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**Folktales as a Tool to Re-read History:  
A Study of Tibetan Tales**

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**Abstract:**

Folktales could be used as an efficient tool in validating the versions of histories circulated in society. The purpose of this paper is to apply the process of folkloric restatement in order to interpret the knowledge embedded in the tales. Identifying the hidden knowledge and analyzing it along the traditions of culture helps us to validate the version of a tale or the culture that transfers the tale. It also proves how folkloric restatement could function as one efficient method for historians to identify the authenticity of tales when there are more versions available of a single story. The paper is developed through three stages. The first stage of the study interprets the function of folktales in a society irrespective of the medium in which it is narrated. The second stage analyses two Tibetan classical folktale texts using the folkloric restatement method and interprets the knowledge embedded within them. The final part analyses how the interpreted contextual meaning is moving along with the Tibetan version of history and culture, unmaking the Chinese version.

**Key Words:** Folktales, Contextual Meaning, Validating History, Folkloric Restatement

**Introduction:**

History plays a significant role in understanding the distinct culture and identity of a particular land developed over centuries. Historians identify and construct history through many sources. Historians also validate the authenticity of available histories, and in validating the history, historians use folktales, myths, and other oral narrations of a particular land to crosscheck the facts. The world often relies on the history presented through the dominant discourses, and when it is recorded using any media, its reliability increases. History gets distorted when a writer/author who belongs to a different community tries to write the history of a particular nation. It is the objective of writing history that matters, for not every history recorded is true to its most complete sense. Edward Said, in his *Orientalism*, says that it was the need of the West to portray their identity as superior to all non-Europeans. So they compared the entirely different traditions of the West and East, portraying those in the East as less civilized and as a culture that lacks history. As a result, a new history

was constructed by the West for the East. The imperialist power of the West helped them in making this new distorted history a dominant discourse. Similar distortion is what the Chinese are attempting by rewriting a new history for Tibet, portraying themselves as superior beings, which the natives disagree with. In the work titled *Highlights of Tibetan History* published by China Studies Series, the 'Foreword' to the book starts with the line "The Tibetans, a nationality of the Chinese nation... (p. 5)", whereas all the historical records published by the Tibetan authorities deny this statement. Such ideas consciously constructed by the Chinese are now dominant as it is propagated through various media, including myths and folklore.

Myths and folklore usually play a significant role in validating any history. For instance, Folklorists state that the characteristics of myths that state the origin, which could be the origin of anything- like the cosmos or earth, tracing their origin in the land- help the historian to identify the antiquity of a culture. Tibetan myths stating the origin of their lives in the mountains belong to ancient times. Though the written records talk of the history of Tibet from the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, the archaeological findings of today state that the presence of ancient Tibet could be traced back to the Neolithic age. In the widely accepted myth regarding the origin of life, Tibetans are identified as the "descendants of a simian father, an incarnation of the compassionate Avalokitesvara, and a mountain ogress" (Gupta & Ramachandran, 1995, p. 13), an incarnation of Tara (Norbu, 1984, p. 3). The myth proves that the Tibetan culture belongs to the primeval periods, unlike the written history. However, the distortions happen for various reasons. The same myth is recorded in Chinese history where Tibetans are "the descendants of the six children begot by a monkey who, after being enlightened by the Goddess of Mercy, married a woman demon living in a mountain cave." (Furen & Wenqing, 1984, p. 9). The divinity assigned to the myth is lost in the Chinese version and is portrayed as the descendants of a monkey and a woman demon. Such changes could be seen in every aspect of Tibetan history. The altered versions made by the Chinese authorities are available in significant libraries whereas the Tibetan history written by Tibetan scholars stating their perception is hardly available to the commoner.

As stated, folklores are embedded with historical and cultural nuances of a community and it acts as a competent tool to transfer them to the next generation. The objective of this paper is to identify how folktales reproduced in print media validate the originality of culture and folklore. The paper is developed through three stages. The first stage explains the relevance of folktales in the modern period, even if the medium of narration changes. The second stage applies the process of folkloric restatement in two Tibetan classical folktales to interpret them. The final part analyses how interpreting contextual meanings hidden in the Tibetan folktales validates their version of history and culture, unmaking the Chinese version.

Alan Dundes, in his essay 'Metafolklore and Oral Literary Criticism' states that "the theoretical assumption that folklore was limited to a survival and reflection of the past was the crippling one for the study of folklore in context." (p. 38). Alan

continues to say, "If folklore only represents the past, then there is no point in bothering to attempt to collect the present context of folklore." and also states that the current studies in folklore reflect the relevance of folklore in the present as well as the past. (Metafolklore and Oral Literary Criticism, p. 38). While defining folklore, Dundes states that it is the texture, text and context of folktales that come to the aid of the folklorist (Texture, Text, and Context, p. 25). He continues that "it is unlikely that a genre of folklore could be defined based on just one of these. Ideally, a genre should be defined in terms of all three." (p. 25). According to him, the texture of folklore is the language, the specific phonemes and morphemes employed, which are practically impossible to translate, and the textural studies are made by linguists rather than folklorists. So, for the people who study folklore, it is the text and context of the text that is more important. The folklore text is "the version or a single telling of a tale, a recitation of a proverb, a singing of a folksong. For analysis, the text may be considered independent of its texture. Whereas texture is, on the whole, untranslatable, text may be translated." (Texture, Text, and Context, p. 27). The context is "the specific social situation in which that particular item is employed." (Texture, Text, and Context, p. 27). Contexts help in interpreting and understanding the text more effectively. In fact, Malinowski observes that "the text ... without the context, it remains lifeless.", and refers them as "mutilated bits of reality." (Metafolklore and Oral Literary Criticism, 1978, p. 39). In other words, it is the context in which a tale is narrated, and the knowledge embedded within is revealed as the knowledge rooted in their culture. Moreover, the function of tales is to transfer this knowledge to the next generation.

It is considered that the significant functions of fairy tales and folklore are to suggest "the unadulterated and pure" and "cosmetic bourgeois standards of beauty and virtue" (Zipes, 2006, p. 107) for the cultural existence of a community. However, today, folklore is attributed to more functions. Zipes continues that folk and fairy tales are now turned into "sharp-edged, radical parts by the end of the nineteenth century" ... with "more social dynamite in the contents of the tales with more subtlety and art." (p. 107). According to Michael Butor, the natural world and the world represented in tales "does not remain side by side with the latter; it reacts upon it; it suggests that we transform it, that we reinstate what is out of place." (Zipes, p. 107).

In this paper, translated Tibetan tales have been chosen as primary texts and are analyzed in the context of twentieth-century Tibet as a case study to identify the function of folktales. The primary objective of Tibetan tales documented and translated today is to resist the 'Cultural Revolution' of the Chinese that started in their land in 1959. The texts undergo high scrutiny after documentation to identify and delete any possible Chinese invasions if they happened. The translated texts in print are published by the Tibetans themselves, considering the new generation of Tibetans in exile as well as other nationalities who are under the influence of the Chinese version of Tibetan history to provide their authentic tales and history. It is true that the context of tales in print is different from the oral context of tales. The oral context does not mean the context during the documentation process but the

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context into which the tale was born for the first time. In oral narration, the audience and the setting in which the tale is narrated matter a lot. In fact, the narrator narrates a text in a context, and that helps the audience to derive meaning. However, in printed text, the text is read by the readers at different places and a familiar narrative context is absent. However, that doesn't mean folktales are devoid of any context. According to Haring Lee, a process called 'folkloric restatement' will help the reader to identify the context and interpret the meaning. If folklore does not go through this process of folkloric restatement, then it remains just a text.

'Folkloric restatement' means to read a printed text while imagining it as a performance. Here, the reader himself/herself becomes the narrator of the text and places it in the context to derive meaning. The typical social setting that led to the reproduction of the tale becomes its context. ("How to Read Ibonia: Folkloric Restatement" 3). The process of folkloric restatement is applied to interpret the knowledge embedded in Tibetan tales where an everyday context is absent. Identifying the hidden knowledge and analyzing it along the traditions of culture helps us to validate the version of a tale or the culture that transfers the tale. It also looks at how folkloric restatement could be one efficient key for historians to identify the authenticity of tales when there are more versions available of a single story.

For the study, two tales entitled *A Story of Antelopes: A Message of Renunciation towards Cyclic Existence* and *The Legend of Birds and Monkeys* were selected. Acarya Ngawang Namgyal, a Tibetan himself, has translated the text, and the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives published it. The textual content of the tale has not changed much since its origin, which could be traced back to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century—however, the meanings altered along with various contexts. In the current paper, the tales are connected to the current social setting of Tibet to interpret the meaning as suggested in the process of 'folkloric restatement.' The geographical setting and the period depicted in the tale help the reader to relate the text to the real world. The physical background of both these tales resembles the topography of Tibet. The characters are animals and dialogic. The animal world is represented in tales that symbolize the real world, and the dialogues rooted in their culture portray the native perception of Tibet and its history (Jose).

*A Story of Antelopes: A Message of Renunciation towards Cyclic Existence* narrates the issues triggered by a hunter in an antelope community through three major sections. The first session narrates the issues within the community that allowed a hunter into their community. It resembles the issues that led to Sinicization in Tibet. The other two sections detail the mis-happenings caused by the Hunter. Tibetans can easily connect to the antelopes, representing how they feel under the Rule of China. The physical setting of the tale resembles the geography of Tibet. Antelopes lived in harmony in a town named Bagchag Sipa, situated in a valley under the reign of Rigpa'i Dawa. Sipa, in the native Tibetan language, signifies society. The young but strong character in the tale, Dopa'i Khyuchog, defies his chieftain's advice to move their residence to a safer area. He says the idea of a chieftain is outdated, and

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his talks won the hearts of fellow creatures. Dopa'i Khyuchog becomes their chief after winning the hearts of his fellow creatures. However, a few days later, a vicious hunter disguises himself, enters the area, and murders the young chief, causing significant grief to the village. The attempts of a saint to dissuade the Hunter from carrying out this heinous murder went in vain.

The thirteenth Dalai Lama, the political and religious leader who coexisted peacefully with his attendants, is symbolized by the head of the society, Rigpa'i Dawa. The testimonial statement delivered in 1932 by the fourteenth Dalai Lama before his death is reminiscent of the foresightful vision of the leader Rigpa'i Dawa, who counsels his people to relocate to a safer location rather than confronting the prominent and haughty hunters. The statement records that.

Very soon in this land (with a harmonious blend of religion and politics), deceptive acts may occur from without and within. At that time, if we do not dare to protect our territory, our spiritual personalities, including the Victorious Father and Son (Dalai et al.), may be exterminated without a trace, the property and authority of our Lakangs (residences of reincarnated lamas) and monks may be taken away. Moreover, our political system, developed by the Three Great Dharma Kings (Tri et al.), will vanish without anything remaining. The property of all people, high and low, will be seized, and the people will be forced to become enslaved. All living beings will have to endure endless days of suffering and will be stricken with fear. Such a time will come. (Rinpoche, 2010)

However, the Tibetans did not take the required action to avert the approaching disaster. They followed the words of the regent, the ruler of Tibet, in the absence of the Dalai Lama till the next Dalai Lama took charge. Dopa'i Khyuchog was such a character who protested the words of Rigpa'i Dawa. Instead, he believed in his wisdom, and fellow animals also shared his thoughts after listening to his words. He believed that

When hunters come, they can flee with long strides. We have giant rock caves wherein we hide;  
We have a keen sense of smell to protect ourselves;  
We have eyes to see distant areas;  
And we have ears to hear anything near us.

Everyone considered this as the best and practical idea and believed that they could defeat the hunters with their own strength. They never listened to their head, who saw the tremendous loss of freedom "buried beneath the big advantage" (4). The head leaves the scene after the first session, sitting on a tall clay hill with his two ears pointing skyward while reflecting in tears over the catastrophe.

Meanwhile, a hunter from another place (whose name is not mentioned, so it could be from any place, and for contemporary Tibet, it is China, whereas in the history of Tibet, most of its neighboring nations attacked Tibet) found the grassland with antelopes as a place with gold-dust scattered all over. This represents how China

is drawn towards the untapped resources and gold of Tibet. China wants access to Tibet in order to gain global power. This represented the Hunter, who was attracted to the wealth of grassland. He concealed his guns and hounds close by, took on the appearance of a cowherd, and pretended to be “in search of his lost cows and tormented by cold, hunger, and thirst” (6). History says that during the ninth Dalai Lama's Rule, the Chinese fighters who arrived in Tibet first were similarly disguised. They initially pretended to assist Tibet in resolving its dispute with Nepali Gorkhas, and later, they started to meddle in Tibet's domestic affairs. Just like the antelopes and their new chief who fell into the trap of the Hunter, the Tibetans fell into the hands of the Chinese and could not escape. However, the actions of Hunterthe hunters were dreadful for the antelope community, and they suffered from his poisoned arrows. They cried out,

Your dreadful look steals away my consciousness  
And extracts blood, sweat, and pus from my every pore  
thought I was being eaten up alive.

It is the same as how the Tibetan people experience Chinese Rule and how they are handled when they try to escape it. The Tibetan environment and culture are being destroyed by the poisoned arrow shot from the Hunter's bow. Furthermore, the other countries are powerless to stop the Hunter from murdering the antelope, just as the saint who failed miserably to stop him.

It is said that the story was initially intended to support Buddhist concepts of karma and cyclical existence, in which even the most minor transgression of good karma can ultimately result in the downfall of not just a single person but even a whole community. The tale circulated in the current Tibet connects to its inhabitants by saying how wrong political decisions affect the entire community and also how people could be destroyed even for more wealth.

The second story, *The Legend of the Birds and Monkeys*, is about a fight between a herd of monkeys and a flock of birds over the boundaries of their respective territories. At the top of Kunzang Hill was a snow mountain home to a herd of white lions. Monkeys lived at the base of the hills, while birds lived in the center of the hill. Geographically speaking, Tibet is atop a mountain, and its inhabitants, like the birds in the story, reside in various mountain sections. The lions atop a hill represented the Lamas, Buddhist monks, and the Dalai Lama, their leader. Similar to the situation with the Tibetans, the nearby monkey society questions the birds' peaceful existence, even though it is the monkeys who have intruded into the birds' territory. The fact that the monkeys traveled to the realm of birds for more fantastic food indirectly alludes to the Chinese invasion of Tibet for commercial gain. When invasions of monkeys started happening often,

One day, the birds held a meeting and said: “We have never heard of the monkeys coming to this grassland already owned by us ... So if we do not complain to them at once, they will ultimately take possession of our land.”

Moreover, the birds asked the celestial Snowbird to talk with the monkeys on their behalf. This incident in the tale reminds the historical event of 1909, when the Tibetans resolved to discuss with the Chinese authorities in order to find a peaceful resolution to China's repeated invasions of Tibet. Meeting the officials claiming a free Tibet was the responsibility of the thirteenth Dalai Lama, who controlled the then-Tibetan kingdom. In the story, Celestial Snowbird states that during the discussion with the monkeys.

All nations like India, China, Mongolia, Tibet, Turkestan, Nepal, and so forth Enjoy their sovereignty. India is ruled by spiritual kings; China is ruled by Chinese rulers; Mongolia is ruled by Emperor Genghis Khan; Turkestan is owned by King Cangra Mugpo; And Nepal is ruled by the Yambu King.

The omission of Tibet in the second part is not accidental, for the Snowbird then asks the monkeys, "Have you not heard about these things?" She is reiterating that they also want the freedom which is enjoyed by other nations. The discussion of the thirteenth Dalai Lama ensured Tibet was free of China. However, it did not last long as it is in the tale. At the end of the first chapter,

The monkey-king was unable to provide a fitting reply immediately. So, with his head bowed, he said in a low voice: "What you have said today appears somewhat true." ... The monkeys then returned to their place.

However, as documented in Tibet's history, the Chinese, assisted by the new Chinese government, quickly retreated to Tibet in 1950 just as the monkeys returned to the spot where the birds had been, paying attention to the young monkey, the new chief of the group.

Tibet then brought the Chinese territorial violations to the UN, where China gained leverage from its permanent membership, and the conversation was put off. In the story, the orator parrot and celestial Snowbird walk to the monkeys' home and call them all together, but the conversation continues with no resolution. Subsequently, a rooster that the birds trust and a rabbit named Loden—who describes himself as "fair complexioned and good-natured"—try to mediate their differences. In actuality, Loden stands for India's foreign policy toward China, and the Rooster may symbolize Jawaharlal Nehru's Panchasheel idea, which promotes peaceful coexistence among Asian nations. Loden and Rooster advise the birds "to offer one-third of the area to the monkeys and make them promise never to be greedy again?" to promote harmonious coexistence. According to the story, the monkeys followed their advice and led peaceful, harmonious lives.

Throughout the story, the birds never resort to violence; instead, they carefully consider their options and consult with the monkeys. The governments of Tibet and China met together today and sent officials to talk about the issue. The ongoing conversations examine the positive and negative outcomes and try their best to take a feasible solution. Decisions made in the tale and taken by Tibet were more

democratic than that of a dictator. The Dalai Lama always preferred to include people, the monks and the common man, in his discussions. The current Dalai Lama even decided to form a democratic government, slowly withdrawing himself from being the political head. In the tale, it is said that.

Our leader is the King Garuda. Today, he lives on the top of Mount Meru. Although it is impossible to speak to him about this, We shall still summon all the birds- From the little fledglings born last night to the white-tailed eagles.

The Dalai Lama felt and keeps saying that the people, especially the younger generation should be more involved in government matters to solve the current issues more efficiently and effectively. Tibet sought the help of global nations, just as in the tale where their discussions failed, they took the wise responses from the deer and other wise animals. Loden, the rabbit's wise decision to share one portion of the land between the monkeys and the birds helped to solve the matter, and he advised the monkeys not to continue the same path again. Thus, the tale tries to procure a far-sighted solution for a peaceful community life with an open attitude of brotherhood.

The territorial invasion of China in the twentieth Century into the land of Tibet destroyed their indigenous culture, altered their history, and restricted them in every possible way to transfer it to the younger generation. It is in this context that the Tibetan elders realized the value of protecting/reproducing their culture. They identified folktales as one medium that could support them in this effort. Most Tibetan tales that are translated today deal with significant questions related to their lives- such as freedom, the issues regarding geographical boundaries and power structures. Many tales, rather than addressing individuals, address the entire community that suffers from the attack of some neighboring community or the other.

In the sustenance of a culture, folktales always played a significant role. They transfer the knowledge of a society that has evolved through generations. The age-old tales narrated in a new context will have new interpretations that influence the conscience of the younger generation unconsciously. However, the knowledge embedded in that context is rooted in the traditions of the society. In Eastern philosophies, unlike the conscious efforts of the West, according to the Malayalam critic (K. P. Appan), the tradition is passed onto generations through unconscious efforts. At the outset, the tales chosen here attempt to prove that wisdom and a peace-loving outlook are more effective than aggression and impulsiveness in finding a solution to a dispute. This knowledge is rooted in their Buddhist traditions, which have been practiced for centuries. That is the key for historians to identify the authenticity of tales when there are more versions available of a single story. The contextual narration of both tales helps the Tibetans connect to the tale rather than take the message. It promises them that a solution is possible for the issue they are facing and a way to approach it. Thus, both tales are relevant in the current Tibetan scenario.



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