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ALLAH AND HIS PROPHETS IN THE FOLKLORIC INTERPRETATION OF ISLAM

*Say: "I am not a new Messenger to come,
nor do I know what is to be done to me or you.
I only follow what is revealed to me.
My duty is only to warn you clearly."*

Al-Qur'an, Al-Ahqaf (The Sandhills, 9)

1. Introduction

The way in which particular personages and stories from the Koran are transformed to become the foundations of folklore texts is dependent on a variety of factors. Perhaps foremost among these is the specific character of the local socio-cultural environment where they come into being and continue to exist. In this account I will focus on field notes, collected among Bulgarian Sunnite Turks living in North-Eastern Bulgaria and the area of the Central Rhodopes. Another relevant factor is the specific interpretation of the inaccessible Arabic text of the Koran, made by the local imam (hodja) for the people whose spiritual leader he is. A third factor is the interpretation of adapted explanations of religious tenets found in textbooks of Islamic belief, as well as the transformation of these explanations themselves into original sources of folk narrative. A fourth factor, among many others, is the life experience of the individual person and the signs, which that person may or may not accept, of God's presence in human affairs.

As concerns the character of the empirical material itself, this work will consider two types of narratives:

1. Narratives about Allah and the Islamic prophets (Peygamberler), which were elicited by direct requests for them from the researcher: "What do you know about Adam, Seth, Idris, Nuh, Ibrahim, Lut, Isma'il, Yusuf, Musa, Da'ud, Suleiman, Zekeria Peygamber, ...or 'Isa Peygamber, Mohammed Peygamber (the Prophet Mohammed)? Tell me something about Him..."

2. Narratives about Allah and the Islamic prophets, which came up in the course of conversations of a more general thematic direction - about faith and religion, about ethnic relations, human morality, personal encounters with the divine, life "here" and "in the hereafter", etc.

2. What do you know about (the name of the Particular Prophet)?

The first type of text is usually a fuller and more detailed story about the Prophet in question. It is most often structured in the legendary or folk-tale style, composed of several relatively independent texts, having in common only their main character, the Prophet whose story is being told.

The texts constructing such a story can be recognized as folkloricized variants of Koranic plots, as legends about origin of something or somebody (so called, etiological legends) whose content

may or may not maintain some sort of topical links with the "reality" fixed in the Koran. They may also be structured as folk religious tales whose main heroes are Allah, Shaitan (Devil), the Prophet (Peygamber) and those connected with him, or Angels (Melyaks). All these types of narratives simultaneously retain their relative autonomy as folkloric texts, and are nonetheless a part of a particular discourse that occurs between folklorist and narratives' performer. The theme of this discourse is chosen by the researcher, but its further development is defined most of all by the individual storyteller. This development is the product of his knowledge and emotional embellishment. It flows from his capacity to associate names, events, and values of a more general character into a single narrative whole, and from his ability to represent his own notions and the ideas held generally in his community through the medium of the story at hand.

2.1. Prophets (Peygamberler) as Main Heroes of Etiological Legends.

I will cite as an example one story concerning the first in the line of Islamic prophets - Adam. The fact that he is usually spoken of not so much as the first Prophet, but as the first Man on Earth, often gives rise to a story, the framework of which supports various legends of origin (etiological legends). In his day, many things occurred which explain why the world and its people appear the way they do today. This is a long excerpt from an interview, but I will put letters (A, B, C...) before thematic sections, which forms separate legends of origin.

A. "Long ago, when there were no people, Allah made Adam. The Angels made him, and God gave him a soul. He (God) says to those four angels: 'Go get a little soil from someplace and make a man on this Earth. So we can see how he'll live'. The four angels go and say to the soil: 'We'll just take a bit of you and we'll make a man!' But the soil starts to cry: 'I can't go. If a man gets made out of me, things will be rough for me tomorrow'. And it goes on crying. The first angel can't take the soil, the second can't take it, and the third, Azrail, goes and says, 'Who was it that created you?' And it says, 'God'. 'Allah', it said. 'Well, me, I'm sent by God. I'm going to borrow you for a little while, and later we'll return you'. And now, when you die, doesn't your body become soil once again? So it goes back then...

B. The four of them make a body, but for forty years it has no soul. It just lay down and sat there. Around that time Allah was creating the animals. When the horse got created, he went over to see what it was lying there: Is it some dirt, or is it a man? He turned his hind legs round to scatter the soil all over, to squash it. Because he thought to himself, 'If this thing becomes a man on this earth, it will cause me a whole lot of misery.' And the horse was just getting ready to squash him, when God sent an Angel to save him. The horse only managed to kick him down around the feet. And that's why now we're all dented in down there.

C. Then God said to the Angel - 'Take this dog over there to guard the man'. And so dogs guard man even today.

D. For two or three years the dog guarded him. And then God said to the Angels: 'Go get a soul out of the trunk and bring it here so we can give it to the man'. Allah has everything all worked out. He's got prepared in there all the souls for all the people who'll ever be born on the Earth. Say, twenty billion of them will come into the world. And the souls are all ready there, in a trunk, just like bees in a hive. Like a honeycomb, but for every cell you've got one soul waiting in there. The Angels go and say to the soul: 'Come on in here!', they go (into the body of the

man). 'But I can't live in there', the soul says, 'It's very dark and very gloomy. How'm I supposed to live in there?' But they lure it in: 'Just go in, for God's sake. Then you can come out again after'. And that's what happened. It goes in through the mouth and you get a person down to the waist. Later Allah sends blood the rest of the way down, and he becomes a whole person. But the soul is only to here (to the waist, he indicates with his hands), the rest is only blood... And that's what happens with people. The soul is like a fly. It goes in in the ninth month when the child is in the woman's body, and it bursts into tears, because it can see then what's fated for it. And it cries, and because of its tears the angel doesn't want to make its fate too bad... And it comes back out right when the person dies.

E. So, fine, but he's all alone. There's nobody there. So one afternoon he prays to Allah that when he turns to his left, he'll see a woman with a green head-scarf. And he creates her. But he creates her all himself. Adam creates her, from his right side there. So, great, only he doesn't understand that she came out of him, and instead he figures she's come down from the sky. And he cries out 'Havva' (that's what we call the sky in Turkish - *hava*). So her name becomes Hava. Adam christens her that. And later so we won't get angry at women for their skin. Where mens' skin is all harsh, women's is softer. Because man is made out of soil, and woman, out of man. So that's why women's skin is softer.. Because as it says in the Koran, "her mother is a man, but what he bears is a woman".

F. And so, they get married and Allah puts them in Paradise. And there, they make a mistake. There was this one fruit in there, big as an apple! And Allah said to them, 'You will not eat from that tree. I won't allow it!' Because if they would eat that fruit, then they'd have to go to the toilet, and it's Paradise there, all clean... There, you eat, you drink, you don't go to the toilet. You just sweat and it goes away. But if you eat from that tree, forget it. That's bread. There's no way to... And then, Shaitan comes into Paradise and says to them: 'Eat some of that fruit. It's the best one!' Hava picks some of the fruit and it goes inside, into her belly. Adam takes some, but just then he realizes what he's done and he grabs his throat. And since then it has remained there on men in their throats (the Adam's apple - I.T.)

G. So now! Both of them have got to go to the toilet. Jibra'il comes and he sees them there taking a crap. And they're trying to figure out where to put it, on their heads, all round here (the private parts - I. T.), in their armpits... And that's how people got hair on their bodies.. Because what are they supposed to do, where are they going to throw it? In Paradise?! (with indignation - I. T.) And when Allah discovered this , he chased them out of Paradise. Forty years, for forty years they lived as punishment at opposite ends of the Earth. And from then on people have always chosen mates (?) from other regions. And later they got back together and had 72 children."

This is not even the entire story about Adam, but one can see in the fragment above how the narrator makes Adam into the main subject of his story, even though sometimes Adam functions simply as occasion for an explanation of something remaining from him today.

The story itself is composed of several relatively autonomous textual structures - folkloricized variants of the well-known themes of the creation of the first people, their temptation by Shaitan and the Fall, and the seven legends of origin topically linked to these - of man's mortality, of the

concavity of the feet and woman's tender skin, of the peculiar bond of man with horses and dogs, of human hair, and of the fact, that people choose spouses from distant regions.

Similar in structure are stories the main characters of which are other Islamic prophets. For example, the story of the Prophet Yusuf might begin as follows:

"Yusuf? He is the Father of all clocks. Because he before anyone else made a clock - out of some grass. There are these little, thin...sort of...grasses, sa'ato - they're called, grass for a clock. When you pick it, it coils around, coils up and becomes a little ring. And from this grass the Prophet Yusuf made the first clock for people. In prison. The landlords, they'd stuck him in there as an obstacle ...This is really a long story...Here it is:

See, this Yusuf's father was the Prophet Yakub. And when his father, the Prophet Ishaq, died, he said to his wife, 'You will marry Yakub to someone from his uncle's family. From your brother's family she's got to be.' So he goes and gets one of his uncle's girls, and she bears him three sons. The youngest was the Prophet Yusuf. And Yakub loved him best of all. And then the other two sons said to him: 'Dad, shouldn't Yusuf and us go and gather mushrooms in the forest?!" So they went off and threw Yusuf in a pit. They did this, because they were mad that their father loved Yusuf best of all of them. So fine, but here on his forehead Yusuf had a star, and it shined just like the moon. Because even before he was born, it was written here on his forehead that he would become tsar, or Peygamber (Prophet). Tsar, Peygamber (Prophet) - they're the same thing.

And, so now he's sitting there in the pit, and his brothers go on back. 'Hey, so where's Yusuf?' 'Well, you see, he got eaten by wolves. He's gone', they said. And then Yakub called all the wolves in the forest and asked them, 'Was it you that ate up my son?' And they all swore: 'It wasn't us!', they said. But he grabbed a big club. Up until then they were all his dogs, those wolves. But once he grabbed that club and hit them, and one of them he even broke his back, he cursed them all: 'From now on you'll eat only your luck (kismet) And since then, wolves, if they get lucky in the forest, they eat, and if not, they don't. If in the forest they find some lamb or sheep, or some wild animal, they eat it, because that's their luck (kismet), but otherwise, no...'

Hereupon follows the story of Yusuf and his brothers.

2.2. Prophets (Peygamberler) as Cultural Heroes.

As another example - a part of the story of the Prophet Da'ud:

"A long time ago, more than a thousand years, this Da'ud was king of this one kingdom, and he was the judge there. A big man. Whoever got in trouble, he ran their trials. And he said who was guilty and who was not guilty. And he ran the trials. A real big man. And a master blacksmith. No problem at all, he would take some red-hot iron, and even though it was burning-hot, he'd grab it with his hand, and even beat it with his fist. He'd hammer it with his fist to forge it. With nothing but faith in Allah. One of his wives asked him: 'Where is that faith of yours from? From me or from you?' And he said: 'Aren't I the closest person to Allah? Aren't I the Prophet here? the tsar? It's from me.' 'It's only because of me', said his wife. 'Tomorrow we'll try and get you to see.' Every morning the shepherd there brought David a leg of meat to eat. And every morning, his wife said: 'Hang it up there on the hook, and I'll take it. But the wife never ever went outside. The shepherd never saw so much as her finger. He wasn't

supposed to see it. But now, that morning, the wife went outside in short sleeves, reached out her hand like this, and said: 'Hang it up here like this (on her little finger)'. The shepherd hung it there, but Da'ud also saw his wife there as he was going to his workshop, and when he grabbed the iron, he burned his hand on it. He couldn't hold the iron in it anymore, or even forge the iron with the other. Because that man saw his wife and the faith vanished. That's why we say that faith comes from the woman.

So now! What's Da'ud supposed to do? He can't work. He's sitting there wondering. And as he was sitting there, he saw a dog lying there with its legs crossed. And then it dawned on him - he would make some pieces of iron crossed just like the legs on that dog. And he made a *kssach*, as we call it, in order to grab the iron with. Like tongs. And when he saw what the head was like on the dog, he got the idea to make a hammer to forge with. And that's how Da'ud invented blacksmiths' tongs and hammer. From the dog's legs he thought up the tongs, and from his head - the hammer. And thus he was able to work with iron again. And this Prophet Da'ud had 99 wives. And all the master metalworkers are from these 99. He is their forebear and tsar. They are his progeny. Therefore not every man can forge iron. Not just anybody can become a master. They just have to be of this stock, and then it'll work out.'

In just such a way the master-builders are descended from the line of the Prophet Lut, and the master-tailors - from that of the Prophet Idris, etc.

Quite often the names and stories of the prophets get confused and mixed together. The story of the Prophet Musa is told as though it had happened to the Prophet Isa. The story of Isa is confused with that of Mohammed. The father of Ismail might be specified as Ibrahim, or Mohammed, or even Allah himself.

3. Faith, Religion, Human Beings, and Prophets

The second type of text functions as a constituent part of a discourse with more general themes. I will adduce examples showing the topical links between the theme of the conversation and the story of one or another Prophet. This latter most often illustrates or clarifies some point made by the storyteller. The story is used as a specific argument, by means of which the truth of the storyteller's point is proved.

3.1. Faith and Religion

The most widespread story proving the necessity of having strong faith is that of Ibrahim and his sacrifice. This story may be structured in various ways, depending on which aspects of it the storyteller wishes to highlight - whether he is telling it primarily as proof of the beneficial results of unquestioning faith in Allah, or rather as a legend concerning the origins of the ritual slaughtering of a sacrificial animal, or instead as an explanation of the functions of the servant ram in the hereafter. In the latter case, the story of Ibrahim's sacrifice is merely the beginning of an explanation as to why the ram fulfills the functions of horse, courier, servant who waits on the supper table of the dead, who carries goods and information between the world of the living and the world of the dead, etc.

It is worth noting that commentaries on religious topics, recorded among Bulgarian Sunnite Turks, are made for the most part by way of comparison between Islam and Christianity. This is

to be expected, of course, in so far as the two are situated in a, so to speak, Christian cultural environment. The initial basis for such a comparison is often the assertion that "*There is no difference between Christians and Muslims. There is only a difference between those who believe, and those who do not*".

"The Bible and the Koran are the same, since they are both from Allah, only they were given to different kings. Whichever king you were born to follow, that's the one you'll believe in. Now let me tell you... a long time ago Allah made the first man - Adam was his name, and his wife we call Hava. And they had many children, 72 pairs, boy and girl. And from them come all the people on the Earth. But you see, Adam loved his youngest son Islam best. And his brothers were all angry and wanted to kill him - their father. They plotted to kill him one day as he was coming out of the mosque. Islam, however, overheard them and warned his father. And the next day they went to the mosque and prayed there to Allah, and when they had finished their prayer, they went to leave. Adam then halted at the door and cursed his sons to all speak different languages. So they couldn't understand each other, and so then they couldn't kill him. And since then there has been division of languages, faiths and nations. They were scattered all throughout the world. Adam remained with his son in Tsarigrad (City of the Tsars in Bulgarian, i.e Istanbul - I.T.), and he named that city Islambul. Later they started calling it Stambol, because they had forgotten how it used to be. And now it's already called Istanbul (the name of the Turkish capital today - I.T.). And so Islam becomes a Turk and from him comes the Muslim faith. From his other brothers come the other different religions. Ibrahim is the king of the Israelites. They all descend from him, and from him they get their religion. The Prophet Isa came to these lands and from him we get the Christian faith. You all call him Jesus Christ. And you believe in him, because you're from his stock. We, on the other hand, are from the stock of Islam, and so we believe in him. So now you get it. But it does all come from Allah. What's important is that you believe. Otherwise, you just aren't human."

The conception of religiousness itself (the narrator's own or that of the other members of the local community) can be found in a great many various forms. Faith in the existence and essence of God, as well as degree of participation in the Islamic religious community are described by various and even contradictory definitions. One can find individuals deeply convinced of the necessity of faith in God and what is written in the Koran, as well as those who "moderately" observe religious practices. One can find uncertain atheists, for whom there is some question concerning the extent to which God exists and how one can establish the truth of his essence and possibility of his intervention in human affairs, as well as people for whom involvement in religion is simply a waste of time. But when faith is not in doubt, emphasis is placed on it primarily in the abstract sense of the concept 'faith', and not on the concrete religion with which its expression is connected

"So look here... whoever doesn't believe in religion, that means he is not a person. There's something special about religion. Yes. And a person without faith is no good... To be a believer, that's the most important thing, and it doesn't matter which Lord you acknowledge, because they're all identical... I believe in all of them. I believe in Jesus, I also believe in Mohammed, because for me they're all the same... it's the faith that's important."

The Prophet Isa and the Prophet Mohammed are often connected by common descriptions as "Prophets just the same", "men of God", "God's judges", "tsars", "brothers". Sometimes, however, it is explained that Jesus is God, and Mohammed - his Prophet, or that Jesus is a prophet, and Mohammed - a judge, or Jesus is the son of God, and Mohammed - a wise shepherd, or Jesus is a Prophet, but cannot speak directly with Allah, whereas Mohammed is the only one of the Prophets who has seen Allah and spoken personally with him. Rather more rarely than might be expected does one encounter the notion of the greater perfection of the later and fuller religion, that established in the time of Mohammed.

3.2. The Holy Books and Ethnic Relations

I will now cite an example, in which a thematic link is sought between the way in which the Holy Books were received, and the desired character of ethnic relations between Bulgarians and Turks:

"So look how it is then. The Koran, the Indjil, the Tevra, and the Zebur - there are four of them. The four angels (melyaks) came down from above, you see, four Kitabs, four texts. And these are the four scriptures. The Koran, you see, is for the Muslims, the Turks, and the Indjil is for the Bulgarians. The Koran, the Bible, these are the same book. As for belief, I believe in the Indjil, and in the Koran, and in the Tevra. I believe also in the Zebur. The Tevra is for the Italians, the Zebur is in Israel, the Koran is for the Turks, and the Indjil is for the Bulgarians. The Indjil and the Koran are one and the same books, one and the same book. And so the priest says 'Amen, Amen', when he reads, and the Hodja says 'Amen' when he reads. I know the entire Koran. I know the Bible too. And so I'm telling you how it is."

In this story, one notes the dominance of the ethnic over the religious in the description of the ultimate destinations of the "four Kitabs". The Indjil goes not to the Christians, but to the Bulgarians, the Koran - not to the Muslims, but to the Turks, etc. This is most likely the result of the specific multi-levelled identity of the storyteller. But it is probably also tied to his desire to clarify and solidify his images of himself. His principal understanding of 'Muslim' is identified with that of 'Turk', and 'Christian' is identified with 'Bulgarian'. Thus the holy books go to their own concrete locations and take up their own equivalent positions of value. The equal status of the four books is conditioned also by the fact that the four melyaks (angels) "come down from above" at the same time, and not in succession, as scholars and Islamic theologians state. Thus the superiority of Islam, as the "last religion" is replaced with the claim that "the Indjil and the Koran are...one and the same book." This truly makes them "equal before God" and can be seen as the basis for further coexistence of "all kinds of people" with a common regional destiny.

3.3. Human Morality and Behavior

"Whoever is a true believer, that person knows how to behave - not to drink, not to swear, not to steal, not to pick fights, not to grab other people's wives. Mohammed says, that a man, if he wants things to be good in the next world, must be virtuous here on Earth. And if he is virtuous here, in the next life the Angels will give him seven beautiful women, and his wife as well, which makes eight. But if he isn't virtuous, they'll take them all away. And his wife too. And he'll just be stuck like that."

There have also been documented many stories containing descriptions of Allah himself, as well as of meetings with him (primarily in dreams), interpreted signs of his presence in human life, etc. Here is one example of the way in which one might describe him who has no form, and is by definition ineffable:

"Very handsome, very powerful, very big. There is no other like him, nothing for you to compare him to. Because he is Lord of the world. He is neither a man nor a woman, he is neither born, nor does he give birth. (And how is it known that he is beautiful? Who has seen him? - I. T.) Well, He (Mohammed) has seen him. If in the world there is a most beautiful thing, then that thing is Allah. There is nothing more beautiful than him. Shining, and powerful. He appears in various forms. He might appear as a mountain peak, or he might appear as a person."

The examples given above speak rather eloquently for themselves. They are cited here in order to illustrate both the concrete, conceptual mechanisms connecting different sorts of 'realities' in one field of meaning, as well as the narrative forms, by which this connection is expressed. A more detailed analysis might investigate how the details of 'reality' as fixed in writing in the Koran are transformed into the adapted explanations of this 'reality' written in textbooks of Islamic religious belief for instance, or the connection of this transformation with actual human experience, and the story into which all stages of meaning change are projected. This is the actual existence of the Islamic religion among the people in Bulgaria whose confession it is, and it deserves especially careful and thorough further analysis.