



The Social Contract and Symbolic Structure in Three Vietnamese Tales of the “Last Born”

In this study of how a last-born sibling in three Vietnamese folktales is cut off from a reasonable share of an inheritance after the death of the father, I argue that this tale type is structured to affirm the idea of a just social contract, and the motif of the last born tale type is affected by shifts in social structure away from a tradition of ultimogeniture. With the rise of a patriarchal system, the youngest was ousted and effectively disinherited. The youngest, who has little possibility of leading a happy life in a society which privatizes property and assigns it to the eldest, becomes a sympathetic figure and the ultimate beneficiary, in folktale, of power and happiness. By focusing on the contrapuntal depiction of the actions of the two brothers and the tale's allocation of appropriate rewards and punishments, I conclude that this depiction reflects a clear moral perspective on the notion of a just social contract and social attitude toward society's “unfortunates.”

KEYWORDS: Vietnam—folktale—last born—ultimogeniture—social contract

FOLKTALES, it is commonly assumed, are a product of the world view of a society at a particular point in time, and characters in folktales always express some aspect of life in that particular ancient historical era. There is also an assumption that “if new tales are composed, the social context must have a certain influence in shaping and determining the content of the new folktale” (NATHALANG 2004, 43). In other words, folktales are similar to a mirror reflecting the realities of life which are transferred into particular tales in the forms of motifs, structures, and plots. In some circumstances, however, the tales may challenge those realities and represent, to borrow Weston LA BARRE’s formulation, “the reversed mirror image of the rejected norm” (1970, 140). In order to investigate how folktales correspond with social construction and “how the folk use the lore” (THITATHAN 1989, 6), this article aims to explore the representations of social contracts and social customs in Vietnamese folktales by focusing on the motifs, structures, and plots of three tales about the eventual social and material triumph of a disadvantaged last born sibling: *The Carambola Tree* (*Cây khế*); *The Greedy Man and the Greedy Bird* (*Nhân tham tài nhi tử, diều tham thực nhi vong*); and *The Gold Cave and the Silver Cave* (*Hà rằm hà rạc*).¹

The social contract has long been a familiar political expression employed by Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Rawls, for example. The concept of the social contract can be defined generally as “the foundation of the true or authentic body politic (which) is held to be a pact or agreement made by all the individuals who are to compose it” (BOUCHER 1997, 37). The notion of the social contract in this paper, however, does not fully correspond to the political doctrine but is rather used in the sense of a customary law or a common law—in other words, an “unwritten” folk law which can shape the meaning of folktales and is hence a focus for investigation. The social contract reflected in folktales is thus distinct from written legal rules and is understood, according to legal anthropologist Cornelis Van Vollenhoven, as “a body of uncodified rules of conduct which are enforced by (organized) sanctions” (Van Vollenhoven, quoted in DUNDES 1995, 112).

Since Vietnam is structured from many different ethnic groups and each group has its own social institutions, communal relationships, and traditional customs, social contracts thus coincide with and are enclosed within a group’s own social organization. However, all groups share the notion of a social contract in the most

common sense, that is, “a set of general conventions and standards for every relationship and every social behavior which is self-consciously upheld as custom” (NGŨ 2000, 100). Rather than a system of rules enjoining people to do this and not do that, a social contract in Vietnamese society comprises social norms as customary modes of behavior, with special focus on morality and conduct. Such customary behaviors are often preserved in ritual, which may have the primary function of “inculcating the norms and values of the dominant ideology” (LANE 1981, 19), but may also preserve superseded norms and values as a trace. For example, in Vietnamese culture, there is a traditional custom in the Tết Thanh Minh festival falling in the spring which perpetuates a social contract between the living and the dead. During this festival, all family members visit their ancestors’ graves and give honor to the ancestors. People often pray before the ancestors, sweep the tombs, pull up surrounding weeds, and offer food, wine, and joss paper accessories. They not only burn incense at their ancestors’ tombs but also at nearby unvisited tombs, thus making the dead feel comfortable. The honor given to the dead by the living is a ritual custom reflecting moral obligation and social value, and by this means “the morality and well-being of the people” is fostered (KENDALL 1994, 166).

This article examines not only the evidence for the recognition of social contracts in folktales, but also identifiable social reactions to changes to elements of the contract during transmission, and, in particular, the significance of the representation of the figure of the last born in folktales. Behavior in folktales is characteristically shaped according to moral or natural “law,” that is, by an assumption that a good life is lived in accordance with the natural order, and hence, since natural teleology, virtue, and practical wisdom are emphasized, that certain actions are right or wrong in themselves (WOLFE 2003, 39–40). This sense of what is right might, however, clash with the social “law” which people are expected to obey. Furthermore, specific instances of conflict between moral law and social law, such as conflict about inheritance and property between an elder and a younger brother, may be seen to have a metonymic function.² This is because the effective instantiation of a privileged class and an underclass within a family potentially exemplifies a wider social division between the ruling upper class and the oppressed lower class, between the rich and the poor.

BROTHERS AS MORAL OPPOSITES IN
VIETNAMESE TALES ABOUT THE “LAST BORN”

Although Vietnam comprises fifty-four ethnic groups, the Kinh (Việt) people comprise around 90 percent, and Kinh culture is perceived to be the dominant national culture (NGUYỄN 2004, 24). This dominance has a major effect on understandings of the folktale tradition, since Vietnamese folktale is predominantly identified with versions of folktales circulating within the Kinh ethnic group. For example, in NGUYỄN Ỗng Chi’s folktale collection (2000), Kinh folktales are the primary focus while versions from other ethnic groups are relegated to a section designated *Dị bản* (variants). Likewise, in Nguyễn Thị Huế’s folktale collection

(2004), Kinh folktales are designated *Bản chính* (main versions) and makes up the primary corpus, while folktales of minority ethnic groups are supplementary and designated *Bản khác* (other versions). Folktales reproduced in text books and picture books for children are also Kinh versions. Because of the popularity and dominance of Kinh folktales in society, and because of the limited scope of an article, the focus of this study will be Kinh folktales, although I will draw some comparisons with the traditions of other ethnic groups where they throw light on the Kinh tales.

Although my study focuses on three representative tales, Kinh folktales about the last born are not limited to these three examples. However, the tales selected incorporate a comprehensive range of motifs found in tale types which reflect a social contract governing the practice of inheritance among siblings, and the three are closely matched structurally in that the plot catalyst in each is the division scene in which the elder sibling takes over the property and just leaves a small portion for the younger. Other versions attribute a contrapuntal moral perspective to the siblings, but instead of describing the unequal property division they begin the story at a later stage of the contradictory situation among siblings, when the elder is already rich and the younger is poor.

Each of the three tales relates that after the father's death, the elder son takes all the property and just leaves a small portion for the younger brother: that is, a thatch hut with a carambola tree in *The Carambola Tree*; a thatch hut and a poor field in *The Greedy Man and the Greedy Bird*; and an axe in *The Gold Cave and the Silver Cave*. In the first two tales, a huge bird comes to eat the fruit from the carambola tree or the rice in the poor field, and offers to repay the younger brother by taking him to an island where he can gather pieces of gold. The young man follows the bird's instruction to bring a bag of three spans, which will hold enough gold to make him rich. When the elder brother enquires about the younger's sudden wealth, he offers to exchange the thatch hut with the carambola tree or the poor field for his own property. The bird again visits and proffers the same reward, but the greedy elder brother takes a bag three times the size specified and collects as much gold as he can. In the case of *The Carambola Tree*, the bird drops him into the sea on the homeward journey because of his overweight bag, while in the case of *The Greedy Man and the Greedy Bird*, the brother is burnt by the sun because he forgets the bird's warning that they must leave the island before dawn. The moral law is doubly emphasized in *The Greedy Man and the Greedy Bird*, however, in a continuation of the tale in which the younger brother asks the bird to return to the island to retrieve the body of the elder. The bird thinks the elder's burnt body smells so good that it starts to eat it and, forgetting that it too must leave before dawn, is burnt up by the sun.

The third tale, *The Gold Cave and the Silver Cave*, realizes the same structure in a different way. Here, the younger brother, tricked out of his inheritance and left with nothing but an axe, becomes rich when he falls asleep in the forest and some monkeys, mistaking his sleep for death, throw him into a gold cave. The elder brother imitates the younger by borrowing his axe and pretending to fall asleep in the forest.

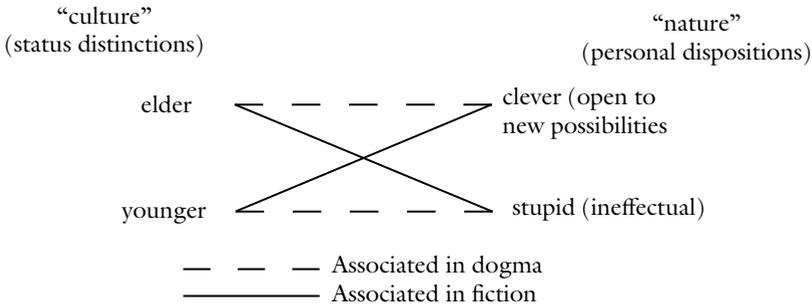
When the monkeys say they will throw him into the silver cave he speaks up and asks them to throw him into the gold cave. The monkeys are startled by the voice of a dead man and run away, while the man tumbles down the mountain and dies.

The theme of the three Vietnamese folktales centers on the two types of characters: the elder brother who is greedy and deceitful, and the younger who is honest and diligent but is cut off from a reasonable share in inheritance by the older brother after the father's death. Because the elder and the younger brothers are moral opposites, they react differently to the same situation and hence they gain differential consequences: the younger gains reward, and the elder receives punishment.

THE UNFORTUNATE YOUNGER BROTHER IN FOLKTALE TRADITION

Tales whose principle character is the youngest brother in relationship with his elder siblings occur widely in folktale traditions across the world. However, it does not mean that they all share the same plots, structures, and motifs. A simple plot difference, for example, is that Vietnamese tales are not subject to “the rule of three,” so that unlike a well-known Western tale such as the Grimms's *Three Feathers*, the Vietnamese tales work by contrasting two brothers rather than developing a climactic contrast in the last of three actions. The theme and plot of tales about siblings in some other cultures thus hinge on a different structure. They do not focus on the contrapuntal depiction of the moral perspective of the brothers as in Vietnamese folktales but emphasize how talented the youngest is. In some cultures, there are tales that center on the intelligence and prominence of the younger brother who rescues his elder from misfortune. There are also tales about a youngest brother who embarks on a quest, rescues a beautiful princess, marries the princess and thereby receives the greatest possible compensation for his lost inheritance—he inherits the throne. For example, in Kuranko folktales, elders are caricatured as being stupid and inflexible while the youngest brother is clever and flexible; in Dahomey culture, the cleverness is associated with the youngest (HERSKOVITS 1958, 90); Western folktales tend to favor the last born in intra-familial power struggles (SUTTON-SMITH and ROSENBERG 1970, 3). The cleverness and talent of the youngest brother in folktales in different parts of the world goes beyond what is ordinarily prescribed and tolerated as being the structurally marginal person in social life. In other words, the extra-social characteristic of the youngest sibling represents “the reversed mirror image of the rejected norm” (LA BARRE 1970, 40). There is an ideology or dogma that “knowledge and social values are associated with the elders” while “uncertainty and ignorance are associated with the junior generation” (JACKSON 1978, 346). The ambivalence of the figure of the last born and the birth order position in convention and folktale is succinctly encapsulated by Michael Jackson in the following figure, which illustrates how “folktale elaborates a formal contrast between status position on the one hand and personal capability on the other” (JACKSON 1978, 349).

As previously noted, not all folktales which depict the figure of the youngest brother belong to the same group as the three Vietnamese tales about the last



Based on original in JACKSON (1978, 356).

born. Since the theme of these Vietnamese tales concerns the opposition, conflict, and unfairness between the elder and the younger siblings, and the elder’s greed, deception, and betrayal when he sees his younger brother attain happiness, I will refer to these Vietnamese tales by a specific name, “the unfortunate last born tale type,” to distinguish them from others.

THE UNFORTUNATE LAST BORN TALE TYPE
AS A REFLECTION OF SOCIAL CONTRACT

The prominence of the youngest brother in folktales is a special phenomenon which attracted the interest of many early folk scholars, who have traced the motif back into history using ethnographic material about past culture and past social organization to locate the time and social contexts in which the figure of the last born is created in folktale traditions across the world. Such studies impart a special nuance to the last born tale type as a representation of “the reversed mirror image of the rejected norm” by linking it to a change in inheritance practices: the argument is that this tale type emerges from social contexts in which ultimogeniture has been a prevailing practice, or a significant option, and the tales preserve this vanished social custom as a trace.

Brunvand cites a number of folktale investigators, such as Andrew Lang, George Laurence Gomme, John Arnott MacCulloch, Macleod Yearsley, and Alexander Krappe, who have investigated the figure of the youngest brother or the youngest son in folktale. Lang was one of the first to argue that tales about the youngest brother have a connection with the ultimogeniture tradition (BRUNVAND 1959, 20). Similarly, Brunvand, when studying groups of the Norwegian Askeladden, “the ash-lad” tale, in which the youngest brother is despised by his elders but finally wins wealth and esteem, argues that there is a parallel between the figure of Askeladden (the youngest brother) and the practice of ultimogeniture. For a complete understanding of ultimogeniture practice, it is necessary to trace the tradition in detail.

Ultimogeniture, or “junior right,” is a kind of social practice of inheritance which shows preference for the youngest brother. This custom is known as

Borough English in England and Celtic regions, as *Maineté ou Juveigneurie* in Brittany and parts of northern France (Picardy and Artois) and as *Jungstenrecht* in Germany under Saxon law (MACCULLOCH 1949, 313). Ultimogeniture was also widespread in pre-revolutionary Russia and was known as *minorat*, in contrast with the *majorat*, or *primogeniture* (PROKHOROV 1977, 354).³

The rule of Borough English points out that “the youngest hath used to inherit the lands as sole heir to his father: and likewise the daughter, if he dies without issue male, the youngest daughter ought to inherit the same as sole heir to her father” (JAMES 1945, 339). In Russia, the youngest inherited the family dwelling but had duties of caring for his parents and unmarried sisters and helping his older unmarried brothers to establish separate households (FRAZER 2003, 178). HASLUCK (1946, 93–94) details this custom in North Albanian family practice: when the father of a family died, all property including the house, land, cattle was given to the youngest, while the elder sons had to move out. This is solemnly considered as a fair share. Property was divided into as many parts as there were sons and each moving son received his part to build himself a house. Thus ultimogeniture is not “a privilege but a natural course” which has its roots in the fact that the older brothers are normally separate from home while the youngest “never severs from the father’s root” (FRAZER 2003, 178). Hence, there is evidence that inheritance practice is not only “the way by which property is transmitted between the living and the dead,” but is also the way in which “interpersonal relationships are structured” (GOODY 1976, 1) since the family conflict described in folktales often arises from the circumstances of inheritance. In other words, inheritance is the prime factor affecting sibling relationship, determining the behavior and character of both the first born and the last born.

The linking of patterns of inheritance with patterns of domestic organization is a matter not simply of numbers and formations but of attitudes and emotions. The manner of splitting property is a manner of splitting people; it creates (or in some cases reflects) a particular constellation of ties and cleavages between husband and wife, parents and children, sibling and sibling, as well as between wider kin. (GOODY 1976, 3)

The explanation that the favored position of the youngest brother in folktale is derived directly from the ultimogeniture practice, however, is not satisfactory since the question of why only the last born is a popular and sympathetic figure in folktales still remains, but not his elder brother(s), since there is also a primogeniture tradition in human history, and why the last born is characterized by his good nature while his brother(s) are always greedy, mean, and selfish.

Although folktales are one form of folk life and a reflection of society, they are not a perfect correspondence to social reality. They are something more than a snapshot of representative events in social reality, but convey the perspective of common people in relation to that reality, and transmit their dream of another world in which their needs and wishes are satisfied. As YEARSLEY (1924, 217) and JAMES (1945, 339–40) have pointed out, the sympathy with the last born develops

as the patriarchy gradually becomes prominent and the right of inheritance is given to the eldest brother. Although the change does not evolve immediately, the eldest brother is eager to claim his new right and so the youngest brother is ousted, despised, and disinherited. MACCULLOCH remarks that tales about the last born “were invented to stem the tide of the new law; at all events they became immensely popular, and long after the time of the conflicting heirships passed, the formula of the despised but clever youngest son was attached to new stories, and became almost the inevitable introduction to a vast series of folktales” (1949, 377). Whether or not the eldest brother asserts his claim and concomitantly develops contempt for his youngest brother cannot be fully demonstrated. However, there might be an assumption that some folktales about the last born may occur in the vague time during which ultimogeniture disappears but the new right, primogeniture, is not established. In other words, some folktales about the last born may appear when the elder is not fully given the right of inheritance. This assumption might be demonstrated by the Vietnamese folktale *The Gold Cave and the Silver Cave* since the elder brother does not automatically inherit the property but must resort to a trick to deprive the younger of a fair share of their inheritance, and hence the distribution is perceived to be contrary to social practice or natural justice. Therefore, this variation might be taken as a reflection of the transition from ultimogeniture or a system of equal property distribution to a primogeniture system.

Another plausible argument has been put forward by Eleazar Meletinski. According to Meletinski, the motif of the unfortunate last born is a particularity of some specific nations that experienced the ultimogeniture tradition. More specifically, it is not simply created when ultimogeniture holds sway, but emerges with a changing of social conditions, when the position of the last born as the heir gradually disappears. With the rise of a patriarchal (and hierarchical) system, the youngest was ousted, possibly despised, and effectively disinherited. To uphold the youngest who has little possibility of leading a happy life in a society which privatizes property and assigns it to the eldest, he becomes a sympathetic figure and the ultimate beneficiary, in folktales, of power and happiness. That is to say, heightening the figure of the youngest brother in folktales is not because they had received any privileges, but because they were placed at a disadvantage in that historical process. The unfortunate last born folktales originated from such a background.

The three Vietnamese folktales which are the primary focus of this article are overt examples of a type of tale in which the youngest son is placed at a disadvantage in comparison with his elder brother in the division of the family legacy, and, as pointed out, one of these tales does not assume the practice of primogeniture. It may be argued, then, that the unfortunate last born tale type in Vietnam arose out of the social structure of societies that had formerly practiced ultimogeniture (or at least some form of equitable property division), providing fairness for the youngest son. That the incident of the poor younger sibling deprived of an inheritance is deeply embedded in those tales once again confirms that it is a significant pattern that shapes the structure of this tale type.

THE UNFORTUNATE LAST BORN TALE TYPE
AS A REFLECTION OF VIETNAMESE SOCIAL SYMBOLIC STRUCTURE

As argued earlier in this article, unfortunate last born folktales carry a traditional view of social transmission. It is nonetheless clear that the incident of unequal division of the inheritance between siblings in this tale type reveals a number of social constructions from past centuries. The first trace can be found at the beginning of the three tales, where the reason for the legacy division is given as the marriage of the elder brother, prompting a desire to live separately from his younger sibling.⁴ Thus, the appearance of the elder's wife at this point in the unfortunate last born tales is not redundant but plays an important role in exerting influence on the sibling relationship. As PROPP has pointed out, “In folklore everyone is assigned a role in the narrative and there are no extra characters. All will act, and only in terms of their action do they interest the listener” (1984, 22). Before he marries, the elder brother is diligent and lives in peace with the younger. The figure of the elder changes when he gets married; in other words, when he has his own family. This motif reflects a Vietnamese social trait in which common property becomes private, confirming the appearance of a private property regime which cracked and broke down the communal family's economic unity. It is characteristic of Vietnamese family organization that there is no extended family or clan, such as the Chinese model, but “a nuclear family of parents and children, with occasional other relatives attached” (WHITMORE 1984, 299). Accordingly, there is no impediment to establishing separate households or dividing family property (TA 1981, 101). Therefore, once a son marries he can take his own property and establish his own household; transferred into the last born tale type, this is seen when the appearance of the sister-in-law leads to the property division in which the younger is disadvantaged in the division of the family legacy.

The unfortunate last born tale type in Vietnam further reflects a specific trait of a patriarchal culture. The Vietnamese family follows “the Confucian ideals of patrilocal residence, patrilineal descent, and patriarchal authority structure” (HIRSCHMAN and NGUYEN 2002, 1063). Some ethnographers, however, contend that rather than being a patrilineal kinship—that is, a social model comparable to the Confucian cultural heritage that prevails in East Asian countries such as China and Korea—Vietnamese family structure is based on a bilateral kinship system which originated in Southeast Asian social practices (HICKEY 1964; LUONG 1989; HIRSCHMAN and VU 1996). Keith W. TAYLOR has pointed to bilateral tendencies in Vietnamese society and how in these the Vietnamese social system successfully resisted the patrilineal style of the Chinese structure (1983, 13, 34, 36, 39, 175–78, 130). In his fieldwork in a village in Northern Vietnam, LUONG observed that a Vietnamese family of five generations living under the same roof held to patrilineal and patrilocal cultural ideals. However, at the same time, he emphasizes the importance of maternal relatives and the primary importance of nuclear family relations. He concludes that neither a patrilineal model nor a bilateral model does full justice to the complexity of Vietnamese kinship patterns (1989, 742). The social kinship

and social model in Vietnam are assumed to be quite flexible as some studies reveal Vietnamese living arrangements do not always conform to Confucian residence rules, depending on the availability of housing and land (HICKEY 1964). However, on the basis of a recent study, HIRSCHMAN and NGUYEN suggest that the idea that “patrilocal customs were not the dominant cultural pattern in Vietnam now appears to be premature” and show that “patrilocal remains a central and pervasive feature of Vietnamese family structure” (2002, 1063). Even under the Lê Dynasty, the realm in which women have a higher status and are “entitled to a number of personal rights and extensive property interests” (TA 1981, 136), “Vietnamese society has (also) taken on the characteristic of a patriarchal organization” (TA 1981, 100) and the position of the male is dominant. It follows, then, that retellings of the unfortunate last born tale type are much more likely to be contextualized within a patriarchal than a bilateral structure, and hence the position of disadvantage occupied by younger brothers is apt to remain pivotal in the tale.

In patriarchal society, the father, a representative of the patrilineal line, is entrusted with the authority to control and protect the whole family. The elder brother is given this power after the father’s death. This power was codified during the Vietnamese Lê Dynasty amongst the rules and laws set out in the Lê Code, which includes the notion of *huong hỏa*, land for incense and fire—“the subtraction of a certain fraction of land or income from the estate of a dead person for the purpose of supporting temple rites for the deceased” (WOODSIDE 1988, 43). According to article 388 of the Lê code,

When the father and the mother have died intestate and left landed property, the brothers and sisters who divide this property among themselves shall reserve one twentieth of this property to constitute the *huong hỏa* [incense and fire] property which shall be entrusted to the elder brother: the remainder of the property shall be divided among them. Those who are children of the secondary wives or the female serfs shall have smaller parts than those of the principal wife.

(TA 1981, 123)

Patriarchal agricultural society allocates a large amount of property to the eldest, who will stay in the parent’s house, take over the family’s tradition and also protect the family’s property. The youngest usually has to move out, and receives the smaller part after marriage. By passing the *huong hỏa* land to the eldest son and its connection with the concept of rituals for the dead, the Vietnamese state attempted to restructure indigenous family relationships with a focus on patrilineality and primogeniture (WHITMORE 1984, 1985, 1997). This custom still persists in modern Vietnamese society since the eldest son usually stays with his parents after he marries and bears the responsibility to venerate his parents as well as his ancestors after the parents die, while other sons establish independent households after their marriages (DO 1991, 73).

Hence, in the unfortunate last born tale type, the right of the elder to divide property ironically reflects the birth-order position in a family within feudal patriarchal society. In other words, the relationship between siblings in this tale type

reflects the model for societal roles since the eldest has the right to decide everything (the eldest can replace the father) and the younger brother is supposed to obey and respect the elders (JAMIESON 1993, 17). In any family, under patriarchy, there was no equal right between elder and younger siblings, as was also the case between children and parents, husband and wife (JAMIESON 1993, 18). For example, in family activities such as sharing a meal, the hierarchical relation is also symbolized in that the senior has the right to start the meal and any junior who starts eating without permission of the elders is disrespectful (LUONG 1984, 299). Thus the notion of inferior status is determined and governed by both the practices of patriarchal society and the rule of primogeniture.

The argument that the last born tale type has a close relationship to inheritance practices in patriarchal society is strengthened if comparison is made with folktale tradition in some minority ethnic groups in Vietnam which are not organized according to patriarchal structures but follow instead matriarchal or bilateral practices. Accordingly, the last born tale type does not exist in the folktale traditions of ethnic groups such as the Rade and Jarai (both of which follow matriarchal practice) and the Sedang (an ethnic group in transition from matriarchal practice to bilateral practice). This point is significant because within the matriarchal society the right of inheritance belongs not to sons but to the youngest daughter (ANG 1998, 132)—that is, they practice female ultimogeniture; and a characteristic of the kinship structure of a Sedang family is that there is no birth-order position within a family. When it is necessary to choose a son to be responsible for the family or to take care of old parents, the choice falls upon the one who is most agile and able, regardless of whether he is the elder or the younger (ANG 1998, 132). That there appears to be no conflict amongst siblings caused by inheritance practices may explain the absence of the last born tale type in those minority ethnic groups in Vietnam.

It is important to note that the motif of the small legacy ceded to the younger in the Vietnamese folktales involves not just the meagerness of the legacy but rather objects of significance which change the younger's fate. On the one hand, they are valueless: a thatched hut with a carambola tree in the front yard (*The Carambola Tree*), a thatched hut and some poor fields (*The Greedy Man and the Greedy Bird*), and an axe (*The Gold Cave and the Silver Cave*). However, on the other hand they prove to be very valuable, because they not only help the younger brother to change his fate and become wealthy, but more importantly, they are productive objects or the symbols of labor. Thus, it can be assumed that common people from the past recognized the important of productive objects in human life. Viewed in this light, we may also consider that the younger brother is not helped by the agent (the bird or the monkey) to change his fate but by the products of his labor.⁵ Without hard work, the younger brother would never have the sweet star fruit or a good rice crop to feed the bird that later brings him a fortune and makes him wealthy. Therefore, the image of the bird or the monkey is a device created by folk narrators to fulfill human aspirations, as a function of Vietnamese folktales is to

offer assurance that people of lower socio-economic status who are upright and hard-working merit an improvement in their conditions (NGUYỄN 2000, 36).

In the case of *The Gold Cave and the Silver Cave*, the audience may wonder about the significance of the axe since this incident has no structural function in the narrative. The younger brother became rich because he was thrown into the gold cave by monkeys who mistook him for a dead body whilst he was sleeping. At this point, the presence of the axe is not mentioned and it seems to be quite unimportant. However, if this incident is meaningless, why does the elder brother borrow the axe from his younger brother?

This incident recalls a folktale of the H'mong—a minority ethnic group in Vietnam (NGUYỄN 2004, 580): an orphan child who has nothing except a small knife sees a great tree and decides to cut it down, using only his small knife, in order to earn his livelihood. A hawk flies past, and, observing this pitiful situation, tells the orphan to sew a square bag and give it to the hawk. When the hawk returns the bag to the orphan it is full of gold and silver. A rich man in town greedily desires to increase his wealth by emulating the orphan, and so he kills his parents in order to become an orphan and goes to the forest, where he pretends to be cutting down a tree with a small knife. The hawk again offers to help the rich man and again tells him to sew a square bag, but, motivated by greed, the rich man now asks to accompany the hawk to the moon to take silver and to the sun to take gold. The consequence is that the rich man was burnt to death by the sun because, absorbed in gathering gold, he forgot an interdiction, articulated by the hawk, that the task must be completed before sunrise.

Just as the rich man in this tale kills his parents simply to restructure his situation—that is, he wanted his condition in life to be isomorphic with that of the orphan child—so in *The Gold Cave and the Silver Cave*, the reason the elder brother borrows the axe from his younger brother is that he wants to disguise himself so that his condition appears to be isomorphic with that of his younger sibling, so that he appears to be a poor, hard-working laborer. The detail of the axe therefore is not meaningless but rather plays the same role in the narrative structure as the incident of the carambola tree or the poor field in the other tales.

THE UNFORTUNATE LAST BORN TALE TYPE AS A REFLECTION OF MORAL LAW

It appears to me that analyses of those folktales which show preference to the last born character above all demonstrate that the tales perform the consequences of cultural and social change. In other words, elements of social structure and social attitude are clearly reflected in tales about the last born and as such the tales confirm Fischer's contention that "any theme which is prominent in the folktales of a group is the subject of considerable conflict in real life" (FISCHER 1963, 262).

In the unfortunate last born tale type, the older brother is always the bad character in contrast with the younger brother. In fact, characters in folktales all over the world are "either altogether good or altogether bad, and there is no evolution

of character” (OPIE and OPIE 1974, 15). That is to say, there is never an alternation or hesitation between the good and the bad within one character, but rather characters in folktales are invariably constructed as mono-characters.

The moral lack or failure of the elder is described directly at the beginning of the story, that is, in the account of the dividing of the property. In *The Carambola Tree* and *The Greedy Man and the Greedy Bird*, the greed of the elder brother is portrayed, while in the *The Gold Cave and the Silver Cave*, the elder is not only greedy but also cunning. The division scene in this particular tale hinges on a paronomasia in the language of the Vietnamese text. The elder tells his younger brother that whatever items of property are gendered as *cái* (feminine gender) will belong to the elder whereas anything gendered as *đực* (male gender) will belong to his younger brother. The younger, out of youthful naivety, accepts the agreement. Consequently, all of the inheritance such as the house (*cái nhà*), the table (*cái bàn*), the chair (*cái ghế*), and so on... belong to the elder, apart from an axe (which the younger brother refers to as *đực rựa*), which thus belongs to the younger. In Vietnamese, *đực rựa* is a compound meaning “male,” where *đực* is not an article like *cái* (“*cái*” in Vietnamese in the context of this tale is an article as “the” or “a/an” in English). So *rựa* is a homonym in the word *đực rựa* (male) and *cái rựa* (an axe). Therefore the younger brother uses *đực rựa* to refer to “an axe” to get the only property that he may take.

In all three tales the contrapuntal depiction of the action of the two brothers is also clearly exposed when the elder and the younger brother are put in the same situation to meet the same creatures. The range of specific motifs in the elder brother’s encounters precisely duplicates those motifs in the episode detailing the younger brother’s encounters. Both meet the same bird, sew a bag, and go to the gold island (*The Carambola Tree*; *The Greedy Man and the Greedy Bird*); both of them meet monkeys and are brought to a cave (*The Gold Cave and the Silver Cave*). It is important to realize that this kind of narrative follows a bipartite structure in which there is a structural parallel between the first half and the second half of the narrative, in that the elder brother mimics and repeats the action of his younger brother. However, this is unsuccessful repetition because they behave differently in the same situation. While the younger brings a three-span bag to carry the gold, the eldest brings a nine-span bag (*The Carambola Tree*); while the younger takes only a moderate quantity of gold and quickly returns, the elder becomes so consumed by his greed for gold that he forgets the interdiction about staying too long (*The Greedy Man and the Greedy Bird*). Through this contrast, the nature of each character is exposed, and the fate of each character is determined, reflecting the notion of a just social contract; that is, the younger brother is rewarded and the elder meets his well-deserved fate. His death is caused by no one but by his own actions; in other words, the character himself creates his fate. Moreover, the pattern of binary structure that shapes this tale type is an affirmation of transcendent meaning, that is “good fortune can only come if it is not sought” (DUNDES 1962, 173). The greedy brother fails because his action is contrived while the younger often meets the donor by chance. Thus, in the Vietnamese folktales about the last born, virtue is aligned with the dispossessed in an important sociocultural message

underlying the moral contrast between the siblings and metonymic of a more general contrast between good and bad, compassion and hostility, rich and poor—and hence, happiness and unhappiness.

The moral law is also depicted in the ending of *The Greedy Man and the Greedy Bird*. Basically, *The Greedy Man and the Greedy Bird* shares the same plot with *The Carambola Tree* but has an extended part which describes how the younger brother, having had no news from his elder for some time, asks the bird to go back to the island and retrieve the body of the elder. The bird finds that the elder's burnt body smells so good that it starts to eat it, forgets the temporal interdiction about returning, and is burnt by the sun. On one hand, the extended part emphasizes the message that greed will lead to a bad fate regardless of whether it is an attribute of a human or animal. On the other hand, the extended part once again depicts the good behavior of the younger brother, since his attempt to give his elder brother a proper burial conforms with another moral obligation in Vietnamese culture and thence a ritual which affirms the norms and values of a dominant ideology of family. Kinh people have an adage that goes, "At death lay all to rest."

The topic of property division is a popular subject in Vietnamese folktales, in which it is either described directly or indirectly, and the outcome usually entails wealth for the youngest. This outcome is precisely in contrast with the beginning which portrays the younger brother's poverty. In particular, the younger brother in Vietnamese folktales never becomes a king while the last born in folktales from other cultures, for example, European folktales, besides receiving wealth, also receives supreme power, inherits the throne and marries the princess (as in *The Sleeping Queen* (Italian), *The Golden Goose* (German), *The Three May Peaches* (French), or *The King of England and His Three Sons* (English), among many others). Perhaps the figure of the last born in Vietnamese folktales does not experience marvelous and difficult adventures like the last born who appears in the folktales of other cultures because the reward that characters receive always corresponds to their deeds and achievements. The reward for the youngest brother in folktales from other cultures is correlative not only with the hope of seeking fortune at the beginning of the tale but also with the protagonist's talent, feats of arms, and the trial he has overcome in order to fulfill his quest. That is to say, "the values associated with daily activity and the acts taken as a means of rendering those values satisfying are strongly ritualized and meaningful in themselves" (APTER 1961, 86–87). The way one does a thing is as important as the end to be achieved, because the way is validated by the culture. Thus, these different endings in Vietnamese and other cultures' folktales are affected by the social concepts and social ideologies of different societies.

CONCLUSION

Focusing on tales in which the principal character has the role of an unfortunate last born, I have explored how these tales reflect concepts of a social contract, and the extent to which changes in or breaches of social contracts shape

the tales' attitudes toward the "unfortunates." By demonstrating the historical and social basis for the prominence of the figure of the unfortunate last born in folktale traditions across the world, I have pointed out the relationship of folktales to social structures, including how this tale type has developed in response to social changes. From an analysis of the scene of the division of property in three Vietnamese folktales about the unfortunate last born, I have attempted to infer the evidence for a shift in social construction and social order towards a patriarchal society, and thence to identify how the behavior of folktale characters is determined by the different family roles they occupy at a time when family organization has undergone change. In implying a moral perspective more enduring than the changing practices of a society, the unfortunate last born tale type deals with an important issue in cultural values: an implicit social contract which distinguishes between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, and the allocation of appropriate rewards and punishments to those behaviors that suggests a positive social attitude toward the "unfortunates" and calls for a more negotiative implementation of property distribution.

NOTES

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1. The versions of the three tales examined here are found in NGUYỄN (2004).

2. Metonymy is a figure of speech in which a part of something stands for the whole by means of an overlap of literal and figurative function. For example, when the younger brother in *The Carambola Tree* inherits only a thatched hut and a meager portion of poor land, these objects are literal attributes of the inheritance, but they also stand for his now impoverished circumstances. As here, metonymic functions usually depend on culturally determined meanings, such as the linking of a thatched hut with a rural underclass: it is a metonymy for the underclass (see STEPHENS 1992, 65–67, 131–32).

3. FRAZER also cites "the existence of ultimogeniture tradition in Southwestern China and adjacent areas of Burma and India" (2003, 180).

4. Marriage can also be seen as a key rite of passage as it both confirms the adulthood of the man and, in principle, with the arrival of a wife the first born becomes head in another hierarchy (man-woman).

5. One of the Vietnamese fables tells of a farmer who, being about to die, wanted his sons to be knowledgeable about the farm, so he summoned them and said that there was a treasure buried under the farm. After he died, his sons took plows and mattocks and dug up the entire farm. They did not find any treasure, but the farm paid them back with a greatly increased harvest. Thus they learned that man's greatest treasure consists in work (BUI 2000, 307).

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