

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON HUMOUR IN ISLAMIC CULTURE

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“And that it is He who makes (men) laugh
and makes (them) weep; and that it is
He who causes death and gives life”
(*Qur’ān* 53: 43–44)

To remind the importance of humour in Islam, even if in a short article, after the terrorist attack to the satirical magazine *Charlie Eβδο* in Paris, might help driving away some clouds of misunderstanding. It is not an easy task but I felt the need to dedicate to the memory of the dear colleague Alexander Fodor some observations on a topic dear to both of us.

With the above quotation from the *Qur’ān*, al-Ġāhiz emphasizes the degree of consideration God has given to laughter, relating it to life as the opposite to death; furthermore he adds that smiling is a child’s first beautiful expression which makes his/her blood richer with joy and strength (al-Ġāhiz, *Buḥalā’* 9). This is one of the earliest observations made upon humour in Islamic literature. No precise definition was given, even though the origin and the cause of laughter were problems that interested physicians and philosophers (Rosenthal 1956:132–8).

Among the many definitions applying to laughter, the most common connects laughing with the relief felt at the momentary withdrawal of one of the many restrictions which the physical and social environment imposes upon men.

Al-Ġāhiz in his foreword to his *Kitāb al-Buḥalā’*, explains that he collects anecdotes and short stories to amuse his readers while informing them on various aspects of knowledge and exposing the mistakes by which misers betray themselves (al-Ġāhiz, *Buḥalā’* 3). Not far from these observations are the reasons given by Ibn al-Ġawzī in the introduction to his *Aḥbār al-ḥamqā wa-l-muġaffalīn* (Ibn al-Ġawzī, *Aḥbār al-ḥamqā* 5–10) to justify his writing of it. Firstly, he states that a fool’s stories cause intelligent people to give thanks to God that they are not made so; secondly, it might put some people on guard against foolishness; thirdly, humour serves as a natural relaxation and to this

purpose is supported by many sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad and the early Muslims.

Arabic literature is richly provided with such humorous collections and the very content of *adab* works is to a large extent made up of amusing stories which have been greatly enjoyed by Arab readers (al-Ḥūfī 1956:12–21).

The earliest materials of Muslim humour belonged to the oral tradition and were only later recorded in anthologies of proverbs and anecdotes. It was during the 3rd/9th century that monographs dealing with humorists were written, although none (of them) is preserved in its original form. Muḥammad ibn an-Nadīm in his *Fihrist* informed us of the most famous titles and names. It contains two rather long lists of anonymous monographs dealing with humourists: Abū š-Šaʿb al-Maḥzūmī, Ibn Aḥmar, Damdam al-Madaynī and others. The immediately following list deals with anecdotes about fools that were collected by unknown authors, the names of the fools are: Ğuḥā, Sawrah the bedouin, Ibn al-Mawṣilī, Abū Alqama and many others that are unidentified. It should be added that the *Fihrist* does not mention other famous humourists as Ašʿab, for instance, whose stories still enjoy a certain popularity but only in the literary field (Rosenthal 1956:17–27). Among these the only one whose fame has survived both in oral and written tradition is Ğuḥā, the protagonist of the sly humorous anecdotes so widely known both in the East and the West. A large number of humorous tales from Arabic literature were translated and spread throughout Europe during the Arab dominion over Spain and Sicily, among these there were Ğuḥā's anecdotes (Corrao 1991:20–3; Makkī 1970:70–90). His stories are still enjoyed by both western and eastern public and are spread throughout printed literature and cartoons.

Ğuḥā is a hero common in the Mediterranean folklore, his anecdotes share various features, but here I will confine my attention to the theme of the fight against the abuse of power and the relationship with the sacred.

The presence of certain themes, known since the pre-Islamic age, is common both in the tales of Ğuḥā, the Sicilian Giufā (Corrao 1994), and also the Turkish Nasreddin Hoca. The poor fool who puts the powerful wise man in difficulty already appeared in Mediterranean collective imaginings in the *Dyalogo tra Salomone e Marcolfo* (5th cent.). To these stories Giulio Cesare Croce and Alessandro Banchieri made reference in their *Bertoldo, Bertoldino and Cacasenno*, an Italian Ğuḥā's stereotype, Bertoldo, whose heritage is perpetrated by his son and his nephew (Croce & Banchieri 1973). Transgression is a characteristic feature of the tales of the fool. In the various traditions of Mediterranean folklore, however, the fool also turns out to be crafty, and the Turkish one in particular, more often than not, shows true wisdom.

Faced with authority, as in the tales of Ğuḥā with Abū Muslim (700–755), the Caliph al-Mahdī (754–785), or Nasreddin Hoca with the terrible Timur (historically known as Tamerlane 1336–1405), folly becomes a peculiar weapon of defence (Anselmi 2000:236–8; Marzolph 1996c). In the Islamic tradition there was a general need to give historical evidence to the heroes of pre-Islamic folklore; for this reason, in some stories the fool meets a powerful personality.

Although Ğuḥā is not a historical person, az-Zabīdī in his *Tāğ al-‘arūs min ġawāhir al-qāmūs* wrote that his mother was the servant of Anas b. Mālik (612–709) and most stories which he is a hero of are ill-founded and that the people were asking God to allow them to profit from Ğuḥā’s blessing (al-Zabīdī, *Tāğ al-‘arūs*, s.v. “Ğuḥā”). We find at other Arab and Turkish scholars the same interest to prove the historical existence of Ğuḥā or Nasreddin. For Alessandro Bausani it is a peculiar attitude of early Muslim authors willing to cancel the pre-Islamic origins of folktales, but the debate is still going on until today¹. It is worth noticing that al-Ġāḥiz explained the use of introducing a well known person as a literary device to give credibility to what had been said (al-Ġāḥiz, *Buḥalā’* 9). Furthermore, to associate the trickster with a historical person who actually existed is expedient to mythologize people and events.

It was on the strength of Ğuḥā as the weak rebel that in the 1970s various Arab and Turkish scholars saw him as a popular hero serving as a safety valve, affording justice to the poor against the oppression of the powerful (Nağğār 1979:113–38; Gürsoy 1977:174–7).

The wise man is also a fool and at the same time a cunning rogue able to use this ambiguous attitude to express common people’s critical attitude towards human faults and the abuse of power as shown from the following anecdotes:

“Abū Muslim, the lord of the country, while visiting Kūfa asked the people around him:

— Who of you knows Ğuḥā and can fetch him for me?

Yaqṭīn said:

— I do.

And called him. When Ğuḥā entered the assembly, there where only Abū Muslim and Yaqṭīn, and Ğuḥā asked:

¹ Ğuḥā’s name, according to ad-Damīrī (1341–1405), a Šāfi‘ī jurist, in his *Ḥayāt al-ḥayawān al-kubrā*, was Dağīn b. Tābit Abū l-Ġusn al-Yarbū‘ī al-Baṣrī; cf. Corrao 1991:19–23. We still find on line the defence of Ğuḥā’s seriousness, see <http://salaf-us-saalih.com/2013/09/15/juha-was-from-the-tabieen-not-a-cartoon-character-so-preserve-his-honor-explained-by-shaykh-muhammad-al-wasaabi/>. (Last opened 13 April 2015). Cf. also Marzolph 1996b.

— Oh Yaqtīn, which of you two is Abū Muslim?” (al-Maydānī, *Mağma‘ al-amṭāl* 396).

In another anecdote where he appears with al- Maḥdī we read:

“The Maḥdī wanted to mock him (Ĝuḥā) and sent for a leather mat (used in former times for executions) and a sword, Ĝuḥā stuck his neck out and warned the executioner:

— Do be careful! Do not hit my cupping-glass with the sword because I have already asked for a cupping!

The Maḥdī laughed and forgave him” (Ibn al-Ĝawzī, *Aḥbār al-ḥamqā* 27).

Ĝuḥā’s anecdotes were so famous that prestigious authors used to rephrase some of them in a more sophisticated and elegant style in order to amuse an educated public. This is the case of the *Maqāma* of Badī‘ az-Zamān al-Ḥamadānī (969–1007). As for Ibn Dāniyāl (1248–1310), Ĝuḥā is mentioned for his being fool and ambiguous (Corrao 1996b:24–5; cf. Corrao 1996a, 1998 and 2002). Satire often spreads when there is no freedom of expression hence some stories criticize the decadence of justice and the hero champions the people’s need for justice. As an example I will recall Ĝuḥā’s anecdote rephrased by al-Ḥamadānī in his *al-Maqāma al-ḥamriyya* where the hero is Abū l-Faṭḥ al-Iskandarī. The story tells that Ĝuḥā/Abū l-Faṭḥ stole the *ḡubba* of a judge who was lying drunk in the fields. When the theft was discovered and the thief brought in front of the judge, Ĝuḥā/Abū l-Faṭḥ said he could prove that the *ḡubba* belonged to a drunkard, and the judge set him free (‘Abd al-Ḥamīd 1979:415–437).

Here Ĝuḥā is mocking the judge who pretends to be serious and upright while he is not; it is also evident that the story denounces a general moral corruption. Satire makes people laugh at what is considered to be an acquired value; it reminds us that values have been established to organize human society that would be in a total state of chaos otherwise, but this does not mean that such values must be considered eternal or sacred. Ĝuḥā infringes upon these values and laughs at them, but he is not a rebel; his infringement is unintentional – he is a fool and he cannot understand the real meaning of it. In fact, he makes the Sultan laugh. Ĝuḥā expresses, through paradoxes, contradictions that are deep within us and that we often disclose through our behaviour in the social gambit.

The anecdotes are affected by the nature of the social and linguistic peculiarities of the land where they are current, and by the laps of the years and their accompanying historic change. Few centuries later, when the Turks replaced the Arabs in the rule of the region, we find Ĝuḥā’s anecdotes attributed to Nasreddin Hoca with new adventures showing the trickster with the powerful

Tamerlane. The following anecdote demonstrates that the relation between the fool and the powerful man remained unchanged.

It is reported that Nasreddin gained the favour of the ruler because of his boldness, and here he bravely answers to Tamerlane question:

— ... Am I just or unjust? ...

Nasreddin Hoca answered to him:

— You are not a just king, nor an unjust tyrant, for it is we who are unjust, and you are the sword of justice that the One, the Subduer (God), has set up as overlord over the unjust (Nağğār 1979:113).

There are no historical reports that the two men ever met, the role of the trickster is not one of political mediator between the tyrant and the oppressed people. Here the hero, to avoid persecution, is cunningly accusing the poor faith of the people to justify the cruel behaviour of the ruler. Nasreddin's boldness is not typical of an epic hero, rather responds to the technique of the satirical use of paradox. It is interesting to notice that almost a century earlier the Ḥanbalī theologian Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) had fought against the Mongols because of their corrupted faith, he believed that among the causes of Islamic decay there was the spread of un-Islamic practices (Michot 2012). For the same reason he was also criticizing some Ṣūfī orders when he believed them to be influenced by un-Islamic beliefs.

The fact that Nasreddin is considered to be a Ṣūfī in the Turkish tradition is an opportunity to show how different the Ḥanbalī and the Ṣūfī critical attitudes toward corruption are. It is worth mentioning the mystical understanding of the above mentioned anecdote, where the two oppositions, good versus evil, are solved on a higher level, which lies according to Nasreddin's moral in the will of the "One, the Subduer (God)". Furthermore it is worth recalling that Ğalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī (1207–1273) used paradoxes to explain his mystical understanding of life. In addition, he also used to mention Nasreddin Hoca's anecdotes (Corrao 1991:25–6). On the meaning of the struggle to survive Rūmī wrote an interesting passage useful for a deeper understanding of the conflict between the poor and the tyrant:

“... for the longing for God and considering of life as a constant struggle in which the fighter should never relent, even for a single hour; for pain is the road to pleasure, and weeping the cause of laughter” (Tamer 1973:172–3).

To conclude, these anecdotes have crossed the borders of time and space thus making evident the universal nature of their satire. Ğuḥā/Nasreddin and the

Sicilian Giufà have always embodied eternal human contradictions setting up good versus evil, nature versus culture. Our hero is ambivalent and that is what made him adaptable to different cultures. Ğuhā's anecdotes, in their modest frame, combine the mystical wisdom of Islam and the sturdy wit of the Arabs in a particular Mediterranean way that highlights their universal values

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