
UNIT 1 ETIOLOGICAL TALES: DEFINITIONS

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1.1 OBJECTIVE

After reading this Unit you will be able to:

- understand the definition of etiological tales;
- comprehend the different features of etiological tales; and
- realize the historical, social, religious, and cultural values propagated in them.

1.2 INTRODUCTION

The word etiology is an explanation of how things came to be or the way they are or were at a given time and condition. It can be seen in the stories of creation, the origin of man and the development and growth of plants and animals. This word etiology is taken from Late Latin and Greek word *aetiologia* meaning “cause description” or the explanations of occurrences in the world. It has also been used in a number of other fields like medicine when the causes of certain diseases are referred to.

In the study of folklore, the term etiology is applied to the accounts of incidences in narrative form. To these definitions belong belief tales, folktales, myths and legends. Any narrative or story belongs to several kinds of definitions or genres. It also depends highly on the intention of the narrator or the story’s function is very important. Hence, a traditional account of how things happen and how a thing originated is taken extremely seriously by both the narrator and the listener.

We can broadly define etiological tales as being religious-sacred or mythological and historical that includes legends, history and historical anecdotes. The narratives could largely be didactic having a high moralistic flavor. Stith Thompson has classified the bulk of the etiological themes as mythological. Some of the common motifs that occur in the etiological tales are origin of the

creator, origin of the demigods, origin of particular places, origin of mental and moral characteristics, etc.

Some of the etiological tales may cross over to other tale types. Some of them are the animal tales, such as “why dogs chase hare” or “ why the sea is salty?” etc. We will now look at some broad definitions of etiological tales. As discussed earlier, etiological tales can be many such as beliefs, folktales, legends or myths. The next few sections will discuss them in detail.

Check your progress 1

Note: 1) Your answers should be about 30 words each;

2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of the Unit.

1) Define etiological tales.

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1.3 HISTORICAL THEMES IN ETIOLOGICAL TALES

Folklore primarily focuses on the collective memory or the recollection of a social group in historical times. It thus also deals with the collective memory of human actions and experiences and also tries to explain historical occurrences. We can say that etiological tales have strong historical connotations. Each geographical region has its own rich tradition. Etiological tales are often connected to the regional history about certain places. To a large extent it explains the cultural origins of any geographical area.

The etiological oral narratives reveal several major historical anecdotes and facts that get manifested in various forms of folklore like songs and dances. Kerala, a rich and diverse state of India has several such etiological tales that define many strong historical origins of the state. One such tale is that of Parasurama. This deals with the origin of Kerala. There are some major historical books such as Keralolpathi in Malyalam which talk about the coronation of the kings. We also understand through this text that Kerala extended from Kanyakumari to Gokarnam.

In the Keralolpathi, there are references to the origins of the performing ritualistic art Sanghakali. It is said that during the reign of the king Pallibana Perumal, a few Buddhists visited him and spoke of their principles. Believing them, he ordered his people to follow Buddhism. The Brahmins, hence, gathered in the Thrikkariyoor temple and discussed their problem of people turning towards another religion. A sage Maharshi Jangaman advised them to follow certain

ritualistic practices with the recitation of holy verses or mantras. They were asked to light a lamp, recite the mantra and go around a lamp.

When they did so for 41 days, there appeared six sages, Bhattacharya, Bhattabana, Bhattavijaya, Bhatta Mayoora, Bhatta Gopala and Bhatta Narayana. The Brahmins accompanied by these wise people went to the king and challenged the Buddhists for a debate. It is said that if the Brahmins or the sastris were defeated, they were ready for their tongues to be cut and themselves to be banished. If the Buddhists failed they were to endure the same. Thus in the debate, the Buddhists were vanquished. Since then the people began to believe that going around a lit oil lamp, reciting the mantra is propitious to overcome dangers. This legend thus attributes to the origin of Sanghakali.

We can also see that many folk words and proverbs have etiological origins that are based on some historical anecdotes. Language mirrors life and it projects the life, customs, likes and dislikes of the people. Many languages bear fact to this. For example, during the French revolution (1799) an instrument called guillotine was used to behead the criminals, the enemies of the revolution by the descending stroke of a heavy blade. This word is used in several of ways which means drastic rule or closure for shortening discussion. The Russian revolutionaries used the word intelligentsia in 1917 to denote the cultured and intellectual classes of the Russian society.

Similarly many English proverbs also have their roots in historical anecdotes. For example, the proverb “the die is cast” means an irrevocable step has been taken. This was uttered by Julius Caesar while he was crossing the River of Ruben. It was a law in the Roman Empire that a general would not be allowed to enter Rome after crossing the River of Ruben without the permission of the Senate. But the proud and stubborn Caesar broke the law and entered Rome through force. Caesar was thus appointed the consul for his whole life. These words of the general have thus become a proverb.

Many such instances can also be seen in our Indian languages. In Bengali the phrase, *mager mulluk* is used to explain a lawless country. From the end of the 16th century to the 17th century the notorious *Mag* murderers were very active in upper Assam and southern Bengal. They committed abduction, rape of women, plundering and murder without any hesitation or scruples. When Assam had no monarch the *Mags* of Burma invaded the country and tyrannized the people. This made the lawless condition of the country very miserable. The phrase *mager mulluk* hence originates from the *mag* invaders.

Similarly, we are also familiar with the Hindi word *kalapani* (meaning banishment) that has a historical explanation. The deep ocean was always out of bounds in the Hindu scriptures. If any one crossed the waters he had to expiate for his sins. Even in the early period of the nineteenth century, the Hindus had to atone for their sins if they went to England. The meaning of *Kalapani* was either crossing the seas or the banishment of the offender beyond the seas during the British regime.

Even certain kinds of folk foods have historical connotations. For instance, we can see this in the famous and popular dish Mughlai Parantha. This thin bread fried in clarified butter has its origin in the courts of the Mughals and this has become the symbol of luxurious cuisine.

The origin of several tribes also has strong etiological connotations. We can see this in the tribes of Nilgiris in India. The main tribes belonging to these regions are the Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas and Irulas. The Todas are pastoral people and they move in search of grazing land within the Nilgiri hills. Their life style is associated with mountains, rivers, forests and buffaloes. They believe that Toda people and their buffaloes were created by the god Ayan. Their gods of the mountains and rivers are said to reside on selected Nilgiri peaks. A legend says that Goddess Thekershi attended the funeral rites of the death of the first Toda.

Kotas are an artisan community. They are experts in working with fire, wood and iron for manufacturing various goods. They have many legends and myths about their ancestors. A Kota myth says that, some centuries ago when the Bagada people were taking refuge in the Nilgiri Hills from the oppressions of Tipu Sultan, the Kota in order to protect them, got themselves occupied in different regions of the Nilgiris, and subsequently smaller units in each unit merged together and seven villages were established.

A Kota legend views that the Kota, the Toda and the Kurumba were real brothers and they were the earliest inhabitants of the Nilgiri hills. These three, as the legend goes, were created from the three drops of god's (Kambatrayn) perspiration. Their separation took place when god asked them what they wanted; one of them said, "Give me the talent of art" and he became a Kota, who later proved to be an able blacksmith, musician, hunter, potter, rope and umbrella maker; another said, "Give me buffaloes who can be my friends, relative and savior", and he became a Toda dairy-man; and the third said, "Give me the power to destroy those whom I do not like", and the third brother who became a Kurumba, possessing powers of sorcery and black magic that the other two dreaded.

1.4 BELIEF TALES

Folk narrative exist in the context of telling and the questions of belief in it. The folk genres in etiological tales can become confusing and overlapping but many of them have belief as being the main contextual element. They are often stories about the supernatural (like ghost stories). Many of these etiological tales relieves anxiety, like the stories of reincarnation and reassures a person about after life. This often helps a person to cope up with death and loss.

Sometimes the unknown and the mysterious are also explained in belief tales. Here given below is a case study of how the fruit tree of the owa plant always ripens at a particular time of the year. In passing it also explains how the jackal and the tiger have got the reddish spots. Let us now look at the case study of a belief tale.

1.4.1 Case study

(Reference: Folktales from India, edited Brenda Beck, Peter Claus, Paphulladutta Goswami and Jawaharlal Handoo, 1987, 289)

In the month of March, locally called Phagun, the sun is rather hot. One day during this month, a deer was resting in the shade of an ow tree. As it was standing there, an ow fruit happened to drop on its back. This startled the deer

and it ran off. While running away, it knocked the nest of a weaver bird off its branch. The startled bird flew away and sat on the head of a stork. The stork lost its scalp and having been startled, flew away and sat on the hole of a crab. The crab pinched the tiger's tail, and the beast again began to run. But soon, the tiger met a jackal. The latter inquired what the matter was. The tiger explained, "I just sat over there and something bit me." The jackal said, "What could have bitten you, I wonder? Come let us go back and investigate carefully.

The tiger had now become so scared that he would not go back. So the jackal said, "Let us both go together. Come, we will tie our tails together with a rope of thatch so that one does not leave other." The tiger agreed to the plan and the two of them went back together. The tiger showed the jackal how it had sat down. The crab, however, again pinched his tail hard and the tiger ran away again. But the jackal was tied to him and was dragged over the rough ground. The jackal soon lost its life, and blood began to spurt from its body. Those parts of the jackal and the tiger on which the blood fell turned reddish and the other parts remained dark.

Soon afterwards, the birds and the beasts of the forest called a meeting and took up the matter of the jackal's death. The animals now addressed the tiger and asked, "Why did you kill the jackal?" The tiger laid the blame on the crab, saying it had pinched him. When the crab was asked why it had pinched the tiger it said, "The tiger sat on my hole." The tiger then explained that it had sat there because a stork had frightened it. The stork said that the weaver bird had sat on its head and that it had lost its scalp. The weaver bird explained that the deer had knocked off its nest and frightened it. And the deer said that it had been startled because an owl fruit had dropped on its back as it rested in the shade of the tree. The animals now decided to lay the blame on the owl tree. This was the verdict of the assembly: "In the month of March your fruits will drop at the slightest breeze." Since then owl fruits have always dropped from their branches at this time of the year.

There are many beliefs about the origin of the Rajputs in India. Supernatural occurrences are credited to the existence of them. The origin of the Rajputs, the Agniculas, the Chalukyas and the Parmaras, have divine antecedents. The miraculous development of them was to prove that they were not born in any ordinary circumstances. It is said that great disorder existed in the region of Rajasthan that needed the emergence of strong men. In this stage of crisis, where sacred books were being destroyed and mankind was being attacked, sage Visvamitra determined to create the Rajputs.

He thus chose the mountain of Abu where he performed a religious rite. There he, along with other sages, had pleaded with the god Vishnu, the preserver of the world. It is believed that a fire pit was prepared at the top of the mountain and an image of grass was made, it was sprinkled with water and thrown into the pit. An incantation was also pronounced.

A figure is said to have emerged out of the pit, holding a mace in the hand, and saying "Mar mar." This man was thus called Parmar. Brahma, the god of creation made another image and threw it in the pit and another figure emerged with a sword. He was named the Chalukya or the Solanki. The pratihars were also created in the similar manner. The fourth hero was brought into existence in the same way and was called the Chauhans. These four heroes became the progenitors

of the principle races of the Rajputs. They were also called the Agnikulas as they were born out of fire.

Belief tales often talk about the birth of principalities and kingdoms. This can be made clear from the following example. The small principality of the Jhalawar, in a region in Kota are said to have acquired their powers from a goddess. It is held that in the last quarter of the 13th century, Keshari Singh Jhala was in the service of the Solanki king of Gujarat. One goddess is said to have appeared before him and asked him to marry her. She produced four sons and before she departed, she said that she should be worshipped as their family deity.

One day, when he was cooking his meals in a cremation ground, a ghost appeared before him which resulted in a conflict, in which the ghost was subdued. This pleased the ghost who promised to help Keshari Singh whenever he needed him most.

Keshari Singh then entered into the service of the Nawab of Junagarh, who was pleased with his capacities and promised to grant him as much of land as he could cover in one night. Keshari Singh now remembered his ghost friend, who then lifted him on his shoulders and carried him around 360 villages. Keshari Singh, hence became the chief of the area and established the town known as Jhalawar.

Besides belief tales many legends are also a part of the etiological narrative, let us now discuss it in the next section.

Check your progress 2

- Note:** 1) Your answers should be about 30 words each;
 2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of the Unit.

2) What are belief tales?

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1.5 LEGENDS AS ETIOLOGICAL NARRATIVES

Legends are short, oral prose narratives that is largely non fictional. For the common man, it is often seen as a lie or something that is not true. We have many categories of legends that are available to us. Often, we come across heroic legends in which long epic poems are composed using traditional motifs. These legends talk about a fictional hero, and as seen in the previous section, their miraculous origins and supernatural powers make them powerful.

We also have many folk legends which share religious characters. It talks about unusual, extra normal phenomena from the point of view of the ordinary world.

We have many legends that have etiological bearings. Many legends try to explain the growth or the origin of many environmental features or many customs. The following case study is one such example of a legend.

Here, the origin of an intoxicating drink in the region of Gujarat has been explained. This is popular among the Rathwa Bhils, a tribal community, living near the Baroda hills of Gujarat. These people are known for the preparation of alcohol.

Case study (Reference: Folktales from India, edited Brenda Beck, Peter Claus, Paphulladutta Goswami and Jawaharlal Handoo, 1987,285)

There once lived a carpenter who was very skilled at his trade. He was also a very clever man, and no one was able to deceive him. As the carpenter grew old, he realized that the time would come soon when the god of death would take him to some faraway place. The carpenter planned for this day by going into the forest and cutting down a large tree. The trunk of this tree was very bulky, and with his special instruments, he was able to carve a large hollow inside it. He then designed a kind of door for this secret cavity, so it could be closed at will. Once the door was closed, no trace remained of the empty space inside.

One day, the god of death came to fetch the carpenter, just as this man had anticipated. The artisan then told his visitor about the hollow he had carved inside the trunk of a tree. His guest expressed an interest in seeing this special achievement. The carpenter was eager to oblige and soon asked the god of death to climb into the hollow so that he could see its full extent properly. As the visitor entered, however, the carpenter quickly shut the door. Once it was closed, of course, no one could tell the hole was there. In this way, the carpenter succeeded in imprisoning the god of death in his secret cave.

The carpenter was very pleased with his trick and delighted with the results. Furthermore, he took great care never to tell anyone about his achievement. He also did not point out to others that people on earth were not dying. Meanwhile, however, the relatives of the god of death noticed his absence. They soon went to Bhagwan, the almighty, to complain. They pointed out that the god of death had gone to fetch man on earth but had not returned. Bhagwan tried his best to trace the movements of this missing divinity, but all attempts failed to locate him. After a while the almighty became dejected. He lost faith in his ability to ever recover the god of death. Again his relatives appealed. They began to cry and lament the loss of a close family member. Furthermore, the earth was becoming overcrowded with human beings. Soon there would be no place for people to live happily anymore. Many hideous crimes were being committed by men made desperate by overcrowding.

The almighty now became more and more worried about the absence of the god of death. He was also worried about how to punish criminals. Then, suddenly one day, a thought sprang into Bhagwan's mind. He now took some mahua flowers in a big pot, boiled them, and subsequently prepared a special drink. This drink would intoxicate any man who partook of it and cause him to lose control of himself. Then the almighty descended to earth with his pot and offered his drink to everyone he could find. Those who drank it became very talkative and expressed their thoughts freely. People enjoyed the drink enormously. Finally the carpenter came to hear about this potion and expressed an interest in tasting it. Bhagwan handed him some which he drank with eagerness. Thus, the carpenter

also became intoxicated and began to talk. He soon lost his control of mind and expressed his most secret thoughts while the almighty listened attentively. He began to brag saying, “ You, almighty, don’t know who I am. Do not try to open my cave, because if you do I will imprison you!”

Bhagwan took up the challenge and said to the carpenter,” How would you imprison me?” The carpenter then opened the door of this cave and Bhagwan watched closely. As soon as the mouth of the cavity opened the god of death leapt out. He was half dead from suffocation, but the almighty soon revived him. The great lord then took the carpenter away to the land of the dead. Next, Bhagwan himself taught the people of the Rathwa community in Gujarat to prepare his drink properly for human consumption. The use of the lord’s intoxicating drink has enabled people to better prepare for death.

Hence, the above case study shows the subjective nature of this etiological legend that appeals to the personal concerns about the average people and reports things that are baffling and could happen to anyone while doing their everyday chores. This legend concerns us and there are no heroic figures. The purpose of this etiological tale is to inform, explain, teach and advise us.

In an etiological legend often the construction of the narrative begins informally and often can find approvals or disapprovals around it. We can find several instances of these kinds of etiological legends in chronicles, annals, travelogues and literary works and are not only found in oral communications.

As discussed above we can see that etiological tales can have historical significance, beliefs based on some supernatural powers or mythological or based on certain myths. The next section will discuss the myths as etiological tales.

1.6 MYTHS AS ETIOLOGICAL TALES

Etiological myths, as defined by Dundes, can be said to be prose narratives, which, in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of what has happened in the remote past. They are accepted as a part of the faith and are often having some sacred roots. They are hence strongly related to religion and ritual. Many of these myths account for the origin of the world, of mankind of death. They might also explain in details the origins of many rituals and ceremonies.

Many people consider myths to have some authenticity and truth in it. This is also a symbolic expression and creation. It also gives expression to common religious values and consolidates them. This, hence mirrors society and social structure. Let us now consider an example. Many etiological myths try to explain the creation of the world. This example is from Nagaland. The people of Nagaland are composed of different tribes, almost being twenty of them, each having their own language and dialect. They have migrated from the south east Asia to the jungles of north east India.

Many of these westward movements was arrested by well organized Hindu kingdoms. Most of the Naga people believe that their creator-god (Lijaba) has an anthropomorphic form. In the following etiological tale it is said how this creator made the land of the Nagas imperfect, while he carefully carved out the land of others.

It is said that Lijaba created the world. At first he worked slowly and carefully, making even broad even valleys and plains. As soon as he worked on Nagaland, a cockroach came and told him that he was to be attacked by enemies. Lijaba, in his haste and hurry, jumbled together a large number of hills and valleys, and did not smooth them down. This explains why Nagaland has steep mountains and cliffs, unlike the plains in the Bhrmaputra valley.

Many myths have common motifs like the separation of the earth and sky. It also talks about the creation of the earth from a cosmic egg and talks about the primitive condition of the universe. For example, in Polynesia its is believed that the sky lay over the earth in the beginning and all creation lived in utter darkness. The earth and the sky embraced each other firmly and their off springs were caught in the narrow space between the parents bosoms. Thus embracing each other the parents continued to produce off springs. Among the Khasis, in India, it is believed that the sky and the earth lay close together by a navel strong. This talks about the sky as an offspring of the earth.

Etiological myths are thus, a creation of the gods, a religious account of the creation of the world. It, explains fundamental deeds which results in the formation of the world, nature and its cultural and sociological features. It often recounts the creative time of god and tries to establish some world order. It is often taken to have some kind of religious sanction.

The characters perform heroic deeds and creative acts. It is possible to obtain a uniform explanation of the world. It tries to create a great beginning to all human activity and describe important aspects of human life.

Check your progress 3

Note: 1) Your answers should be about 30 words each;

2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of the Unit.

3) What does the etiologiical myths explain?

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1.7 LET US SUM UP

Etiological tales show some kind of cultural, sociological, historical and religious beginnings. It describes the origins in a sacred and divine sense and is embodied in the folklore of the people. This can be seen across culturally and time periods.

They have metaphors for the actions of humans and gods and often mirror culture and society. It often has religious roots and does not vanish with the complexity of human life.

1.8 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

- 1) The word etiology is an explanation of how things came to be or the way they are or were at a given time and condition. It can be seen in the stories of creation, the origin of man and the development and growth of plants and animals. This word etiology is taken from Late Latin and Greek word *aetiologia* meaning “cause description” or the explanations of occurrences in the world. It has also been used in a number of other fields like medicine when the causes of certain diseases are referred to. In the study of folklore, the term etiology is applied to the accounts of incidences in narrative form. To these definitions belong belief tales, folktales, myths and legends. Any narrative or story belongs to several kinds of definitions or genres. It also depends highly on the intention of the narrator or the story’s function is very important. Hence, a traditional account of how things happen and how a thing originated is taken extremely seriously by both the narrator and the listener.
- 2) Folk narrative always has a context of telling and the questions of belief in it. The folk genres in etiological tales can become confusing and overlapping but many of them have belief as being the main contextual element. They are often stories about the supernatural (like ghost stories). Many of these etiological tales relieve anxiety, like the stories of reincarnation and reassure a person about after life. This often helps a person to cope up with death and loss. Sometimes the unknown and the mysterious are also explained in belief tales.
- 3) Etiological myths, as defined by Dundes, can be said to be prose narratives, which in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of what has happened in the remote past. They are accepted as a part of the faith and are often having some sacred roots. They are strongly related to religion and ritual. Many of these myths account for the origin of the world, of mankind of death. They might also explain in details the origins of many rituals and ceremonies.

1.9 READINGS AND FURTHER REFERENCES

- 1) Gupta, Beni. *Magical beliefs and superstitions: A historical and sociological study*. Sundeep prakashan: Delhi, 1979.
- 2) Dundes, Alan. *Sacred Narratives: readings in the theory of Myth*. University of California Press: Berkeley, 1984.
- 3) Green, Thomas. *Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Beliefs, Customs, Tales, Music and Art*. ABC-CLIO: Santa Barbara, 1997.