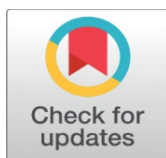
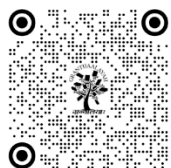


THEORY OF CULTURAL EVOLUTION IN THE HISTORY OF FOLKLORE STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

Social sciences and Humanities scholars have long studied Folklore material from an interdisciplinary approach. The point of study has been revisited from the gateways of academic histories of these disciplines, which have thoroughly used folklore materials, although not as a primary study. It is important to note how the journey of mankind, from the basic communication to complex structures of verbal and non-verbal communication, which for a long time constituted folk material to a more advanced written literature attributing to reading materials to different disciplines based on their objectives. In this paper we study specifically how the theory of cultural evolution from anthropology corresponds with the history of folklore studies, and evolving understandings on the folk groups, their culture and material variations contributing to the dynamic approach.

Keywords: Evolution Theory, Cultural Anthropology, Social Anthropology, Folklore Studies

1. INTRODUCTION

From apes to human, the journey has been uniquely transformational. Yet, the study of cultural evolution and its history finds the material culture in the progressive civilization of human settlements as its foregrounding material. Human beings, especially Homo sapiens, from the agricultural settlements to modern technology have come far befitting the circumstances, as the only species said to survive the challenges and competition among others as the fittest. The early man learned to communicate, design, use and develop ideas that became the universal knowledge to generations, which dispersed into a span of large geographical space of the globe in a limited time. The dispersion of human settlements has further propelled the idea of “survival of the fittest” within the species, seeing the limited resources and growing population. During the study of human societies and culture, what in general is covered under Social Sciences and Humanities, Anthropology as a subject in the early 19th century became the independent field to study for cultural differences, explain material culture of ancient living, to investigate biological origins, contemporary challenges and transformation faced by different culture and societies in multilayered space and time.

Folklore, which earlier termed as antiquities, or a material from past of primitive, non-literate societies, was ignored as an independent science of study about the transformation, as it was believed that the knowledge base transferred

from one generation to next was only in oral and informal forms. It was until the European Renaissance endeavours in the 18th century to expand its influence through sailing, technology, weaponry and ethnographic writings about foreign lands, that folklore was collected and later studied under the umbrella of Cultural Anthropology. Although, folklore material has always been subjectively studied as a resource for comparative study by many philosophers and theoreticians, especially to study and compare the developments of civilizations, language, human psychic and its expression in different parts of world, mostly colonies which were deemed as inferior under the propelling theory of "Social Darwinism". Therefore, Evolutionary theory later became the basis for the major folklore theory of Diffusion, Polygenesis, Myth-ritual and Solar mythology as it foregrounds the long debate on cultural and biological evolution of human societies. Since it was observed that folklore as an expressive medium carried historical evidences, mythologies and a broader worldview, as it has always travelled along the culture, in fact support it in its making.

Before Renaissance, biblical story of Tower of Babel and its destruction provided the prevalent concept of degeneration in explanation to cultural dispersion and diversity. According to the story, before the destruction all people belonged to one single civilization, soon faced a wrath of differences in human minds and after that people dispersed and created their own culture and languages. While some progressed, other civilizations degenerated and became savages. Although, this concept was challenged and later replaced by the idea of progressivism, under the Evolutionary studies, that all societies had started from primitive to more advanced state, independently. British philosopher John Locke in his work *Essay Concerning Government* (1690), foregrounds knowledge and reason derived from experiences as the difference in societies. As different experiences generate different ideas and different ideas develop different societies. In accordance with the expanding empire, Europeans much easily believed that they were more advanced to chart out the universal history of humankind. It was a French statesman, Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, who first remarked about the linear progress from savagery, barbarism to agriculturally based civilization of any human society which is shaped in history and can guide us to understand humanity, in his book *Plan for Two Discourses on Universal History* (1750).

Later, the foundation of Biological Evolutionary Theory gave answers to many difficult questions on variations, extinction and diversity of organisms in relation to Human sciences. Carlous Linnaeus extensively worked upon *Systema Naturae* (1735) to systematically categories the taxonomy of different life forms. Another Naturalist, Buffon outlined biological evolution in his forty-four-volume work *Natural History* (1752-1799). His ideas were later used by Darwin in his inventive work. According to Buffon, life has multiplied faster than its food supply, promoting a struggle for existence, drawing attention to extinction of some life forms, physical variations within species and evolutionary habits to adapt. It was only Charles Darwin and Herbert Spenser who took these biological findings into the realms of social and cultural studies. After pioneer works by Darwin and Spencer, social scientist grounded their theories on the progress of human civilization from simple to complex and to understand the cultural route and findings through several artifacts, folklore and material culture found common in different societies, correlating the variations and withdrawal of myths and rituals in modern societies.

In *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859), Darwin postulates several concepts related to biological changes, progression, adaptation and survival. According to him, natural laws of natural selection was the fundamental cause of changes and variations which occur due to increased competition for food, shelter and mates, which in turn able the offspring to adapt and reproduce at a faster rate. The "adaptive" characteristic is mainly important for the parents to pass on the crucial information, genetically and extra- somatically, to gear up the offspring for the upcoming threat and challenges, therefore increasing their chances of survival. It is also important to note that the answers to extinction and newer life forms were not yet figured out, but Darwin's theory explained the accumulation of adaptive traits and knowledge which altered the appearances of the existing species, challenged the neighbouring species to extinction and developed new species. This is how, we now see ourselves as the successor of Apes and close cousins to monkey, otherwise which would have been difficult, considering different religious theories limiting the idea of humankind as the direct descendants of angels created by the God. Therefore, we today understand macro, universal human history, and, micro, individual cultural phenomenon as a progress which was/is not a cakewalk but full of challenges, conflicts, complexities and morbidities.

Herbert Spencer, on the other hand, was more interested in evolution as a general phenomenon, where better skilled succeeded the game of survival, and observed that social evolution can be studied in the same way as the biological evolution. He described society as an interconnected set of organs, which can be identified, and their roles and functions can be understood in maintaining the social structure. It was also Spencer, who termed "survival of the fittest" the common saying, mostly credited to Darwin who used it as an alternative to his idea of "natural selection". Spencer also

popularized the concept of “social darwinism”, which puts the natural right of superior civilization, such as Europeans and other Western countries to dominate those who were technologically less advanced. Although, he also widely spoke about the transmission of learned behaviours from one generation to another, the reason of progress of different cultures at different phases. This can also be understood in the light of folklore, which is transmitted as a learned knowledge of one’s culture and traditions from one generation to the next, which emphasizes on the individual’s native issues and identities. Folklore travels in oracy, which makes its transmission fast and varied, therefore facing conflict with other existing folklores and if not relevant in contemporary times making it susceptible to disappear soon. Although, the similarities in themes and common dilemmas of human mind remains the same in any space or time, accounting to psychic unity. Therefore, folklore changes and adapts to the progress of human needs and civilization, but it never seizes completely, making it a primordial carrier of knowledge base to study human societies within and outside.

Evolution of culture picked the interest of anthropologists across the world in the late 19th century. And what was called Unilineal Evolutionists, American Lewis Henry Morgan and his English counterpart Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, drew attention towards the universal evolutionary stages of cultural developments from primitive to complex societies. Both believed that the basic similarities in human thoughts and mechanisms there lies a psychic unity of humankind. Unilineal Evolutionary studies were rooted in comparative methods, which observed that societies progressed in parallel fashions, independently. It is manifested that, those contemporary “primitive” cultures were like “living fossils”, which can be studied to trace the previous stages of currently advanced cultures. The cultural and folk material remnants were the “survivals” of the existing knowledge. Therefore, simple and complex societies were studied, and many folk materials were collected by ethnographers, anthropologists and folklorists from both the societies, which guided one into both diachronic study in history and synchronic study within the current system. It also gave rise to one of the most important theories in folklore to understand the variations, i.e., Diffusion theory, Historical- geographical theory, Myth-Ritual theory and Solar Mythology theory. It will be discussed later in this work.

Morgan was interested in Native American cultures, especially in marriage rituals and descent which led to his work *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity* (1871) and later *Ancient Society* (1877). In his comparative study of kinship, he correlates the social evolutionary stages (which he termed lower, middle and upper) with specific developments in family structures, traditions and technology. According to him, evolutionary progress within the society was not achieved through competition, but the “flowering” of new thoughts to subsistence the new changes and challenges. On the other hand, Tylor, his contemporary, focused on the three stages pattern of savagery-barbarism-civilization in his pivotal work *Primitive Culture* (1871). His important theory on evolution of religion, compared the three stages of cultural evolution to that of religion, which according to him started in animism, with pagan ideas and deities in Nature’s form, evolved into polytheism with multiple deities, such in Greek Culture, Hinduism and reach into its highest form of monotheism, modern religion such as Christianity, Islam, etc.

Around the mid-19th century, Folkloristics also flourished as a science of studying human culture, materials, traditions, myths, rituals, its construction, transformation and repeated transmission in oral / verbal expression. It became interesting to note, after “Solar theory” propounded by Max Muller that myths existed in the form of reduced signs based on nature, like the Sun, in the past but the prolonged use of the word without its actual connotation has lost the real meaning in present therefore giving birth to myths, “disease of language”. He concluded that after collecting his extensive data from the South Asian sub- continent, especially India. He was studying the origins of Indo-European myths, which shared similarities in themes, meaning and form irrespective of the geographical distance. One explanation to this phenomenon was given by Diffusionists, who believed that the most folk materials, especially folk stories originated from the single source and travelled to different parts with the people of trade and travel. Although, considering the cultural evolution, another theory of Polygenesis situated its answer in the unity of human mind, giving birth to identical materials at two different places unknown and independent from each other.

Many studies were conducted to classify the routes of stories and its variations in form of historical-geographical index, Arne Antti was one of the profounder. In his historical and comparative investigations of the folk data, he categorized the oral recordings in place-war system, where one story travelled or existed at different place at one time in different ways and written recordings as date-war system, where written data found place in different variations. On this behalf we designed two orders, geographical and historical to classify the collected data. Similarly, folklorists across the globe made themselves busy to classify the collected data and preparing tale-type index and genre-based categorizations, which further paved way to analyses and ethnographic research of one’s own culture to reinterpret the lost meanings and traditions in an industrial world.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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