

THE INFRACTION OF THE RELIGIOUS CODES
IN THE MEDITERRANEAN FOLK LITERATURE
The Case of the Islamic Ğuḥā and the Sicilian Giufà

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Ğuḥā is a cunning-fool hero; more than a thousand years ago he became the lucky protagonist of a series of comic stories known all over the Mediterranean area. Ğuḥā's legend, born in the Arab world around the 8th century, was spread in the Ottoman age all over the Turkish dominions; and eight centuries after the Arabs left Sicily his stories are still alive in Sicilian lore¹.

The study of the Arabic Ğuḥā, known as Nasreddin Hoca in Turkey, has stimulated the interest of many oriental scholars, as well as some Italian anthropologists; but the Arabs no more knew about the survival of the Sicilian Giufà, than did the Italians know of the existence of the Arabic Ğuḥā.

Here I will try to examine a particular aspect of Ğuḥā's stories, which has emerged as a result of a comparative study of the Arabic, Turkish and Sicilian traditions; my study will deal with Ğuḥā's behaviour towards religious codes and towards death.

The corpus of the Sicilian, Arabic and Turkish anecdotes has been chosen from the stories of the hero recorded by Arab, Sicilian and Turkish scholars during this century². The results of previous studies

¹ A more complete bibliography of the classical and modern studies is in Pellat 1960; Corrao 1991.

² This research is limited in space and in time due to the huge amount of material that has been produced on Ğuḥā/Nasreddin in the area that stretches from Morocco to Iraq; here I have chosen the Arabic stories of the Mashreq in preference to those of the Maghreb, because they are closer to the Turkish and Sicilian ones. For the time being, I have chosen the modern age in order to understand the penetration of the stories among the literate, both in Turkey and in the Arab countries. Furthermore, in this century

of the comic hero pointed out that his stories are used as an "exhaust-valve" for an oppressed people during difficult times of historical crisis when it is impossible for them to express a direct criticism of their rulers; further studies recognized in Ğuḥā the forefather of the Mediterranean trickster figure³.

Ğuḥā / Nasreddin Hoca / Giufà, is the cunning idiot who uses both cunning and stupidity to save himself from the absurd situations that he himself has generated. Ğuḥā is the hero of adventures that occur during the course of daily life. He is the metaphor for the man, at once wise, foolish, noble and cowardly, working for the sake of humanity but unable to stop the evil, and so on. The cunning idiot is a madcap figure who subverts values and traditions and provokes laughter by bringing together orders which are incompatible; laughter that helps to overcome the anxieties of daily life. Ğuḥā commits transgressions in every field; he throws into confusion any order that is an acquired value in the society where he acts. Thus he acts as a thief, he makes mistakes when he speaks, he misunderstands; he is not merely stupid or purely cunning; he is always doing exactly the opposite of what he is supposed to do. For example, when he wanted to hide some money he chose a cloud as a sign by which to recognize the hiding-place; when he ate the goose leg that he had cooked for Tamerlane, he swore that he had killed the goose when it was sleeping on one leg; he stole the mantle of the drunkard judge and later, during the trial, he extorted money from the judge for he had violated the Qur'ānic law; when his mother asked him to pull the door (in the sense of closing it) and join her in the mosque he did it literally and pulled the door off its hinges.

Ğuḥā/Nasreddin has been seen as a typical character representative of the national community, and for this reason a particular meaning has been given to him: al-^cAqqād 1956; Farrāğ 1954; an-Nağğār 1979; Yūnis 1969; Köprülü Zade 1918; Gölpinarlı 1961; Oztelli 1964; Önder 1964; Önder 1971; Naci 1977; Sarab 1977; Pitrè 1978; Calvino 1956.

³ an-Nağğār, 1979; Alpan 1977:186-196; Gursoy 1977:174-177; al-Shamy 1980; Sa'd 1985.

The cunning-fool violates every written or implicit law of the moral and behavioural code of the society where he acts, therefore some stories narrated in the Christian area are different from the ones from the Islamic countries; particularly those that deal with religious matters. The distinction among them goes further than the changing of the name given to the place of worship (church/mosque); it touches a particular standpoint of religious belief.

In the Islamic world there are stories about Ğuḥā with a mystical meaning. These stories, according to the oriental scholars, have Turkish origins. To prove this they recall the existence of Nasreddin Hoca's tomb in Hortu (Akşehir, Turkey), which remains today a place of pilgrimage. It is said that the mystic saint, Ğalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī, used Nasreddin's stories to explain the most obscure standpoints of his doctrine⁴. As for the Arabic Ğuḥā, originally he was not a mystic, but later mystical stories of his deeds were introduced among the Arabs at the time of the Ottoman conquest. In the 16th century the Egyptian historian Ğalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūṭī wrote that one should not laugh at Ğuḥā, known as Naṣr ad-Dīn Rūmī (the Anatolian), but should rather ask for his blessing (Dayf 1958:25-40; an-Nağğār 1979:66).

We will now examine the behaviour of this saint-cum-school master – the name Hoca refers to the teacher of the Qur'ānic school – who is considered to be a mystic, and more precisely a *walī*, a friend of God, to whom one turns to ask for his blessing. The interpretation of the behaviour of the mystic (*walī* or the fool) relates their strangeness, or idiocy, to their relation with the divinity: they are so absorbed in the contemplation of God that they do not give any value to life on earth (Bausani & Pareja 1951:520).

Ğuḥā/Nasreddin displays an irreverence towards the religious class, he mocks at bigots and infringes the most elementary laws of worship.

⁴ In the *Saltukname*, of Abū l-Ḥayr Rūmī we find that Nasreddin lived in the 14th/15th century and was a dervish (mystic) of the confraternity of Sayyid Maḥmūd Ḥayranī (d. Akşehir in the year 1268); cf. Shah 1973:17-22; Tamer 1973:172-173; Kritzeck 1973:153-158; Basri 1973:28-33; Boratov 1963:194-223; Christensen 1924:7-37.

In order to understand his kind of irreverence I will present a few examples: when he is in the pulpit of the mosque he gives strange sermons; he hears the call to prayer and he runs away from the mosque; he blames God for making melons grow on a small plant rather than a big tree; he claims to be a prophet in order to escape from Tamerlane's violence; he pretends to be a school teacher but children throw stones at him and his only student is a bear.

These stories have always embarrassed religious circles because of the way they bring together both the sacred and the profane. It is worth remembering here that such incongruity led the first Arab scholars who studied *Ḡuḥā* to believe in the existence of two different characters: a wise man and a fool.

In Turkey the less orthodox stories have been attributed to the most extremist mystics, like the Bektashi, whose behaviour merits reproach, acting as they do against any human respect, and infringing laws of conduct simply for the sake of being contrary: so once they have been kept away from human conventions they can dialogue directly with God⁵.

This is a possible interpretation of the fool's behaviour. But the mocking of the religious elite reminds us of certain tricksters who mock the shamanic rites. The fool's tricks do not cancel the supernatural powers, but make them more understandable and mitigate the fear they can inspire.

It is worth mentioning that, among the people converted to Islamic monotheism, the trickster survived, associated with Satan, the beloved-hated by God. It can be said that, from a mystical standpoint, the figure of the beloved-hated by God corresponds to the effort made by man to

⁵ Cf. Toygar 1977:164-168. The dervish (literally a beggar, a mystic) is a simple member of a mystic confraternity. The sufism (mysticism), at the time of the seldjukids rule (12th c.) was accepted by the religious orthodoxy, and a growing number of people felt the need for a wise man to act as spiritual guide in their mystical experience. Such people created the need to establish rules and hierarchy: so came into being the dervish confraternities; Bausani & Pareja 1951:509-522; Bausani 1958:94-103; Eliade 1972:173-174; Miceli 1984:114-115.

reach a perspective where the contrarities are cancelled out, and the spirit of evil entices good. This rebellious angel has stimulated the spread of many legends still living in folklore.

In the Islamic religion, Satan is called *ar-Rağ'im* (he who is pelted away with stones). It is said that falling stars are thrown by angels against devils who listen to their discourse and then report it to man altering the original meaning (Q.15.18)⁶. This is another possible correlation with the comic misunderstandings of the fool; like the devils our hero is marginalised, ill-treated and pelted away with stones.

To associate Satan with the fool has a particular significance: according to Islamic belief, both the sacred-divine and the sacred-demonic are concentrated in God. This explains why devils, being only a weak counterpart of the divine, are simple executors of orders. Iblis is a rejected creature, a deceiver who has no power over believers (Q. 15.27-43).

There are no mystical elements in the Sicilian tradition, but there are irreverent stories against the religious class. Here again our hero behaves as a "fool". In Sicilian folklore there are many stories about devils: in Lo Nigro's classification of Sicilian folktales, few Giufà stories are in this vein (Lo Nigro 1958).

Giufà's devilish behaviour has no mystical meaning but he still infringes the religious laws: he steals in church, he deceives the priest, he blackmails the bishop, and worse of all he kills. The Sicilian fool, like Arlecchino and Bertoldo, is reckoned among the heirs of the agrarian devils (Camporesi 1976). But still Giufà's devilish strength distinguishes him from his companions, who flout laws but never kill. Giufà kills his sister by giving her a very hot soup, and in the story of the "morning-singer" he kills a man thinking he is a bird. But Giufà is not always an unconscious killer, in fact he kills the priest's mother by throwing

⁶ We should remember that the Muslim tradition has introduced a theme which is not found in the *Qur'an*: the presence of Iblis as an "adviser" or "opposer" of God in his creation, in this function he acts as a negative and bad adviser, cf. Calasso 1970:71-90.

stones at her, and he beats to death the man sent by the blacksmith to dismiss him.

Sometimes the cunning-fool plays the role of the one who avenges the weak, but even in such cases as this he behaves badly: he extorts from the bishop who killed some goldsmiths out of greed. Giufà flies in the face laws just for the sake of doing so. He also pretends to be dead and steals from the thieves who are dividing their booty in a church.

From what we have discussed two elements emerge: the devilish behaviour, culminating in murder, as a violation of God's law; and the systematic transgression of human laws.

We can observe that the tradition of Giufà in Sicily was not developed and therefore did not assimilate the mystical element, because the Arabs left the island before they could adopt it from the Turkish culture.

But the reason could lie in the difference of religious belief. In the Christian tradition all good and evil is not concentrated in God: Satan is equally dreadful to and influential on human beings, as we can read from Giobbe's book. The Sicilian Giufà is more devilish: he violates the divine order and kills; that is a reason why he never becomes a wise old man, like his Islamic counterpart, but always remains a silly boy.

The role played by the cunning-fool in Christian society is quite different from that played in the Islamic. In Christian culture there was no need to prove and justify the historical existence of the mythological fool; in his transition from mythology to fable the cunning-fool has kept his mystery unchanged.

Vice versa in the evolution from pagan mythology to the Islamic faith, the fool, as well as many others, has undergone a radical demythologization. Islam has a typical and fundamental characteristic: it is a monolithic monotheism that has justified historically all the pre-existing mythological legends. That is what happened to Ğuḥā, around whom a long list of contradictory evidence has been built, related by chains of false transmitters who were supposed to have witnessed his historical existence.

Ğuḥā most probably corresponds to a pre-Islamic mythological archetype to whom stories inspired by historical events were attributed. Later these very stories became new myths. Here I can recall the example of stories whose protagonists are Nasreddin and Tamerlane, or al-Mahdī and Ğuḥā. The relation between the king and the poor evokes a pre-existing model, like the one of King Solomon and Marcolfo (a Jewish legend famous in the Roman empire in the 5th century A.D.); the model was transferred to historical personages and then it became part of a new mythology whose function was to lighten the tensions caused in daily life by absolute power.

In the process of demythologization the Islamic stories of the fool lost the magic elements which have survived in the Sicilian tradition. For example, I recall the story where Giufà destroys the magic spindle granted by the fairies so that he could produce the cloth without fatigue; and another story where Giufà ploughs the sea with a magic plough. The Sicilian Giufà, like the mythological trickster, wants to roam idly and to run away from the hard reality of human work.

We have said that the difference between two religious cultures, the Islamic and the Christian, characterizes the stories of Giufà / Ğuḥā / Nasreddin on the theme of death too.

Let us compare the Sicilian story where Giufà kills the priest's mother who dismissed him, and the Arabic story where Ğuḥā, unjustly condemned to death by the Caliph al-Mahdī, saves his life by uttering a cunning phrase. The Islamic Ğuḥā laughs and jests when he faces death, because he mocks dreadful things, death never arrives in his stories; Ğuḥā's function is limited to the subversion of the given order with a wry phrase, in this way he diverts fear from the sphere of existence.

The Sicilian Giufà violates the precept "do not kill" and by doing so he diverts, among those who listen, the fear and the attraction of the violation; therefore he defuses the tensions inspired by the religious precept, and maintains the educational function of subverting the rule, while by laughing he reconfirms it.

None of the three Ğuḥā dies, as many other heroes of folklore; Ğuḥā is ageless, in his stories there is an absolute absence of any sense of time, and he is always young. The Islamic Ğuḥā has a son who bears the same name and is as stupid as the father; their relationship shows the eternity of the character. The pretended eternal youth of the Arabic Ğuḥā is mocked by his younger wife, who betrays him. As for the aged Nasreddin Hoca, his wisdom is mocked by children.

The myth of eternal youth and sacred old age and death is brought down and mocked; otherwise it would give a sense of seriousness to a character whose main function is to provoke laughter.

To sum up, we should conclude by saying that Ğuḥā's violations in Christian society are not necessarily considered as such in the Islamic world. This responds to the very nature of the personage. As a matter of fact in the Christian religion a different moral weight is given to the prohibition of killing. In the Islamic world it is God who decides who lives or dies; but to kill while propagating God's law is a good action worthy of a special place in paradise (Q. 2.190-193; 61.11). The Sicilian Ğuḥā is a devil who violates divine laws, but he does it for fun; by doing so he diverts the fear of such violation among the listeners. As for the muslim Ğuḥā, he is an executor of God's will, who violates human laws to re-affirm the need of God, and to invite people to reflect and look beyond the limits of earthly bounds. Ğuḥā seems to reflect what can be called a mythology of the human condition, whose content reveals a mystery which is part of the human drama. The function of these stories is to help man to overcome the sphere of direct experience, lacerated and contradictory, to discover a hidden dimension of reality. As a matter of fact, the narration of the adventures about the cunning-fool gives us the chance to imagine a dimension where contrarities are erased, in view of a time without conflicts and strains. As I said before the cunning-fool, with the subversion of traditional values and the bringing together of incompatible orders, provokes a free laughter which helps overcome the fears of existence.

These stories remind man that ultimate reality is beyond good and evil, and, transcending the possibility of understanding them rationally,

it can be grasped only as a mystery or a paradox. And, in this acceptance, it is possible to find the mystery of totality in the mystic tales of the Islamic Ġuḥā, folly in the diabolic Giufà, as well as in the Carnival and New Year festivals; that is to say in those celebrations meant to subvert human behaviour and to annul traditional values: which is the same aim pursued by the mystic techniques of bringing opposites together (Eliade 1983: 112-113).

To conclude I would like to sum up the two different standpoints which emerge from the comparison between the Islamic and the Sicilian stories of Giufà. A first particular characteristic of the cunning-fool, assimilated in Islamic culture is this: evolving from the mythical legend to the tale, the couple God-Iblīs is identified with historical heroes who share divine attributes, like Tamerlane and al-Mahdī. The awful sacred power of Islamic sovereigns does not correspond to Giufà's antagonist: the clerical apparatus, conformist and suffocating, is the antagonist of the Sicilian peasant.

Ġuḥā/Nasreddin is not only a fool, he is also a blasphemous desecrator, a transgressor of religious morality. Giufà, instead, is a crazy peasant and an iconoclast, (holder of the "cultura diaboli" that the peasants never abjured) heir of the agrarian devils. The violent feelings in the Sicilian stories echo the social hate and savage religious polemic of certain medieval heretical groups, who were wildly attacked and massacred by nobles and churchmen in the name of God.

We can conclude by saying that, beyond the particular characteristics, both in the subverted world of the cunning-fool Giufà, and the wise-fool Ġuḥā/Nasreddin, the winner is the positive strength of a laughter that subverts everything and involves everybody.

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