Indian and Buddhist Influence in Islamic Anecdotes

Francesca Maria Corrao

Indian cultural tradition arrived in the Mediterranean area along the two major channels of translation of the classic works of Oriental literature and oral tradition. A prominent example is supplied by the famous collection of fables known as Kalila and Dimna, which is the Perso-Arabic adaptation of the Indian *Pañcatantra*[1]. In its voyage westward, this work never lost its original Indian identity. The fables included in Kalila and Dimna had an enormous impact in the Islamic world and in the West through their moral and yet playful approach to the more serious aspects of human relations.

My research on the influence of oriental tales in Islamic literature began over twenty years ago in Cairo, when I was working on a comparative study on the anecdotes of the Islamic trickster Juhā which correspond to the Italian Giufà, a fool of the folk literature[2].

In my first work on the subject I traced the birth of the character to the Mediterranean area. In the course of time, however, reading the collections of Indian fables, I found that certain anecdotes circulated in an area well beyond the Mediterranean of Salomone and Marcolfo (Corrao 2001).

1) Bechis, Giovanni (editor), 1983. *Pañcatantra*, Milano: Guanda. Gabrieli, Francesco (editor) 1967. *Le Mille e una Notte* [Thousand and One Night]. Einaudi: Torino. Boccaccio, Giovanni, 1985. *Decameron* Milano: Mondadori. Corrao, Francesca Maria. "A Comparison between 'One Thousand and One Night' and the 'Pentamerone' of the Italian Writer G. Basile" (Muqāranah bayna alf laylā wa layl wa qisās 'l-bintāmīrūnī, *Il Pentamerone*, li-'l-kātib al-Itālī Bāsīlī, G. B. Basile", Ahmed Etman (editor), *Comparative Literature in the Arab World*, The Egyptian Society of Comparative Literature (ESCL), Cairo University, pp. 299–305.

Over the last two centuries both in the Arab world and in Turkey scholars interested in the figure (Juhā, Nasreddin Hoca) set out to prove the existence of a specific personage in their own national popular literature (Marzolph, 1996). In Turkey, moreover, Nasreddin Hoca has had serious studies dedicated to him in which particular emphasis was placed on the mystic interpretation of certain anecdotes, and in particular the tales dwelt upon by mevlana Jalaluddin Rūmī (13th century)[3].

In the early 1980s a member of an Egyptian Sufi confraternity prompted me to study the stories of the Arab Juhā which lent themselves to mystic interpretation. In the first stage of my research, however, I approached the figure starting from a comparative study between the Arabic Juha and the sicilian Giufà[4]. The behaviour of both Juhā and Giufà actually has many points in common with the host of tricksters studied by the French scholar Lévi Strauss. The closest definition of this type of figure was formulated by a scholar from Palermo, Silvana Miceli (Miceli 1984), who brings his function into sharper focus. The foolish rascals violates—albeit only temporarily—any order for the sake of reasserting his own validity; he breaches conventions to destroy, but at

2) The stories of a Mediterranean fool named Marcolfo were spread in Italy in the fifth century; a book was print in Venice in 1500; a literary version of these stories was written in 1608 by Giulio Cesare Croce, who changed his name in "Bertoldo" and added a son named "Bertoldino"; later in 1634 Alessandro Banchieri included a grand son named "Cacasenno", see Croce, Giulio Cesare and Banchieri, Alessandro 1973. *Bertoldo Bertoldino e Cacasenno*. Milano: Mursia. After the Arab conquest of Sicily some of these stories were attributed to Giufà, and his fame lasted centuries until Giuseppe Pitrè collected them in his books *Fiabe novelle e racconti popolari siciliani* [Sicilian folktales, novels and stories, 1875], and *Fiabe e leggende popolari siciliane*, [Sicilian Fables and folktales, 1888]; soon after many Italian writers used some stories of Giufà the fool in their writings, as for instance: Pirandello, Luigi, 1928. "La Giara" [the pot], in *Novelle per un anno* [Stories for one year]. Firenze: Bemporad. Sciascia, Leonardo. *Il mare color del vino* [The wine coloured sea]. Milano: Adelphi. De Franco, Filippo, 1993. *Le storie di Giufà raccontate al popolo siciliano*, [Giufà's stories narrated to the Sicilian people] (Ind. Riun, Ed. Sicil. I ed. 1924). Palermo: Reprint. Bufalino, Gesualdo, 1986. "Morte di Giufà" in *L'uomo invaso* [The mad man]. Milano: Bompiani.

3) Marzolph, Ulrich, 1992. *Arabia Ridens. Die Humoristische Kurzprosa der Frühen Adab-Literatur in Internationalen Traditionsgeflechten*. Frankfurt am Main: Bd. 1–2. Marzolph, Ulrich, 1996. *Nasreddin Hodscha, 666 wahre Geschichten* [666 Nasreddin Hodscha anecdotes]. Monaco: C.H. Beck.

4) Corrao, Francesca Maria, 2001. *Le storie di Giufà* [Giufà's Stories]. Palermo: Sellerio.

the same time to reaffirm, a set of over-rigid rules. Historically speaking, in the transition from paganism to the monotheistic religions—and Christianity in particular—the function of the trickster is associated with that of the little devil since he calls God's great work into question. Michail Bachtin studied the assimilations of these figures in folklore, and he pointed out that these became carnival's demons whose role was to overturn the natural order, its rules and roles, but only for a limited period of time (Bachtin 1979).

The trickster, or the fool, in Islamic tradition was a creature protected by the community because his strange behaviour was due to his contemplation of God (Corrao 2001). In modern times, according to the Egyptian scholar Muhammad Rajab al-Najjār, trickster's stories serve as a "safety valve", helping to get over those critical moments in history when no direct criticism of the system is admitted (al-Najjār 1979). In particular, the stories of the Arabic Juhā range over various topics, by no means limited to social-political criticism. In the earliest collections, in any case, the main function of the anecdotes is to warn the wise against having anything to do with the foolish lest they be tricked[5].

It was by chance that I discovered that an episode of the Arabic Juhā reappears in the *Pañcatantra*. This celebrated 6th-century collection of stories includes tales of the earliest oral tradition. It was compiled by a brāhmaṇa to teach the art of government to the young heirs to the throne. In particular, the story tells of a husband who learns that his wife is betraying him and decides to denounce her, but she comes up with a new trick, turns the situation round, and publicly accuses him of betraying her (Bechis, 19831: 35).

In another well-known collection of Indian fables, *Ocean of the Streams of Story*, by the brāhmaṇa Somadeva (11th century) the episodes involving fools are brought together in one section (Somadeva 1993: 697–826). More often than not the fool is a brāhmaṇa, or a servant. The stories are recounted for pedagogic ends.

Comparing the Indian and Arabic collections, a significant difference emerges. The Indian tales present a negative image of the woman as mean cunning and treacherous, while the Arabic tales show her to be

5) Al-Najjār, Muhammad Rajab, 1979. *Juhā al-'arabī* [The Arab Juhā] Kuwait.

crafty—she hoodwinks the fool and denies him food—but she is not simply treacherous[6].

In the Indian stories the fool is always a loser, to be wary of; he is weak man who succumbs to the powerful and cunning. In the Arabic and Islamic world Juhā gets into difficulties when he is by the side of his wife or before institutional authorities. In both the Sicilian and the Arabic tales the fool shows his cunning even in the most disastrous cases, and succeeds in turning to his favour situations that only boded ill, exploiting now his cunning, now his decency.

An Indian anecdote attributed to a merchant's errand by corresponds to a Juhā tale included in both the Indian and the Sicilian collections:

> *"A merchant told his silly servant:—Take care of the shop door: I'm going home for a moment! Having said so much the merchant went his way: then the servant wrenched the shop door away, put it on his back, and went to see a dance show. When the merchant got back he rebuked him roundly;—As you told me, I took care of the shop door!—the other replied"* (Somadeva, 1967: II, 776).

There is another Indian anecdote still closer to the Arabic version tells of a merchant's son (Somadeva, 1967: II, 741), but this is how it goes in the Arabic version:

> *"One day Juhā decided to go off on a long journey, and so he gave the great quantity of iron he possessed to a neighbour to take care of it. On his return he went to the neighbour and asked for the iron. His neighbour told him: I'm sorry, my friend, but I have a lot of mice, and they ate all your iron.*

6) al-Najjār dedicates a whole section to the subject of Juhā and the women. See Corrao. "L'ospite di Juhā" [Juhā's guest], "La moglie di Guhā" [Juhā's wife], "Le due mogli di Guhā" [Juhā and his two wives], "Un parto veloce" [A quick childbirth], "La dote della figlia" [The daughter's daughry], in *Storie di Giufà*. pp. 67, 81–2, 99, 101. See also Corrao, Francesca Maria. "L'eros nella tradizione anedottica islamica: i matrimoni di Guhā" [The heros in Islamic anecdotes], in *Le parole dei giorni. Scritti per Nino Buttitta*. Ruta, Caterina (editor). Palermo: Sellerio. Vol. II, pp. 1192–8.

Juhā was astonished, and said to him: Oh, my old boy, call upon God, but do mice really eat iron?" (Corrao 2001: 97–8)

Other anecdotes warn the wise against having to do with fools, or explain that one should not be reckless, as fools can be; thus, in India, the story goes:

"A fool was sailing the sea in a ship when a silver bowl fell from his hand into the water. Then the silly man remarked all the features of that place (eddies and such like), thinking:—on my way back I'll get the bowl back from the waters! He landed on the other side of the sea; eventually he crossed back, and saw the eddies and other marks he had noted in the water. So he dived in again and again, thinking he had recognised the place. They asked him what he was up to, and he explained what his aim was: so they all laughed and made fun of him" (Somadeva, 1967: II, 759).

There is another version of this tale in another celebrated collection of Indian fables, the *Hitopadeśa* of Viṣṇuvarman dating back to the 14th century[7]. This comes closer to the Arabic version recounting how Juhā, before entering the city market, hides money in the desert, taking a cloud as a landmark; when he returns someone sees him searching there, and asks him what the landmark is for the hiding place, and Juhā answers that he can no longer find the shadow of the cloud (Corrao 2001: 73). In the Indian version a fool hides a ring in the sand and goes to bathe; on returning he cannot find it; they ask him if he left any mark to locate it, and he says that it was the shadow of a cloud.

Other stories admonish not to trust fools, and to make the point it is said that they question the dead senselessly; the idea recurs in a

7) *The Heetopades of Veeshnoo-Sarma, in a Series of Connected Fables, Interspersed with Moral, Prudential and Political Maxims* (Bath: 1787). This collection of Sanskrit fables in prose and verse, has been translated in many languages. Among the oldest English version there is that of Charles Wilkins, the one of Jones (1799) and that of Sir Edwin, Arnold, 1861. *The Book of Good Counsels, from the Sanskrit of the "Hitopadeśa"*. London: Smith, Elder & Co.. The story is also quoted in a book of Sanskrit grammar, see Ashok Aklujkar, *Sanskrit. An easy introduction to an enchanting language*, Richmond, Svādhyāya Publications, 1992, 3rd vol. pp. 25–6.

Turkish tale of Nasreddin Hoca who, given for dead, joins in the argument between the men bearing him to the cemetery to direct them along the shortest way (Somadeva 1967: 919; Corrao 2001: 104–5).

In the Indian collections, as in the *Thousand and One Nights*, certain characters are possessed by devils. This feature no longer finds any place in the Sicilian stories of Giufà, where, however, the idea persists that people who do bad deeds are turned into animals (Somadeva 1967: 104, 217).

Actually, this is a trick, too, but the fool believes in this nonsense. The story goes that he makes his way to the market to sell an ass; two thieves make away with it, and one of the villains takes the place of the animal. He then explains to Juhā that as he had ill-treated his mother she turned him into an ass; now, however, having atoned for his bad ways, he had recovered human guise. The two celebrate the event; then Juhā goes to market to buy an ass and recognises his own, but he does not buy it, explaining that he wants to punish him for his bad behaviour, because of which he had been turned back into an ass (Corrao 2001: 65–6).

In this Arabic version the focus comes more on the uprightness of the fool than on the transformation and subsequent redemption which, after all, never actually took place since the whole thing was a trick. In the Indian version, on the other hand, the transformation does come about, the "animal-man" weeps and moves to pity someone who promptly saves him. Moreover, the transformation is often brought about by evil personages. In this evolution of the story we can trace the transition from polytheist to monotheist religion—from the idea of salvation made possible through the merit of others to the idea that the individual must mend his ways and then hope in divine grace. The idea of "magic" punishment inherited from the previous culture remains, but it is less important, serving to warn children not to behave badly towards their mothers[8].

8) It is worth mentioning that the theme of transformation of man into animal has survived in western literature up to recent times, as for example in Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* see Grözingen, Karl, 1993. *Kafka e la Cabbala*. [Kafka and the Cabbala]. Firenze: Giuntine.

Another interesting aspect of the tales of the fool is the transformation from a condition of unawareness to one of wisdom. In the Indian tradition many of the tales involve Brahman faithful or Buddhist monks, while Sufis feature in the Islamic tradition. Before examining some of the tales a preliminary point needs making. There exists a sacred Buddhist text entitled "mDo-mdzangs-blun" or the "Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish" as it is known to the Mongols[9]. The text offers no account of any particular fool, but explains how a common mortal can progress from the condition of foolishness to wisdom if he takes to the way of Buddhist practice. The Tibetan Buddhist texts were translated into Mongol when they converted to Buddhism. Later the Uygur became Muslim, Emmanuel Cosquin wrote that subsequent to the conversion certain important Buddhist principles persisted in the thought of various mystic confraternities[10].

In particular, it has emerged from the research by the Turkish scholar Emel Esin that a parallel can be drawn between Uygur Buddhism and Turkish Bektashiyya. He points out the correspondence of certain terms, the common concept of the microcosm represented by the individual and the macrocosm corresponding to the spirit of the cosmic universe, the dharma. Esin then goes on to observe that the symbol of Mount Sumeru is represented by the conical hat of the Bektashi

9) Lévi, George, 1925. "Le Sutra du Sage et du Fou, dans la literature de l'Asie Centrale", in *Journal Asiatique*, 207 (1925) pp. 305–32. Fry, Stanley, 2000. *The Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish*. Library of Tibetan Works and Archives. It is one of the most interesting, enjoyable and readable Buddhist scriptures. For centuries, it has been an inexhaustible source of inspiration, instruction and pleasure for all who have been able to read it. The history of this unusual scripture is still uncertain. Legend has it that the tale were heard in Khotan by Chinese monks, who translated them into Chinese, from which it was translated into Tibetan, then into Mongolian and Oirat. The Narratives are Jatakas, or rebirth stories, tracing the causes of present tragedy in human lives to events which took place in former life times. The theme of each narrative is the same: the tragedy of the human condition, the reason for this tragedy and the possibility of transcending it. But unlike Greek tragedy, Buddhist drama is never an end in itself, i.e. a catharsis, but a call to transcend that which can be transcended and need not be endlessly endured.

10) Cosquin, Emmanuel, 1913. "Les Mongols et leur prétendu rôle dans la transmission des contes indiens vers l'Occident Européen. Étude de folklore comparé sur l'introduction du « Siddhi-Kûr » et le conte du « Magicien et son apprenti »" in *Revue des Traditions Populaires* (1912) Paris: Clouzot pp. 4–6.

Dervishes, for whom it represents the point of contact between the earth and the universe[11].

On the subject there is also an important study by Alexander Popovic and George Veinstein, in which a number of interesting concordances are analysed. It is beyond our scope to address the topic here, but these analyses do, however, offer a useful premise for any attempt to reinterpret the stories in which Juhā appears to adopt "mystic" behaviour. In fact, as we know, the celebrated founder of the Mevlevi confraternity, Jalaluddin Rūmī, resorted to the stories of Nasreddin Hoca, the Turkish Juhā, to expound the more complex aspects of his thought. From the condition of foolishness, the follower would go through the successive phases of initiation to approach God following the teaching of the master. The dance of the Dervishes stands as metaphor for the union between microcosm and macrocosm through the whirling of the Dervishes on themselves, and then about the master.

All this goes to show that the stories of Giufà can be approached in a different light, not at the level of fool-wise man contradistinction, nor as clash between the contradictory categories of nature vs. culture, but in terms of transformation through a continuous process of growth and spiritual ripening.

One interpretation does not exclude the other, but, rather, they complement one another and point to two different perspectives, one seeing harmonisation in emancipation from a lower to a higher condition, while the other, dualist view interprets the contradistinction at the level of dichotomy, where one prevails over the other. The former sees the law of birth and death that permeates the universe in a flux of constant transformation, while the latter, monotheist and Christian, accounts for the universe as the work of a God who creates and a demiurge that destroys to validate the work and reconstruct it. Finally, in the Islamic reading the fool Juhā\Nasreddin ignores earthly laws to approach God in contemplative ecstasy.

11) E. Esin, "Thèmes et symboles communs entre le bouddhisme tantrique et la tradition des Bektachis Ottomans", in Popovic, Alexandre et Veinstein, Gilles, 1995. *Bektachia. Etudes sur l'ordre mystique des Bektachis et les groupes relevant de Hadji Bektach*, Istanbul: Les Editions Isis, 1995, pp. 31–7.

Let us see, now, how some tales of Nasreddin Hoca\Juhā can be reread in this light. The Juhā anecdotes that usually provoke laughter can at times leave one somewhat perplexed, which is not particularly conducive to interpretation in anthropological terms. I am thinking, for example, of the "Friday sermon", "the call to prayer", and "a treetop road", to name some anecdotes that we find in both the Turkish and the Arabic traditions (Corrao 2001: 86, 123, 119). In the first anecdote the protagonist refuses to make the sermon, and by so doing points out that the real spiritual quest goes beyond the arguments that the faithful are acquainted with, and that they therefore have no need of the help of the shaykh. In the second, instead of going into the mosque on the call to pray, the fool runs in the opposite direction and seeks faith elsewhere in the world. Thus, metaphorically, we are apprised of the need for a spiritual approach, and not to follow the teachings to the letter in the place where religious practice is codified by men. "A treetop road" tells of one who takes his shoes with him on climbing a tree, as he reaches the top, he might find a road; this is a more emblematic anecdotes in that it refers to the need to rise above and away from earthly things to seek the true faith in the universe.

On first reading these anecdotes we are moved to laughter at the naivety of the protagonist, but rereading them at a deeper level we are led beyond the immediate sense to cast our eyes further than the customary frames of reference. However, the action of Juhā is not destructive; indeed, it leads one to sublimate the contingent and seek out its spiritual sense.

On the other hand, the Sicilian stories of little demons lead to the extreme of contradistinction; for Giufà there is no middle way: he takes his revenge on the unjust bishop and brings about his death; the same fate befalls the priest who exploits him, and the "Morning-singer" who annoys him. In the Arabic tales, too, we find anecdotes telling of injustices suffered by Giufà or some other character, which Juhā remedies, at times with cunning, at other times with wisdom. Also following this line are the Sicilian Giufà tales such as "The bet" and "Giufà and justice" (Corrao 2001: 23, 45). In the latter, in particular, recurs a motive that also appears in a Buddhist tale; the fool tricked by the judge punishes him with a blow on the head because he has not done him justice. Once

again, in this story there emerges the old Buddhist interpretation in showing that the law of cause and effect strikes beyond our capacity to understand it.

If he acts in accordance with his heart, whether wittingly or not, Giufà\Juhā finds help within himself or in others and solves problems; by the same token, if he or others act badly they eventually pay the consequences.

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Indian and Buddhist Influence in Islamic Anecdotes

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As I started studying Guhā's story many years ago, I decided to compare the anecdote I found in both Arabic Turkish and Sicilian folklore. Since the beginning it was clear to me that the Turkish anecdote had a strong mystical influence. The great mystic poet Jalaluddin Rumi had mentioned the Anatolian trickster Nasreddin Hoca. These anecdotes were recently spread in Egypt under the name of Nasreddin Hoca al-mulakkab Guhā al-rūmī (named Guhā the Anatolian). Later I discovered the existence of few Guhā's anecdotes in the *Pañcatantra* and in the Indian collections of tales, "*The Ocean of Tales*". As I studied the oriental origin of the Egyptian shadow theatre, I discovered that Guhā's stories were spread in Egypt earlier before the Turkish tricksters had appeared; I also learned that an Indian Sutra existed that was attributed to the Buddha Shakyamuni entitled "*The Wise and the Fool's Sutra*". From the reading of this old text, I came to understand the oriental roots of Guhā's foolishness. In this paper I will try to provide a deeper understanding of the anecdotes.