Folklore and Contemporary Mass Media: An Assessment with Special Reference to Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The terms “Folk” and “mass” are considered to be categorically opposite. Although it is said that the folk ceased to exist when the mass arises, the return of folklore in mass media tells a different story. On the topic of the relation between folklore and mass media in contemporary societies three terms that have been in use in folklore scholarship can be identified, namely: ‘fakelore’, ‘folklure’ and ‘folklorismus’ In spite of the differences among them, the terminology reveals that both media studies and folklore studies have reached a meeting point of a shared phenomenon. In analyzing this new phenomenon and prominently challenging the idea of the death of the folklore in the age of mass media, in 1994, American folklorist Linda Dégh, described the complex coexistence between the two (Dégh 1994). This paper is intended to examine the relation between folklore and mass media in contemporary Sri Lanka, mainly deploying Dégh’s theoretical perspective. A sample of media materials that significantly exemplify this complex coexistence will be analyzed and tested against the hypothesis: “mass media and folklore in contemporary Sri Lanka are in convergence of a complex process of telling and re-telling creating new sites of mass/folk lore”.

Key Words: Folk, Mass, Films, TV commercials, TV serials

Running Head: FOLKLORE AND MASS MEDIA IN SRI LANKA
Introduction

Three terms are in vogue to explain the relationship between folklore and mass media in folklore scholarship: ‘fakelore’, ‘folklure’ and ‘folklorismus’. The term ‘fakelore’, coined by the American folklorist Richard M. Dorson, is defined by him as “the presentation of spurious or synthetic writings under the claim that they are genuine folklore” (quoted in Dundes 1989, 40). Sullenberger offers a succinct definition of ‘folklure’ as “the calculated association of folkloristic concepts with manufactured products, usually through one form or another of the media, in the sole interest of commercial gain” (Sullenberger 1974, 53). ‘Folklorismus’ is “the adaptation of folklore and tradition” (Newall 1987, 131). In spite of the differences among these terms, the terminology reveals that media and folklore studies have reached many a point of convergence.

In addition, the theme has a direct link with the discussion on the difference between folklore and masslore. Although there has been attempts to mark a clear-cut difference between folklore and masslore (Rysan 1971), it is arguable whether they exist separate isles anymore, especially in the context of exposure to mass media. Whenever a folkloric material is adapted and retold in mass media it becomes a masslore and causes to generate masslore.

Methodology

This is a textual analysis of a sample of media texts collected from the contemporary Sri Lankan media sphere. The sample consists of films, TV serials and TV commercials that have folkloric connotations.
Studies on Folklore and Mass Media

Studies on the encounter between folklore and mass media date back to the 1960s. Alan Dundes’ “Advertising and Folklore” (1963) and Tom Burns’ “Folklore in the Mass Media” (1969) are important forerunners in this regard though they vary in their aim, scope, and methodology. Scholars from all over the world have brought about convergence between the fields of folklore and media, (Anagnostou 2006; Baker 2005; Booth 1995; Clements 1974; Danielson 1979; De Surmont 2008; Dégh 1994; Handoo 2000; Hoffmann 1965; Kononenko and Kukharenko 2008; Koven 2003 and 2008; Lutgendorf 2012; McClenon and Edwards 1996; Motley, Henderson and Baker 2003; Okleshan, Baker and Mittelstaedt 2000; Newton 2010; Otero 1999; Rajgopal 1998; Staemmler, 2005; Sullenserger 1974; Tatira 2001; Wood 2006) though it has never been a concerted effort.

In understanding the nature of these studies it is important to summarize few of them. Rather than following a chronological order I would like to begin with a recent study. In her paper “Folklore and Advertising: An Examination of Traditional Themes and Motifs in British Twenty-First-Century Television Advertising Campaigns”, Victoria Louise Newton analyses a sample of advertisements collected through recordings of twenty-four hours of television broadcasting in the United Kingdom over two consecutive weekends in March 2006 (2010). Her paper explores two aspects of folklore and advertising. It offers some suggestions about the classification of folklore in advertising, examining both structure-based and motif-based approaches, and considers the wider aspects of the use of traditional themes and motifs in advertising, analyzing the reasons for their use, the nature of their appeal, how the use of folklore in advertising is being employed and developed to meet the needs of a changing market.
Depending on the definition of motifs presented by Jan Harold Brunvand, she identifies the patterns of appearance of motifs in the advertisements in the United Kingdom as the table below depicts:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Diversity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other World</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>19.8%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Folktale characters/ imagery</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magical helpers</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking birds/animals</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauty/youth remedies</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magical product</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impossible task</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humans controlled by magical objects</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role reversal</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shape shifters</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>10=</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demons exorcised</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>10=</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enchanted objects</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>10=</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Newton 2010, 52)

This chart shows that during the selected time period, 202 advertisements with folkloric elements were aired. Out of these 202, 40 advertisements have used the folkloric elements of ‘other world’; in terms of percentage, it amounts to 19.8. Being the highest number, it is ranked the first. This element has appeared in 12 different forms. Accordingly, folkloric elements of ‘shape shifters’,
‘demons exorcised’ and ‘enchanted objects’ are ranked the last as they each has appeared in only 4 (2.0%) advertisements out of the total 202.

In analyzing these data she concludes that the folkloric advertisements appeal because they bring together two different modes of entertainment (television and folklore), which combine to capture the attention and imagination of the consumer/audience. As folkloric elements “tap into a deep-seated collective knowledge of folktales learnt in childhood” (Newton ibid, 57), they bear the potential of holding the customers’ attention which could finally result in buying the particular product advertised. As such, the use of folkloric themes in advertising becomes a means of addressing the most intimate sentiments.

“The advertisements remind people of a world that is remote from our everyday lives, which, depending on the fashions of society at the time, might be images of an idealized past, future or, more directly, a world reminding them of the fairytale land of their childhood, when everything seemed much simpler, magic could happen, good fairies could help people with their lives, and people could become more beautiful, healthier, have cleaner houses, better cars, and live a kind of utopian existence” (Newton ibid, 57).

Thus advertisements, by exploiting folkloric elements, find a way to connect consumer products with the deep rooted collective knowledge of the people.

In a study titled “Folklore Studies and Popular Film and Television: A Necessary Critical Survey”, Mikel J. Koven presents a survey of the literature on folklore in film and television. At the end of a detailed discussion that covers a considerable number of studies that have been tried out in the field, Koven concludes that looking for folkloric motifs and tale types in popular (fiction) films and television have tended to dominate the research – whether from myth, Märchen, legend, or other folkloric sources. He adds that these studies can be
divided into two categories: those that suffice to identify the folklore within and those that look to analyze the changes in the story's meanings when transferred/adapted/translated from one medium to another. “Next to the "motif-spotting" research”, he says, “the next most popular (or rather, prolific) interstice between folkloristics and popular-culture studies is fan ethnography” (Koven 2003, 190). His suggestion to the folklorists is that as there are many aspects yet to be explored regarding the relation between folklore and popular films and television, and as popular cinema still remains tangential and an adjunct to the main tenants of folkloristics, it is time to think about popular cinema and television and their relevance to folklore studies (ibid, 190).

In another study, which focuses on proverbs in Zimbabwean advertisements, Liveson Tatira explores the ways in which proverbs and other witty sayings have been "liberated" and disseminated in Zimbabwe through the mass media (2001). Analyzing the continuous presence of proverbs in advertisements in Zimbabwe, he makes the strong point that the use of proverbs adds an authenticity to advertisements as proverbs are considered to be truths coming out of real life experience and tested by past generations. Further, they are advices to be accepted without questioning (ibid, 231-32).

In exploring the folkloric/mythological linkages in popular Indian films, Jawaharlal Handoo points out that irrespective of the languages they are produced in, popular films in India are more or less like “modern fairy tales” (2000, 213). In his observation, this similarity can be found both in story-line and structural levels. “The magic of the myth and the fairy tales has not died out completely”, he adds, “but survives in the changed forms in the Indian popular cinema” (ibid). According to Handoo, there can be deciphered four broad categories in popular Indian cinema which seem to operate on folklore: full myth films, half myth films, mythic theme films, and fairy tale pattern films. The difference between full myth films and half myth films is that while the
first incorporates traditional myths of folktales or their national or original versions without changing basic plot structure, the latter imposes myth or the traditional narrative on a non-traditional plot-structure or vice versa. Mythic theme films “represents such films which borrow one or many mythic motifs and use them according to the needs of the plot-structure, which otherwise is completely non-mythic and modern”, according to Handoo (Ibid). Fairy tale pattern films are popular films, those having a comparable fairy tale structure. The hero after facing many tests and defeating the villain, tracing and marrying the heroine is the deep rooted fairy tale structure in these films.

“The logic of the fairy tale pattern: from disequilibrium to equilibrium is an essential feature of such films… Thus the fairy tale, if not in its entirety, but in terms of structural frame and action patterns seems alive and thriving in one form or the other in modern Indian celluloid phenomenon. That these patterns and structures are still meaningful and relevant to Indian mind and society, and in fact form an important aspect of Indian mass culture is further supported by the recent phenomenon in the real political life of the same society which has accepted many celluloid heroes as political personalities who have or are shaping the political destiny of the land” (ibid).

The above discussed studies, which represent a sample of a considerably large number of works, depict how the folklorists have attempted to explain the relation between folklore and mass media from different viewpoints, perspectives, and are working with different methods and materials. However, American folklorist Linda Dégh’s American Folklore and the Mass Media (1994) is considered to be the first book-length treatment of the theme. Although her work itself gets limited in being “American” in its title, her attempt to theorize the relation between folklore and mass media has a wider global relevance. As a theoretical background to my observations on the relation
between mass media and folklore in a Sri Lankan context, I would like to recollect the basic theoretical assumptions of her book.

**Linda Dégh on Folklore and mass media**

Dégh’s approach towards understanding the relation between folklore and mass media significantly starts with an attempt to redefine “folklore” itself. Recollecting the ideas of German folklorist Rudolf Schenda, she points out that he “never separated the lore from the folk, nor did he speak of an independent and superior oral tradition” (Dégh *ibid*, 1). Hailing the Schenda’s disengagement in the “euphoric enthusiasm and worshipful compassion for the folk that is so common in the works of professional folklorists”, Dégh says, “...his pioneering approach to narratives and narration in the frames of social communication of culture is far from romantic; it is a model for studying folklore in society” (*ibid*). Further, in establishing the foundation for her argument, Dégh summarizes the ideas of Rudolf Schenda as follows:

“For him, the folk was never an idealized rural isolate unwittingly preserving national values but rather a collaborative product of negotiations between social classes... Folklore thus is the product of an ongoing historical process that consolidates the interaction of literary and oral, professional and nonprofessional, formal and informal, constructed and improvised creativity. With the advent of mass production—book printing and audiovisual reproduction— the earlier harmonious give and take between oral and nonoral folklore ceased to exist, and technical productivity (Benjamin 1963) dictated a different pace for folklore communication through new media” (*ibid*).

On these grounds, Dégh asks a basic question: “Can we say that printed or electronically reproduced folklore, out of the normal context of traditional
spinning rooms, firesides, and wayside inns, is not folklore?”, and continues to answer on her own, “It retains all the criteria by which we judge what is folklore and what is not: it is socially relevant, based on tradition, and applied to current needs” (ibid). In contrast to the approaches of traditional folklorists she welcomes and celebrates the new situation with utmost optimism claiming that “Folklore blossoms and proliferates before our eyes as it emerges from new conditions more vigorously and forcefully, empowered with more authority and prestige, than ever before” (ibid). Contextualizing the relation between folklore and the mass media, Dégh says that we have reached a new era:

“The mass media liberate folklore from its earlier confinement to the so-called lower layers of society and from the prejudice—both pro and con—that stigmatized it. Folklore belongs to everyone, not only to the underprivileged uneducated masses. It is a common cultural property characterizing our ways of thinking, believing, and dreaming, and our modes of defining our identity. The observer of emergent folklore may be able to decipher the meaning of basic human ideas that continue to recur in myriads of new interpretations through the accessibility of modern media. We are eyewitnesses to a new era in which folklore gains power and prestige as an authoritative voice: the voice of the urban-industrial folk, the voice of concern, fear, day dream, and hope; the voice of all humanity alienated and fractured by electronic efficiency…” (ibid).

Not only the very idea that mass media contributes to the maintenance and creation of folklore but also the emphasis on how individuals take media instruments into their own hands to maintain, reconstruct, create and transform traditional practices, make her approach significant. The mass or the folk is not a passive entity of dupes; instead it is a shareholder of a complex procedure of telling and retelling. Not only that folklore is embraced to mass media, but “it is
closer to the truth to admit that the media have become a part of folklore” (Dégh ibid, 24). She reminds that the receiver of folklore has never been an arbitrarily elected receiver; and his role always has been almost as active as the sender. Describing this relation between folklore sender and receiver she says “the folklore receiver can be compared to the consumer who made out of the order for the merchandise delivered to his or her address” (Dégh ibid, 35).

The most important idea that underlies her whole argument is that whatever the form in which it makes its manifestation, folklore has been and continues to exist in every society; it’s a continuous social process of telling and retelling, constructing and reconstructing, adapting and resisting, using whatever media is available. Eighteen years back, when she first published her work, she was only working with materials from advertisements, women magazines, Pentecostal church community, and memoriams in daily papers. Recent phenomena like blogs, social networking sites, and web communities have exemplified her argument with new types of uses. It is worthwhile to examine the role folklore played in recent social networking sites, including initiating uprisings in the Middle East; similarly, it is also interesting to look at the process of telling and retelling tales that is in vogue in occupy Wall Street campaigns etc., especially using the net in addition to the oral, print, and electronic media.

**Mass Media and Folklore in Sri Lanka**

In Sri Lanka, the relationship between mass media and folklore can be identified in many different forms. Rather than following a genre wise categorization, I would prefer to discuss it emphasizing its functionality. In that case, the encounter of mass media and folklore in a contemporary Sri Lankan context can be divided into two main categories:

1. Blending of folklore and mass media to authenticate dominant ideologies and hence be used as a tool of manipulation, control, and domination
2. Commercialization of folklore in mass media; folklore summoned in service of consumer culture

As an example to the first category I would like to discuss a very recent trend in Sinhala cinema which is marked by a revitalization of legends of ancient kings, especially those who are considered to be the heroes who defeated the invaders/enemies and united the country ‘under one flag’. Interestingly, this trend emerged in the post-war Sri Lanka. It has metaphoric reference to social ‘realities’: current president Mahinda Rajapaksha, who has ‘defeated’ the LTTE and ‘united the country’ ‘under one flag’.

The initial film in this array was ‘Abha’, which was subtitled ‘The story of prince Pandukabhaya’. Prince Pandukabhaya is a legendary character who became the king of Anuradhapura after heroic win over all the difficulties he had to face from the childhood. The legend is extravagantly portrayed in Mahavamsa and reappears in literal-oral versions blurring the line between history and folklore.

In a moment of ‘victory’ over a separatist guerilla movement, and while the majority Sinhalese were celebrating the ‘victory’, this filmic retelling of the Pandukabhaya legend had many implications. As he was the first king hero in the history of Sri Lanka, the film hints that the Pandukabhaya era is back. And most interestingly Pandukabhaya is portrayed in the film as the descendant of Sinha (lion) Clan, building an intertextual (inter-legendary) bridge to the legend on the origin of the Sinhala people. The whole ethnic conflict, to put it in a metaphorically, was a “war between lions and tigers”; the ‘message’ of this retelling is very clear: ‘this land belongs to the lions’. In addition to this, it implies that the current president, as the present representative of this clan, is a ‘leader of the lions’. An elected president was thereby re-crowned a king in the people’s minds. This is the Sinhala film produced with the largest budget
hitherto, and it gained a huge popularity among the majority Sinhalese community. This clearly reveals how legendary characters play a vital role in present day ideological formations.

“Abha” was followed by a series of Sinhala films that dealt with historical/legendary/folkloric themes and characters, latest being “Siri Parakum” by Somarathne Dissanayake. One interesting fact is that the state patronage the particular films got. These films were not mere re-telling of ancient legends but telling and creating stories of the present. For instance, when the child prince in “Siri Parakum” bellows “Mama raaja kumarayek nemeyi game kollek” (I am not a prince but a village boy), it has an ideological link to the political campaign about “the leader who came from a village and who knows the fragrance of paddy fields”. As a whole, all these films can be understood as a way of superimposing heroic legendary images of the past onto a contemporary personality and hence transforming him into a legendary persona. The politics of legends thus at work as the relation between the ruler and ruled is given a legendary dimension.

Stories based on legendary characters are also found in Sinhala television dramas. One of the state owned television channels, ITN, beamed a range of such teledramas. One of them was on Uthuwankande Sura Saradiyel, who is best known as the Robinhood of Sri Lanka, lived in Kandy, and was a bandit. The serial drama was an attempt to portray this legendary character as a hero, who fought against British rulers. Another serial was on the legendary character Weere Puran Appu, the rebel who led the failed Matale rebellion against the British rule and, was executed by a firing squad. Gongalegoda Banda, the leader of the 1848 Rebellion, Kiwulegedara Mohottala, who was a leader of the Uva-Wellassa Rebellion, and the Venerable Kudapola Rahula thera, who was shot dead by the British army for his act of dishonuoring the British flag are among the other legendary characters who have made their appearances in these
TV serials. In the new context, these stories of the past had taken on new meanings. More than being stories that recounted the struggle against British imperialism, these stories came to be seen as stories of heroes who fought and died for the motherland. In a period when the majority Sinhalese community was hero-worshipping the military these stories were a timely released ideological morale boosters.

Secondly, the commercialization of folklore or the use of folklore in marketing products and services is very common in contemporary Sri Lanka as in any other country. I will only discuss three advertisements to describe this process. My first example is a biscuit advertisement made for the brand ‘Munchi Tikiri Marie’. The product-name carries a folkloric connotation; the word ‘tikiri’ is frequently used in Sinhala folk literature. A word having a very close association with the English word ‘cute’, it can be found in many folk tales and songs including lullabies, and is especially used to describe features of women or children. The said advertisement depicts a girl on the stage to perform a folk dance with a folksong being played in the background, in a variety show in her school. Stepping onto the stage, the girl forgets the first line of the folksong; the little girl looks embarrassed as the audience is waiting for her to start the song and dance. At this moment another girl, who looks like the elder sister of the little girl, appears by the side of the stage and purposely eats a ‘tikiri marie’ biscuit to help the little girl to remember the song. Seeing this, the little girl remembers the first two lines of her song:

“Tikiri tikiri tikiri liya
Kaleth aran lindata giya”

(The cute, cute, cute lady went to the well carrying the pot).

The song ends not with the lines in the ‘original’ folk song but is changed to:
“Kaviya mathaka nethuwa giya

Tikiri nisa hondata giya”

(Went onto the stage but forgot the song, just because of the tikiri it was done).

The audience applauds and the advertisement ends with the words “kohomada tikiri mole!” (How is the cute brain!). What is interesting in this advertisement is the way it combines cuteness, intelligence, and folksy.

The second advertisement is also a television commercial of the National Savings Bank in Sri Lanka. This advertisement was in promotion of one of its special saving accounts. The advertisement shows a mother in a typical rural house putting rice into a bowl to prepare for the dinner. After putting the necessary amount of rice into the bowl, she takes two handfuls of rice back from the bowl and puts them into another pot. At this time her little daughter comes near and curiously enquires about the meaning of two handfuls of rice putting into a separate pot. Replying the daughter’s query mother says that those two handfuls of rice are kept for savings and they will be helpful in a time of shortage of rice in the future, explaining the value and advantages of saving to her little daughter. Now, the little girl knowing the value of saving and accepting her mother’s advice starts saving money ‘by every penny and every rupee’ and finally opens an account in NSB. The point in this commercial is that, it mingles this traditional folk belief of saving two handfuls of rice at every time before cooking rice with a new banking idea. Although the traditional idea of saving is very different from the contemporary one, it articulates it in a way that makes these appear to be similar.

The third advertisement is a TV commercial of a national daily. The advertisement begins with a young man waiting for his last bus on a dark night
to reach home. In the dark there appears a young woman with a baby in her hand and asks him to hold the baby for a while. At this time the bus reaches and getting on to the bus the young man says “It’s too not easy to trap people like me. This is the newspaper I read” showing the newspaper he has in his hand. There is a belief of a female-devil called ‘Mohini’ among the peasants of Southern Sri Lanka. It is believed that this female-devil appears as a beautiful lady with a child in her hand and approaches men with a request to hold the child for a while. If a man takes the child from her, she kills him by squashing his throat. By importing this belief into the advertisement it simply gives the message that this particular newspaper keeps its readers well-informed and hence even saves their lives too.

**Conclusion**

Relationship between mass media and folklore has been a topic of discussion for many folklorists, since the 1960s. As most of the studies do not go beyond the motif spotting in a given media text, a development in the theorization is needed. In observing this phenomenon in a Sri Lankan context, some important factors can be identified. That folklore is a powerful tool for garnering support or resistance to ideas is an accepted fact. However, this process of garnering support or resistance to an idea using folkloric elements is not always dramatic and obvious. Very often it operates through subtle machinations that are hardly noticed. Historical facts, for instance, that suits a particular political group may be restored and reused, albeit in an altered form to establish or challenge present realities. Advertisements that make strong political statements are very often glossed over because they are always covered under the guise of ‘simple’ and ‘superfluous’ versions of reality. This probably is the secret of the powerful influence that advertisements have over the popular imagination. They appear too banal, too superfluous to merit any serious attention. However, as mentioned earlier, very often they make very strong political statements.
References:


