richard Bauman and Dell Hymes, a folktale cannot be understood merely as an isolated written transcription on a printed page; it is a live, performative communicative event where vocal intonation, somatic gestures, facial expressions, and active audience participation co-create meaning.

Throughout world history, folklore has served as a primary weapon of subaltern resistance against oppressive ruling elites. In slave plantations of the American South and the Caribbean, enslaved Africans used the Anansi spider and Br'er Rabbit trickster tales as coded survival manuals, teaching young people how to navigate and subvert the overwhelming physical power of white masters through clever dissimulation. Similarly, among indigenous and Dalit communities in India, folktales, ballads, and village performance arts provide counter-narratives that celebrate subaltern rebellion, mock caste arrogance, and preserve sacred histories suppressed by dominant written archives.

3. The Decolonial and Ecological Imperative in Contemporary Folklore Studies

In our contemporary era of globalized digital homogenization, the study of oral and folk tales assumes an urgent decolonial and environmental mission. The relentless expansion of corporate consumer culture threatens to extinguish indigenous oral libraries, local mythologies, and vernacular storytelling practices—a cultural tragedy that folklorists describe as the loss of biocultural diversity.

By recovering and honoring oral creation myths, trickster wisdom, and Gaia care narratives, contemporary scholars and students participate in an essential act of epistemic restoration. These ancient stories teach humanity that we are not solitary masters of a dead planet, but humble members of an interconnected cosmic family. Folktales remain living fountains of wonder, ethical resilience, and imaginative vitality, guiding humanity toward more compassionate, sustainable, and democratic futures.

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 3 Comparative Folklore & Orality Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 2)

1. Structuralism, Morphology, and the Archetypal Mechanics of the Folktale

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 3 Comparative Folklore & Orality Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 3)

1. Structuralism, Morphology, and the Archetypal Mechanics of the Folktale

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3. The Decolonial and Ecological Imperative in Contemporary Folklore Studies

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 3 Comparative Folklore & Orality Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 4)

1. Structuralism, Morphology, and the Archetypal Mechanics of the Folktale

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3. The Decolonial and Ecological Imperative in Contemporary Folklore Studies

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 3 Comparative Folklore & Orality Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 5)

1. Structuralism, Morphology, and the Archetypal Mechanics of the Folktale

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 3 Comparative Folklore & Orality Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 6)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 3 Comparative Folklore & Orality Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 7)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 3 Comparative Folklore & Orality Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 8)

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Throughout world history, folklore has served as a primary weapon of subaltern resistance against oppressive ruling elites. In slave plantations of the American South and the Caribbean, enslaved Africans used the Anansi spider and Br'er Rabbit trickster tales as coded survival manuals, teaching young people how to navigate and subvert the overwhelming physical power of white masters through clever dissimulation. Similarly, among indigenous and Dalit communities in India, folktales, ballads, and village performance arts provide counter-narratives that celebrate subaltern rebellion, mock caste arrogance, and preserve sacred histories suppressed by dominant written archives.

3. The Decolonial and Ecological Imperative in Contemporary Folklore Studies

In our contemporary era of globalized digital homogenization, the study of oral and folk tales assumes an urgent decolonial and environmental mission. The relentless expansion of corporate consumer culture threatens to extinguish indigenous oral libraries, local mythologies, and vernacular storytelling practices—a cultural tragedy that folklorists describe as the loss of biocultural diversity.

By recovering and honoring oral creation myths, trickster wisdom, and Gaia care narratives, contemporary scholars and students participate in an essential act of epistemic restoration. These ancient stories teach humanity that we are not solitary masters of a dead planet, but humble members of an interconnected cosmic family. Folktales remain living fountains of wonder, ethical resilience, and imaginative vitality, guiding humanity toward more compassionate, sustainable, and democratic futures.

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