

LOGICAL GRANDMOTHERS

AHMED AL-SHAHI and F.C.T. MOORE (trans.), *Wisdom from the Nile: A Collection of Folk-Stories from the Northern and Central Sudan*, (with an introduction), Oxford: Clarendon Press 1978. xii, 242 pp., Bibliography, Appendix, Index. £10.00.

In the northern Sudan, village grandmothers and other old folk still pass away some of their evenings telling stories to the children. They may not go on doing so much longer: the folk tradition is already passing away in towns, for much the same reasons as apply here in England. Some years ago, Dr. Al-Shahi and Dr. Moore, one teaching anthropology and the other philosophy at Khartoum University, very sensibly took the opportunity of gathering a body of folk stories while they still could. Conditions were not ideal. Other people had to be relied on to collect most of the stories on the spot, and there were no tape recorders to spare. Hence, the method the editors adopted can easily be faulted; but if people were to wait for the ideal conditions which reviewers sometimes seem to take for granted, or even to demand, little would be done at all and more would be permanently lost than is being lost already. What the present editors did was to ask a group of university students to collect these Arabic stories in their home towns and villages, keeping as closely as they could to the colloquial language and style. Of course, some did better than others.

The fruit of the enterprise is a translation of 71 stories out of 120 collected. Several are variants, and some others share themes and details. As has been usual in The Oxford Library of African Literature, the stories are prefaced by a lengthy introduction.

Translated with a confident mastery of local language and reference, the stories make entertaining reading - more so, in my

view, than quite a lot of the stories in the *Arabian Nights*. They are rich in lively description and unexpected, even startling, detail. Little imaginative touches enliven the narrative:

When the girl saw her [the ghoul] coming like that, she looked at her in great fear, and refrained from waking Muhammed in case the ghoul should kill him. When the ghoul came near, the girl wept silently and her tears ran into Muhammed's ear, and he woke in panic.

Some stories are complicated and difficult to interpret. Others are plain, like the satirical story of the cat who went on the Pilgrimage and grew long whiskers:

The pilgrim cat replied: "May God bless you all. I assure you that after my pilgrimage I repented, and decided that I and my children will never eat mice again from now onwards, and that we shall all be friends...." Most of the mice had moved quite a distance from their holes, and some had gathered in circles, and were dancing on their hind legs, and going "Sss, sss, sss, sss!" The grandfather of mice sang out to them: "Put your tails inside your holes. The pilgrim's eye is gleaming red for you."

There is a well-known Persian poem on the same theme (one wonders how often it is quoted in Iran now) where the cat becomes a mullah and leads the mice at prayer. This is the only story in the collection for which I remember such a clear literal variant, but I am no expert in Islamic folklore.

It is not surprising that the prudence of age is one of the themes of these stories that grandmothers tell. The wise old folk mouse saves the young ones from the disaster into which their desire for easy happiness is leading them:

They wanted to dance and sing, for just that one occasion, free from the fear of cats.

The weak and poor manage to save themselves from the malevolence of the strong and rich, and the happy ending is usually that they become strong and rich themselves. Neglected orphans are ultimately rewarded. In all this, providence plays a great part, but not to the exclusion of courage, determination, ingenuity and prudence.

We learn from the Introduction to *Wisdom from the Nile* that the story tellers often expressed their own views about the themes of the stories, by saying, for example, that they were 'about courage' or 'about cleverness'. It would have been interesting to have these views reported in detail, though some are presumably represented in titles such as *Muhammed the Clever*. I doubt, however, whether these views would have been of much help in interpreting the more complicated stories. For the adult

reader, Muhammed's cleverness is no more than child's play when his is outwitting the ghoul. One could not say the same of a later detail in the story, where we come to the counterpart of fitting Cinderella's glass slipper:

Then the ghoul attacked with her seventh head, and Muhammed severed it by the roots with one great blow, and she fell wallowing in her own blood. Muhammed the Clever went to the girl and put his ring on her finger. He put his hand in the blood of the ghoul, and dabbed [pressed] it on her thigh.... Everyone who made the claim [to have killed the ghoul] had the ring tried on him and was tested against the [hand] print on the girl's thigh; but they did not match. Finally, Muhammed came towards the Sultan in all his manhood and courage....

The Introduction to *Wisdom from the Nile* includes an ethnographic account of the working life of the people among whom these stories are told, but it tells one little, in ethnographic detail, of their imaginative and moral life. Instead of this, a substantial part of the Introduction is devoted to an imaginative and quite subtle, or at least ingenious, attempt to interpret one group of the stories in terms of dichotomies between marriage in and marriage out, cultivated land and desert, and so on. Incest is identified as the logical extreme of the preferred marriage of parallel cousins, and marrying a jinn or a ghoul as the extreme of marriage to a stranger. Without a better account of the ethnography of the imagination in this area, I myself find it difficult to accept some of the interpretation. The family of Fatma the Beautiful refuse to help her to take a bowl of water from her head unless she accepts their proposal that she should marry her own brother. The interpretative comment is: 'The proposal is shocking in itself, but it is doubly shocking in that it is made as a condition for the simplest act of the farmer's life - the bringing of water to the land.' Quite a lengthy argument about agriculture rests on this interpretation, but people certainly cannot irrigate their fields with bowls of water, and these would seem more fitly associated with the house and the women than with the land.

The editors claim that this breaking of the imaginative code will explain the meaning and the function of the stories:

These considerations provide an important key to the semantic analysis of our stories and of the story of Fatma the Beautiful in particular. We shall find depicted clearly in a picturesque world of the imagination the problems of marriage in the communities where these stories are told. In fact, it would not be going too far to say that the stories express the theory of marriage in these communities, the theory which professional observers with all their techniques and researches do not always find it easy to penetrate, but which is

already being grasped intuitively by the young child who asks his grandmother to tell once more the story of Fatma the Beautiful.

This is a big claim, and I myself am not entirely happy about it, more particularly because of its main foundation, a somewhat laboured account of why the preferential system of marriage could not work if it were prescriptive. But it is not prescriptive. Moreover the kinship diagrams used in the argument are all so logical as to be entirely symmetrical. Of course, this can be called an 'abstraction' but what is it abstracted from? Perhaps grandmothers in the northern Sudan, like grandmothers here, ask awkward children, 'What would happen if we all did it?' but even if they do, I doubt whether they spend much time, consciously or unconsciously, speculating on purely logical questions based on premises so remote from experience.

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