

A Singpho Folktale

Reproduced from the book "Myths of the North-East Frontier of India" by Verrier Elwin and reprinted by the Director of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar.

There was once a very great Raja who had seven wives. One year they all became pregnant at the same time. The six elder wives had human children but the seventh and youngest gave birth to a tortoise. When the raja saw the tortoise baby he was angry and drove the mother, though she was most beautiful, out of his house and made a little hut for her outside the village.

Gradually the six elder boys grew up and when they were old enough, they prepared to go down river to trade. When the tortoise boy heard about it he said to his mother, 'My brothers are going to trade; let me go as well.' The mother said, 'your brothers can walk about, for they have hands and feet, but you have none. What do you want to go trading for?' 'All the same,' said the tortoise boy, 'even if I have no hands and feet, I'd like to go.'

So the mother prepared the tortoise-boy for his journey and put him in the boat with his brothers. When they came into mid-stream the tortoise-boy brought a flute from under his shell and played it. The trees of the forest heard the music and came to the bank to listen and this is why to this day there are many trees along the banks of rivers.

The boat went down the river and the tortoise played his flute. After a time he said to the six brothers, 'Leave me here; you go on and when you return, call me and I will join you.'

He jumped into the water and sank to the bottom. There he found a great store of gold and silver and precious stones and hid them under his shell. He went on a little further and found many different musical instruments.

When their brothers had finished their trading they returned and called their tortoise-brother, and he came up from the bottom of the river and clambered into the boat. Then he brought out the instruments from beneath his shell and played them. He gave some of them to his brothers and they all played together very happily.

When the boat neared home and the raja heard the music he supposed that his sons must have made a great deal of money and were celebrating their success. He went down to the bank to welcome them with honour and took them home. But he took no notice of the tortoise-boy and left him in the bottom of the boat. But soon his mother came for him.

Presently the Raja made arrangements for the marriage of his sons. The tortoise-boy said to his mother, 'My brothers are getting married; find a wife for me too.' The mother said, 'But you are a tortoise, you are not a human being. What sort of girl will you get to marry you?' The tortoise-boy said, 'There is a Raja's daughter in a village not far away and I want to marry her.' The mother said, 'But she is the daughter of a Raja and you are a tortoise.' The tortoise-boy said, 'that may be so, but what does it matter? Go and ask the girl's father.' So the mother went to the Raja and said, 'Give your daughter to my son.' The Raja replied, 'Very well, I will give him my daughter on this condition, that within two days, before the sun rises for the second time, your son must make a boat of gold and diamonds and bring it to my palace.' The mother went home and told her son.

Now the tortoise had great wealth hidden beneath his shell and he brought it out and called a craftsman who made a boat of gold and diamonds and they took it to the Raja's palace before the sun rose for the second time. The Raja came down to see it and there the tortoise-boy was sitting in the boat shining like the sun. When the tortoise saw the Raja he changed his shape and became a handsome youth, and the Raja willingly gave him his daughter in marriage.

What is a Folktale? Two Definitions

A characteristically anonymous, timeless, and placeless tale circulated orally among a people

- A traditional narrative, usually anonymous, handed down orally — e.g., fables, fairy tales, legends, etc.

Source: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/folktales>,
<http://urbanlegends.about.com/od/glossary/g/folktale.htm>