



No Brains

Maghreb Sufism – Tunisia, Algeria

One day ʿĪḥā saw a group of neighbours pass by, all dressed in colourful clothes, carrying banners, and armed to the teeth.

‘Where are you going dressed like this?’ asked ʿĪḥā, in amazement.

‘We’re going to war!’ answered one of them. ‘A neighbouring emir is offending our emir, and he is saying that we are not men enough to face his army. So we are going to show him who we are.’

‘The battle will be tough,’ said another, ‘but we will have a chance to seize the glory.’

‘Wonderful!’ exclaimed ʿĪḥā. ‘I thought I would never have been able to experience glory by myself. Also, I’ve never been at war, and that must be exciting.’

‘Well then, join us!’ they told him.

A few days later they came to war and, as soon as the captain of their unit gave the order to charge the enemy, ʿĪḥā was shot by an arrow in the middle of the forehead!

‘Quick! Take him to the surgeon!’ shouted one of his neighbours, who had witnessed him fall.

They took him to a *haima*, located at the rear, and there the surgeon examined the wound with concern.

‘The arrow must have pierced the brain,’ said the doctor to his assistant. ‘We could extract it, but the risk lies in the amount of brain that we could remove from behind the arrow.’

ÿhā, hardly able to open his eyes, said to the surgeon:

‘Do not worry, sir. You can easily draw the arrow. Fear not. You won’t drag my brains out with it.’

‘You shut up!’ exclaimed the surgeon. ‘Here, I am the only person who understands this kind of wound. How do you know that the arrow has not reached your brain?’

‘Well, because if I had the even the smallest brain, it would never have occurred to me joining my neighbours in order to wage war.’ □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2020).

Under license Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA.



Comments

The main character in this story, who, in Tunisia, goes by the name of ÿhā is, neither more nor less, than the famous Mullah Nasruddin (*Mollah Naşr al-Dīn*) of the Persian Sufi oral tradition. This is the Nasreddin Hodja of Turkish Sufism, known in all Muslim lands by various names: ÿuḥā, ÿehā, Naşr al-Dīn Joḃa, ÿawha o Goha, among many others (Thomas de Antonio, 1993, p. 190).

Nasruddin is an archetype of the human collective unconscious, the Trickster archetype, an anti-hero who seems to offer us a somewhat deficient moral model. He is constantly trying to confuse or deceive other characters without respecting social norms or conventions. But he is also a troubling figure, capable of being ingenious and clever at times, but extremely clumsy at others.

The Trickster combines ‘the cheater and the clown, the sage and the jester, the teacher and the madman, the social offender and the model citizen, the creator of the world and the one who disrupts

everything in it. The Trickster is everything at the same time' (Cutanda, 2016, p. 238).

This archetype appears in almost every culture on the planet. We have: Anansi the Spider in African cultures; Coyote or Iktomi the Spider of the North American First Nations; the god Bamapana who features in the mythology of the Australian Aborigines. Even in our contemporary culture, the Trickster appears in the form of characters like Bugs Bunny or Pippi Langstrump.

In the myths of ancestral cultures, he often emerges as a cultural hero, the one who makes human society possible –like Raven in Northern Canadian and Arctic cultures. Furthermore, he serves as a communication link between the first beings of Creation.

However, behind this appearance of somewhat despicable and antisocial morality, the Trickster is a true teacher of society. According to Wesley-Esquimaux (2011, p. 198):

Even from a contemporary standpoint, we are able to see through the dichotomous representation, and his humorous, bumbling, lustful, gluttonous, greedy, and usually selfish actions, to a trickster figure that is a hero who is taught and teaches not only independence, as Victor Barnouw would have it, but interdependence (Barnouw, 1955, p. 341–355). From the beginning, the trickster and first beings are interrelated, interdependent figures that teach and learn hard lessons about being a human in an all too human world.

In short, the Trickster is an archetype of mediation between pairs of opposites, thus creating an image of the uncertainty and complexity of our human experience. He is a symbol of human selfishness and, at the same time, a warning about the dangers of it.

But perhaps his most important cultural role is that of a *safety valve*. This is because, if a society loses its way, 'the disconcerting and transgressive archetype of the Trickster will inspire some of its members from the collective unconscious to adjust their attitudes and actions' (Cutanda, 2016, p. 239). As stated by Conroy and Davis (2002, p. 256), the Trickster 'serves a ritualised function in mocking and challenging the forces of the status quo'.

Sources

- Conroy, J. C. & Davis, R. A. (2002). Transgression, transformation and enlightenment: The Trickster as poet and teacher. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 34(3), 255-272. doi: 10.1111/j.1469-5812.2002.tb00303.x.
- Cutanda, G. A. (2016). *Relatos tradicionales y Carta de la Tierra: Hacia una educación en la visión del mundo sistémico-compleja [Traditional Stories and Earth Charter: Towards a Complex-Systems Worldview Education]* (PhD thesis). University of Granada, Granada, Spain.
- MacDonald, M. R. (1992). A man with no brain. In *Peace Tales: World Folktales to Talk About* (pp. 21-22). Little Rock, AR: August House Publishers.
- Muzi, J. (2006). Un hombre sin cerebro [A Man Without Brain]. In *30 Cuentos del Magreb* (pp. 79-80). Bilbao: Bakeaz.
- Thomas de Antonio, C. M. (1993). Ÿuhā, un personaje popular en el Magreb y en todo el mundo árabe [Ÿuhā, a popular character in the Maghreb and Throughout the Arab World]. *Al-Andalus – Magreb*, 1, 187-224. Available on <https://idus.us.es/bitstream/handle/11441/63167/Yuha%2C%20personaje%20popular.pdf>
- Wesley-Esquimaux, C. (2011). Myth and the unconscious: Speaking the unspoken. *Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Aboriginal & Indigenous Community Health*, 9(1), 193-217.

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 16f: Recognize that peace is the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are a part.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Principle 6c: Ensure that decision making addresses the cumulative, long-term, indirect, long distance, and global consequences of human activities.

The Way Forward: This requires a change of mind and heart.

