

Ulrich Marzolph

SANITIZING HUMOR
ISLAMIC MEDITERRANEAN JOCLAR TRADITION
IN A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Johannes Pauli, the German author of the popular moralizing chapbook of funny and serious stories *Schimpf und Ernst*, in 1522 narrates the following story:¹

Once upon a time it rained and all those whom the rain touched became like children and fools, behaving childishly and foolishly. It so happened that a wise man passed and noticed that even grown-up people behaved so foolishly as to go around naked and ride on their hobby-horses, and in his mind he judged them to be fools. They also thought him to be a fool, laughed about him, made fun of him, and clapped their hands in wonder. He asked them how it had happened that they had become fools. They told him, saying, "It rained, and whoever was touched by the rain was forced to act like a child and do foolish things." The wise man then asked them whether there still was any of the rainwater to be found. One of the fools said, "No," but another one spoke up, "Yes, the puddle over there holds some of that particular rainwater." So the wise man laid down on the ground, forced his mouth into the puddle and drank from it, and after that he took some water from the puddle, wetted his head and washed himself

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¹Johannes Pauli 1972, no. 34

with it. Immediately he had also become a fool and likewise did foolish things and acted like a child.

Pauli's story in comparative folk narrative research is known by the denomination *The wise man and the rain of fools*² and constitutes just one version of a tale which by no means is exclusive to his collection. Moreover, Pauli's version is a not particularly convincing rendering, since the wise man's action lacks a discernible motivation. Pauli himself quotes a second, closely related version, in which the maddening water is contained in a specific well and those who consume the water are forced to sing and dance.³ The chain of tradition to which the story belongs covers a geographical region extending from central Europe to the Middle East.⁴

In time, it stretches from sixteenth century versions contemporary to Pauli, such as those in Lodovico Guicciardini's *Hore di ricreazione* (1568)⁵ and its German translation by Daniel Federmann, *Erquickstunden* (1574), back through earlier Italian and Portuguese versions to the thirteenth century collection of troubadour poetry by the

² *Mot.*, J 1714.2.

³ Pauli 1972, no. 54.

⁴ Jason 1988, *912 A; in addition to the texts catalogued by Jason (IFA nos. 243, 6545, 11935, 12825), Edna Hechal from the Israel Folktale Archives in Haifa kindly supplied information on two more versions (IFA nos. 12825, 12899). The former of these texts, narrated by Eliyahu Agassi from Baghdad, follows the standard Arabic version (king and his vezir, water of a river), while the latter, narrated by M. Bachayev relating to the memory of his father (who originated from Bukhara) is a variant text: People in a certain town turn crazy by eating the new crop of wheat. The demand to change the king, whose behavior is different from their's. In order to remain in power, the king acts crazy. 'Ali-Akbar Dihhudā in the standard Persian collection of proverbs and proverbial sayings (Dihhudā n.d., p. 870) in relation to the proverb «raftam šahr-i kūhā, didam hame kū, man ham kū» quotes a Persian text whose plots corresponds to al-Iskāfi's version; since no source is given, it remains unclear whether this text is Dihhudā's translation or whether it derives from an older Persian source.

⁵ *EM*, VI, 1990, cols. 293-295.

Aragonese Peire Cardinal⁶ and, eventually, to Arabic texts of the twelfth and eleventh centuries.⁷ Considering its extension in both time and geographical range, the text in question constitutes a promising example for tracing the transfer of jocular tradition in the Mediterranean during the period on which the essays in the present volume are meant to focus. Similar discussions from the point of view of comparative folk narrative research have been published by the present author at various occasions.⁸ While keeping the chronological range in mind, the current essay is to widen the scope of discussion by relating the transfer of jocular tradition to a general contemplation on the mechanisms of adaptation and change.

The earliest known version of the text under consideration is included in the mirror for princes *Lutf al-tadbīr fī siyāsat al-mulūk* (The Delicateness of Management in the Policies of Kings) compiled by the Arab philologist al-Iskāfī (died 421/1030).⁹ Its plot is slightly different from Pauli's text:

In former times (*fī al-zaman al-awwal*) there was a king who only drank rainwater, the same way the people of his dominion (*ablu nābīyatibī*) did. (One day) his astrologers said to him, "Our knowledge makes us understand that the reason (*'aql*) of whoever drinks from the water of the coming year will change so that it will become confused (*hūlīta*). If the king deems it right, he may give order that water be stored for him and his immediate surrounding, so they will not drink from the water of that particular next year." So the king ordered large cisterns to be constructed, and within them they stored as much water as to suffice for him and his immediate surrounding. When the rain came and all the people drank from

⁶ Martinez 1955, J 1714.2; Braga 1915, 36, pp. 274-277; Bambeck 1984, pp. 351-355.

⁷ Marzolph 1992, II, no. 724.

⁸ Marzolph 1992, I, particularly at pp. 177-233; 1991a; 1991b; 1994.

⁹ al-Iskāfī 1979, pp. 225-226; on the author see Meisami, Starkey 1998, I, p. 398.

it, their minds changed and they became confused. The king and his immediate surrounding, however, drank from the previous[ly stored] water, and so they were not afflicted by the deficiency of the normal people (*fa-lam yaṣibhum mā aṣāba al-'awāmm*).

When the normal people noticed that the king and his immediate surrounding were in a state of mind different from their own, they wondered between themselves, "Our king has become confused, his mind and the mind of his entourage have changed. It is imperative to dispose of him and replace him by a reasonable king whose mind has not changed." As the rumor of this talk reached the king, he addressed his counselors, secretaries and astrologers, saying, "You have witnessed what they have agreed upon. So what is your suggestion?" They replied, "Our suggestion is that all of us drink of their water, so that we may acquire their state of mind. Then they will not perceive you or us as strange the way they do now." The king and his courtiers acted accordingly, got confused, and became like the people. As the normal people noticed that, they remarked, "The king has recovered, and his affairs now are in good order."

Johannes Pauli, in a manner comparable to most of the European authors quoting the tale, has appended a clear moral to both his versions of the story. His interpretation is that whoever becomes part of a crowd will eventually behave like the crowd, no matter how much he may have criticized that very behavior in the first place. Incidentally, this insight is expressed by a number of popular proverbs, such as "If you are in the company of fools, act like fools," or, "Birds of a feather flock together." The Arab author al-Iskāfī, on the other hand, does not give us a clue as to his reading of the story. Nor are secondary indications available, since al-Iskāfī does not quote the story in any of the thematically framed chapters of his book, but in the final chapter that comprises an apparently random selection of "various anecdotes about the delicateness of management" (*ḍurūban muḥtalifan fī lutf al-tadbīr*). The second known Arabic version of the story is con-

tained in the twelfth century anonymous compilation of fables and educative stories *al-Asad wa 'l-ġawwās* (The Lion and the “diver”). Though clearly derived from al-Iskāfī’s model, this version is appended with an interpretation in context¹⁰ Its author argues that people should be ruled in a manner corresponding to their capacity of apprehension – somewhat in the manner of the (Shiite) *ḥadīṭ* “*kallim al-nāsa ‘alā qadri ‘uqūlibim*”.¹¹ Furthermore, the author of *al-Asad wa 'l-ġawwās* points out that it might at times be necessary to pretend a certain lack of intelligence in order to effectively teach those who do not command a high intellectual capacity of understanding.

From an analytical point of view, the story provides a variety of readings: On a practical level, one notices the king’s pragmatic decision to do whatever necessary in order to stay in power; on a folklorist level, the story supplies just another illustration for the transformative qualities of water;¹² on a sociological level, one might understand the action as the leveling of differences in order to attain (or preserve) social order; on a psychological and probably even on a mystical level, the story may be understood as teaching the necessity of self sacrifice in an extreme expression of sympathy and identification. Whichever understanding is implied, the story obviously offers its reading as an *exemplum*.¹³

For the purpose of the present focus, I propose to read it as a hyperbolic cast exemplifying the interaction between the individual and society. Society here, with a high degree of correspondence to the exigencies of actual life, is depicted as demanding a certain common denominator in order to function properly. In the context of achiev-

¹⁰ *al-Asad wa 'l-ġawwās* 1978, pp. 150-151. See my review (in *Fabula* XXV, 1984, pp. 362-366) of the German translation by Gernot Rotter (Rotter 1980, tale at pp. 165-166); cf. also Wagner 1996, pp. 480-489.

¹¹ Dihḥudā n.d., III, p. 1229.

¹² Cf. *Mot.* D 10: *Change of sex*, and *EM*, V, 1987, cols. 1138-1142.

¹³ See *EM*, IV, 1984, cols. 627-649; Berlioz, *Polo de Beaulieu* 1992.

ing this common denominator, the king, who in theory is supposed to act and be accepted as the supreme commander, is satirized as succumbing to the blackmailing of the masses. Is this, one wonders, truly a model to follow? Does society, do the masses truly exert such a strong influence as to dictate a supreme individual's decision?

Jocular tales such as the one discussed here often are known to serve as an outlet relieving tension and channeling social frustration by portraying social order in an inverse proportion to reality. Probably the most widespread expression of this notion in European tradition is the popular fantasy known in English as *Land of Cockayne*, in German as *Schlaraffenland*.¹⁴ This utopian vision pictures the immediate satisfaction of physical needs without the slightest investment of effort and thus in psychological terms illustrates the desire for an eternal perpetuation of an infantile state of human social development. In a sociological perspective, it exemplifies the splendid dictatorship of popular culture and ridicules the educative effect of social instruction achieved by such means as learning and working. Taking the notion of "social order upside down" common to both, the *Land of Cockayne* and the story of the maddening rain, as an inverse depiction of reality, the actual working mechanism of social order and tradition reveals itself as outlined by the exertion of active control, interference and conscious modelling. Tradition, to be more specific, is molded not only and not even primarily by an unconscious process propelled by the anonymous masses, such as Herder's romantic concept of "Naturpoesie" would have it. Rather on the contrary, it is often directly dependent on extraneous interference that aims at the conscious abolishment of certain constituents of tradition while at the same time encouraging the further development of others. This "sanitizing" effect is pertinent to each and every tradition. It is present in the construction of biography as well as of history, and as for the Islamic context can be demonstrated particularly effective in the

¹⁴ See Richter 1984.

complicated problem of the Prophet Muhammad's exemplary behaviour as well as the corpus of his utterances (*ḥādīth*).¹⁵ In order to research this "sanitizing" effect in a comparative perspective, one usually needs to rely on the analysis of large bodies of material deriving from various origins over a long period of time.

In this respect, and certainly exclusively neither for the area of the Islamic Mediterranean nor for the period under consideration, jocular tradition as materialized in humorous texts constitutes a particularly promising object of study, since it meets all three of the aforementioned requirements. Islamic Mediterranean jocular tradition is characterized by a number of favorable frame conditions: While the earliest preserved extensive examples of Mediterranean jocular tradition, such as the anonymous compilation *Philogelos*, date from Greek antiquity,¹⁶ medieval Arabic literature preserves a wealth of jocular material that in its quantity to our present knowledge is matched only by Chinese sources in the Far East;¹⁷ Italian compilations, such as Poggio Bracciolini's Latin *Facetiae*¹⁸ or the Renaissance collections of novella¹⁹ to a certain extent rely on material originating from the Islamic world and thus supply rewarding material for comparative analysis;²⁰ and, lastly, the Islamic Mediterranean by the various guises of the character of Nasreddin Hoca commands an internationally unrivalled protagonist of short humorous tales who has conquered virtually every corner of the Islamic world "in the footsteps of Mohammed" and who over a period of a millennium has experienced all kinds of sanitizing efforts, ranging from the conscious implementa-

¹⁵ See Günther 1998.

¹⁶ See Marzolph 1987.

¹⁷ Harbsmeier 1984; 1989.

¹⁸ Bracciolini 1905; 1906; Sozzi 1982.

¹⁹ *EM*, IV, 1984, cols. 926-933.

²⁰ See Marzolph 1994.

tion of specific traits to the attempt of abolishing his popularity for good.²¹

In the following discussion, no clear distinction is made between a fool, a joker, or a trickster, and for the sake of exactness it might at times be wiser to speak of a popular protagonist of short humorous prose. Different as the reasons may be which make a specific character the target of jokes, as far as their formation is concerned, all jocular characters are subject to similar mechanisms. These mechanisms encompass the genesis, development and construction of the narrative repertoire connected with specific characters. In their totality, they result in the characters' eventual popularity or disappearance from tradition. The decisive question to be followed in a comparative perspective is: How did famous protagonists of jocular prose in the Islamic Mediterranean world become what they are today? The answer, simple as it may seem, implies a constant development and involves different factors. So the refined question emerges: Which factors contributed to the success of those who remained and became popular, and which factors are responsible for the disappearance of those who today are but a historical relic? What happened and why did it happen the way it did?

The process of "sanitizing" which underlies the said development is at least twofold: On the one hand, it implies the natural, unconscious and to a certain extent spontaneous sorting of preferred, as well as the elimination of undesirable, elements of tradition. This mechanism in folk narrative research has convincingly been demonstrated in the theory of the tale type: Ideal types, such as for instance the *Cinderella*- or *Bluebeard*-tales, were not designed by a particularly ingenious author or generated *ex nibilo*. Their essential structure has developed over a long period of time. Elements appealing to the audience eventually were accepted as successful constituents while

²¹ *EM*, VI, 1990, cols. 1127-1151; *EI*², VII, fasc. 129-130, 1992, pp. 1018-1020; Marzolph 1991c; 1995; 1996a.

other elements at various stages might have been inserted on a tentative basis before being discarded as not attractive or not in accordance with the tale's other requirements.²² In this way, tale types emerged that consist of a structure of certain basic components ("Minimalgerüst") offering potential "slots" ("Anknüpfungspunkte") to be filled with ingredients (such as motifs, details, motivations) according to the specific narrative tradition or performance situation. An essential quality of a successful tale type lies in its possessing a clear, discernible, and appealing structure. At the same time it would have to offer a sufficiently attractive potential for elaboration and embellishment in correspondence with the respective context. This kind of "unconscious sanitizing" is above all prevalent in cultural systems dominated by oral tradition (taking into account other basic modes of communication such as gesture and pictorial representation).

"Sanitizing" tradition, on the other hand, also means a conscious, voluntary, and targeted interference chiefly prevalent since the introduction of new media of mass-communication, such as printing and, more recently, electronic communication by ways of radio or television broadcasting, audio or video cassettes, and, most recently, the internet. This "conscious sanitizing" is often linked to the restriction or propagation of specific components of a moral, social, or political intent. For instance, when folk literature in nineteenth century Europe was molded into children's literature,²³ or when the vigorous and vulgar protagonists of oral jocular literature – such as the German Eulenspiegel or the Arabic Juḥā – were domesticated by way of nineteenth century printed editions of their jokes, this usually implied a conscious abolishment of obscenities – by which one should understand in a neutral sense each and every constituent, whether verbally articulated or acted, conflicting with the moral guidelines of the

²² See, e.g., Bettelheim 1976.

²³ *EM*, VII, 1993, cols. 1297-1329.

surrounding society. The considerable amount of material which from a present perspective qualifies as “obscene” in Italian Renaissance novella, seventeenth and eighteenth century German *Schwank*-literature, or – for the sake of the present discussion – in sixteenth century manuscript tradition of Nasreddin Hoca,²⁴ allows for two conclusions: First, moral standards differ according to the values of the surrounding society; and second, moral standards may develop and change as time goes by.

The jocular material contained in medieval Arabic literature²⁵ is most conveniently surveyed by way of such monumental encyclopedic summaries as al-Ābī’s (died 421/1030) *Naṭr al-durr* (The Scattering of Pearls). In accordance with other similar compilations, al-Ābī has grouped his material in three different categories of chapters dealing with topics, types of character, and named protagonists respectively. Topics include “Readywitted answers” (*al-ajwiba/al-jawābāt al-muskīta*), “Grammatical mistakes” (*lahn*), “First done” (*awā’il*), and lies; the types of characters mentioned cover a wide range from stupid people from Medina through madmen, stingy people, and tricksters to homosexuals, beduins, people who broke wind and the stereotype set of despised professions (*al-ṣinā’āt al-ḥaṣīṣa*); the named protagonists include venerated persons of Islamic history such as Mohammed and the four “righteous caliphs” (of which, to be exact, the Shiite author al-Ābī only includes ‘Alī in his first book, followed by chapters on the Shiite *imāms* and various respected people of the Hashimite clan, while relegating the other “righteous caliphs” to the second book of his encyclopedia) as well as characters known with various degrees of historical reliability included for various arguments of anecdotal quality. Most of the ten characters who could qualify as jokers of some kind (Abū ‘l-‘Aynā’, Muzabbid, Abū ‘l-Ḥārīt Jummayn, al-Jammāz, Juḥā, Aṣ‘ab, Abū ‘l-‘Ibar, Abū ‘l-‘Anbas, Ibn abī ‘Atīq, and

²⁴ See Burill 1970; to compare Sakaoğlu 1996; see also Başgöz, Boratav 1998.

²⁵ For the following passage, see Marzolph 1992, I, particularly pp. 38-45.

Ibn al-Jaṣṣāṣ) at the turn of the twentieth century are but of a historical interest.

Little did the situation contemporary with al-Ābī indicate that Juḥā would eventually develop to be the dominant protagonist of jocular prose in popular tradition, eventually dislodging most other characters and even acquiring parts of their anecdotal material for his own narrative stock. Though already known in ninth century Arabic literature, up to the seventeenth century, Juḥā appears to have been but a *primus inter pares*, not necessarily the dominant character destined to supersede all of his initial rivals. And even the two comprehensive compilations documenting Juḥā's popularity in the seventeenth century, Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Iyās al-Ḥanafi's *Nuḥbat al-udabā'* (Entertainment of the educated) and Yū suf ibn al-Wakīl al-Mīlawī's *Iršād man naḥā ilā nawādir Juḥā* (Guidance of those who share a liking for anecdotes on Juḥā), show him to be a character who, albeit very popular, shares his position with a group of other jokers, some of whom just like him originate from the formative centuries of Islamic culture.

So why was it Juḥā and nobody but him who became so famous? As a first attempt to answer this question, it is useful to transfer the theory of dual requirements sketched above for the ideal tale type to the ideal protagonist of short humorous prose narrative:²⁶ In order to persist in popular tradition a character needs a clear basic structure and the additional offer of potential slots for further elaboration. The clear basic structure initially offered by Juḥā was one of provocative half-wit, at times charmingly naive, at others breathtakingly provocative. In both cases, he would usually allow the audience to either share his delight in fooling his opponents and "teaching them a lesson", or feel superior to his overt simplicity of mind. Typical examples of the anecdotes which established his later reputation include the following:

²⁶ See also Marzolph 1998a.

Once, as Juhā entered the house, he found his father's concubine asleep. As he bent over her, she asked sleepily, "Who is it?" whereupon he replied, "Hush! I am my father!"²⁷

One day, Juḥā's mule bolted and went a direction different from the one he intended. A friend whom he met wondered, "Where are you going, Juḥā?" and he replied: "Don't ask me – ask the mule!"²⁸

Once, when Juhā heard someone exclaim, "How beautiful the moon is!", he added, "Yes, particularly at night!"²⁹

It certainly holds true that other contemporary characters originally were quite close to Juḥā as far as a general qualification goes, but most of them possessed other characteristics which resulted in restricting their lasting appeal to popular tradition: Some, like the poet al-Jammāz or the jeweler Ibn al-Jaṣṣāṣ were probably too present in pseudo-historical consciousness to be further developed; others, like the grammarian Abū 'Alqama or the Medinese trickster Aṣ'ab lived on, but were molded into the rather restricted models of stereotype unsensitive grammarian and stereotype greedy person, respectively.³⁰ And most of those, including those persons known by name, within any of the "types of character"-group never gained enough momentum to mature into autonomous individuals. Popular tradition, or for that matter, society, chose to elaborate Juḥā by exploiting the various offers he implied. In this way, until the nineteenth century, Juḥā was permitted to develop in a relatively calm way, with manuscript tradition continuously stressing Juḥā's adolescent predilection for sexual and scatological matters. It was to be the introduction of the new print media that resulted in a decisive change of the attitude in which the jocular character of Juḥā was portrayed.

²⁷ See Marzolph 1992, II, no. 577.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 869.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 627.

³⁰ Rosenthal 1956.

Though this event goes beyond the chronological scope of the present volume, it is to be discussed in detail, since it constitutes a significant representative of the way the interference of a singular individual can shape the perception of a whole society.³¹

Even though a lithographed edition of 1274/1857 existed previously, the year 1278/1861 most probably constitutes the date of the *editio princeps* of the *Nawādir Juḥā* printed in movable type. Previous research has convincingly argued that the Arabic booklet constitutes an adaptation of the corresponding Turkish collections published as of the year 1253/1837. However, the translation and adaptation practiced in the Arabic booklet represent quite a peculiar way of creative compilation. While all of the early Turkish editions incorporate an average amount of about 125 to 130 tales, the Arabic edition contains 233 tales, thus comprising almost twice as much as any of the collections it pretends to be modelled on. About 100 of the Arabic tales correspond to tales in the Turkish edition, which thus is translated in its majority. The additional items in the Arabic edition have been culled from other sources, and about 50% of them correspond to tales documented in classical and post-classical Arabic literature. On the other hand, the editor of the 1278 edition relied upon the indigenous tradition of Arabic Juḥā tales only to a lesser degree. While by the beginning of the nineteenth century altogether about 130 tales at some time or other had been attributed to Juḥā in Arabic literature, only about 10 out of a total of about 70 tales adapted from Arabic literature constitute tales originally related to the Arabic Juḥā. All other items had previously been attributed to anonymous or other named characters and are here for the first time mentioned in connection with Juḥā.

But even though the *Nawādir Juḥā* only to a minor degree contain genuine Arabic Juḥā tales, the few ones present do not strike the reader as alien. Rather on the contrary, the strategy of their position-

³¹ For detailed references to the following discussion, see Marzolph 1999.

ing effectively made them dominate the whole collection. They do not stand out as items extracted from classical literature by virtue of philological erudition but are implemented in such a way as to combine narrative repertoires from varying origins in order to mold a new, or rather *the* new Juḥā. The particular technique of compilation employed might best be compared to a zipper or a braiding technique: The compiler took blocks of varying sizes from at least two essentially incongruous narrative traditions, first launching tales which had been part of the narrative tradition on Juḥā for centuries, which he intertwined with two small blocks of tales of Ottoman Turkish origin. Next he put blocks of 5 to 15 anecdotes from Arabic literature, now for the first time attributed to Juḥā, alternating with blocks of 5 to 10 tales adapted from the Ottoman edition. Starting with item 94, there is a large block of more than 70 tales translated from the Turkish edition in the same order as in the original. This is followed by an almost equally large block of about 65 tales either corresponding to tales in classical Arabic literature or adapted from as yet unidentified sources.

The compiler's technique is quite ingenious, since by creatively combining different efforts he succeeds in credulously inflating the narrative repertoire on Juḥā to a capacity encompassing almost any humorous narrative whatsoever: First, in the cautious opening passage, the reader is "hooked" to expect tales on Juḥā, as a character well known from indigenous written and (supposedly also) oral tradition. The expectation is aroused and furthered by three specific details: first, the title of the collection explicitly names the protagonist "Juḥā al-Rūmī", the Byzantine (meaning: Ottoman) Juḥā; second, the first sentence after the obligatory invocation of God printed inside an ornamental heading continues in the tradition of manuscript compilation with an *ammā ba'du*-passage reading "*fa-hādīhi ba'du nawādir wurīdat 'an al-ḥwāja Naṣraddīn al-mulaqqab bi-Juḥā 'alayhi al-raḥma*" (what follows are some of the anecdotes related to the Ḥwāja Naṣraddīn who also bears the nickname of Juḥā, [God's] mercy

upon him); here, the two jocular protagonists are equated by qualifying the (originally independent Arabic) name of Juḥā as a *laqab*/nickname of (the Turkish protagonist) Nasreddin; and third, a small number of Juḥā tales from his traditional standard repertoire in Arabic literature is quoted. Once “hooked”, the reader is then made to identify tales attributed to the Turkish Nasreddin as Juḥā tales. The shift of identity involved is further supported by the fact that a number of the introductory anecdotes in the Turkish collection actually derive from Arabic sources. The best known example of this group of anecdotes probably is the one in which Nasreddin Hoca on three consecutive occasions asks the congregation gathered for prayer whether they know what he is going to say. This anecdote had already been adapted in early Turkish manuscript tradition from an Arabic version attributed to the Yemenite Abū 'l-‘Anbas in the Spanish Arabic author Ibn ‘Abdrabbih’s *al-‘Iqd (al-farīd)*.³² The acceptance of extraneous (Turkish) narrative materials is further eased by the repeated intermingling with indigenous (Arabic) tales. This process of familiarization goes on until the reader does not question the origin of the tales and readily accepts a huge bulk of extraneous material as “authentic”. Having done so, he is rewarded by an almost equally large number of tales familiar to him, since adapted from indigenous Arabic sources, or at least more familiar than the Turkish ones.

The result achieved by such a technique was the genesis, or rather the conscious and systematical creation of a completely new narrative repertoire, molded by compiling, adapting and shifting narrative materials in a previously unprecedented degree. Moreover, since the new printing techniques allowed the distribution of large quantities of relatively cheap books, the new repertoire created was to cover up previous and to result in dominating subsequent tradition.

³² Cf. Marzolph 1992, II, no. 378.

The fate of Nasreddin Hoca in Turkish tradition, though closely related to the Arabic Juḥā,³³ developed quite differently. Turkish tradition as officially propagated nowadays regards the character as a national jocular monument. The development that eventually resulted in the present situation comprises several major steps: First, manuscript tradition, in which Nasreddin is a rather coarse hero, indulging in quite a number of activities which from today's moral standard are regarded as highly objectionable; second, early print tradition, since the Turkish *editio princeps* of 1253/1873, which step by step eliminated questionable and uncomprehensible constituents of his repertoire; third, the comprehensive printed edition of Veled Çelebi İzbudak, nicknamed Bahā'ī, originally published in 1323/1907 and reprinted as well as plagiarized numerous times.³⁴ It was this edition that further molded Nasreddin's character by eliminating undesired elements and introducing new narratives; and fourth, the propagation of Nasreddin as a major folkloristic element in Turkish cultural policies in the second half of the twentieth century, culminating in the declaration of a UNESCO-sponsored International Nasreddin Hoca year for the period of 1996-1997.³⁵

Taken together, these steps had a strong sanitizing effect on tradition. Even though Nasreddin in living Turkish oral tradition, about which due to lack of reliable and detailed research not much is known, might preserve and cultivate other traits of character, publicly available tradition on Nasreddin presents him as a charming and subtle "immortal" constituent of Turkish folk humor. One of the documents available to outline Nasreddin's sanitized position as propagated by the Turkish government can be downloaded from a

³³ See, e.g., Özdemir 1990.

³⁴ Bozyiğit 1987, nos 128-144.

³⁵ Marzolph 1998b; 1996b.

website published by the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.³⁶ The first part of the website presents a file entitled *The Curriculum Vitae of Nasreddin Hodja*. It reads as follows: Wit, common sense, ingenuousness, ridicule ... and the kind of humor that reflects human psychology, exposes the shortcomings of a society, criticizes even state and religious affairs yet always settles matters amicably are the elements which together create a special kind of logic, the Nasreddin Hodja logic. These features of the stories make the 13th century character Nasreddin Hodja immortal. Therefore it is not an exaggeration to consider him one of the main building blocks of folk thought, and his humour, one of the best in the world.

Yet, it should be pointed out that these stories are related neither to Nasreddin Hodja himself nor to his historical personality. In other words, over the centuries many new stories where he was used as the main character have emerged, enriching the collection we have today. According to certain stories, Hodja was a contemporary of Tamerlane, who invaded Anatolia at the beginning of the 15th century, and according to the others, he lived either before or after the age of Tamerlane. Today, we still do not have historical documents that relate Hodja's life and his personality in depth.

The date 386 found inscribed on a grave stone attracted a lot of attention. Considering his humor, the date was read backwards. The year 683 of the Islamic calendar corresponds to the years 1284-1285. Other documents were used to support the theory that he died sometime in the years 1284-1285. One of the most reliable documents is the date 1383 (796 in the Islamic calendar) found inscribed

³⁶ <http://www.access.ch/tuerkei/GRUPD/CHAPTER1/nhodja1.htm>; same page also published at <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/GRUPD/CHAPTER1/NHodja1.htm>. Other links as of June 25, 1998, are available at <http://w1.871.telia.com/~u87104365/urllsrc.htm> and <http://www.cs.biu.ac.il:8080/Cour..th/Analysis/NA/Hodja/sources.html>. As of May 24, 2000, the interest search engine google.com gives a total of 1,207 hits for the query "Nasreddin".

on the wall of his tomb in Akşehir. It indicates that Hodja died before 1393 and his tomb had been visited for years.

The town of Sivrihisar of the city of Eskişehir is accepted as the birthplace of Hodja. A gravestone dated 1327 found in Sivrihisar, belongs to his daughter Fatima and indicates that she lived 43 more years after his death.

The oldest Nasreddin Hodja story is found in the book called "Saltukname" written in 1480, which also contains other folk stories and legends. It is stated in "Saltukname" that Hodja was born in Sivrihisar and that the natives of Sivrihisar were famous for their strange behavior and ingenuousness. The strange behavior of the natives of Sivrihisar is also mentioned in a handwritten story book in Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris. These documents are considered proof of his birth in Sivrihisar.

The strange concoction of naive critical consciousness and authoritative statement exhibited in this document is representative of most contemporary Turkish publications on Nasreddin Hoca. And even though the author of the passage quoted above acknowledges a certain awareness for the historical genesis of Nasreddin's narrative repertoire, from a philological point of view it still is hilariously funny that the first anecdote quoted in the ensuing selection of *Some Famous Stories of Nasreddin Hodja* is the one known in comparative folk narrative research as *Asinus vulgi* (*AaTh* 1215):³⁷ A father and a son travel together with their donkey. No matter which way they share their positions of riding and walking by foot, they are always criticized by the people they meet. This anecdote is first documented in medieval Arabic (historical) literature and thus shares the fact of an extraneous origin with some of the most popular Nasreddin Hoca-anecdotes, such as the ones about the pot that has a child and dies (*AaTh* 1592 B),³⁸ the one in which Nasreddin wonders why mel-

³⁷ *EM*, I, 1975, cols. 867-872.

³⁸ Marzolph 1992, II, no. 502.

ons do not grow on trees (*AaTh* 774 P),³⁹ or the one which ends in the punch line «... and if this is the cat – where is the meat?» (*AaTh* 1373).⁴⁰

We may take it for granted that a certain percentage of Nasreddin's contemporary narrative repertoire has been added at a later stage in the character's development. But still, the question is what happened to the other constituents which originally formed an important share of the character's individual representation? Where in contemporary tradition is the "genuine" historical Nasreddin, the Nasreddin of manuscript tradition of the pre-print period?⁴¹ Where is the crude jester obsessed with the idea of intercourse who simply took women «as vagina»⁴² and would not hesitate to copulate with his mule or even a bag of yoghurt?⁴³ Where is the Nasreddin who would outspokenly criticize today's government the same way he is celebrated by that very government to have criticized Turkey's Mongol conqueror Tamerlane?⁴⁴ It certainly is not for lack of topics that this Nasreddin is not present, since the very government claiming Nasreddin as its inherited possession is worldwide indicted for its objectionable policy in such sensitive matters as the freedom of expression, the solid degree of corruption in circles of power, or the brutal suppression of Kurdish identity. Available evidence in this respect argues that Turkish folklore tradition on Nasreddin has been consciously "sanitized" over the past decades: First, and basically, Nasreddin is claimed to originate from and belong to Turkish tradition, while his multicultural and cosmopolitan traits are either taken for granted and thus alleviated or neglected and denied. Second, indige-

³⁹ *EM*, VIII, 1996, cols. 633-636; Marzolph 1996c.

⁴⁰ *EM*, VII, 1993, cols. 1109-1111.

⁴¹ Cf. Boratav 1996.

⁴² Legman 1968, I, chapters 6, 5, 3.

⁴³ Karabaş 1990, pp. 299-305; Başgöz, Boratav 1998, pp. 29-32.

⁴⁴ Marzolph 1996d.

nous Turkish tradition is filtered and cleared of undesirable elements regarded as extraneous. And third, in its "sanitized" form, this very tradition is then explicitly propagated as a means of defining ethnic and national consciousness.

The Turkish attitude concerning the conscious formation of Nasreddin Hodja constitutes a specific interpretation of the sensitive link between humor and ideology.⁴⁵ In folklorist terms, it aims at a nationalist kind of folklorism, which for the present purpose may be defined as an attitude claiming folklore to be national heritage even though the kind of folklore officially sponsored and propagated only to a limited degree derives from indigenous popular culture.⁴⁶ This stratagem allows an adapted and modified version of the folklore factor Nasreddin to exist while at the same time employing the narrative fiction related to him in its domesticated and sanitized form for the specific purpose of counterbalancing any undesired repercussion of objectionable political action in public opinion. In more general terms, folklore in Turkey constitutes a factor 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.

Seen in a comparative perspective, Nasreddin neither is necessarily a Turkish phenomenon nor are the mechanisms proven to affect his tradition restricted to Turkey. The character undoubtedly and to a decisive portion originated in Turkish tradition. However, in his present form as the most prominent character of Mediterranean jocular tradition he belongs to the living oral tradition of a number of other Mediterranean tradition areas, such as Sicily and Malta, Albania, Greece, and Bulgaria, as well as the tradition of the Kurds or the

⁴⁵ Marzolph 1996e.

⁴⁶ Cf. Başgöz 1978; Ozturkmen 1993; Conrad 1998; Başgöz 1998.

Sephardic Jewish communities now resident in Israel. As the above discussion of the Arabic printed edition of tales on Juḥā has argued, equivalent mechanisms of adaptation can be shown to exist in most other traditions areas. The conscious interference with popular tradition might be motivated by differing objectives, and its agency might vary in accordance with the related cultural factors, yet the basic mechanism shared can always be understood as an attempt to “sanitize” tradition, to consciously mold tradition into a specific form.

On the other hand, humor in its quality as a spontaneous verbal art form possesses an imminent capacity of evading tight control. Hence, the funny side of most attempts to sanitize humor lies in their success being doomed; the sad side consists in the fact that sanitized versions of folk humor constituents dominate public perception and thus risk at dominating public opinion. In like situations, folklorists might feel tempted to warn about the ensuing deprivation of popular culture, if such a situation persists. On the other hand, folklorists share the awareness that mankind has been accompanied by a constant lament as for the imminent loss of irreplaceable traditional knowledge (often labelled the “wisdom of the elders”) probably ever since human intellectual awareness constituted itself. In this context of the mutual dependency between the conscious interference of specific strata of society and the freedom of individual development, one should keep in mind that the preservation of tradition and its continuity are but one side of a coin. The other side of this coin is occupied by perpetual change, development, variety, and numerous other components that in their totality contribute the magnificent challenge of creative imagination.

Considering the mentioned mechanisms of sanitizing tradition, the initially quoted anecdote provides yet another reading: In the context of political domination, the story may be understood as mirroring the common people’s wish to live their lives without being forced to abandon their popular predilections. Rather on the contrary, the story shows the dominating powers being forced to suc-

cumb to the popular follies, thus resulting in the domination of the dominated and the splendidly innocent reign of moral standards that previously defied commonly defined values. In this way, the story hypothesizes an optimistic outcome of the constant struggle between publicly propagandized moral standards and the vigorously obscene tradition of popular perception. But while Renaissance sources to our modern understanding were surprisingly liberal, a success that in reality, is likely to be prevented by the commonly acknowledged achievements of culturization.

ABBREVIATIONS AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

AaTh = Aarne, Antti-Thompson, Stith, *The Types of the Folktale*, Helsinki, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1961.

EM = *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, Göttingen.

Mot. = Thompson, Stith, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, vols. 1-6, reprint Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, [1989].

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Collana "Matteo Ripa"

XVIII

EUROPA E ISLAM TRA I SECOLI XIV E XVI

EUROPE AND ISLAM BETWEEN 14th AND 16th CENTURIES

TOMO II

a cura di

Michele Bernardini, Clara Borrelli,
Anna Cerbo, Encarnación Sánchez García



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