The trickster in Assamese Folktales

ANIL BORO
Lecturer, Department of Folklore Research, Guwahati University, Guwahati.

The trickster figure in folk narratives all over the world is a tricky, skillful and resourceful character, often full of contradictions and ambivalence. A rogue and a clever deceiver, he can outwit and outplay his adversaries by virtue of his wit and presence of mind. The tricksters of Assamese folktales, unlike the trickster of, say, Native American tales and myths, isn’t a culture hero. The Assamese trickster is not responsible for creating conditions that allow for the civilization of human society.

The Assamese word for trickster is Tenton or Teton, literally meaning “the clever one.” In his pioneering work on the tales of Assam, Praphulladatta Goswami has included four trickster tales along with other versions and parallels amongst other ethnic communities of the region and other central Indian tribes.

The trickster is very often out of his home for his apparent foolhardiness. This feature is seen in many of the trickster figures of this region. In one such tale, he meets some thieves who ask him to enter a house and throw out the valuables to them. He beats on a drum instead and the householder gets up and apprehends him as the others flee. As he is being taken to court, he finds a man cry out at an unruly bullock, “Would someone kill it with but one stroke?” Tenton deals the animal a fatal blow and sends it to its death. So the man follows him to court. As they go on, a woman is seen selling bananas to the following strain,

Give me a paise
Take a bunch,
Then go away, a kick on my breast.

Tenton drops a paise, takes a bunch of bananas and gives her a kick. She also follows him to court. At the court he explains his action thus: “Does a thief beat on a drum in the home he has entered? I but looked for something to eat.” The King’s minister observes here: “His words are worth a thousand rupees”. He goes on, “I did what that man had asked me to do: I slew the bullock with but one stroke”. The minister again observed that “His words are worth a thousand rupees”. He concludes by declaring: “I paid exactly what the woman had asked for her bananas”. The minister reiterated that “His words are worth a lakh of rupees”.

The King acquires Tenton. After a few days Tenton comes to the court and claims a hundred and a thousand and a lakh rupees from the minister, for as he declared, “A word is a word”. The King forces the minister to make good the claims. With the money, the lad persuades the minister’s daughter Champa to bathe and feed him. He leaves his money with Champa and asks the King: “Who bathes whom? Who places a seat for whom? Who feeds whom with her own hands?” The King answers: “Why a wife does these things for her husband?” Then the lad Tenton tells the King that Champa has done these things for him. Despite the opposition of the irate minister, the King allows the lad to marry Champa and makes him an officer [Goswami: 1970]. Thus the trickster gains in two ways. He marries the minister’s daughter and becomes the minister of the King. In the initial stage of the narrative he appears not to be very clever, but the way he responds subsequently establish him as a trickster.

In another Trickster tale entitled “Tenton”, the trickster hero follows the same initial move. He is taken to task by his father and is turned out of home for no fault of his own. His father wanted the son to extort some more money from the moneylender who came in his absence. Out of home, the lad finds a man ploughing the paddy field under the midday sun. He shows sympathy for the ploughman for his hard work with old bullocks. The man tells that he has laid by a score of rupees for a new bullock. The lad feints thirst and tries to scoop some water from the muddy field. The man sends him to his house nearby. Tenton goes and asks the man’s wife to hand over the score of rupees as her husband has secured a new bullock. The woman is suspicious and he calls out to the ploughman, “She won’t give”. The ploughman shouts back: “Hei! Why don’t you give?”, thinking that she is denying the thirsty lad water. The woman hands over the money and Tenton makes good his escape. He buys a goat and stays the night at a stranger’s. The host offers him clothes for it is winter. He shows sympathy for the ploughman for his hard work with old bullocks. The man tells that he has laid by a score of rupees for a new bullock. The woman is suspicious and he calls out to the ploughman, “She won’t give”. The ploughman shouts back: “Hei! Why don’t you give?”, thinking that she is denying the thirsty lad water. The woman hands over the money and Tenton makes good his escape. He buys a goat and stays the night at a stranger’s. The host offers him clothes for it is winter. He says that the goat will eat up the cold and he does not require any cloth. He sleeps on some hay and from time to time calls out: “Goat, eat up the cold.” Next morning the host exchanges the goat for a horse. Tenton rides away. He sees a boy at a sweetshop, tells him that his name is Fly and starts eating the sweets. The boy shouts to his father who is inside: “Father, Fly is eating the sweets.” “Oh, let it.” says the father. So Tenton eats as much as he can. From there he reaches a rich man’s house at evening. He halts there. Next morning he stirs up the dung of his horse. His kind host says, “You need not throw it out, my son will do that”. Tenton says that he only looking for coins for the horse excretes rupees and he picked up a few coins. The host buys the horse at a high price. Tenton returns home with all the money and his father takes him back. The clever younger
brother deceiving his foolish elder brother is the theme of the trickster tale entitled “Ajala and Tenton”.

There are parallels of these narratives among the ethnic communities of the region and the State. The motif of robbing the ploughman is found in the Mising Trickster tale. Besides the ethnic communities of Assam like the Bodos, Karbis, Mising, the ethnic communities of Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya have their trickster figures akin to the Assamese trickster figure. In tales like this, the foolish elder brother comes to his senses under the influence of his neighbours and shows maturity and outwits his clever younger brother. The tale has an exact parallel, as Goswami explained, among the Meches [Bodos] of western Assam and the Meiteis of Manipur. Even the Chinese have a trickster tale with the same motif. But in the Chinese version the elder brother is cleverer than the younger brother.

The trickster tale is very popular amongst both the literate and non-literate society. The clever tricks of the hero provide entertainment to the listeners.

Trickster heroes like the Brahmin’s servant are well known for their witty tricks and tirades against high caste people. In Assamese society, casteism was never as prominent and cruel as in the rest of India. But this did not mean that casteism did not exist at all in this part of India. A review of available literature in the early twentieth and late nineteenth century reveals this. It is probably for this reason that the so-called tribal and low caste people cut jokes at the expense of the high caste people, if not in real life, in popular folktales which have the function of “role reversal” as well as “escape mechanism”.

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Notes on Assamese Place-Lore¹
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ÚLO VALK
Chair, Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, University of Tartu, Estonia

During the last decades a new concept, “place-lore” (Est. kohapärimus), has been added to Estonian folkloristics to denote local legends (muistend), beliefs and descriptions of customs that are connected with places, and oral histories, memories and other genres concerning places and toponymes (Remmel 2001, 21). Place-lore is not a distinctive folklore genre; it is not an analytical concept but a synthetic device to study various genres in their connection with environment. According to Mall Hiimäe, place-lore focuses on natural and cultural surroundings, such as hills, valleys, forests, wetlands, lakes, rivers, fields, stones, old trees, graveyards, chapels, churches and other objects. The very existence of these places in the neighbourhood supports the tradition memory of the local people (Hiimäe 2007, 364, 370), who share their narratives, beliefs and customs with the younger generations, newcomers and visitors.

Research in place-lore is among the emerging trends in contemporary international folkloristics. Cristina Bachelega’s inspiring monograph is dedicated to the production of legendary Hawai’i in the tourist industry and connections between local narratives and the environment (2007). She makes a clear distinction between geographical locations in the landscape and places. The beauty of the landscape can be admired by outsiders, who know nothing about the places as “emotionally, narratively, and historically layered experience” (Bachelega 2007, 35). Place is a location that evokes feelings and memories and is bound to