

The Folktale as Cultural Comment¹

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Ever since Ruth Benedict wrote the preface to her *Zuni Mythology*² it is popular with anthropologically and sociologically oriented folklorists to postulate studies of the interrelationship between folktales and society. Such studies usually focus on the storyteller as an exponent of a particular cultural and social environment who communicates with his audience through a tale on the basis of shared socio-cultural norms and expectations. The shared cultural background is a prerequisite for a successful storytelling event. If this background is not basically the same for narrator and listener, the tales told by the one can be expected to "mean" different things to the other. At worst, they will be incomprehensible or distasteful, at least, they will constitute an intellectual challenge to the audience: the tale has to be reinterpreted, since quite obviously the narrator's world is not the audience's. Laura Bohannon's recounter of the Tiv's struggle with the story of Hamlet admirably traces such an effort to reduce discrepancies between the features of a strange story that reflect differing cultural promises of the European narrator and the listeners' own cultural "truth".³ E. Hammel's documentation of the "Americanization" of the actors and acts in *The Three Bears* is another such case, although on a less personal level, i.e., without tracing the transformations to particular narrators and particular audiences.⁴

This offshoot of the Culture and Personality approach in Folklore prompted such a beautiful study as Linda Dégh's account of Szekler

1. An earlier draft of this paper was read at the 7th Annual Meeting of the Middle East Studies Association of North America, Milwaukee 1973.

2. Ruth Benedict, *Zuni Mythology*. New York 1935.

3. Laura Bohannon, Shakespeare in the Bush. In: *Natural History Magazine*, August-September 1966.

4. Eugene A. Hammel, The Myth of Structural Analysis: Levi-Strauss and the Three Bears. Addison-Wesley Module in Anthropology, Module 25, 1972, pp. 1-29.

storytelling,⁵ and is widely acclaimed generally, but did not win many adherents. To the serious folklorist it bears one big hardship: to be faithful to the approach the analyst must not only collect the tales down to minute details, plus some general information about the narrator, as usual, but must acquire an intimate knowledge of the cultural background of which the tale, the narrator, and the audience are part of, and also must document the narrator's personality far beyond the framework of the usual age-occupation-status note. Without knowledge of the culture in which the storytelling event is embedded, no valid statement about the tale can be made. To acquire this postulated intimacy with a culture and a narrator, however, takes more time than one can reasonably hope to be able to spend in the field. (Discouragingly enough, ten years of contact with the Szekler community stand behind the wealth of information that let Linda Dégh write her classic).

With a little twist in emphasis, however, the same constellation of narrator-tale-audience all formed by one culture can be used as a shortcut to learn something about that culture: namely, if we treat the tale not merely as the product of a culture, but as a comment on some features of that culture, given by an exponent of the same culture. This implies that a narrator can not be treated as an unreflective adherent of his culture,—culture's instrument to shape a tale, as it were,—but one who recognizes points of conflicts, morals, problems, etc., within his culture and seeks to express them through his tales. He conveys his evaluation of the world around him to his audience, in fact to anyone who cares to listen, including the folklorist.

Like the statements in a projective test, evaluative statements in a tale are not conscious efforts by a narrator. Usually a narrator does not try to say something veiled in an innocent tale, that otherwise he could not say—as it is true for certain political tales or political jokes—but makes these statements spontaneous and unaware of their quality as comments. The narrator does not have to identify himself with the opinions somebody has in a tale, he does not have to carry the responsibility for the sentiments expressed, and therefore can talk about everything less inhibited than under different circumstances. For example, the middle aged, male Middle-eastern narrator can let the hero in his tale describe a beautiful lady in detail from head to toe, while he never would dream of doing so in public otherwise. Advisers to a chief might—in the tales of a particular narrator—be stereotyped as dumb, conspiratory villains

5. Linda Dégh, *Folktales and Society*. Bloomington-London 1969.

yet the narrator himself and his fellows actually display nothing but respect and reverence for such advisers in their behavior. Challenged in the relaxed privacy of a long standard, trusting relationship, they will, however, well admit their actual distaste for such advisers, quite in accordance with the tales.

The assumption behind this approach is that every narrator selects from a large number of tales he has heard over the years only those which appeal and are meaningful to himself and his audience. He will not select them at random, but according to certain personal inclinations, philosophical or moral principles, emotional dispositions, and economic circumstances that affect him and his listeners. Whatever these socio-psychological factors are in every single case—we are not concerned with their analysis here—they will motivate a narrator to select certain tales and disregard others, and they will prompt him to shape the tales he retains in certain ways. Thus, both the repertory and creatively manipulated details within each tale will exhibit the same concerns, themes, and messages. Analyzing the prevalent themes in a particular narrator's active repertory on the one hand, and treating idiosyncratic details in the execution of the tales as opinions, validations or explanations of the topics the narrator seems particularly concerned with on the other hand, will give us an insight into the meaning of certain cultural features without ever having asked a single direct question of the people or unwittingly distorted testimony by phrasing it in concepts alien to the indigenous culture.

The method to this approach is simple enough: 1. The analyst has to elicit the complete active repertory of a narrator, with an indication of the narrator's favorites. 2. The analyst has to record all statements—verbal and non-verbal—the narrator makes about any feature in his tale while he is narrating. These will tell whether the narrator takes one character more serious than the other, whether he is moved by the plot or gets emotionally involved with particular episodes, and what kind of behavior he judges as "bad" and "good" in his characters. 3. The reactions of the audience to the tales have to be watched, to find out to what extent the audience agrees with the narrator's interpretations and comments. 4. Repertory and individual tales have to be analyzed in terms of dominant and recurrent themes that are important to the narrator. 5. As an option, different versions of the tales, told by other members of the same community, can be documented and compared with the original informant's version. This comparison can reveal the features the narrator has shaped creatively and demonstrate more clearly

the informant's particular emphasis. (It also will enable the analyst to identify any possible purely idiosyncratic themes or emphases, that is such that might not be shared anyone else in that community. It is hard to imagine such a case, however). 6. The same procedure has to be repeated with another, and yet another informant from the same cultural environment. If the assumption to this approach is valid, then it has to be expected that every informant will reveal additional, different aspects or themes in the culture or will at least comment on them differently. The more such information can be gathered, the more different viewpoints can be asserted, and the better are the chances for assessing a particular culture with his method.

From this analysis should emerge a coherent pattern of statements about some features in the world of one or more exponents of a particular culture. Statements that are particular to a person, i.e., more or less idiosyncratic, but nevertheless of general validity, since their messages have been understood and accepted by the audience. If the listeners could not agree with these messages, they would correct them or would reject the tale altogether, just as the Tiv rejected Hamlet.

To illustrate my point, I will draw on material I have collected during a three year anthropological field research in an Iranian tribe.⁶ There, I was able to establish a collection of over 60 tales from a few informants in one community, and this, together with the intimate knowledge of these storytellers' personal circumstances and the culture in general, makes it possible to test the method outlined above. I shall select two narrators, analyze their tales in the way outlined above and then, as a check on the validity of the result of the analysis, shall try to measure the information revealed in the tales against my knowledge of the narrators' personal situation in the community and statements about those cultural features discussed in the analysis that I have gathered otherwise during my years of close contact with these people.

The analysis is based on the tales of two informants. These particular informants were selected because both are in their way extreme exponents of their culture and likely to make radical, contrasting, and thus easily recognizable statements about the same features in their own culture. The two topics that for both emerged as of special interest are women and servants. In both cases the audience usually consisted of about three to ten people. All tales were told in the evenings in a relaxed,

6. The research was done in 1965-66 and 1969-71, and was supported by grants from the Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the Social Science Research Council, and the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

cordial atmosphere. None of the messages quoted here have been rejected or modified by any of the listeners present, or any of the few local people who subsequently listened to the tales on the tapes. To safeguard the identity of the informants, I use the fictitious names of Ahmad and Afsane.

Ahmad, an elderly, rather poor man, is an enthusiastic storyteller. There are no professional narrators in this community, but there are some that have gained a certain reputation as being "good" at it, and Ahmad is one of them. His active repertory is not very big, but his five favorite stories are very long. (THE MARE WITH FORTY COLTS, AYAZ, ALI MARAK, SADAT O SEID, ESAPAHLOUN.⁷) He tells only "grand" stories with elaborate plots about kings, court intrigues, battles, and dragons, and introduces and ends them with formal phrases heard by professional storytellers and on the radio. The plots of his tales are the familiar lot of the hero who comes to fame and fortune after mastering his adventures. Court and city are the prevalent localities, and these features have little, if anything, to do with his tribal-peasant but they do give him the opportunity to dwell on his most favorite theme: the servant.

The picture of the ideal servant, his indispensability for any great man as adviser, nurse, and guard, the vulnerability of his position as a subject of a rich and powerful man on whom he is totally dependent, the hardships he has to endure through the misuse of power by his lord and from envious co-servants, is developed by Ahmad whenever the slightest opportunity arises in his tales. In some cases, this servant motif propels and integrates the whole story. In ALI MARAK, e.g., the hero's death and misfortune to a number of people as a revenge for these people's mistreatment of their servant, who is the hero's brother. This same string of misdeeds, in the version of another informant, is not at all connected to any previous sufferings of a servant, but fabricated into a trickster-tale. In ESAPAHLOUN, Esaphaloun's servant is the center of the story, while the version of another informant is built around Isa and his love as the main actors, and Isa's servant is only a minor figure in the scheme.

Ahmad's servant-heroes are "good": morally superior, unselfish, honest, and loyal, even if wronged by a master. Clearly, this is Ahmad's ideal type of a servant, a stereotype he cherishes. However, the obvious satisfaction—in intonation, gesture and exclamations even more so than in words—he draws from this touching portrait of the servant as a great

7. For tale types and motifs see notes at the end of the article.

man, is balanced by the highly emotional involvement in Ali Marak's revenge-actions. There, for once, the greedy, cheating, cruel masters, one after the other, get what they deserve—punishment for the haughty mistreatment of their poor subjects.

The other kind of emotional climax in Ahmad's narrations lies in the final rehabilitation and subsequent honoring of a formerly mistreated servant by his master. The apologies of a master and the servant's triumph over intriguing enemies are depicted with utmost affection and emotional involvement by Ahmad, who otherwise tends to take his characters rather lightly and to make fun of their weaknesses.

Getting compensated for one's services is another detail in the servant theme. In *SADAT AND SEID* for example, the bath attendant is tipped an incredibly noble "100 toman" by the king's son who uses the bath—a detail absolutely irrelevant to the plot of the story. The hero in *ESAPAHLOUN* enlists the helpful cooperation of an old woman by showing her his money, thus conveying to her that an association with him would, indeed, be profitable for her. Such details are not used by other informants in tales.

In Ahmad's tales, one very easily can find himself in the role of a servant. Wherever a rich and powerful man comes in close contact with a hungry have-nothing, the poor assumes servant duties willingly and almost automatically. In *ESAPAHLOUN*, for example, the poor hunter-hero comes to a richly furnished tent in the mountains whose owner is nowhere to be seen. The hero nevertheless at once makes himself useful, brews tea, cooks dinner, and cares for the master's horse without ever being asked to do so. This feature comes up also in other tales told by different informants.

Seen as comment on Ahmad's world, all these statements suggest that servants are an important necessity to rich and noble people; that they are poor, honest, and loyal, yet mistrusted unjustly and mistreated frequently; that to be poor is to be dependent, and to be dependent meant to have to pledge one's loyalty and obedience to where the bread comes from, never mind the hardship. Ahmad's expression for "to become a servant" or "to be in somebody's service" is a term that literally meant: "to make (oneself) miserable"—a sweeping value judgment and comment on the status of a servant. For a servant, Ahmad says, there is only the hope, that through some enlightenment the master will at one time recognize the value of his dedicated subject. With heartfelt joy and satisfaction he remarks about the faithful old servant at the end of *ESAPAHLOUN* that Isa, the master, "took the old man with him and

cared for him personally”.

Ahmad, thus, does not despair. He advocates skills and an honorable vocation as a source of pride, even if the income of that vocation is very small indeed. The poor servants in his stories all bear their lot with great dignity and the self-assurance of just and indispensable men, no matter how great their particular predicament is at the moment. Ahmad comments on the vocation of every single one of his paupers: be it, for example, a thistle collector (SADAT), hunter (ESAPAHLOUN), shepherd (AYAZ), or farmhand (ALI MARAK), he sees it as respectable, indispensable and morally meritorious work. The only group of miserable paupers whose skills (meddling in other people's affairs) lack this dignity are old women. But women are a different problem altogether for Ahmad, and his second favorite theme.

In his tales, there are only two kinds of women: “good” women, and “bad” ones, both stereotyped and of different significance for the plot. A “good” woman to Ahmad is one who is completely submissive to the authority of her father or husband, never speaks up, never airs any opinion, and has no mind or will of her own. In addition, she must be modest, kind, and hard working. “Good” women function mostly as rewards for the hero but play no important part in the plots. “Bad” women, on the other hand, are consequential for the progress of the story. They deliberately incite heroes with their beauty, and subsequently send them away to master dangerous adventures, or bring misfortune upon their lovers. They are characterized as strong-willed persons who take matters in their own hands, and—as old women—as slanderous and conspiratory.

Ahmad's feelings towards women are expressed straightforwardly: He ridicules and curses the ugly, despicable old women, and he makes fun of the “good” girls, if he says anything about them at all. In SADAT AND SEID, for example, the hero wants to postpone his marriage with the king's (“good”) daughter because he sees more troublesome adventures ahead. The king, trying to persuade him to take the girl with him nevertheless, counters his apprehension by saying: “And if I never should see you and her again, as long as you took her along right now, I couldn't care less!” As for bad women, Ahmad is satisfied only when he describes their ultimate and just bad fate: Samanbar (in SADAT AND SEID) the beautiful lady who lives all by herself in a castle and deprives legions of enthralled young men cleverly of their money, finally is overpowered by the hero, turned into a donkey and set loose with a herd of male donkeys as punishment. The adulterous mother of Sadat and Seid who

caused her sons arduous journey (but also their successes, a fact completely ignored by Ahmad) finally is rejected by her sons, a lamentable fate indeed, Ahmad says. The only beautiful and powerful, yet "good" women Ahmad can agree to are the fairies. They can act independent from a male authority and still never bring misfortune.

Seen as comments, Ahmad's treatment of women suggests a deep rift between the men's and women's world. Not only are women seen as subservient and in a dependency position from the men, but this is seen as good, the satisfactory state of affairs while an outgoing, outspoken woman threatens the welfare of everybody. A man has to judge a woman against the postulates of submission, kindness, and industriousness—only to find her either dull or immoral. To trust a woman brings hardship, and he is a fool who delivers himself to the mercy of a woman. Pressed to reveal a powerful secret to his wife, Sadat finally gives in "although you are only a woman", (Ahmad lets Sadat say) only to find himself swindled out of all possessions by his wife the next moment.

Women are necessary, but evil, vain, and conspiratory, if they do not fade into the woodwork conveniently. The exception—the fairies—are beyond reach: among mortal women, Ahmad comments, no fairy can be found.

At this point let us transcend the analysis by probing deeper into Ahmad's own life and his position in his culture. Let us keep in mind that whatever was said so far about Ahmad's comments in his tales, was induced solely on the basis of the information provided in these tales. Not a single question was asked, no theory used to interpret his tales.

Ahmad is about fifty years old, an "old man" by local standards, and illiterate. Small, thin, wiry, with a faunic temperament, he is a well known, jesterlike figure in his community. As a child, he was abducted from a village several dozen miles away, and had been brought up in the local community, without any relatives, as a servant. Since many years, he is the bath keeper in the village and supervises the serving of food at most feasts in the homes of rich villagers. He is counted as a member of the local endogamous barber-class which is very low in status, and is married to a woman of the same class. Although he has almost no land and is poor by local standards, his indispensability as servant and bath keeper, and his skills in his profession secure him a fair standing in the village, and are a source of pride for him personally. He has seven children and a daughter-in-law whose verbal fights with his wife are famous in the village. His wife has the reputation of having a sharp tongue and one of his daughters stubbornly and outspokenly refuses to

marry, much to the dismay of Ahmad, who as a father is responsible for the appropriate and timely marriage of his daughters. In Ahmad's eyes his womanfolk does give him a hard time at home. However, never in my years of his acquaintance did I observe him getting emotional about women. Usually he bears his domestic hardships with humour and counters them with a nonchalant, resigned general disapproval of the female sex.

Both pet subjects in Ahmad's tale, then, the servant and women, are of immediate relevance to his own situation. As a servant since childhood, although he never talks about this time, not even when questioned about it, he must have endured numerous hardships and deprivations—physical and emotional ones, and by intimately participating in the servants' world he learned a good deal about how masters in general should, and do behave towards their servants, and how servants should and do relate to them in a variety of circumstances. He talks a lot about servants in his tales because he has to say a lot about them. But what he has to say he cannot say in public. There are no accepted channels through which he—or any other servant—could air his opinion about the whole matter, neither about the positive nor the negative sides of it. In his tales, however, hidden behind colorful characters, Ahmad enacts his own existential joys and anxieties and at the same time gives us an excellent account of what it means to be a servant in his society.

Similarly, women constitute a problem in his world. Measured against his culture's ideal of a woman, and against the ideal of a household head's relationship with the women in his house, Ahmad's house falls short of even moderately good performance. The discrepancy between "should" and "is" is undisputable, and Ahmad in his tales blames the women for it. He is cheated of his role of a strong master in his house, and although in daily behavior he still musters dignity, restraint and humour in carrying that burden, in his tales he tells the world how disobedient, obnoxious women act and what they are worth: disregard and punishment. His audience agrees: it likes the stories.

As about the topic of the servant, Ahmad would be much embarrassed to talk about the topic of women openly and directly. Almost certainly, however, he would not make harsh and emotional statements about them when asked. What is true for him, is true for men in general: what they say about women when questioned is quite different from how they act towards them—which is hard to observe since most of the interaction takes place in the privacy of their homes,—and what they unwittingly reveal of their attitude towards them in the tales.

Afsane is the opposite of Ahmad in about every respect. She is a young woman of tribal nobility, a teacher, married to a teacher and has two children. She knows many tales and likes to hear and learn more, but she rarely tells any, i.e., she is not a storyteller like Ahmad. Her occasional audience consists of her family and some neighbors, but most of her narrating was stimulated by my interest. Her active repertory nevertheless is settled, and although she continually learns more tales, it is easy to predict which ones she will add to the pool of "her" stories. The repertory includes about fifteen tales and varies from very short explanatory tales like "How the Lizard was made" to the involved and complex stories of Ahmad's kind. All of them, especially her ten favorites, share one quality: either in plot or at least details, they are concerned with women.

Like Ahmad, she too operates with the traditional stereotype of the "bad" versus the "good" woman in her tales. The condemnation of a bad, i.e., unfaithful, treacherous, wasteful or disobedient woman is as profound as Ahmad's: she is turned into a turtle (THE TURTLE), cut to pieces (THE LIZARD), divorced (THE BIRD) or lynched (KELAHMAD). "Good" girls, however, don't fare much better. They are married off in barter arrangements (SAINT NOAH), driven to despair by stepmothers and aunts (THE BIRD, XANZADEH), eaten by a lion (THE SHAH'S SON), assaulted by a slave (THE SNAKE), or commit suicide to escape an unbearable situation (THE BIRD).⁷ The only good woman who does not end pitifully and still is regarded highly by everybody is the fairy, who, however, is not spared the frustration of seeing her stubborn husband disregard her advice and get into trouble. In the end it is even she who has to save him. The only time in the stories when a strong willed, courageous woman is not punished or ostracized, is in the story of HASSAN SHIRKOSH, and here the problem is dealt with humour. A strong willed princess chooses a supposed hero as a husband for herself—it is understood that this is wrong: a girl has to let her father arrange a husband for her—only to find out that he actually is a coward. Ashamed of that self inflicted, embarrassing situation, she carries out all the braveries her father asks of her dumb husband herself. Although quite capable of manly and heroic deeds, she must perform them secretly, because as a woman, she has to appear as the one who depends on her husband and is weak and submissive. She succeeds in her desperate efforts and saves her husband's reputation. He

7. For tale type and motifs see notes at the end of the article.

is made the king and thereby is spared any further challenges at his physical prowess.

Afsane's tales analyzed as comments reveal women as suppressed creatures who have no say and who have to conceal their emotions, abilities and accomplishments. If they are successful at that, they are "good" yet not necessarily happy. Unlike Ahmad, who simply forgets about the good women, Afsane remarks that no matter how good a woman is, she is not spared hardships or even death. Not even a fairy is an exception. When in *THE WOLF GIRL AND THE FAIRY*,⁷ the hero who had disregarded his fairywife's advice is subsequently rescued by her, Afsane highly emotionally makes the fairy exclaim in frustration: "Have I not told you not to do that!" A woman, no matter how "good" she is, has to expect to be disregarded by men, although for well-being and status she is dependent on them. In *HASSAN THE LION-KILLER*⁷ Afsane leaves no doubt that if the hero is found a coward and pretender, his wife, although a princess, will be unmercifully ridiculed with him, the more so since she had behaved badly by choosing him herself. She has to carry out all the braveries in order not to let her husband lose face in the community, because she would fall with him. When in the end saved from imminent embarrassment, she puts up with her dumb and clumsy master for good, Afsane has no comment: neither the princess nor Afsane can see any other satisfactory end. With a similar matter-of factness, which in itself is a kind of comment, the suicide of the innocent girl (in *THE BIRD*) who despairs because of her stepmother's unjustified accusations and naggings is described. For somebody with such problems, there are no other ways to cope with them. (This last tale is of interest also because Afsane incorporated it into her repertory during my presence. It was told first by a visitor (a woman), and Afsane accepted it immediately and even begged the hesitant woman to tell it to me too.)

About bad women, Afsane thinks like Ahmad. There are no regrets on her part when the adulteress is lynched, or a woman is punished otherwise for vainness, disobedience or some independent action. A woman must not be bad, Afsane says, although she is a little less sure about how passive a woman has to be to be "good". Afsane's point, however, is that neither can win.

The other theme to be discussed in Afsane's tale, the servants, are of much less importance. Poverty as such is rarely mentioned in her tales

7. For tale type and motifs see notes at the end of the article.

and never elaborated, and the connection between poverty and dependency from centers of wealth and power—a connection very obvious in Ahmad's tales—is drawn only once when a formerly rich man is swindled of his money and becomes the servant of his tormenter, (only to be rescued soon, however). Money as such is not of importance and the necessities of life are taken for granted. Afsane neither describes poverty nor does she comment on how one might feel who is poor. Servants do occur in her tales, but stay on the fringe of the action. The exception is a "black slave" in *THE SNAKE*, who carries the very negative image of a molestor and is duly killed by the hero. In *HASSAN THE LION-KILLER*, it is the servants around the princess who are most likely to find out about the princess' double-life since they are in intimate contact with her all the time. As such, they are potentially dangerous, especially if one has something to hide. Otherwise the services of servants are taken for granted with remarks like "they put food in front of him" (*HASSAN THE LION-KILLER*), or "they took the man to the King" (*THE SNAKE*), but not further discussed.

At this point again let us try to measure this analysis against the narrator's own position in her world and informations about her culture gathered elsewhere.

As the daughter of an important and influential man in the tribal area, Afsane grew up in the luxury of a tribal chief's court. Her family is wealthy and her own income as a teacher allows her to live up to her status in terms of dress, jewelry, servants, and travel. Personally, she is a highly regarded teacher and her dignified bearing in public and proper shyness, kindness and retiring politeness give her a superb standing in her community. This image she presents to the world stands in contrast to her character in many ways. Privately, her interests are intellectual. She debates often with the Mulla (a relative of hers) about religious problems, with the school inspector (another relative) about educational affairs, and is about the only woman in her community who reads books and papers regularly and listens to cultural broadcasts on the radio. She is aggressively outspoken when challenged and is somewhat famous among relatives and close neighbors for her fierce fights and eloquent arguments with her husband, who, although proud of her professional success, would rather see her conform to the traditional picture of the wife as a housekeeper and amiable servant of himself and the children. Such arguments are most likely to occur when once again one of the various babysitter-housekeeper arrangements that Afsane has to organize to keep her household working during her absence, proved to be in-

sufficient and children or husband had to suffer it. Occasionally, reproaches of this kind are also made by neighbors who claim that her children and her husband were neglected. At the same time, however, she is envied by the younger women, especially her students and former students for her access to the world and to a salary that makes her "dealthy" and thus independent from a father's or husband's pocket.

Afsane accuses her husband generally of being stubborn and of disregarding her advice and opinion in matters of importance to the family. Her husband, who has no immediate relatives in this community, would like to move elsewhere, but she resists because of the job she has here and because she has gained an independence here that she feels she would not enjoy in a community where she is a stranger. For the sake of the same independence she resists to lodge near her mother's, which on the one hand would be convenient because her mother could take care of her children, but on the other hand would put her under much closer supervision by her mother.

Like most women, Afsane rarely ever talks about her problems or those of women in general. If a woman's problems become known than only as particular cases: poor old widow X is not given any support by her sons; Poor Y ran away from her husband because he had beaten her again; Poor Z is getting a co-wife; Poor So- and So's husband is in town working and leaves her and the children alone all winter. Lately, an additional lament can be heard: poor So- and So is pregnant again. . . . Any of these situations is seen as hopeless for the woman: to sue irresponsible sons is costly and next to impossible for an illiterate, resourceless old woman; to get a divorce for a woman means to lose her children (they stay with the father); to resent the husband's second marriage, although perfectly legal, is unwise, because the husband will turn against her; etc. Statements like these cannot be heard in public, not even jokingly. The only way to talk about them is in heart-to heart gossip. However, if nothing else, a grim record of suicides and suicide attempts by women as opposed to virtually none among men, as well as headaches, migraines, and other tension-related maladies as common complaints almost exclusively by women, point to the vulnerable and conflict-ridden position many women find themselves in. The only way out is seen in education, and it is characteristic that this community has five women teachers (out of sixteen teachers altogether). Even this road to independence is not without thorns, however, as Afsane's case demonstrates. Bitter remarks of frustration can be heard by girls who have some school and see their abilities and knowledge wasted in their role as a traditional

mother and housewife. The most important benefit educators promise girls they will receive from schooling is that they would become “better mothers, who would know how to keep a clean house”, a promise disputed hotly by many who claim that education visibly alienates their daughters from these virtues, and makes them hope for a grand, salaried future, that, for most of them, never comes.

In her tales then, no matter what the plot is, Afsane always tries to explore a woman’s world and comments on the obviously painful dispute between the ingrained popular stereotype of a woman and her proper place in that culture, and the women themselves who find it increasingly hard to live the life of negation wanted of them.

In regard to servants, Afsane’s picture simply complements Ahmad’s. The differences in both reflect the difference between the one narrator, who is a servant, and the other, who employs them. Both points of view are “real” in the sense of describing an attitude towards the same social phenomenon that governs interactions between servants and masters in that culture.

Additional informants would reveal additional statements about these topics. The purpose of this paper was not to exhaust these themes, however, but to demonstrate that, in fact, tales a narrator likes to tell very likely are loaded with features and remarks that only are the narrator’s very own but also reflective of his view of his and his audience’s world, and to show that they can be used to elicit statements about features in that culture that otherwise are not made readily to a nosy field-worker.

TALE TYPES AND MOTIFS¹

THE MARE WITH FORTY COLTS. *Type:* Story includes variants of Types 550, Search For the Golden Bird; 551, The Sons on a Quest for a Wonderful Remedy for their Father.

Motifs: P251.6.1, Three brothers. H1242, Youngest brother alone succeeds on quest. K935, Magic earth. B211.3, Speaking horse. B401, Helpful horse. B181, Magic horse. B11.7.1, Dragon controls water-supply. H333.3.1, Killing dragon before princess is sacrificed. D1355.23, Love-producing magic feather. T24.2.1, Fainting away for love. F234.1.15.2, Fairy as dove. F387, Fairy captured. T135.1, Marriage formula: "You are mine and I am yours". H133.3.1, Quest for marvelous apple. H133.5, Quest for marvelous flower. H1331.1, Quest for marvelous bird. G610.3, Stealing from ogre as task. H982, Animals help man perform task. D332, Transformation: equine animal to person. H1331.4, Quest for marvelous horse. K713, Deception into allowing oneself to be fettered (here: to be bridled). D1018, Magic milk of animal. D2144.4, Burning by magic. H94, Identification by ring. D1505, Magic object cures blindness. J155.4, Wife as adviser. S11.3.7, Father orders son to be assassinated. K537.1, Poisoned food fed to animal instead of to intended victim. K926, Victim pushed into well. Q36, Reward for repentance. 271.5, Formalistic number: seven. 271.12, Formalistic number: forty.

AYAZ. *Motifs:* K1812.1, Incognito king helped by humble man. P361, Faithful servant. P367, Clever servant. H561.5, King and clever minister. K2250, Treacherous servants. P111, Banished minister found indispensable and recalled. N112, Bad luck personified. H541, Riddle propounded with penalty for failure. B741.2, Neighing of stallion in Assyria impregnates mares in Egypt.

ALI PAZANAK AND ALI MARK. *Type:* Parts of the story correspond to Types 1003, Plowing. 1007, Other Means of Killing and Maiming Livestock. 1012, Cleaning the Children.

Motifs: D13.2.1, Ram carries off girl. B604.1, Marriage to snake. B631.8, Human offspring of marriage of person and snake. R111.1.5, Rescue of Woman from snake-husband. L31, Youngest brother helps elder. W152.12, Stingy man and his servants. J1114.1, Man deceived by his hireling. J2516.0.1, Revenge by literally misconstruing order. K1461., Caring for the child. Child killed. K958, Murder by drowning.

SADAT AND SEID. *Type:* Various parts in the story correspond to Types: 567, The Magic Bird-heart 567A, The Magic Bird-heart and the Separated Brothers.

Motifs: B103.2.1, Treasure-laying bird. D1478, Magic object provides light. J2093, Treasure sold for trifle. K2249.4, Treacherous merchant. H971.1, Tasks performed with help of old woman. K2213, Treacherous wife. P251.5, Two Brothers. N244, Overheard (human) conversation. D876, Magic treasure animal killed. B113, Treasure producing parts of bird. D1015, Magic internal organs of animal. D10154.4.1, Magic bird liver. R213, Escape from home. N772, Parting at crossroad to go on adventures. H71.2, Bird indicates election of king.

1. Types according to Aarne-Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale*. Helsinki 1961. Motifs according to Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*. Bloomington 1955.

T75.0.1, Suitors ill treated. K1210, Humiliated lovers. T24.2.3, Fainting away from seeing an extraordinary beauty. T45, Lover buys admission to woman's room. T311, Woman averse to marriage. D861.5, Magic object stolen by hero's wife. (Here: Hero's mistress). D832, Magic object acquired by acting as umpire for fighting heirs. D830, Magic object acquired by trickery. P242, Children punished for father's sins. D1520.19, Magic transportation by carpet. D1472.1.22, Magic bag supplies food (here: and other things). D1361.42, Magic object renders invisible. K1349.10, Admission to woman's room by means (of cap) of invisibility. T135.1, Marriage formula: "You are mine and I am yours." K2213.4, Betrayal of husband's secret by his wife. T320, Escape from undesired lover. F234.1.15.2, Fairy as dove. F345, Fairies instruct mortals. D153.29, Magic leaf (here: bark) bears person aloft. D1500.1.4.2, Magic healing leaves. D953, Magic twig. N512, Treasure in underground chamber. D2161.3.8, Insanity magically cured. H346, Princess given to man who can heal her. T351, Sword of chastity. D2161.3.1, Blindness magically cured. H11.1, Recognition by telling life history. Q523, Humiliating penance. Q584.2, Transformation of a man (here: woman) to animal as fitting punishment. D132.1, Transformation of a man to ass. D1880, Magic rejuvenation.

ESAPAHLOUN. *Motifs*: T104.1 Rejected suitor wages war. P361, Faithful servant. R169.5, Hero rescued by servant. R211, Escape from prison. R225, Elopement. N338, Death as result of mistaken identity: wrong person killed. D1882.1, Rejuvenation by Saint.

THE TURTLE. *Motifs*: Q331.2, Vanity punished. Q584.2, Transformation of a man (here: woman) to animal as fitting punishment. D192, Transformation man (here: woman) to tortoise. (A2148, Creation of turtle).

THE LIZARD. *Motifs*: K2213, Treacherous wife. S111, Murder by poisoning. Q429.3, Cutting into pieces as punishment. (A2148, Creation of lizard).

THE BIRD. *Motifs*: L55.1, Abused stepdaughter. A1599.9, Suicide by strangling. E613, Reincarnation as bird. B211.3, Speaking bird.

KELAHMAD. *Type*: Variant of Type 1358C, Trickster Discovers Adultery, Food goes to Husband Instead of Paramour. Second part of the story is a variant of Type 1380, The Faithless Wife.

Motifs: T230, Faithlessness in Marriage. K1500, Deception connected with adultery. K1514, Adulteress gets rid of husband while she entertains lover. P297, Nephew. J125.2, Adulteress betrayed by child. K1549.8, Woman cooks food for paramour. K1571, trickster discovers adultery: food goes to husband instead of paramour. K1553, Husband (here: husband's nephew) feigns blindness and avenges himself on his (uncle's) wife and her paramour. Q411.0.1.1, Adulterer killed. Q241, Adultery punished.

SAINT NOAH. *Motifs*: P234, Father and daughter. K20341, King's daughter secretly pledged to many to win their aid. N817.0.1, God as helper. D332.1, Transformation: ass to person. D341, transformation: dog to person. A1372.7, Origin of pleasant and unpleasant women.

XANZADE AND BAGZADE. *Type*: 403, The Black and The White Bride.

Motifs: K2212 Treacherous Sister. F234.1.15.2, Fairy as dove. T584.0.4, Angels assist childbirth. F312.1, Fairies bestow supernatural gifts at birth of child. D2102, Gold and silver magically produced. F343.12, Fairy gives ring. T133, Travel to Wedding. K1911, The substitute bride. R131.2.1 Princess rescued from drowning. Q40, Kindness rewarded. D2161.3.1, Blindness magically cured. K1816.9, Disguise as peasant. H94.2, Identification by ring baked in bread. Q416.2, Dragging to death by horse.

THE SHAH'S SON. *Type*: Second half of the story is a variant of Type

403A, The Black and the White Bride.

Motifs: P893, Sign hung out informing brothers (here: father) whether has born boy or girl. S322.1 Father casts daughter forth. S144, Abandonment in desert. B522.4, Eagle carries off condemned child. B535.0.5, Abandoned prince (here: princess) grows up in eagle's nest. D1962.2, Magic sleep by lousing. R10.1, Maiden abducted. L62, Marriage of lowly heroine to prince. K2252, Treacherous maid-servant. K1843.4, Maid impersonates wife. B17.1, Hostile beast. K572, Escape from captors by means of flattery. E631.03, Plant from blood of slain person. D1316.5, Magic speaking reed betrays secret. Q416.1, trampling to death by horses.

THE SNAKE. *Motifs:* K2251, Treacherous slave. Q244.1, Punishment for attempted rape. P175, Slave killed. B244.1, King of snakes. Q53, Reward for rescue. D1815.2, Magic knowledge of animal's language. B134.1, Dog betrays woman's infidelity.

THE WOLF-GIRL AND THE FAIRY. *Type:* 315A I, II, The Cannibal Sister; 508 The Bride won in a Tournament.

Motifs: J154, Wise words or dying father. M356.3, prophecy: unborn child to bring evil upon land. P251.4, Brothers scorn brother's wise counsel. L10, Victorious youngest son. H1462, Vigil for dead father. D855.1, Magic object acquired as reward for vigil. B587.1, Magic horse wins jumping contest for man. F234.2.5, Fairy beautiful young woman. M391, Fulfillment of prophecy. G33, Child born as cannibal. M340.5, Prediction of danger. N815, Fairy as helper. F398, Hair burned to summon fairy. K2241, Treacherous innkeeper. K92, Gambling contest won by deception. N9.1, Gambler losing everything. K1837.5, Wife disguises as man and outwits landlord of inn when he tries same tricks he has played on her husband to get all his goods. K2212, treacherous sister. K551, respite from death granted until particular act is performed.

HASSAN THE LION KILLIER. *Type:* Variant of Type 1640, The Brave Tailor.

Motifs: L113.1.4, Shepherd as hero. L101, Lowly hero marries princess. K1950, Sham prowess, K1953, Sham brave man. H1174.2, Overcoming dragon as task. B11.11.7, Woman as dragon slayer. J1762, Stupid husband. K1951.2.1, Run-away calvary hero tears out limbs of dead trees.

SUMMARY

The interrelationship between tales and storytellers is a popular theme in folklore and can be approached from various angles. This article is based on the hypothesis that storytellers use tales to comment on certain cultural features, especially those that are of relevance to them personally. While narrating their tales, narrators evaluate these features and interpret them to their audience, who, by approving or disapproving parts of the tales, accepts and verifies or rejects the messages the narrator contained in them. It is argued that this hypothesis can be utilized to analyze tales with the purpose to extract evaluative opinions and comments about certain cultural features made by exponents of that same culture, without using categories potentially alien to the culture studied and without having to ask questions that might prove to be sensitive or annoying. The method to this kind of analysis is described in several steps. (Eliciting the complete active repertory and favorite tales of a narrator; Recording a narrator's evaluative statements about the tales; Recording the audience's reaction to the narrator's interpretation of the tales and his messages; Analyzing repertory and single tales in terms of dominant and recurrent themes; Comparison of the tales with versions told by other narrators in the same community). Repeated with the tales of other informants, the procedure will reveal different areas of concern in the culture, as well as how the people deal with these concerns, and what they think about their problems. In the article, such an analysis is exercised using the tales of two informants from an Iranian tribe, and the results are checked against informations gathered about these informants and their culture during an extended anthropological fieldwork.