

When Generous Gods Offer “Backhoe-Arm Load Of Gems”*: Folk Ideas Found among Gem Miners of the Sabaragamuwa Region

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Abstract

Global research into folkloric speech acts, like folktales, folksongs and folk drama, have revealed a rich body of concealed cultural conventions and concepts, prompting the folklorist Alan Dundes to identify such events as ‘autobiographical ethnography,’ or the way in which a group of people would portray themselves. The present study focuses on potential cultural conjecture that could be located in a body of regional folktales found among a group of people engaged in a specific vocation, gem mining. These folktales are published as *Sabaragamuwe Menik Kathandara saha Sinharaje Withthi* (Gem-related Tales from Sabaragamuwa and the Happenings of the Sinharaja Forest) by their collector Tharindu Sudharshana Abeysinghe. This study intends to locate the folkloric postulate of ‘folk ideas’ embedded in the tales with the objective of

* This is a direct translation of the quote “dena deviyo denekota backhoe atha purola denava kivvalu” found in Tale No. 14 of *Sabaragamuwe Menik Kathandara saha Sinharaje Withthi* by Tharindu S. Abeysinghe (2018).

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cultural comprehension, especially considering the important role attributed to the gem industry in Sri Lanka's contemporary economy. Texts in public circulation tend to reproduce the material sphere of their surroundings—literally and metaphorically—and could lend themselves to an analysis of the social conditions of their production. This study intends to achieve such an objective through a close-reading of a group of texts whose creators/raconteurs/audience were people involved in gem mining in the Sabaragamuwa province. Through a close analysis of 'folk ideas' this study intends to understand how the miners involved in extracting valuable stones from the bowels of the earth position themselves against their material conditions.

Keywords: Folktales, Cultural Conjecture, Folk Ideas, Gem Industry, Material Condition

Introduction

Folktales, or for that matter any folkloric speech event, like folksongs, folk drama etc., are carriers of cultural axioms though there is a tendency to overlook such concepts owing to the problematic issue with the term 'folk' which connotes the ideas of "Illiterate, Rural, Lower stratum" (Dundes, 1980, p. 4). However, folkloristics, or scholarly study of folklore (folktales being an item of folklore), has opened up a world of cultural possibilities embedded in samples of folklore among which are issues ranging from cultural conjecture, cultural prejudices to "folk fallacies"[†] (Dundes, 2007, p. 56). Although bodies of folktales have been studied for historical inquiry,[‡]gender representations[§] and ethnic understanding^{**} in Sri Lanka, there have been no focused studies on folktales from the

[†] According to Dundes (2007) an example of a 'folk fallacy' is a stereotypical idea projected onto a specific ethnic group

[‡] Anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekera studied folktales from the village around Sigiriya for an alternative perspective of the reign of the kings Kasyapa and Mugalan. These folktales were published by his co-researcher, Ananda Tissa Kumara (2005) under the title *Sigiri Janashruti*.

[§] See Medawattegedara (2015).

^{**} Medawattegedara (2017).

Sabaragamuwa region or on the ones narrated by gem miners in that region. This is despite the presence of a fair number of folktales from Sabaragamuwa in the print medium^{††} and the importance of the gem industry to the nation’s economy. The present study intends to address this research gap and create an interest in the folkloric body of knowledge found in this region. The focus of this study is a collection of folktales found among the gem miners of the Sabaragamuwa province. Currently these folktales are published under the title *Sabaragamuwe Menik Kathandara saha Sinharaje Withthi* (Gem-related Tales from Sabaragamuwa and the Happenings of the Sinharaja Forest) by their collector Tharindu Sudharshana Abeysinghe. This study intends to locate the folkloric postulate of ‘folk ideas’ embedded in the tales with the objective of cultural comprehension, especially considering the important role attributed to the gem industry in Sri Lanka’s contemporary economy. Texts in public circulation tend to reproduce the material sphere of their surroundings—literally and metaphorically—and could lend themselves to an analysis of the social conditions of their production. This study intends to achieve such an objective through a close-reading of a group of texts the creators/raconteurs/audience of whom were people involved in gem mining in the Sabaragamuwa province.

Folktale, Myths and Folk Ideas: Definitions

As far as folkloristics goes, for a narrative to be identified as a ‘folktale’ it should establish certain conditions. Two such conditions are antiquity and continuity, which are foregrounded in Thompson’s definition of folktales: “all forms of prose narrative, written or oral, which have come to be handed down through the years” (Thompson, 1977, p.4). Wickramasinghe, one of Sri Lanka’s foremost Sinhala novelists who wrote much about Sinhala folklore, adds the notion of ‘reality’ to his view on folktales. He argues that folktales were “born out of people’s

^{††} Sabaragamuwa has been the geographical focus of at least three collections of folktales lately: one collection focuses on the patron deity of the region, God Saman; another on the legendary king of ancient Lanka, Ravana; and the other on gem-related folktales, which is the focus of the present study.

real-life experience” (Wickramasinghe, 1968, p.x) where they constructed a “real approach” (Wickramasinghe, 1968 p. x) to life by restricting elaborate descriptions on the setting and characters unlike in a novel. Kirk (2011) echoes Wickramasinghe’s position when he views folktales as narratives with “high factual and low fantastic content” (Kirk, 2011, p. 58). These concepts of ‘reality’ and ‘factual’ would form the theoretical backdrop for the present study as it attempts to locate the ‘folk ideas’ embedded in a sample of gem-miners’ tales from Sabaragamuwa in order to understand the nature of their material conditions.

Another form of folkloric prose narratives that is found in Sabaraguma (in addition to folktales) are myths. Myths are distinguished from folktales owing to their close connection to rituals—as Hultkrantz maintains, “(t)he myth constitutes a ritual text...” (Hultkrantz, 1984, p. 154). Myths are also a way the primitive minds came to terms with natural phenomena and in the words of Gomme, a myth “belongs to the most primitive stages of human thought, and is the recognisable explanation of some natural phenomenon, some forgotten or unknown object of human origin or some event of lasting influence” (Gomme, 1984, cited in Boscom p.129). Frazer**also agrees with Gomme when he maintains that myths are a result of human curiosity concerning the causes of events and objects. But he argues that myths lack authenticity, they are “mistaken explanation of phenomena.” (p. 75)

According to Dundes, ‘Folk Ideas’ are “traditional notions that a group of people have about the nature of humanity, of the world, and of life in the world” (Dundes, 2007, p. 185). However, Dundes also argues that ‘folk ideas’ need not be openly apparent in folkloric material and they could be “unstated premises” (Dundes, 2007, p. 185) which could underlie thought and action of individuals—the present study takes this argument into consideration when re-reading the tales for

** Frazer’s comments are extracted from an essay in *Scared Narratives. Reading in the Theory of Myths*, edited by Alan Dundes (1980).

embedded ‘folk ideas.’ Dundes’ idea about ‘unstated premises’ is also a notion that is somewhat reflected in the work of the literary critic Pierre Macherey specifically in his recommended mode of reading literary texts. All speech, according to Macherey “envelopes in the unspoken in order to reach utterance” (Macherey, 2016, p. 93), and this “silence” (Macherey, 2016, p. 93), informs us of the “precise conditions for the appearance of an utterance, its limits...real significance” (Macherey, 2016 p.93). The entrenched ‘silences’ in the folktale sample under consideration here would be read for what they state about the gem miners’ views of the world and its nature. This study thus intends to add to cultural comprehension of a group of individuals from a specific geographical location and industry. The gem industry of Sri Lanka is a major foreign exchange earner and generates a total of about US \$350 million worth of foreign exchange on an annual basis.^{§§} The industry employs around 600,000 people, including miners, cutters, polishers, craftspeople, designers, dealers, manufacturers, salespeople and marketers.^{***} Prior to the Covid-19 crisis, there were industry-generated discussions on increasing the income generated by gems and such discussions focused on the nature of policy governing the industry. In the light of all this, it would be of interest and importance to understand the deep beliefs and ideas shared by the people involved in the industry. There has been no focused research on the folklore of the gem industry of Sri Lanka for this study to draw inspiration from. Thus, it is hoped that this study would generate interest among the academic community and cause other researchers to undertake related studies.

^{§§} Extracted from: Sri Lanka Export Development Board (n.d.). Gems, Diamonds and Jewellery Export Performance. Retrieved from <https://www.srilankabusiness.com/gem-diamond-and-jewellery/about-sri-lanka-gems/export-performance.html>

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Sabaragamuwa Province^{†††}—A Short Introduction

Sabaragamuwa is one of the nine provinces of Sri Lanka, located in the south west of the island covering an extent of 4,968 km², or 7.6% of the total land area of the island. Considered the 8th largest province in Sri Lanka, it encompasses two administrative districts, namely Ratnapura and Kegalle. Ratnapura district, which is famed both locally and globally for its gems, is the larger area of 3,275 km² while Kegalle covers 1,673 km². In terms of inhabitants, Sabaragamuwa's total population according to the last census of 2012 was 1,928,655. Sinhalese comprise the majority ethnic community (86.3%) while Sri Lankan Tamil, Indian Tamil and Sri Lankan Moor population comprise 2.3%, 6.9% and 4.2% respectively. Sabaragamuwa is rich in its cultural heritage, possibly owing to the presence of the Sinharaja forest, veddas or the aborigines of Lanka with their own cultural traditions (and folklore) and a gem industry with its own folkloric trends and traditions.

Folkloric Analysis of the Research Sample

Gem-related Tales from Sabaragamuwa

Sabaragamuwa Menik Kathandara saha Sinharaje Withthi (or Gem-related Tales from Sabaragamuwa and the Happenings of the Sinharaja Forest), the collection of folktales under study here, is an assortment of folktales, myths and anecdotes collected and compiled by Tharindu Sudharshana Abeysinghe (2018). He neither claims to be a folktale collector nor does he claim any exposure to the science of folklore. He does claim however, that the objective of his endeavours was to help a reader acquaint herself with aspects of the gem industry. Of the 108 entries in the book, 45 folktales and myths were selected as samples for this study. One of the biggest drawbacks of this collection is that the compiler does not offer extensive reflections and information on his mode of collection of the

^{†††}Information for this section was extracted from the official website of the Sabaragamuwa Provincial Council, <http://sg.gov.lk/sgpc/about/>

tales, nor does he offer a comprehensive critical background to the society which gave him the tales. As Weerasinghe (1986) asserts, the entire context of the tale being told needs to be documented: the setting, biographical details of the tellers/listeners; the facial gestures/voice intonations of the teller; the response of the audience—all this needs to be recorded when collecting the tales. Abeysinghe (2018) has largely neglected these aspects. He does offer some sketchy information about the story narrators, but that effort lacks details and consistency. At the same time, the compiler does not explain to his readers why he chose folkloric material to acquaint an audience with the gem industry—which is an interesting suggestion in the sense that he has assumed folktales to be conveyors of a ‘reality.’ He does not provide a comprehensive study of the social and cultural conditions of the region and people which gave him the stories, whose presence would have added a rich facet to this academic study. Yet, in spite of these shortcomings, the collector has given us some rare tales narrated by the gems miners, an event a reader would have missed had Abeysinghe not undertaken the endeavour in the first place. These tales offer thematics that range from the difficulties and frustrations of gem mining, gem valuing and selling to the memories related to the beginning of the gem trade in ancient Lanka. Thus a careful reading of these tales could offer veritable insights into the mind set and the beliefs of the community of people involved in gems whose life experiences and narratives are seldom heard and told.

The present study is essentially a textual reading of the tales of the gem miners and not a field research of folkloric material and samples. Yet, a textual analysis also offers its own advantages such as the ability to undertake a parallel analysis of the considerably large sample of folktales to mine for insights hitherto unexplored. At the same time, texts tend to signify the material conditions that circumscribe their production and would offer a reader fresh perspective into socio-cultural conditioning of a given material setting.

Literature Review

Abeysinghe's collection of folktales culled in from the gem miners is the first of its kind in Sri Lanka, though there has been no focused academic study of it. Since Abeysinghe's folktale collection involves a group of people engaged in a specific vocation, it would be of relevance to observe a similar folkloric study from elsewhere for inspiration and elucidation. Dundes (2007) has conducted a study of what he calls, Viola Jokes, the humorous stories told of the viola players in an orchestra, a group stereotypically considered as lacking substantial musical skills to play a more challenging instrument like the violin. After a close study of these tales centred on viola players Dundes concludes that despite their disparaging nature, the humorous tales about viola players help relieve the tension of the musicians and also act as bridges to bond them. The musicians "...not only share the jokes; they share the anxieties that produced the jokes in the first place" (Dundes 2017, p. 245). In other words, such jokes play a cathartic role in moderating tension in a musical setting. It would be of interest to observe the role played by imaginative tales that are related to a specific vocation—gem mining—in the Sabaragamuwa province to understand how narratives interact with lives and how lives interact with narratives.

Results and Discussion

A total of 45 folktales and myths in the sample were read for 'Folk Ideas.' This reading generated three primary Folk Ideas (represented as (a), (b) and (c) below), with one such Folk Idea offering five sub-ideas. They are arranged as follows for ease of discussion.

Folk Idea:

- a) Magical aspects in gem mining: this Folk Idea is expressed in diverse modes of narrative and those narratives could be categorized as follows:
 - a.1) Magical origin of gems in ancient Lanka

- a.2) Magical origin of gem mining in ancient Lanka
- a.3) Magic that governs the lives of gem miners
- a.4) Magic associated with gems
- a.5) Escaping magical forces

Folk Idea: b) Gems and karmic influences

Folk Idea: c) Unfair valuation of gems

Each of the above Folk Ideas and sub-ideas are discussed in detail below.

Folk Idea a): Magical aspects in gem mining

This was one of the frequently occurring Folk Ideas in the tales with diverse modes of narrative. Overall, the folktales almost always associate gems with magic. This magic posits the presence of constructive divine forces or disruptive supernatural forces associated with gems, gem mines and gem miners. These forces either take the personified idea of the patron deity of Sabaragamuwa, god Saman or earth-bound spirits possessively guarding gems. Gems in the ancient land of Lanka originated as a result of a magical intervention and such magical forces are still present around gem stones and their locations of discovery.

a.1) Magical origin of gems in ancient Lanka

Tale No. 11, titled Yakkina Hedu Dupatha (The Island Built by a She-devil), is a creation myth, in the sense that it offers an account of the creation of the nation called Lanka, its gems as well as the ubiquitous coconut tree. The land called Lanka was originally built as a pleasure garden for god Shakra^{###}—the pious god king who is featured frequently in Buddhist narratives. The construction work of the land was entrusted to

^{###} God Shakra is the ruler of the two heavens Thavathinsaya & Chatur Maha Rajikaya. The term Shakra is the Sanskrit version of the Pali Sakka (J.B, Dissanayake 2020) ; Shakra is the “king of Gods...the lord over the celestial beings in the heaven of the “Thirty Three” according to Buddhist Dictionary by Nyanatiloke.

a yakkina,^{§§§} a relative of Kuveni. In addition to fruits, flowers, forests and water bodies, she infused the soil of this garden with gems brought from heaven. God Shakra, her client, was overjoyed with this creation and he placed his walking stick firmly on the ground and it took root instantly and became the first coconut tree in the world. Just as much as this myth has narrativized the beginning of a nation (Lanka) and objects (gems and coconut trees), it has also syncretized two important cultural imperatives pertaining to the Sinhala race: Buddhism (through god Shakra), and the Vijaya-Kuveni myth (through yakkina, a relative of Kuveni) of ancient Lanka's historical chronicle *The Mahavamsa*.^{****} This myth acts as a prequel to the Vijaya-Kuveni myth. An extensive discussion of the cultural politics of this myth is beyond the scope of this study, but a discussion on the notion of gems is. Firstly, this creation myth disseminates the Folk Idea that gems are a sacrosanct 'event' that was inspired by a heavenly imperative of a Buddhist deity and local skills of the yaksa tribe. A pious god (representing Buddhist morality) and earthly inhabitants capable of magic (combining the idea of magic and hard work) merged their skills to infuse gems in a specific locality in ancient Lanka—namely the Sabaragamuwa province. This Folk Idea could have been the main inspiration for the creation of a body of imaginary folk narratives by gem workers of Sabaragamuwa whereby they infused the gruelling and testing gem trade with a moral imperative governed by Buddhist morality and other supernatural protective (and disruptive) forces. The narrative potential of the tales offer a means of reinterpreting the inevitable strains, exertions and frustrations associated with locating gems, thus offering expectations and hope for the lonely and isolated gem worker in the deep bowels of the earth. This myth might also be the supporting reason for the existence

^{§§§} Understandably a member of the Yaksa tribe—who were believed to be the first inhabitants of pre-historic Lanka

^{****} Vijaya, a subversive prince from North India, was considered the forefather of the Sinhala race and his romance and subsequent betrayal of a princess named Kuveni, an original inhabitant of Lanka and who is also a member of the ruling yaksa tribe, forms the foundational myth of the Lankan nation-creation. It was written down in the 4th century historical chronicle called *The Mahavamsa Or the Great Chronicle of Ceylon* (1912).

of Folk Idea (b) which conceives of a connection between karmic forces (good karma = good morality) and discovering of a generous cache of gems (magic).

a.2) Magical origin of gem mining in ancient Lanka

If South India is etched in the national psyche for its destructive invasions of ancient Lanka, there are folktales from Sabaragamuwa that offer this region a positive and constructive role: that of imparting the finer skills of the gem trade to Lankans. Folktales frequently refer to a group of South Indian gem miners, identified as ‘Mukkaru,^{††††}’ who were the pioneering gem miners in ancient Lanka. They used a combination of skills (locating, sifting, cutting and polishing gems) and magic (they owned a ring that could locate potential gem sites) in their vocation. Mukkaru were human and were vulnerable to error. They would throw away Wairodi (Star Sapphire) gems believing that they were worm- infested.^{‡‡‡} A group of Mukkaru attempted to cheat god Saman and god Kataragama on a vow and faced a tragic end. This group promised to offer a ship load of gems to the gods if they were allowed to find seven ship loads of gems from Sabaragamuwa. They offered a ship load of low-quality gems to the gods and fled the country. The angry gods sank their ships in mid-sea. This image of a Mukkaru as a Folk Idea offers a model for potential gem miners as to what they should and should not do. Skill and hard work, this Folk Idea suggests, need to be combined with magic and morality to achieve success. Greed should be managed and gratitude paid. At the same time, the Mukkaru tales also locate human vulnerabilities, using a character that is essentially non-native. Thus, a Mukkaru from South India is a skilled miner, shrewd and calculating in his trade; he manipulates magic to his own benefit; he could be impetuous and throw away valuable gems; and he is vulnerable to

^{††††} The compiler of the tales believes that the term might have originated from combining the two words: Menik+ Karu; yet, an entry in the Sinhala Dictionary (n.d), Vol. 19, Section 39., the term refers to a ‘group of people from Southern India who were experts in capturing elephants’.

^{‡‡‡} Wairodi (Star Sapphire) is a gem that displays a white star like shape inside the stone due to heavy aluminum oxidation

covetousness when he discovers gems. Far from being a historical reality, Mukkaru is a reflection of a present 'reality' projected on to imaginative fiction.

a.3) Magic that governs the lives of gem miners

God Saman, who enjoys pride of place in Sabaragamuwa as its patron deity, protects gem miners according to the folktales. The earliest reference to this deity occurs in the tale *Yakku Kapapu Gal* (Stones Cut by Devils) which posits the deity in an entrepreneurial light as an owner of a gem-cutting factory employing members from the yaksa tribe. The perfectly faceted glass-like stones used in this factory, the tales say, are still found, the tale narrates, in Sabaragamuwa. God Saman's exotic perpetually-fruit-laden garden is a sanctuary for miners who get lost in the Sinharaja forest. Here the miners are protected and fed with fruits until they are ready to resume their journey. God Saman is quick to respond to firm believers of his jurisdiction. Thus an ardent believer who made a passionate plea for success prior to mining a pit struck a stone that fetched him 4 million rupees. Despite the presence of ferocious wild animals in the forest and the questionable morals of gem miners (good people tend to be protected by deities, goes a belief system in Sri Lanka) god Saman protects these miners from harm. For a gem miner, living in unforgiving terrain with potential for bodily harm from wild animals or mining accidents, and searching for elusive and rare valuable stones, this Folk Idea of a powerful supernatural force whose protective power overcomes the impossible-to-surmount dangers of their trade might balance off his frustrations, demotivation and fear. God Saman, the heavenly image of a Folk Idea, in that sense is a consolation for miners of Sabaragamuwa who are involved in a task whose success cannot be guaranteed.

a.4) Magic associated with gem stones

Just before the discovery of a gem there would be spirits who would attempt to disrupt the process. Thus, a miner might hear an ominous cough from an invisible person just as he is about to locate a gem, thus disrupting his work. There are gems that

possess the power to kill a long-suffering heart patient; and if kept under the pillow of an ordinary person at night, the sleeper could die in the morning. Some gems are cursed perpetually and should be only given to museums. These Folk Ideas that underscore some of the Sabaragamuwa folktales are an indication to the listener/reader that gems are objects possessed with magical narratives and should be handled with care and concern. Bringing that idea closer to life, one could argue that these tales warn a gem miner of the stress and strain that would accompany his hard-won discovery of a gem—and the inevitable flooding of wealth.

a.5) Escaping magical forces

The magical fields that surround a gem could be neutralized using one’s spit or cow dung, several tales suggest. Thus, when a snake king vomits a large gem in order to attract insects, a young man steals the gem by dropping cow-dung on the gem. If not for the cow-dung, the mere sighting of this gem could curse the onlooker. If one remembers to apply saliva when he chances upon a gem, the gem would be considered his property. This act of sullyng a gem through spit/dung is a symbolic ritual of transferring its ownership—from magic to a miner. It is a rite of passage which defines how a gem stone possessed, guarded and protected by a supernatural entity could be safely transferred to another party. Once again, this Folk Idea acts as a warning to a gem miner that as he locates a gem, he also confronts forces that are beyond his grasp and control. Locating a gem would, as the Folk Ideas have suggested so far, requires hard work and magic. A part of that magic is to strip away the magic from the gem.

Folk Idea: b) Gems and karmic influences

Another recurring Folk Idea found in the Sabaragamuwa folktales is the notion that gems are closely bound to one’s spirituality, specifically to one’s karmic forces. The folktales feature two types person who find gems: those who possess financial, technological and human resources to operate mines and insignificant people who find gems by chance. The presence

of the latter outnumbered the first in the folktales. Thus, an unsuspecting householder realizes that there is a massive gem embedded in the miris-gala (grinding stone) in his kitchen; thieves visit abandoned gem mines frequently and find valuable stones that have been mistakenly thrown away (repetition of an act similar to Mukkaru, they threw certain valuable stones acting under ignorance); a backhoe operator finds gems in the midst of his hard toil on a road; a priest locates gems hidden under the statue of a deity in a kovil; a farmer finds gems amidst mud in a paddy field; in the night, a gem falls upon a man's head from the roof. Stories that feature this Folk Idea achieve a task equivalent to Buddhist missionary work: they inculcate the notion that meritorious work done in a previous existence is never exhausted, and could transform into events of prosperity in the present birth. Another significant aspect of this Folk Idea is that it maintains consistency with the Buddhist imperatives found in the gem-origin myth discussed above. God Shakra's motivation was responsible for the presence of gems in the nation state, and thus those who were passionate believers and practitioners of Buddhism are bound to find success in the gem trade.

Folk Idea: c) Unfair valuation of gems

The process of valuation of a gem is posited in the tales as an event rigged with dishonesty and deceit. Gem merchants are depicted in the tales as cunning and crafty men who would resort to lying, pretending and even thieving to obtain a gem for the lowest price. Thus, several gem merchants conspired and humiliated an elderly female who insisted that the stone she had discovered was extremely valuable. They suggested otherwise, but she persisted with her assumption—she turned out to be right. Another gem merchant who offered a ridiculously low price for a valuable gem stone and whose offer was rejected, broke into the room of the gem finder to steal this gem. A gem buyer of (unknown) foreign origin offers a low price for a gem stone on display at a saloon. The saloon owner was unaware that it was a valuable stone. This Folk Idea conveys the notion that the hard work that is invested to locate gems is

rarely rewarded. As one narrator in a story says, the one who has the merits to find a gem stone is always poor and is languishing on a road side. It is interesting how the magic seems to have abandoned the hardworking gem miner as he discovers a gem. That could be related to the notion that the gem by now is sullied (with his pit) and is devoid of magic—thus exposing itself and the owner to the deceitful practices of the material world.

Conclusions

Folktales and myths related to gems created/told/heard in Sabaragamuwa primarily carry Folk Ideas about the nurturing and destructive presence of magical forces particularly in the act of searching for and finding gems. In addition, they expose the grievances caused by the unreasonableness of the material world. These two dichotomies—magic and the material world—create tension in the narratives. This tension could be interpreted as a response to the discontents, botches and frustrations in the material world of gems. Magic does not exist in the ‘real’ world—yet the presence of magic in the fictitious world makes the ‘real’ world manageable and acceptable. The folkloric space is a parallel universe to the existing universe where the imagination could project the tension of the material world into its fold. In this imaginary ‘world’ there is hope for the hard-working gem mine worker. Here he would be compensated provided that he is a morally superior person; his good work in another life would act upon him positively in this space; and benevolent deities would protect him even in the middle of the harsh Sinharaja forest. By defining their material reality in terms of Folk Ideas, which are narrativized in folktales, the gem mine worker goes deep into the bowels of the earth to ply his trade. Folk Ideas are his motivation and inspiration. And perhaps one could argue that it is a folktale narrated at a fire place in the cold Sinharaja forest that motivates a miner to soldier on until he locates a gem that might bring him comforts and the nation, economic progress.

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