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The Polythetic Network of Tamil Folk Stories

Abstract

This paper examines a number of Tamil folk stories gathered and published by Tamil writers, and demonstrates that a family resemblance (in Wittgenstein's sense) exists among them. Their motifs constitute a polythetic, or multiply arranged, network. The polythetic notion acknowledges the fact that we have to come to terms with complexity and probability rather than postulate essences and constants that are, at best, unfalsifiable. Since any motif in the Tamil stories may be combined with any other (although of course some combinations are more likely), the reconstruction of an original story is impossible. The paper gives instances of almost identical versions of stories, of almost identical stories with different or opposite conclusions, and of functional equivalents that pursue the same didactic or other purposes through different plots with different motifs. There is no good reason to regard any of these stories as preceding any other.

Key words: folk stories—oral literature—Tamil—polythetic notion

WRITTEN TAMIL LITERATURE, covering a time span of roughly two thousand years, has long seemed the only Tamil literature worth studying. More recently, however, scholars both native and foreign have begun to study Tamil oral epics, such as the *Peruṅkatai* (VIJAYALAKSHMY 1981), *The Three Twins* (BECK 1982), and the *Maniṅṅuravan Story* (HART 1986), to mention but a few. In addition to these lengthy and sometimes grandiose narratives, however, there exists a multitude of short, unpretentious tales. In recent decades these village stories, folk stories, or “wandering stories” (*nāṭōṭi kṭaiṅkaḷ*) have increasingly caught the attention of the Tamils themselves. Foremost among the gatherers and retellers of folk stories is K. Rajanarayanan, who, writing in the folk tone, publishes collections of orally transmitted tales and sometimes weaves folk stories into his literary creations.¹ In the following essay I shall rely mainly on his collections, supplemented by those of other Tamil authors.

Tamil folk stories resemble each other rather closely and are vaguely similar to collective tales from other parts of India and the world.² Scholars, although aware that the same folklore motifs may occur in different stories (as documented, for instance, in Thompson’s *Motif-index of Folk-Literature*), continue to behave as though a sort of magical glue holds together a story after it has left the narrator’s mouth. Proponents of this view would not, of course, use such facetious terminology; German folklorists, for instance, have coined the term *Wandersage* (wandering myth or saga) for it. A consequence of this view is the belief that one can find or reconstruct the original or true form of a story, as if subsequent additions and changes followed a secret logic. PROPP, for example, has claimed that all Russian fairy tales can be reconstructed to the tale of the princess and the dragon (1966, 22). In a similar vein, LÉVI-STRAUSS has asserted that the stories of a myth cycle can develop only within a fixed boundary, by adding more and more versions like a cylinder open on top (1971, 566). What is more, all changes are said to be only transformations that leave the meaning of the story intact (1971, 250–51).

The purpose of this article is to correct once again these intrinsically implausible ideas. I have already offered a critique that focuses on the structural theory of myth, drawing on a large body of Indian temple legends (*sthala purāṇa*) (EICHINGER FERRO-LUZZI 1987).³ In the wider context of demonstrating the polythetic nature of the concept of humor, I have also anticipated the idea of a polythetic network of motifs that have no center and no constants (EICHINGER FERRO-LUZZI 1992, 160–65). In the present article I will stress the impossibility of reconstructing or finding an original collective tale. I will show that there is not just a resemblance but a “family resemblance” among Tamil folk stories. WITTGENSTEIN’S metaphor of family resemblance (1976, paragraphs 65–71) is perfectly adequate to show that concepts need not be definable by an essential feature—most abstract concepts are not, in fact, so definable—but are rather held together by overlapping similarities. The notion of a family resemblance might, however, suggest that there was an ancestor, which in the case of collective stories could support the search for an original form. To avoid this misleading conclusion, the genetically neutral term “polythetic,” meaning “multiply arranged,” has long been proposed.⁴ I hope to show that the motifs in Tamil folk stories are multiply arranged. It must be stressed that in this formulation the very concept of motif has fuzzy edges—that is, it may be extended or abbreviated at will. It may refer to a single object, such as a pestle, or it may be a relation, such as one brother trying to cheat another.

I will start by giving instances of stories so similar in motif and purpose that they may justifiably be called versions of one and the same tale. Given the vagaries of memory, most narrators, even when attempting to repeat a story, provide only a similar version rather than an identical copy. Next I shall examine stories that resemble one another more vaguely, and conclude by proposing a polythetic network of motifs cropping up in both similar and widely differing stories.

VERSIONS OF THE SAME FOLK STORY

The folklorists’ conviction that one and the same story may have different versions is verifiable in some cases, especially when the narrators come from a limited area. I shall elucidate my concept of “version” using stories that pursue the same didactic or other purpose and share most of their motifs. Changes in protagonists and complexity are immaterial. Lest it be thought that shorter versions are closer to the original, it must be stressed that the imagination does not work in an evolutionary way from the simpler to the more complex. The length of a story depends rather on the individual narrator’s skill and taste.

In one story, about de facto illiteracy and the Tamil capacity to join in

the crying of another person, the precise reason for the first person's tears is not important. In one version a nearly illiterate son-in-law starts crying when his totally illiterate family members show him a letter. Asked why he weeps, he replies, "Periya mā illai," meaning that in the letter there is no big *mā*, the only character of the Tamil syllabary that he remembers from his primary school days. His family, misunderstanding his words as "Periya amma illai" (Aunt is no more), join in his crying (RAJANARAYANAN 1984, 54–55). In another version of the story that does without the double meaning, the son-in-law, who has not progressed beyond the first grade of primary school, starts crying when shown a letter, and is soon joined by the other members of the family. The literate father-in-law then arrives. Seeing that the letter is an invitation to celebrate a child's birthday, he asks his son-in-law why he is crying. The latter explains that the big letters he studied in first grade have now become smaller. If this trend goes on the letters will all die, making it impossible to write (RAJANARAYANAN and SELVARAJ 1993, 214–15).

Desire for a particular type of food is a popular motif in Tamil folk stories. The simplest version known to me combines the husband's appetite and the wife's voracity. The husband, wishing to eat savory round *vatai*, buys all of the necessary ingredients and tells his wife to prepare at least thirty pieces. On his return from work he finds only a single *vatai* on his plate. When he angrily asks his wife where the other twenty-nine have gone, she admits that she has eaten them. In reply to his incredulous question about how she could have done so, she demonstrates by stuffing the last *vatai* into her mouth (SAHEB MARAIKKAYAR 1985, 33). Another, almost identical, version substitutes *tōcai*, flat pancakes, for *vatai*, and introduces an ingenious way of obtaining the ingredient blackgram. The husband rubs cheap lamp oil on his body and then, shouting Kṛṣṇa's sacred name Govinda, rolls three times on the ground where blackgram is spread out to dry (RAJANARAYANAN and SELVARAJ 1993, 136–37).

Other versions reduce the number of food items but elaborate the competition between husband and wife. In one version the husband wants to eat three of the five *koḷukkaṭṭai* (sweet dumplings) his wife has prepared, but she objects. In another version the husband wishes to eat *aṭai* (a flat savory). While he is bathing the wife finishes off all but three; when he demands two of them the wife protests. In both cases the husband and wife decide to subject themselves to a test of endurance, in which the one who sleeps longer and gets up later will receive more treats. The next day the villagers, thinking that the motionless couple has died, take them to the burning ground. In one version the husband's lover arrives, lamenting that he has broken his promise to die with her. Hearing this, the outraged wife jumps up and

grasps her rival's hair, whereupon the husband also rises, content that he has won the wager (RAJANARAYANAN and SELVARAJ 1993, 137–38). In another version the heat of the pyre induces the husband to shout. The people flee in terror, convinced that his ghost has spoken. The husband then runs towards his house, followed by his wife, but while they were gone a cat has eaten the delicacies (MUTHIAH 1990, 217–18).

Daydreaming and building castles in the air (Tamil has a similar metaphor) are other popular motifs found in stories that resemble one other quite closely, as well as in stories where the resemblance is more vague. In one version a vagrant finds an egg and imagines using it as the starting point of his fortune. He asks a potter to put him up for the night and is given a place to sleep where the pots are stacked. Continuing his fantasy, the vagrant now imagines that he has grown rich, that he is asked for a loan by a grocer who earlier refused him alms, and that he kicks him away (MUTHIAH 1990, 202–203); another version has the beggar daydreaming that he marries the king's daughter, and that he kicks her when she refuses to obey him (RAJANARAYANAN 1991, 78). His actual kick not only causes him to crush the egg (which he had been holding in his armpit) but breaks the pots to pieces, earning him a sound beating by the potter.

Another narrator creates a similar version using the marriage motif. A blind watchman sits on a platform in the fields. Though unable to see the birds and animals that come to eat the crops, he can hear them and is thus able to chase them away. The villagers have promised to arrange a marriage for him, so he imagines his platform to be a marriage dais. In his mind he approaches his bride, who bashfully moves away. Following her, he ends up falling off the platform and thus making himself crippled as well as blind (MUTHIAH 1990, 199; RAJANARAYANAN 1991, 78–79).

Triads being a favorite motif of folk narrative everywhere, I will now cite two versions of a story that are distinguished mainly by a fact of numbers. Both deal with the partition of property, a transaction fraught with problems in Tamil society. In the shorter version the cunning elder brother induces his father to give the top part of the family's only palm tree to him and the bottom part to his younger brother. After the father's death the angry younger brother refuses to water the tree and prevents his elder brother from climbing up his lower half, so that the latter must use a ladder to gather the fruits. Then he threatens to cut the tree. The elder brother, realizing that it is better to make peace, proposes to his younger brother that henceforth they divide the fruits and not the tree (LENA TAMILVANAN 1986, 115–18).

In the longer version there are three items of property: a mango tree, a cow, and a blanket. At first the dull younger brother agrees to his clever elder brother's proposal to divide the tree into top and bottom parts, the cow into

front and back parts, and the blanket into day and night use, but after a while he realizes that he has been duped. He threatens to cut the bottom half of the mango tree, he hits the cow so that she kicks the elder brother as he milks her, and he wets the blanket so that it cannot be used during the cold night. These actions induce the latter to ask forgiveness (RAJANARAYANAN and SELVARAJ 1993, 167–69).

While the stories mentioned above all make fun of some kind of stupidity, the final instances allow the listener to enjoy the clever outwitting of a cheater. Humor in folk stories is frequently based on reversal, with the socially inferior party winning over his superior (in Indian culture a younger brother is lower in status than his elder brother). In the two stories outlined below, women, who are socially inferior to men, outdo not only their husbands but demons as well. The stories, obviously two versions of the same tale, are composed of similar or identical motifs, although these are put into somewhat different contexts. In one version there is a man-eating demon who does not devour people as long as it is kept busy. The king suggests heavy work like cleaning all the tanks and strengthening all the dams in the kingdom, but the demon finishes these in no time. Thereupon the queen saves the situation by asking the demon to split one of her long hairs into 108 parts. Finding this impossible, the demon retires to a cave as the queen has ordered him to do, and never troubles people again (RAJANARAYANAN 1984, 169–74).

The other version also ends with a trick about hair but changes the task; in addition, the popular number 108 and its variant 1,008 are introduced into the story's antecedent.⁵ The property of a miserly landlord does not produce good crops, since the man fails to guarantee a proper water supply by repairing tanks and digging wells. A holy man advises him to repeat a secret mantra 1,008 times for 108 days, saying that a Brahmin demon (*brahmarākṣasa*) will then appear to do the work, but warning that if the demon is idle it will kill the landlord. Again the wife saves the situation by asking the demon to straighten one of her curly hairs.⁶ As it wonders how to do so the demon passes a goldsmith who is straightening a wire in the fire. The demon hits upon the idea of also putting the hair into the fire, thus burning it to ashes. Ashamed of its defeat, the demon runs away never to return (MUTHIAH 1990, 16–20).

All of the stories so far have had a humorous component. But humor, though a frequent or prototypical⁷ feature of Tamil folk stories, is not an essential one—there are sad, or at least serious, folk stories as well, like the two story versions that follow.

Two young cross-cousins are friends from childhood who dearly love each other and want to marry. Given the rules of Tamil preferential marriage this would present no problem were it not for the enmity between their

respective parents. In despair the parents turn for advice to an old man, who declares that if the two young people remember each other's body marks from the time they were children, this would prove they are truly in love and should not be separated. The cousins cannot remember anything, however, so they decide to meet secretly during the hustle and bustle of a religious festival. Too bashful to show each other their bodies, they reveal their respective body marks to each other in song and thus manage to make their parents agree to their marriage (RAJANARAYANAN 1992, 52–56).

In the other version the uncle threatens to kill his niece, together with her whole family, if he should ever see her in his son's company. The two cousins, however, swear eternal love. To seal the oath the boy cuts his little finger and the girl her little toe, and both promise to sing about each other every full moon. The girl's father, afraid of his violent relative, moves with his family to another village. A merchant there happens while traveling to come to the youth's village. Hearing the young man sing, he tells him that in his village there is a girl who sings in the same way every full moon. The youth is thereby able to find his cousin and marry her without telling his father. In the course of time a child is born to them. When the father learns of their whereabouts he rushes to their house with a sickle. On seeing him his little grandson laughs, which changes the father's heart; he embraces his grandson and makes peace with his son and daughter-in-law (RAJANARAYANAN 1991, 147–51).

IDENTICAL MOTIFS IN SIMILAR STORIES

In the preceding section I have given instances of story versions that pursue identical purposes and contain similar or identical motifs, but whose obvious similarity does not allow either to be declared the original form of the other. I now turn to stories containing similar motifs put to different didactic or other uses. The above-mentioned story versions concerning an absurd division of property stress the need for harmonious collaboration between brothers. There is another version in which the same idea is employed in order to show a usurer the error of his ways. A farmer asks for a loan, promising to give as interest half of his crop, either the part growing above ground or the part growing below ground, at the usurer's discretion. Thinking the farmer a great fool, the usurer opts for the upper part. The farmer then grows groundnuts. The next year, when the usurer chooses the part growing below ground, the farmer raises millet. Realizing that cheating is wrong, the usurer henceforth sets fair interest rates (RAJANARAYANAN and SELVARAJ 1993, 238–40).

The stories about building castles in the air serve as a warning against living by illusion. Another Tamil story placing the same motif into a caste

context may be considered a folk interpretation of the famous *Bhagavad Gītā* teaching that it is better to do badly the tasks of one's own caste (or more exactly, one's own *varṇa*) than perfectly the tasks of another caste. (It may be noted in passing that a similar idea also exists in other cultures where caste is not an issue: a German saying states, "Cobbler, stay with your boot-tree" [Schuster bleib bei deinem Leisten]). In the Tamil story a potter decides to give up his ancestral work and take up farming (remember that a potter also figured in one of the preceding stories of dangerous illusion). He sows sesame and manages to get a good crop of seeds. Returning from the oil press, he dreams about selling the oil, acquiring more land, and getting rich. When he passes the spot where he used to dump the earth for his pots he forgets that his headload is now a container of oil, and he throws down what he is carrying. The container breaks and all the oil is spilled. His fellow villagers, who had earlier warned him not to abandon his traditional work, now advise him to return to it, and he accepts their advice (RAJANARAYANAN and SELVARAJ 1993, 237–38).

Stories about obstinate misers and equally obstinate beggars—the Tamil language permits joining the pair with the rhyme *koṭākkāṇṭanum viṭakkaṇṭanum*⁸—exist in quite similar forms but span a whole range of possible outcomes, and are generally (though not necessarily) didactic in purpose. In one story an obstinate miser, in order to avoid giving a mendicant what he has promised him, feigns death, is taken to the burning ground, and is cremated against his wish (VELUSAMY 1984, 65–70). In this tale there is no true winner: the miser manages not to give, but pays with his life, and the mendicant comes away with nothing.

In another story with the same motif the miser jumps down from the bier and shouts angrily at the obstinate mendicant, "If I go to hell I'll provide a meal for you there!" The mendicant calmly replies, "Tell me when you're going to hell and I'll be there, without fail" (LENA TAMILVANAN 1986, 90–95). The end of the story thus remains open. The listeners laugh, but the characters themselves may believe in the possibility of meeting again in hell.

In another story about obstinacy, a lazy, miserly Brahmin tells other Brahmins that by providing meals for ten people every day they can gain religious merit. He thus manages to get fed in a number of homes. A clever neighbor decides to teach him a lesson by asking for a meal in return. After putting off the importune guest with a variety of excuses, the miser finally sends him to buy an eating leaf. Instead of going to the market, however, the neighbor hides in the loft, where he overhears the miser and his wife plan a violent quarrel to discourage the guest from reentering their home. Later, when the couple think that their stratagem has worked, they sit down to eat. The husband proudly says to his wife, "How I hit you without hurting you

(*nōkāmal*)!" The wife replies, "How incessantly I cried (*ōyāmal*)!" Jumping down from the loft, the clever neighbor adds, "How I stayed without leaving (*pōkāmal*)!" The couple must then let him remain for the meal (MUTHIAH 1990, 106–109).

Although ending differently, the three stories above all share a common didactic intent. This intent is not present in the next story, in which another miser, this time a farmer, manages to put off an importune temple priest who visits his village from time to time in the hope of receiving donations. The miser finally tells his wife that the next time the priest comes she should remove her marriage necklace and tearfully inform the fellow that her husband has just died. She does so, but the priest replies that he will stay in the village until after the ceremony that ends the pollution period (usually held on the sixteenth day after death). The farmer, returning from his fields, notices that the priest has not yet left. He therefore climbs a tamarind tree in their backyard to wait for his departure. Night comes, and the priest visits the backyard to empty his bowels. Thinking about the farmer's death, he suddenly realizes that it occurred on an inauspicious day. Just then he catches sight of the farmer sitting in the tamarind tree, and imagines that because the farmer died on a bad day he must have turned into a demon. The frightened priest's legs visibly tremble. The farmer, seizing this opportunity to chase him away once and for all, jumps from the tree and shouts that if the priest ever shows up again he, the demon, will kill and devour him. The priest runs for his life, and the tale ends with the farmer congratulating himself on his cleverness (MUTHIAH 1990, 311–15). Although obviously related to the other stories on obstinate misers and unwelcome guests, this particular tale derives its special humor from a cleverness independent of moral considerations, as well as from the shrewd use of religious beliefs (another favorite motif in Tamil folk stories).

The next pair of stories may be seen as expressions of religious folk philosophy, or, more precisely, as folk interpretations of Śāṅkara's teaching of nondualism. In the first story a holy man explains to his disciple that god is everywhere, so that all living beings must be worshiped as god. Later the disciple sees a temple elephant in rut. The mahout, unable to control the animal, tries to warn people away. The disciple, however, approaches the elephant with hands raised in worship, and is picked up and hurled away by the animal. Limping back to the monastery, he informs the guru of what has happened. The guru remarks that it was right to consider the elephant as god, but that he should not have disregarded the words of the mahout-god (RAJANARAYANAN 1989, 34–35).

It may be assumed that this incident helps the disciple grasp the subtleties of Indian religious philosophy and thus become a better believer. In an

almost identical story, however, a quite different conclusion is proposed. To the guru's reply that he should have considered both the elephant and the mahout as god, the disciple replies, "From now on I don't need any more god—the suffering the elephant-god has caused me is quite enough" (MUTHIAH 1990, 228–29).

The next two stories are composed of similar motifs and even share identical tragic ends, yet I do not consider them versions of the same story since they uphold different cultural values. In one a canine couple are so fond of each other that they eat together and even howl together. When the wife gets pregnant she craves some ash-pumpkin, and to please her the husband steals one. Just as he is testing the flavor the owner arrives. The owner hurls a stone mortar at the dog and kills him. The desperate wife asks why her husband was killed; told that it was for theft and unable to bear the shame, she hangs herself, thus exemplifying the age-old Tamil concept of honor (RAJANARAYANAN and SELVARAJ 1993, 70–71).

In another story, told by a member of the Tamil Paliyan tribe, the protagonists are humans. The pregnant wife craves a jackfruit, and the husband promises to bring her one even at the cost of his life. Knowing that bears like jackfruit, he goes to where the animals live, kills one, and obtains a fruit. Although he does not eat so much as a single pulp segment, the fragrance of the split jackfruit attracts four more bears. Even then the husband has a chance to escape by throwing the fruit away, but, wishing to keep his promise, he runs, trips, and is killed. The wife searches for her husband; heading in the direction of circling vultures, she finds him dead but still clasping the jackfruit skin. She dies of a broken heart (RAJANARAYANAN 1992, 145–51). In a European context the wife's poetically sad end would remind one of Isolde's death, but in India it expresses the ideal of the devoted wife (*pattini*) who does not wish to survive the death of her husband, and if need be joins him on the funeral pyre.

DIFFERENT STORIES AS FUNCTIONAL EQUIVALENTS

In the preceding section I have given instances of folk stories connected by similar or identical motifs but ending differently. Nobody but a confirmed structuralist would maintain that their transformation leaves their meaning intact. I will now turn to stories that differ in most of their motifs and are linked only through their purpose or through the idea that inspires them.

There exists a curious mental tendency to play with opposites—to declare the inferior to be the superior, the weak to be the strong, the stupid to be the wise (see EICHINGER FERRO-LUZZI 1983). Such paradoxical reversals are prominent in humor but not limited to it; we may recall the boy Jesus teaching the Pharisees, the Gospels promising that "the last will be first," and the

child Murukaṇ instructing his father Śiva. In Tamil folk stories the inverted opposites are often father and son. In one story a thief, wishing to introduce his son to the fine art of theft, demonstrates by climbing a tree and stealing an egg from a nest without the mother bird even noticing. Back on the ground the father discovers that the egg, which he had put into his waistcloth, is gone. His son respectfully hands him the egg; the boy had quickly learned that one must distract the intended victim (actually he had not distracted his father himself, but utilized the fact that the latter, while descending, had fixed his attention on the bird) (RAJANARAYANAN 1991, 55–58). In a story retold by MUTHIAH (1990, 224–25), a thief's young son succeeds in stealing another experienced thief's stolen property. In yet another story of this type the son turns out to be a better liar than his father (RAJANARAYANAN 1991, 88–89).

The next two stories are functional equivalents in that both concern people who rid themselves of unwelcome guests through use of a pestle, but otherwise the plots are very different. One story involves a wife who is unwilling to prepare a meal for a group of holy men invited by her husband. Telling them that they have come on the anniversary of her mother's death, she explains that the mother died from delirium before the family could treat her by hitting her head with a pestle, as their country doctor had prescribed (note the Indian version of electric-shock therapy). Ever since on the anniversary of her death the family had pacified her spirit by inviting holy men to dinner and beating their heads. The holy men take to their heels. The wife then explains to her husband that they left in anger because they had asked for the pestle and she would not give it to them, the pestle being an heirloom. Anxious to please the holy men, the husband hurries after them, pestle in hand. When they see him coming they run all the faster (RAJANARAYANAN 1984, 112–16).

The following pestle story, though a functional equivalent of the one above, shows that no motif is restricted to a particular context. The story consists of three parts. In the first part the tale's unwelcome guest is introduced—a son-in-law who repeatedly visits his father-in-law, a farmer, expecting to receive gifts. In the second part the farmer's only son falls seriously ill but is cured by the herbal remedies of an exorcist. The members of the family, impressed by the exorcist's success, put complete trust in him, and thus follow his advice to change their names so that they cannot be recognized by the person who caused the son's disease by casting the evil eye. Henceforth the farmer is to be called "Plantain," his wife "Sweet Pudding" (*pāyasam*), the baby "Rope," the cow "Guest," and the dog "Bind Up."

In the third part of the story, which takes place after the family has become accustomed to their new names, the son-in-law pays an unexpected

visit. His brother-in-law tells him that Plantain (the farmer) and Sweet Pudding (the mother-in-law) will soon arrive. The son-in-law, ignorant of the situation, wonders how the family could have known of his visit and thus prepared such delicacies for him. The farmer then arrives, shouting to his son to tie the Guest (the cow) and grab the Rope (the crying baby), after which he calls out "Bind Up!" (the dog's name). The son-in-law flees in fright, thinking that his father-in-law intends to beat him for abusing his generosity. The farmer does not understand the reason for his son-in-law's sudden departure, but his wife offers an explanation, suggesting that he might have been offended because they had yet to give him the pestle they had promised as part of the dowry. The farmer grabs the pestle and chases after his son-in-law, but the son-in-law only runs faster (RAJANARAYANAN 1992, 101–105).

The motif of the miser also occurs in tales that are functionally equivalent but with rather different plots, such as those involving stinginess competitions between misers. In one story of this type a miser, instead of eating the rice flour contained in a bundle, dips the bundle in water and then drinks the water in which some of the flour has dissolved. He is defeated by another miser, who drinks the water on which the shadow of a bundle of rice flour has fallen (LENA TAMILVANAN 1986, 38–41). This particular competition is framed as a family story, in which a stingy father is seeking a stingy husband for his daughter.

In another story about a stinginess competition a triple hierarchical distinction is made. The king wants to find out who among three known misers is the stingiest. The first miser sprinkles ghee on his guests' rice with a blade of grass instead of with the usual small spoon. He is outdone by the next miser, who shows his guests the ghee but does not pour it; he in turn is bested by the third miser, who simply announces that ghee has been served without even showing it (RAJANARAYANAN and SELVARAJ 1993, 250–51).

The danger of taking the imaginary for the real, a motif seen above in several versions of the same story, also occurs in quite different but functionally equivalent stories. For example, a poor couple imagine that they have a cow that provides them with plenty of milk and curd. The wife talks of giving some of these imaginary products to her brother's children, to which the husband objects. When she insists, he beats her, inducing her to take refuge with her brother. The brother then tells his violent brother-in-law that the milch cow has eaten the grass in his own (also imaginary) garden, thus bringing the man to his senses (MUTHIAH 1990, 222–23). In another version the two brothers-in-law come to blows. The village council decrees that since the husband beat his wife for nonexistent milk, and since the brother-in-law beat the husband for a nonexistent cow, the two actions are

equivalent and the case is settled (RAJANARAYANAN 1991, 21–27).

Scholars have coined the term *malapropism* for the ludicrous misuse or distortion of words. There are, however, other types of word misuse that the Tamil folk narrator likes to exploit. For instance, in one story a youth tells his friend, whom he is taking to see his prospective bride (a preliminary to marriage), to reply “plenty of” to the questions asked by his future in-laws. The girl’s father is delighted when he hears that there is “plenty of” land, jewelry, and other such things, but not when the friend replies “plenty of” to a question about the suitor’s debts (MUTHIAH 1990, 22–23).

In an otherwise completely different story, the seemingly appropriate adaptation of an expression of commiseration leads to the humorous misuse of words. A village headman’s dull younger brother wishes to take over his elder brother’s job, believing it to be easier than farming. Having heard his brother console a man whose mother had died by saying she had been a mother to the whole village, the substitute headman attempts to comfort a bereaved husband by telling him that his deceased spouse had been a wife to the entire village. Severely beaten, he no longer desires his elder brother’s job (SAHEB MARAIKKAYAR 1985, 37; LENA TAMILVANAN 1986, 269–71).

SAME MOTIFS IN DIFFERENT STORIES

The stories in the preceding section demonstrate that quite different stories may convey the same didactic or other meaning. Such functional equivalents seemingly confirm Levi-Strauss’s claim that all stories in a myth cycle have the same underlying meaning. Of course, claims that quite different tales are transformations of one another, or that stories have underlying meanings different from their surface meanings, are completely unfalsifiable and thus should not be seriously proposed. However, the existence of functionally equivalent stories composed of different motifs is clearly incompatible with the conviction of certain folklorists that it is possible to reconstruct the original story on the basis of motifs. I will now turn to examples in which the same motifs crop up in very different stories. These stories may be understood as forming a polythetic network of associated ideas.

The popular food motif, for instance, is central to stories about cravings for a particular type of food during pregnancy and at other times. It also forms the nucleus of stories about husbands and wives competing for a certain item of food. An obstinate desire for food connects these stories to stories about stubborn misers and equally stubborn beggars. The motif of being taken alive to the burning ground and being actually or nearly burnt to death fits nicely into both narrative contexts.

Although the craving for a certain item of food in the stories above was usually connected with bad conjugal relations, this is not necessarily so. A

story starting with the husband's desire for *atiracam* (a sweet) involves very different motifs and has a quite different didactic purpose. A poor Brahmin wishes to eat *atiracam*, so his wife unhesitatingly gives him her *tāli* (golden marriage badge) to pay for it. He gives the *tāli* to another Brahmin woman (apparently a good cook) and asks her to prepare the dish. Having done so, the woman divides the sweets among herself, her client, and her lover. At that moment her husband returns. The client and the lover hide in the loft of the house. Someone hiccups, and they cry out that they are thirsty. The naive husband questions his wife about the reason for the commotion. The clever wife replies that what he hears are his ancestors' voices, and that he should cut two limes and throw them up in the air. This he does. When the two men in the loft start quarreling about the limes, the wife explains to her husband that it is his ancestors who are quarreling, and that he should go to the tank and take a ritual bath in order to pacify their souls. As soon as the husband is gone the lover leaves the house. The Brahmin client threatens to tell the woman's husband about the lover if she does not give back the *tāli*. She willingly gives it back, and even reproaches him for having brought it in the first place. The husband returns the *tāli* to his wife and gives her the rest of the sweets, making her happy (RAJANARAYANAN and SELVARAJ 1993, 150–51).

The food motif in this story simply serves to frame a story about a whole gamut of conjugal relations: the wifely devotion of the *pattini* who gives even her *tāli* so that her husband may satisfy his whim, the irresponsibility of the husband who does not hesitate to exchange his wife's sacred *tāli* for some food, and, worst of all, the adultery of the second wife. The female adultery in this story is mentally tied to the male adultery that became apparent at the burning ground in the earlier story about the late-sleeping couple. From the sexual motif of adultery strands connect to many stories about marriage and eroticism, as we shall see below. Furthermore, the food motif is linked to the stories about getting rid of unwelcome guests, stories that do without competition but that share the use of the pestle as a plot device.

One pestle story inserts the motif of deceiving people with the help of religious beliefs and rites (the memorial service). This motif may lead back to two of the stories about craving a certain food: the one in which the husband obtains blackgram by rolling on the ground seemingly in honor of Govinda (Kṛṣṇa), and the one in which the Brahmin client and the lover hide on a loft. Use of the loft as a hiding place may lead to the story about the obstinate miser defeated by the unwelcome but persistent guest.

The motif of deceit through the help of religious belief is tied to folk interpretations of transcendental religion (folk nondualism) and to beliefs in various kinds of supernatural beings. Among the tales that utilize these ideas

are the two versions of the story about a woman outwitting a workaholic, man-eating demon that were presented above, as well as several stories about bathing heavenly maidens, stories that I now wish to introduce.

One of the stories uses the common cross-cultural prohibition against seeing a supernatural being, particularly a naked goddess, and thus differs from the Kṛṣṇa myth, in which the god is the voyeur and human women are the victims. The story is particularly suitable for showing that even well-known pan-Indian motifs are not necessarily static. Although the existence of similar stories elsewhere need not be attributed to diffusion, in India it is likely that the Kṛṣṇa myth and the folk story influenced each other, although the direction of this influence cannot be ascertained. In the story there is a lake that never dries up, even during the most severe droughts. The king learns that this is because a heavenly maiden likes to bathe there. He secretly watches her, then steals her clothes. The heavenly maiden immediately disappears, along with the water in the lake. Only after the king has made amends does the water return, but not the heavenly maiden. Instead she causes beautiful aquatic flowers grow in the lake (RAJANARAYANAN 1992, 95–100).

The notion that it is sacrilegious to see the divine stands to reason in magico-religious terms, yet the notion can be turned around. This inverted motif is found in another folk story that is composed of a complete jumble of motifs. So far I have given instances of identical motifs used in different stories, stories that may not have been equally well told but that nevertheless show some kind of logical organization. However, there also exist stories into which the narrator crams a kaleidoscope of folklore motifs without much rhyme or reason. In the tale in question not only do we find the inverted motif mentioned above, but also such common motifs as a marriage test, a search for an unfading flower, an animal born of a woman, magical advice obtained from sages, triple magical objects, successful trickery on the hero's part, a voyage across seven seas, a prohibition on looking back, a flying carpet, and the hero's marriage to a princess. The inverted bathing motif occurs when a sage advises the hero to steal the clothes of the youngest among seven bathing virgins. The virgin, attempting to retrieve her clothes, runs after the hero shouting, "Look at my beauty!" The hero, who does not look back, eventually returns her clothes on the condition that she give him the unfading flower he needs (RAJANARAYANAN and SELVARAJ 1993, 52–54).

The erotic bathing motif is mentally tied to other motifs relating to sex, not only the motif of adultery but also that of polygynous marriage. In one story a prince passes his wedding night in a rather uncomfortable position, with the wife on the upper floor pulling his neck and the wife on the lower floor pulling his legs. In the morning the prince decrees that a thief, instead of being executed, must marry the two princesses (RAJANARAYANAN 1984,

64–67). In this story, which also utilizes the motif of obstinate competition, the husband has a narrow escape. In another story involving polygyny he ends up bald, since his younger wife plucks out his white hairs and his older wife his black hairs (RAJANARAYANAN 1984, 49–50).

Obstinate sexual competition between co-wives can also be expressed through the motif of absurd division, of the type we saw in the earlier story about the cow being divided, front and back, between the two brothers (or in another tale about the four legs of a cat jointly owned by four merchants [CLAYTON 1948, 56–58]). In one story jealous co-wives divide between themselves the care of their husband's legs. They not only try to pull their husband to them as in the preceding story but also injure his legs so he cannot go to the rival. Thanks to their "kind" attentions the husband finally dies (RAJANARAYANAN 1991, 123–25). This erotic theme, considerably toned down but also involving injury to the limbs, may inform the story of the blind beggar on his platform who imagines himself approaching his reluctant bride.

Although several of the stories we have seen illustrate the danger of living by illusion, in other stories illusion is used intentionally, as in the case of the miser who offers his guest the word "ghee" instead of the real thing. This emphasis on the word links numerous stories in which language plays a central part, such as those involving misused words and double meanings. One form of double meaning we saw resulted from a change of names, and since this strategy was of unintentional help in driving off an importune guest it may lead back to the initial food motif.

In proposing that Tamil folk stories form a polythetic network of associated ideas I do not mean, of course, that they were created in a certain order or that the interstory links are necessarily the ones I have suggested. Still, such associations have certainly operated in every narrator's mind.

DISCUSSION

I hope that the evidence presented above has convinced the reader that there exists a crisscross of overlapping similarities among Tamil folk stories. These similarities form a family resemblance in Wittgenstein's nongenetic sense, in which the various motifs are multiply arranged. Thus Tamil folk stories and folk narrative in general should be seen to form a polythetic network that excludes any constancy of structure, meaning, and sequence of function. It also excludes the possibility of reconstructing the original form of a tale. Even though it may, for example, make more sense for a son-in-law to desire a pestle than for holy men to, there is no good reason to assume that the son-in-law story precedes that of the holy men. Both wife-takers and religious mendicants may abuse their socially acknowledged right to receive gifts, and

may thus be mocked.

When our prehistoric ancestors started to speak it was probably not long before they started telling stories. However, just as human evolution—even if it occurred in one area—was certainly not limited to a single individual, so potential story-tellers must have been numerous and their creations mutually interactive from the very beginning.

The belief shared by many folklorists that one can trace the original form of a story undoubtedly owes much to linguists' attempts to reconstruct protolanguages. Such reconstructions are to some extent justified, of course—since certain linguistic changes can be historically documented, it is tempting to project similar changes further into the past. Such reconstructions, however, are based on the premise that languages develop in isolation, with little influence by neighboring and substratum languages, a supposition that is quite unlikely. With regard to Proto-Indo-European, SCHMIDT suggested long ago that it may actually have been a collection of dialects rather than a monolithic language (1872), which would render its reconstruction even more hazardous.

Furthermore, analogies between language and narrative are quite tenuous.⁹ A language may serve as the identity badge of a community, but not a tale. The Indian linguistic states could not be narrative states, although certain tales or motifs may be more common in one area than in another.¹⁰

As I have pointed out elsewhere (EICHINGER FERRO-LUZZI 1987), the belief in constants and essences is based on a mental proclivity with a long philosophical history. This mental proclivity and prestigious philosophical background, however, do not make the belief true. Both science and philosophy have progressed from theories of simplicity and essence to theories of complexity, probability, and various forms of chaos or indeterminacy. The polythetic notion is an expression of this new awareness. Applied to Tamil folk stories, this means that no story has either a stable plot or stable boundaries, and that any motif may be combined with any other motif (although not every combination is equally probable). Some combinations make a better story than others and some motifs are more common than others. The fact that certain motifs occur more frequently does not imply that these must have been present in an original story, but rather that they enjoy great favor either cross-culturally or within a given culture.

For instance, the emphasis on food in Tamil folk stories does not surprise the Indianist, who knows the extraordinary importance of food in Indian culture: in social life, religion, medicine, humor, and even modern Tamil literature (EICHINGER FERRO-LUZZI 1995, 189). And in light of the high value placed on generosity in India, mocking the miser stands to reason.

Tests belong to the folklore of the world and contests occur cross-

culturally as well, but the stress on competition seems typical of Indian culture. Even Hindu gods engage in wagers. Competitions establish hierarchies, and a concern with making hierarchical distinctions, although not exclusive to India, is probably stronger there than in the West. Examinations to discover who is cleverest are part and parcel of any competitive society, but competitions to determine who is the greatest fool (EICHINGER FERRO-LUZZI 1992, 153–54), or who is the greatest miser, may be uniquely Indian.

Interest in language is another typically Indian characteristic apparent in serious and humorous fields. Wordplay (Skr. *śleṣa*, Ta. *cilētai*) has been developed into an art by the Indian pandit. The joy of creating learned double meanings and other language-related humor may have filtered down to the popular level, resulting in stories based on word misuse and other linguistic misapplications, but it may also have worked the other way around, with the pandits upgrading the sort of double meanings apparent in, for instance, orally transmitted riddles (KAPP 1994, 125–49).

The religious bent of the Indian population is too well known to need mentioning here, but the pragmatic use of religion in folk stories (especially those of a humorous nature) may be less well known. This use, sometimes for the egoistic purpose of deceiving one's fellow men, does not imply skepticism toward religion on the part of the people. It is rather a form of the nonblasphemous joking on religious matters that I have discussed elsewhere (EICHINGER FERRO-LUZZI 1992, 120–35).

Certain recurrent motifs in Tamil folk stories, such as named food items, the pestle, and the loft, are specific to Tamil material culture; others, like the burning ground, have great ritual importance. The revelation of one's state of mind through singing is not something invented by the folk narrator—it is rather a reflection of the institutionalized singing seen in real-life situations. More or less stylized funeral laments may, but need not, express the singer's true state of mind. However, there also exist crying songs in which low-caste women voice their genuine sorrow. Grief may also be expressed in a singing voice by persons in trance, when under an exorcist's influence. My claim that Tamil folk stories and other collective narratives have no constant structure and meaning (as structuralists hold they do) nor any demonstrable original form (as some folklorists believe they do) is not intended to discourage scholars from studying them. The polythetic approach offers a new perspective, one that would seem to capture the richness of the popular imagination without forcing it into a straitjacket of preconceptions. Folk stories are a mine of information on a people's culture, values, and mental proclivities. However, over and above their academic use, these stories are for giving pleasure, to the average listener no less than to the native and foreign scholar.

NOTES

1. See my monograph on this writer (EICHINGER FERRO-LUZZI 1996).
2. By "collective tales" I mean orally transmitted tales. Since the retellers are likely to make some intentional or unintentional changes, the tales are the creation of many authors.
3. There is a patent overlap between myth, legend, and other forms of folk narrative, so that it is impossible to claim any type of structural peculiarity for the myth.
4. Rodney NEEDHAM introduced the polythetic notion into anthropology (1972). He has continued to apply it in his later work.
5. I intentionally avoid speaking of magical or symbolic numbers, since numbers have first to be favored before it is possible to put them into a magical context or give them a symbolic meaning (see EICHINGER FERRO-LUZZI 1987, 148–81).
6. Note the caste distinction between the two narrators, which in this case corresponds to a racial distinction. The queen has long straight hair, while the lower-caste landlord's wife has curly hair.
7. By prototypical feature I understand a particularly frequent and sometimes also prestigious feature that reduces the vagueness of the polythetic concept without, however, rendering it essentially definable.
8. The fact that the two words rhyme is probably the reason why they have become a pair. Rhyme, in fact, is among the few cases where language may indeed influence thought in Whorf's sense.
9. For the inadequacy of analogies between grammar and narrative structure, see EICHINGER FERRO-LUZZI 1987 (xx–vxi).
10. For instance, the female discoverer of an idol in Kerala *sthala purāṇas* (temple legends).

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