

TRADITION AND COMMUNICATION

by

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Tradition makes a persistent attempt to embody in an audible or otherwise a perceptible form what is in itself inaudible or perhaps imperceptible. *Svastika* (good mark) which the Indus Valley people used three thousand years B.C. has not been relinquished by the contemporary Indian people : *Svastika* instead has gained its symbolism through various levels of reference. Tradition in common parlance is opinion, belief or custom handed down from ancestors to posterity. It acquires many layers of meaning through the process of transmission in time and space by word and act. Our attempt here is to explain how these layers of meaning form into a smoothly integrated system consistent with the metaphysical pursuits of the Orient and how that wisdom has been communicated through and sustained by Sinhala folklore. The belief system among the Sinhala people constitutes the main area in which one could discern this syncretism in its apparent contradictions. I have therefore limited the scope of this paper to identify some of the important aspects of traditional wisdom communicated in the following broad areas of Sinhala folklore.

- (1) traditional wisdom implicit in the verbal art component of folklore such as myths, legends, epics, folk tales, ballads, memories, songs, folk speech, proverbs, riddles, rhymes, oral law and dirge;
- (2) traditional wisdom manifested in the belief system of the Sinhala people such as in rituals, customs, festivals, dance and theatre;
- (3) traditions enmeshed in non-verbal dimensions of culture such as artefacts, styles in clothing, architecture, food, cooking, etc.

Folklore is a complex process of communication not only with one another, but also with one generation with the subsequent generation. This is achieved through several ways, the most important of which is by coded conventions of both verbal and non-verbal behaviour. What one generation has preserved in its folklore has to be decoded by the other generation in order to understand the full implications of the message thus conveyed.

The opposition of science, if any, to traditional wisdom and knowledge is based on the proposition that traditional knowledge is not empirical and therefore unscientific. Modern anthropologists notably Fredrik Barth (1966), Raymond Firth (1973), Evans-Pritchard (1956) and others have through their studies on human culture and society, amply proved the veracity of the

traditional wisdom transmitted through the myth, ritual, magic and sorcery, etc. They have even evolved disciplinary procedures by which traditional wisdom can be subjected to the rigours of structural-functionalist explanations. Levi-Straussian rationalists for example "attach particular importance to mythology and to informants" statements about what ought to be the case. Where there is a discrepancy between verbal statements and observed behaviour rationalists tend to maintain that the social reality exists in the verbal statements rather than in what actually happens' (Leach 1976 : 5) In the Orient, particularly in India, tradition plays a vital role in every field of human thought and activity. In art, architecture, or in many spheres, guidance and practice (Upadesa and Abhyāsa) must be got not only from the canonical texts, but also from the teacher (Guru) in the traditional hierarchy of teacher-pupillary succession (Guru-Sisyaparamparā). It is in this context that in India divine origin or primordial revelation is ascribed to various arts and sciences, like art and architecture to Visvakarma (doer of all) or music and poetry to Sarasvati (Goddess of learning).

In oriental thought which applies to Sri Lanka too, facts and figures, statistical probabilities are not the main concern. What concerns them is the subjective experience which is not susceptible to statistical demonstration. It is a process where the living meaning of ritual and belief becomes apparent. It therefore transforms itself to a sacred science—which is one of the qualities in contrast to the profane science—one of quantities. The question therefore, whether traditional wisdom is empirical or not does not concern us.

Traditional wisdom or the traditional communication is the handing down of information, opinions, beliefs and customs by word of mouth or by example through successive generations. Its validity therefore is implicit in the process of transmission itself. Its validity is explicit in the cultural continuity embodying a massive complex of social customs, beliefs, rituals and conventions indissolubly linked with the past experiences exerting an influence on the present social behaviour. For example, the Oriental life is modelled on types of conduct sanctioned by tradition. For India, Rama and Sita represent ideals still potent, the *Svadharmā* (one's duty) of each caste is an ascertained mode of conduct; and until recently every Chinese accepted as a matter of course the concept of manners established by Confucius. (Coomaraswamy : 1977, II : 119)

The dominant feature of traditional society is its orderliness consistent with the principles implicit in the traditional wisdom. In India, the caste system has been a determining factor behind the Hindu society. The earliest reference so far available to us regarding the caste system goes back to the Rg Veda (Rg Veda X : 90) which speak of Varṇas (colours) indicating a division of labour rather than a racial division or a social classifica-

tion. It is this division of labour which governed the life and the community as a whole and that of the individual. It is true that in later centuries the 'tyranny of caste' in India determined the minute details of rites of passage and other social behaviour; but it is also true that it regulated the traditional order of the society. However much the caste system was deep rooted in India, it never hindered the unrestricted freedom of belief and thought. In traditional society therefore, there is no real distinction between the sacred and the profane acts of the society. Both are intermixed and enmeshed with each other. In such societies the needs of the body and the soul are satisfied together.

The Varṇāśramadharmā thus established in India was the basis of the traditional society—a distinctive feature of the Indo-Aryan civilization. According to the Varṇa-dharma, the ancient Indian had evolved four basic purposes in life which he refers to as the Purusārthas (human ends, human values). The Code of Manu (Manusmṛti) for example classifies the customs and the conventions which were transmitted by word of mouth through generations. Manu is said to have fixed Indian conduct for all times. According to him the four human ends/values (Purusārthas) are Dharma (spiritual duty), Artha (material prosperity), Kāma (desire) and Mokṣa (liberation). The Āsrama dharmas, thus enunciated a counter balance between the physical and the metaphysical polarity. It is a similar counter-balance that is perpetuated by the traditional communication implicit in folklore and folklife. Our endeavour here is to delineate the main characteristics of such Communication encoded in Sinhala folklore and folklife.

II

Myth

All mythology involves a corresponding philosophy; but we have to be clear what we are talking about when we discuss the myth. Most agree that myth refers to stories that are traditional. However a problem arises as to which traditional story is a myth, which one is a legend or which one is a folktale. Most scholars have now a tendency to agree that the stories about gods and their activities, the culture heroes and their remarkable feats in general are myths. Whatever the fantastic explanations given to such stories are 'the truth can be summarised in a few words—Dreams, fears and stresses—it is from these that come the Gods and heroes and the tales about them.' (Stith Thomson: 1955:171) The myths therefore are not mere inventions but acknowledgement of events resulting from enjoyment, stress and experience. "We shall only be able to understand the astounding uniformity of the folklore motifs of all over the world and the devoted care that has everywhere been taken to ensure their correct transmission if we approach these mysteries (for they are nothing less) in the spirit in which they have been transmitted from

the stone age until now with the confidence of little children indeed, but not the childish self-confidence of those who hold that wisdom was born with themselves (Coomaraswamy 1977, I:369).

Let us now take one of the best examples from Sinhala folklore to illustrate what has been said before. The coming of Vijaya. What are its salient and universal characteristics as a myth :

- (1) The oracle or soothsayer's prophecy that Suppādevi would have a non-human conjugal union in an adventurous context.
- (2) Sinhabāhu and Sinhaseevali the son and the daughter of Suppādevi, agonised by being the children of a beast seek ways and means of escaping from the father, Sinhabāhu 'takes the barrier, (rock) upon his shoulder to a distance of fifty yojanas.
- (3) Sinhabāhu, the son kills the father.
- (4) Sinhabāhu marries his sister Sinhasīvali.
- (5) Sinhasīvali bears twin sons sixteen times the eldest being Vijaya (*Victor*)
- (6) Vijaya with his 700 retinue lands in Lanka on the day that the Tathāgata attains Parinibbāna (final despiration)
- (7) The Tathāgata advises the Sakra to protect Vijaya the new King of Sri Lanka where the Buddha Dhamma will be established.
- (8) Vishnu to whom the Sakra entrusts the island admonishes Vijaya and his followers, bless them by tying a magic thread.
- (9) Kuveni cannot devour the men because of the magic thread, but succeeds in harassing them by hurling all the 700 men one after another.
- (10) Vijaya not seeing his men sets out with the five weapons (Pancāyudha)—Sword, bow, battle axe, spear and shield) to confront Kuveni (an example of metamorphoses).
- (11) Vijaya threatens her and the Yakkhini tormented with fear prays him for mercy. However lest Vijaya might be betrayed, he makes the Yakkhini to swear an oath.
- (12) The 700 men are relieved and Vijaya takes the Yakkhini as his spouse. Kuveni betrays her people and abets Vijaya to kill most of them.

- (13) Vijaya ultimately betrays her who after abandoning her two children from Vijaya is slain by a Yakkha.
- (14) The two children Disāla and Jivahattha marry each other and their descendants are the Pulindas (Vedddhas).
- (15) Vijaya marries the daughter of Paṇḍu and is consecrated as the King of Lanka. They have no children to succeed him and therefore a message is sent to his brother Sumitta to come and take over the Kingship. Sumitta too being too old sends his son Paṇḍuvāsadēva disguised as a Buddhist hermit. Vijaya was dead by this time.
- (16) Paṇḍuvāsadēva takes Bhaddakacchāyanā a Sākyan princess as his spouse. She is extremely beautiful—a woman made of gold. (Golden colour of the skin counts as a mark of particular beauty). Bhaddakacchāyanā too comes to Lankā disguised as a nun. They have ten sons and one daughter—Ummādachitrā.

Although the incidents enumerated just now are common knowledge, I purposely reminded them to show how each and every episode (in its minutest detail) has in it an inherent quality which makes it intelligible in the frame of logico-mathematical model so often elaborated by eminent anthropologists of the Levi-Straussian tradition. Every one of these sequences stand the test of classificatory thought and analogical reasoning in mythic conceptualization. If it is so, it certainly is a repository of traditional communication inherited by the Sinhala people. Now let me briefly spell out the subtle manner in which the symbolic constructs of the Sinhala ethnicity is preserved in these sequences. I observe in the Vijaya myth four main categories reinforcing the Sinhala ethnicity. They are :

- (1) Alliance and filiation or geneological relationship in rationalizing Vijaya's descendants to be Pulindas and Panduvasdeva/Bhaddakacchāyanā descendants to be the Sinhala race (patrilineally the valiant Sinhabāhu and matrilineally related to Lord Buddha). The metamorphic conjugal union between human and non-human in the case of Suppādevi and Vijaya on the one hand and the conjugal union between the sister and the brother in the case of Sinhabāhu and Sinhasīvali and Vijaya's two children on the other have been repudiated by avoiding Vijaya or Sumitta to be the real ancestor. When it comes to Sumitta's son the non-human colouring is diluted to fit in new circumstances.
- (2) Secondly, I perceive a systematic articulation of the concept of human distinctiveness of 'who we are' and 'how we came to be'

implicit in the remarkable feats of Suppādevi in joining a beast; Sinhabāhu resorting to patricide, Vijaya the valiant warrior confronting non-human Kuveni. Once the ethnic distinctiveness is established Vijaya leaves the scene allowing Panduvāsdeva to embrace nationalist and Buddhist ideals. In common parlance we do not call ourselves to be the descendants of Panduvāsdeva.

- (3) The magico-religious conceptualization which up to date is inherent in socio-political thinking among the Sinhala people is ingrained in the Vijaya myth. I refer to God Vishnu in his capacity as the protector of the Island, blessing Vijaya and his retinue; Vijaya taking with him the Pancāyudha in going to meet Kuveni who he thought might overpower him. Then again Panduvāsdeva, Bhaddakacchāyanā retinue arriving in Sri Lanka disguised as Buddhist mendicants; the choice of Buddha's Parinibbāna day to be Vijaya's arrival in the Island have to be considered in the proper context. The pattern is therefore already set in these incidents to impose an ecclesiastical sense of order running through the entire corpus of Sinhala folklore genera.
- (4) Fourthly I perceive an epistemological and a dialectical validity of discussion in the Vijaya myth. There is the overvaluation and the undervaluation of close kin relation. Overvaluation in the brother-sister marriages and the undervaluation in patricide. In incidents such as the oracle and the soothsayer prophesy, the numeral of 16— in the sixteen births given by Sinhasīvali and 700 in Vijaya's 700 men; Kuveni betraying her people with her resultant death at their own hands; Vijaya's betrayal of Kuveni with the resultant absence of an issue to succeed him we observe a syncretism of common beliefs and aspirations of the Sinhala people.

The example of the Vijayan myth should therefore show how the tenets of traditional wisdom can be communicated through our folklore if the scholar is sympathetic and has the capacity to see in them the metaphoric meaning coded in them. When you see a temple building or a church building if you are not sensitive or if you do not have the capacity to see something more than a building, surely the artifact cannot be blamed. We have to blame ourselves. This applies to the myth as you would have seen now and to all other aspects of oral tradition such as legends, epics, folktales, ballads, memorates, songs, folk speech, proverbs, riddles, etc.

Belief System

Now let me comment very briefly on the traditional wisdom communicated in the Sinhala belief systems such as the ritual, customs, festivals, dance, theatre, etc. Here I will take only two examples both pertaining to the rites of passage.

Firstly I take the puberty rites. What are its salient features?

- (1) The elders attempt to ascertain the exact time of the first menstruation.
- (2) A symbol—a twig or young coconut leaves are hung at the entrance to the house.
- (3) The girl is kept secluded in a room inside the house. In certain Kandyan villages a separate hut is constructed under a tree, preferably a jak tree. An elderly lady or some young playmates are kept there to keep company with the girl.
- (4) The elders meet the village astrologer to determine the time of the first bath.
- (5) The girl covers herself from head to foot with a white cloth and proceeds to the bathing place.

වසා මොට්ටැක්කිලියකුත් ගෙන වරක් සැලියක් ඉස නබා
මෙවන් රැසිරු රිදී ලද ලිය ගොසින් වී ගොඩ උනු සුබා

If she happened to stay in a temporary hut it is burnt as soon as she leaves it. She stands on a heap of paddy and twigs and leaves of some milk bearing trees like the jak tree. She is bathed from a new earthen pot. The pot is then thrown over her head to be broken into pieces. This is done in order to avert the effects of any curses fallen through the evil eye or the evil mouth. In some parts of the country an elder strikes a milk bearing tree with a knife no sooner it is known that the girl had attained age. In certain localities the girl while proceeding to the bath strikes a jak tree with a knife uttering the words :

දෙමව්පියන්ට දෙස් නැත, සහෝදර සහෝදරියන්ට, දෙස් නැත, මට දෙස්
නැත. ඒ සියළු වස් දෙස් මේ කිරි ගහටයි.

- (6) The girl returning from the bath is received by an elderly person coming towards her carrying a pot full of water.

- (7) She enters the house facing a burning lamp or she herself lights a lamp as soon as she enters the house.
- (8) She proceeds to a room where there are fruits, sweetmeats, gold and silver, etc. symbolising prosperity for the future.
- (9) She greets the parents first by offering betel leaves which is followed by greeting all those who have attended the ceremony.

Many a scholar commenting on such ethnographic details pertaining to such customs and rituals attempt to reconstruct the social conditions or religious beliefs implicit in the ritual. I think there is more meaning in these rituals than what meets the eye at a mundane level. There is folk communication encoded in them which has to be decoded by the prudent folklorist or the anthropologist. One has to be analytical and patient in examining each and every detail forming a part of the whole ritual complex. If you deem these complexities as a ritual language you are on safe grounds. In ordinary language if a substantial section or certain sentences are missing in a given context it will be difficult to comprehend its meaning. One has to reconstruct the prototype from what remains. In the ritual too every single, isolated or minor detail is significant. They help us to reconstruct something close to the whole ritual which should then be subjected to an analytical examination.

I observe three important strata of folk communication linked with the puberty ceremony. Firstly, preparing the potential initiate to embark on to the future life as an adolescent girl. She is firstly separated from the normal role in the society. This is done traditionally by confining her to a lonely room and living in a social vacuum—social timelessness. This is further emphasised by various proscriptions and prescriptions regarding food, clothing and even shelter (a separate hut). All these are preliminal prerequisites for her to cross from one social category to another.

Secondly, she is infused with self-confidence by undergoing various rituals such as the astrologer's determination of the correct time for the bath, etc.; the initiate taking off her original clothing immediately after the bath which itself is a form of ritual washing. This is the period when the profane is overpowered with the sacred; when the initiate is more or less 'contaminated with holiness' and thereby infused with a strong psychological foundation for the life to be in a few moments. Minute details of the ritual such as transferring the curses of the evil eye or the evil mouth to the jak tree, entering the house facing a lighted lamp, her partaking of the food (sweets, etc.) are significant attributes reinforcing the psychological foundation. The auspicious moment on which the puberty took place too is analysed in the Sinhala folklore in order to establish the desired confidence. I give two instances:

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ගුරු දිනේ ලැබුව මල්වර	පින්වතිය
ලබමින් සැපත් යස දරු	සම්පතිය
සමගියේ රැසිරු සර හිමිහු	නැනැතිය
උමගනේ සදිසිවෙයි දනු	සැකනැතිය

රෙහෙණ නැකත මල්වර වුනු	පියකතීනි
දරණ ගුණ සුවය රැසිරෙන්	අගපැමිණි
වරණ හිමිකුමෙකු සහ සරණය	වෙමිනි
දෙරණ පතළ සිරියෙන් වැජඹෙයි	නිතිනි

Thirdly, the initiate is brought back to the normal society with full confidence to shoulder the responsibilities of her new role. This is achieved by the Kotahalu Mangallaya itself by meeting the elders and treating them in her household. She thereby establishes in her own mind the reciprocal relationship she is pledged to maintain in the future. Is not the whole ceremony a rational approach of transferring the initiate into a new life? This is what I consider as traditional wisdom and knowledge communicated through our folklore.

The second example I would like to discuss is the Sinhala New Year. The Sinhala New Year is a very good example of what Arnold Van Gennep has termed as preliminal (separation), liminal (transition) and post-liminal (incorporation or aggregation). The whole process is a rite of passage comparable to ceremonies of birth, childhood, puberty, betrothal, marriage, etc.

There is no doubt that the conscious attempt of the past elders was to instil the concept of regeneration through the New Year rituals. Thereby they renewed the energy of the nation to shoulder the responsibilities of the ensuing year. One could perceive that rationally the ritual behaviour has preserved their wisdom.

Firstly, the Parāṇa Avurudda (old year) has to die through the rites of expulsion. This is achieved by lighting the household hearth at the auspicious moment and preparing the last meal for the year. In some parts of the country people have the last bath of the year and get purified for the new year. Isn't this a form of ritual washing we just observed in the puberty rites? These rites of the old year are pre-liminal—rite of separation. One has to die for the other to be reborn.

The second stage is the period of transition (liminal). This period of social vacuum (Nonagate) is a pre-requisite of most rites of passage in most parts of the world. Nonagate is the period of labour pains for the new one to be born. All economic, social and educational activities cease. The dich-

tomy of the profane and the sacred is implicit in the custom of engaging in meritorious activities during this period which is very correctly designated as Puṇya Kālaya.

Thirdly the dawn of the New Year is marked by the Subha Mohota or the Nākata. The occasion is heralded by the peal of temple bells and burst of crackers, etc. The new one is born at the auspicious moment when the household hearth is kindled by the housewife, in accordance with the advice admonished by the astrologer. Subsequently all activities commence and the New Year is born with renewed energy and expectations. In sum, the entire nation has passed from one defined era to another equally defined era. Apart from the concept of regeneration, the moral sentiments of the people are restored and revived on such customs as salutations to the elders, and the reciprocity implicit in the exchange of gifts and social calls, etc. Here too the elders of the past have preserved devices to make the nation socially cohesive.

The crossing of boundaries of social space and time are involved in both these examples of puberty and the new year rites. The crossing of boundaries whether physical, psychological or social is in a sense pregnant with excitement and anxiety, both of which create an ideal situation for ritual. There are occasions where even the most ultra-modern scientists have resorted to the ritual when confronted with excitement and anxiety. The scientific analysis of the ritual is that it psychologically pleases or appeases man's emotions especially at times of crisis. It is certainly true; but it is also true that there is something more than that. It is functional to maintain and exert social control and social behaviour. We observe day in day out various rituals being performed, some of them even organised by the state. Rituals such as Kohombakankāriya, Vap Magula, Alut Sālmangallaya and Avurudu Sirit cannot be explained away by saying that they are performed only to appease the emotions of the people.

We now come to the last category of folklore referred to earlier in the opening remarks. They are the traditions enmeshed in non-verbal dimensions of culture such as artifacts, styles in clothing, architecture, food, cooking, etc. I opt to take a few examples from the elements of the Sinhala Design and Ornament.

Ira-Hañda

The Sun and Moon are universal as symbols of eternity. In the Brazen Palace (Lohapāsāda), King Dutugemunu is said to have had ornaments and among them were the emblem of the sun in gold and the moon in silver. The sun and moon are very often engraved on Sannasas and cut on boundary stones as symbols of eternity.

Apart from the historical, archaeological and literary evidence referring to the sun and the moon as symbolic representations, folk poetry too has transmitted its significance. Oral tradition itself is related to the sun and the moon.

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සඳ දෙවියන් සඳ මුදුනෙන්	වඩිනතුරු
ගණදෙවියන් ගණ අඳුරෙන්	වඩිනතුරු
සිව්පද කියමු අපි ඉරගල කිබෙන	තුරු

Then again permission is sought from the sun and the moon to recite folk poetry.

උදයට පායන ඉර දෙවියන් හා සවසට සඳ දෙවියන්	වීසිනා
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සබයෙ සිටින ලොකු කුඩා මහත්වරු කියන්ට කවි අවසර දෙන්තේ	
අද මේ තිස් පැය මල් කවි කීමට පත්තිනි දෙවි අවසර දෙන්තේ	

Love at least in the initial stages is deemed to be eternal. When it is realised that it is not so, it is too late. Love at its prime stage is symbolically made eternal by the attributes made to the sun and the moon as in the following two examples :

ඉරට පුළුවන්ද ගිරවුන්	එලවන්ට
සඳට පුළුවන්ද සාවුන්	එලවන්ට
මලට පුළුවන්ද බමරුන්	එලවන්ට
නුඹට පුළුවන්ද මගෙ සිත	නලවන්ට

ඉර වැයම් කළොත් ගිරවුන්	එලෙව්වැකි
සඳ වැයම් කළොත් සාවුන්	එලෙව්වැකි
මල වැයම් කළොත් බමරුන්	එලෙව්වැකි
නුඹ වැයම් කළොත් මගෙ සිත	නැලෙව්වැකි

Makara Torana (dolphin or crocodile facing each other forming a portal to the image house).

The makara coming from the Indian tradition is either the Gate of Life or the Jaws of Death. This sort of dichotomy is very often found in symbolic representations. Red for example is treated as a sign of danger which may be

derived from red signifying blood. But red is also associated with joy and happiness because it is blood that yields life. Virginity in the newly married girl is indicated by placing a red basket of flowers to be seen by the relations.

Haṃsa

The well-known Sacred Swan in Hinduism has carried its message in Sinhala folklore too. Haṃsa signifies the capacity for discriminating the good from the evil and has the extended meaning as beautiful and auspicious. This concept of beauty and predicting success has found its way into the Indian and Sinhala erotic literature when they compare a woman's breasts to the Sacred Swan. The Haṃsa Pūttuva—two or more swans' entwined necks—is a common motif in Sinhala jewellery.

Siṃha

The Siṃha (lion) as the mythical ancestor stands for dignity, majesty and power as attributes of the Sinhala race. One can see how effective and functional a folklore motif could be when we are reminded of the Siṃha motif adorning many an institution ranging from various levels such as the Siṃha Giri (Sīgiri) to the C.T.B.

Nelum Mala

The Nelum Mala (lotus) is perhaps the most eloquent symbol in Buddhist art at all levels of reference beginning from the simple folklore to symbolic exegesis.

More and more examples can be added to this list of symbolic representations in Sinhala folklore conveying the proven message that they are the carriers of folk intelligence and wisdom.

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