

Article

# Himalayan Folklore and the Fairy Tale Genre

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**Abstract:** Based on fieldwork by the author conducted in Tibetan cultural areas of the Indian Himalayas, this paper explores Himalayan understandings of what defines a fairy tale, in contrast to the Western understanding. In parts of the Himalayas, a distinction is made between “*lakshung*” (fairy tales) and “*kyakshung*”, which are shorter stories, the kind one might tell over tea. In light of the proposals to record and disseminate many of these stories using new media, this paper seeks to examine these genre definitions and investigates the various contexts in which these stories are told.

**Keywords:** fairy tale; Himalaya; new media; genre definitions

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## 1. Introduction

The Western fairy tale genre has long been the subject of attempts by scholars to be defined, and the concept has proved to be a slippery one. Recent scholarship [1] has even questioned whether some of the most famous European fairy tales can be classed as such. It is very difficult to define exactly what a fairy tale is, but fairy tale expert Jack Zipes links their development to “oral folk tales, which contain wondrous and marvelous elements” ([2], p. 2). Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* [3] attempts to describe fairy tales according to their component parts and Max Lüthi [4] surveys fairy tales in contrast to related genres.

Around the globe, a similar distinction exists between fairy tales and other kinds of stories, but there is no consensus about how to differentiate between these various narratives. At the same time, stories from outside of the West are being digitised and disseminated in both old [5] and new [6] media. Often, these stories are not organised along the lines of traditional genre distinctions, but according to particular objectives: narratives containing animals are collected for use in conservation, for example, regardless of whether they are fairy tales, fables or other kinds of narratives [5]. These new groupings, along with their availability to scholars made possible by new media, provide an opportunity to reassess the limits of various narrative traditions.

When researching folk tales in Spiti, a cold mountain desert in the northern Indian Himalayas, I would ask participants if they could tell me any stories about the area and was sometimes told that they did not know any stories. They did, however, know a fairy tale (*lakshung*). When I asked what the difference was between a fairy tale and other stories, I was told that the fairy tale was a story about someone having powers, whereas a *kyakshung* was a shorter story, often told while having tea.

This paper presents one such example of a *lakshung*, collected by the author in Spiti in August 2015.<sup>1</sup> Features of the European fairy tale, as identified in scholarship, will be contrasted with those of this tale, with the aim of broadening the Western understanding of fairy tales and shedding new light on genre definitions.

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<sup>1</sup> The findings of this study are the results of 40 unstructured interviews conducted in Spiti in July and August 2015. The interviews were conducted in Spitian, a language closely related to Tibetan, and translated into English with an interpreter present. Transcripts of English translations of the stories referenced here can be obtained from the author of this paper.

## 2. Results

In an interview [7] with Dawazangmo, a resident of Spiti, the following fairy tale was obtained:

Once, there was a King named Baladewana and a Queen named Kunzangma. When they were married for a long time, they had still no children. They prayed and the goddess came, holding a dhu (shell) and in the other hand tha (prayer beads). She said,

“You will have a child who will be very brave and indeed a kind man.”

They had a child and named it Dhondova. After three years, the Queen died. The king was worried about bringing up the child, so he married a commoner. Her name was Panmachen. After the marriage, the goddess came again and said that they would have a child who would make chortens. They had a child called Chungo Doyon.

After a few years, the children were very close, but the mother was jealous of the first child inheriting the kingdom. She went East and found old men and women talking, saying that the younger child would get nothing. She went South and found young people saying the same. She went North and youngsters were also saying the same. She went West and found small children making thrones from stones—one big and one small. They said the big one was for the older brother and the small one for the younger brother.

“I have to do something,” she thought.

She pretended to be ill and called the king. The king offered to do anything for her, so she asked for her son to inherit the kingdom and he agreed. They exiled the older brother. During the night, the brothers were braiding their hair (chuti). The younger brother tied his braid to his older brother. The older brother cut his hair and left. When the younger brother woke and found his older brother gone, he went after him.

Tsalma (food given at birth) was given to the older brother. The younger brother followed and they shared the tsalma. They boiled leather and ate it. The younger brother felt thirsty and fainted. The older brother took him to the waterfall and went away.

If men have power, they can change into a monkey (sheu). The younger brother changed into a monkey because he had died and had the power to change. He lived there and ate fruit from the trees. He ate half of the fruit and left half for his brother.

The older brother went far away and saw lungta (wind horse). He called out, “Father!” There was a monk in the house who recognised him as a son from a previous life. He took him inside.

The older brother was a talented horse-rider, superior to others; other children wondered about him and were jealous. There was a meeting and it was decided that the brother should be thrown into the lake. When they came to the monk’s house, the monk used his power to hide the brother in the horn of an ibex. The villagers came and were angry. They said they would make lā (spirit) burn red under the fire and threatened to burn the monk with it. The monk was hiding and the older brother came out and offered to go with the villagers. The villagers took him.

The Princess of that place (to which he was taken), Lechewalden, came and took him with her. She tied her hair to his, but the brother also cut his hair and jumped into the lake. He found many people and animals thrown into the lake. He was a reincarnation of a god, so he revived all the people in the lake and came back. He went to the monk and called, “Father.” The monk did not know who he was and said,

“I have no child.”

However, he (the monk) opened the door. He was shocked and fainted.

The older brother, the monk and the revived people all went to the waterfall and saw the monkey. As the older brother stepped three steps, so did the monkey. But the monkey was afraid of the monk. The older brother went and saw the fruit gathered by the younger brother. He took the younger brother into the village by the lake and was made King because of the Princess.

The brothers decided to visit their parents. The mother of the younger brother was ashamed of herself (nubda). She sank into the ground with shame. The younger brother was made King of the first kingdom.

### 3. Discussion

It is not the aim of this paper to provide a definitive classification of Himalayan fairy tales. Rather, by highlighting features commonly associated with Western fairy tales that can be found in Dawazangmo's *lakshung*, and by noting important differences between these tales and the way that they are transmitted, this paper seeks to challenge and deepen Western genre definitions.

#### 3.1. Features of the Western Fairy Tale in the Lakshung

Fairy tales, argues Zipes [2], are a type of appropriation of the wonder folk tale. Zipes mentions several features of the wonder tale:

Rarely do wonder tales end unhappily. They triumph over death. The tale begins with "once upon a time" or "once there was" and never really ends when it ends. The end is actually the true beginning. The once upon a time is not a past designation but futuristic: The timelessness of the tale and lack of geographic specificity endow it with utopian connotations—utopia in its original meaning designated "no place", a place that no one had ever envisaged. We form and keep the utopian kernel of the tale safe in our imaginations with hope." ([2], p. 4).

Dawazangmo's *lakshung* exhibits the features of Zipes' wonder tale. The ending is a happy one, with both brothers being made kings of their respective kingdoms. Death is triumphed over, with the younger brother living as a monkey after his death and the people of the lake being revived. The *lakshung* also exhibits the common beginning Zipes associates with the wonder tale ("Once, there was a King named Baladewana and a Queen named Kunzangma . . . "). It could also be said that the end "is actually the true beginning" in the sense that the story ends at the beginning of the brothers' reigns over their respective kingdoms. Moreover, the tale is not geographically specific.

Further, Zipes [2] summarises Propp's [3] functions of the wonder tale, giving them his own emphasis as follows:

1. The protagonist is confronted with an interdiction or prohibition that he or she violates in some way. Often the protagonist commits an error or seeks to improve his or her social status by embarking on a journey. One way or another the protagonist is commissioned—sent on a mission.
2. Departure or banishment of the protagonist, who is either given a task or assumes a task related to the interdiction and prohibition, or to the desire for improvement and self-transformation. The protagonist is assigned a task, and the task is a sign. That is, his or her character will be marked by the task that is his or her sign.
3. The protagonist encounters: (a) the villain; (b) a mysterious individual or creature, who gives the protagonist gifts; (c) three different animals or creatures who are helped by the protagonist and promise to repay him or her; or (d) three different animals or creatures who offer gifts to help the protagonist, who is in trouble. The gifts are often magical agents, which bring about miraculous change.
4. The endowed protagonist is tested and moves on to a battle and conquers the villain or inimical forces.

5. The peripety or sudden fall in the protagonist's fortunes is generally only a temporary setback. A wonder or miracle is needed to reverse the wheel of fortune. Sometimes a fairy, hermit, wise man or woman, or magically endowed human or animal will intervene to benefit the protagonist.
6. The protagonist makes use of gifts (and this includes the magical agents and cunning) to achieve his or her goal. The result is (a) three battles with the villain; (b) three impossible tasks that are nevertheless made possible; and/or (c) the breaking of a magic spell.
7. The villain is punished or the inimical forces vanquished.
8. The success of the protagonist usually leads to (a) marriage; (b) the acquisition of money; (c) survival and wisdom; or (d) any combination of the first three ([2], pp. 3–4).

Dawazangmo's *lakshung* may be said to exhibit the first function in the sense that both brothers—the principal protagonists in the story—embark on a journey: the older brother first leaves the kingdom and the younger brother goes after him. The second function can be seen in the fact that the older brother's character (brave and kind) is exhibited not just in the prophesy of the goddess, but also during his journey (for example, his offer to go with the villagers when the monk was threatened). The third function can be seen in both the gift of *tsalma* and the hospitality of the monk. The fourth function can be seen in the older brother's showdown with the villagers and the fifth and sixth can be seen in his revival of the people in the lake. The seventh function is satisfied when the mother of the younger brother sinks into the ground with shame. Finally, the eighth function is satisfied when the older brother is made king because of the Princess.

Max Lüthi [4] identifies elements of the fairy tale's style that can also be seen in Dawazangmo's *lakshung*. The fairy tale hero "is not astonished by miracles and magic; he accepts them as if they were a matter of course" ([4], p. 46). Moreover, in Lüthi's view, there is no detailed description in the fairy tale ([4], p. 50); in the *lakshung* also we are given no detail about the appearance of any of the characters. This, argues Lüthi, "gives the European fairy tale its clarity and precision" ([4], p. 50), which is added to by the isolation of the characters, for example in the separation of two brothers. Such a separation of brothers can also be seen in the *lakshung*. In Lüthi's fairy tale, there is a tendency towards extremes and contrasts ([4], pp. 50–51), which can be seen in the death of the younger brother before he is reborn as a monkey. Lüthi writes that fairy tales show a preference for solid, man-made objects ([4], p. 51); this is possibly seen in the *tsalma* given to the older brother and the *tha* held by the goddess, although natural objects are also important (the *dhu* and the ibex horn). Inner journeys become outwardly visible in Lüthi's fairy tale ([4], p. 51); in the *lakshung*, both brothers eat food given at birth and the younger brother is reborn as a monkey. There is a delight in (often word-for-word) repetition in fairy tales, according to Lüthi ([4], pp. 53–54). This is seen in the *lakshung* in the mother's journey ("She went East/South/North/West and found . . ."). Finally, danger is averted at the last possible minute ([4], pp. 56–57), which could possibly be seen in the *lakshung*, in the older brother's coming out as the monk is threatened and in hiding.

A preliminary survey of features of the fairy tale in the work of Zipes, Propp (via Zipes) and Lüthi suggests that the *lakshung* shares many of the characteristics of its European counterparts. However, this survey is not exhaustive, and it can be argued that the Western conception of the fairy tale is itself an evasive one.

### 3.2. The Fairy Tale as an Indistinct Genre

We have seen that Dawazangmo's *lakshung* shares many features that scholarship associates with the Western fairy tale. However, it should be noted that the distinction between the Western fairy tale and other genres is not absolutely distinct. In European literature, fables contain fairy tale motifs or vice versa. As Propp ([3], p. 5) points out, animal tales contain elements of the fantastic, and animals play a large role in fantastic tales. Moreover, Zipes classes Hans Christian Andersen's "The Ugly Duckling" as a fairy tale, although it could also be seen as a fable. He writes,

Placing one's faith in God is an undercurrent in Andersen's most famous fairy tale "The Ugly Duckling" (1844). Although there are no Christian references in this narrative, Andersen uses the tradition of animal tales to demonstrate that there is such a thing as intelligent design. The duckling must have faith to overcome all the obstacles in his life so that he can triumph in the end. As in the traditional tales in which animals, insects, and plants speak and come to life, Andersen conveys didactic morals. They are not always religious... They stand in the tradition of Aesop's fables and reflect Andersen's notions of 'survival of the fittest' ([2], p. 124).

Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales fall into the literary (rather than oral) tradition; having been written for children by a single author, they differ significantly from the oral tales collected in Spiti. However, the possibility of classifying these tales in different ways illustrates the potential genre overlap in the Western tradition.

It may be that "a scientific exactness [for classifying narratives] . . . does not in fact exist" [8]. Indices that identify folk narratives through tale types, such as that by Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, have been a valuable tool of analysis for folklorists. Uther [8] points out that the Aarne-Thompson system cannot possibly document all oral and written folk narratives of the world, pointing to the fact that "the tale type index is structured according to genres and arranged according to themes . . . While we can see from the history of folktale classification that all these various genres can suitably be placed in the tale type index, there are other folk narratives that do not fit in its thematic divisions." Uther's revision of the Aarne-Thompson catalogue includes the miscellaneous type, which allows for heterogeneous types or those tales that are difficult to clarify.

In the Himalayan context, one story presented to me by Tashi Tandup as a *kyakshung* [9] could plausibly be called a fable due to its moral message, although the protagonist is not an animal:

Khira Gompo Dorje was a hunter in Tibet. He used to bring a leg of whatever he had hunted to a monk. One day, he went to the monk and saw all the bones of the animals he had hunted—they nearly filled the room. He felt sorry in his heart for all the death he had caused. He decided to commit suicide and threw himself off a cliff. Immediately, he attained Enlightenment and flew away. The monk thought,

"I have said lots of mantras and meditated a lot."

So the monk threw himself off a cliff—but instead of attaining Enlightenment, he died. The moral is: it matters what is in your heart, not who you are.

Thus, in this region of the Himalayas, as in the European tradition, fables are not synonymous with animal tales. In the same way, animals often play a role in fairy tales, for example the monkey in Dawazangmo's *lakshung*. However, the distinction between *lakshung* and *kyakshung* (first made to me by Dawazangmo, but independently confirmed by other interview participants) is a common one, and seems to rely in part upon the context in which these tales are told. More research on this matter is needed, but tales presented to me as *kyakshung* have included saints' legends [10], local legends [11] and etiological stories [12].

Writing of the European tradition, Steven Swann Jones ([13], p. 9) highlights a fundamental feature that distinguishes the fairy tale from other genres: "While these other genres of the folktale are reasonably mimetic—that is, they depict life in fairly realistic terms—*fairy tales depict magical or marvelous events or phenomena as a valid part of human experience.*" Jones acknowledges two other genres that include non-realistic elements: the fable and the tall tale. However, Jones points out that, in the fable, the non-realistic personification of animals is "a literary device for isolating and portraying human foibles, not as an ontologically or philosophically accurate representation of the phenomenal world. Similarly, in the tall tale, the marvelous events are considered artistic exaggerations, storytelling 'lies' . . ." ([13], p. 10). It is only, according to Jones, in the fairy tale that we are expected to accept these magical elements at face value.

It is true that in Dawazangmo's *lakshung*, these marvelous elements are accepted at face value (the power of the younger brother to change into a monkey, the power of the monk to hide the older brother in the horn of an ibex and the power of the older brother to revive the people in the lake are all examples of this). In another *lakshung* told to me by Lobsang Tenpa [14], houses are magically erected by the gods and "anything is possible." However, if we are to classify Tashi Tandup's story as a fable, we must reject the assertion that fables do not ask us to accept magical elements at face value. One might argue that the hunter's ability to fly could be seen as a literary device to illustrate human foibles when contrasted with the monk's failure to do so. However, the animal personification of Jones' example plays a very different role: here, we are only asked to accept the anthropomorphism at face value before we hear a story of "otherwise realistic human behavior" ([13], p. 10). In Tashi Tandup's tale, the marvelous ability to fly plays a pivotal role in exposing the monk's folly. We also see instances of the magical and protective powers of animals (in this case, the yak) in Spiti in local legends [11] and etiological stories [12]. In this case, the distinction between *lakshung* and *kyakshung* cannot rest on the presence or absence of elements of the marvelous. This is not due to the absence of the marvelous in *lakshung*, but rather to the presence of it in the *kyakshung*.

### 3.3. Fairy Tales and Old Media

We should remember that, before the advent of new media, the European fairy tale underwent a transformation at the hands of old media. The development of the fairy tale from oral folk tales into the written literary genre in Europe must be seen in context. Lüthi points out that the written recording of fairy tales was influenced by particularities of the culture and time in which they were recorded. He writes:

It must now be clear that the Grimm brothers did not retell the fairy tales exactly as they heard them. On the contrary, they carefully edited them, simplifying or embellishing them according to their poetic inclinations or pedagogical intentions . . . Naturally, they were not completely independent of the spirit and the taste of their times . . . ([4], p. 28).

Moreover, Giambattista Bastile, who compiled the 50 fairy tales of the Pentamerone "did not retell the fairy tales exactly as he heard them; he fashioned them to his taste. It was the taste of the baroque era" ([4], p. 29).

In addition, the author's personal situation and character play a role in the development of the fairy tale genre as it shifts from the oral to the literary tradition. As Zipes writes,

The more the literary fairy tale was cultivated and developed, the more it became individualised and varied by intellectuals and artists, who often sympathized with the marginalized in society or were marginalized themselves. The literary fairy tale allowed for new possibilities of subversion in the written word and in print . . . ([2], p. 7).

Zipes is not alone in his assertion that fairy tales must be seen in their historical contexts. Warner [15] criticizes Bettelheim's Freudian analysis of the fairy tale, arguing, from a feminist perspective, that his argument ignores historical influences on the fairy tale genre, especially when dealing with cases such as that of the wicked stepmother. She writes, "This archetypal approach leeches history out of fairy tale. Fairy or wonder tales, however farfetched the incidents they include, or fantastic the enchantments they concoct, take on the colour of the actual circumstances in which they are or were told" ([15], p. 213).

When trying to extrapolate features of the Western fairy tale to produce genre definitions, we should remember that the fairy tale has undergone an evolution within the context of European cultural history, and has been influenced by those individuals who have elected to collect and record these tales. Therefore, it would be rash to assume that fairy tales from around the globe must meet the criteria arising from the study of the European form to be deserving of the name. As we have seen, Himalayan fairy tales may share many of the features associated with the European fairy tale,

but perhaps we should appeal to the concept of family resemblance (rather than distinctness of form) when discussing genre definitions in both cultures.

#### 4. Conclusions

There is a distinction between the fairy tale and other genres in Himalayan culture, and a superficial reading may justify the claim that these genre distinctions include similar features to those found in the Western tradition. However, this claim must be qualified to reflect several considerations. Firstly, the genre distinction between fairy tales and other genres in the West is not always a clear one. We see examples of fairy tales that can also be classed as fables, and motifs commonly associated with one genre regularly appear in other genres. Secondly, the written form of the Western fairy tale was influenced by specific historical and even personal circumstances. We cannot expect to see such circumstances reflected in the style of their Himalayan counterparts. In addition, although a strong written literary tradition exists in the Himalayas, this is not the same as an endeavour to collect fairy tales per se, as attempted by the likes of Bastile, Perrault or the Grimms. As a result, a large part of the distinction between *lakshung* and *kyakshung* rests on the context in which they are told (longer stories that require more time, as opposed to shorter stories to be told over tea). This in itself merits further investigation: to what extent can we draw genre distinctions according to the context in which narratives are deemed appropriate to be told? In the light of proposals to animate, record and digitally disseminate fairy tales along with Himalayan stories from other genres, it is possible that exposure to new media may change the face of the Himalayan fairy tale. Moreover, the resulting accessibility of these tales to Western scholars can broaden our global understanding of the fairy tale genre itself.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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