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WHAT IS FOLKLORE GOOD FOR? ON DEALING WITH UNDESIRABLE CULTURAL EXPRESSION

FOLKLORE, AS IS commonly agreed, is a powerful cultural expression both containing and conveying a number of meanings (see e.g., the systematic summaries by Honko 1984; Kottinger 1990). For those who actively practice folklore, its meaning differs from the meaning it has for those who observe or research a folklore performance. It also means something different for those people who use folklore than for those who propagate folklore for specific purposes. Pondering the question of whether folklore belongs to anyone in terms of ownership, it is hard to think of anything but a negative answer. Folklore as an intellectual concept encompassing a variety of genres cannot be owned, purchased, or possessed in the same way as material goods. If, on the other hand, we think of folklore as a material concept, whether as an artifact or as a retrievable secondary source of verbal or physical performances, it becomes possible to imagine a positive answer.

If folklore does belong to anyone, then it ought to belong to those who generate and practice it. Yet, one might object that this is a purist or romantic point of view, dominated by wishful thinking. What about those who investigate folklore, those who publish and archive folklore, or those who control the practice of folklore under specific cultural or political premises? Are the fieldworkers and researchers not entitled to claim the lore as theirs with the same right as do those who use folklore in practice? Is their claim probably even more justified, since after all it is their documentation which preserves folklore for future generations, albeit in a frozen image of reality, while living folklore is bound to develop and change, deteriorate, or vanish? Do people who sponsor folklore events or restrict certain folklore activities not exert a considerable influence on the living practice and further development of folklore, thus defying any hypothetical claim of ownership by active handling? And if so, how do they go about

controlling folklore? How do they eliminate or adjust folklore to their needs? And finally: Why should they want folklore at all?

The following consideration is governed by my specific position as a folk narrative scholar specializing in the Near East, particularly Iran and Turkey. Both countries, different as they are, share a number of similar factors, such as the Islamic religion and a strong national consciousness. Moreover, in the course of recent years both countries have experienced major changes in the development of societal values which—as far as folklore is concerned—has led to revaluations regarding which kind of folklore is deemed desirable. To demonstrate this, I would like to discuss two case studies in Turkish and Persian folklore based on contemporary firsthand experience.

NASREDDIN HODJA

A major part of Turkish folklore activities and research focuses on Turkey's most popular hero, the trickster Nasreddin Hodja (Marzolph 1992, 1996a). Nasreddin constitutes a pseudohistorical person of minor clerical rank originating in the thirteenth or fourteenth century in southern Anatolia. Over the centuries, he has become the point of crystallization of a large number of short humorous narratives which nowadays are known in the whole of the Muslim world, from Casablanca to Peking. Given Nasreddin's predominant character as a fictional joker and trickster, it comes as a surprise to see him mentioned in the *Resolutions of the 1995 General Conference of the UNESCO* (Twenty-eighth Session, Paris, 25 October to 16 November 1995; Volume 1: Resolutions, p. 89). Under the heading 11.4: "Celebration of anniversaries" it reads, "(xxix) seven hundredth anniversary of the death of the Turkish humorist Nasreddin Hoca (Mulla Nasruddin, Goha) (1996)." To a specialist, reading this reference causes a strange kind of satisfaction and relief, a sort of "so at last we know for certain . . . !" Attempts to date Nasreddin Hodja reliably have used the year 386 of the Muslim era, mentioned on his alleged tombstone in the Turkish town of Akşehir. The commonly accepted interpretation is that this number is the trickster's final posthumous joke and must be read backwards, meaning that his death occurred in 683 of the Muslim era, or 1284 of the Christian era (Bajraktarević 1936). Other attempts have linked Nasreddin with the Mongol emperor Timur (Marzolph 1997), who—by the way—was celebrated in 1996 in connection with the 660th anniversary of his (equally hypothetical, though slightly more conceivable) birthday. It is mentioned in the UNESCO list of officially acknowledged anniversaries right *after* Nasreddin. Neither in popular imagination nor in scholarly speculative theory has any dating of Nasreddin's death in the year 1296 of the Christian era (696 Muslim era) been considered. All other attempts at arithmetical reckoning in order to arrive at exactly seven centuries from Nasreddin's death in 1996 also appear

futile. From a historical point of view, the UNESCO anniversary date can only be judged as bizarre.

To appreciate this, it is necessary to delve a little deeper into Nasreddin's development. Nasreddin Hodja is first mentioned in several anecdotes dating from as early as the second half of the fifteenth century. Comprehensive compilations of narratives on Nasreddin are known from the sixteenth century onwards (Burrill 1970; Boratav 1996). Early Turkish manuscripts comprised a large amount of sexual, scatological, and otherwise disputable material. With the introduction of printing in the nineteenth century, Nasreddin, by way of the choice of the particular anecdotes included in the anonymously compiled collections of his *Letâ'if* (anecdotes), was gradually transformed into a charming and subtle philosopher, whose major preoccupation would be to confront his surroundings with apparently strange questions or unconventional solutions to common problems. Even more so, the first edition of Nasreddin tales published by Veled Çelebi İzbudak in 1907 (1323 Muslim era; see Korucuoğlu 1994) resulted in presenting Nasreddin as a "domesticated" and "sanitized" popular character. İzbudak's publication has been reprinted and exploited numerous times since the beginning of the twentieth century and is comparable in status to a canonical collection. İzbudak laid the foundations for Nasreddin's present interpretation as a prototypical amiable fool, a harmless and appealing character who practices a charming kind of absurd philosophy by playing on the restrictions of human intellectual capacity and the inevitable shortcomings of human existence. The results of this development can be seen today in printed editions, which towards the end of the twentieth century, are distributed in various languages to the large international tourist community visiting Turkey.

On the other hand, oral tradition on Nasreddin Hodja appears to be widespread but rarely documented. As a matter of fact, although certain indications exist as to the popularity of Nasreddin tales in oral tradition—such as the frequent use of colloquial phrases referring to specific anecdotes—we know very little about the range of orally told, orally invented, and orally transmitted anecdotes on Nasreddin in Turkey (or, for that matter, in any of the countries where his tales are told). Nasreddin in oral tradition is supposedly a character who lives the way people do, talking and acting in everyday life, while also mirroring the physiological needs and natural acts incumbent upon every human being—by which I refer to tales often (dis)qualified simply as "sexual" or "scatological." As the few rare instances of relatively faithfully documented tales from oral tradition show, Nasreddin is an unrestricted hero, clever and nasty at the same time, sympathetic and drastic in his words and deeds, and certainly less domesticated and adapted to officially propagated moral standards than in any printed publication. Yet on the whole, the Nasreddin tradition is dominated

by the innumerable booklets printed since the first half of the nineteenth century. The depiction of Nasreddin in these booklets resulted in transforming a supposedly vigorous and vulgar hero of popular oral tradition into a domesticated "folk philosopher," a veritable ambassador of good-natured Turkish mentality. This development is accompanied by a growing number of allegedly scholarly studies elaborating what the American-educated Turkish scholar Seyfi Karabaş (1981, 1990) has criticized as the "biographical approach," which focuses on such problems as how to verify the authenticity of anecdotes attributed to Nasreddin or attempts to reconstruct his original character (Türkmen 1990).

On a more general level, the development of Nasreddin in twentieth-century Turkish tradition is part of the intricate relationship between nationalism and folklore in Turkey (Başgöz 1978; Öztürkmen 1993), resulting in the molding of an item of folklore by decidedly intentional propaganda. At the same time, the perception and representation of folklore as a whole is shaped: Nasreddin is equated with Turkish folklore and Turkish folklore is Nasreddin. On yet another level, Nasreddin's development as a humorous philosopher since about the middle of the twentieth century is sharply contrasted by cultural and political developments in Turkey, such as the thorough disregard of basic human rights and a dominant nationalist policy resulting *inter alia* in various armed clashes with Turkey's Greek neighbors, in the proclamation of an "independent" Turkish state in Cyprus (which internationally is only recognized by Turkey), and the brutal suppression of Kurdish identity in Eastern Turkey. This political background supplies the most convincing explanation for the proclamation of the "International Nasreddin Hodja Year." It is intended to distract public opinion from political action, to cover up and outshine reproachable political acts by presenting the "true" character of the Turkish nation to the international community.

Another argument underlines this interpretation. The summer of 1996 witnessed the fifth event in the series of "International Congresses of Turkish Folklore," held every five years. In analyzing this event, the state of folklore scholarship in Turkey can best be understood from two antagonistic points. On the one hand, the congress incorporated a special three-day section on Nasreddin Hodja, commemorating the UNESCO-proclaimed "International Nasreddin Hodja Year." On the other hand, the inaugural plenary lecture of the congress by the Bloomington-based Turkish scholar İlhan Başgöz, focusing on erotic elements in the Nasreddin Hodja corpus, had to be discontinued because of violent verbal aggression on the part of several nationalist folklorists in the audience (cf. Sakaoglu 1996). Their patience did not endure hearing İlhan Başgöz quote such anecdotes in the name of Nasreddin as the explanation of the Minaret as the penis of the earth. Moreover, because of alleged "organizational difficulties," the second

plenary lecture, which was to treat the connection between humor and ideology by focusing on Nasreddin Hodja anecdotes in the twentieth century, was relegated to the crowded obscurity of an afternoon section (Marzolph 1996b).

As a short digression from the main focus of the discussion, I would like to mention what I regard as one of the most telling, and at the same time bizarre, monuments in the Islamic world. As can be imagined from the previous discussion of Nasreddin Hodja's popularity, statues of the character abound in Turkey. Probably the largest one is situated in front of a motorway resthouse near Eskishehir and portrays Nasreddin on his donkey; the donkey is standing on a fragment of the globe, while Nasreddin points with his staff to the ground. This is a frozen representation of the famous anecdote corresponding to one of the motifs of the international tale type AaTh 922, *The King and the Abbot*: When Nasreddin was asked where the center of the earth was situated, he just pointed to the ground with his staff and said, "If you do not believe me, prove the opposite!" (Nicolaisen 1993). This statue might be understood as positioning Turkey as the center of the world, a mildly ideological and, in fact, common attitude held by many other countries. More telling is a recently erected statue in front of the central railway station in the Turkish capital of Ankara. In times and societies in which people travel by train, the central railway station conveys the first impression of a given city to the traveler. More than any other city of a given country, the capital assumes the responsibility for representing essential national qualities in order to produce an impressive image that visitors remember. For instance, foreigners arriving in the U.S. capital of Washington by train cannot fail to realize that they have arrived in the capital of a country that regards itself as one of the most powerful nations of the world, for the Washington station is a monumental structure with (heavily overstressed) neoclassicist elements. In contrast, Ankara has recently chosen to represent its national character by a comparatively modest statue in front of the railway station depicting a man who is seated backwards on some quadruped and is clad in traditional clothing and wearing a huge turban. Drawing closer to the statue, one can easily recognize that the man is meant to represent Nasreddin Hodja, but the quadruped is not, as might be expected, his stereotypical donkey. Instead, it is a chimera, a winged lion with an additional human head rising from its neck. This strange combination reveals its subtle meaning when compared to the original by which it was inspired. The chimera is a three-dimensional version of a Hittite relief exhibited today in a special section in the Museum of Anatolian civilization on Ankara's castle hill. The relief was excavated near Carchemis and dates from about the ninth century B. C. Apparently, the statue was inaugurated on the occasion of the Nasreddin Hodja Year in 1996. Inspired by an idea of Ankara's mayor, Ali Dinçer, the statue is said to be executed on the proposi-

tion that both Nasreddin Hodja and the ancient civilization of the Hittites belong to Anatolian culture. To a sensitive foreign visitor, the statue reveals more than this innocent meaning. Here, Nasreddin Hodja, the stereotypical representative of the charming side of Turkish national character, is related to pre-Turkish Anatolian civilization in a manner that invites multiple readings, which range from taking possession of a former culture to the suggestion of continuity. In the end, these readings result in constructing Turkish identity as the legitimate successor to a mythical past. Historical truth, such as the fact that Turkish people did not exist in Hittite Anatolia, is rated second in rank compared to the hegemonic claim of Nasreddin's (Turkish) humor. Furthermore, the fact that the two cultures occupy the same geographical area serves as sufficient proof of their relatedness, the contemporary culture being regarded as superior by the historical turn of events.

This sum of evidence makes it obvious that the Nasreddin tradition is directed and exploited in various ways. First, Nasreddin is claimed to originate from and belong to Turkish tradition, while his multicultural and cosmopolitan traits are neglected and denied. Second, Turkish folklore is filtered and cleared of undesirable elements regarded as extraneous. Third, in its "sanitized" form, folklore is explicitly propagated as a means of defining ethnic and national consciousness. Given these outlines, it is not surprising that not a single publication of Nasreddin tales collected from unrestricted contemporary oral tradition in Turkey exists. Such a collection would spoil the desired picture by adding to Nasreddin's character all those spices that publicly propagated tradition aims to eliminate.

MASHDI GALIN

Mashdi Galin is the name of a female Persian storyteller, incidentally the one storyteller with the largest recorded and documented narrative repertoire in the whole of the Iranian tradition area (Elwell-Sutton 1980). In the early 1940s when she was seventy-five years old, Mashdi Galin told more than one hundred of her tales to the British journalist Laurence P. Elwell-Sutton, then in his early thirties, who wrote them down in his own Persian handwriting. For the remaining forty years of the collector's lifetime, except for a small volume of tales adapted for children (Elwell-Sutton 1950), Mashdi Galin's tales remained unpublished. When, in early 1996, about fifty years after their recording, the tales were presented to the Persian public (Marzolph, Amirhosseini-Nithammer and Vakiliyân 1996), they not only constituted a rare folklore document of historical importance, but they also met with radically changed conditions for the publication of folklore (Marzolph 1994).

Before the revolution of 1979, folklore in Iran was thriving. Both folklore activities and research in various national and regional institutions were

encouraged and sponsored, since folklore as the living cultural expression of the people was seen as a means of stabilizing national consciousness. This national consciousness in turn was promised to be guaranteed by the royal family. Thus, the propagation and patronizing of folklore constituted a direct link to the vital interest of the imperial dynasty for its continuation. As a consequence of the revolution of 1979, the monarchy was abolished and theocratic "Islamic" rule was established. While the West has been interested mostly in those subsequent events affecting its foreign policy and economic interests, internal developments in Iran have led to an almost complete reevaluation in virtually every field of life. Moral standards have been redefined, social conduct has changed (Keshavarz 1988), huge numbers of streets have been renamed, and schoolbooks had to be rewritten. In the months immediately following the revolution, folklore, like other fields of life, experienced a promising but short period of uncontrolled freedom before eventually being closed down. Enjavi Shirazi's famous radio program was discontinued, and the prominent folklorist himself was forced to resign from the folklore archive he had collected. Similarly, the state-subsidized National Center for Ethnology and Folklore ceased to exist (and only much later saw a meager revival as a branch of the central Organization for Cultural Heritage, the *sāzmān-e mīrās-e farhangī*).

The following years were a period of emotional reaction against customs and beliefs judged as un-Islamic and regarded as contradicting the currently propagated set of religious values to which every cultural activity would have to comply. Special vigor was exercised in restricting or trying to abolish folklore customs practiced at the beginning of the Iranian New Year (March 21)—even to such an extent that the originally innocent custom of jumping over the fire on *Chaharshanbe-ye suri*, the last Wednesday of the Iranian solar year, at times gained the character of a subtle anti-government protest. In cases such as this one, repression, by a simple dialectic process, created resistance. While it appears inevitable that any revolution (which, in its radical denotation, after all means a "turning upside down") should result in the propagation of new standards, the consequences for folklore in Iran were disastrous and continue to be so almost twenty years later. While folklore today is again tolerated to a certain extent, at the same time it is constantly being surveyed for suspected contradictions to the current system of Islamic values. As for the specific case of folk narrative, both the object and the field of study appear to have suffered from a triple verdict.

First, folktales are condemned because of their close affinities to the now detested imperial family. Folktales tell of kings and queens, of rulers and princes; folk narrative research, on the other hand, was propagated before the revolution and sponsored by the Pahlavi monarch and his family. Second, folktales are distrusted because they deal with a fundamental pillar of national consciousness. Folk narratives, especially hero tales, draw on the

collective memory of Iran's imperial past; folk narrative research in this respect is seen as an approval of the previous ruling system. Third, folktales are suspected of embodying and encouraging elements that contradict Islamic values as presently defined. Folk narratives tell of love and hate and of all kinds of illicit and morally objectionable acts, such as extramarital sexual activities or the consumption of intoxicating substances. Folk narrative research dealing with these facts is perceived as advertising knowledge about them and implicitly authorizing their actual performance.

The past years, however, have witnessed a tentative re-engagement in folklore research. The national broadcasting company meanwhile (not without a certain amount of resentment) has accepted the timeless importance of its folklore archive, which was funded before the revolution. It has begun to scrutinize those of its resources that were not destroyed by negligent or intentional disregard, eventually aiming at a restricted and controlled access, such as the use of primary folklore material for the preparation of radio programs. Folklore is again being taught in courses at various universities, and a folklore section within the ethnographic department (*bakhsh-e mardom shenāsi*) of the centralized Organization for Cultural Heritage has been established. The organizational alignment of this institution with the powerful Ministry of Islamic Guidance (*vezārat-e farhang va ershād-e eslāmi*) clearly indicates the ministry's claim, if not to own folklore itself, then at least to control access to resources and research. This attitude moreover prevails in the publication policy of the Organization for Cultural Heritage. A recently completed scientific survey of folk narrative in all Iranian provinces, though prepared in camera-ready copy, is not deemed fit for publication. While the official argument against publication of certain objectionable data often focuses on topical and organizational difficulties (lack of readership, non-availability of paper resources), it can hardly be denied that ideological considerations often underlie such decisions. Since responsible officials have not yet agreed on a common basis as to which parts of the undesired heritage of folklore are to be published, it is thought best not to publish at all (as the Persian saying goes, "An essay not written does not contain any mistakes"). At times, even the complete elimination of folklore had been a goal, comparable to the intended elimination of the imperial past in Iran's collective memory, but this goal has since been accepted as unattainable.

The publication of such seemingly innocent texts as the folk narratives told by Mashdi Galin must be understood against this background. Again, this point deserves to be discussed in some detail, since the history of this particular collection of folktales, in a number of ways, is representative of the various stages in the history of folk narrative research in Iran.

The tales were collected in the 1940s by a British journalist (and scholar-to-be) from the oral, albeit artificially-induced, performance of an aged

female native storyteller. This kind of teamwork probably represents the most common technique—the native informant supplying the material basis for the presentation and/or analysis later to be accomplished by the foreign researcher. Yet, neither the tales collected nor the context of their acquisition were subjected to an in-depth scholarly analysis as might have been expected. Instead, the tales inspired a volume of Persian folktales, published in English in 1950. The author adapted the primary material supplied by the Persian storyteller to what he then judged to be folktales suitable for British children (Elwell-Sutton 1950). The collector was not concerned with preserving or presenting “authentic” folklore, but intended to present (to his national community) a sympathetic and appealing representation of the culture of Persian culture. Again, the subsequent fate of the collection reveals the attitude towards folklore prevailing in Iran in the late 1950s and early 1960s because the Persian friend in whose house the collector had met the storyteller eventually published a small volume of the tales in Persian (Elwell-Sutton 1962). Yet this too was not based on the primary material as documented in the collector’s manuscript. Instead, it was a Persian retranslation of the grammatically rephrased and stylistically modified English adaptation (see the comparison in Marzolph and Amirhosseini-Nithammer 1994: vol. 2, 62–66). So in the Persian context, too, the authentic material was judged inferior to a version that had been “purified” in terms of content and language. In the early 1960s, the accepted “purification” was based on the judgment of a foreigner whose method, analysis, and probably also moral background was regarded as superior. In the early 1990s, on the other hand, officials responsible for publications were, and still are, highly suspicious of foreign “Orientalist” activities. Moreover, even now the authentic folklore material of Persian culture is not allowed to be published in its original form, since political and moral standards have shifted. As for the 1996 edition of Mashdi Galin’s tales, several tales that were regarded as unsuitable from a moral or political point of view had to be abolished. Thus, while frame conditions had meanwhile changed, the actual outcome in terms of respect for an unspoiled performance and documentation of folklore is similar. Before the revolution the West served as a model to follow, while after the revolution ideals are modeled according to a romanticized, neo-classical image of the early Islamic days. Yet in neither perception is folklore allowed to exist and prosper as a living expression of contemporary cultural reality.

While the original Persian edition of Mashdi Galin’s tales published in Germany in 1994 (Marzolph and Amirhosseini-Nithammer 1994) contains 118 tales, the adapted version published in Teheran in 1996 contains only 110 tales, because of the above-mentioned guidelines. In discussing publication policies, it is to be remembered that censorship in Iran is practiced in a way not clearly outlined by legal definitions. The law rules against any

publication regarded as un-Islamic. This might result in a general publication ban, or in a request to amend or abolish criticized words or passages. The point here is that while folklore exists as a document of actual performance, it is not permitted to be made available to the public. In other words: While folklore may be owned in its archived form, the claim of ownership holds little value in terms of publication when confronted with the politics of power.

The Iranian presidential elections in the summer of 1997 resulted in the hoped-for change of rule, which (from a European perspective) was laden with expectations of political and cultural liberation and of reintegration into the international community. Above all, cultural expectations focused on the new Secretary of Culture (and Islamic Guidance), Dr. 'Aṭa' ollāh Mohājērānī, who had earlier even proposed entering into verbal exchange with the United States government. At the time of this essay, it is still much too early to discern any major or general change in the treatment of culture and cultural expression by the new government. Yet it should be noted that the second edition of Mashdi Galin's tales, which had been stuck in the process of reevaluation, has suddenly been granted exemption from any further change.

In conclusion, it is useful to contrast the two case studies in a more general analysis. The Turkish attitude concerning Nasreddin Hodja aims at a specific kind of folklorism. This would allow an adapted and modified version of the folklore factor Nasreddin to exist. At the same time, the fictional character Nasreddin in its domesticated and sanitized form would be employed in a conscious political attempt to counterbalance any undesired repercussion of objectionable political action in public opinion. In more general terms, folklore in Turkey constitutes an aspect of the tourist industry and thus of national welfare. The part of folklore visible to the average visitor is controlled, adjusted, eliminated, or expanded in connection with the exigencies of foreign representation. Folklore is encouraged and sponsored, albeit in its modified, sanitized, and controllable form.

The Iranian attitude, while similarly regarding certain folkloric elements as undesirable, is mainly concerned with the impact of folklore practice and research within the country. Until the realization of perfect Islamic rule in all fields of life by those in power, the Iranian people are primarily regarded as immature and unable to judge for themselves the moral feasibility and permissibility of cultural expression. Thus, guidelines are deemed imperative, access to folklore archives has to be restricted, and activities or publications are only permitted after having been checked thoroughly against Islamic values. The fact that the said Islamic values do not constitute a fixed and unanimously agreed upon set of regulations, but are rather open to interpretation and even personal speculation, poses a problem not easily resolved.

In both of the cases discussed, the position of folklore as a fundamental cultural expression is acknowledged, yet folklore is not regarded as a legitimate constituent of cultural heritage whose practice and research should be permitted without official guidelines. On the contrary, folklore qualifies as a traditional element that challenges officially desired goals. The techniques of interventions concerning the publication of folklore are strikingly similar, yet, while in Turkey folklore is appreciated as a convenient means to assist in constructing a sympathetic outward representation of the Turkish nation, the Iranian attitude results from the inability to reach the desired goal of abolishing folklore for good. On a different level, both attitudes implicitly reveal the fact that even though accessibility to, and publication of, folklore may be owned, folklore as a living expression of popular culture does not easily surrender to the restrictions of official guidelines.

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