

# Asian Oral Literature in Kenya's School Curricula

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## **Abstract**

*The Asian oral literature taught in Kenya's schools is purely Indian oral literature. They are both historical-religious collections based on India's various religious civilizations and modern legends about the experiences of building the Kenya-Uganda Railways from Mombasa, Kenya, at the turn of 20<sup>th</sup> century. This paper was presented on the occasion of the "India-East Africa Relations: Shifting Terrains of Engagement" seminar organized by the Department of Geography, University of Cambridge, UK, at the British Institute in Eastern Africa, Nairobi, 27-28 April 2009. It draws heavily from an analysis of "Oral Literature of the Asians in East Africa" (2002) by Mubina Hassanali Kirmani and Sanaullah Kirmani. The book details style and performance of oral narratives, riddles, proverbs, and songs. The discussions are supported by research in African oral literature. The study concludes that Indian oral literature in East Africa manifest differences and similarities with African oral literature in language and style, and thematic concerns.*

**Key words:** Asia, East Africa, India, Kenya, Oral Literature, Style, Theme

## **Introduction**

There is a long history of Indian tradition in East Africa through commerce dating way back to AD 801 (Walji). Equally, the contribution of Indians in East African history is also recorded in the perils of building Kenya-Uganda Railway from 1896, especially the menace of the man-eating lions of Tsavo at the Kenya's coast (Patterson) and crossing the roughness of the Indian Ocean for several months under cramped conditions (Salvadori).

In the available collections of Indian oral literature in Kenya's school curricula, the oral literature genre pieces are sample collections, not necessarily a reflection of the oral traditions taught in India's schools or of everyday performances in India. For example, use of animals such as monkeys and bears to tell stories in the streets and use of puppet theatres have not found currency in East Africa (Kirmani and Kirmani 17). To a larger extent, Indian oral literature in East Africa manifests the elite status and locale particularity of the Indian immigrants in East Africa.

The style and performance of Indian oral literature in East Africa and the social settings of their stories follow after an urban life where stories are told after school or work, and after a meal, preferably for a very short period of time, with children gathering around an older relation. The audience, children, usually interject the narrators like in the African oral narrations; however, for the myths and legends that manifest religious themes, they are usually told in places of worship. The audience only listen to the preachers (Kirmani and Kirmani).

## **Stylistic and Thematic Relevance**

The themes of the Indian myths revolve around religious teachings and truth, especially in the world of Hindu civilization. In the story “The Beginning of Life in This World” (Kirmani and Kimani 23-24) Manu is rewarded for his kindness of rescuing a small fish that kept growing bigger and bigger troubling him until he released it into the ocean. Soon God punishes people by releasing flood, the fish which identifies itself as the God Vishnu, the preserver, advises Manu to build an ark. The same theme runs in the stories of the God Ganesh in “The Creation of Ganesh, the God with an Elephant Head” (24-25) and “Why the Moon Appears and Disappears” (25-26).

Unlike the African legends built around historical figures or rulers, or those charged with certain magical responsibilities (Finnegan, Okpewho), the Indian legends in addition have purely religious personages. In “The Story of Ram” (Kirmani and Kimani 27-28), the king has designated his first wife’s son to inherit the throne as custom dictates; however, he had also promised his third wife that he would grant her all her wishes. Then she asks the king to banish Ram from the kingdom and let her son Bharat to inherit the throne. The wish is granted. In “Lord Krishna and the Serpent King” (29-30), Lord Krishna (at the River Yamuna) helps the community to kill the Serpent King who used to swallow or enable the disappearance of people and live possessions from the village; “The Legend of Love” (30-32) details the story of Taj Mahal monument which was built to demonstrate love for a woman. On the contrary, the African stories and legends, to a larger extent, demonstrate military prowess.

In addition, there is co-existence of humans and the wild in Indian animal stories. However, in African stories, there is manifest tension between them (Bukonya et al, Okombo and Nandwa). These harmonious and cordial interactions between humans and nature set the African stories apart. The characters of Indian stories also shoulder religious roles and traits. In “The Beasts who Boasted” (Kirmani and Kirmani 34-35), the unique features of the beasts make them easy prey to the humans; for example, the elephants are hunted for ivory, the lion for its skin, the fox for its fur, and the peacock for its feathers. And the religious lesson given is that whatever you boast of is your downfall. “The Clever Jackal” (35-36) is a clear trickster story common in African fables. The jackals test the bravery of the lion by making it look foolish. They do not run away from the King Lion who is surprised when confronted by the jackals to help them deal with an even bigger lion they had spotted somewhere. The King Lion is led to confront its reflection on a pool of water down a cliff. The lion furiously frowns and jumps at its reflection, drowning to death.

In “The World is Falling Apart” (36-37) which is a story of foolishness, a monkey up a coconut tree drops down some coconut scaring a rabbit that was resting at the foot of the tree. The rabbit thought that the world was falling apart and kept running away aimlessly scaring other beasts that included the hare, antelope, giraffe, zebra, fox, deer and the lion who stopped them in the run and dared ask them who said that the world was falling apart. But all of the beasts denied any knowledge, making the rabbit hide in a burrow out of shame. In “The Monkey and Hotchpotch” (37-38) a fisherman who owned a monkey and a goat would

tie them around their necks before leaving for fishing, as he also prepared and left his hotchpotch meal. As the fisherman leaves the homestead, the monkey unties the rope and feeds on the hotchpotch meal, and smears a little on the mouth of the goat to make it a suspect; then ties the rope around its neck before the fisherman returns home. It went on like that for several days until the fisherman decided to hide around the homestead and find out what was happening. Once he discovered, he beat the monkey and began tying the rope around its stomach. Such a story of cordial and friendly interactions between humans and primates in African stories is rare. There is usually some conflict between them over crops in the field or domestic game. Similarly, in the story “How the Monkey Got a Red Bottom” (39) a family decide to punish a monkey residing around their village for eating their ripe fruits in the farm by inviting it for lunch. They conspired to let the monkey sit on a heated pan.

Tales of fate is another category of Indian stories that miss in African oral literature (Kiiru). There is the tug of war between fate and effort, with bated eagerness to find out which one wins. In the story “Struggle Versus Fate” (Kirmani and Kirmani 40-41), a poor man was aided to improve his material condition by being offered some business capital, however it was only fate brought about by pearls found in a fish that was given to him as a form of gratitude for lending a piece of iron in his possession to a fisherman that saved him. In “An Offering” a fortune teller prophesied that Zaffar would die immediately after his wedding. However, in the streets Zaffar assists a poor person who then saves him.

The classification of Indian stories as moral stories is in stark contrast to African oral stories where moral lessons are embedded in every story (Vansina). In “The Monkey and the Crocodile” (Kirmani and Kirmani 43-44), out of greed a monkey on one berry tree at the bank of a river sees ripe and better berries on a similar tree at the opposite bank. It asks the crocodile to carry it across, which request is granted. However, in the middle of the river the crocodile asks for the monkey’s heart. The monkey replies it that it does not carry its heart but leaves at the top of the tree. Then it requests the crocodile to return it to the bank in order to procure the heart. The crocodile foolishly agrees. “A Kingly Gesture” (44-45) is about asylum seekers from Persia who were nearly rejected by the king on his orders to fill a glass with milk, but the asylum seekers dissolve a lot of sugar into it without the milk pouring down to demonstrate that they would not be a trouble to the kingdom. In “Digging for Wealth” (45-46), a dying father said to his sons that he had hidden some wealth in their piece of land and asked them to dig for it. One of the sons dug the land quickly, did not spot the wealth, felt angry then left for the city to earn a living. The other son cultivated some crops on the land and reaped the wealth.

The other category of Indian stories is the stories of wisdom and wit where characters test each other’s ability to respond to issues. In African oral literature, such stories are virtually non-existent (Finnegan). In “Counting Bangles” (Kirmani and Kirmani 48), Birbal was asked, “Bribal, since you see your wife every day, how many bangles does she wear on her hands altogether?” Birbal replied, “Your majesty, she has the same number of bangles as one eight the amount of hair in your beard. And since you touch your beard every day, you must already know the answer.” In “The Blind and the Sighted” (49), Birbal was digging a hole in the courtyard then asked his assistant to record the names of those who saw what he was

digging, yet managed to ask what he was doing. He wanted to prove the number of those who were blind, who, apparently, included the king.

In “The Cleverest Merchants” (49-50) Birbal is asked who the cleverest people in the kingdom are. He replies that they are the merchants. Some form of a well-known grain *Moong Dal* is handed to the merchants and asked to state its name. They dodge the answer until they reply that the answer is the one stated by the emperor. Finally, in “The True Owner of the Bag of Coins” (51), an oil merchant left his bag of coins at the grocer’s shop. The grocer’s proprietor claimed it. The case was brought before Birbal who resolved by emptying the coins into a pan full of hot water, which dissolved some oil in the coins, confirming the bag to belong to the oil merchant.

The role and form of Indian riddles resemble the African riddles except that they lack clear-cut opening and closing formulas (Chimombo, Lo Liyong). In addition, while African riddles are part of children’s games, Indian riddles are told among both adults and children and are at times delineated chronologically based on the various kingdoms in their history. The natural environment setting of Indian riddles differ from the African ones. Rice paddies are a common feature in Indian riddles.

There is a category of Indian riddles called “Wisdom Riddles” which require logical resolutions and is not common in African riddles. For example, “Crossing the River” (Kirmani and Kirmani 59):

Once there was a man with a lion, a goat and some grass. The man needed to cross the river. His boat was too small and could hold only him and one other thing. How could he carry the lion, goat, and grass so that the lion would not eat the goat and the goat would not eat the grass?

The solution was given thus:

He could take the goat over and go back alone. Then take the lion over and then bring the goat back. Then take the grass over and leave with the lion and come back alone. And in the final trip, take the goat over. (61)

Indian proverbs bear some similarity with African proverbs. They are told by older generation to inspire certain attitudes by way of symbolism and imagery. However, proverbs about money and wealth (68-69) are, to a larger extent, not common in African oral literature. For example, “money saved is money earned” or “A losing gambler risks double”.

The classification of Indian songs follows after the African ones. The performance of the songs is with interludes of music and dance. Their classification is also similar. They include lullabies, children’s songs, play songs, love songs, marriage songs, work songs, dance songs, or songs of death (dirges). However, their songs bear some religious fervour such as “Craving for a Child” (78-79) sung by a woman asking God to bless her with a child. There is a category of the songs called *Fatan* (90-93) that are quite contemporary and are sung with fun and humour to console a family for losing their daughter through marriage. For example, “My Daughter is Gone” (92):

Early in the morning the mother sweeps the threshold,  
Sweeping the searches for the foot-marks of her daughter.  
O, my daughter! In vain do I search for your footprints,  
How can they remain in the dust so long?  
They are not there, my sweet daughter,  
They are all rubbed off, my daughter.

Songs of separation detail the trials and tribulations of families across the Indian Ocean as a result of the rush for a future in East by the Indian immigrants. For example, “Sad and Pale” (96):

After a lapse of twelve long years  
Your beloved has come home,  
And you seem so sad and pale, my love.

I sailed the seas for twelve long years,  
And brought precious ornaments for you;  
Yet you seem so sad and pale, my love.

This category of songs are read together with the songs of the sea (*abavani* songs) (101) sung with rhythmic monotony to inspire sailors to captain ships through the perils of the sea (Indian Ocean).

## **Conclusion**

The analysis of Indian oral literature in East Africa has demonstrated both differences and similarities with the African oral literature in both style and thematic concerns. Their stories and riddles lack clear opening and closing formulas, and, in most part, carry religious themes and lessons. Sometimes there are some leads to indicate the beginning of a story, but are not rigidly enforced. However, they manifest other elements of narration such as structured plot, humour and suspense, or repetitions. Figures of speech are utilized more and more in the process of narrations. In addition, the stories have all sorts of characters: human, animal, gods and demons. The latter are rare in African stories, unless they are equated with ogres or monsters. African legends unlike Indian ones demonstrate military prowess. Finally, Indian proverbs and songs bear some semblance of modern life with money and explicit expression of love featuring.

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