

Introduction

THE TALES

The forty-five tales included in this volume were selected on the basis of their popularity and the excellence of their narration from approximately two hundred tales collected on cassette tapes between 1978 and 1980 in various parts of Palestine—the Galilee (since 1948 part of the state of Israel), the West Bank, and Gaza. The criterion of popularity reflects our intention to present the tales heard most frequently by the majority of the Palestinian people. Both our own life-long familiarity with this material and the opinions of the raconteurs themselves helped us to assess a tale's popularity. We made a point of asking the tellers to narrate the tales heard most often in folktale sessions of the past, and in most cases we selected only those tales for which we had more than one version. In the few cases where variants were not available (e.g., Tale 44), excellence of narration was the determining criterion, as it was in choosing a version (always taken as a whole and without modification) from among the available variants.

In this collection we have included only the type of tale known in the Palestinian dialect as *ḥikāye* or *xurrafiyye*—that is, “folktale” proper. With such terms as *Märchen*, *wonder tale*, and *fairy tale* all used to designate the kind of narrative under discussion here, the word *folktale* almost defies definition. The Arabic terms, however, provide us with helpful clues. The first, *ḥikāye* (which, correctly translated, means “tale”), is derived from a root that means not only “to

narrate” but also “to imitate (artistically).” Hence the designation *ḥikāye* puts the emphasis on the mimetic, or artistic, aspect of narration, whereas *xurrafiyye* (properly translated, “fabula”) is derived from a root stressing its “fabulous,” or “fictitious,” aspect. (The term *xurrafiyye*, we must note, is the more inclusive of the two, for it is also used to refer not only to folktales but to other types of fictional oral narrative as well.)

This “fabulous” element in folktales has doubtless led the community to consider them a form of *kizib* or “fantasy” or “fiction” (literally, “telling lies”). And in fact it was by recourse to such a label as “a tale that is all lies from beginning to end” (as in the last episode of Tale 37) that we most frequently elicited the type of material we sought. The other designation used to obtain them, *ḥikāyāt ‘ajāyiz* (“old women’s tales”), has major implications for our understanding of this genre, for it clearly indicates that society considers the telling of these tales to be a woman’s art form. Of the seventeen tellers included here, only three are men.

In all likelihood there is a direct relationship between the first label (“all lies”) and the second (“old wives’ tales”). To the extent that the tales are thought to consist of lies, adult men tend to shun them, even though the vast majority of these men were exposed to them repeatedly as children. And to the extent that they are “old wives’ tales,” folktales are perceived by men as being somehow silly, their telling an activity fit only for women and children. The fabulous element in folktales lends them an air of improbability and unreality. A man who likes to listen to and tell folktales (in other words, an active male carrier) is considered to be a *niswanjī*, or one who prefers the company of women to that of men. In their gatherings (*dīwān*), men prefer to listen to epic stories (*sīra*), like that of Abū Zēd il-Hilālī, which is frequently sung to the accompaniment of the *rabāba* (single-stringed instrument with a flat sound box made of wood and goat skin). They also like to hear tales of Bedouin raids (*ḡazw*) and adventure (*muḡāmarāt*). These, collectively, are known as *qiṣṣa* (stories). Their content appears more realistic. It is not necessarily thought that the events described in them actually happened, only that they could have happened. The heroes of these stories, especially if they have a historical basis, are thought to have lived just yesterday and their conduct is considered exemplary.

Another major difference between folktales (*ḥikāye*) and stories (*qiṣṣa*) that hinges on the gender of the narrator lies in the manner of

delivery. Because most folktale tellers are women, their narration involves little gesticulation or physical movement. The performance aspect of telling tales is minimized, with the tellers relying on their voices and the power of the colloquial language to evoke a response. The tales told in the *dīwān*, in contrast, may involve a considerable amount of physical movement and acting out of the narrative. The distinction is especially apparent in cases where one person tells both types of story. For example, Šāfi', one of our best tellers (see "The Tellers," below), in performing to a male audience in the *dīwān*, would often jump up from his chair and try to act out the narrative, whereas in telling folktales he remained seated and hardly moved at all. Folktales thus offer their tellers a greater potential for linguistic expression than do epic stories. They are told from memory, and their language, though poetic in itself, is still the language of prose and the speaking voice. The tellers are free to give linguistic shape to the tale, to tell it in their own way, even though they cannot change its form. The stories narrated in the *dīwān*, unlike folktales, are frequently in the measured language of poetry, which must be recited rather than spoken, sometimes even with the aid of a printed text.

The Palestinian folktale is a highly developed art form. Its style, though not artificial, follows linguistic and literary conventions that set it apart from other folk narrative genres. It relies on verbal mannerisms and language flourishes not used in ordinary conversation, especially by men. Women were largely responsible for developing this style, and they carry on the tradition. To sound credible, men who tell these tales must adopt the narrative style of women. Šāfi', for example, was reluctant at first to admit that he knew folktales. He wanted to narrate the tales of romance and adventure preferred by men at the *dīwān*. We therefore had to tape several hours of these romantic tales before he consented to tell folktales. The art of the narrators consists in their ability to use creatively the narrative style received from tradition. Folktale style matures with age, and it is not surprising that the majority of tellers represented here were over sixty years of age when the tales were recorded (a fact also perhaps indicating that the Palestinian folktale tradition is dying out; more on this below). The cultural significance of old women's dominant role in folktale narration is not to be underestimated. As we shall see, women in their maturity are at the apogee of their authority in the society.

Folktales, moreover, are told in a special setting that distinguishes them not only from the stories recited in the men's *dīwān* but also from other types of folk narrative current in the society. Among these are tales illustrating proverbs (*maṭal*), describing a rare event (*nahfe*, *nādre*), or recreating a past occurrence (*sālfe*); animal fables (*ḥikāyet ḥayawān*); jinn tales (*ḥikāyet jān*), saints' legends (*ḥikāyet wili*); myths (*uṣṭūra*); and memorates (*muḡāmara*). A good illustration or the last category occurs at the end of Tale 42, where the men are sitting around on their side of the tent exchanging stories. These forms of narrative do not require a special setting for their telling. They are occasional and come up by chance in the course of ordinary conversation, when someone might say, "This reminds me of . . ." and then proceed to tell the appropriate story. The narration over, normal conversation resumes. These stories are rarely told for their own sake, as folktales are, but are usually used to illustrate a point, offer subtle recommendation concerning behavior, or volunteer a different perspective on a subject.

The settings in which the folktales presented here were recorded generally resembled the authentic folktale settings of the past, except for the presence of the tape recorder. The tales were all recorded at the homes of the tellers in the presence of a small audience, usually consisting of the collector and members of the teller's family. Occasionally children would be present, influencing thereby the course of the narration. Other than providing appreciative responses and asking the occasional question about unfamiliar words or expressions, the collector played a largely neutral role. Once a session began, tellers usually volunteered tales of their own accord. At the end of each telling, the collector thanked the teller, saying, "God save your tongue!" Although it was not difficult to locate tellers, it was not always easy to get the material we were seeking (as in the case of Šāfi').

In the past, folktales were told for entertainment, usually after supper during winter evenings, when work in the fields was at a minimum and people were indoors with time on their hands. During the summer there were likely to be other forms of entertainment or subjects for conversation, such as weddings and festive occasions, and folktales were not told. The most common setting for tale-telling was the small family gathering, consisting of two or three mothers from a single extended family and their children, combined perhaps with a neighbor or two and their children. Although men were occasionally present at these sessions, they

preferred to spend their time in the company of other men at the *diwān*. Large gatherings and formal visits are not appropriate settings for the telling of tales, which requires a relaxed and spontaneous atmosphere, free from the constraints imposed by the rules of hospitality.

Telling these folktales, then, is a social activity, part of a culture that puts heavy emphasis on the oral tradition and verbal ability and where conversation is valued for its own sake. People do not go visiting expressly to hear folktales, but rather because they enjoy each other's company and like to sit around in the evening chatting (*sahra*). They go where conversation is good, and the evenings entertaining. (The house of Šāfi' is popular because both he and his wife are good conversation-alists and storytellers.) At these small, intimate, family gatherings people casually drift into telling folktales. Someone might say, "Tell us a tale!" and if the mood is right a session begins. Usually the oldest woman present is deferred to. If she knows a tale and wishes to tell it, she will proceed with an opening formula such as "Testify there is no god but God!" When she finishes, she pronounces a closing formula, and someone else will take a turn. (Not all the tales in this collection, it should be noted, begin with an opening formula or end with a closing one. The closer a recording session came to duplicating an actual folktale setting, the more likely the tellers were to pronounce the formulas.)

The opening formula creates an air of expectation as the session unfolds. A casual evening's visit turns into an esthetic occasion for the duration of the telling. The atmosphere is aided by the dim light of an oil lamp or a kerosene lantern and by the attitude of the audience, who huddle around a clay brazier (*kānūn*) warming their hands over the embers. In modern times the experience of a folktale session would be equivalent to going to the cinema. The introductory formula ushers the audience into a space radically different from the space outside. Darkness, light, and shadow help shape the experience, as does the modulation in the teller's voice. Once begun, the tale is narrated straight through to the end. Long interruptions are not appreciated, nor would it be permissible for someone else to start another tale. The continuity of narrative time is essential, allowing the element of fantasy in the tales to take over the listeners' imaginations and help them break from ordinary experience. The audience are encouraged to suspend their disbelief until the closing formula brings them back to the world of everyday reality.

For such a setting, a special style and narrative attitude are necessary. The style imitates the speech patterns of ordinary conversation (we recall the root meaning of *ḥikāye*, “tale,” as “to speak”), and the narrative attitude reflects beliefs about magic and the supernatural that Palestinian society attributes more readily to women than to men. For men in general, not only is the fictional world of the tales something of a lie, but the manner of speech required to bring it into being sounds artificial as well. Folktale style depends on a variety of devices to put the action into the realm of fiction, whereas the story style preferred by men tends to emphasize historicity. The fact that the most common opening formula (*waḥdū l-lāh*, “Testify that Goa is One!”) is a kind of invocation to dispel the influence of jinn and ghouls would seem to indicate that the telling of folktales is a magical process involving the aid of powers whose influence must be neutralized before the narrative even begins. It would, for example, be totally inappropriate for someone to interrupt an ordinary conversation with an opening formula and then proceed to tell a folktale. The gap between the domains of life and fiction must remain absolute.

Among other devices of style that help to maintain this distance—and which audiences expect in a successful narration—are the frequent threefold repetitions, a passive manner of delivery, and a reliance on verbal mannerisms and flourishes that are more characteristic of women’s speech than of men’s. Threefold repetition (which is certainly not unique to the Palestinian folktale) lends an air of unreality to the events, as though an action were not valid until ritualistically repeated three times. Three is a magic number in many cultures, and in the tales its power works at the level not only of action but also of sentence structure. The most frequent syntactic pattern in all the tales is the parallel sentence with three verbs (“She reached out her hand, took the ring, and bolted the door again”), reflecting the paratactic pattern of narration in the tale as a whole. Absence of gesture removes visual stimulus, throwing listeners back on the expressive power of language. Finally, the verbal flourishes and mannerisms derived from women’s speech give the tales their particular character and are to be found in every tale without exception, even in those narrated by men. Those encountered most frequently in this volume include exclamatory interjections of all sorts (e.g., “Far be it from the listeners!”—*b’īd ‘an is-sām ‘in*—when a socially odious subject is mentioned) and

the forms of address used by women among each other ("O you whose face has been smeared with soot!"—*yā mšahḥara*).

Thus we see that the tale creates a time and space set apart from the rest of life in which events and transformations, because they have no equivalent in experience, can be understood only by the imagination and not by rational thought. The narrative attitude appropriate to folktales must somehow present the possibility of magical transformation as though it were an ordinary event, yet still allow the narrator to remain skeptical. Tellers frequently interject remarks such as "If the tale is to be trusted!" (an alienating device in the Brechtian sense) to remind listeners that the tale is, after all, a fiction. In this manner the narrative attitude identifies the elements of a possible fictional world but distances it from experience. For example, because merely to mention the jinn in narrative time (that is, while the tale is being told) could bring them into being, the narrator must avoid this possibility by invoking the name of Allah. This in fact is another verbal mannerism of women: mention of the jinn (who occur frequently in the tales) is immediately followed by the formula, "In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful!"

Although the folktales told in the type of setting just described are not specifically children's tales, the presence of children in the audience is essential to the whole activity. One would never find grown men and women telling folktales just to one another. Of course, adults, including the men, enjoy the tales and are usually on hand during a session, but it is the presence of children that shapes the event, affecting the manner of delivery and helping to create a sense of anticipation during which anything can happen. The tales in any case appeal to the children, who, more easily than the adults, can imagine the jinn, ghouls, and other supernatural beings that abound in them. These are frightening creatures, which mothers frequently use in warning ("You'd better behave, or the ghoul will devour you!"). The presence of the adults at these sessions, especially the mothers, is therefore reassuring to the children, and the whole process helps to socialize and imbue them with the values of the culture.

Folktale sessions do not go on for long hours into the night, partly because the fellahin go to bed early but also because a natural rhythm, or span of attention, exists beyond which telling and listening become

tedious. The length of a session is determined by the audience and the mood. If adults outnumber the children, the tales are likely to be more serious; with more children, shorter and more humorous stories are likely to be told. If people feel bored, or if there is an interruption from the outside, the session will come to an end. At any rate it rarely lasts longer than the time it would take to narrate four or five tales. Spontaneity is essential.

The Palestinian folktale is part of the Arabic folk narrative tradition. The tales are told in the Palestinian dialect, with its two major divisions of *fallāḥi* (village speech) and *madanī* (city speech). Most of the tales included here were narrated by villagers only because tellers were more available in the villages, where the tendency to preserve folk traditions is today much greater than in the cities. In times past, however, the folktale tradition was as popular in cities as in villages, perhaps even more so since city dwellers had more leisure time compared with peasants, who were tied to the cycle of the seasons. City dwellers tend to be more polished in their use of language than villagers, and they are less likely to hold the variety of folk beliefs exhibited by village tellers.

The tradition, as we have noted, is carried on mostly by older women in a household setting, but it is not unusual for girls and prepubescent boys to tell tales to one another or to their younger brothers and sisters for practice or pleasure. When going visiting, for example, parents will sometimes tempt their younger children to stay at home with promises of tales from their older brothers and sisters. Once puberty is reached, however, the boys will stop telling the tales; they now want to be regarded as men, who consider the telling of folktales a womanly, household activity, one intimately connected with the rearing of children. Before radio and television, folktales were the main form of entertainment for the young during the evenings. They were universally popular throughout the country, and there are very few Palestinians over the age of forty who have not heard them on at least one occasion. Their preservation up to the present day attests to this popularity.

Tellers have little room to improvise. Their function, as the audience understands it, is to give the tale its due by narrating it with all the stylistic devices and verbal flourishes at their command, but they may not change any of the details. Despite this expectation on the part of the audience, however, variation does arise (and necessarily so, for without variation the folktale traditions of the world would have ossi-

fied and died out long ago). Narrative details, or folk motifs, can fit into more than one plot context, and it would be surprising if different motifs were not woven into the same tale. The important consideration here, however, is not how variation comes into being—a thorny theoretical question in any case—but what the attitudes of tellers and audience toward that variation are. If a teller should narrate a tale with details different from the ones the audience knows, she will never claim originality but will always say she is telling it the way she remembers it. Or she might say she knows two versions of the tale and has decided to tell one rather than the other. Both explanations are acceptable to the audience. In this manner, once a new motif enters a tale it becomes a part of it, particularly for those hearing it for the first time.

The folktale tradition we have been describing falls within the context of the extended family and forms part of the social life of a settled and flourishing peasant community. With the recent displacement of the Palestinian people, the social and geographic bases for the tradition have been severely disrupted. Certainly, the frequency of tale-telling sessions has declined markedly, and with the people's continued dispersal the chances that the tradition will survive are dim. Modern, educated Palestinian parents are more likely to read than tell tales to their children, and the tales they do read are frequently European ones translated into Modern Standard Arabic. Because, as we have said, the colloquial language is itself an essential aspect of the experience of the tale, the children of today are not hearing the same tales their parents did.

Yet in spite of the odds against it, the tradition still survives. Grandmothers in the villages and refugee camps still tell the tales to the children, and young people interested in the tradition do become active carriers. One of the tellers included in this volume is a twenty-two-year-old woman from the West Bank (Tale 31).

THE TELLERS

There is nothing unusual about the seventeen tellers from whom the tales were collected. They do not think of themselves primarily as tale-tellers, nor do they feel they have a special ability. They are all householders, the great majority (fourteen) being housewives who can neither read nor write. Only two of them live in a city (Gaza and Jerusalem); the others have lived in villages all their lives. To introduce

readers to the life circumstances of the tellers, we have chosen to focus on those among them who have given us the largest number of tales. Knowledge of their circumstances will help us understand the tales they have told.

Fāṭme (Tales 1, 9, 11, 23, 24, 26, 36, 38, 43), fifty-five years old when these tales were collected, is a housewife who lives in the village of 'Arrābe in the Galilee, next door to her father's family. Married to her (patrilateral parallel) first cousin, she has never lived more than twenty yards from the house of her birth. She has given birth to twenty live children, eleven of whom have survived. A passive carrier of the tradition, she does not normally tell tales, nor is she known in the village as a teller. When she did consent to tell some tales, she was apologetic because she could not remember details quickly enough. Not being literate or a regular teller, she was not entirely comfortable using the flourishes that enhance the style of the tales. She apologized frequently when using them, saying that was the way she had heard them from her mother. Nevertheless, she is a good conversationalist and, in spite of all her apologies, told the tales well.

The presence of the collector's children, who were hearing these tales for the first time, was a great help in drawing the material from her. She would not have told the tales straight into the cassette machine, or to an audience composed only of adults. The children made her feel it was not a serious matter, and, not surprisingly, most of the tales she related are those that could be considered "children's tales." Enjoying the telling, she laughed along with the children at the funny spots; the relaxed mood no doubt colored her choice of material, for her tales are among the most humorous in the entire corpus. (A good teller in a natural tale-telling situation, it must be noted, would normally not break the spell of narration so frequently, commenting on the action and laughing with the audience. She would give the tale its due by telling it as it should be told, leaving the rest to the audience.)

Šāfi' in contrast, is an active carrier of the tradition, that is, one of four or five in any village community who show an intense personal interest in preserving and transmitting the practice. Because he has a good memory, his repertoire is large, and he is always seeking to increase it. He differs from most other active carriers in being male and in having learned to read simple texts. He therefore has access to the material from the Arabic oral tradition available in print, such as

the epic story (*sīra*) of Abū Zēd il-Hilālī and tales from the *Thousand and One Nights*, which have left an indelible mark on his work. Indeed, he at times had recited parts of the epic stories, performing them to an audience of friends at his home in 'Arrābe (Galilee).

These few facts tell us a great deal about his tales (5, 8, 10, 15, 25, 44), which most resemble the type of adventure tale available in print. At age sixty-five, he is a mature teller. His sense of plotting and double-plotting is superb, and his narrative style is highly polished. The actions in his tales evolve logically, and the transitions are natural; there is none of the clumsiness in delivery or forgetfulness of detail that collectors sometimes encounter. Having been a shepherd and a plowman all his life, he has direct knowledge of the land and its contours and of the details of the husbandman's daily life. The material culture of the Palestinian peasant is open to our gaze in his tales, as are human virtues and vices. Being an experienced teller, he was able to pace himself, filling approximately one side of a sixty-minute cassette for each of his tales.

His wife, Almāza (Tales 14, 18, 37), is also an active carrier of the tradition. She has told stories all her life, enjoys telling them, and prides herself on knowing many. Unlike Fāṭme, who has heard tales from only one source (her mother), Almāza has heard them from a wide variety of sources. She was in her late fifties when her tales were collected.

At age sixty-five, Im Nabīl (Tales 17, 19, 28, 30, 39) lived with her son in the village of Turmuṣ'ayya (district of Ramallah) when we collected her tales. Like most of the other tellers, she could not read or write, but she knew many tales—long ones, short ones, humorous ones, tales of adventure, and “tales for children. In some respects she is the archetypal old woman, the repository of old wives' tales. Because she had not told the tales in a long time, her narration was not always fluent; she halted frequently, recalling details. Nevertheless, her delivery was authoritative, and she knew exactly the type of tale the collector was seeking. Of the eight she volunteered, five were selected for inclusion.

Finally, a word about Im Darwīš, who is responsible for two of the best tales in the collection (Tales 21, 45). She was about sixty-five when we recorded her. The daughter of the village chief of Dēr Ḥannā, she is married to the son of the village chief of 'Arrābe (both villages in the Upper Galilee). Although she can neither read nor write, unlike most of the other tellers she is not directly connected with agriculture. Both her

tales weave prose and poetry in an organic manner, relying on a good memory for poetry and the ability to use it effectively in the structure of the tale. Tales like “*Şōqak Bōqak*” (Tale 21), a sophisticated romance, are rarely ever told by peasant tellers in a village milieu. Her mother, who was originally from the city of Haifa, had taught her both tales.

THE TALES AND THE CULTURE

Having selected the forty-five tales to be included in this volume on the bases discussed earlier, we then had to arrange them so as to give the reader the most meaningful perspective. In many collections, tales are presented at random, without regard to form or content. We rejected this arrangement because it does not demonstrate an organic connection between the tales and the culture that gives rise to them. Other arrangements are based on the form of each tale—that is, on its Aarne-Thompson type number (for which, see Appendix C)—but this approach too was rejected on the same grounds. The best arrangement, we thought, is one that not only relates the tales to the context but also helps them cohere one to another. On considering the tales as a whole, we observed that they fit into a pattern reflecting an individual’s life cycle from childhood to old age. We therefore decided to divide them according to this pattern into five thematic groups—individuals, family, society, environment, and universe—some of which are further divided into subgroups. These categories are useful only to the extent that they help us understand the tales; the discussion in the afterword to each group will make clear why certain tales were grouped together.

Our decision to adopt this scheme is based on our desire to ground the tales in the culture from which they arise. It would be wrong to start out with the assumption that the tales merely reflect the culture, or that the culture constitutes the subject matter of the tales, for then their interest would be strictly regional, limited to the cultural area from which they came. Rather, the forms of these tales, which are derivable directly from the Arabic and Semitic traditions in folk narrative, are related also to the Indo-European tradition, with which they share recognizable plot patterns (as identified by Aarne-Thompson type numbers). Certainly, the form of each tale is part of its content. If, for example, we consider “*Sackcloth*” (Tale 14) on the basis of plot alone, we see that it is in essence the story of Cinderella (and