

African Folktales



Told in Israel

Edited by GENE BAHARAV

THE GOLDA MEIR MT. CARMEL
INTERNATIONAL TRAINING CENTRE
HAIFA — ISRAEL

1985

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PREFACE

This publication was an attempt to collect some of the folktales related by the participants attending the courses in Adult Education, held at the Golda Meir Mount Carmel International Training Centre for Community Development, in Haifa, Israel.

During the existence of this Centre, since 1961, we have enriched our knowledge with a wealth of African folklore: tales, music, arts and crafts, handed down from generation to generation. This material, based on a diversity of traditions and customs, might be of interest to many.

Not only participants attending courses here, but friends and even complete strangers from other countries warmly commended this modest attempt to collect folktales of different nations. We hear that some of them have already been translated into other languages.

We are grateful to the participants of the courses who have cooperated with us by narrating their tales, and we trust they will feel rewarded for their effort when they read them in print.

We hope that more people will enjoy these tales and use them as reading material in their own countries, which was our original purpose of collecting and printing them.

Mina Ben-Zvi
Director, MCTC

PROLOGUE

Listening to a tale from the Kilimanjaro or from an Ashanti village in Uganda has helped to bring us closer to the Africans studying here. Each of them takes a pride in his own traditional tales, told by "my grandmother before bed-time" or by "my eldest brother while waiting round the fire for supper".

These tales, passed down from generation to generation, long before there were any written records of the past in Africa, are treasures from a life that is disappearing in the new continent of Africa, with its changing rhythm.

Before there was any formal schooling in Africa, folktales served as a basis of education and even this small collection illustrates the values and morals esteemed amongst the African people. We see how the small and weak can overcome the big and mighty; such as the goat that gets the better of the elephant. And we see how the enterprise of the venturesome man brings reward and a simple boy becomes a chief.

Certain characteristics such as obstinacy are deplored as they are the world over. The "Tale of Death" which is known to every child of the Cameroons, according to Mrs. Ndenge, shows the fate of a child who will not listen and impresses the importance of obedience.

In many of the tales we recognize familiar types, although they are often in the guise of animals. There is the cat in search of a friend, "the strongest of all" and the leopard ruler whose real interest is in plundering those he pretends to serve.

We are indebted to the narrators for giving us a glimpse of their world and hope that on their return home, they will continue to tell folktales and to collect them from their people, for the enrichment of all.

Gene Baharav

INTRODUCTION

The scholarly interest¹ in African folktales started outside Africa around the middle of the 19th Century, and was strongly influenced by the colonial interests of the European superpowers. So, for example, was the fine German anthology of African folktales, published in 1917 within the prestigious series of "Folktales of the World Literature" and edited by the excellent German Africanist, Prof. Carl Meinhof, dedicated to the "brave German men and women in Africa".

This attitude has considerably changed after World War II. Many of the scholars who have been working in the recent decades in the field of African national literatures have not come, as in the past, from the general field of African Studies, but from the disciplines of linguistics, folkloristics, cultural anthropology and ethnopoetics.

This change is also evident within this collection, which consists of 72 folktales collected in Israel and published in three separate instalments (1963 - 30 Nos., 1965 and 1966 - 21 Nos. each).

In my Introduction to the first collection, dated September 1963, I related the motivation behind the project of collecting African folktales, conducted in Haifa, Israel, jointly by the International Training Centre for Community Services on Mount Carmel, and the Israel Folktale Archives (IFA; now part of the Haifa University). The collectors and narrators were the African students who studied over 20 years ago at the above Centre, and represented 14 countries (see Geographical Index on p. 000).

The following three aspects were mentioned in my above Introduction as factors which brought about the students' deci-

sion to collect and submit for publication folktales, remembered by them as part of their oral, cultural heritage:

1. The folktales, and especially the collected legends, would create a genuine national literature in the emerging, independent African countries.

2. The tales would raise the self-esteem of the story-tellers in their community as well as the faith of the people, listening to the tales and transmitting them, in their own cultural heritage.

3. The stories and their comparative annotations would prove to young and adult listeners and readers, that the mind of man is similar all over the world and that racial and religious differences are artificial and external.

The three above reasons combined with idealistic, scholarly and intellectual curiosity, motivated many similar projects which took place in the 1950s and early 1960s all over the world, in many places of learning and research attended by African students, eager to extend and to deepen their knowledge and professional skills. Let us mention for example a Czech selection of Sudanese folktales published in Prague in 1962, one year before our collection, and containing the narrative repertory of the Sudanese student Abdelrahim Salim who studied then in Czechoslovakia. The collection was translated by a local, Czech expert in children's literature, Dr. Markova, and intended mainly for children, but its usefulness for folklore scholars has been stressed by folklorists.²

Several of the African students, whose submitted folktales were published in the Haifa collections, started, upon their return home, local Archives of folktales, folk-literature and traditional lore. Their organizational zeal met in many cases with an enthusiastic response of the local community. Many professional and technical inquiries reached me from Kenya (represented in our collection by 20 tales), Uganda (7), Tanganyika (12), Liberia (6) and other countries about problems of preservation, storage and classification of the collected narratives, about extending the Archives to proverbs, songs and material culture (local museums), but unfortunately, without

constant contacts and cooperation the projects could not develop.

Let us hope that the republication of the folktales in this collection, will not only, among other things, arise memories in the hearts of the collectors and narrators represented therein about their pioneering efforts and praise-worthy achievements, but will perhaps renew their attempts and activities on the field of local, ethnic and national museums and archives of cultural, both spiritual and material, treasures.

The 72 folktales published in this collection are a fine and genuine sample of the narrative lore prevailing in the various culture areas of Africa, South of Sahara.

The Sahara desert has always served as a great dividing line for cultures of the African continent. North of the desert, from Egypt to the Atlantic Ocean, the contact with European and Moslem cultures has been intimate and continuous. As far as the folktale is concerned, Northern Africa is regarded by comparative folklorists as "a southern fringe of the European and Asiatic area".³ South to the Sahara, however (and this holds true with East Africa too), though there exist, as everywhere else in the world, foreign influences and intrusions from Euroasia, folk traditions are essentially local. The great majority of the African tales have certainly had their origin on the soil of Central or Southern Africa.

This explains the fact that the threefold division of the African folktales in our first (1963) collection could be continued in the two following ones, and that the final classification gives a quite characteristic division of the three main topics:

1. Animals and their world - 23 tales.
2. The realm of man - 32 tales.
3. Local legends and traditions - 17 tales.

This general division is characteristic for all African culture-areas,⁴ and it corresponds to the European classification of folk-narratives into genuine folktales (including animal, magic and realistic tales and novellae) and legends; in African tales, however, the "realm of man" intertwines supernatural and

realistic elements so strongly that it is very difficult to point out a demarkation line between them.

Within this general frame there exist essential differences between culture areas and tribal traditions. Where there has been little direct contact with the Asians and Europeans, contamination is negligible, but it increases in direct proportion to outside contacts. In East Africa which is better represented in our collections than any other culture area, especially in that part close to Arabia and even further South, there is ample evidence of the long association with Asian Moslems, even when the native populations have not embraced the Islam religion. Most of the 23 animal tales in our collection have distinctive parallels among the Euroasian animal tales, although the acting characters in the tales are different.

The percentage of non-African parallels to the 32 folktales classified in our collection as belonging to "The realm of man" is much smaller. In a 50 years old, but still scientifically valid study of African tales and their universal parallels, Dr. May A. Klipple has shown,⁵ on the basis of the material available in the 1930s, that from the total of 718 tale-types listed in the international folktale index,⁶ 119 (i.e. 16.6%) are found in the African folktale-corpus.

A similar analysis of the "realm of man" folktales within our limited corpus of the 72 folktales shows a much smaller percentage (around 10%). This may prove that the magic and realistic tales related in the 1960s by African students in Israel are more genuine and less influenced by foreign elements, than the corpus of English translations and adaptations of African folktales available in the 1930s to folktale scholars.

The 17 "local" legends and traditions in our collection are its most genuine component. They are based on socio-religious conventions unfamiliar to the Euroasian ear or folk-belief, and in many cases they cannot be understood without an "in-depth" interpretation, based on the analysis of the socio-cultural context and worldview underlying the specific tale.

Let us illustrate the above findings by a sample analysis of the 32 tales included in the "Animal Tale" section:

The African animal tales were most popular outside Europe, and their publications and adaptations go back to the period before the scholarly approach to them and before the comparativists attempted to study them, mainly by genetical and structural comparisons with the Aesopian fables or with the Buddhistic Jatakas. This special interest in African animal tales, especially in American folkloristics, may also be due to the fact that many of these tales reached the West in a later stage of development in the American Black Uncle Remus cycle.

The first tale in our collection (from Zimbabwe) is a classical example of an international animal tale (AT 155) extant in hundreds of versions from various parts of the world.⁷ Usually a man rescues a serpent (in a few cases a bear) from a sure death. The rescued ungrateful animal threatens to kill the rescuer. A clever judge (usually a fox; in some Jewish versions - King Solomon, the wisest of all men, who understood all animal languages) enables the rescuer to put the animal back into captivity, or to kill it.

Our tale-type, used already by Aesop and extant in a Hebrew midrash, is very popular in Africa, and in the 1930s 49 African (Sub-Saharan) versions were known.⁸ The version published in our collection follows the structural pattern of the universal tale and the triad of the acting characters - the negative (a), the positive (b) and the neutral (c) who causes (by his clever ruse and judgment) the resolution of the conflict:

a. The endangered, then rescued animal which proves ungrateful, is the wolf who is "greatly feared amongst the animals" and who is introduced by the Zimbabwe story-teller as somebody who is used to break promises. The story-teller is a farmer and he has probably good reasons to regard the wolf as a dangerous, damage-causing and cheating animal. All these qualities, as well as the wolf's behaviour in the plot, designate this dramatis persona as "negative".

b. The benefactor-rescuer is the local small, horned ante-

lope, the duiker, which is regarded as a dupe. In fact it rescued the wolf after two other (clever) animals, the giraffe and the antelope, had refused to help. On the run the duiker meets the two animals who justify the wolf, i.e. condemn duiker's foolishness. Though a fool or rather a simpleton, the resolution of the conflict is in the duiker's favour. Which means that thanks to the clever judge, he becomes the "positive" hero of the plot.

c. The clever judge is the hare who, before bringing the duiker to the wolf, makes the latter reconstruct the original happening and leaves the wolf to die in the pit.

The message of this animal tale is clear: Only a stupid person helps an evil-doer. If he then suffers because of his foolish, perhaps naive deed, it is his own fault; nobody else is to blame.

The local background (the *dramatis personae*) and the message are stressed in our version, but the structure and the narrative plot are essentially the same all over the world.

Different tribes favour different animals as being clever and cunning. Their common denominator is that they are in fact weak, unpromising "underdogs", like the hare who is in reality the weakest among the animals (wolf, giraffe, antelope, duiker) areas in Africa the positively acting character, "the great deliverer", "the clever one" etc. is often the jackal, the tortoise, the spider, the ant, etc. Very often an animal which plays an important role in the animal tales of the area is also a mythical being, a founder of all creation, etc.

Many of the African animal tales bear an aetiological character and explain the origin of various qualities and behaviour patterns of animals, who have always intrigued human beings living close to them. In most cases the time of the aetiological folktale is set in the remote, mythical past. In our collection we have tales explaining how animals and birds became domesticated (Nos. 2, 10, 23). Accordingly, the friendship between man and cat, though later than that between man and dog, is based on a primeval act of friendship and on an agreement on mutual helpfulness.