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The curse of “*Kuveni*”: metaphorical approach to analyze power and style of folklore

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the history of Sri Lanka, folklore has played a significant role in defining the characteristics and hierarchy of people in society, with power and style expressed through figurative language. This study reviews the folklore of *Kuveni* to shed light on how the rise and fall of power is expressed through the dress styles and adornment of ancient Sri Lanka, as described in folklore traditions. “*Kuveni*”, in folklore, was the first female ruler and her story represents a significant turning point of the antiquity of the Sinhalese- the Sri Lankan nation. There are different mythical characteristics intertwined with the story of *Kuveni*. As it unfolds, *Kuveni* can be identified as the main inducement behind the victory of Prince *Vijaya* who conquered the country, and *Kuveni* betrayed her own tribe in order to seize power for the prince. It is believed that the Sinhalese nation originated from *Vijaya* who captured the power of Sri Lanka with the help of native princess *Kuveni*. Accordingly, the evolution of *Kuveni*'s character from an individual woman to a lover, wife, mother and a single parent finally getting murdered by her own tribe is an intriguing narrative of cultural significance. Through analysis of literature, and a metaphorical approach to the analysis of expressively-used mythical folklore of *Kuveni*, this study explores the representations of her character's power through style. Particularly, the study contributes to the contextual understanding of power and style that existed in the country at that time.

KEYWORDS: *folklore, Kuveni, body adornments, power, style*

Introduction

Folklore can be identified as a great source of knowledge and experiences that are descended upon the lips of people successively, so as the customs and superstitions that are embedded to their lifestyle which penetrate over the generation as a code of belief or actions (Gomme 1885; Gupta 2007). There is no possibility to eliminate the traditions, customs or beliefs enrolled in folklore that come from generation to generation, as myths or superstitions have no scientific basis. Folklore tales are expressions growing from a long history hence they are ‘the popular explanation of phenomena’ (Temple 1886, p. 196). Folklore is significant in characterizing and symbolizing concepts and unveiling historical knowledge. This study takes a metaphorical approach in investigating folklore of “*Kuveni*”, the iconic first female ruler of Sri Lanka (SL) in a systematic review of literature to explore the power and style that existed during the pre-history of SL.

Temple (1886, p. 206) states that, ‘What I would strongly urge is that we should remember that the world of which we have human record is so old that all things- even those which appear to us as primitive- must have a history, and that before we compare we should, so far as we are able, ascertain that we are historically justified in making the comparison.’ Being related to far history or having less evidence is not a justification to be considered as a myth or a superstition. Folklore by means are ascends of oral history and are very limited in physical evidence and in literature. However, the metaphorical data that can be extracted from both the narratives and the literature can be used to analyze folklore. In particular, the story of *Kuveni* in SL, likewise the approach of this study in investigating the power and style, the ideation of the character development was done through the figurative language therefore was a comparison with the general folklore literature.

Methodology

Folklore, having an intimate relationship with culture mainly depends on oral traditions. It transmits knowledge across generations. Therefore, the application of the knowledge component of folk in a methodical manner can be identified as ‘folk-science’ (Gupta, 2007). Studying folklore has different approaches, yet this paper sets a long-established scientific approach to the study of folklore, following the work of nineteenth century scholar Gomme. According to Gomme (1885), folklore divides into four main areas as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 2 highlights another approach of analyzing folklore. Humans nourish culture through folklore. According to the social-scientific approach, understanding of the components of folk culture is vital in the study of folklore. Among the sub categories shown in Figure 2, this study uses folk art or ‘Artistic folklore’, ‘Folk-literature’, and ‘Folk practices’ in reviewing the *Kuveni*'s narrative.

The *Kuveni*'s story is studied based on the narrations and affirmed through available, albeit limited, literature, due to the lack of geographical references except a few in performing arts (stage dramas and films) which characterize *Kuveni* yet are debatable to the approach used in this study.

Figure 3 shows the analysis of folklore of *Kuveni* in which the study primarily takes qualitative yet metaphorical approach, adopting a mixed method integrating the scientific and social-scientific approaches (concluded from Figure 1 and 2) to analyze the literature and expressively used mythical folklore in SL context, focusing on the *Kuveni*'s story. Therefore, the power and style related elements of *Kuveni*'s folklore are identified.

Figure 4 indicates the components of scientific and social-scientific approach which are used in this study to compare, contrast and analyze the characteristics of *Kuveni* to identify the physical and emotional behavior that symbolizes the rise and fall of power and style of “*Kuveni*” and its impact on the country at the time.

Review and Discussion

The story of *Kuveni* is a well-known narrative in SL history which verifies the origin of the Sinhalese nation in the island. It is believed that before the arrival of Prince *Vijaya*, the son of *King Sinhabhahu* from ‘*Lata Rata*’, North India, three main communities were in SL as *Yakka, Naga, Dewa*. *Kuveni*: a *Yakka* princess, helped *Vijaya* to seize the power of the country, who came to SL with his 700 companions who were expelled from *Lata* kingdom. *Kuveni* and King *Vijaya* had a son and a daughter named *Jeewahathitha* and *Disala*. *Vijaya* established his kingdom in “*Thammenna Nuwara*” with his fellow ministers establishing other villages by their names. Later, King *Vijaya* wanted an enthronement according to the North Indian customs and his ministers brought a princess from *Madura puraya*, South India. Since *Kuveni* was an exile, she ran away

with her two kids. Keeping the children outside of the *Yakka* village, she returned to her *Yakka* relatives only to get killed by a *Yakka* man due to her betrayal. One of her uncles who saw the kids outside of the village advised them to run into the forest saying their mother was killed. Terrified, kids ran to the forest eventually leading to the origin of the Indigenous community (*Vedda*) (Geiger, Bode and University of California Libraries, 1912 and Weerasekara, 2016).

Kuveni cursed *Vijaya* and *Sinhala* nation when she was killed and that is known as the curse of *Kuveni* (*Kuveni Sapaya*) where king *Vijaya* and all his successors started to experience nightmares of a big black leopard. Since there were no descendants to the throne, his nephew, *Panduwasudeva* became the next heir. The new king also experienced the same and became sick. Subsequently, “*Kohombayak kankariya*” was introduced to SL as a cure (Seedaraman, 2016).

The *Kuveni*'s narrative was first revealed in *Deepavamsaya* on which the *Mahavamsaya* was based, which were the great historical chronicles of SL written in the *Pali* language by a

Buddhist *thero* named *Mahānāma* circa 5th century BC. Different authors later translated it into *Sinhala* (SL's native language) and English. Being a *yakka* princess, *Kuveni* had powers inherited from her ancestry. She had therianthrope powers as when *Vijaya* landed on the island she was in the form of a female hermit spinning cotton by a wheel. 'Then the yakkhini seized him, and hurled him who cried aloud into a chasm. And there in like manner she hurled (all) the seven hundred one by one after him.' (Geiger, Bode and University of California Libraries 1912, p. 56). Eventually, *Vijaya* realized that *Kuveni* is a female devil with supernatural powers.

Indian and Sri Lankan folklore share similarities regarding these supernatural personalities, but they are quite complex in terms of good and bad behaviors, human or not. Teverson and Lothspeich (2019) states that, 'India has its own ways of speaking about classifying its stories, and its own lexicon of symbols, motifs and themes, in its different languages and regions, and among its various ethnic communities'. Most of the Indian folklore are in written forms. *Kuveni*'s story has been prevailing mainly from word of mouth and its main written evidence is the 7th chapter (regarding *Vijaya*'s arrival to SL) of *Mahavamsa*.

Folklore includes witchcraft, magic or wonders which is classified under the superstitious beliefs, since this is a 19th century theory, other scholars have also drawn this method (Gomme 1885; Davies and White, 2015). Magic and supernatural powers can be identified as the manifestation of power and the ability to transform herself can be identified as a special technique of adorning herself into the situation as shown in Figure 5. In the story of *Kuveni* and *Vijaya* there are many important incidents where *Kuveni* uses transmogrify to adapt into the situation. First situation is spinning cotton as a female hermit and capturing the fellow men into a pond by her spell bounds. It is said that *Kuveni* could not harm them because of the *pirith* thread (a thread which is tied into their hand by God *Upulvan*) when they landed in SL. When *Kuveni* agreed to get the power to prince *Vijaya*, and the two parties' reunion to work as a team, the fellow men of *Vijaya* used to cook rice with condiments from the trade ships which were devoured by *Kuveni* (Geiger and Bode, 1912). Therefore, this can be identified as an exemplification of her power and the prosperous life she led within her territory.

The clothing, adornments and sensual pleasure of *Kuveni* is romanticized in a figurative language. 'When the yakkhini had taken the first portions (of the 26 meal) that *Vijaya* handed to her, she was well pleased, and assuming the lovely form of a sixteen-year-old maiden she approached the prince adorned with all the ornaments. At the foot of a tree, she made a splendid bed, well-covered around with a tent, and adorned with a canopy. And seeing this, the king's son, looking forward to the time to come, took her to him as his spouse and lay (with her) blissfully on that bed' (Geiger and Bode 1912, p. 57).

Upon receiving the food, she was pleased and transformed her appearance from a hermit to a very attractive sixteen-year-old young maiden. It is said that once she was adorned with all the ornaments, in Sinhalese meaning "*swarvabharana*," she totally changed her appearance to a youthful and gorgeous girl. This metaphorically shows her physical and psychological transformation where the prince, infatuated by her beauty, accepted her as his spouse. It subtly sets out the sexual consummation between *Vijaya* and *Kuveni*, and she did not perform promiscuity with every man, so physically and psychologically she transformed herself to a lovable woman and was devoted to her husband and this can be identified as a turning point of her life, and the *Sinhalese* nation.

The shape-shifting from one human form to another clearly depicts her superhuman powers, and her depiction as devouring the treasures from trade ships which were going near the coast shows *Kuveni* as a very powerful woman within her territory. The ability to attract the prince to win his heart and to be his spouse by developing an intimate relationship from the very first meeting clearly shows *Kuveni* as a woman who was

gifted with charm to acquiesce the heart with her sensual qualities (Sturkenboom, 2014).

Making a splendid bed well covered with a canopy for their first night presents an idea of *Kuveni* as a native royal woman familiar with royalty and customs. *Mahavamsa* story highlights another powerful quality: her ability to create anything as she wished which shows the magical powers she owned as a superhuman. In the West, these kinds of superhuman personalities can be defined as 'fairies'. In Indian folklore, these gorgeous women with enchanting qualities are known as "*Apsara*" (Teverson and Lothspeich, 2019). *Kuveni*'s specialty is that she can be identified as a soul with mixed attributes where the devil and the fairy can be seen situationally inside the same person hence her characterization depends on the situation and her emotions.

According to the *Mahavamsa*, when *Kuveni* asked him to massacre all the *yakkas* who were assembled at *sirivattupura* for the wedding ceremony of the *Yakka* king, *Vijaya*, who was an ordinary human asks from *Kuveni*, 'how could I defeat the *yakkas* who are invisible? I will utter cries, and where thou shalt hear that sound, strike ! and by my magic power shall thy weapon fall upon their bodies' (as stated in Geiger and Bode 1912, p. 58). *Vijaya* slew all the *yakkas* and was bestowed with all the garments of the *yakka* king, and this symbolic act of passing of the garments shows the power-shift from *yakkas* to Aryans. Therefore, *Kuveni* can be identified as being vital behind the victory of *Vijaya* and her trust upon *Vijaya* made *Kuveni* to use her supernatural powers against her own community. This can be identified as a very strong symbol to understand about the power concept and the power-shift from *Yakka* and from *Kuveni*.

The seven-day celebration of the royal wedding with music and dancing and other ceremonial events where all the relations assembled stands as a metaphor for their customs and traditions and the royal celebration of matrimony. Figure 6 and 2 describes the Ceremonial / Festival Customs as an important subsector. Thus, *Kuveni* being a *yakka* princess, was interested in the arts which prevailed within their community and that aesthetics might have helped her to enhance her charm as a woman.

As mentioned before, *Kuveni* cursed *Vijaya* during her demise and was reborn as a *bagini Yakkini*; a female devil called *Bagini* (Seedaraman 2016). Figure 7 shows the emotional transformation of *Kuveni* from good to evil.

Conclusion

Kuveni can be identified as a uniquely ambiguous personality, who cannot be defined neither as a devil, nor a human, nor as divine. The metaphorical review signifies the conversion of *Kuveni*'s emotions into physical changes and subtly shows the transformation of power. In ordinary life we, humans play different roles according to our emotions, however as in folklore, *Kuveni* differs from us due to her exceptional personality and power immersed through her emotions. Thus, *Kuveni* can be identified as the turning point of the "power" shifting from natives to Aryans- extermination of *Yakkas*- in ancient Sri Lanka, leading to the origin of a new community in the island. The ability of *Kuveni* to transform, create and ravage, self and others in different ways denote the emotional power behind her character. Her power-centered personality signifies the nature of femininity expressed in Sri Lanka at that time. The symbolic analysis of *Kuveni* also implies shape-shifting behavior of the character in relation to emotions and the style of femininity that is vital in the power shift. The character of *Kuveni* symbolizes a unique, yet ambiguous, individual with different personalities expressing power and style throughout her life: she acts as a fairy during their consummation, a human who mothered two children and finally a devil who curses for the injustice which happened to her and her children. As the review highlights the charisma inherited in her character, developed in many stages of the lifestyle suggests further investigation of style shifting in ancient SL female through folklore.

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FIGURES

Figure 1: Analysis of folklore: Scientific Approach (adapted from Gomme, 1885)

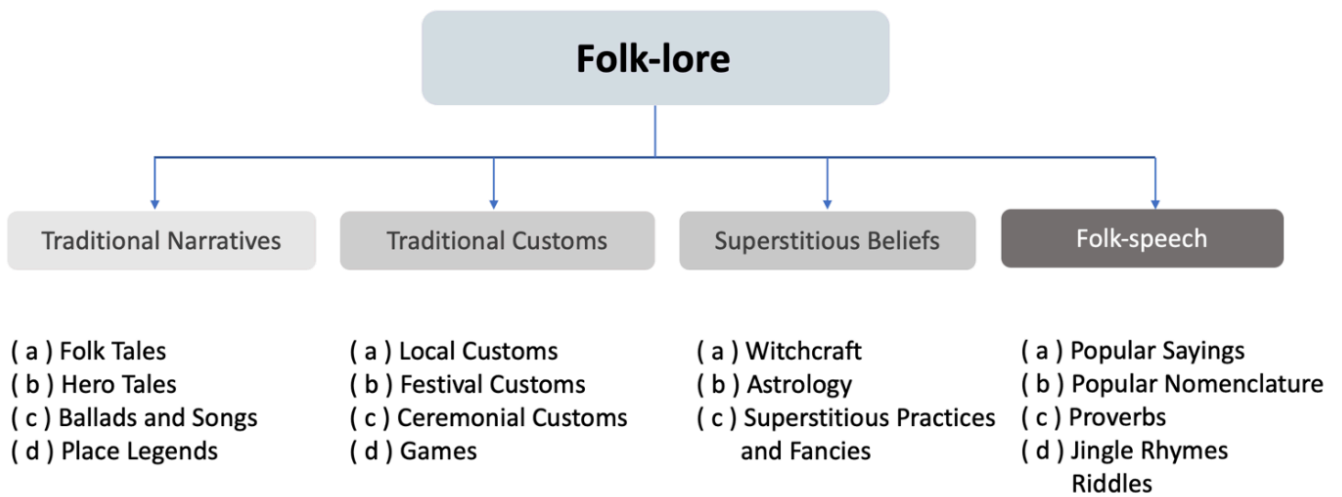


Figure 2: Analysis of folklore: Social-Scientific Approach (adapted from Gubta, 2007 and Islam, 1985)

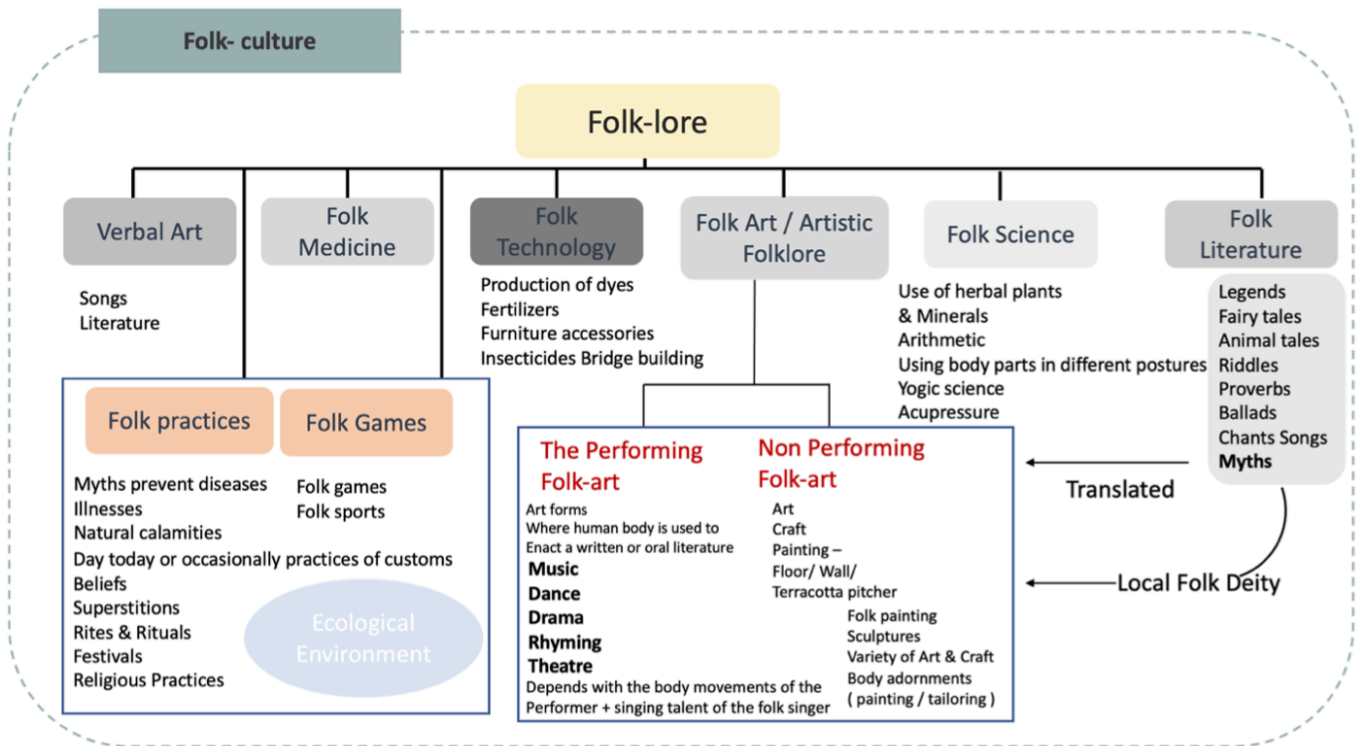


Figure 3: Analysis of folklore of Kuweni

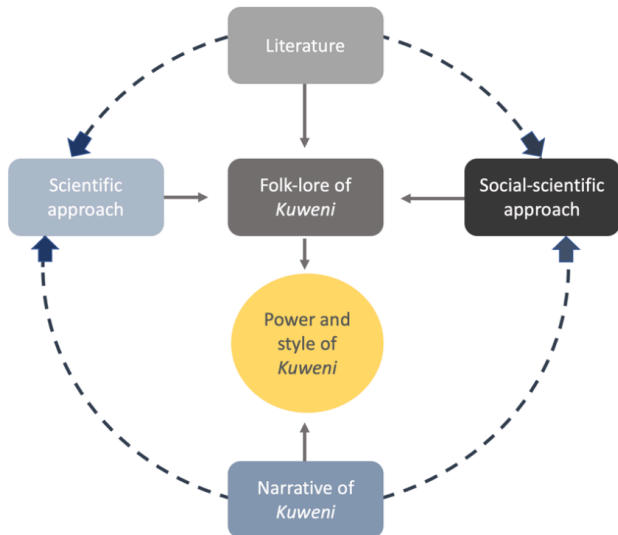


Figure 4: Identification of Power and Style of Kuweni (adapted from Gomme, 1885; Temple, 886; Islam, 1985 and Gupta, 2007).

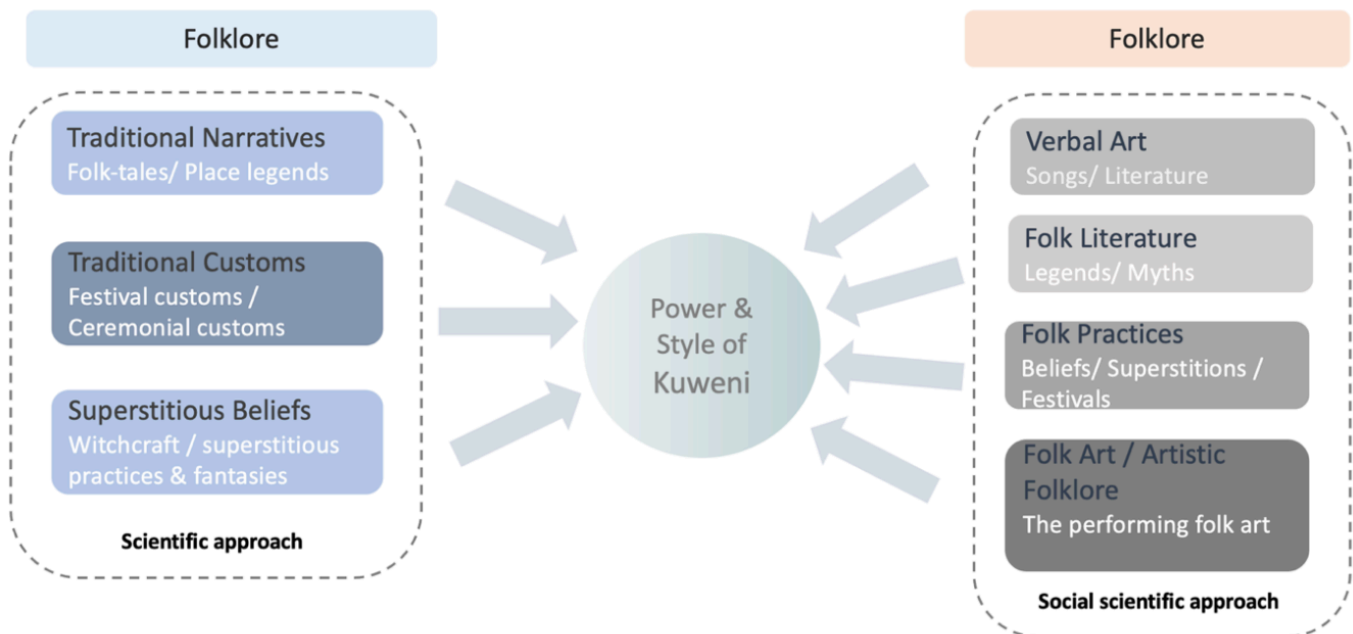


Figure 5: Manifestation of power of Kuweni in the form of witchcraft (adapted from Gomme, 1885 and Geiger, Bode and University of California Libraries, 1912).

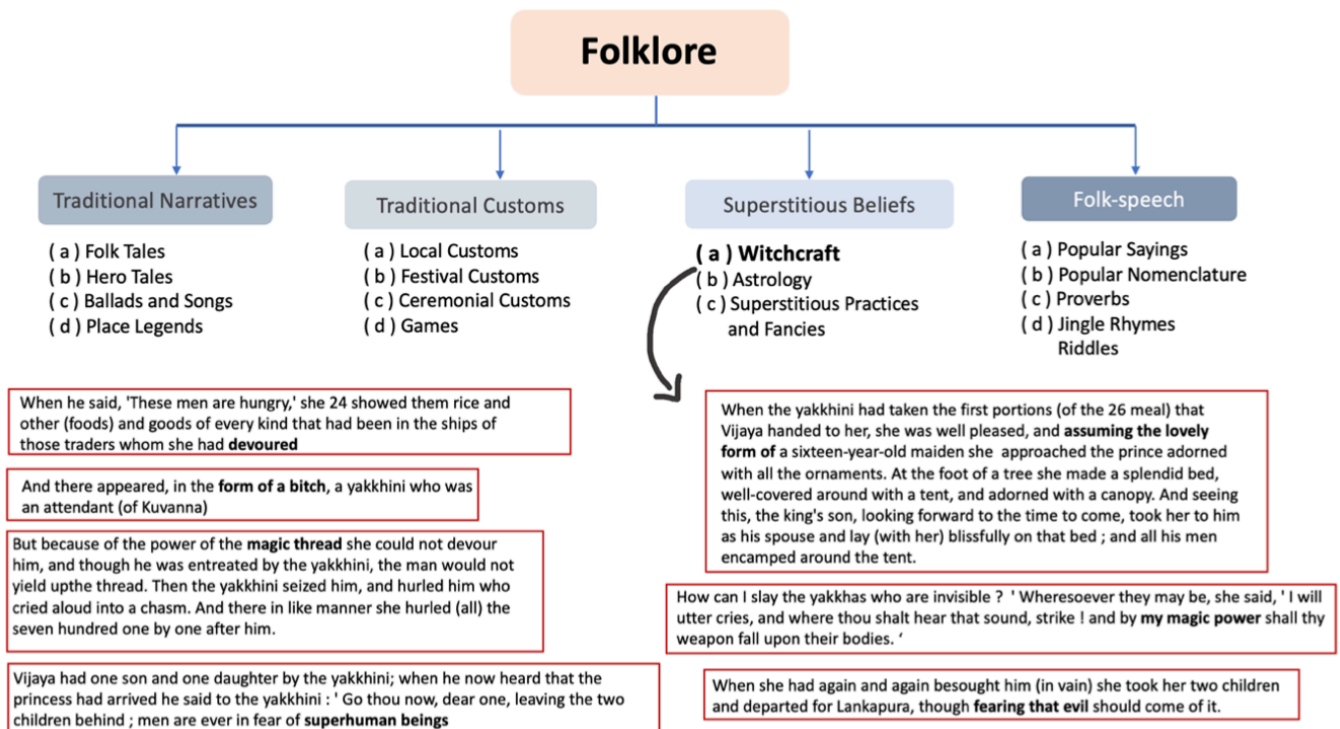


Figure 6: The Festival/ceremonial customs related to the story of Kuweni(Gomme, 1885 and Geiger, Bode and University of California Libraries, 1912).

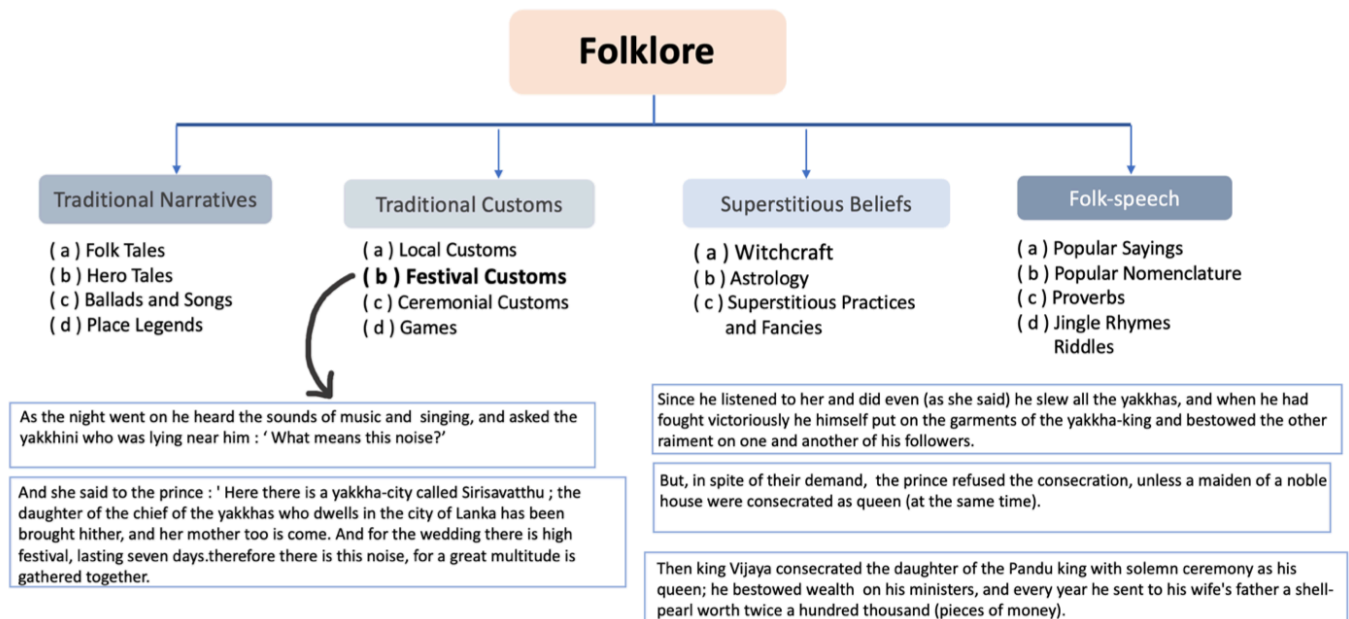


Figure 7: Transformation of the Kuweni with emotions (Geiger, Bode and University of California Libraries, 1912 and Seedaraman, 2016).

