Indian Numskull Tales
Form and Meaning

By

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INTRODUCTION*

The expression " numskull tale " is used as the " generic term for the absurdity, ignoramous, noodle and fool stories of the world, popular everywhere and occasionally overlapping with the trickster-buffoon and anecdote " (Leach 1972: 804). In the trickster tales, however, those tricked seem always to represent the normal world in terms of their actions, behavior and basic characteristics; this is not true of the numskull tale, which moves in a world full of " numskullness " and, therefore, does not obey the laws of the normal world, which in point of fact it seems to quite frequently reverse.

The fact that a numskull and a character of the trickster tale represent these opposing worlds leaves little doubt about the different generic qualities of these two popular varieties of oral narrative. Numskull tales, indexed by the Aarne-Thompson index under the numbers 1200–1349 and 1675–1724 (see Thompson 1961), form both an important part of the global oral tale repertoire and a significant genre in Indian folklore.

In this brief paper I shall examine some of the main characteristics of the numskull tales as represented in a small corpus of such tales that have been collected from various regions of India (Kashmir and its surrounding areas, Harayana, Rajasthan, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Assam, Sikkim, etc.). Due to space considerations I will restrict the study to the analysis of one subtype of numskull tales, namely, tales of that group of numskulls who behave abnormally and are usually harmed not by the cleverness or trickery of others, but

by their own follies.

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

My attempt here to delineate a general structural framework of numskull tales has been inspired by the work of V. J. Propp (see Propp 1968). Propp, as is well known, studied tales (especially the Märchen, or wonder tale) " according to the *functions* of its dramatis personae " (Propp 1968: 20). He considered " function " (the actions of the character or characters of a tale which have implications for the advancement of the plot (see Propp 1968: 21) as the fundamental building block or the molecule of a tale structure (Propp 1968: 78), or that part of the story which " serves as stable constant element in a tale, independent of how and by whom [it is] fulfilled " (Propp 1968: 21).

It is this molecule, the basic constant element of the tale, that Propp suggests is needed to measure the tale structure. *Function*, therefore, is a unit of measurement for analysis of tale-structure, in much the same manner as a molecule or an atom is a unit for the analysis of the physical phenomenon.[1]

Following these and other formulations of Propp, we find that numskull tales everywhere are structured according to a set of five functions, which will be discussed in the following section. Three of these five can be termed as *central* or *core* functions, and the remaining two as *peripheral* functions. By " central " or " core " functions I mean those functions that form the nucleus of the structure of such tales. These functions are the basic building blocks and are therefore to be found in all numskull tales. Peripheral functions, on the other hand, are, as their name suggests, optional functions. They always follow the central or the core functions, and never precede them; they therefore seem to be conditioned by the behavior of the central functions. It is these functions which, in the form of distinctive features, mark the subtypes of numskull tales. These functions and their order of occurrence is listed below.

Central or core functions:
1. Problem/task. The numskull hero is posed a problem or task, or confronts one accidentally.
2. Numskull hero's reaction. The numskull hero reacts to the problem by trying to solve it.
3. Contrary result. The numskull hero fails to solve the problem (or fails to apply a rule or code in an appropriate manner, thereby harming himself).

Peripheral or optional functions:

4. Mediation. A mediator (a kind of " donor ") enters the scene and helps the hero solve the problem.
5. Positive result. The problem is solved or the task is completed.

Let us explain these functions and their order of occurrence through a concrete example:

Ten villagers (numskulls) leave for the town. On their way they have to cross a stream. All of them jump in and swim across. On reaching the other side of the river they count themselves to check if everyone has crossed the stream safely [Function 1, Problem/task]. Each one of them counts and recounts and is shocked to find the number does not go beyond nine [Function 2, Numskull hero's reaction]. Convinced that one of them was washed away in the waters, all of them wail and weep for the lost one [Function 3, Contrary result]. Meanwhile, a traveler happens to pass that way, and finding the villagers wailing and weeping asks what the cause of their grief is. The villagers narrate the whole event. Without letting them notice what he is doing, the traveler counts them and finds ten. Then he asks them to throw down their caps one at a time for a final count [Function 4, Mediation]. They do this, and with each cap the traveler counts, " one, two . . . ten," then recounts, and shows them that all ten are alive [Function 5, Positive result]. The villagers do agree with him, but they still ask one another, " How did he do it? "

Most Indian numskull tales end with the hero making a fool of himself and harming himself through his own actions. Yet there are tales in which these disasterous results are overcome and the problems solved with the help of a mediator, as we have seen in the above example. Thus tales that end positively seem to have all five functions fulfilled, usually by two main characters—the numskull hero and the mediator, representing the two opposing realms, the realm of the numskulls and the realm of normal humans. These characters are sometimes called " tale roles " in the language of structural analysis (see Jason 1977). On the other hand, some numskull tales may have the first three functions—Problem/task, Reaction and Contrary result—as we can see from the following example:

In the land of Kottazham, there was a big mango tree standing at the brink of a pond. There were a lot of mangoes on that tree.

Now in Kerala, mangoes are preserved in salt, and a very good curry is made with them which goes well with rice. The men of the place wanted to put all the mangoes on the tree in salt, but they had no jar large enough for the purpose [Function 1, Problem/task]. So one of them, more resourceful than the rest, made a suggestion: " Why

not shake all the mangoes into the pond," he said, " and then put plenty of salt into the water? "   They all thought it was a very happy suggestion and agreed to carry it out.   They climbed the tree and shook the branches and the mangoes fell into the water.   Then they put a large quantity of salt into the pond [Function 2, Reaction].   Some weeks after this they decided that it was time to take the mangoes out.   They had been in salt water long enough.

So one of them tied a big jar around his neck and jumped into the pond, with the idea of taking as many mangoes as he could.   But the jar on his neck was soon full of water and he was drowned.   Those who waited for him on the bank thought that he was taking more than his share.   Otherwise he would have come up.   So another man also jumped in with his jar around his neck.   When he also did not come up, yet another jumped in.   Thus a good number of them were drowned that day [Function 3, Contrary result] (Jacob 1972: 57–58).

There are also tales in which the central or the core functions are repeated several times in order to make the tale longer and its structure more apparent.   Such tales usually conclude with contrary results, with the exception of a few cases in which the postponement of the function of mediation finally leads to a positive result.   This usually happens, as we shall see later, in the stupid son-in-law tale cycles, which are an important part of Indian numskull narrative repertoire.   Another type of well known numskull tales presents a chain of independent episodes in cyclic form.   The only link between the various episodes in such tale cycles is the common numskull hero.   Some of the best Indian examples of such tale cycles are *Sekh Cilli* or *Sekh Culia ke kisse* (" The stories of Sheikh Chilli or Sheikh Chulia "), *Mulla Nasruddin ke kisse* (" The stories of Mulla Nasruddin "), *Lalbujhakkad ke kisse* (" The stories of Lalbujhakkad "), from the Hindi-Urdu speaking regions, and *Paramanandayya Sisulu* (" Parmanandayya and his disciples ") from the Telugu speaking regions and surrounding areas.

CHARACTERS AND THEIR ACTIONS

Numskull tales have two main " tale roles," the numskull hero who always represents the non-normal (numskull) world, and the mediator, who represents the normal world.   The numskull is posed with a problem, or he confronts one, or is given a coded message which he tries to solve or decode.   The mediator is the character or entity that helps the hero to solve the problem, accomplish the task or decode a message. The mediator mediates between the numskull and the normal world; between the problem and its resolution and between a code and its correct message.   In the absence of a mediator the problem or the task

remains unresolved and the code misunderstood, thus causing frustration or even harm to the numskull hero.

The numskull characters in Indian tales represent non-urban groups of peasants, villagers and shepherds, who are shown in the tales as having less exposure to urban phenomena, to the technical superiority of the urban areas and their modernity. These heroes may also belong to different social or ethnic groups who, because of their particular ethnic affiliations, are looked down upon by the narrating community. In some tales we come across individual characters from the normal society whose behavior is non-normal and who behave like numskulls despite the fact that they do not belong to either of the two categories mentioned above.

The mediator in numskull tales, as noted above, always represents the normal world. He is usually shown in tales as a person of ordinary means or of low social status, such as a " stranger," a " traveler," a " petty thief," a female spouse or an elderly relative from the normal world. The mediator enters the numskull world temporarily, " illuminating " or correcting the non-normal behavior of the numskull individual or group, either by directly himself solving the problem for the numskull hero or by helping indirectly to solve his problem.

An interesting phenomenon in these tales is that through the normal/non-normal, wise/foolish, and ordinary/extraordinary diachotomies a kind of role reversal is suggested, by which a " wise man," or a leader of the numskull world, the person who holds the highest status in his own society, is equated to a person of ordinary or low status. " In this frame," writes Jason, " the man of low status symbolizes the lack of intelligence in the normal world and the wisdom in the numskull world. In contrast the leader symbolizes the folly in the numskull world and the wisdom in the normal world " (Jason 1972: 25). This can be expressed as follows:

	Normal World	Numskull World
Man of low status	Folly	Wisdom
Social leader	Wisdom	Folly

This explains why the mediator, who represents the ordinary in the normal world, stands in opposition to the numskull hero, despite that hero's high status in the non-normal world.

Jason further divides the actions of the numskulls into two groups: (a) actions which imply lack of knowledge of basic attributes of objects or basic technology, and (b) actions which reveal that the performer lacks the ability to apply non-deductive rules of inference (see Jason

1972: 25). This classification of Jason has achieved theoretical dimen-
sions. To begin with, it explains the basic structural paradigms of the
numskull tale which cause the role reversals and build the tale nucleus.
Indian data fully supports Jason's view. Numskull characters in Indian
tales are depicted as lacking knowledge about the basic attributes of
objects, about basic technology, and about some elementary logical
operations. All these attributes help maintain equilibrium in a normal
human society. Once this equilibrium is disturbed by lack of knowl-
edge, a non-normal world is created which is operated by non-normal
humans, or numskulls.

The following examples, drawn from a wide range of Indian num-
skull tales, support this view.

  i.   Animals are thought capable of laying eggs, and fruits capable of
       bearing animals (Andhra Pradesh).
  ii. Pumpkins are thought to be mare's eggs (Andhra Pradesh, AT1319).
  iii. Salt is sown in the field and numskulls wait for it to grow (Rajasthan,
       AT1200).
  iv. Numskulls try to preserve mangoes by dumping salt and mangoes
       together into a pond (Kerala, see example above).
  v.   Cotton is thrown into fire in order to mold it into ornaments
       (Kashmir).
  vi. Numskulls fail at counting their own number (Kashmir and
       Andhra Pradesh, AT1287; see example above).
  vii. Numskulls do not know that men with heavy jars tied to their necks
       can be drowned when thrown into a river, pond or sea (Kerala).
  viii. Numskulls do not know how to separate a woman's (or child's)
       hands that are holding flour or dough around a wooden or con-
       crete pillar (Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh).

Similarly, in tales which show numskulls as having a little knowl-
edge or awareness of the world around them, their behavior shows
a lack of appropriate application of the deductive or non-deductive
rules of inference. Deductive rules of certain activities or of decisions
are misunderstood, misapplied, or applied in an inappropriate manner,
in the wrong situation or context, thus bringing incorrect or reverse
results which disturb the equilibrium and cause numskull situations
which sometimes have harmful results. Consider the following ex-
amples:

  i.   Sheikh Chilli wants to send a bottle of perfumed oil to his wife
       by cable or telegram (Uttar Pradesh and surrounding areas).
  ii. A son-in-law trying to be sensible and relevant asks his father-in-

law, " Father, are you married? " (Kerala).

iii. A son-in-law told to sit at a high (respectable) place in his father-in-law's house climbs atop a cupboard (Kashmir, Kerala, AT1685).

iv. Certain codes and advice are followed literally despite their contextual or situational connotations. For example, a numskull horse-carriage driver is told by his master that he should watch carefully and pick up " things " that fall from the carriage while the master is riding, because on a previous occasion the numskull's stupidity cost the master a bag of money that fell while he was riding. The numskull agrees and collects all the feces thrown down by the horse, and presents it to his master.

THE NUMSKULL WORLD

Some questions that need to be explained before we attempt to decipher the meaning or messages hidden in these tales are what is meant by the " numskull world," where does it lie, and what makes it different from the normal world. Though the barriers between the normal and the numskull worlds are purely symbolic, they can nonetheless be discussed under the following three headings: spatial barriers, socio-ethnic barriers, and attitudinal or behavioral barriers. Let us consider each of these in turn.

Spatial barriers. Spatial barriers between the numskull and the normal worlds are maintained in oral tales in a three-dimensional manner: (1) Numskull settlements in European folklore are attributed to certain well-defined geographical locations such as Gotham in England, Chelm in Poland, Poshekhon in Russia, Schilda in Germany (see Jason 1972: 2; Leach 1972: 797). In India there are similar locations in various cultural regions, such as Bhainswala in Haryana, Shikarpur in Punjab, Bhogav in Uttar Pradesh, Kottazham in Kerala, Baro in Bihar and Aaluur and Tippanamapatti in Tamil Nadu; (2) numskull settlements with defined geographical locations with symbolic names such as " Tsotalhom " in Kashmir, or " Pedgav " in Maharashtra; and (3) annonymous numskull settlements symbolized by non-urban groups of " villagers," " peasants," " shepherds," etc, who are supposed to be less exposed to urban sophistication and modernity.

Socio-ethnic barriers. Numskull characters are always shown as belonging to a social or ethnic group different from the narrator's own. Urbanized social status and the technological advances projected symbolically through these social or ethnic groups always stand as barriers between the numskull and normal worlds. These barriers, as is well known, can be seen in a variety of folklore forms in addition to the numskull tale,

such as jokes or ethnic slurs and the like; in such examples, however, these barriers are broken by the process of reciprocity. In other words, a joke about Poles current among Jews, for instance, will be reciprocated by a similar joke about Jews told by Poles, and tales about Untouchables among Brahmins are equally balanced by tales about the Brahmins themselves. We have, on the other hand, no evidence to indicate that numskulls have created tales about characters from the normal world, depicting these people as " numskulls." The reason is very simple: " numskulls " do not *really* exist except in the minds of narrators and their creations. Poles, Jews or Brahmins exist both in reality and in oral and literary creations.

Behavioral barriers. The attitudinal or behavioral state of the narrating society as well as the numskull hero also separate the so-called normal world into the numskull and normal realms. In tales where the num-skull population is not represented by geographical or socio-ethnic characteristics, numskull individuals are identified within the narrating society itself at the level of family relations. These relations are dis-tributed between the numskull and non-numskull worlds on the basis of sex, age and the hierarchy these relationships communicate.

Thus at the level of sex we have a numskull spouse, most often a numskull husband. At the level of age, one often finds the stupid boy of normal parents. Similarly, at the level of kinship relations and at-titudes, the numskullness of the son-in-law is very well known in Indian folktales. Despite the symbolic high social status and the central place of the son-in-law in the Indian kinship system, the stupid son-in-law tales in India indicate the sensitive attitudes of both the son-in-law (numskull hero) and the normal narrating society which seems to identify itself with the girl's parents. A cursory psychological examination might reveal that both behave in the manner they do in the tales under certain psychological compulsions. Both the son-in-law and his wife's parents (considering these as representatives of the narrating society) seem to overcome certain complexes carried by their respective cultural roles. The son-in-law's superior position in his wife's parental home (it is here that his numskull behavior surfaces) is a role assigned to him by the culture, and this symbolic superior role makes him perform stupid actions. This reversal of roles of both the son-in-law and his opposites seems to substantiate the basic thematic dichotomies of numskull tales we discussed earlier.

The narrative society, on the other hand, overcomes its symbolic inferior position by depicting the son-in-law as a numskull in tales, something which cannot be done in real life no matter how strong the

desire to do it may be. This theme also tends to remind one that the symbolic special position of a son-in-law in Indian society is the result of strong and important kinship ties rather than of any personal trait of the son-in-law.

The numskull tale has not received the attention it deserves as a genre of oral narrative. Investigations of its generic qualities, such as its relationships with jokes, legends, humorous tales and trickster tales (all of which can result in multiple studies) are necessary, as are studies of the functional aspects and instructional value of this important form of oral narrative. For example, it seems that the numskull tale is structurally designed to mediate or overcome the inherent contradictions in human societies, be these contradictions psychological or purely logical. A numskull tale teaches, in a most effective manner, simple but fundamental rules of non-deductive logic and its application. In other words, the numskull tale explains the law of gravitation without bringing in Newton, or the Archimedes principle without discussing Archimedes.

Yet another important aspect of the numskull tale is the power of communication. Like some other forms of oral narrative, the element of humor generated by the violation of socially accepted norms, or the basic principles of the universe, and the consequences that follow result in these tales on the one hand reaffirming the strength of these norms and principles, and on the other the generation of humor both for entertainment and for the effective delivery of a message. The facts that numskull tales are highly structured and powerful carriers of messages, and also possess high potential in their delivery, are in need of further investigation. In this brief essay my aim was merely to introduce these aspects.

NOTES

* An earlier version of this paper was presented in a panel on " oral narrative " at the Third International Conference on South Asian Languages and Linguistics (SALL), held in Mysore 13–16 January 1982.

1. Propp was not only inspired by the discoveries made in the pure sciences in respect of the formulation of universal laws, but was also influenced by the terminology used by such sciences. In addition to using terms such as " molecule," " cell," " constant," " variable," etc., for example, he also adopted the term " morphology " to explain his mode of analysis. See Propp 1968: 20–24 and Chapter III for the number of functions and their qualities.

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