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Cultural Elements in Tamil–Malayalam Oral Tales: A Comparative Study

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***Abstract*-- Tamil and Malayalam oral tales constitute a vital component of South India's intangible cultural heritage. Transmitted across generations, these narratives preserve and reflect the social organization, customary practices, food ways, occupational patterns, kinship ties, and value systems of their respective communities. Facilitated by geographical contiguity and centuries of socio-cultural interaction between Tamil Nadu and Kerala, oral narratives have continuously circulated, adapted, and cross-pollinated across these linguistic landscapes.**

This study examines selected oral tales from the Tamil and Malayalam traditions to evaluate their shared structural foundations and localized cultural variations. Focusing on the genre of fool or numskull tales—specifically Tamil Kunnaththuran tales alongside Malayalam Thekkambagaththan and Namboothiri narratives—the paper adopts a structural framework to trace recurring narrative units: Lack, Misunderstanding and Attempt to Remove the Lack, Intervention, and Result. The comparative analysis demonstrates that while localized characters, settings, and material culture vary, the underlying structural mechanics remain strikingly parallel. Ultimately, these tales function not merely as folk entertainment, but as vital instruments of cultural transmission, collective memory, and social critique.

***Keywords*-- Tamil oral tales; Malayalam oral tales; cultural elements; comparative folklore; Numskull Tales; Kunnaththuran tales; Thekkambagaththan tales; Namboothiri tales; structural analysis; Aarne–Thompson classification index.**

I. Introduction

Oral tales form a cornerstone of human intangible cultural heritage, serving as traditional vessels for transmitting collective wisdom, normative values, customs, and community memory across generations. Because oral narratives move fluidly across geographic and linguistic borders, culturally connected regions frequently share overlapping narrative repertoires. Mechanisms such as migration, commerce, intermarriage, pilgrimage, shared political histories, and geographical proximity facilitate this cross-cultural diffusion.

During transmission, the core structural framework of a tale often remains stable, while surface features—such as localized settings, dialects, flora, fauna, and occupational details—adapt to match the receiving community's context.

Tamil and Malayalam represent two closely linked linguistic and cultural traditions of South India. The shared border and long-standing historical interactions between Tamil Nadu and Kerala have fostered a continuous exchange of folklore. Both regions possess rich oral traditions that mirror agrarian life, social stratifications, local religious beliefs, kinship systems, and village governance.

Among the various genres of oral narrative, Numskull Tales (numskull tales) occupy a unique position. By utilizing humor, literalism, exaggeration, and absurd actions, these tales represent everyday social situations while offering subtle commentary on human error, social boundaries, and community norms. Tamil Kunnaththuran tales and Malayalam Thekkambagaththan and Namboothiri narratives are prominent exemplars of this tradition. This study provides a comparative structural analysis of these tales, demonstrating how shared structural patterns operate under distinct regional guises in South India.

II. Diffusion And Circulation Of Oral Tales

The cross-cultural transmission of folktales is a foundational theme in folkloristic. Pioneer scholars such as Max Müller (in solar mythology) and Theodor Benfey (in his study of the Panchatantra) demonstrated how oral motifs travel across expansive geographic regions over time. Similarly, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm recognized the remarkable ease with which folktales migrate and establish roots across cultural borders.

This diffusion occurs through several socio-historical channels, including trade routes, migratory movements, conflict, and religious pilgrimages. Neighboring communities maintaining daily social and economic contacts exhibit the highest degree of narrative overlap. The Tamil and Malayalam cultural zones exemplify this dynamic: centuries of regional contact have produced a shared repository of folklore that reflects both independent cultural evolution and mutual influence.

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III. Nature And Social Functions Of Numskull Tales

Numskull Tales are a universal folklore category. Centered on cognitive errors, literal interpretations, and illogical choices, these narratives often designate specific regional sub-groups, villages, or social classes as targets of satirical humor. Importantly, these representations are not objective sociological depictions; rather, the "fool" serves as a narrative archetype used to test the boundaries of common sense, social custom, and practical reasoning.

In many traditions, specific villages become colloquially branded as "settlements of fools." In the Kanyakumari district of Tamil Nadu, local tradition associates such narratives with villages such as Alur, Kadukkara, Kunnathur, and Pungarai, giving rise to traditional colloquial labels like Alur Manthaiyan, Kadukkaraiyan, Kunnaththuran, and Pungaraiyan.

A parallel dynamic exists in Malayalam oral tradition through Thekkambagaththan tales and humorous anecdotes involving Namboothiri (Brahmin) figures. In both linguistic traditions, these narratives utilize simple, everyday problems to build absurd sequences that culminate in comedy and social critique.

IV. Narrative Mechanics And Structural Framework

In structural folkloristics (drawing on models established by Vladimir Propp, Alan Dundes, and Gna. Stephen), narrative plots can be deconstructed into functional sequences. In South Indian numskull tales, the narrative trajectory regularly follows five key structural functions:

Lack → Misunderstanding → Attempt to Remove Lack →Intervention →

Lack: The initial problem, desire, or missing necessity.

Misunderstanding: A cognitive error, flawed logic, or hyper-literal translation of advice/events by the protagonist.

Attempt to Remove the Lack: An absurd action undertaken to resolve the initial problem, driven directly by the misunderstanding.

Intervention (Optional): The entry of an external figure who provides advice or attempts to redirect the foolish action.

Result: The outcome—which, in Numskull Tales lacking corrective intervention, almost universally ends in loss, injury, destruction, or deception.

V. Comparative Structural Analysis Of Tamil And Malayalam Tales

1 Analysis of a Malayalam Numskull Narrative

A classi c Malayalam fool tale documented by Lalitha Handoo (1983) illustrates this structural sequence:

Setting & Context: In Kottayam, a large mango tree grows near a pond. The villagers wish to preserve the abundant harvest in saltwater—a standard culinary practice in Kerala.

Lack: The villagers lack sufficient ceramic jars to pickle all the harvested mangoes.

Misunderstanding (1): A villager proposes dumping all the mangoes and salt directly into the pond to pickle them en masse.

Attempt to Remove Lack (1): They harvest the mangoes, throw them into the pond, and pour in large quantities of salt.

Attempt to Remove Lack (2): Weeks later, a villager ties a heavy jar around his neck and dives into the pond to retrieve the pickled fruit.

Result (1): The jar fills with water, pulling him down to drown.

Misunderstanding (2): The waiting crowd assumes he is staying underwater to hoard the mangoes for himself.

Result (2): Subsequent villagers tie jars to their necks, jump into the pond, and drown one after another (Handoo 1983: 255–256).

A similar Malayalam tale recorded by K. C. Jacob (1989) involves a landlord who drops his ring into a river from a boat. He marks the spot on the boat's gunwale using lime paste so he can return to find it later—a foolish act that amuses the boatman upon reaching the shore.

Both narrative motifs appear in identical or closely variant forms in the Kunnaththuran tradition of Tamil Nadu, proving the existence of a shared narrative pool across the Western Ghats.

2 Structural Mapping of Selected Tamil Kunnaththuran Tales

To assess the applicability and consistency of the proposed structural model, selected Tamil Kunnaththuran tales are analysed with reference to the international Aarne–Thompson–Uther (ATU) tale-type classification. The analysis focuses on the recurring narrative elements of lack, misunderstanding, attempt to remove the lack, and result.

The selected tales demonstrate how these structural components operate in different narrative situations while producing humorous, ironic, or destructive consequences.

AT 1201 A: In this tale, a Kunnaththuran wishes to plough his field and sow paddy without stepping on the seeds. His concern that walking through the muddy field would damage the seeds constitutes the lack and misunderstanding underlying the narrative. To overcome the perceived problem, he asks four men to carry a cot into the field and sows the paddy while sitting on it, representing the attempt to remove the lack. However, the weight of the cot and the movement of the four workers result in the field being trampled and damaged, thereby producing the result.

AT 1203 B: This narrative centres on a farmer whose paddy field is overrun by weeds. The presence of weeds constitutes the lack. The Kunnaththuran misunderstands the relationship between manure and weeds and assumes that applying manure will selectively eliminate the unwanted plants. He therefore applies manure throughout the field as an attempt to remove the lack. Instead of destroying the weeds, the manure causes them to flourish, eventually overwhelming the paddy crop. The destruction of the crop constitutes the result.

AT 1204: In this tale, a father wants to know the departure time of a bus, which constitutes the initial lack. He sends his son to obtain the information. During his journey, the son encounters several people, including the parent of a sick child, a person who has sold a broken pot, and a man returning after stealing coconuts. The son repeatedly misunderstands their statements and treats unrelated remarks as messages relevant to his father's question. These successive misunderstandings constitute a series of misunderstandings and attempts to obtain or transmit information. When he finally returns home and answers his father's question with “I know nothing,” his father beats him. The punishment constitutes the result of the accumulated misunderstandings.

AT 1204 A: In this narrative, a Kunnaththuran is unable to reach the tamarind fruits growing high on a tree. His inability to obtain the fruits constitutes the lack. He mistakenly assumes that cutting down the entire tree will provide an easy means of collecting the fruits, which constitutes the misunderstanding. He consequently cuts down the tamarind tree as an attempt to remove the lack. The owner of the tree severely beats him, thereby constituting the result.

AT 1211: A Kunnaththuran desires to eat kaanam (horse gram), which constitutes the lack. He steals the crop from another person's garden and eats it, representing the first attempt to remove the lack. Subsequently, he sees a goat chewing its cud and mistakenly assumes that the goat is capable of revealing his theft. This constitutes the misunderstanding. Acting out of fear, he kills the goat, and this destructive action constitutes the result of his misunderstanding.

AT 1211 A: In this tale, the Kunnaththuran wishes to drink honey, establishing the lack. When he observes bees swarming around the nose of a buffalo, he mistakenly assumes that honey is stored inside the animal's nostrils. This constitutes the misunderstanding. In an attempt to obtain the supposed honey, he cuts off the buffalo's nose. However, no honey is found, and the buffalo dies as a consequence of the action. The death of the buffalo and the failure to obtain honey constitute the result.

AT 1216 A: The Maharaja of Travancore sees a fine bunch of bananas in Kunnathur and wishes to reserve it for the palace, constituting the lack. He therefore issues an order that the bunch should be taken to the palace once it ripens. His misunderstanding lies in assuming that writing the order on the temporary bract of the banana flower will effectively communicate the instruction to the owner. This action constitutes the attempt to remove the lack. The bract subsequently falls away, causing the written message to disappear before reaching the owner. The loss of the message constitutes the result.

AT 1218 A: Madachami wishes to acquire cattle for rearing and agricultural purposes, constituting the lack. He goes to the market and purchases two bullocks, representing the attempt to remove the lack. When he observes the animals urinating, however, he mistakenly believes that their stomachs contain holes and that they are suffering from a fatal condition. This constitutes the misunderstanding. Convinced that the animals are going to die, he returns them to the seller and receives his money back, thereby resulting in financial loss and the failure to achieve his original objective.

Taken together, these narratives demonstrate the recurring structural pattern of lack → misunderstanding → attempt to remove the lack → result. Although the specific situations, characters, objects, and cultural references vary from one tale to another, the underlying narrative mechanism remains relatively consistent. In most cases, the protagonist's attempt to overcome an ordinary problem is based on a mistaken interpretation of reality, and the resulting action leads to loss, destruction, punishment, or failure. This recurring pattern provides a useful structural basis for comparing Tamil Kunnaththuran tales with corresponding Malayalam fool-tale traditions.

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VI. Synthesis: Cultural Adaptation And Social Critique

1. Structural Unity and Material Diversity

The comparative analysis demonstrates that the structural framework of Lack → Misunderstanding → Attempt → Result operates consistently across the selected Tamil and Malayalam fool-tale traditions. Despite this structural unity, the material and cultural elements represented in the narratives vary according to the geographical, ecological, historical, and social contexts of the respective communities.

The agricultural and culinary practices represented in the Tamil Kunnaththuran tales are closely associated with local patterns of cultivation and food production. References to kaanam, paddy cultivation, and tamarind harvesting reflect aspects of the agrarian environment of Tamil-speaking regions. In contrast, the Malayalam narratives incorporate cultural practices associated with Kerala's distinctive landscape and food traditions. The tale involving the preservation of mangoes in salt, for example, reflects a specific culinary practice, while the use of ponds, water-filled jars, and boats reflects the importance of Kerala's reverie and water-oriented environment.

The narratives also preserve elements of historical and political experience. The appearance of the Maharaja of Travancore in a Kunnathur tale is particularly significant in this regard. It reflects the historical association of the Kanyakumari region with the former princely state of Travancore and demonstrates how oral narratives can preserve traces of regional political history. Thus, while the structural pattern of the tales remains relatively stable, their narrative materials are adapted to the cultural and historical circumstances of the communities in which they circulate.

2. Socio-Pedagogical Functions

Numskull Tales perform important social and pedagogical functions in addition to providing entertainment. Their humorous portrayal of foolish behavior enables communities to communicate practical knowledge, social expectations, and behavioral norms in an accessible form.

a. Instruction through Absurdity:

The exaggerated and often absurd consequences experienced by the protagonists provide indirect lessons concerning practical reasoning and appropriate behavior. Ruined crops, loss of livestock, financial loss, physical punishment, and other negative consequences demonstrate the dangers of poor judgment and inappropriate action.

In this manner, the tales implicitly communicate community knowledge relating to agriculture, animal care, commerce, communication, and everyday social conduct.

b. Social Critique and Satire:

Numskull Tales also provide a culturally acceptable medium for social criticism. Through humour, irony, and exaggeration, they can question the behaviour of rulers, landlords, socially prominent individuals, and other authority figures. The temporary reversal of conventional expectations allows storytellers and audiences to examine social hierarchies and practices from a critical perspective. Thus, humor becomes a means of expressing observations about power, authority, ignorance, and social behavior without direct confrontation.

The socio-pedagogical significance of these narratives therefore lies in their ability to combine entertainment, instruction, and criticism. Their continued circulation suggests that oral tales function not merely as repositories of amusement but also as informal mechanisms through which communities preserve and communicate social knowledge.

VII. Conclusion

The comparative structural analysis of Tamil Kunnaththuran tales and Malayalam Thekkambagaththan and Namboothiri narratives reveals a significant degree of structural unity within the South Indian fool-tale tradition. Despite differences in language, dialect, geographical setting, material culture, characters, and local references, the selected narratives repeatedly employ a common sequence involving lack, misunderstanding, attempt to remove the lack, intervention, and result. This recurring structure provides a useful basis for understanding the relationship between Tamil and Malayalam oral traditions.

At the same time, the material details embedded within these narratives demonstrate the process of cultural adaptation. Agricultural practices, food traditions, landscapes, occupations, political references, and everyday social experiences vary according to the cultural environment in which individual tales are transmitted. The coexistence of structural similarity and cultural diversity therefore demonstrates how oral narratives can retain a stable narrative framework while adapting their content to different communities and historical circumstances.

The study further establishes that Numskull Tales perform functions that extend beyond entertainment. Through humor, absurdity, irony, and exaggerated consequences, they communicate practical knowledge, reinforce behavioral expectations, preserve collective memory, and provide opportunities for social criticism.

The foolish actions of the protagonists often illustrate the consequences of poor judgment, ignorance, greed, and inappropriate behavior, thereby transforming seemingly simple comic narratives into vehicles of social and cultural instruction.

The structural similarities identified between Tamil and Malayalam tales may be understood in relation to the long-standing geographical, economic, and social interactions between the two linguistic regions. At the same time, their cultural differences demonstrate the ability of oral traditions to absorb and express local experiences. Tamil–Malayalam Numskull Tales thus provide valuable evidence of both cultural interconnectedness and regional distinctiveness.

Further comparative research involving a larger corpus of Tamil and Malayalam oral narratives may provide deeper insights into the processes of narrative diffusion, cultural adaptation, regional identity, and social commentary.

Systematic documentation of lesser-known oral traditions is also essential for preserving these valuable forms of intangible cultural heritage and for understanding the complex relationship between folklore, language, culture, and society.

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