

The Trickster Against His Will: Towards the Study of Somali Folk Narratives*

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*Before it can become an object of serious and
Well-considered study, every branch of knowledge needs
To be classified.*

S. Thompson, *The Folktale*, 1978, p. 41

I. Introduction

The creative endowments of the Somali people manifest themselves not only in the traditional poetry but also in the narrative forms of folklore. They divide their folk prose into *sheeko* (a tale) and *sheekaxariiro* (a fairy tale). According to the general theory of cliché,¹ the Somali array of narrative art provides examples at various levels. The supra-phrasal clichés of transferred meaning, (e.g., fables, didactic animal, legendary, and fairy tales) have as their counterparts structurally similar supra-phrasal units with directly motivated general meaning, in other words anecdotes, schwanks,² and novelistic tales.³

Also present are other types of clichés typical of African narrative folklore, except for those myths which are understood as mono-semantic stories that describe and explain outward things. These seem not to have been preserved in the Somali case. But examples can be found of mythological tales ("Holes in the Sky,"⁴ "Heavenly Camel") and related aetiological tales originating from myths which elucidate the characteristics of animals, their habits and distinctive features: "The Tortoise's Shell," "Why the Hyena has Short Hind Legs," "The Jackal has Changed Its Gait but Does Not Walk like the Prophet," and others.

Thanks to the work of several generations of scholars, an abundance of Somali folktales has been collected and published in Somali and other languages, notably English, German, Italian, and Russian. Included are such masterpieces as "A Soothsayer Tested,"⁵ "The Greedy Man, the Boy and the Hyena," "A Tragedy," "The Human Trial," "A Reproach," and "The Bustard," among others.

My collection of more than three hundred Somali folktales was amassed from Somali and foreign publications and from Somali informants. I divide these tales into five types: mythological tales (*sheekooyin mala-awaal ah*), animal tales (*sheekooyin xayawaan*), legends (*sheekooyin sooyaal ah*), fairy tales (*sheekaxariirooyin*), and novelistic tales (*sheekooyin murtiyeed*).⁶

Among the main features of the Somali narrative one notes its cyclic recurrence, brevity, simplicity of composition, and limited expressive means. Due to frequent and sudden changes of motifs, the action in Somali folktales typically develops swiftly. Many narrative texts sparkle with humor. This rich and intriguing material seems, however, almost unknown to contemporary Somali readers as well as to foreign researchers engaged in comparative folklore studies. It is extremely important for scholars to concentrate on (1) recording those pieces of Somali folklore still remembered by elders, (2) republishing existing collections of folktales in Somali, (3) translating them into major European languages, and (4) critical application of cataloging as accumulated in *The Types of the Folktale*,⁷ by A. Aarne, and *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*,⁸ by S. Thompson. The possibility of incorporating plots and motifs of Somali folktales into the systems of classification of the narrative folklore were examined in my *Folktales of the Somali People*, which included two hundred Somali narratives translated into Russian.⁹

II. The Cataloguing of Plot Types

A thorough investigation of the extensive list of Aarne's plot types found only nineteen that completely or partly coincided with the plots¹⁰ of Somali folklore texts from the book. Those that are completely identical include N75: "The Help of the Weak," in which the mouse gnaws the net and liberates the captured lion (The Somali tale is "The Lion and the Mouse"); N110: "Belling the Cat," in which the mouse buys a bell for the cat but no one dares tie it on her ("The Mice and the Cat"); and N1419H: "Woman Warns Lover of Husband by Singing a Song" ("The Women's Deception").

The other plots differ in details. They are N41: "Fox in the Orchard," featuring a fox who had overeaten, then fasted for six days to slim down and return underground through the fox hole. In the Somali tale, "The Hungry Jackal," the same fate happened to the jackal who gorged himself on hens. In N52: "The Ass without a Heart," the ass as

a toll gatherer from wayfarers is killed by the lion for asking for such a charge. The fox eats the ass' heart. When the lion requests it, the fox replies that the ass clearly had no heart since he was foolish enough to ask the lion for a toll in the first place.

In the Somali tale "The Donkey and the Dog," the heart of the silly donkey that cried out in a dangerous place was eaten by the dog. Concerning folktale N207A: "Ass Induces Overworked Bullock to Feign Sickness," the ass must do the bullock's work and persuades the animal to return. The plot of the Somali tale "The Donkey and the Ox" is shorter and does not mention the bull's return.

In N655A: "The Stray Camel and the Clever Deductions," four men detect the tracks of an animal and from them deduce that (a) it was a camel, (b) it was one-eyed (grass is eaten on one side of the road only), (c) it was lame (had uneven tracks), (d) it was carrying oil (drops of oil are seen on the ground), and (e) it had no tail. In the Somali tale "The Lost Camel,"¹¹ three brothers are able to deduce that the camel was one-eyed, overloaded, and had no tail.

Next is N285D: "Serpent Refuses Reconciliation." A snake is given a gift of milk and then emits gold from its tail as a reward to its provider. Later the man's son demands that all the gold be provided at once and cuts off the snake's tail. The snake bites the boy. The man tries to give the snake more milk but they can't be reconciled for each has injuries that cannot be forgotten. The Somali plot is no less dramatic. A nomad with his family residing in the snake's land is permitted to stay for only one night. The nomad wants to stay longer and decides to kill the snake. He strikes at a snake sleeping on a stump with his axe. The snake awakens and escapes. At night, the venomous snake bites the nomad's eldest son. In the morning the man offers reconciliation, but the snake refuses. "Until I see the trace of your axe and you see the tomb of your son there can't be peace between us," insists the snake: "Peace that's broken can't be mended."

A famous Russian folklorist has noted the originality of the Somali plot about the cannibal woman Dheg-dheer, whose one ear was longer than the other one,¹² called "The Cannibal Woman."

Several other of Aarne's plots vary in Somali folktales: N62: "Peace Among the Animals – The Fox and the Cock" (The Somali tale "The Cock and the Jackal"); N288C:* "The Deliberate Turtle" ("How the Tortoise went for Water"); N157:* "Lion Searches for Man" ("The Lion"); N2042A:* "Trial Among the Animals" (the Somali cumulative tale "The Human Trial"); N1341: "Fools Warn Thief What Not to

Steal,” who explain where everything is and where the key is kept (The Somali tale “Two Fools”); N1339E: “Strange Foods,” in which a fool is unacquainted with figs (in the Somali tale “The First Dates haven’t been Fried Yet,” a simpleton does not know that dates need no cooking); N1624: “Thief’s Excuse” (the Somali tale “A Lie leaves no Trace”); N1920: “Contest in Lying” (“Too Much Lies”); N1456: “The Blind Fiancée” involves the search for a needle (the character of the Somali tale “A Boy and a Girl” is an almost blind bridegroom); N1353: “The Old Woman as a Trouble Maker” (“The Old Woman’s Evil”); N926C: “Cases Solved in a Manner Worthy of Solomon” (“The True Mother,” from the Somali cycle about wise Siyaad Dharyo Dhoobe).

Several of the above-mentioned plots from Somali folktales are actually known elsewhere around the world. Such “wandering” plots are found among the narrative folklore of many people who speak different languages and live in different habitats with no common historical roots or cultural traditions.

For the majority of the plots in my Somali folktales book, there is no place in Aarne’s cataloguing. It cannot be explained by the fact that Aarne’s index is only based on the narratives of the European and Indian areas.¹³ The cataloguing of the international folktale stock cannot be based on plots in principle. For this purpose a plot is too large a structure.

III. The Cataloguing of Motifs

Much more helpful are “those details out of which full-fledged narratives are composed,”¹⁴ i.e., motifs. According to Thompson:

Most motifs fall into three classes. First are actors in a tale — gods or unusual animals or marvelous creatures. Second come some certain items in the background of the action — magic objects, unusual customs, strange beliefs, and the like. In the third place there are single incidents — and these comprise the great majority of motifs. It is this last class that can have an independent existence and that may therefore serve as true tale types.”¹⁵

Some examples of those motifs are “Raising of the Sky, Origin of Stars, Clouds and Rain” (the Somali mythological tale “Holes in the Sky”¹⁶); “Attempt of the People to Reach the Sky and to Obtain the Heavenly Camel Constellation” (the Somali tale “Heavenly Camel”¹⁷); “Battle

Between Birds and Animals" ("The Hares and the Pheasants"); and "Marriage Tests" are found in many Somali novelistic tales.

The identifiable motifs of Somali folktales that number over several thousand belong to all chapters of Thompson's motif-index. The only exception is "The Dead," marked by the Latin E, which consists of the motifs of resuscitation, ghosts and other revenants, reincarnation and the soul. The motifs of Somali narratives are most fully represented in the following chapters: "Animals" (B), "Taboo" (C), "Tests" (H), "The Wise and the Foolish" (J), and "Deceptions" (K). The most widespread motifs include H360-389: "Bride Tests" (the Somali tales "The Best Mat for a Man," "A Good Wife," and others); H580-599: "Enigmatic Statements" ("Wiil-Waal and his Rival," "A Secret Message," "A Traveller," and others); H900-1199: "Test of Prowess: Tasks" ("Giant Gannaje," "Unusual Skin," "A Throat," and others); J200-499: "Choices" ("The Choice," "Which Girl Should He Marry?," and others); J1500-1649: "Clever Practical Retorts" ("The Hyena and the Jackal," "Three Fools," and "How Kabacalaf Outwitted Huryo," among others).

Many Somali motifs are not fixed in Thompson's motif-index. Such examples include SA179.14.¹⁸ "God Shortens the Hind Legs of the Hyena" (The Somali tale "Why the Hyena has Short Hind Legs"); SA2494.3.6: "Enmity between Hyena and Lion" ("Why the Hyena and the Lion Quarreled"); SD621.1.2: "Lizard by Day, Woman by Night" ("The Lizard," and others). The original motifs represent a valuable contribution by the creators of Somali narrative folklore to the body of world folk literature.

To catalogue motifs according to Thompson's system is no easy task. A main difficulty is related to the possibility of different interpretations of the significant elements of a folktale and to some weak points in the semantic harmony of the system itself. For instance, what happened to the jackal who imitated the walking style of the Prophet (the Somali tale "The Jackal has Changed Its Gait but Does Not Walk like the Prophet") may be attributed to SA2273.3: "Animal Characteristics: Imitation of Human-Being;" A2440: "Animal Characteristics: Carriage;" J512: "Animal Should Not Try to Change His Nature;" or J2413: "Foolish Imitation by an Animal."

Only after careful motif-cataloguing "will it be possible to make adequate use of the [Somali narrative folklore] collections now existing in print and in manuscript."¹⁹

IV. The Two Main Motifs of Somali Animal Tales: The Trickester Against His Will

"The Lion and the Squirrel"²⁰ belongs to the genre of animal tales that occupy an important place in Somali narrative folklore. Their main feature is an allegory: the animals are implicitly deemed to behave like humans. Two motifs are regularly used in these folktales: (1) the unification of the beasts' efforts for joint hunting or tending their livestock; and (2) their deliverance from rivals and the ultimate seizure of a valuable herd.

The main characters of this genre are a lion, a hyena, and a jackal. Other beasts and birds — cheetah, leopard, baboon, turtle, squirrel, and ostrich — act in them as well.

The role of domestic animals such as camels, cows, donkeys, sheep, and goats is typically passive. As the king of the beasts, the lion is feared and obeyed by everybody. He is crafty but not wise and often cannot foresee the consequences of his actions ("Greed," "The Lion and the Squirrel"). A rare exception is the tale about bulls in which the lion manages to embroil and eat them, one after another. These animals, according to folktales, are not endowed with intelligence ("The Three Bulls").

The lion is avid and fierce. Whenever booty is supposed to be shared, he appropriates either its choicest portion ("The Nine Hyenas and the Lion," "The Seven Baboons and the Lion") or the biggest part ("The Knocked-Out Eye of the Hyena"). Typically, he takes everything ("The Lion, the Hyena, the Leopard, the Cheetah and the Jackal," and others).

In case there is no booty yet hunger must be satisfied, the lion shows disdain for his own subjects. In "The Clever Jackal," the lion pretends to be ill, lures other beasts into his den, and then eats them one at a time. Only the wily jackal escapes. He had noticed many footprints leading into the lion's house, but none coming out.

The clever and observant jackal plays the role of a trickster in Somali animal tales.²¹ Sometimes his pranks are spontaneous and funny (as in the tale "The Lion and the Jackal"). More often they are well-thought-out and sometimes cruel ("The Tongue of the Crocodile," "How the Jackal took Revenge on the Hyena," "The Blind Hyena and the Jackal"). Sometimes the cunning character manages to exploit the lion ("How the Jackal took Revenge on the Hyena") or even to get rid of him ("The Intrigues of the Jackal," "How the Jackal Took Revenge on the Lion").

We now turn to a tale about the squirrel. At its beginning is motif number one. Compared to other tales of this kind, it is slightly modified because we are informed about the number of she-camels that belonged separately to their respective owners. Apart from the highly disparate positions of the lion and the squirrel in the “animal hierarchy,” it corresponds to their dimensions. This establishes the intrigue of the narration. The lion needs only one she-camel to make one hundred head. He will seize the first opportunity to get rid of the squirrel and become quite rich, for a herd of one hundred she-camels is a sign of great wealth in Somalia.

The vulnerable position of the squirrel is seen in the fact that he could not lift the fallen large bush that lay at the entrance of the enclosure. It will play the role of triggering the anticipated conflict whereby the squirrel is prepared for the role of the victim. There was next a great surprise. Instead of killing the tiny rodent with one paw punch, the lion gulped him down. Finding himself in the lion’s stomach, the squirrel (seemingly destined for victimhood) turns into an executioner. The small animal known as just a common field toiler is transformed instead into a witty trickster.

Having rejected the pleas of the unfortunate lion to leave his body through any of its three holes, the squirrel kills him. Having escaped (we know not how), he performs a triumphant song whereby he proclaims himself a man (albeit a small one) who has heroically vanquished a massive enemy. The tale is crowned with another well-known motif: the squirrel gets the hundred she-camels. It is not clear why he needs them. He is unable to protect them, does not drink milk, and eats no meat. It doesn’t matter, though. As Shakespeare so aptly put it, “the Moor did his duty.” The tale can come to an end.

V. Some Tricks of the Somali Animal Trickster

The goal of the jackal-trickster in Somali animal tales²² is the appropriation of somebody else’s or common property, usually a she-camel or a herd of cows or camels. He achieves this objective through a series of different tricks. Within the framework of the terminology elaborated for the description of the tricks of the Raven, the cultural hero and trickster of the Paleo-Asiatic epics,²³ the tricks of the jackal are usually built on the following predicates:

A. *Imaginary bait*. In the tale “How the Jackal Took Revenge on the Lion,” the trickster persuades his rival to swallow a stone coated with

chewing resin. The lion chokes to death. The same trick appears in the tale "The Intrigues of the Jackal." The ostrich chokes on a stone received from the jackal and is unable to say a word to a lion who gets angry and kills him;

B. *Instigation*. In the same tale, the jackal first disposes of the hyena by encouraging him to extract some ghee from a tree trunk by knocking it three times with his head. He then gets rid of the lion, having persuaded him to rest upon a disguised pit. He falls upon the unseen hot coals underneath and dies.

C. *Imaginary mutual aid*. In the same tale, the jackal and the hare kill and eat a newborn she-camel. The trickster suggests they help each other remove the remnants of meat stuck in their teeth in order to disguise their crime from the lion. The hare tries his best, but the jackal inserts between the hare's teeth bits of the meat from his own mouth. The lion examines the teeth of both animals and then kills the hare.

It is interesting that when the jackal acts roughly (e.g., tries to kill a weaker rival), he perishes himself. In the tale "The Tortoise and the Jackal," he used a very heavy stone to hit an innocent reptile with which he shared a herd of cows. While doing so, he loses his balance and falls into a deadly abyss.

The jackal also gets punished when he behaves in a silly manner as in the tale "The Tortoise and the Jackal's Habit." He ignores the tortoise's warning to be silent while in a man's garden. The jackal retorts, saying, "When I am sated I always bark. This is my habit." When they cross a river together with the jackal astride the tortoise's back, the reptile starts flailing causing the jackal to fall into the water and drown. The last words he hears come from the tortoise who warns, "When I reach the middle of the river I always start swinging. This is *my* habit."

In some Somali animal tales the tricks may be based on an imaginary threat, insidious advice, overt teasing, imaginary death, deceptive relationships, or an imaginary weakness (as described in the aforementioned theoretical source). The rather limited number (about forty) of such tales available to me is insufficient for me to confirm this assumption. Yet the imaginary threat, for example, may be detected in at least two Somali novelistic tales: "Geeddi-the-Cheat" and "Truth and Falsehood." As for the faked death, where the trickster pretends to be dead, the potential death of our trickster against his will seems to be another of its variants.

*My thanks to Prof. Charles Gesheker for his helpful comments on an earlier draft.

Appendix

"The Lion and the Squirrel"²⁴

Once a lion that kept ninety-nine she-camels and a squirrel that kept only one decided to band together. Every morning one would set off for the pasture while the other stayed home to rest. The lion would open the enclosure and let out the camels because the squirrel could not lift the big bush, which had been felled and positioned at the compound's entrance.²⁵

One evening when the herd was in the enclosure the lion set off in search of new grazing areas. "I'll be back by the morning," he said.

When dawn came and the lion did not return the squirrel began to worry. He went to the enclosure, but could not open it to let the animals out. The lion finally appeared after three days. When he saw the hungry camels he flew into a rage. "Why did you keep them in the enclosure?" he shouted. "Look how lean they've gotten!"

Before the squirrel could explain, the lion grabbed him and gulped him down. When the squirrel found himself in the lion's stomach he started to scratch it with his sharp nails. The lion howled with pain and told the squirrel to get out of him.

"But how can I get out?," asked the squirrel.

"Through my nose!"

"No," protested the squirrel. "There's mucous there."

"Then through my backside!"

"There's shit there."

"So get out through my mouth!"

"There's snot there."

The squirrel continued aggressively scratching until the lion, unable to stand the pain, expired. Then the squirrel got out of the lion and sang:

“Did anybody see how the small man defeated the big one?
Did anybody see how the squirrel killed the lion?”

He then kept all one-hundred she-camels for himself.

Libaax iyo dabaggaalle

Beri baa libaax sagaashan iyo sagaal halaad leh iyo dabaggaalle tulud lihi geel isku darsadeen. Maalinba mid baa geela raaci jiray, kan kalana wuu nasan jiray. Libaaxa uun baase xerada dhacanta saari jiray, kana rogi jiray.

Habeen baa markii geelii la soo xereyey libaaxii sahan u baxay, isla caawa inuu soo laabto baana ballanku ahaa. Waagii hadduu baryay, libaaxiina iman waayay baa dabaggaalle inuu geelii oodda ka qaado isku deyey, wuuse kari waayay. Libaaxii saddex beri kaddib buu soo laabtay. Geelii oo mooradii ku silacsan buuna ugu yimid. Dabadeed isagoo caraysan buu dabaggaallihii ku yiri:

- Maxaad geela oodda uga rogi weyday? Maxaadse xerada ugu celisey?

Isagoon jawaab ka sugin buuna haabtay oo dhunxiyey. Dabaggaalle isagoo bed qaba kolkuu calooshii libaaxa tegay buu bilaabay inuu xiidmaha jarjaro. Libaaxii markuu xanuun la adkeysan waayay buu dabaggaallihii ku yiri:

- Maandhow, iga soo bax!
- Xaggee ka baxaa? – baa dabaggaallihii yiri.
- Sanka, – baa libaaxii yiri.
- Sanka duufka lahaa, maya, maya! – buu ugu jawaabay.
- Haddaba, dabada iga soo bax, – buu yiri libaaxii.
- Dabada xaarka lahaa, maya, maya! – buu ugu warceliyey dabaggaallihii.
- Haddaba afka iga soo bax, – buu libaaxii yiri.
- Afka xaakada lahaa, maya, maya! – baa dabaggaallihii ku jawaabay.

Kolla bixid dooni mayne xiidmihii buu jarjaray, libaaxiina siduu u margaagayay buu goobtii ku qurbaxay. Markuu hubsaday in aarkii geeryooday buuna soo baxay dabaggaallihii oo heestan qaaday:

Nin yar oo nin weyn dilay ma aragteen?
Dabaggaalle aar dilay ma aragteen?

Halkaas buuna boqolkii halaad ugu haray.

Notes

1. G. Permyakov, *Ot pogovorki do skazki (From Proverb to Folk Tale)*. Moscow, 1979.
2. Plot anecdotes consisting of several episodes.
3. Permyakov 1979, p. 59.
4. The folktales mentioned in this article can be found in the list of publications in which they appeared for the first time.
5. A detailed analysis of this folktale by the pioneer of Somali studies in Russia, A. Zholkovsky, is in Jama Musse Jama's *Essays in Honour of Muuse Ismaaciil Galaal* (Pisa, 2011).
6. Waxaa la yidhi – Sheekooyin hidde ah (Cologne, 1996); Somali folktales (Moscow 1997); Chetire giyeni/Four hyenas/ Afar waraabe (Moscow 2016).
7. Antti Aarne, *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography*, translated and enlarged by S. Thompson (Helsinki: Academia Scientarum Fennica, 1961).
8. Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fables, Jest-Books, and Local Legends*, Vol. I – VI (Bloomington, IN, 1955–1958).
9. *Somaliyskiye narodniye skazki (Folktales of the Somali People)*, (Moscow 1997).
10. Only full-fledged plots were taken into consideration.
11. The original title is “The Smarter You Are, the Farther You Go to Relieve your Nature.” The English titles of this and some other Somali tales have been modified.
12. E. S. Kotlyar, “Afrikanskaya skazka (Opit tipologicheskogo issledovaniya)/African Fairy Tale,” *Experience of Typological Research* (Moscow, 2002), pp. 135–136.
13. The limited effectiveness of Aarne’s system for indexing the non-European folklore was noted by many scholars, in particular by G. Levington, the compiler of “The Eskimo Tales Typological Motif-Index,” *Skazki i mifi eskimosov* (Moscow, 1985). The same was mentioned by S. Thompson, “Outside of Europe . . . Aarne’s index is of little use. In the remoter parts of the world the European tale-types are applicable to very few stories,” in *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Vol. 1 (1955–1958), p. 10.
14. S. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Vol. 1, p. 10.
15. S. Thompson, “The Folktale,” pp. 415-16.
16. E. S. Kotlyar, *Ukazatel’ afrikanskikh mifologicheskikh syuzhetov i motivoov (The Index of the African Mythological Plots and Motifs)* (Moscow, 2009), p. 56.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
18. The S before the number of a motif means that this is a Somali motif only.
19. S. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, p. 10. The words in square brackets have been added by G. Kapchits.
20. See this tale in English and Somali in Appendix.

21. In at least two of them there are other real tricksters: a squirrel (“The Squirrel’s Reception”) and a snake (“The Snake and the Squirrel”). In the variant of the last tale, published by Ciise M. Siyaad, the trickster is a leopard.
22. In the Somali novelistic tales there seem to be two tricksters: Geeddi-the-Cheat (Geeddi Khayaano) and Yoonis-the-Thief (Yoonis Tuug).
23. E. Novik, “Struktura skazochnogo tryuka (The Structure of the Fairytale Trick),” *Of mifa k literature (From Myth to Literature)* (Moscow, 1993).
24. G. Kapchits, *Chetire giyeni/Four hyenas/Afar waraabe* (Moscow 2016).
25. The Somali nomads make fences from felled bushes and branches of trees.

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