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Animal Folklore on Stamps of the World

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"Animals of all kinds feature in rituals, legends and folk tales throughout world culture, reflecting the curiosity humans have always had about other species with which they share the earth ... and the desire to share the remarkable powers of other species" (Pickering, 1999).

Celebrated in art and literature, folklore is associated with societies, traditional as well as modern, and may be passed on through the print media or exclusively orally, via tales, proverbs, poems, chants, ballads and songs. Animals feature prominently in many folklore, an important function being transmission of societal values or shared ideas of a specific ethnic group or society, including teaching character traits, and among other things, kindness and concern for others, value of hard work, respect for elders and remembering a promise made (Das, 2011). Animals may also feature in tales in the realms of fantasy, such as those that either impart wisdom or nurse and often lend supernatural help to (human) heroes. Some tales are spun to tell why things are as they are, such as, why cats can climb trees, the memory of elephants, the wily cunning of foxes, etc. In a nutshell, animals provide an engrossing medium to engage children in tales that teach and impart societal values and warn them of perceived dangers (Creany, 2013).

Perhaps the most famous amongst these are the tales of Aesop (ca. 620–560 BCE), born a slave in Greece and famous in his time as a story-teller, and a near contemporary of the Buddha (ca. 563 BCE or ca. 480 BCE – ca. 483 BCE or ca. 400 BCE) himself. Historians of folklore have long debated the source of these stories, whether the original source was in fact, eastern, such as the tales of Buddha’s previous lives (known as the Jatakas) or the Panchatantra of India, many of which feature animal characters, centred around a virtuous being, animal or human.

Postage stamps is an easy medium for the transmission of information, and consequently, the use of stamps in education is common (Yardley, 2015). Greece (as well as Cyprus and Hungary) have issued stamps illustrating some of the stories from Aesop’s Tales. The story of the hare and the tortoise, for instance, illustrates the importance of ponderous labour and of humility, and the story of the fox and the stork, whose moral lesson is "One bad turn deserves another". Many are thus fables, a subgenre of folktales that uses anthropomorphic animals to highlight a particular point.

Closer to home are the celebrated tales of Sang Kancil (a mouse deer) getting the better of Sang Buaya and Sang Bedal (two crocodiles), that have been immortalised in philately. Folktales such as these depict the wise/silly animal motif, in which the smaller one outwits a much larger animal.

Stamps, because of their ubiquitous nature, often attractive design and interesting thematic content, are a strong source of dissemination of societal values, once conveyed by word of mouth in the form of animal-centric folklore. While the effect on human culture is evident in many of these tales, a central observation is that all societies, traditional or otherwise, employ animal-based stories as a medium for early learning.
Figure 1. Greece. 1987. “Aesop’s Fables” (Stanley Gibbons, SG 1744A–1751A). A series of eight stamps were issued by Greece, over two thousand years after the passing of Aesop, each illustrating a particular fable. Famous animal tales covered include “The Deer with its Antlers Caught in Branches”, “Fox and the Crow”, “Fox and the Grapes”, “Zeus and the Snake” and “Hare and the Tortoise”. Face values of the series are 2d, 5d, 10d, 22d, 32d, 40d, 46d and 130d.

Figure 2. Cyprus. 2011. “Aesop’s Fables. The Hare and the Tortoise” (SG 1255–1259). A lighter take on the tales from Aesop, this self-adhesive release comprises five individual stamps, each of 34c value, depicting the competition between the hare and the tortoise.

Figure 3. India. 2001. “Stories from Panchatantra” (SG 2027–2034). A series of four pairs of se-tenant stamps show stories from Panchatantra (literally, five principles), a collection of mostly animal folktales that date back to around the 3rd century BCE. Depicted here on Rupees 4 + 4 value stamps is the story of the Tortoise and the Geese (SG 2034), which features a talkative tortoise that perished because it did not heed the advice of its friends (by talking while being carried away from a drying pond).

Figure 4. Denmark. 1997. “Europa. Tales and Legends by Hans Christian Andersen” (SG 1123–1124). Under the theme Hans Christian Andersen’s (1805–1875), Danish author known for fairy tales is a 5.25k stamp (SG 1124) that depicts the story “Thumbelina”. Mrs. Toad shown has been described as an “unbearably beautiful, selfish, vain, busy, arrogant and insanely sexy toad”.

Figure 5. Great Britain. 2006. “Animal Tales” (SG 2589–2596). The Enormous Crocodile, authored by Roald Dahl (1916–1990), original illustrations by Quentin Blake (1932–), is the story of an African crocodile that wants to eat children, who are saved by other animals in the jungle. The function of such stories may be to serve as warnings of dangers lurking outdoors. The stamp is good for first class letters within Great Britain (SG 2591).

Figure 6. Malaysia. 2007. “Traditional Children’s Folk Tales” (SG 1407–1415; MS1416). Sang Kancil, the plucky mouse deer wishes to cross the river but fears Sang Buaya, the crocodile. So Kancil calls out and asks him and all other crocodiles to queue up to be counted for the king’s feast. Once all have lined up, Kancil hops from one crocodile to another and crosses the river! It is se-tenant (SG 1409–1410) to a stamp (both of 30s value) that tells another heroic story of Sang Kancil, who helps Sang Kerbau, the buffalo escape from the jaws of Sang Bedal, a second crocodile.

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References


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