"Focusees" of jocular fiction in classical Arabic literature

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Tradition, in the sense of both German "Tradition" and "Überlieferung", constitutes a vital part of human existence. The two notions of the term, though sharing common aspects, point in opposing directions. On the one hand, an expression such as "traditional life" suggests an inclination towards the past, an adherence to customs that have been codified into a form perceived as static and that risk becoming outdated or being overcome by the natural progression of developments. On the other hand, a term such as "oral tradition" implies a continuous reproduction and thus conveys an idea of constant motion. While the German term "Tradition" refers to a (albeit hypothetical) faithful and unchanged reproduction of codified conceptions, "Überlieferung" indicates an element of adaptation and change. Both notions overlap in so far as they denote reproduction and thus imply life. Any tradition that is not reproduced becomes extinct and obsolete. On the contrary, traditions which are reproduced stay alive and thus are subjected to similar agents such as those operative in biological reproduction.

This is the concept behind the term "biology of tradition," which was coined by folk narrative scholars of the early twentieth century, such as FRIEDRICH RANKE (1926)[1] and CARL WILHELM VON SYDOW (1932)[2] with regard to the conjectured "life" of folk tales and legends in oral tradition and performance. These scholars were the first to request folklore texts to be studied not merely as literary monuments dismembered and separated from their original surroundings, such as had been the primary objective of the so-called "Finnish" school of

1 RANKE, F.: Grundsätzliches zur Wiedergabe deutscher Volkssagen. In: *Niederdeutsche Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 4 (1926), 44-47, at 45 f.

2 SYDOW, C. W. VON: *Selected Papers on Folklore*. Copenhagen 1948, 11.

geographically and historically-oriented folk narrative research.[3] In order to appreciate the meaning of folklore as a living tradition,[4] they claimed that tales should be analyzed in the context in which they are told, performed, and transmitted.[5] They thus inaugurated a shift in folklore research from text to context, from the static perception of artificially induced and arranged narrative texts to the study of the dynamics of narration and tradition, of the numerous contacts and interactions that are eventually responsible for the genesis and further development of narratives.[6]

The more folk narrative research investigated the intricacies of performance, the more it was necessary to shape adequate tools for understanding and interpreting the object of research. Studies of the early twentieth century about specific narrators made it clear that tales were not the canonized and unchangeable texts as they had been regarded, albeit with a certain amount of hypocrisy, by romantic attitude. Instead, scholars became aware of the fact that narrators shape their texts according to the situational context by taking recourse to an available set of narrative elements ("motifs")[7] or complex units ("tale types").[8] Gifted narrators would inventively combine these elements and embellish them with individual traits, often drawing upon personal conceptions.[9] This mechanism of inserting new elements into previously existing (or rather preconceived) narratives concerns most, if not all, narrative genres, though in varying degrees of intensity. It should be remembered, however, that the concept of a preconceived text existing *per se* in an unchanged and unchangeable form is a highly problematic theorem. Such a "Grundform" ("Urform")[10] of a given tale

3 RÖHRICH, L.: Geographisch-historische Methode. In: *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* (henceforth: *EM*) 5, Berlin/New York 1987, 1012-1030.

4 KOTTINGER, W.: Hermeneutik. In: *EM* 6 (1990), 841-845.

5 BEN-AMOS, D.: Kontext. In: *EM* 8 (1993), 217-237 (extensive bibliography).

6 DEGH, L.: Biologie des Erzählguts. In: *EM* 2 (1979), 386-406, at 386.

7 BEN-AMOS, D.: The Concept of Motif in Folklore. In: NEWALL, V. J. (ed.): *Folklore Studies in the 20th Century*. Woodbridge/Totowa, N. J. 1980, 17-35.

8 COURTÉS, J.: Motif et type dans la tradition folklorique. Problèmes de typologie. In: *Littérature* 45 (1982), 114-127; GEORGES, ROBERT A.: The Universality of the Tale-Type as Concept and Construct. In: *Western Folklore* 17:1 (1983), 21-28; HOLBEK, B.: Variation and Tale-Type. In: *D'un conte ... à l'autre. La variabilité dans la littérature orale*. Paris 1990, 471-484.

9 NEUMANN, S.: Individualisierung. In: *EM* 7 (1993), 158-160.

10 TOMKOWIAK, I.: Grundform. In: *EM* 6 (1990), 258-260.

often rather corresponded to the idealistic expectations of early twentieth century folk narrative research than to the actual circumstances of living tradition.

While the above assessment primarily applies to folk narrative, it also holds true for other narrative genres, notably those subjected to a high degree of popular reception. For the purpose of the present discussion, the resulting conflict may be generalized as a competition between the fictional (since not belonging to the "original" text) and the factual (since existing as a theoretically "pure" concept). This conflict of fictionality[11] vs. factuality[12] experienced in the formation of narratives and narrative clusters, within the discipline of folk narrative research eventually resulted in the application of a number of theoretical concepts that were generated above all by the analysis of the two most obvious relationships fictional and factual narratives may entertain. Factual narratives can be fictionalized by stripping them of their original historical garments and by placing them in a different environment in terms of time, protagonists, locality, and even motivation. On the other hand, fictional narratives can be factualized by supplying them with a credible, reliable or otherwise apparently factual garb and by fitting them together with other narratives whose factuality is known or accepted beyond doubt.

Again, the phenomena alluded to are by no means germane exclusively to folklore. As for Arabic literature, HENRY FREDERICK AMEDROZ already in 1904 pointed out a tale of the *Arabian Nights* told as history in the *Muntaẓam* of Ibn al-Jawzī;[13] in 1956, CHARLOTTE R. LONG in a paper published in the journal *Archaeology* discussed the tale of *Aladdin and the wonderful lamp* as constituting a repercussion of narratives about Egyptian tomb robbers;[14] and recently Muhsin Mahdi has discussed the tale told by the king's steward in the *Arabian Nights* as resulting from the same process of "history to fiction".[15] Yet,

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11 WÜRZBACH, N.: Fiktionalität. In: *EM* 4 (1984), 1105-1111.

12 NEUREUTER, H. P.: Faktizität. In: *EM* 4 (1984), 802-806; see also BAUSINGER, H.: Historisierung und Enthistorisierung. In: *EM* 6 (1990), 1091-1097.

13 AMEDROZ, H. F.: A Tale of the Arabian Nights told as History in the "Muntazam" of Ibn al-Jauzi. In: *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1904, 207-293.

14 LONG, CHARLOTTE R.: Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp. In: *Archaeology* (1956), 219-214.

15 MAHDI, M.: *From History to Fiction. The Tale Told by the King's Steward.* In: id.: *The Thousand and one Nights (Alf Layla wa-Layla). From the Earliest Known Sources.* Arabic Text Edited with Introduction and Notes. Part 3: *Introduction and Indexes.* Leiden/New York/Köln 1994, 164-180, notes p. 254-262; almost identical in: *The Thousand and One Nights in Arabic*

orientalist scholars have mostly focused on the reverse process, occupying themselves with tracing fictional elements in history or in otherwise decidedly or pretendedly non-fictional texts. While they have taken notice of the phenomenon that even admittedly fictitious compilations "at times cloak their romances and fantasies in pseudo-historical garb," they are too often "so steeped in their academic training and elite intellectual background that they only apprehend popular texts through the filter of their own preunderstanding of what 'true' historical study entails".[16] After all, the prime goal of orientalist studies was, and still is, the attempt to understand a foreign culture by analyzing its religion, history, and "serious" intellectual contributions – meaning by "serious": closest to our capacity of perceiving them as serious, quite regardless of their evaluation in their culture of origin. In order to arrive at that goal, it is accepted as an indispensable first step to sift through the available data and eliminate inaccurate or unreliable elements. Since elements that – for instance in historical texts – can be identified as fictional are obviously invented and thus contradict the quest for ultimate truth, they have to be discarded. It may be useful to remember at this point that such an attitude disregards the fact that each and every text, whether non-fictional or fictional, is always quoted with a certain intention and thus possesses a meaning and a function. Understanding this function might eventually reveal more about the actual meaning of a text than could be extracted by analyzing the text at its (historical) face value.[17]

Given their mental predisposition, Western scholars willingly, probably all too readily, accepted the verdict of Arab intellectuals of the classical period who expressed their contempt of imaginative narrative. According to a representative testimony in al-Tawḥīdī's *al-Imtāʿ wal-muʾānasa*, fictional narrative is judged to contain "unfounded statements, mixed with the impossible, conjoined to the marvelous and the entertaining, and [is] incapable of derivation [*taḥṣīl*] and verification [*taḥqīq*]".[18] On the other hand, early Islamic scholars were already

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Literature and Society. Ed. R. G. HOVANNISIAN, G. SABAGH, F. MALTI-DOUGLAS. Cambridge 1997, 78-105; also in: *Oral Tradition* 4,1-2 (1989), 65-79.

16 Quotations from HEATH, P.: *The Thirsty Sword. Sīrat ʿAntar and the Arabic Popular Epic*. Salt Lake City 1996, 149.

17 See HONKO, L.: Folkoristic Studies on Meaning. In: *Arv* (1984), 35-56; RÖHRICH, L.: Zur Deutung und Be-Deutung von Folklore-Texten. In: *Fabula* 26 (1985), 3-28.

18 Quoted from ABBOT, A.: A Ninth-Century Fragment of the "Thousand Nights". New Light on the Early History of the Arabian Nights. In: *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 8,3 (1949), 129-

conscious of the obvious presence of fictional material in non-fictional texts, predominantly the *ḥadīth*. Subsequently, they developed a methodological inventory – such as the handbooks on transmitters (*rijāl*) – aiming at identifying these fictitious elements in order to be able to eliminate them whenever necessary.[19] Moreover, besides the mere existence of fiction in a body of texts so essential for the basic definition of Islamic consciousness as the *ḥadīth*, Islamic scholars were even forced to acknowledge certain legitimate and useful functions of fiction. SEEGER A. BONEBAKKER has recently discussed the various arguments quoted by traditional Islamic scholars concerning the illustration of moral points by employing anthropomorphized animals,[20] and RINA DRORY has pointed out that some of the arguments used since the very beginning of an intellectual debate in Islamic times – such as the legend concerning the origin of the literary term of *khurāfa* [21] – might even be understood as attempts to legitimize fiction in general.[22]

When correlating Arabic fictional texts to the biology of their tradition, a number of "epic laws"[23] can be extracted to which tradition is subjected and according to which tradition is shaped. One of the most striking phenomena in the study of narrative (and not necessarily "fictional" narrative) in classical Arabic literature is the gradual development of large bodies of narrative material

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164, at 156; see also MARZOLPH, U.: Re-Locating the Arabian Nights. In: *Orientalia Lovanensia Analecta* (in print).

19 See the contribution by SEBASTIAN GÜNTHER in this volume.

20 See BONEBAKKER, S. A.: Some Medieval Views on Fantastic Stories. In: *Quaderni di studi arabi* 10 (1992), 21-43; idem: *Nihil obstat* in Storytelling? In: HOVANNISIAN e.a. (as in note 15) 56-77; a similar version was published in Mededelingen der Koninklijke Akademie der Wettenschappen, Dec. 55, no. 8. Amsterdam 1992.

21 As for a folklorist interpretation of the legend on *khurāfa*, not discussed by DRORY, see SATO, M.: Geschlechtswechsel. In: *EM* 5 (1987), 1138-1142, at 1140; MILLS, M. A.: Sex Role Reversals, Sex Changes, and Transvestite Disguise in the Oral Tradition of a Conservative Muslim Community in Afghanistan. In: JORDAN, R./KALÇIK, S. (eds.): *Women's Folklore, Women's Culture*. Philadelphia 1985, 187-213, at 198; BRUFORD, A.: Some Aspects of the Otherworld. In: NEWALL (as in note 7), 147-151; MILLS, M.: It's about time - or is it? Four Stories of/in Transformation. In: R. D. ABRAHAMS (ed.): *Fields of Folklore. Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Goldstein*. Bloomington, Indiana 1995, 184-197.

22 DRORY, R.: Three Attempts to Legitimize Fiction in Classical Arabic Literature. In: *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 18 (1994), 146-164.

23 HOLBECK, B.: Epische Gesetze. In: *EM* 4 (1984), 58-69.

attributed to specific individuals. Well known examples of this phenomenon in different areas of narrative are al-Aṣma'ī and the numerous stories about his encounters with Bedouins; Wahb ibn Munabbih as a standard teller (*rāwī*) of narratives of alleged Jewish origin (*isrā'īlīyāt*); Hārūn al-Rashīd as a representative of the figure of the just and sensitive ruler – notably an obvious breach with historical reality – in the narrative cycle embedded in the *Arabian Nights*;[24] the Medinese jester Ash'ab as the stereotype glutton;[25] the wise fool Buhlūl as a mirroring reminder of the *vanitas mundi* (a function that, incidentally, corresponds to that of the court-fool in medieval Europe),[26] or Juḥā/Nasreddin Hoca as a standard protagonist of Near Eastern jocular narrative.[27] The individuals concerned with this phenomenon are labelled in folk narrative research "Kristallisationsgestalten",[28] a term that does not possess an English equivalent. It may be rendered somewhat clumsily as "individuals serving as the basis for the crystallizing of narratives". Here I propose to coin the term "focusee" meaning "individuals serving as a focus for the attribution of narratives". The basic idea of the phenomenon that certain kinds of narratives develop around certain characters, was formulated already in the ninth century by the brilliant polygrapher al-Jāḥiẓ in his book on stingy people (*al-Bukhalā'*): „If somebody were to attribute an anecdote to Abū l-Ḥārith Jummayn, al-Haitham ibn Muṭahhar, Muzabbid, or Ibn Aḥmar, then it would, even if boring, have the largest success imaginable. If, on the contrary, he were to reproduce a rather funny anecdote of intricate meaning and attribute it to Ṣāliḥ ibn Ḥunayn,

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24 GERHARD, M. I.: *The Art of Story-Telling.* Leiden 1963, 417-470; cf. MARZOLPH, U.: Hārūn ar-Rašīd. In: *EM* 6 (1990), 534-537.

25 ROSENTHAL, F.: *Humor in Early Islam.* Leiden 1956 (reprint Westport, Conn. 1976).

26 See MEZGER, W.: *Hofnarren im Mittelalter.* Konstanz 1981; id.: *Narrenidee und Fastnachtsbrauch.* Konstanz 1991; LEVER, M.: *Zepter und Schellenkappe. Zur Geschichte der Hofnarren* (French original: *Le sceptre et la marotte*, 1983). Frankfurt am Main 1992; MARZOLPH, U.: *Der Weise Narr Buhlūl.* Wiesbaden 1984; id.: Der Weise Narr Buhlūl in den modernen Volksliteraturen der islamischen Länder. In: *Fabula* 28 (1987), 72-89.

27 MARZOLPH, U.: Zur Überlieferung der Nasreddin Hoca-Schwänke außerhalb des türkischen Sprachraumes. In: *Türkische Sprachen und Kulturen. Materialien der 1. Deutschen Turkologen-Konferenz.* Ed. INGE BALDAUF/KLAUS KREISER/SEMIH TEZCAN. Wiesbaden 1991, 275-285; id.: Mollā Naṣroddīn in Persia. In: *Iranian Studies* 28,3-4 (1995), 157-174; id./ BALDAUF, I.: Hodscha Nasreddin. In: *EM* 6 (1990), 1127-1151.

28 KÖHLER-ZÜLCH, I.: Kristallisationsgestalten. In: *EM* 8 (1996), 460-466.

Ibn al-Nawwā', or any other despised person, then it would not only become boring, but also dull, which is even worse."[29]

This statement, however lucid it might have been at the time of al-Jāḥiẓ, from a historical perspective contains in itself the theoretical implications that it analyses. Though passages such as the one quoted have preserved "the names of a score of raconteurs from the earliest centuries of Islam",[30] those names need an exegesis in order to be appreciated in their contemporary relevance after the passing of a millennium. And this turns out to be a major challenge, since the individuals named can be identified only with a limited degree of certainty.[31] Abū l-Ḥārith Jummayn, al-Haitham ibn Muṭahhar and Muzabbid apparently were popular jesters around the time of the caliph al-Mahdī; Ibn Aḥmar, whose name is also included in two lists of buffoons (*baṭṭāl*) and fools (*mughaffal*) respectively in Ibn al-Nadīm's Fihrist,[32] probably was a serious poet.[33] As for Ṣāliḥ ibn Ḥunayn[34] and Ibn al-Nawwā',[35] there exists only some vague evidence as to who they might have been.

In order to appreciate the quoted individuals in their contemporary meaning, we thus have to rely mainly on the evaluation given by al-Jāḥiẓ himself. Yet, beyond this difficulty, the unequal amount of narrative material available about them is telling in itself. For Ṣāliḥ ibn Ḥunayn and Ibn al-Nawwā', those individuals qualified by al-Jāḥiẓ as "despised persons" (*bughaḍā'*, sg. *baghīḍ*), no further anecdotal material survives. Obviously they were truly "despised" by tradition. Al-Haitham ibn Muṭahhar is quoted in a number of sources, yet never in a very prominent position, and is thus not a very convincing example. But

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29 al-Jāḥiẓ: *al-Bukhalā'*. Ed. ṬĀHĀ AL-ḤĀJIRĪ. Cairo 1983, 15-18; see MARZOLPH, U.: *Arabia ridens. Die humoristische Kurzprosa der frühen Abbasidenzeit im internationalen Traditionsgeflecht.* 1-2. Frankfurt am Main 1992, vol. 1, 237 f.

30 PELLAT, C.: Nādira. In: *EI*^{2}, VII, Leiden 1993, 856-858, at 857 a.

31 See al-Jāḥiẓ: *al-Bukhalā'*, 261-264, nos. 13-17.

32 See ROSENTHAL (as note 25), 8, 10.

33 PELLAT, C.: Ibn al-Aḥmar. In: *EI*^{2}, III, Leiden 1979, 697 f.

34 Ṣāliḥ ibn Ḥunayn is quoted once more in al-Jāḥiẓ's *Risālat al-Jidd wal-hazl* in a context indicating that he might have been a kind of silly court-fool (*muḍḥik*); see *Rasā'il al-Jāḥiẓ.* Ed. ʿA. M. HĀRŪN. vol. 1, Cairo 1384/1964, 236.

35 Ibn al-Nawwā' according to the annotation by ṬĀHĀ AL-ḤĀJIRĪ (p. 264, no. 17) probably is to be identified with the Rāfiḍī Kuthayyir ibn Ismāʿīl al-Nawwā', whose name is quoted in al-Ashʿarī's *Maqālāt al-islāmīyīn* and al-Baghdādī's *al-Farq bayn al-firaq.*

Abū l-Ḥārith Jummayn and Muzabbid are documented in dozens of anecdotes in a large number of classical sources[36] and by their popularity prove al-Jāḥiẓ's statement to be correct. Moreover, Muzabbid not only lived on in tradition, but also gained in popularity. Out of the five individuals quoted, both Abū l-Ḥārith Jummayn and Muzabbid in the tenth century were dedicated specific chapters in al-Ābī's encyclopedia of jokes and anecdotes, *Nathr ad-durr* (chapters 3.8, 3.7).[37] The former in later centuries appears to be largely forgotten, while the latter is still treated in the seventeenth century in a chapter of the *adab*-compilation *Nuzhat al-udabā'* (chapter 24).[38] He was also devoted one of the obscure popular writings by Yūsuf ibn al-Wakīl al-Mīlawī (or al-Maylawī), this particular one being entitled *Iṯḥāf al-mutawaddid bi-akhbār Muzabbid* (The presentation to the dear friend of anecdotes on Muzabbid).[39]

Virtually all of the quoted individuals have by the end of the twentieth century lost their popular appeal and are known only to a small number of specialists. This fact elucidates another basic rule of narrative tradition concerning the function of the focusee. Though success of any given protagonist may be predicted to some extent, it can never be granted with absolute certainty. Ultimately, it is to be decided only in retrospect. Yet, as a prime condition even before having to be acceptable to popular opinion and taste, successful focusees simply have to be known. To quote al-Jāḥiẓ once more: "Anecdotes are only truly interesting when one knows the characters and can trace them back to their sources by establishing a kind of contact with their protagonists".[40] Al-Jāḥiẓ probably alluded to direct historical knowledge, but his statement is certainly valid for other kinds of knowledge, which at any rate – as human experience in general – is subjective. We know only those facts that we allow ourselves to be confronted with. And we remember only those incidents that in some way fit

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36 See the index in MARZOLPH (as in note 29); the archived data of jocular narratives in classical Arabic literature include about 40 quotations of Abū l-Ḥārith Jummayn, and more than 120 quotations of Muzabbid.

37 MARZOLPH (as in note 29), vol. 1, 40.

38 ibid., 68.

39 NEMOY, L.: *Arabic Manuscripts in the Yale University Library.* New Haven, Conn. 1956, 129, no. 1204 (Ms. Landberg 258, fol. 82b-95b); see Brockelmann, *GAL* 2, 414, no. 13 a; 2, 637 f., no. 9 b. On the socio-cultural context of Muzabbid see ROWSON, E. K.: The Effeminates of Early Medina. In: *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111, 4 (1991), 671-693.

40 Al-Jāḥiẓ: *Bukhalā'* (as note 29) 13-15, quoted by C. PELLAT in *EI*^{2}, VII, Leiden 1993, 857 b.

into our mental predisposition. Knowledge in itself is not an objectifiable factor. It is rather an intricate conglomerate composed by the constant interaction between objectifiable facts on the one hand, and imagination, fantasy, and invention on the other hand. So the "knowing" of certain protagonists and the "kind of contact" one is able to establish with them does not necessarily rely on exact knowledge but rather on credibility and appeal. Listeners or readers believe an anecdote to be true as long as it fits into their preconceived image of its protagonist.

As for the focusees of jocular fiction quoted by al-Jāḥiẓ, none of them managed to survive in popular tradition to the present day. All of them were displaced and superseded by others, and it is a mild irony of history that eventually a character proved to be the most successful whose star at the time of al-Jāḥiẓ was just rising. The character of Juḥā, for whom a first anecdote is mentioned in al-Jāḥiẓ's *Kitāb al-Bighāl*, is so popular in the oral and written tradition of the Arab world at the end of the twentieth century that the very fact of his popularity in oriental studies serves as an implicit argument for not dealing with the history of his development with the same degree of seriousness as traditionally accepted areas would deserve. On the other hand, Juḥā can serve as an exemplary case for the development of a central focusee in jocular narrative, since the unfolding of the repertoire focusing on him can be traced in great detail. Prior to the introduction of printing to the Arab world, which also had a dramatic influence on his repertoire, about 130 anecdotes are documented in the course of ten centuries. The following short remarks constitute a condensed summary of a larger research on Juḥā which is soon to be accomplished.[41]

The major published study on Juḥā, the *Akhbār Juḥā* by ʿABD AL-SATTĀR AḤMAD FARRĀJ,[42] concentrates on a commentary of the Juḥā-stories as rendered in the *Nawādir Juḥā al-kubrā* by ḤIKMAT SHARĪF AL-ṬARĀBULSĪ, itself constituting an adapted Arabic version of the Turkish compilation by ÇELED ÇELEBI IZBUDAK, nicknamed "Bahāʾī," which was originally published in

41 The research under the supervision of the present author was undertaken by ANGELIKA AL-MASSRI in the course of a project conceived together with JOSEPH SADAN (Tel Aviv) and IBRAHIM GERIES (Haifa). The envisaged publication is to contain full bibliographical references for the following statements. We gratefully acknowledge funding through a research grant from the German-Israel Foundation.

42 FARRĀJ, ʿA. A.: *Akhbār Juḥā*. Cairo 1957, ³1980.

1323/1907 and reprinted numerous times.[43] FARRĀJ succeeded in tracing many of the anecdotes quoted back to original versions in classical Arabic *adab* literature and thus was able to analyze the traditional element in a collection of stories in the early twentieth century. His study traces the various constituents of a given narrative corpus and relies on a retrospective approach. Hence, it does not help much in understanding how this corpus came into being. Analyzing the corpus of Juḥā-stories from the genetical angle, its development can be sketched as follows:

– After the first mention of an anecdote on Juḥā in the late ninth century (al-Jāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-Bighāl*), the corpus expanded rapidly, until it is documented in the early eleventh century (predominantly in al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Baṣā'ir wa-l-dhakhā'ir*; al-Ābī, *Nathr al-durr*; and a lost book by ath-Tha'ālibī quoted later by Ibn al-Jawzī, *Akhbār al-Ḥamqā*), when it already comprised more than 50% of the overall repertoire known to exist before the year 1800.

– Major additions to the repertoire occur in the fifteenth century in a work purporting to be an extract from al-Ābī's *Nathr ad-durr* (az-Zaydī, *Lubāb Nathr ad-durr*) and in two compilations of the seventeenth century (*Nuzhat al-udabā'*; al-Mīlawī, *Irshād man naḥā*). These additions draw upon various sources. On the one hand, previously existing anecdotes were attributed to Juḥā, such as anecdotes from classical Arabic literature originally attributed to either known or anonymous protagonists and internationally distributed folklore motifs. On the other hand, new anecdotes that fitted into the previously defined character were invented.

– Contrasting the steadily rising total number of Juḥā anecdotes available with the amount quoted by individual authors, it may be noted that most authors after the formative period of the early eleventh century do not even quote half of the narrative repertoire available to them. The highest degree of utilization (about 60%) is attained by al-Mīlawī (al-Mailawī) in the seventeenth century – a number which underlines his success in compiling the only monograph collection of Juḥā anecdotes preserved.

Fiction plays an important role in the formation of Juḥā as the major focusee of jocular narrative. The fact that the individual himself is predominantly fictional did not prevent him from gaining a specific image. Rather on the

43 See BOZYIĞIT, A. E.: *Nasreddin Hoca Bibliyografyasi Üzerine Bir Deneme*. Ankara 1987, nos. 128-144; Korucuoğlu, N.: *Veled Çelebi Izbudak*. Ankara 1994.

contrary, at an early stage the character in tradition was already linked to a specific concept of a (slightly childish and pubescent) provocative ready-wit. This concept allowed for the inclusion of a large number of corresponding new anecdotes. On the other hand, it prevented the inclusion of anecdotes that would contradict the character as previously defined or shaped by tradition. Juḥā could only gain his present dominant position in Arabic jocular narrative because his character on the one hand was maintained open enough to allow the addition of many new incidents, while on the other hand its outlines were defined clearly enough not to let it be inflated into an unrecognizable state.[44]

These statements lead to another link between the phenomenon of focusee and fictional narrative. Facts, events, and specific individuals gain a lasting and dominant representation in narrative tradition only when they comply to certain rules. Obviously, one of these rules is to retain a certain shape. Another, probably the more important one, is to appeal to basic qualities of humanity in order to be accepted on an emotionally unquestioned basis. Only facts, events, and individuals that manage to escape the deconstructive and eventually destructive questioning of an analytical mind may hope to survive and expand their narrative repertoires. On a different level, this is probably the reason why fiction is much better known and remembered than historical truth. Since historical truth corresponds only to a limited degree to the exigencies of simple and unequivocal representation of a given fact, event, or character, it is often easier to remember and appreciate those parts of fictionally cultivated or embellished history that, even though invented, fulfill the expectations of likelihood and probability.

Besides, as for detailed knowledge, it is a well known paradox of historical research that the focus of narrative develops proportionally juxtaposed to the amount of time passed since the related event. That is to mean, the more time has passed since the event, the more we "know" about it. Primarily, one should expect the opposite. Those who had been eye-witnesses, those who had been in contact with eye-witnesses or at least those who had lived in close proximity to the events concerned appear to be the ones best equipped to reproduce a faithful account of what happened. Yet the like witnesses often give no more than a short

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44 Concerning some of the most recent developments of the character, see DOUGLAS, A./MALTI-DOUGLAS, F.: *Arab Comic Strips. Politics of an Emerging Mass Culture*. Bloomington (Indiana University Press) 1994, 60-61, 122, 126, 153.

and quite detached enumeration of events, while their critical distance is exhausted by the parallel quotation of varying or even contradicting versions, whose quotation they often conclude by the stereotype formula *wa-llāhu a'lam*/"While God knows best".[45] It remains for later sources to relate the details, backgrounds, and motivation behind certain events which are indispensable to the listener or reader in order to appreciate the psychological and human dimension, which beyond the analysis of factual data is the one that really matters. At that point of perception, a prototypical "ben trovato"[46] is constituted. Historical faithfulness is of secondary importance, and meaning is constituted by how it might have been.

45 Notably, this formula, from the perspective of Western analytical research, is often misunderstood as the admission of inability to arrive at knowledge independently. From the indigenous Muslim point of view, on the contrary, the formula rather constitutes the humble surrender to the fact that all human knowledge cannot fail to admit its own relativity, subjectivity, and limitation.

46 See BÜCHMANN, G.: *Geflügelte Worte*. Berlin [31]1964, 444.

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