

## TWO FOLKLORISTIC ARTICLES

By M. GALLEY

### A MEDITERRANEAN HERO

WE are going to talk about a very popular folk hero known from the East to the West of the Mediterranean countries. I am sure he is familiar to you. As an introduction and in order to conjure him up, let us start with the usual phrase in Maltese: *darba kien hawn tifel jismu Ġaħan\**...

Selecting from the best-known folktales which exhibit his achievements, we will pick out two: in one of them, his mother is going out. In Malta she is going to church, in North Africa and Turkey she may be going to the Turkish bath, in Egypt to market. Wherever she goes matters little: it is always the same story, and before leaving the house she invariably gives instructions to her son. She recommends, for instance, not to let anybody come in during her absence. Then, if Ġaħan happens to go out, he must 'pull the door after him': *Tigbed il-bieb warajk*, his mother says! The boy soon feels inclined to take a stroll, but he remembers the phrase *tigbed il-bieb warajk*... And so he takes the door out of its hinges and goes away pulling the door after him.

The second tale – another typical story that is known all over the Mediterranean area – runs as follows: Ġaħan goes to his neighbour and borrows a kettle, or a big pot, from her. After some time, he comes back bringing the utensil together with a tiny one of the same type. His neighbour enquires about the presence of the small pot. He retorts: 'Didn't you know that your pot was pregnant? And so it gave birth to that little one (*wilditha n-nbasa*).' The neighbour looks perfectly satisfied with the explanation and keeps both pots... Later on Ġaħan solicits the same favour of his neighbour: 'All right', she says immediately. But days and days are going by and there is no sign of Ġaħan any more. So the neighbour goes to him and Ġaħan accounts for the disappearance of the utensil: 'Oh well, you know... your kettle has died...' The neighbour becomes angry: 'How possibly?...' – 'Oh, didn't you agree last time? But, whatever gives life, must die one day...'

Both examples can be considered as an illustration of Ġaħan's personality. Before analysing the main trends of his character and its significance for society, we will go through a few data in order to outline

\*See p. 76 for notes on Transcription of Arabic characters,

the history of Ğahan. In other words, the question is: are we able, by consulting documents and according to tradition, to make up a descriptive sheet about Ğahan? Can we trace his origin? Has he really existed, when and where?

First, what about his name? You say Ğahan in Maltese. In Sicily, they know him under the name of Giufa, in Albania Giucha, in Corsica Jean le Fou. In North Africa, they call him Ğoĥa, or Ğha in the West, and Ğuĥa in Tunisia. The Berbers usually say Si Ğoĥa, thus conferring to him a term of high respect, which obviously is not devoid of irony. Yet in the same way as people are given nicknames, Ğoĥa can be named differently from one area to another in North Africa. Of course the various denominations are connected with the image people make of him: for example, Ben Sakrân (= son of a drunkard), Bu Naĝâs (= the sleeper), Bu Hamâr (= the one with the donkey) as he is most frequently pictured riding on his donkey.

In Egypt they say Goĥa, the same word as previously Ğoĥa. On the contrary, in the Middle East – I mean Iran, Turkey, and farther up to Central Asia – he is known under the Turkish name Hodja, or Nasreddin Hodja.

Whatever his name may be, whatever the contrary, he symbolizes the very essence of humour everywhere. Needless to say, one can pick up slight differences from one country to another, from rural to urban regions: his stories sound more refined here, or more unpolished there. But what is noticeable from this geographical survey is that there seems to be a double current: in one case, the word Ğoĥa is Arabic, in the other, Hodja is derived from Turkish.

Now, how did he travel through all those countries? From where did he start? Had he a living model at some time?

According to tradition, the Turks claim the ownership of our hero: a certain Nasreddin Hodja is said to have been living in Turkey in the 13th century. His birth-place was a small village in Anatolia, his parents were peasants. He himself became an 'imam' and a 'qâdi', in other words: priest and judge, in the Moslem religion. Still nowadays crowds of people go on pilgrimage every year to the place where he was buried: on the tombstone, or rather, monument erected there, they can see a door with a huge padlock, which is supposedly meant to symbolize the vanity of man's efforts to protect himself since Death, when It knocks at the door of either the rich or the poor, cannot be prevented from entering. . . apparently, the ultimate joke he made at his own expense. At any rate, the Hodja's popularity is unquestionable in Turkey where people still chuckle over his stories and quote his japes and quips in everyday conversation. However, such data do not necessarily imply that the legendary character

derives from a Turkish Nasreddin Hodja living in the 13th century. After all, the fact that he may or may not even have existed, matters little to people: to them he is a very real person. They will not argue about historical truth when, for example, they tell anecdotes relating his encounter with the great Mongol invader, Timur-Leng (or Tamburlane) who is reported to have engaged the Hodja as his court-jester, which is logically impossible, unless the Hodja might have lived two hundred years...

What is more interesting to know about the starting point of Ğahan, is that the Arabs mentioned a book of Ğuĥa's anecdotes as early as the 9th century. The book is entitled 'Kitāb nawādir Ğuĥa' and it is referred to in *Kitāb el-Fihrist*. Such a reference from a reliable source bears witness to the existence of Ğuĥa as a popular folk hero in the Arab countries in, at least, the 9th century, long before Nasreddin Hodja lived. In consequence, we may presume that the Turkish Hodja could be the double of his Arab legendary ancestor. That people, in Turkey, at some time of their history, should have felt the need of adopting the Arab jokester and identified him in the person of a real Nasreddin Hodja, looks now very likely, the more likely as both names (Ğuĥa and Hodja) sound very similar.

Then one can more easily account for the distribution of the names given to our Ğahan in the countries where we have pointed out that he was famous: from the Arab countries, 'Ğuĥa' spread at the same time as the Arabs moving westwards, whereas 'Hodja' circulated through the Balkans with the Turks.

We leave History aside now, and focus our interest on legend and Ğahan's personality. You recollect the two stories we quoted at the beginning.

First, Ğahan pulling the door after him. What strikes us here comes from the fact that he looks as if he were unable to understand the meaning of a phrase except in the literal sense of words. His interpretation is strictly verbal and apart from the context. He does not question his interpretation, nor visualize what looks absurd about going and pulling the door after him. And of course the comic element arises from the fact that this brings him to do exactly the contrary of what his mother meant. She meant: 'keep the door locked', whereas eventually he opens the door to any intruder.

It is precisely because Ğahan does the opposite of what is expected, the opposite of a socially accepted behaviour, that he is a source of popular entertainment as is always the case with folly. Let us take another example which is famous in Malta as well as in North Africa: when he met two men fighting with each other, he was prompted to say the appropriate phrase 'God part the two of you!' But forgetting everything about the circumstances, he will say the same to a bridal couple and this

undoubtedly sounds shocking to the pair, unreasonable, hence laughable for us. There is always a gap between the way people normally speak and act, and the way Ġaħan does himself. And yet in the above-mentioned examples he does not seem to bear any malice. He even makes efforts in order to please his mother – in other words, to adapt himself and be integrated into society, – but on the whole everything he tries turns out a failure, as on the day when, in a Maltese tale, he buries the sow into the earth, convinced as he is that it should grow like a tree... No wonder that his mother complains about his silliness: what an ass! she says. He is definitely deficient in judgement and sense. What can we do with him? It is hopeless...

And yet if we resume the second example mentioned at the beginning – the one with the kettle which is said to be pregnant and to die, – is that pure folly? In reality Ġaħan is not a simpleton then, he merely plays the fool, he counterfeits folly and in the end... he laughs best who laughs last! Because he gives the impression of being an idiot, people are ready to make good bargains to his prejudice, and they, in their own turn, are his dupes. Thanks to a very pertinent witty remark, he manages to reverse the situation and get out successfully. Little by little we proceed to a whole series of tales in which Ġaħan, in spite of all appearances, proves to be very clever. People treat him as a typically gullible person, whilst he makes them commit the most unreasonable foolish actions as, for example, buying for an extravagant price a donkey which is said to produce gold, or a knife that presumably kills and resuscitates anybody. Ġaħan has more than one card up his sleeve and at the very moment when people want to get rid of him, at the very moment when he is going to be hanged, he escapes by the skin of his teeth through a happy turn of expression, a relevant sally, quite to the point, which suddenly brings a smile on the others' faces and saves his life. Laughter stands for his strength. He looks as if he could keep the control of any situation by firing off a very apropos remark which cannot but disarm his opponent.

In the previous examples, we have seen him triumph over people who generally wanted to deceive him: he finally cheats them. This is justice, after all. But we should not take for granted that he always stands for the victim. His character is not limited to a defensive aspect: he does more than delude or amuse people on the mere purpose of taking his revenge or getting out of a mess. You probably remember the story of Ġaħan with his costume (again, it is universally known throughout the Mediterranean). Here is the summary: Ġaħan has been driven away so many times from wedding parties because he was not properly dressed... When he at last is let in because he wears new clothes, he pours the food on his clothes inside his sleeves, saying: 'Eat, eat, my clothes, since you, not me,

have been invited!

Of course speaking to one's clothes and feeding them is completely devoid of common sense and derisive. But in reality he does the right thing and says the right words that are liable to make us feel what snob-bishness and social discrimination are like. What looks absurd in Ġaħan's deeds, what sounds nonsensical in his words, finally enables him to hit the nail on the head: sham and pretension – the butts of satire and caricature – become the targets of nonsense.

In this respect, the Turkish Hodja seems to play an outstanding part and possess a special gift for denouncing falsehood, hypocrisy and bribery in society. Never does he miss an occasion to mock lawyers and the so-called doctors of Islam. It is true that people used traditionally to distrust human justice and lawyers, as Professor Aquilina has pointed out in his article 'Law and lawyers in Maltese proverbs' (in *Maltese Folklore Review*, vol. I, n°I). In Turkey the Hodja hints at their venality, their illegal and dishonest habits. As an illustration, here is one of the Hodja's stories: at court the Hodja is eventually said to be in the right and legally entitled to keep a water buffalo (which, of course, belonged to someone else), on the mere pretension that he, the Hodja, was hunting and his bird – a little one baptized 'falcon' for the occasion – has swooped down upon its prey, the buffalo. Needless to say, the judge had been promised a gratuity by the accused!

As for the doctors of Islam, they are not spared either. He cannot tolerate the pedants, full of books, void of learning. When one of them, putting on airs, asks him questions about the centre of the Earth, or the number of stars in the sky, he manages to reply in such a way as to deflate the speaker's pretension and place him in a ridiculous situation: 'there are as many stars in the sky as hairs in your beard. – Oh then, how many hairs in my beard? – As many as hairs in my donkey's tail. If you don't believe me, we'll tear off both beard and tail and count...'

The fact that, as we have seen from the above examples, he aims at a certain form of social criticism does not signify that he, Ġaħan, is a model of morality. I am thinking of a tale known in Malta: everything starts from one chickpea. Under the pretext that the neighbour's chicken has eaten his chick-pea, Ġaħan takes possession of the fowl: *jeu iċ-ċiċra jeu it-tiġieġa*. He does not even hesitate to cut off somebody's head in order to secure his success. He seems to obey a principle whose morality is questionable: the end justifies the means. Never does he go to the others' assistance, as Robin Hood for instance, or other popular heroes would do. For Ġaħan, charity begins at home... He can be so cynical and cruel that people get exasperated and decide to get rid of him, reject him as an out-cast. In North Africa, his only friend ends by giving him up: he joins

Ġaħan's enemies and all the villagers murder him. But such an extreme appears as exceptional. In spite of his shortcomings he remains very popular.

We have come to the point when we can wonder what makes Ġaħan so popular. As we have just seen, Ġaħan unveils pretence or corruption in society and, almost in every case, he outrivals the others by his tricks. He breaks his way through society by fair means and foul. From his point of view he is not an isolated example in the Mediterranean folktales. Other typical characters embody similar aspirations from the people. He can be associated in this respect with a character known everywhere in the world as the trickster. One of the best known in this area (he has much in common with Ġaħan), is 'il tignoso' in Italy, 'l-aqraz' in the Arab countries, 'Keloghlan' in Turkey. In each case the word means: the one affected with ringworm, usually bald-headed, symbolizing a poor boy, most of the time an orphan. However lazy and artful he may be, he is dear to people because of his miserable condition and because he finally triumphs by his wit over stupid people. He characterizes the ingenuity of the poor: Ġaħan starts in life without the slightest prospect of success, he is bullied by everyone, but eventually he will become king and/or marry the king's daughter... Folktales must satisfy a popular need for social compensation and equity.

When playing the role of a fool, he apparently behaves in an irrational, absurd manner, says incoherent words, takes antic postures. In fact, he seems to be at times between reverie and reality. Remember when he addresses a statue: because the branches of a tree are waving in the wind and reflecting over the statue, he believes that the statue is nodding. In North Africa he is talking with an owl hooting in the night, or dogs barking, etc.... Another example which gives an idea of Ġaħan's poetical vision of the world is when he undertakes to rescue the moon: he sees the reflection of the moon in the water of a well and believes that the moon has fallen down. In my opinion, Ġaħan is not unlike the village idiot who was traditionally treated with a certain consideration and kindness, because one confusedly felt that he, like children – and in some manner, like saints, – sees the world from a different angle, and that he may be nearer to God. In Egypt, the stories about Goħa seem to emphasize this aspect: Goħa is incapable of behaving like other people in society, and all through his life he preserves his innocence, his childlike soul. Certain remarks he makes, produced by those anomalous gifts, draw the attention of a learned professor, because he knows that there is some revelation in what sounds nonsensical (see: *Le Livre de Goba le Simple*, by A. Adès et A. Josipovici). This leads us to put the question: is there not a certain similarity between Ġaħan and the court jester? The company

of buffoons was greatly appreciated in all the Arab countries, for instance at the court of Haroun-al-Raschid (8th century). As a matter of fact, a jester whose profession is to make sport by jests excels in nonsense as Ġaḥan does in his way. In order to confer sense, nonsense requires – as H. Moss writes – ‘two qualities rarely found in combination: the ability to think and feel like a child and a highly developed sense of language.’ Nonsense then, having something of the nature of a game, ‘makes of the absurd an entertainment, a release and a form of criticism.’ I am tempted to quote a most eminent writer, Shakespeare, when he put in Jaques’s mouth the following words:

‘O noble fool. A worthy fool!  
Motley’s the only wear.’

Now it is time to come to a conclusion. I am well aware that the title of our talk ‘A Mediterranean hero’ may have surprised you. How can we call Ġaḥan a hero, if the usual acceptance of ‘hero’ suggests someone capable of achieving superhuman tasks, and chiefly someone who symbolizes extraordinary bravery and chivalry, as does the hero in wonder tales. In fact, Ġaḥan has nothing in common with such a paragon of virtue, he is the opposite, the antidote, and very likely the parody of the ordinary hero. Yet he manages to reach the same end, but the other way round: he also gets the better of a giant (remember *il-ġgant Ghulija*), marries a princess, becomes king. Judging from his achievements, are we not entitled to call him a HERO...?

## UNIVERSALITY AND SPECIFICITY OF FOLKTALES

To say that a folktale is universal naturally means that it is known everywhere, or nearly everywhere, in the world. For example, *Cinderella* does exist in most of the countries from China to Europe and Africa. Even the title is very often the same: in the Afab countries (North Africa), the tale is known under the name of *Aïcha Rmâda* (*Aïcha*, being the name of the girl; *Rmâda*, literally speaking = ‘ashen’). But the tale can also be called ‘the orphan’, or ‘the orphan and the cow’, since the dead mother usually transforms herself into a cow in order to feed her little daughter. Then, although the title may differ, the plot remains the same: it deals with the misfortunes of a young girl, owing to her stepmother’s jealousy and cruelty. The universality of *Cinderella* is, of course, quite understandable for psychological reasons: everywhere in the world, it is most of the time a tragic situation for a young girl to be motherless, and brought up by a stepmother.

Thus, a certain amount of tales – we call them VERSIONS – are connected with Cinderella, as far as they treat the same universal subject. In other words, they are related to one another by what an eminent American folklorist, Stith Thompson, named a 'genetic relationship'. Needless to say, within such a genetic relationship, the tales can assume differences: however similar the subject is, the way it is told is variable from one country to another, even from one part of the country to another, exactly as, in one and the same human species, let us say the white race, people may be genetically related by a certain number of common features (the colour of their skin, and other physical or mental characteristics), and yet, from country to country, they possess properties of their own which differentiate them and are specific to a country. As far as folktales are concerned, the matter may be the same, as is the case with Cinderella and all its versions widespread in the world, but the manner changes, the more so as folktales are traditionally oral: they are not fixed; one storyteller, in consequence, can make a tale more concise, or more elaborate, or more artistic. He can add or omit certain narrative elements.

Coming back to Cinderella, we have so far recorded four hundred versions for that single tale. This gives us an idea of the huge amount of narrative material and of the practical necessity of arranging folktale collections into classified groups. The usefulness of an index for bringing the great mass of folktales of various countries into a single classification is clear enough. This is why a Finnish scholar, Antti Aarne, undertook a classification which covered the countries of Northern Europe and was meant to serve as a basis for all the further classifications. It was in 1910. In 1928 American folklorists, under the guidance of Stith Thompson whom I mentioned a moment ago, published the classification in its revised form, extending the index to Southern Europe. Since then, a new revision has been made available, covering more countries. Unfortunately, there are still large areas almost completely unexplored.

Now, what is the classification like? It is, as we have seen, a classification based upon a certain idea of the universality of folktales, and of their diffusion throughout the world. It is entitled *The types of the folktales*. 'Type' refers to one traditional tale, considered as the most typical, the most representative of a whole family of tales. For instance, the four hundred versions we have already mentioned will be grouped together under Type Cinderella. And if we look into the index, we will find Type Cinderella under number 510. Or else, if we look for Type *Snowwhite* and its versions, we will find them under number 709. Or again, such a type as is well known here in Malta – the story of a hero who goes to the underworld and rescues the princesses who have been



taken away by some dragon or sea-monster – will be found under number 301. And so on... This, of course, enables collectors and scholars to have a common base of reference. Besides, the data which are given about the geographical distribution of each type in the index are of valuable importance for any comparative studies of folktales.

But what is more interesting about the study of folktales, – I mean, more interesting than comparing the versions of one and the same type from their exterior framework, from the pattern on which they are composed, – is to clear up their particular significance, their specificity of meaning according to the country, and see to what extent they are the expression of the culture from which they are originated. Folklore has got an interest as far as it is a mirror of culture, a projection of the society concerned.

Let us take the example of symbols, which, by the way, abound in folktales. A symbol, in spite of all appearances, is significant of different things from country to country. One must be aware that a symbol is a social convention based on facts drawn from experience. It is associated in people's minds with certain events, and suggests different things according to the country. Spring, for instance, as a season, means for lots of people the end of Winter, the re-birth of Nature. But if, in one definite country, an event of momentous importance occurred precisely in Spring, the word 'Spring' will be given a symbolical meaning. Colours are also symbolical: red usually means joy, merriment, good luck. Do not people say here in Malta that a red *bagħlija* brings good luck? But in another culture, red can be associated with the colour of blood, hence with bloodshed and death as in the phrase 'bull-eye window'. On the contrary, in China, eye suggests a retreat, a hiding-place, because of the position of the eye in its socket.

If I have mentioned the above examples about symbols, it is to put emphasis on the danger of comparing elements from different cultures. One must be conscious of their specificity of meaning which differentiates them from country to country. The same caution must be applied to the study of folktales in general.

As an illustration, we will take the example of a particularly widespread folktale: it is the universal story of a girl from a poor family (usually a shepherdess in Europe, since shepherd symbolizes the lower people in society). She finally marries the prince, because in various circumstances she surpasses other girls by her cleverness. In the Mediterranean area, the tale usually takes the form of a verbal contest, not between the female candidates to marriage, but between both, boy and girl, who are going to be married. In that verbal contest, they exchange

rhymed verses according to a tit-for-tat system, or as you say in Malta *Botta u Risposta*. And we know that all through the Mediterranean, from ancient Rome to pre-Islamic Arabia, people traditionally enjoyed this type of competition between two poets. In Arabia, during periodical fairs, each tribe used to come with its poet who had to defend his tribe's honour. Is it not almost the same in Malta where the *għannej* is charged with his village's renown, particularly at Mnarja?

Now, how does the competition start between the boy and the girl in our tale? Most of the time, he catches sight of her at the very moment when she is busy on the terrace of her house watering her basil plant. In Sicily, this type precisely appears in Sebastiano Lo Nigro's *Racconti Popolari Siciliani* under the title *Il vaso di basilico*. The same in the Turkish classification worked out by Eberhard and Boratav (*Typen Türkischer Volksmärchen*), where it is called *Das Basiliemädchen*, the basil maiden. This is not an indifferent, meaningless detail: basil has got a symbolic meaning in this area. I have been told that here in Malta people used to put a pot of basil (*ħabaq*), or carnation, on their window-sill (*ħarriegħa*), when their daughter had reached the age of marriage. In Italy, Boccaccio tells us a beautiful, but sad, story about *il vaso di basilico* which inspired one of Keat's poems: a young maiden is watering her pot of basil with her tears, since inside the pot she has hidden the head of her lover whom her brothers murdered. In Sicily, still nowadays, a very effective way for a young lady to discourage someone coming to pay his court is to say (because she is engaged to someone else): 'my basil is no longer available'... And in North Africa, when young lovers send greetings to each other, they express their feelings through a metaphorical code; they say, for instance, 'I greet you in a pot of basil'. All these examples – and we could quote more taken from Greece or Rumania – show that basil is symbolic of love and marriage, so much so that when, at the very beginning of tales, one comes across basil, and however harsh and biting the contest may be between boy and girl, we gather that in the end they will get married.

The boy starts the contest in North Africa by addressing her as *ya bent el-ħabaq*, o basil maiden... and he goes on rhyming in order to defy, to challenge her. She has to take up the challenge, because her honour is involved in the matter, as is the case between two people who compete in *Botta u Risposta*. So, she parries his shafts of wit and rispostes herself. And little by little, she looks as if she were establishing more and more firmly her right to be considered as his equal, as his mate in the future. At any rate, she seizes the opportunity through this verbal con-

test to evince her intellectual gifts. Her honour is implicated in the competition (*Botta u Risposta*). It is true that most of the time the contest has something of the nature of a game, but if we go through the same type of tales in North Africa and mainly such tales as are told by female storytellers, the tone of the competition becomes more dramatic and cutting; the boy and the girl carry on a merciless fight, not only a verbal duel. The nasty tricks she plays on him may even imperil his life, she almost kills him. For example, she pretends to help him pass from one terrace to another on a wooden board. And at the very moment when he stands on the board, she tilts the board over in order to make him lose his balance and fall. It looks a rather strange manner in which to treat the man who is to marry her, does it not? In reality, she does not do so out of pure mischief. Here again, she has a high sense of honour, as a woman and as a member of her father's family. Her honour has been severely outraged by the man, as we understand from the beginning of the tale. In fact, the boy is said to be guilty of a very serious misdeed which is a disgrace to the family of the girl. We are told that he *ikasser el-ħorma*, he breaks the 'ħorma'. What does it mean? *ħorma* comes from the word *ħaram*, one of the most important concepts in Moslem religion. *ħaram* refers to what is sacred, venerated, and in a wider sense, prohibited in the name of God. For example, the grave of a saint is *ħarâm* and it is forbidden to overstep the bounds that surround it. In the same way, the dwelling-place of women, called *ħarem* (same root), is protected within its bounds. This is why the young lady of the tale says that the man has broken *el-ħorma* by going beyond the limits of the harem. By doing so, he has violated a most sacred law, and sullied the family's honour. So, not only is she entitled to defend her honour, but it is her duty to pay him back and take her revenge. She has to make him atone for his fault. But at the same time, being very clever, by contending for her honour, she awakens his attention and arouses his admiration. Little by little, he realizes that she deserves man's respect, and he confesses: *ah quddâh fik!* literally = 'how much there is in you!' She has asserted herself in this critical period which precedes marriage, and proved to be a very reliable wife. Since, then, the struggle is over, the insult has been repaired and everything is in order. The issue of the strife is marriage, as she states herself: using the opposite word of *ħaram*, *ħalal*, she welcomes him with the phrase *marħabâ u aħlâ u saħlâ b-ez-zûğ el-ħlâli* ('welcome to my legitimate husband'). It seems as if a North African woman had to establish married life on a basis of mutual esteem, which is comprehensible from a social point of view: the statute of women is still very traditional in North Africa. This is probably why folktales told by women show a peculiar aggressive inclination on the woman's side,

but at the same time they seem to signify that, if a woman has a strong personality and the sense of her family's honour, she will be treated with consideration by her husband. She has then to prove, out of her intelligence, what she is, from the very beginning of their relationship.

So, starting from a similar plot (the clever girl who marries the prince, or the rich man), we can realize how specific, how different the meaning is, according to the culture, and how essential it is to go through the original text and pick up keywords, in order to perceive the social context.

We have come to the point when, after analysing a certain number of facts such as the verbal contest, or key-words like 'basil', 'haram' and 'halal', we can wonder to what extent a folktale is the expression of the culture from which it springs.

It seems that we are entitled to say now, from the analysis of the clever girl, that a folktale is a reflection of traditional social values. First, the sense of honour is emphasized, and in the case of the Arabic versions, woman's honour is based on moral principles dictated by religion. It is true that in the Mediterranean countries people are very punctilious when honour is concerned, the more so as a woman of the family is implicated. People have to obey the code of honour, I mean a certain number of rules forming a standard of conduct in social life. Still nowadays in countries like Sicily, Greece, Lebanon, Egypt, if a serious offence dishonours a girl and cannot be redeemed by the offender, a crime – namely, 'crime of honour' – is most frequently committed by the girl's family: her father, or eldest brother, feels obliged to kill both the offender and his own sister.

On the other hand, one must not take for granted that folktales are invariably the medium through which moral values are conveyed, or that the hero is a social model who embodies a moral ideal. For instance, the 'hero' can behave in such a way as is absolutely in contradiction with moral values. In my previous talk I made allusion to the trickster, a very popular character, who breaks his way through society by fair means and foul. He can be cruel and cynical. But people like him, because he symbolizes the ingenuity of the poor and triumphs over big people by his wit. In that case, folktales are a release and somehow a criticism of social order. Through folktales people can express certain aspirations as in the case of our young lady of the Arabic tale: if she is so aggressive, it is because of a feeling of frustration and a reaction against the condition of North African women. Everybody knows that folktales, carnival parades, puppet shows, are the occasion for people to release themselves and express their secret impulses. For instance in North Africa, at the time when the Karagöz was still very popular, about twenty years ago, one day they showed the devil (*Xitan*) dressed like a policeman...

Therefore folktales, as other productions of popular imagination, are a vehicle of social reactions. This is why a tale can offer a picture of society that is in contradiction with reality. As an illustration, I will quote the following example: again in North Africa, people still nowadays show a great propensity for marrying their girl-cousin (*bent el-ġamm* = the uncle's daughter on the father's side), as may have been the case in Malta in the olden days. Several proverbs say the advantages of such an alliance:

'Take your uncle's daughter.  
If she chews you,  
She does not swallow you up'.

(which is probably connected with the desire of not sharing the family property by marrying a relative). On the contrary in folktales, the hero goes on a long journey and brings back a young lady who is completely unknown of his family: she is a foreigner. Then, in spite of the existence of a traditional alliance, people, consciously or not, introduce another type of marriage.

As a conclusion, it seems from the previous examples that we are justified in saying that folktales are not only the reflection of traditional values, but also the means for the people to project a certain number of psychological preoccupations. The study of folktales requires a thorough knowledge of the people and of their language. This is why I hope that some of you will be interested in the study of Maltese folktales: you are far more competent than I to do it.

#### ABOUT THE TRANSCRIPTION OF ARABIC CHARACTERS

- ج is written: (1) ġ when pronounced like the Maltese ġ (*gab*) ex: زوج *zuġ* (North Africa)
- (2) g when pronounced like the Maltese g (*goff*) ex: جحا *goħa* (Egypt)
- ح is written h with a dot underneath: ħ, pronounced like the Maltese ħ (*habb*). Ex: حرم *ħaram*.
- ض is written d, an interdental consonant. Ex: قاضي *qâdi*
- ع (replaced by the Maltese ġh) is written: ġ Ex.: عamm = ġhamm (ع being pronounced with a pharyngeal sound).
- ق is written: q (unlike the Maltese q, it is pronounced with a velar sound). Ex.: قدام *quddâh*.
- ه is written: h (unlike the Maltese h, this Arabic glottal consonant is pronounced). Ex.: اه *ah*.