

BELIEF AND NON-BELIEF IN ARAB, MIDDLE EASTERN
AND SUB-SAHARAN TALES:
THE RELIGIOUS-NON-RELIGIOUS CONTINUUM
A CASE STUDY*

By

HASAN EL-SHAMY

Introduction

For nearly a century western folklorists and other students of tradition-bound cultures have noted the stark resemblances between some of the sub-Saharan African narratives and their counterparts elsewhere, particularly in Europe.¹ Most of these similarities were explained in terms of recent borrowing (diffusion) from European and West Asian tale repertoires, through the spread of Islam, Christianity or the existence of colonies of 'non-African' groups. In these early impressionistic 'studies', the physical proximity of the two segments of the continent and the social and cultural interaction between their inhabitants played no significant role, nor did the context in which such tales actually appeared. Similarly, the actual impact of the interaction between the indigenous inhabitants of the two tiers of the continent remains largely unexplored. In spite of recent studies proving the fallacious nature of this assumption and the existence of a large repertoire of shared narrative traditions,² the prevailing viewpoint that the Sahara was a natural barrier to culture exchange still persists. Most recent studies compare the sub-Saharan tale to European analogues, rather than to Arab and other northern African parallels.

Yet, in numerous cases these similarities cannot be satisfactorily explained in terms of "recent borrowing" and still await further research.³

Preliminary investigation of this category of 'shared narratives' reveals the existence of a group of tales, which incorporate major components harking back to antiquity. A fairly recurrent pattern is revealed. The two main axes for the movements among the various segments (culture areas, language families, ethnic groups or tribes, nations, etc.) seem to be the religious on the one hand, and the non-religious on the other, or that which is sacred and that which is not.

The temporal dimension, throughout which the multiple texts expressing various aspects of the narrative concerned, usually spans millennia (or at least centuries) while the spatial dimension consists of areas and groups separated by considerable distances.

Such is the pattern revealed by a study⁴ of an Arab tale whose contents synthesize two structurally distinct parts; the first may be designated as combining tale type 705, *Born of a Fish*⁵ and type 554*, *The Boy in the Eagle's Nest*, while the second links Type

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Note: Endnotes in the original are given here as footnotes. Original pagination is indicated within angular brackets: < > : (e.g., "<9>" = p. 9 in the original).

For technical considerations, under-dotted Arabic letters are given here as underlined letters.

1. See Stith Thompson, "European-Asiatic Folktales in Other Continents" in: *The Folktale*. (New York, 1946), pp. 283- 296, esp. pp. 284-286.

² See Hasan El-Shamy, *Folktales of Egypt: Collected, Translated and Edited with Middle Eastern and African Parallels*. (Chicago, 1980), especially p. 240 and p. 250. Also see Hasan El-Shamy, "Einigkeit macht stark (AaTh 910F)," *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* (Göttingen) Vol. 3, nos. 4-5 (1981), pp. 1256-1261.

³ See El-Shamy, *Folktale*, p. 238.

⁴ Hasan El-Shamy, "Vom Fisch Geboren (AaTh 705)," *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* (Göttingen). Vol. 4, nos. 4-5, pp. 1211-1218.

⁵ Designations of tale-types are made according to Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, *The Types of the*

706, *The Maiden Without Hands* to Type 870*, *Stepmother Makes Love to Stepson*.⁶ The *Type Index* does not report any Arab or sub-Saharan occurrence of this tale, nor does the *Index* recognize its composite typological nature.

The study was based on a text from Egypt, narrated by the same adult female from whose repertoire another narrative will be examined below. This text may be summarized as follows:

(Part one). I. A husband disobeyed his wife and ate magic food (usually a fruit) intended to make her pregnant; he became pregnant. Via an unusual part of his body, he brought forth a <9> baby girl and abandoned her as his wife had ordered. II. The infant was raised by a wild bird (usually a falcon or eagle) on top of a tree. A prince saw her reflection in water and fell in love with her but could not reach her. III. An old woman tricked the maiden into descending; she was captured and married to the prince.

(Part two). IV. During the prince's absence, his mother (or another character) mutilated the wife and cast her away; the wife received supernatural help. V. The mother disguised and presented herself to her son as his wife; they slept together. She became pregnant and craved a certain fruit found only in the supernatural garden of the wife. VI. Servants who were sent to fetch the fruit listened to a *rhyme* in which the truth was told, but were made dumb magically. VII. The prince himself went, learned the truth and was reunited with his wife. The culprit mother was punished.⁷

Various components (tale types) were shown to exist in sub-Saharan communities virtually covering the entire continent. "Part one" (types 705 and 554B*) manifested distinct association with belief narratives associated with the origin of the tribe in Kikuyu, Kamba, and Masai traditions. It also appears as a belief narrative associated with Prophet Sulayman (i.e., King Solomon) in the writing of an eleventh century Muslim hagiographer and historian (al-Tha'labi).⁸ Likewise, the majority of the components in

Folktale. (FFC. no. 184, Helsinki, 1961), abbreviated here as: AaTh.

⁶ The limited appearance of these tale types, beside many others, in Eastern Europe suggests that they were derived from Arabic-Islamic sources. These narratives bear evidence to their Arabic nature. For example, Motif T578 "Pregnant man"--a cardinal component Arab texts--only appears sporadically in Europe and seems to be concentrated around the Baltic Sea area, see texts in P. Smits *Latviesu ... (Latvian Folk Legends and Fairy Tales)* (Waverly, Iowa, 1962) vol. 6, no. 16.69, pp. 470-480; *Ibid*, vol. 7, nos. 1.13, Pp. 39-42, and 1.20, pp. 62-67; *Ibid*, vol. 9, nos. 13.1-13.10, pp. 163-181.

Also, Chilean folklorist Pino-Saavedra has noted the near total absence of this motif from the "romanische" versions of AaTh 705; these versions were most likely derived from Andalusian or maghribian narrative repertoires. See Y. Pino-Saavedra, *Chilenische Volksmärchen* (Düsseldorf, 1964), no. 23, pp. 135-142; *Cuentos Folkloricos de Chile*, vol. 2 (Santiago de Chile, 1961) no. 93, pp. 89-94. (English resumes of this Spanish text were prepared for the present writer by Y. de Lecuna and V. Fuks of Indiana University.)

Similarly, Mot. T412 "Mother-son incest" seems to be confined to Arabic Middle Eastern renditions; it appears in Somali, Sudanese, Nubian, Egyptian, Palestinian, Syrian, and Iraqi variants. The second part of the tale is related to AaTh 870C* *Stepmother Makes Love to Stepson*, " is reported in *The Type Index* only once in Iceland. As indicated above, it is recurrent in Arab renditions of this tale type.

⁷ For the full text, with author's editorial notes and annotations, see *Tales Told Around the World*, R.M. Dorson, General Editor, (Chicago, 1975) pp. 149-168.

⁸ Ahmad Ibn Muhammad al-Tha'labi, *Kitaab qisas al-'anbiyaa'* (Cairo, n.d.) p. 25.

both parts of the tale were shown to hark back to antiquity.

The present study examines another Arab non-religious tale under terms apparent in the pattern outlined above. However some emphasis has been placed on the narrator, for--as will be demonstrated--the affective components of a narrative cannot be designated when the text is peeled off its behavioral system.

The Narrator and Her Text

The tale was recorded in April, 1969, from 'Azeezah 'A., then thirty-eight years of age, originally a Bedouin (i.e., an Arab nomad), mother of a girl of three, who lived with her husband, thirty-two, and his second, younger and favored wife, in Al-Basateen, a district near Ma'adi, a suburb of Cairo, Egypt, bordering the Eastern Desert. She comes from a tribe of settled 'Arabs' who, until two or three generations earlier, were nomads. Although living under semiurban conditions--the husband did odd jobs and sometimes acted as a middleman--she still wore a veil and was not permitted to leave her home alone.

I had asked her husband to help me find a Bedouin woman who told tales. He explained that no Bedouin man would allow a female member of his household to converse with a male stranger. The husband offered to introduce me to a man, his own father, who was well-versed in poetry. I explained, "I want to hear stories which a woman has learned from her *khâlah* (maternal aunt), for example." He evidently internalized this specific fact; after several months <10> he offered to have his wife narrate to me, "Since we have become 'like a family'," and in the presence of my own. He agreed to let me tape-record the tales but refused to allow photographing her [i.e., his wife].

'Azeezah narrated in my home in her husband's presence and with my own wife and daughter nearby. At the beginning she was very nervous and told specific tales which he suggested but could not himself narrate. She learned most of her tales from her mother and stated so. However, her husband, apparently influenced by his desire to give me exactly what I had asked for as his profession and rules of courtesy both required, often interjected: "She learned it from her maternal aunt." At the beginning of the recording session 'Azeezah repeated what he said, stating, "from my maternal aunt and other women." Toward the end of the session, however, she gave "other women" only as her source. Her husband interrupted: "Say: 'From my maternal aunt!'" 'Azeezah snapped, "I haven't got a maternal aunt! From where shall I produce a maternal aunt so that she would have told me the story!?" She defiantly stated, "I heard it from my mother," and went on to explain: "Our father would go out someplace, then our mother would tell us these things."⁹

'Azeezah enjoyed telling the tale and was vividly ego- involved in its events; this story and "The Falcon's Daughter" are her favorite tales. She used tale-telling to attract her husband to her quarters. She had to compete for his attention with her *durrah* (i.e., co-wife), who is her husband's second, younger and more favorite wife, as well as with his sister and his mother. Most of 'Azeezah's tales reflected hostility between the 'heroine' in the role of the wife on the one hand and the co-wife, mother-in-law and

⁹ On the role the informant's motivation plays in generating "distortion of data, and relevant literature, see Hasan M. El-Shamy, "Folkloric Behavior: a Theory for the Study of the Dynamics of Traditional Culture." Ph.D. Diss. (Bloomington, 1967), pp. 55-59, 275-276, esp. notes 80-82.

husband's sister on the other. Her active, readily recallable repertoire was composed of ten tales. She spoke rapidly with frequent brief pauses between major episodes within the tale. She did not elaborate or give her background descriptions.

The husband (Shindi) stated that he had married his second wife only out of tribal-pride. She is his father's brother's daughter, and thus lived in the neighborhood. She was about to be given in marriage to a fellah (i.e., a peasant), an act that is considered shameful for a 'true Arab' family. During the early wedding ceremonies Shindi objected vehemently. So the girl's family asked him, "Would you marry her?" He answered 'gallantly', "Yes I would!" Shindi explained, "I did so to save the family honor." Later, however, his "gallant" act proved too costly, for "fighting between the old wife ('Azeeah, our narrator) and the new-one never ceases." Shindi laments, "They have made my life miserable. Each one has her own 'quarters within the house, but if I go here [i.e., to one of them] the other one gets mad, and if I go there, the first one gets mad."

Additionally, economic matters are perceived as a sign of expressing of concern and affection. Shindi explains, "What makes things worse is that I am a man-with-a-limited-income! My father is very old and I must take care of my mother, and my younger sister--who, at the present <11> time, is mad at her husband-- and is back home with my parents. This means that I am keeping two households open! If I buy something for one [wife], the other one gets angry and would want something better for herself!!" He lamented, "Now, 'I hit myself with a shoe a hundred times' for having married two!!" When asked which of the two wives he would rather keep, he readily stated, "The new-one, but the old-one [i.e., the narrator] is also my relative and I can't divorce her. What would she do? And her family would be offended." Shindi concluded, "I must [continue to] live in this misery."

The tale revolves totally around the rivalry between co- wives. Recent studies in Egypt show that polygyny has virtually disappeared from urban centers and has drastically declined in rural regions, yet residues of this once central social practice still linger in traditional communities. It is interesting to observe the modern trend towards reinterpreting *sharee'ah's* (Islamic law's) stand on polygyny. Although formal teachings permitted a man to marry as many as four wives, modernists argue against polygyny on two counts. First, polygyny was permitted under specific conditions, which have long ceased to exist, and second, polygyny represents a male's interpretation of the Koran in which God permits a male to marry as many as four wives provided that he be absolutely just and fair to all of them. These modern advocates of monogamy argue that male interpreters of the holy Koran have ignored the particular verse in which it is stated unequivocally that a husband will not be just, no matter how hard he may try.¹⁰ This Koranic statement is presently argued to be an actual negation of such a male privilege.

In congruence with the modernists' view, our present story demonstrates that the equal treatment by the husband of each of his two wives still did not prevent jealousy and hostility from developing between them.

The tale below belongs to a category of folk narratives labeled by those who tell

¹⁰ *The Glorious Koran, surah* (Chapter) no. 4, verse 129.

them *haddootah* (pl.: *hawadeet*).¹¹ It corresponds to the English term 'fairy tale', the German *Zaubermärchen* (formerly, *Märchen*), the Yoruba *alo*, and the Fon *heho*.¹²

Hawadeet-telling represents an exercise in fantasy. The intent of the narrator is to entertain. They are usually fairly long, multi-episodic, use stylized beginning and ending formulas, and are not *per se* believed in as a true, communal, historical or religious happening. Yet we find that action in the tale occurs within a fairly realistic frame of reference and surroundings (i.e., stage). It also has an element of humor, which evoked laughter repeatedly on the part of the narrator. This humor, however, seems to be esoteric and is meaningful mainly to a person with the narrator's *real* experience as a co-wife. The tale accurately reflects her hostile attitudes and negative sentiments toward her younger and more attractive competitor (co-wife) in real life.

It is interesting to note that the tale, and consequently, its narrator, rewards the younger, aggressive, and tricky, but more preferred wife. From an affective viewpoint¹³ the attitudes the tale expresses toward the older, passive and naive wife are exactly those, which cause chagrin <12> to the narrator in real life. Yet the narrator identified--or at least seemed to do so, with the younger wife, judging by observable events during the narrating process. Such an experience is typical vis-à-vis trickster tales. However the present story does not belong to that category of narratives. Although a thumb-sized human being is a recurrent theme in Egyptian and other Arab narrative lore, it is particularly associated with type 700, *Tom Thumb*, which is widely distributed in Egypt. Although "Finger-Joint" always appears in tricky roles, this character is different from the institutionalized tricksters *Goha* and *Abu-Nawwas*.¹⁴ The trickster is always a male; he plays both the tricky and the wise roles, and appears in a broader cultural context, including proverbial expressions. Both the trickster and his role are perceived to have at least symbolic reality. 'Finger-Joint,' by contrast, appears as a male or a female, as is the case in our present text. Finger-Joint's occurrence in expressive tradition is limited to a number of tales (constituting a narrative-cycle) revolving around the basic themes of type 700. A little sparrow (°Aasfoorah, i.e. °Ausfoorah), or even the smaller starling (*zraizrah*; diminutive, feminine form of *zarzourah*, i.e., a little she-starling) also appear in the broader narrative context of our tale as the main characters. In this respect the sparrow and the starling are invariably females.

An interesting belief appears in the tale: the *tulbah*, (i.e. a child that was prayed for) an abnormal, usually physically deformed child born as an answer to a prayer. As both the narrator and her husband assured me, a *tulbah*'s wishes are always answered by God, 'just because of its being a *tulbah*.' It should be born in mind, however, that the presence of this belief in the tale does not negate its non-belief nature. The **narrator's intent** was to narrate a fantasy tale, and indeed the tale exists in the broader traditions as such.

¹¹ <20> This category of fantasy tales is also referred to by a number of other "native" labels in various Arab culture areas. "*hichaayah*", "*sabhoonah*", "*hazaawi*", "*khurafaat*" are some of such recurrent labels. See "Classification of Traditions," in El-Shamy, *Folktales of Egypt*, pp. xlv-xlvi.

¹² See Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa*. (Oxford, 1970), pp. 363-373.

¹³ See Hasan El-Shamy, "Emotionskomponente," *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, vol. 3, nos. 4-5, pp. 1391-95; also see H. El-Shamy, "Sentiment Genre and Tale Typology: Meaning in Middle Eastern and African Tales," in: *al-Ma'thurat al-Sha'biyyah* (Doha, Qatar) vol. 1, no. 3, July 1986, pp. 41-52.

¹⁴ See H. El-Shamy, *Folktales*, pp. 219-221.

‘Uglit es-Subaa’ (Finger-Joint)

Once there was a woman who did not get pregnant. Finally she prayed to God: "God reward me with a girl child even if she happens to be as big as a finger-joint."

God gave her a daughter that was as big as a finger's joint. When she grew up, she took the water jar and went to fill it with water [carrying the jar on top of her head]. Of course the jar was right next to the ground [narrator laughs]. One man was passing by and saw the jar and wondered, "Is this water jar moving by itself? Or is there somebody carrying it?"

They said to him, "No, there is somebody carrying it."

The man said, "Fine, I'll follow her and I'll marry her."

They said to him, "She is only a *tulbah* [a child born as an answer to a prayer]. She is as big as a finger-joint. How are you going to get married to her?"

He said, "I'll just marry her and that's final."

He followed her to her house and sat down with her father, and said to him, "I'm requesting to be your affine [(in-law)]."

The father wondered, "Through whom?"

He said, "Through your daughter."

He [the father] said, "I have no daughters! We prayed for her so that she may only serve us. <13>

She's as big as a finger's joint. Could such a thing get married?"

He answered, "I'll marry her and that is final."

He handed the father the money [for bride wealth] and put her in his saddle bag--for he was an Arab. He put the saddle across the donkey's back and left. When he got home he reached for a window (like this one [narrator points to a window in the collector's guest room]) and put her hand on its sill. She wasn't a real woman, so he just put her on the windowsill. After he put her on the window sill, her *durrah* (co-wife) came looking for some eggs in that window—(she had ('do not blame me') a chicken which used to lay eggs on the sill of that window). She reached into that window and Finger-Joint said to her,

"Take your hand off

May your hand get cut off!

For I am your *durrah*

And I'm here to '*akeedik* (snare you, make your life bitter)."

The woman said [narrator looks around as if searching], "Where is that *durrah* [of mine]?" She looked here and there; she didn't find anybody. Finally she saw her in the niche. She said to her, "Sister, why should you snare me? You are welcome."

So they lived in the same house.

One day he [the husband] brought this one 20 "*wiggah*" [i.e., '*uqqah*, oke] of flour and that one 20 okes of flour.

Finger-Joint, the following morning, was eating her bread; she had already baked and had everything ready while the other one hadn't even started yet. (For Finger-Joint was a *tulbah*, whatever she wished for got done.) Her *durrah* came to her and asked, "What did you do!? How did it get gone so soon?"

She answered her, "I prepared the dough and said, 'Bessssss, Bessssss,

Bessss!!, and 'Keshsh keshsh keshsh!! [sounds used to call cats and dogs respectively]'. So the cats and dogs came and baked it for me." (She wanted to trick the other one.)

The other one, being so dumb, prepared the dough and called the dogs and the cats and shut them inside with the dough. [Narrator laughs] Every time they fought with each other over the dough: "Ne-y-o-o-w!! Ne-y-o-o-w!!" [i.e., growl]. Finger-Joint said to her [slyly], "Here you are, now they are baking. They are even toasting the bread for you."

The other one entered the room only to find the dough tray wiped clean: nothing in it. And the cats and the dogs were unable to move for they had their bellies so full. [Narrator laughs] Now she shrieked, "They didn't bake!"

Finger-Joint said to her, "That's because you did not invite their chief! Had you invited their chief, it would have ordered them to work. It would have hit them and made them work. Now they were disorganized without a head man." She said, "All right!"

The husband brought this one a jar of cheese and a jar of honey and brought that one a jar of cheese and a jar of honey. <14>

In the morning Finger-Joint had her door painted (like this one). The other one asked her, "What did you do to the door?"

She said to her, "I mixed the honey and cheese with my feet and splashed it on the door. That made it shiny."

The other one being so dumb did as she told her. She splashed the door and the walls. All the flies in the world landed on it [narrator laughs]. She said to her, "How come my door is not like yours? What happened?"

Finger-Joint answered, "That's because you did not mix it well. Had you mixed it well, flies wouldn't have gathered on it."

Now this one got pregnant--that is--this one got a loaded stomach and that one got a loaded stomach. Finger-Joint completed her months and delivered and the other one completed her months and delivered. After delivery Finger-Joint's son was already saying, "Mother! Father!"

The other one asked her, "Sister, your baby is [already] saying 'Mother! Father!' How come?"

She answered her, "You are not clever. Already I have prepared the oven and heated it well and put the baby in it and baked him inside.

He came out saying 'Mother! Father!'"

She said, "All right."

The other one, being so dumb, went, prepared the oven, heated it, cleaned it and inserted her baby in it. [Narrator speaks with great compassion] *yâ 'aini!* (i.e., poor little thing!). The kid turned into a piece of coal. She said [to Finger-Joint], "Where is the kid, madam?"

She answered, "Maybe you did not prepare the oven properly. What could I do for you [i.e., you are hopelessly stupid]!"

Now the husband came home and found out about what had happened to his son. He beat the first wife and ordered her, "Go to the home of your father!" He lived with Finger-Joint 'in stability and prosperity and they begot boys and girls.'

'And I was there and just returned.'

The Cultural and Cross-Cultural Matrix

The traditionality and stability of this text and its related narrative forms is demonstrated by its recurrence. It *may* be classified under Type 1387* *Woman Must do Everything Like Her Neighbors. Absurd Results*. The *Type Index* cites this minor tale type under the broader category of "The Foolish Wife and Her Husband," types 1380-1404, a secondary theme in our present text.

It also incorporates motifs¹⁵ common in the 'Thumbling' cycle of tricky acts: F535.1.1.10 "Thumbling hides in a small place"; J2401 "Fatal imitation"; F2411.6, "Imitation of jumping into fire without injury: dupe burned up" and a variation on motif K1013.22, "Burning children on promise of giving them beautiful fawn's spots." A patterned combination between <15> motifs T543.1, "Child born in answer to prayer" and T553, "Thumbling born as a result of hasty wish of parents" appears. New Motif [T553.1§, "*tulbah*: Thumbling is born in answer to prayer,"] is suggested for this narrative component which is common in Arabic lore.

Our present tale is well known in rural and nomadic communities in Egypt; six additional variants were collected recently from numerous areas including Nubia and the oasis of the Western Desert. All seven renditions were told by women and reported to have been learned from women. None of the variants recorded in Egypt is associated with solar or other objects in the physical, natural world.

The basic pattern of the plot appears as a concluding episode in a number of Egyptian renditions of type 898, *The Daughter of the Sun (The Speechless Maiden; the Puppet Bride)*, pt. IV, where a wife tricks other co-wives, or her husband's sisters into imitating her "magical" deeds. When they do, they die or cause death to their children. Type 898 is also restricted to female narrators.

A closely related rendition of our text appears in Iraq, but within the context of actual folk beliefs.¹⁶ This *belief narrative* deals with "solar mythological" characters and has an etiological function, but it lies outside the realm of formal religion. According to this belief, which the author (Saleh) assigns to Baghdad:

Pleiades (*al-Thurayya*) and Scorpio (*al-^cAaqrab*) were co-wives. Their husband was a traveling merchant. One time the husband was late in returning home and all the wives' rations were gone. Scorpio suggested that each should kill one of her children, keep one side for herself and give the remaining side to the other. Pleiades agreed to be the first. When Scorpio's turn came she returned the same side she had received from Pleiades. This was repeated until Pleiades finished her children. Upon the arrival of the husband, Scorpio took her children out of hiding, cleaned them and presented them to their father. Pleiades gulped in horror. Out of mercy, God elevated her to heaven as a number of scattered planets; this signifies her "torn up" condition. God turned the treacherous co-wife into a scorpion. Therefore a Baghdadi mother never lets her children

¹⁵ Designations of motifs are made according to Stith's Thompson, *Motif Index of Folk-Literature*. 6 vol. (Bloomington, Copenhagen, 1955-58).

¹⁶ ^cAali Haydar Saleh, "Solar Residuals in Arab Beliefs." (Arabic), *al-Turath* (Baghdad) vol. 3 pt. 5-6 p. 47.

sleep in the open without a cover, for fear of Pleiades' envious eye.

The segment dealing with cannibalism and deceiving other co-wives into killing and eating their own children, while the deceiver spares her own, appears as a component in Type 462, *The Outcast Queens and the Ogress Queen*. This tradition--which seems to be on its way to extinction--is also narrated mainly by females.

The basic plot involved in type 1387* also appears in two other narrative contexts (i.e., subtypes). In the first, which may be designated as subtype I (Type 620, *The Presents*),

An old man tells a good-hearted woman to hit him; she finally agrees. The old man disappears and in his stead she finds gold. An envious neighbor woman imitates her, with disastrous results.¹⁷

In the second (i.e., subtype II) the plot involves 'animals'; in Egypt it occurs frequently as <16> an independent story in the same repertoires of the narrators of our main text; evidently, the two narratives belong to the same cognitive system. It has also been reported from the Berber area in North Africa.¹⁸ A rendition which I collected from a young woman in 1969, is entitled "Zraizrah" (i.e., little she-starling). According to this recurrent text,

A couple pray for a child, even if she happens to be a sparrow. They beget a little sparrow which they name "Zraizrah." As soon as she was born she volunteered to guard her parents' *tamarisk* (garden); the plants grew miraculously fast. She sang constantly about her fate. A man came to take a branch from the fragrant trees. She caused him to be upside down. He put her in his pocket and took her to his home; she kept on singing about her fate. Because of her cleverness, she received wonderful gifts before she flew back to her home. The wife of her father's brother became jealous and sent her own son, the crow, to imitate Zraizrah. He misbehaved and was severely punished.

The broader narrative spectrum of type 1387*--as represented by our main text and subtype II--includes a number of highly stable components which suggest a link between our present text and an ancient Egyptian religious account, referred to as "Plutarch's Mythological History of Isis and Osiris."¹⁹

In this account:

The goddess Isis learned that the corpse of her murdered husband, Osiris, was enclosed in the trunk of a tamarisk tree, which grew miraculously in the court of the palace of the king of Byblos. Isis worked as nurse for the newborn son of the King. Isis "... put him every night into the fire in order to consume his mortal part, whilst transforming herself into a swallow; she hovered around the

¹⁷ An archival variant from Oman in southern Arabia is available (El-Shamy's personal archives); for a published southern Egyptian variant of this subtype see Ahmad Rushdi Saleh, *Funoon al-'adab ash-sha'bi (The Genres of Folk Literature)*, Cairo, 1956, pp. 48-49.

¹⁸ See R. Basset, *Contes populaires berbères*, no. 5. (Paris, 1887).

¹⁹ In E. Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians*, (London, 1904) pp. 186-194, especially pp. 190-191; see also E. Spence, *Myth and Legends of Ancient Egypt* (New York, 1927) pp. 68-69.

pillar [made of the trunk of the tamarisk tree] and bemoaned her fate." The queen spied on her, became horrified, and snatched the infant out of the fire. Isis informed her that by doing so she had deprived her son of immortality. Isis asked for and was granted the tree trunk. She took out her husband's corpse and left for Egypt.²⁰

The female sparrow, the woman, the transformation acts and the singing about one's fate; the vigil, the tamarisk tree and the winning of gifts (or a husband); the infant, the fire, the immortality (or a similar alleged positive effect of fire), and the misunderstanding of the true nature of the supernatural acts by the woman, or sparrow--all these are components in a cognitive system.²¹ They are characteristic of the ancient Egyptian account and our present tale (type 1387*), in the context of its subtypes.

In sub-Saharan Africa, tales which may be classified under type 1387*, have been reported from two widely separated groups on opposite sides of the continent. A variant of our main text was reported from the East African Horn area.²² In this Somali rendition:

A merchant has two wives, a wise one and a foolish one, and each has two sons. The husband <17> leaves for Aden on a business trip. Upon learning the news of his return, the wise wife prepares to receive him. She perfumes the house and has a clever painter decorate it. The "foolish wife," "her rival," asks her how she got the doors to be so shiny. The "wise wife" advises her that she painted them with sheep's blood. "After the foolish wife departs, the wise wife takes her own two sons, perfumes them and hides them from the eyes of her co-wife." The foolish wife tries to imitate the wise one; she paints her house with sheep's blood. When the husband visits the first he is pleased with her, her home, and the cleanliness of his children, but when he visits the "second wife," he is "hurt and saddened."

Another important variant of our tale appears as a belief narrative involving *orishas* (deities) of the traditional religion of the Yoruba of southwest Nigeria. Such accounts are exoterically referred to as "myth." A variant of this story is given in Harold Courlander's *Tales of Yoruba Gods and Heroes*.²³ Here, the two rival wives are often *orishas* (i.e., deities, gods): Oya the female *orisha* of the Niger River and Oshun the female *orisha* of the Oshun River. The husband is Shango, an ancient oba (chief) of the city of Oyo and the *orisha* of lightning and the thunderbolt:

Shango favors Oshun because she is a good cook; Oya asks Oshun to give her the secret to her good food. Oshun advises her that she has been using parts of her ears to enhance the flavor of the food and adds that was the reason she has

²⁰ Budge, *The Gods* ..., p. 190.

²¹ See H. El-Shamy, *Brother and Sister, Type 872**: *A Cognitive Behavioristic Analysis of a Middle Eastern Oikotype* (Folklore Monograph Series: Bloomington, Indiana, 1979), esp. pp. 1-5.

²² In Husain A. Shalabi's *'aqasees min as-soomaal (Little Narratives [i.e., tales] from Somalia)* Cairo, 1962.

²³ Greenwich, Conn., 1973, no. 16, p. 97-100, and p. 194; see also the variants given in William Bascom's study cited below.

been wrapping her head-cloth around her ears. Oya cuts off her own ears and cooks them along with the food offered to guests during a feast²⁴ Shango and his guests were disgusted. Oya tells him that Oshun used the same recipe, but Oshun denies it and shows her hidden ears as proof. The two female deities quarrel; in a number of variants they become rivers. Their dispute is still going on; that is why the water is turbulent at the spot where the two streams converge.²⁵

It is also worth mentioning here that the Yoruba people in Oyo believe that Oshun has the power of giving barren women the capacity to give birth. The ancient Isis performed a similar function.

The organic connection among these geographically separated texts (variants) is clearly shown in the similarities between the Iraqi and the Yoruba renditions. Both narratives represent "belief" accounts; they both deal with natural entities, which play a role in belief systems, and both have eotological functions. It is also significant that in the Iraqi rendition the *deceived* party is believed to be envious of children because she had lost her own, while in the broader context of the Yoruba rendition --where no children were involved-- the *deceived* bestows children upon women. Though oppositional, these two roles are mutually complementary and interdependent. Without recognizing its typological characteristics, William Bascom concluded that the Yoruba "myth" (i.e., belief narrative) has no equivalent in The *Type Index*, and consequently studied some aspects of its distribution in Cuba and Brazil.²⁶

Clearly the new data cited here from Arab, <18> Berber, and sub-Saharan communities reveals a much broader stage for the tale, and offers clues which suggest a closer association between the Yoruba and other groups in the northern and eastern parts of Africa. As indicated by the ancient Egyptian text, this association seems, indeed, to hark back to antiquity, when the story was to have been a part of a religious belief system. Subsequent religious and culture changes seem to have led to the transformation of the genre under which the tale may be designated, i.e., from a sacred narrative account (referred to as "myths") into an ordinary folktale. However, as in the case of a similar tale (type 613, *Truth and Falsehood*), both the ancient belief narrative and the folk account of the same narrative could have existed side-by-side from the outset.²⁷

Conclusions

The tale of "Finger Joint" (coded as type 1387*, or whatever) projects the same pattern of spatial and temporal continuity that also characterizes "The Falcon's Daughter" (coded type 705). Both narratives fluctuate between the belief and the non-belief contexts of expression. It exists on both 'sides' of the Sahara in multiple variants, which constitute a cluster of related narratives incorporating the same basic themes, plot, and

²⁴ Compare with "Maneros, whom the [ancient] Egyptians so frequently call upon in their banquet ...", being another son of the queen of Byblos who died of fright; see Budge *The Gods...*, p. 191).

²⁵ Compare the theme of Isis drying up "... the river Phaedus [which was] sending a rough and sharp air..."; see Budge, *The Gods...*, p. 191.

²⁶ <21> "Oba's Ear, a Yoruba Myth in Cuba and Brazil," in: *Research in African Literatures*, 7, no. 2 (Fall, 1976), pp. 149-165.

²⁷ See El-Shamy, *Folktales*, pp. 61-64.

psychological attitudes. These variants, however, are expressed mainly within the confines of culturally institutionalized contexts: a female-bound *haddootah* (in Egypt), a folk belief-narrative (in Iraq), or a traditional religious-narrative (in Nigeria). The appearance of the tale in one community as belonging to one genre does not exclude its occurrence in the same community as belonging to another genre.

The issues of typology addressed here lie beyond the confines of the performance by *a* narrator under the conditions provided by a narrating (performing) event. The typological qualities of the narrative seem *not* to be readily subject to the narrator's personal preferences or viewpoint. This apparent resistance to change is *not* to be taken as an indication of a Superorganic existence of the story, i.e., independent of its human bearers.²⁸

What seems to be involved here is that in an established and fairly stable text, the behavioral specifics of creativity, interpretation, personal views of the narrator, do not radically alter that text.

It is this quality of being 'established' that lends tale texts their stability throughout time. But it must be remembered that being stable and being static are not one and the same.

The two cases cited here only indicate the existence of the pattern presented above. Much more research is needed before the exact dimensions and dynamics of that pattern are ascertained.

Hasan El-Shamy
Bloomington, Indiana

²⁸ As suggested by C. Lévi-Strauss's statement that myths think themselves through man rather than man thinking himself through myth. See *Le cru et le cuit* (Paris, 1964) P. 20.