

## **Ambiguous Jokes. Nasreddin Hoca, Afandi and Folklore Studies**

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There are two remarkable situations I remember when musing on folk narrative research. In one of them Ulrich Marzolph plays a central role, in the other he doesn't. The other unfolded in Oxford's venerable Bodleian Library, where I was sitting and reading – for the pleasure of it – a manuscript of the *Jāmi' al-ḥikāya* type. Later on over dinner a colleague remarked that for the first time in his life he had seen somebody laugh in the Bodleian reading room; that alien was me. – The first scene was an occasional encounter of our jubilarian, myself, and an old friend of ours, a practical practitioner of folklore at its worst, who in response to one casually mentioned narrative motif came up with a bunch of dirty jokes in which that motif was elaborated. While two of us were still struggling to regain our composure, one of us took down a few fieldnotes.<sup>1</sup>

Folk orature and popular literature may have been first invented for listeners' and readers' amusement but scholarship is a serious matter. Building bridges between these worlds apart, and demonstrating to what degree ideologies and cultural politics of sorts have intruded into this delicate relationship as a third set of major determinants, is one of Ulrich Marzolph's lasting merits. He has drawn our attention to the question if folklore can be imagined as belonging to anyone, and if so, who that should be – those who generate and practise it, or those (politicians or activists) who "propagate folklore for specific

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<sup>1</sup> For a fruit of that scene cf. Marzolph, Ulrich: Der Schieler und die Flasche. Zur Rezeption einer arabischen Anekdote in der persischen mystischen Dichtung. In: *Oriens* 32 (1990) 124-138, fn. 32.

purposes",<sup>2</sup> or those who eternalize it through scripturalization, preservation, investigation and so on. – In fact, it seems as if the ownership question could be answered only in one meaningful way: All of these parties are co-owners since in entangled ways they all cooperate in bringing about folklore as we know it. In the universe of folklore, texts cannot be tracked down to one authoritative version, nor can ultimate authority be claimed for any one of the readings given, or meanings ascribed to it. Some Turkish folklorists have come to replace the notion of variant by *eş metin*,<sup>3</sup> literally 'co-text', which renders this idea of "alternative truths" quite neatly.

Those who just "do" folklore seem to have little problems with the absence of authoritative texts – they may try to compete for supremacy within their kind by outdoing one dirty joke by an even more dirty one and a wondrous tale by a more wondrous one, or they may give their own story a little twist that makes it "better" than the one told by someone else. Even in as highly competitive a genre as the Central Asian *aqın* / *askiya* singing contest the goal of a performance is only to outwit one's competitors, not to outrule them. As soon as ideologists join the conversation, however, things turn difficult. We remember two decades of power game around the publication of Pertev Naili Boratav's *Nasreddin Hoca*: The first and second edition (June and July 1996) had to be withdrawn from the book market. Boratav's alleged trespass consisted in publishing Nasreddin Hoca stories originating from manuscripts of the 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, from early lithographs, and from oral tradition handed down by poets and scholars, without editing language or content. The manuscript stories reflect the modes of times when society was (or at least some

<sup>2</sup> Cf. for example Ulrich Marzolph: "What Is Folklore Good For? On Dealing with Undesirable Cultural Expression", *Journal of Folklore Research* 35(1)(1998): 5-16: 5.

<sup>3</sup> Pehlivan, Gürol. Mizaha Vahdet-i Vücut penceresinden bakmak: Salâhi'nin şerh-i nutk-ı Nasreddin Efendi adlı risalesi. In: *Millî Folklor* 92 (2011) 117-130: 119.

members of society were) ready to accept straightforward plots and rude language not only in the oral domain, but also in writing. Influential circles in Turkey at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century deemed "Boratav's Nasreddin Hoca", as it would be called, to be too offensive as to be circulated in the public.<sup>4</sup> Allegedly ill-willing folklorists were – that is, Boratav was – by others blamed with having deliberately distorted "our Hoca"; one folklorist with an apologetic approach went as far as suggesting to reduce by half the corpus, which to his understanding had by Boratav, but also by the folks been irresponsibly contaminated with alien material. The goal of this purification was to restore the Hoca, and together with him the community he allegedly stands for, to his disgraced honor and purity. Allegations of abusing the Hoca for promoting erotic obscenity and anticlerical sentiment were in the air.<sup>5</sup>

Unsurprisingly, disagreement about what is desirable in a protagonist and what is not, or in a broader sense, where the borders of the unthinkable and unspeakable should be drawn, is as old as the stories themselves.<sup>6</sup> Even the otherwise pretty frank early author of the manuscript from which Boratav took his story no. 191<sup>7</sup> had not

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<sup>4</sup> For a brief discussion of the history of the print, withdrawal and final reprint in 2006, cf. Payza, Halit: Boratav'ın Sakıncalı Nasrettin Hoca'sı, <http://www.gercekedebyat.com/haber-detay/boratavin-sakincali-nasreddin-hocasi-halit-payza/2099> (8 June, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> For a comprehensive summary of the debate that culminated in 1995-97, see Gökem, İsmail: Nasreddin Hoca olgusunun algılanması ve anlamlandırılması üzerine. In: *Türkbilgi* 23 (2012) 83- 106; the quotes relate to Gökem's chapter on the folklorist Saim Sakaoglu.

<sup>6</sup> This observation has been put forward by Boratav as early as 1987 (cf. Boratav 1996: 30).

<sup>7</sup> I refer to the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of Boratav, Pertev Naili: Nasreddin Hoca. Ankara (Edebiyatçılar Derneği Yayınları) 1996: p. 140. Unfortunately provenance is only indicated for some of the stories (not for 191); the bulk of the texts is from 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts.

managed to refrain from distancing himself from one of Nasreddin's blasphemous pranks, as the text tells:

One day Nasreddin Hoca goes to the mosque to recite his morning prayer. He performs the *takbīr*. He performs the *takbīr* and doesn't stop. Someone says: "Hoca! The morning prayer is four *rak'at*. How many have you performed!" The Hoca says, "I have performed too many so that I make God indebted."<sup>8</sup> – *Estağfirullāh!*

The *estağfirullāh* which concludes the story is a comment to the Hoca's reply, a paratextual element within the story, so to speak, added by either the author himself, or the scribe, or a copyist. Who is the Hoca to even dream of putting himself in a higher position than his creator. Anyone who hears someone talk like that will feel urged to ask God's mercy on behalf of the trespasser, and so did the transmitter of this story. However, his embarrassment did not take him so far as to downgrade the story to a less offensive wording or even to suppress the story rightaway. One word of third-party shaming and admonition is all he drops and we cannot even know if he did so from the bottom of his heart or by hypocrisy, or with a twinkle of the eye.

A manuscript including 147 Nasreddin Hoca stories, dating from 1777<sup>9</sup>, concludes with another remarkable paratextual comment: "There exist some sound (*ṣaḥīḥ*) legends about the Hoca. But most of them are allegations."<sup>10</sup> This comment tells us very clearly that authenticity of the text and reliability of the tradition mattered to the transmitter (who may have cut his teeth on *ḥadīṣ* scholarship), but it does not tell us if his doubts about the provenance of some other stories had perhaps led him to exclude these from his compilation. Nor would the comment tell us what it was that had raised his doubts,

<sup>8</sup> Tanrı'yı borçlu eyleyem.

<sup>9</sup> For a short description of the manuscript preserved in the Library of Ankara Üniversitesi Dil-Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi, cf. Boratav 1996: 70.

<sup>10</sup> Hoca'nın bazı ṣaḥīḥ menāqibleri vardır. Ammā ekserisi bühtāndır; quoted after Boratav 1996: 22.

so that we cannot know if he had possibly excluded blasphemic stories known to him, or absurd ones, or yet others which did not conform to his imagination of the authentic Hoca. One thing the comment tells us for sure, on the other hand, is that as early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century, way before the infiltration of Ottoman folklore studies with romantico-moralist European purism, there existed an autochthonous understanding of, and judgment about which stories could be rightfully attributed to Nasreddin Hoca and which ones couldn't. This existing inclination to reconstruct tradition – whether by silent disapproval or by actively excluding some elements from the tradition and/or replacing them by more appropriate ones – may have paved the way for the ensuing process of reshaping the stork-like Nasreddin Hoca corpus into a decent bird.

This reification process has more recently culminated in Saim Sakaoğlu's suggestion to disentangle what he reads as the Hoca's multiple personalities, and to sort out the corpus which Sakaoğlu interprets as consisting of a *genuine* stock that depicts "our Hoca" – a perfectly wise, witty and innocent champion of Turkish folklorism, we might say –, and *alien* elements which folks have come to mistakenly attribute to that amicable character, as it were:

Go out on the street and ask our people what they understand as Nasreddin Hoca jokes. You will see that most of the jokes they will tell are jokes that don't belong to him.<sup>11</sup>

By saying so, Saim Sakaoğlu confirms that the oral Nasreddin Hoca tradition of today is not in line with the image drawn by cultural activists (and some folklorists) who are promoting the Hoca as a local,

<sup>11</sup> "Sokağa çıkınız, insanımıza Nasreddin Hoca fıkrası olarak neleri bildiğini sorunuz. Onların anlatacağı fıkraların çoğunluğunun onun olmayan fıkralar olduğunu göreceksiniz" (Sakaoğlu, Saim: Çok Kimlikli Nasreddin Hoca'dan Tek Kimlikli Nasreddin Hoca'ya. In: I. Uluslararası Akşehir Nasreddin Hoca Sempozyumu (Bilgi Şöleni) 6-7 Temmuz 2005. Akşehir (Akşehir Belediyesi Kültür Yayınları) 2005, 68-70:70; quoted after Görkem 2012: 93).

ethnic, national or whatever hero. One could of course turn the argument upside down and say that the image which is being drawn for various ideological and economic ends<sup>12</sup> is not in line with the living oral tradition. Most stories about Nasreddin Hoca (and his counterparts in other languages like Mullā Naşriddīn, Afandī, Juḥā...) which are in actual oral circulation have sexually obscene, scatological or absurd plots, or a mixture of these, and depending on the circumstances of the performance, their wording varies from allusive to straightforward or ribald. They are frequently told, but who is going to count them. *Orature* does not easily stand a chance against the written word.

The bulk of printed and digitized material today, on the other hand, mirrors exactly the "witty moral champion" image, and comes in downgraded or completely sanitized language. The jokes often contain introductory or concluding textual elements which, when compared with contemporary oral materials or written materials from earlier periods, appear to be of paratextual nature (explanations and/or interpretations); today they come as integral parts of the basic text.

Indeed, the cleavage between the oral and the scriptural tradition of today is striking, in content as well as language. This observation is – perhaps unintentionally – contradicted by a remark in a small Turkish study on "the power of the word in Nasreddin Hoca jokes":

With their poetry-like manner of expression and the short and dense meanings they contain, the jokes aim at conveying their message to the reader in a straight and unmistakable way.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> For a detailed study on the branding of Nasreddin Hoca today, see Kahveci, Zeynep Nagihan: *Günümüzde yaşayan Nasreddin Hoca imgesi* (Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Gazi Üniversitesi) 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Şenocak, Ebru. *Nasreddin Hoca'nın fıkralarında sözün gücü*. n.d.1483-1504: 1483.

What the author of that study is actually writing about is to my understanding not the quality of *written* Nasreddin Hoca (and other) jokes, but of oral ones – which are not geared on a "reader", but on listeners. Conciseness is indeed one of the prime features of a good oral joke and versatile jokers of today observe the rule of brevity, density and swiftness. The texts from most of today's collections, on the other hand, are anything but concise compared with the laconic variants from earlier corpora; many of them are strikingly wordy and contain all kinds of retarding elements. One example may suffice to illustrate this de-poeticizing phenomenon. The "paratextual" elements – which in fact are today merged into the basic text – are for demonstration put in brackets here:

[Günlerden bir gün üç aylarda mı, beş aylarda mı olduğunu çıkaramayan] bir adam Hoca'ya: "Ay üçe midir, yoksa beşe mi?" deyince Hoca, [ifadedeki kullanım bozukluğuna kızarak:] "Bilmem, son zamanlarda ay alıp sattığım yok. " diye [cevap verir].<sup>14</sup>

When one day a man [who was unable to figure out whether they were in the 'moon-in-three' or 'moon-in-five'] asked the Hoca, "Is the moon to-three or to-five", he [got angry with the way the saying was distorted in the phrase and] responded, "I don't know, I have not sold a moon these days."

For comparison, here is a variant from a one-century older collection (by Veled Çelebi İzbudak "Bahâ'î"<sup>15</sup>):

Bir gün Hoca Naşreddin Efendi pazarda gezerken bir herif "Hoca. Bugün ayın üçü mü, dördü mü" diye sordukta "Vallahi bilmem şu günlerde ay alıp sattığım yoktur" demiştir.

<sup>14</sup> Şenocak (n.d.: 1487) is quoting this text from a 2004 edition of Memet Fuat's collection *Nasreddin Hoca Fıkraları*, p.123; the explanation of the pun, in which the Hoca "misunderstands" the man's inability to figure out what period of early spring (the "three-moon" etc.) they were in and responds as if he had asked the price, had first been suggested by Boratav in a 1975 conference paper (cf. Boratav 1996: 57, 53).

<sup>15</sup> [Veled İzbudak Bahâ'î] *Leṭā'if-i Hoca Naşr-ed-Dīn rahmatu l-lāhī 'alayhi*, 2. Aufl. [Istanbul] 1921/1339: 18.

When one day, while Hoca Nasreddin Efendi was strolling on the bazaar, somebody asked, "Hoca, is today the third or the fourth of the month", he said "By God, I don't know, I haven't sold a moon these days".

From the way Bahâî is rendering the joke it is pretty clear that he did not get the pun right, but different from more recent editors, he did not deem it necessary to "correct" or enhance that text so as to secure a straight and doubt-free understanding.

Bahâî has in fact altered many texts – yet his emendations do not relate to ambiguity caused by phraseology, which is at stake in this story, but to perceived immorality of plot and most of all, to inadequacy of wording. Veled Çelebi (also known by his pen-name Bahâî) was a scholar who valued primary research – along with texts collected from earlier printed books, in his *Leṭā'if-i Hoca Naşreddîn* (1909, 1921, 1923)<sup>16</sup> he included 185 *laṭîfe* which had been sent to him by friends and colleagues. He does not specify where his informants took the texts from, maybe some came from manuscripts, others from entertaining meetings of gentlemen of rank and yet others right from the streets of an Ottoman provincial town. In any case the newly collected texts all had to stand the critical look of Veled Çelebi and this is perhaps why the language of many stories is incredibly stilted, no improper words are being used, and offensive plots are a bit downgraded the same way as texts from earlier written sources are which form the first part of the book. Here are three co-texts which aptly illustrate Bahâî's particular way to handle texts. First, a joke quoted from a pre-19<sup>th</sup> century source by Boratav:

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<sup>16</sup> Seyfettin Özege's catalogue indicates only the first and third editions. I am using a 1921 edition which does not render the author's name, but is doubtlessly the second edition; it includes 252 pages as opposed to 253 of the 1923 edition. (Özege, Mehmet Seyfettin: *Eski harflerle basılmış Türkçe Eserler Kataloğu*. İstanbul 1971-1980.)



Hoca bir gün görür bir kelb mescid içine yestehler. Hoca urmak isteyücek kelb dahı hırlayup üstine atılmak ister. Hoca dahı korhusından: "İt beğim it!" demiş.<sup>17</sup>

One day the Hoca sees: a dog is shitting into the mosque. When the Hoca wants to beat it, the dog growls and is going for him. Out of fear the Hoca said, "Dog - Lord Dog!"

From a popular internet collection of today:

Bir gün Hoca bir köpeğin mescidin kapısına işediğini görmüş. Kovmak için öfkeyle hayvanın üstüne gidince köpek de hırlayarak ona gelecek olmuş. Hoca hemen sesini tatlılaştırarak: "Hoşt beyim hoşt" demiş.<sup>18</sup>

One day the Hoca saw that a dog was pissing at the door of the mosque. When he was angrily going about it, the dog aimed at him snarlingly. Immediately the Hoca sweetened his voice and said, "Off, Mylord, off!"

The Boratav text bears the most typical characteristics of oral joke tradition – laconicity of wording paired with greatest possible offense: the plot goes about "shitting", and about doing so in the mosque, of all places. The plot of the recent internet text is somewhat domesticated, since pissing is not quite as rude as shitting and the action has been relocated to the outside of the mosque. This kind of downgrading in written form cannot only be observed in jokes but also in proverbs: While the scriptural Islamic (and other) tradition generally prefers the version "Speech is silver, silence is golden", neighboring oral versions have been reported as "To speak little is gold, to talk much is mud"<sup>19</sup>. Orality prefers the plain and unequivocal while scripturality is the

<sup>17</sup> Boratav 1996: 170, No. 291.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.fikralarim.com/host-beyim-host.html> (accessed 10 June, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Wasserstein, David J. A West-East puzzle. On the history of the proverb "Speech is silver, silence is golden". In: Arazı, Albert et al. (ed.): Compilation and creation in adab and luga. Studies in memory of Naphtali Kinberg (1948-1997). Winona Lake, Indiana (Eisenbrauns) 1999, 239-259: 255.

locus of the more subtle and nuanced. Now where on this scale would Veled Çelebi place his text?

Bir gün hoca mezârlık arasında gezerken bir koca köpeğin bir mezar taşına işediğini görüp hemen elindeki sopasıyla köpeğe urmak isterse de köpek dişlerini sırtarıp hırlayarak Hoca'nın üzerine hücum edince Hoca parçalayacağını idrâk eylemekle kemâl-i havıfla büzülerek ve arka arka çekilerek "Geç yiğidim geç" demiştir.<sup>20</sup>

One day while the Hoca was strolling about the graveyard he saw a huge dog pissing on a tombstone. While he immediately wanted to beat the dog with the stick in his hand, the dog bared its teeth, snarled and aimed at him. The Hoca understood that it would tear him to pieces, cowered away in terror, retired back and said, "After you, brave young man!"

Veled Çelebi goes for neither the typically oralist solution nor for the one preferred by representatives of our contemporary scripturality. It does not come as a surprise that in line with his rank as a learned man and public intellectual, Bahâ'î converted the simple text into the complex grammar and elaborate style of late Ottoman Turkish. What is fascinating, however, is his handling of the plot. He also relocates it,<sup>21</sup> but his goal is obviously not to "preserve the mosque from too much pollution", but a more ambitious one, so to speak: He shifts the scenery to the heterotopic cemetery<sup>22</sup> where stray men and stray dogs meet on equal terms and anything can happen, preferably all kinds of human and animal trespasses.

There exists a textual parallel included in a late 19<sup>th</sup> century work by a co-Mevlevî of Veled Çelebi, Seyyid Burhaneddin, the *Kitâb-ı Hoca*

<sup>20</sup> Bahâ'î 1921: 30, No. 52.

<sup>21</sup> I am not saying that Bahâ'î himself necessarily invented the relocation, but out of all available options he selected this one.

<sup>22</sup> Foucault, Michel: Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias. In: Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité 5 (1984) 46-49, see the "deuxième principe". (Available at <https://foucault.info/doc/documents/heterotopia/foucault-heterotopia-en-html>, accessed 12 June, 2017).

*Nasreddin* also known as *Burhāniye Tercümesi*<sup>23</sup>, which is an explanation (*şerh*) of 121 jokes within a mystical framework. Our story is there registered as no. 35 and mentions the same scenario with Nasreddin Hoca on the graveyard and a dog pissing at a tombstone. The *tercüme* interprets the story as a call on man's trust in God as the supreme avenger; we may add, it also calls on the (dervish-like) stroller across the graveyard (what business does a man have on a graveyard if not drinking wine and meeting other dubious men...) not to claim superiority over a fellow sinner. Nasreddin Hoca, as it were, symbolizes a person in-between the better and the worse, an ambiguous figure. The versions of both Mevlevîs coincide in this attribution – it is made explicit by Seyyid Burhaneddin within the framework of the *şerh* genre, while Veled Çelebi, who is pending between old-style *adab* literature and innovative scripturalization of folklore, uses the potential of both genres to play exactly on ambiguity without ever naming it.

For the Islamicate culture when understood as an essentially scriptural one, the 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century has been made out as an important period in the paradigm shift from tolerating and enjoying ambiguity to insisting on unambiguousness.<sup>24</sup> This unequivocalization process has deeply affected Ottoman/Turkish folklore studies (and by extension, folklorism) – in quite a surprising and perhaps therefore widely ignored way.

The more traditionalist faction, if we may call it that, is represented by scholars like Bahâ'î, who regardless of his endeavors to "civilize" the verbal components of tradition, on the spiritual plane remained true to

<sup>23</sup> For details on the work and its author, see Fikret Türkmen's edition, *Letâ'if-i Nasreddin Hoca (Burhaniye Tercümesi). İnceleme-Şerh*. Ankara 1989.

<sup>24</sup> The idea is elaborated with many fascinating examples by Bauer, Thomas: *Die Kultur der Ambiguität. Eine andere Geschichte des Islams*. Berlin (Insel) 2011.

the genuinely ambiguous character of much of folklore, hence for example, the protagonist Nasreddin Hoca. The "modernist" faction, on the other hand, fell into two camps, a populist one insisting on oral tradition (whether alive among the populace or petrified in earlier manuscripts) as the only valid representation of folklore, and a (local-, ethno-, national-...) chauvinist one that in its quest for unrestrictedly positive representations of "the local" etc. resorted to a rigidly purist reshaping of the tradition according to their own imaginations. Both factions shared the horror of the ambiguous, and the obsession with authenticity – what segregated them was their understanding of what is "authentic" (and why). Representatives of both camps have carried the debate down to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, as the above-cited controversy around Boratav's *Nasreddin Hoca* edition shows.

The quest for unambiguity in folklore is everywhere; Ulrich Marzolph has aptly described examples from Turkey and Iran<sup>25</sup> and many more can be identified. In Soviet Central Asia, the official equivalent of Nasreddin Hoca was stylized to conform to the principle of "national in form, socialist in content". The Uzbek (*Mullo Nasriddin*) *Afandi* for example wears old-style local garments and rides on his donkey, but he is by no means the God of Earth any longer who used to be in charge of all business below the navel, and he is triumphantly being proclaimed an atheist (*dahriy*).<sup>26</sup> The puritanical and infantilizing drive in sanitizing the texts has actually been much stronger here than in the Ottoman/Turkish realm<sup>27</sup>, as the comparison of the following

<sup>25</sup> Marzolph, Ulrich: What is Folklore Good For? On Dealing With Undesirable Cultural Expression. In: *Journal of Folklore Research* 35.1 (1998), 5-16.

<sup>26</sup> Afandi Latifalari. Bahodir Sarimsoqov/Farida Yo'ldosheva (eds.). Tashkent (G'afur G'ulom) 1989: 113.

<sup>27</sup> The trajectory of the Hoca into Central Asia remains to be investigated; the editors of the hitherto most comprehensive collection, Afandi Latifalari (1989), cite a 1941 local edition by Sharif Rizo as if that were the beginning of the tradition, but since the Hoca has been appropriated as an afandi/apandi < efendi, an Ottoman Turkish loanword which was by the

texts will show. The texts are Ottoman from Boratav and *Burhāniye*, and Uzbek from a recent standard collection.

N.H. one day goes to mosque. Accidentally he is wearing a short kaftan. See what happens – he stands in the front line. When prayer starts and they do the prostration his cocks were seen. A man from behind him grasped them firmly. And N.H. in his turn grasps the imam's cocks firmly. The imam turns round, "Hey man, what are you doing?" N.H. said, "I thought you guys were playing the cocks game."<sup>28</sup>

One day the Hoca was wearing short clothes and went to mosque. When during prayer he did the prostration, the man behind him saw the Hoca's testicles and immediately grasped and squeezed them. And the Hoca grasps and squeezes the testicles of the imam in front of him. The imam turns round and looks – it's Hoca Efendi! When the imam said, "Hoca, what are you doing?" he said, "Ask the man behind me!"<sup>29</sup>

Fun during prayer. Afandi was praying in the mosque. A joker tugged at the hem of his long shirt. The Afandi in his turn tugged at the hem of the imam's long shirt. The imam got angry. He spoiled his prayer and asked, "Mullo Nasriddin, what are you doing?" – "I don't know, ask the man behind me", the Afandi responded.<sup>30</sup>

In the given form, the Uzbek text is probably good enough for ridiculing the prayer rites, but otherwise it has been infantilized to the point of unintelligibility.

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early 1920s on political grounds stigmatized and ousted from everyday language, his "immigration" must have happened way before the Soviet period, whether directly from the Ottoman Empire or via Tatar intermediaries.

<sup>28</sup> Boratav 1996: 95, No. 15.

<sup>29</sup> Türkmen 1989, No. 395. Burhaneddin Çelebi's interpretation of this story reads as follows: "Rather than being shamed among the folks of Doomsday tomorrow, when those who are lined up in rows to be questioned might hold on to imams who advise you to deviate from the commandments of Islam, you want to avoid that. (This) is being recommended."

<sup>30</sup> *Afandi Latiflari* 1989: 143.

Or should we credit the Soviet editor with the subversiveness of rendering an impeccable, child-proof text while relying on the ability of their adult readers to read between the lines and decipher the metaphor? The latter solution would preserve the ambiguity of the original content – is the Afandi plainly obscene or does his behavior and talk conceal and thus reveal much deeper meanings, as interpreters like Burhaneddin Çelebi would suggest? It would even enhance the joke on a meta level by adding another dimension of ambiguity – the twinkle of the eye of a cunning editor who circumvents all censorship... I think we can generally credit editors (although in this particular case I have no proof of it) with this kind of meta-joke since the editors in their turn can trust in their readership/audience to know the respective non-domesticated co-texts from oral tradition.

Just like in Turkey, the living oral tradition in Uzbekistan until this day champions minimalist and straightforward stories. Words perceived as obscene are avoided there, too, but infantilization does not happen, as can be seen from a text conveyed to me by a highly educated mid-age gentleman from southern Uzbekistan:

One day Amir Temur told the Afandi: "Make an excuse that is worse than the offense!" – During prayer Afandi grabbed between Amir Temur's thighs. Furiously the king said, "What are you doing?!" "Sorry, your majesty", said Afandi. "I thought it was Bibi Xonim<sup>31</sup>."

The domesticated Uzbek version runs as follows:

One day the king said to the Afandi: "Play a joke on me that is so rude that I will sentence you to death. Then ask my forgiveness (with an excuse) that even outdoes your trespass. The Afandi obeyed. When they went to the garden together, Afandi poked the king in the ribs.

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<sup>31</sup> The favorite spouse of Tamerlane.

The king got furious: "Fool, what are you doing?!" – "Sorry, my king", said Afandi, "I thought you were *kelinoyim*".<sup>32</sup>

In the Turkish context, the story is mostly related to İncili Çavuş, a 16/17<sup>th</sup> century courtier, and the story culminates while İncili climbs a staircase behind the padishah.<sup>33</sup> The point of the joke is obvious enough – and so is the fact that the official Uzbek written variant misses out an important aspect of the Afandi's character, namely, his undecidedness in sexual matters. Man or woman does not matter, he would have both of them. In the context of national Uzbek folklorism this degree of ambiguity seems to be unbearable; the Afandi is converted into an unequivocally heterosexual person who against the king trespasses in line with the socially welcome anti-establishment image – the Afandi challenges the emperor by poking him as one would poke one's peer, as it were –, but then goes on topping his sin with a (however, somewhat downgraded) sexualized trespass which does not challenge normative heterosexuality.

The Afandi's ambiguity in sexual matters – and one should add, the prominent role of sex in the stories crystallizing around this character, and in a broader sense all sexually connoted motifs in folk tradition – has been a major challenge for Central Asian folklorists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but not the only one. Handling ambiguity related to religion was not an easy task for them to fulfill either.

The trickster Afandi / Nasreddin Hoca in matters of religious creed and practise displays the same kind of ambiguity as a mystic. His hybris in attempting to make God his debtor, and the desire of the person who handed down the story to distance himself from it, has

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<sup>32</sup> Afandi Latifalari 1989: 212; *kelinoyim* lit. 'my daughter-in-law' is the Uzbek euphemism used for the addressee's wife.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, "Özrü kabahatinden büyük" available at <http://www.edebiyatvesanatakademisi.com/anonim-edebiyat-mizah-hiciv/incili-cavus-fikralari-19570.aspx> (accessed 1 June, 2017).

been mentioned above. The story is missing in the *Afandi* collection which does not come as a big surprise: Regardless of claims to the contrary, Central Asian Soviet "atheism" hardly ever touched upon the theodicy while stressing minor issues like anticlericalism and struggling against noxious cultic practise. Another interesting example of raising human voice against the creed, which is missing from the canonized Uzbek folklore tradition because the creed itself is postulated as being missing, is the "sharing out like Allah" story of Boratav no. 90: When asked to distribute roasted chickpeas to the children "as God would do it", Nasreddin Hoca to some children deals out plenty, and only few to some others; upon their protest he cries out, "Allah! (...) Look, even these little kids don't approve of your way of sharing out!"<sup>34</sup> In Veled Çelebi's collection the story is quoted as "being transmitted by some honorable friends" (while otherwise only very few stories are from anonymous transmitters; the desire to become known for such a story wasn't too big). The text is as flatulent as much of Bahâ'î's material and it concludes with an apologetic paragraph on God's infinite grace and generosity, whose nature as either part of the basic text or paratextual comment by the editor is not specified, with the second option appearing more likely. While *Afandi latîfaları* cannot render the story, in Afghanistan today the motif is used in a locutionary way ("Do you want me to divide the cake with God's justice or with mine?") yet mostly accompanied by a paratextual "*astağfirullāh*", which indicates that the saying is perceived as *kufîr*.

Not only Nasreddin Hoca's ambiguous sufi-like actions, which can be read as *kufîr* geared on earning God's wrathful glance, have in some popular perception made him into a saintly person, but there are also quite a few stories about verbally abusive rebuff that people suffer at his hands<sup>35</sup>, which resemble the kind of rebuff reported as having been

<sup>34</sup> Boratav 1989: 113sq.

<sup>35</sup> For N.H. stories of this kind and their interpretation in the spirit of the Mevlevîye, cf. Burhaniye Tercümesi, Türkmen 1989, laîfe 20 "sen halt etme cahil köpek, ol kabağatın bilür", 29 "zeker başına çıkarsınız", 40 "ipe



dealt out by opaque-minded sufi saints. The Hoca's stories have, like stories about sufis and saints, been called *menqıbe/menāqıb* 'legend' and some of his actions, *kerāmet* 'miracle (performed by a saint)'. In the same vein, it was in a dream vision that the Hoca told the author of a manuscript dating from 1676 to assemble his stories, as the man claims in his preface.<sup>36</sup>

In fact the border between tricksters of the Nasreddin Hoca subtype and those of the sufi-saint subtype is permeable in both directions. Nasreddin's seemingly mocking posthumous invitation to the Friday prayer community to shortly visit him at his grave turns out to have rescued the believers from being killed under the collapsing mosque, which led one 18<sup>th</sup> century transmitter to defining in a (paratextual?) remark the event as a miracle proving the Hoca's elevated saintly rank.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, there is the story about an otherwise acknowledged and estimated Naqshbandi saint who did *not* succeed in rescuing all his adherents from the collapsing minaret of his convent mosque, an event which prompted some believers to doubt his sanctity.<sup>38</sup> The ambiguity of both trickster subtypes is affirmed by such stories that, truly or seemingly, go against the narrational norm: The saint is expected to protect his followers, which he does not, while the joker, who is being expected to play a prank, does.

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un serilür", 55 "minnet hüdāya sana ne", 82 "cimā'a doymadı deyü ağlayın", 109 "Allāh vere", etc.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Boratav 1996: 12.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Boratav 1996: 25, 70.

<sup>38</sup> The story relates to Muḥammad ʿAlī Ešān (known as Dukēi Ešān) from Andijān who led an 1898 upheaval against the imperial Russian government. For the story, cf. *Manāqıb-i Dūkēi Ešān* (Anonim žitiya Dūkēi Ešāna – predvoditelya Andžanskogo vosstaniya 1898 goda). Vvedenie, perevod i kommentarii B.M. Babadzanov. Kyugel'gen, A. fon (ed.). Tashkent-Bern-Almaty 2004: CXI-CXIII. An eye-witness and the wife of a victim, who cast doubt on the Ešān's sanctity, both die under "miraculous" circumstances so that the doubts are quickly silenced (ibid., CXIII).

There is probably much more ambiguity in folk stories than one would assume at first sight. Some of the Nasreddin Hoca jokes are so plainly funny that the (non-Mevlevî or otherwise ill-prepared) listener/reader would not expect a story behind the story – for example all the texts where one way or another the protagonist helps himself to lots of food, sometimes to a whole banquet, mostly at the expense of bystanders who don't get their share.<sup>39</sup> The topos as such occurs in many genres – expectedly in jokes and formulaic narratives like the Turkish *tekerleme*,<sup>40</sup> and less expectedly in laments<sup>41</sup> and stories about saints. In a story which I recorded in Northeast Afghanistan in 2006, Eshân Dāvūd, a saintly spiritual leader of the 1930s, gobbled down a banquet meant to serve fifty and finished off a goatskin of water to go with. What in form and content sounds like a genuine *tekerleme* story was then explained by its narrator as a miracle metaphorizing the Afghan king Nādiršāh's unsatiable greed for "devouring" lands and peoples. The paratext resolves the inherent ambiguity of this story – it breaks the façade of fun and reveals a very serious allusion.<sup>42</sup> But in

<sup>39</sup> E.g. Leṭā'if 1921: 120sq., 159sq., 176... .

<sup>40</sup> Boratav, Pertev Naili: Le "tekerleme". Contribution à l'étude typologique et stylistique du conte populaire turc. Paris (Imprimerie Nationale) 1963: 57sq., type 21 "propos et aventures gastronomiques".

<sup>41</sup> Görkem (2006) has a hilarious lament text which the mourner released upon the deceased's wife's grateful remark, "For God's sake, keep telling us more about my husband", so that he felt compelled to "tell the truth" rather than praising the deceased:

*Gelir alt baştan oturur*

*Lokması batman götürür*

*Oturduğu sofrayı batırır*

*Buna Göde Ali derler*

'He comes and takes a modest seat; with one bite he takes away a bushel; if he partook in a banquet, he'd dry it up; they call him Paunchy Ali'. (Görkem, İsmail: Anadolu-Türk Ağıtlarının mizahî karakter hakkında bir değerlendirme. In: Erciyes Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi (Prof. Dr. Tuncer Gülensoy Armaganı), 2006 (1) No. 20, 153-168: 157.)

<sup>42</sup> The local governor, at whose court the scene allegedly took place, evidently got the point. He immediately released the Eshân – who is said to have been

many cases we just don't have paratexts so that two, or many, readings remain in the air, or only one out of many becomes apparent. The meaning may be unequivocal in context, but when stories/motifs are stripped of all context as they end up in manuscripts and collections, not only the possible second meanings are lost but also, perhaps in many cases, it is the sense of ambiguity as such which is no longer preserved. Good luck for folklorists and cultural activists who like it simple.

In conclusion, I should like to describe what I consider the climax of ambiguity in jocular stories about tricksters: futile ambitions to dissimulate folly. One of these is again about Nasreddin Hoca's voracity.

ʿImād tells the Hoca, "Hoca! Whenever something to eat is brought in front of you, you tuck in until it's gone. You never have enough. Why don't you just eat some and then stop it like other people do." The Hoca says, "Ey ʿImād, let us tie a thread around my toe. Whenever I am eating too much, pull the thread, and I will stop it." They agree (on doing so). One day they partake in a banquet, he and ʿImād. When they're about to serve the meal, a cat's paw gets entangled with the end of the thread. The Hoca does not reach out for eating. They said to the Hoca, "Why aren't you helping yourself?" The Hoca said, "But ʿImād has pulled the thread, so how should I eat?!"<sup>43</sup>

The Uzbek Afandi corpus also includes this story. While in the Ottoman version Nasreddin Hoca is the protagonist, Afandi only takes the role of the advisor to an anonymous crazy king and persuades him to have a thread tied around his foot.

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Ibrāhimbeg Laqay's imam during warfare against the Afghan government – whom he had summoned for being questioned about his role in the upheaval. (Recorded from a Laqay gentleman at a banquet in Khoja Bahā'uddīn village, Kunduz province, August 2006. Interestingly, the other gentlemen present immediately switched the code and continued to tell tekerleme-like stories about their own alleged gastronomical adventures.)

<sup>43</sup>

Boratav 1996: 125sq. No. 140.

When the ambassador came in and sat down, the king asked, "Tell me, are dogs and cats fat in your country?" The Afandi gently pulled the thread, and when the king had stopped talking he started to explain the "meaning" of this sentence to the ambassador: "What our Majesty insinuated with his words is that if dogs and cats are fat, it shows that people live in plenty". The ambassador was satisfied with this and bowed before the king. When the king saw this, he shouted at the Afandi: "Idiot! If I spoke such meaningful words, why did you pull the thread!"<sup>44</sup>

The Uzbek story echoes a text preserved in a serious narrative genre (or should we say a genre whose ambiguous character between funny entertainment and serious information is not usually acknowledged), in a late 17<sup>th</sup> century historical-cum-hagiographic text<sup>45</sup> from the Nogay Steppes about Chinggis-Khan's descendents in the lineage of Batu, the *Čingiz-nāma*. One of Batu's successors to the throne, Tödä Mängi, was insane but luckily he would take his noblemen's advice. When ambassadors from the Supreme Khan came for a visit, the advisors persuaded Tödä Mängi to tie a thread around his foot. A man would hide beneath his throne and any time he started talking nonsense, that man would pull his leg.

The day after they granted the ambassador an audience. (Tödä Mängi) enquired about the Khan's health and the well-being of the folks. Then he said, "Are there many mice in your lands?" He said yes. And he asked, "Does it rain a lot in your lands?" He said, "It does." The man who held the thread saw that he was starting to talk nonsense and so he pulled the thread. (Tödä Mängi) said to the ambassador, "I would have asked some more but they are pulling my leg." The advisors immediately saw the ambassador off.

<sup>44</sup> Afandi latifalari 1989: 219.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. DeWeese, Devin: *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde. Baba Tükles and Conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition*. University Park, Pennsylvania 1994: 194 fn. 83.

The ambassador told the Supreme Khan what had happened, and the emperor and his noblemen deliberated about what kind of a person that distant relative might be:

It is good that he asked about the rain because rain brings well-being to all the people. And it's not bad that he asked about the mice since they harm everyone. But they were unable to figure out what his "They are pulling my leg" meant.<sup>46</sup>

Since we know the whole story and its context, we know what that saying meant. But there are more difficult questions with which the story leaves us at odds: Is speech silver? Who is the fool? And: why is that funny? Or is it? – As narrative tradition goes, the Prophet Muḥammad assured his community that joking and jesting (*mazāḥ-u muṭāyiba*) is welcome (*mustaḥibb*) as long as it is not being exaggerated, does not convey lies, and is rendered in clean-and-right (*pāk-u rāst*) words.<sup>47</sup> Alas – or luckily – he allegedly did not resolve the ambiguity about these qualifications.

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<sup>46</sup> Faksimile of the original Turki text in *Utemiş Xadži* 1992: XVIII; my translation.

<sup>47</sup> From a Turki manuscript of Faxruddīn bin Mullā Husayn Wā'iz Kāshif's *Laṭā'if uṭ-ṭawā'if*, Berlin State Library (Staatsbibliothek Preußischer Kulturbesitz), Ms. or. oct. 1677 p. 8.

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