
RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Travelling Folktales of the Basil Girl's Wiles

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ABSTRACT

This article sheds light on the translation, evolution, transformation, and circulation of "The Merchant's Daughter," a highly significant piece of Moroccan folklore, tracing its journey within Morocco and globally. Central to our analysis is the tale's origins, which, as theorized by Hasna Lebbady, trace back to Andalus and were carried across the world by Muslims exiled from Spain. This journey encompasses varied landscapes and geographies, across three continents, North Africa, Europe, and South America, illustrating the tale's adaptability and enduring relevance. A focal point of exploration is the tale's nuanced portrayal of women's wit as a tool to navigate and subvert the constraints of patriarchy and authoritarian power structures within their societies. By compiling and comparing variations of the tale from different regions, this study demonstrates the diverse ways in which the narrative has been refashioned to reflect local cultures, societal norms, and resistance strategies. Through the lens of "The Merchant's Daughter," we contend that cultures are not monolithic entities bred in isolation but are instead the result of centuries-long encounters and exchanges. By engaging with this folktale's transnational circulation and thematic richness, our study contributes to a broader understanding of how folktales cross borders, circulate, and adapt as well as the dynamic processes of cultural transmission and adaptation. It underscores the role of storytelling in preserving cultural identity, fostering resilience, and navigating the complexities of global and local intersections.

KEYWORDS

Transnational folklore, The Merchant's Daughter, storytelling and agency, oral tradition and resistance.

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1. Introduction

Historically, folktales played a crucial role in society, serving not only as entertainment but also as a means for education, moral guidance, and religious instruction (El Koudia, 2003). This multifaceted purpose of storytelling, deeply embedded in tradition, often unfolded within the home, where tales were passed down from one generation to the next, particularly by mothers and grandmothers. These narrative sessions provided not just amusement but also imparted valuable lessons and principles. However, this rich tradition has seen a shift with the advent of modernity, where traditional storytelling increasingly gives way to television and other forms of mass media for family entertainment.

In the context of such evolving narrative traditions, the story of Scheherazade, the central figure in "The Thousand and One Nights," emerges as a testament to the enduring power of storytelling. Scheherazade, through her wit, courage, and wisdom, employs storytelling as a strategic tool for survival in the face of imminent death at the hands of Sultan Shahrayar, who has vowed to execute each new bride after one night as a means to avenge his betrayal by a former lover. By captivating Shahrayar with her unfinished tales, night after night, Scheherazade secures her survival and embarks on a mission to halt his cycle of violence against innocent women.

This mission culminates in a profound transformation within Shahrayar, who, throughout Scheherazade's storytelling, reforms from a vengeful ruler to a compassionate human being. This change is symbolically sealed by the revelation that Scheherazade has become the mother of his three children during their nights together, thereby intertwining their fates and embedding the transformative power of her tales within the royal lineage itself (Holliday-Karre, 2020).

The heroine in the Moroccan folktale "The Carpenter's Daughter" finds herself in a somewhat similar predicament. In this tale, the Sultan enjoys asking difficult riddles to his subjects and delights in beheading them when they fail to decipher the riddles. The turn of the carpenter comes but his ingenious daughter Aisha guides her father in answering the Sultan's questions, impressing him with her wit and knowledge. Eventually, the Sultan desires Aisha as his wife because of her exceptional intelligence. After becoming queen, Aisha helps a man unjustly judged by the Sultan. However, when the Sultan discovers that Aisha has intervened, he banishes her from the palace but permits her to carry anything that she likes. Aisha sedates the Sultan, conceals him in a chest, and transports him to her father's home. Upon awakening and angrily chastising her for abducting him, Aisha retorts that he had given her permission to take whatever she wished, and it was he whom she loved the most. They reconcile, and their happiness is restored.

"The Carpenter's Daughter" is a compelling Moroccan folktale that not only showcases the heroine, Aisha's, unparalleled intelligence but also her cunning ability to navigate through life-threatening challenges with her inventive tricks. Aisha's initial demonstration of wit, by guiding her father to solve the Sultan's riddles, immediately sets the stage for her cleverness, distinguishing her in the Sultan's eyes and leading to her becoming his queen. Her knack for problem-solving and her strategic thinking are further emphasized when she intervenes on behalf of an unjustly judged man, showcasing not just her intelligence but her compassionate use of her wits for justice (2006, pp. 65-75). Aisha's actions throughout the tale are a testament to her clever use of trickery, not just for survival but as a means to uphold justice, reform the monarch, and ultimately, protect innocent people.

Witty and cunning women, such as the carpenter's daughter, frequently emerge as a recurring theme in Moroccan folktales. Through their cleverness and wisdom, these characters circumvent and subvert male-dominated authority and environments, enabling them to thrive in otherwise hostile social settings. Among the most notable examples of tales featuring women who are both tricksters and ingeniously resourceful is the folktale "The Merchant's Daughter."

2. The Merchant's Daughter

The plot revolves around Aisha, the daughter of a rich merchant. She goes on the terrace to water her basil pots when the Sultan's son, who dwells in a neighboring house, asks her how many leaves were in her basil plant. In response, she challenges him to answer how many fish were in the water, stars in the sky, and verses in the Quran. Enraged, he mocked her for eating the fallen paste. Aisha takes her revenge when she sees the Sultan's son's act of eating a pomegranate seed that fell to the ground. The Sultan's son disguised himself as a Jewish peddler and tricked Aisha into allowing him to kiss her as a price for perfume. Without seriously undermining the realistic tone of the plot, Aisha retaliates by disguising herself as a black slave entering his bedroom, drugging him, and while he is asleep, shaves off his beard, paints him as a woman, and inserts a cucumber in his behind. The humorous sexual act contributes to a temporary suspension of the audience's moral judgment and affirms the tale as an exclusive product of female creativity and storytelling.

The prince takes his revenge by marrying the elusive Aisha and confining her in an underground granary, providing her only with coarse food and water. However, Aisha clandestinely digs a tunnel connecting the granary to her parents' house. This allows her to visit her family daily while returning to her prison before her husband's visits. Despite the Sultan's attempts to assert his dominance, Aisha consistently rebuffs his advances, affirming the cleverness of women.

This Sultan dies and his son inherits the throne. Aisha continues to defy him. The king goes on a pleasure excursion. Aisha precedes him and pitches her tent. The sultan is curious about the beautiful mysterious woman. He desires her but Aisha imposes conditions on the Sultan's interaction with her, extracting concessions such as a marriage contract and dowry items. The Sultan agrees to her demands and spends extended periods with her without recognizing her true identity. This occurs three times and Aisha bears three children, each conceived during the Sultan's visits.

The Sultan decides to take another wife, and during the wedding ceremony, Aisha uses her children to disrupt the preparations for the new wife's arrival, revealing the dowry gifts ultimately leading to the Sultan's acknowledgment of the lineage of his children. He cancels the wedding and honours Aisha for her intelligence, recognizing her as a formidable adversary. The tale concludes with Aisha's victory, cementing her reputation as a masterful strategist.

The prince's indiscretions during their terrace encounter compel the heroine to leave the marginal confines of the home and venture into the streets, in search of ways to challenge and counter the prince's authority. By navigating the alleys and offering

herself in the slave market, she confronts and transgresses the spatial boundaries traditionally associated with gender. Doreen Massey's (1994) work on "Space, Place, and Gender" can be particularly illuminating here, as it articulates how spaces are not merely physical locations but imbued with power relations and gendered meanings. Massey's argument that spaces and places are dynamic, reflecting and shaping social relations, underscores the heroine's actions as not just physical movements but as contestations of gendered power dynamics.

Upon gaining entry into the prince's private quarters and, later, constructing a tunnel to seek respite with her father post-marriage, the heroine's actions further challenge the dichotomy of public and private spaces that often reinforces gender roles. Dolores Hayden's (1982) examination in "The Grand Domestic Revolution" of how architectural spaces perpetuate gender norms provides a framework for understanding the heroine's disruption of these spaces. Hayden's notion that the design and organization of space can enforce or challenge societal norms echoes through the heroine's repurposing of traditionally male-dominated spaces.

Moreover, her decision to pitch her tent three times during the excursion scenes symbolizes a deliberate act of claiming and transforming spaces into arenas of gender contestation. This act resonates with Bell Hooks' (1990) discussion in "Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics" about marginalized individuals' capacity to reclaim and redefine spaces that were not designed for them. hooks' exploration of space as a site of resistance aligns with the heroine's strategic use of space to assert her agency and challenge patriarchal structures

Moreover, Aisha's actions, including traveling independently, negotiating the terms of her marriage dowry, and imposing terms on her suitor, portray her as a woman of independence, in control of her destiny and body. The theoretical underpinning of such portrayals can be contextualized within social role theory, as proposed by Eagly (1987), which explains the behavior of women and men through the roles they occupy, including stereotypes, attitudes, and ideologies relevant to gender. This theory, which has been enhanced and extended over the years (Eagly & Wood, 2012), provides a robust framework for understanding Aisha's negotiation and independence as manifestations of her agency (Alice H. Eagly, 2019). Additionally, the concept of radical imagination, particularly in the context of Black women's political ambition and agency as explored by Pearl K. Ford Dowe (2020), sheds light on how individuals navigate and resist marginalization through personal, political, and social choices, thereby underlining the importance of self-esteem, the value of indigenous organizations, and proactive steps taken to refute and protect against negative stereotypes. This perspective further enriches the discussion around Aisha's actions by emphasizing the significance of individual agency in challenging and redefining societal roles.

The tale of Aisha and the basil plant was first documented in the Moroccan dialect by G. Marchand in his book *Contes et Legendes du Maroc* (1923), on pages 36-38, published without a title, the storyteller's identity, or any translation. In this version, she is depicted as the carpenter's daughter.

Mohammed el Fassi offered another version from Fez, titled "La fille du marchand et le fils du sultan / Lalla Aicha bent et-tajar ou would es-soultan," in his collection *Contes Fasis*, pages 89-100. El Fasi, who sourced the tale from his grandmother in Fez, translated it into French with Emile Dermenghem in 1926; this version was reprinted in 1975. However, the authors did not include the Arabic original nor did they elaborate on their method of collecting the tale (Dialmy, 1991).

A year later, *Contes Fasis* was translated as in a rare book by E. Powys Mathers' on North African folktales, entitled *The Young Wives Tales and the Tales of Fez* (1927) under the title "The Merchant's Daughter and the Sultan's Son," p. 43-52. Later, it is anthologized in Herbert Van Thal's *Oriental Splendour: An Anthology of Eastern Tales* (1953), pp. 283-292. In 2007, Mathers' English translation of "The Merchant's Daughter and the Sultan's Son" was reprinted with revisions by The Moroccan Cultural Studies Centre at Fez.

A variant of Aisha's tale was recorded in Tetuan in 1935 and later published by Jaime Busquets Mulet in 1953 as "Hikayat walid al Sultan maa bint al-najjâr." Busquets transcribed the tale in the Tetouani dialect of Moroccan Arabic and provided a Spanish translation titled *El hijo del sultán y la hija del carpintero*.

In 1983, Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi published another version of Aisha's tale under the title *Qui l'emporte, la femme ou l'homme? Conte populaire marocain raconté*. Mernissi recorded the story from her illiterate aunt, seventy-nine-year-old Lalla Aziza Tazi. Mernissi's text is presented in Moroccan Fassi Darija and translated into Classical Arabic and French. Similar to Marchand's version, in Mernissi's rendition, Aisha is depicted as the carpenter's daughter.

It appeared in translation the following year as "The Merchant's Daughter and the Son of the Sultan" in Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology* (1984), pp. 450-453. Fatima Mernissi reprinted the tale in her book, *Women's Rebellion & Islamic Memory* (1996), pp. 13-20. By then the tale has become fundamental in the development of Mernissi's feminist project based on subaltern female agency, her endeavour to "decipher women's refutation of patriarchy when voiced in

languages other than their own. One such endeavour is to grasp and decode illiterate women's rebellion, whether voiced in oral culture or in specifically dissenting practices considered marginal, criminal, or erratic" (Morgan, 1996, p. 450).

The tale was translated by Miriam Cooke and Elise Goldwasser as "Who's Cleverer, Man or Woman?" and published in Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke in *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing* (1990), pp. 317-27. As the tale was becoming central in Mernissi's feminist project, it appears in her book *Ruses de femmes? Ruses d'hommes?: Conte Populaire Marocain*, told by Lalla Laâziza Tazi transcribed in Arabic by Fatima Mernissi and translated to French by renowned Moroccan poet, Abdellatif Laabi (2006).

In 1978, Daisy Dwyer included a story in her book *Images and Self Images: Male and Female in Morocco* under the title "Aisha, the Carpenter's Daughter." Dwyer recorded this tale from the southern Moroccan town of Taroudant. She does not offer details about the female storytellers from whom she collected the narrative. The Taroudant tale incorporates significant variations. A father has three daughters. From the outset, the Sultan's son plots to ravish the youngest sister while their father is away on a pilgrimage. In his pursuit, he disguises himself as a woman and brings food laced with a sedative, to take advantage of Aisha. However, it is her sisters who end up consuming the food and falling asleep, while Aisha refuses to eat and remains vigilant. With his plan thwarted, the Sultan's son makes his escape. Following this, the customary exchange on the terrace regarding the number of basil leaves occurs, met with Aisha's astute counterattack.

In 2009, Hasna Lebbady translated the story under the title "Aisha the Carpenter's Daughter," as narrated by a woman from Tetuan, in her book *Feminist Traditions in Andalus-Moroccan Oral Narratives*. This narrative parallels the plot structures observed in the Fassi and Mernissi versions but introduces some variations.

In 2015, a unique rendition of the basil plant story was presented in Aicha Rahmouni's *Storytelling in Chefchaouen Northern Morocco* with the title "Lalla Aisha al Magmuma Assakna fi al Matmoura," transcribed in its original Moroccan Darija and translated into English as "The Lady Aisha the Tormented, She Who Dwells in the Granary."

The Basil Plant tale is Moroccan. Considering the variations of the tale, we observe how it spans the entirety of Morocco, extending from the northern cities of Tetuan and Chaouen, through Fez, and reaching all the way to Taroudant in the south. The tale integrates elements of local colour, including references to the Quran, dowries, and the terraces that function as women's spaces in the Islamic Medina. The names of the protagonists are also telling. Lebbady associates the name of Sidi Mohammed with the name of the Prophet. However, Dialmy (1991) associates Lalla Aisha with Aisha Qandisha through her seductive act of watering basil to allure the prince, adopting the disguise of a black slave, and using a razor to shave his beard, a symbolic act of castration. Dialmy contends the name of Lalla Aisha symbolizes the wide spectrum of female representation in Morocco, extending from the chaste Aisha, the Prophet's wife, to the mythical Aisha Qandisha, the seductress to tempts men.¹ Thus, the Basil Tale blends aspects of Moroccan folklore, imaginative ethnography, and cultural mythology, providing a comprehensive exploration of norms, beliefs, gender identities and social dynamics within Moroccan society.

Additionally, the tale is grounded in the familiar Fassi topography. The young girl requests her Dada to accompany her to Moulay Idriss for diversion, seeking relief from the distress inflicted upon her by the prince. The prince heads to the Mellah, the Jewish quarter, to acquire Jewish clothing for his disguise as a Jewish peddler. Lalla Aisha is taken by her aunt to Dar Benkirane to be sold into slavery for the prince's household. These sites, notable for their cultural and historical significance, anchor the story within a real-world context that is deeply intertwined with the geography and cultural heritage of Fez.²

Moroccan folktale scholars and feminist theorists have emphasized the distinctly Moroccan aspects of the tale, highlighting its cultural and sociological worldview. For Lebbady "like Antaeus, has been deeply rooted in the Moroccan soil for centuries" (Lebbady, 2009). For Dialmy, the tale is interpreted as revealing gender roles and the initiation of a young girl into sexuality within an Islamic society (Dialmy, 1991).

Significantly, Mernissi's feminist project begins to take shape as she introduces the tale with a chapter provocatively titled "Female Contestation Does Not Come from Paris." Rhouni comments, "This self-confidence is the result of moving from anchoring feminism in popular culture in *Qui l'emporte la femme ou l'homme?*" (2010, p. 123).

¹ In Moroccan folklore, Aisha Qandisha is portrayed as a female demon, manifesting either as an old hag or a young woman of extraordinary beauty, but always with the feet of a goat, a mule, or a camel. Renowned for her intense libidinous nature, she seduces handsome young men and drives them to insanity. See Edward Westermarck, *Ritual and Belief in Morocco*, (London: Macmillan, 1926), vol. 1, pp. 392-4 and Vincent Crapanzano, *Hamadsha* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 44.

² In Lebbady version no such spatial marker exist. The city's topography is absent.

Given the significance of the tale in Moroccan society, Farida Benlyazid, film director and Mernissi's close friend, turned it into a movie in 1999 as *Keid Ensa* or "The Ruses of Women." Discussing the inspiration behind the film, Benlyazid mentions that:

Generations of women have told this story to their daughters. I also heard it as a little girl. In this film, the world of the imagination offers women a plethora of possibilities that are usually suppressed by the traditions of a male-dominated society (1999).

Benlyazid emphasizes the profound cultural significance and enduring legacy of storytelling among Moroccan women. Similar to Mernissi, she believes that the imaginative world of storytelling offers women a multitude of possibilities, serving as a subtle form of resistance and empowerment to contest and challenge the conventions of a patriarchal society.

At the end of the film, the vanquished Sultan says to Aisha, "Lalla Aisha, we are at your mercy, so be gentle with us. And now, who prevails, the cunning of men or the cunning of women?" She answers in a reconciliatory tone, "We are under the command of Allah, my lord. He who has given strength to men and cunning to women, we must use them in the way of goodness, understanding, kindness, and affection."

Hasna Lebbady critiques the film adaptation of Aisha's tale for overemphasizes aspects of Moroccan society as being more restrictive towards women than depicted in the tale (2009). Additionally, she criticizes the film's use of the word "keid" (ruse) in its title, suggesting it portrays women's actions as deceitful rather than clever, thereby reinforcing negative stereotypes associated with women in patriarchal societies. She concludes, "It is perhaps this emphasis on insight which has enabled the tale to dismantle the binary logic that opposes men to women in ways that the film has difficulty doing" (2009, p. 44).

The film was screened at multiple Moroccan film festivals and repeatedly on Moroccan national television channels. The popularity of the film is the familiarity of audiences with its as storytellers or audiences as well as the audience's "appetite for authentically Moroccan representations" (2009, p. 44).

In November 2022, Farida Belyazid received an honour at the Marrakech Film Festival, and her film was showcased on a giant screen in Jemaa el-Fnaa Square, renowned as the hub of Moroccan storytelling (akhbarona, 2022).

3. Euro-American Basil Plant Maiden

In her anthology of Tetuan folktales, Lebbady emphasizes that the Aisha basil tale on which the movie *Keid Ensa* is based is Andalusian. She states, "These are the tales that have been told by women in the north of Morocco for hundreds of years, and can be traced back to the time of al-Andalus." Lebbady argues that Aisha's tale unfolds in a house characterized by Andalusian architecture, with open courtyards, and where the terraces on the roof serve as spaces specifically for women. She says,

And since such houses are representative of Andalusian architecture I began to suspect that those tales, which have been told in such towns as Fez and Tetouan, both of which have a substantial Andalusian background, were of Andalusian origin (2009, p. 14).

Lebbady's theory, which posits the origin of the tale can be identified through its architectural elements, is intriguing. However, a more compelling intertextual connection exists: Spanish folktales echo the Moroccan Aisha's tale. This connection is further substantiated across multiple versions, demonstrating the tale's cross-cultural resonance.

The maiden and the basil plant, known as "La mata de albahaca" (The Basil Plant), is a recurring theme in Spanish folktales. In his 1923 anthology of Spanish tales, "Cuentos Populares Españoles" (Popular Spanish Tales), Aurelio Macedonio Espinosa presents four variations of this story, collected from distinct regions in Spain: Toledo (Toledo), Aldeorno (Segovia), Granada (Granada), and Barbadillo del Mercado (Burgos). Comparing the basil tale from Fez with that of Granada, significant common motifs become apparent in this chart:

The Merchant's Daughter And The Sultan's Son	The Basil Plant
<p>A wealthy merchant has a daughter named Aisha.</p> <p>Aisha tends to basil plants on the terrace.</p> <p>The Sultan's son teases her to count the leaves on her basil plant.</p> <p>Aisha challenges the prince to count the fish in the water, stars in the sky, and verses in the Quran.</p> <p>Disguised as a Jewish peddler, the prince sells Aisha perfume for a kiss</p> <p>The prince taunts her for accepting to be kissed.</p> <p>Disguised as a black slave, Aisha sneaks into the prince's chamber, drugs him, and places a cucumber in his buttocks</p> <p>The prince avenges himself by marrying her</p> <p>Aisha is confined to a cell and subjected to further persecution.</p>	<p>A father has three daughters.</p> <p>The daughters tend to basil plants on a balcony.</p> <p>The king challenges one of the girls, to count the leaves of the basil plant</p> <p>Mariquilla, the youngest, responds by challenging the king to count the number of stars.</p> <p>Disguised as a woman beggar, the king asks for a kiss in exchange for food.</p> <p>Mariquilla gives three kisses.</p> <p>Disguised as a doctor, Mariquilla inserts a radish into the king's bottom as treatment.</p> <p>Seeking revenge, the king marries her.</p> <p>The tale ends with the sugar doll motif.</p>

The common motifs found in the Moroccan tale "The Merchant's Daughter and the Sultan's Son" and the Spanish folktale "The Basil Plant" go beyond mere coincidental similarities, underscoring a shared origin. On the other hand, the variations between them showcase how these narratives have evolved and travelled across diverse geographical, cultural boundaries, and historical periods, adapting to their new contexts.

The act of watering the basil plant, symbolic of female fertility, is central to both stories. It initiates the encounter between the female protagonist and the male authority figure. In both cases, the woman initiates her attack by invoking her rival's intellectual authority:

Aisha, "O you who hold all lands, O learned Lord, O sage who reads in the book of Allah, tell me how many fish there are in the water, stars in the sky, and stops in the Koran!"

Mariquilla, "Holder of pen and ink, how many stars are there in the sky?"

Female agency in the tales underscores the elevated status and autonomy of women in Andalusian society, a period when women in Islamic Spain of the eleventh and twelfth centuries were notably freer than their Eastern counterparts, as Anouar Majid vividly describes. Majid observes that these women exhibited a remarkable degree of erotic freedom, both in their public poems and personal lifestyles, which is a testament to the progressive nature of Andalusian society at that time (2000, p. 112). Further emphasizing the societal valorization of female agency, educational opportunities for women in Andalusia were not merely symbolic. Women became poets, scholars, and even surgeons, roles that were documented and celebrated in contemporary works (Baltes and Smelser, 2001; Lawler, 2008, p. 137), highlighting the unique and progressive role of women in Andalusian society. The exchange of riddles between the protagonists showcases a clash of wits, challenging the male authority with their knowledge while weaving a narrative of romance and desire.

The tale also made its way into Italian folklore. There are at least two variants from different regions. The first is titled "The Pot of Basil," collected and published by renowned Italian folklorist Giuseppe Pitrè in his *Fiabe, novelle e racconti popolari siciliani* in 1875, translated into English as *The Collected Sicilian Folk and Fairy Tales* (2009). "The Pot of Basil," narrated by a certain daughter of Giuseppa Furia at Ficarazzi, showcases the story's spread and adaptation within Italian folklore. In the tale a father sends his daughter, Rusidda, to be educated at a school. She engages in a witty exchange with the prince from a school terrace facing the king's residence. When challenged by the prince to count the leaves of a basil plant, Rusidda cleverly retorts with a question about the number of stars in the sky. Rusidda wears a disguise and tricks the prince into kissing her horse's behind. He retaliates by posing as a sailor, selling her a fish for a kiss. As revenge, she wears the disguise of a doctor, enters the palace, and frightens the prince with the approaching death. The prince, intrigued and outwitted, takes her as his wife to avenge himself by cutting off her

head. However, Rusidda saves her life by replacing herself with a sugary puppet doll in her marriage bed. The prince stabs the doll and regrets having killed a sweet bride. She reveals herself and reconciliation takes place between the prince and the girl of basil.

The repetition of Spanish motifs and narrative structures in the nineteenth-century Sicilian tale also appears in a mid-twentieth-century Milanese version titled "The Pot of Marjoram." This version was collected and published by Italo Calvino, a distinguished Italian literary writer and folklorist, in *Fiabe italiane* in 1956. "The Pot of Marjoram," recounts the clever exchanges between Stella Diana, a beautiful apothecary's daughter, and a young nobleman. Stella Diana, while watering marjoram on her sewing mistress's terrace, is challenged by the nobleman to count its leaves, prompting a witty retort about counting stars. Later the nobleman, disguised as a fishmonger, exchanges a fish for a kiss under the guise of selling it. In retaliation, Stella Diana jeeringly tricks him into kissing her mule's tail for a jeweled belt. Stella Diana scares him by appearing as a veiled ghost. Eventually, the youth takes her as wife. But fearing revenge for her pranks, Stella Diana creates a life-size pastry doll for their wedding night. Mistaking the doll for Stella Diana, the groom is horrified when he "kills" it, only for the real Stella Diana to reveal herself. The story concludes with their joyous reconciliation and reunion.

The European tale of the Basil maiden has traversed the Atlantic to Puerto Rico. Elements such as questions and counter-questions about the number of leaves and stars, disguises, exchanges of goods for kisses, vegetable penetration, proposals to the heroines, marriage, and reconciliation are recurring motifs in Puerto Rican folklore.³ *The Journal of American Folklore* (July-December 1924: Vol. 37, issues 145-146) dedicates space to about four variants of this tale, including two titled "La mata de albahaca" and two titled "La matita de albahaca," found on pages 302-304, showcasing the tale's adaptability and resonance within the Puerto Rican cultural context.

The paradigmatic sugar puppet motif in Euro-American tales has also found its way to North Africa. In the Moroccan city of Wazzan, there exists a unique tale known as "Lahbaq" or "Basil" where the exchange of witty repartee between the maiden and the prince culminates in the prince marrying the maiden to kill her. In a twist, she uses a pumpkin filled with honey, placed on the marriage bed, which the prince slices open, mistaking it for her. A similar story, featuring the sugar bride, is found in the Egyptian tale "Daughter of the Fava Bean Seller."

Rafael Ramírez de Arellano, in his anthology *Folklore Portorriqueño: Cuentos y Adivinanzas Recogidos de la Tradición Oral* (Madrid, 1926), includes several tales involving basil. "La Mata de Albahaca" (No: 27) and "La Albahaca" (No: 28) stand out for their uniqueness. "La Mata de Albahaca" adheres to the traditional narrative structure but introduces the common motif of vegetable penetration. On the other hand, "La Albahaca" depicts a heroine who ingeniously disguises herself as a black servant/slave to infiltrate the king's private quarters, mirroring a central motif in the tale Moroccan basil tales.

4. Plot Variations in Different Spaces

Fatima Mernissi in her book *Dreams of Trespass*, describes the terrace as a distinctly feminine and intimate domain where women enjoy freedom away from male surveillance or the constraints of tradition.

The prince's sight of Aisha on her terrace tending to basil is an infringement of her private space, a profanation of the sacredness of the feminine place. This behavior is a transgressive act and a breach of boundaries through voyeurism; it signifies his sexual misconduct. He not only sees her but imposes a verbal interaction on her during which he taunts her about the number of leaves in the plant. Her retort is interesting "O son of the Sultan," she answered, "O you who hold all lands, O learned Lord, O sage who reads in the book of Allah, tell me how many fish there are in the water, stars in the sky, and stops in the Koran!" The reference to his royal birth, land authority, and spiritual knowledge challengingly defies his intellectual, political, and spiritual authority (2006, p. 9).

The girl's detractor deploys the kiss trick. The scene of disguise and kiss trick is a recurrent trope in the Basil Folktales. The youth disguises himself as a peddler, often a Jew in Moroccan tales, and comes to her door hawking his good insisting on being paid in kisses. The maiden willingly allows him to kiss her cheeks. This motif occurs in almost all basil plant tales with variations on the disguise and the sold items (fish, oranges, perfumes, candy, lace).

The trick kiss scene raises interesting contradictions in the portrayal of the girl's character within the folktale basil plant genre. On one hand, she is portrayed as a paragon of moral integrity, indicating that her actions and decisions are driven by a firm commitment to ethics and virtue. However, her decision to compromise herself with a kiss strays from the expected behaviour of someone with unwavering moral principles, as it suggests a transactional approach to personal interactions that could be interpreted as undermining those very principles.

³ There no stabbing of the sugar doll, in Porto Rico tales

The Fassi tales simply state that "The girl consented and allowed herself to be kissed on the cheek," without seeing any ethical dilemmas in the act. While other basil tales try to explain and mitigate the girl's ethical compromise. The Tetuan tale tries to mitigate Aisha's behaviour, explaining that "She was very tempted and, ascertaining that nobody was watching, she extended her cheek to be kissed" (Lebbady, pp. 31-32). Condolingly, in Calvino's Milanese version, Stella Diana gives the vendor just "a quick kiss" a sacrificial act for her sewing mistress, offered in exchange for purchasing the fish, not for her benefit, not for herself (1956). The Sicilian version admonishes the heroine's frivolity, deeming her actions as foolish, particularly because the prince absconded with the fish after receiving his kiss.

In the Porto Rico tales, while her two elder sisters disgustingly reject the peddler's request for kisses in exchange for his goods, Pepita, the younger sister, willingly yields to the peddler's condition of sexually compromising her and accepts a kiss as a form of payment in exchange for goods. The tale explains that Pepita consented to the kiss because she "recognized the King's voice, and she laughed to herself" as if she was acting as a counter trick.

Because on some occasions, the kiss is not rewarded with the desired merchandise as in the Sicilian version, the suspicious maiden in the Chilean tale of "The Basil Plant" cautiously asks the merchant to unload the oranges first before she allows him to kiss her. The text reads: "If you'll just give me one little kiss, the oranges are yours." "Can it be true?" she said. "Go on and unload the fruit." When he had finished unpacking, she gave him a kiss on the lips" (Saavedra, 1967). This marks the first instance where the kiss occurs on the maiden's lips rather than her cheeks.

Although the basil tale remains silent on the implications of the kiss ruse on the moral character of the heroine, her discovery of the sexual deceit escalates the rivalry between the bachelor and the virgin to its climax. It culminates in the trope of disguise, the infiltration into the prince's private quarters, and the ultimate humiliating act of vegetable penetration.

In Marchand's version (1923), the maiden paints her face black to disguise herself as a maid, infiltrates the Sultan's son's private quarters, and has a glimpse of his sleeping place. Then returns to her own home. The heroine in the El Fassi version is not contented with this voyeuristic scene but performs unimaginable tricks on the prince (1926). Having disguised herself as a black slave, she gains entry into the prince's service, drugs him with a soporific, and, heedless of potential retaliation, shaves his beard, applies feminine makeup to his face, inserts a cucumber into his buttocks, and puts a mirror in front of him so that when he regains consciousness he sees himself in this grotesquely obscene posture. This scenario represents the most humiliating act of penetration inflicted on the prince in the basil tales. The acts of shaving and penetration serve as symbolic castration, a profound violation intended to diminish his masculinity and patriarchal arrogance. To escape public embarrassment, the prince is compelled to remain secluded until his beard has sufficiently regrown to face society.

By comparison, the penetration scene is omitted in the Tetuan version of Lebbady, where only the shaving of the beard and the application of makeup occur. In the Spanish version the king's son becomes ill, and the girl, posing as a skilled doctor, enters the palace and recommends the insertion of a turnip into the prince's buttocks as the only cure, a procedure that is carried out, resulting in the prince's healing (Lebbady, 2009). Similarly, in the Italian version from Sicily in "The Pot of Basil," Rusidda disguises herself as a foreign doctor and gains entry to the prince's chamber, and frightens him with the threat of death (Pitrè, 2009).

In Euro-American tales, the narrative takes a darker turn during the wedding night, when the prince plans to kill his new bride. Ingeniously, she crafts a dummy from dough in her likeness, fills it with honey, and places it in the marital bed. When the prince strikes the effigy with his sword, he discovers the blade smeared with honey. Believing it to be blood, he tastes it and is immediately filled with remorse for having killed what he thinks is his bride with sweet blood. At that moment, the real bride emerges from her hiding place, and the prince, delighted by her "resurrection," joyously embraces her. The tale deliberately omits the presence of the heroine's parents so that the heroine relies solely on her ingenuity and strength to achieve independence and assert her agency.

Unlike the Euro-American Basil tales, which conclude with the reunion and reconciliation between the maiden and the male protagonist, Moroccan folktales extend the narrative to include ongoing conflict and persecution post-marriage. They incorporate several instances of patriarchal persecution, social oppression, and transgressions occurring between a man and his newly wedded bride. Her confinement represents a form of burial, leaving Aisha in a liminal state, neither alive nor dead.

Defying the confinement imposed by her princely husband, Aisha secretly digs a tunnel to her father's house. Assuming the role of a daughter, she spends her days there pleasantly, only returning to her cell at the approach of the prince. One day, he approaches her to share his plans for a pleasure trip. Acting swiftly, she precedes him and pitches her tent at the intended location. Upon his arrival and learning that a beautiful lady resides within the tent, the libidinous prince is consumed with desire for the mysterious woman. At this point, the tale diverges into different versions regarding the nature of their sexual encounter.

In Marchand's version of "The Carpenter's Daughter," Aisha assumes various identities. Initially, she claims to be the Pasha's daughter. When the Sultan's son summons her, she arrives fully veiled. Before departing, she requests his ring, which he obliges and gives to her. On a subsequent outing, she presents herself as the Cadi's daughter. The Sultan summons her again, and as she leaves, she asks for his dagger, which he also gives to her. The third time she meets him, she identifies herself as the daughter of the *mohasseb*, or treasurer. Once more, when leaving, she requests the *tahlil*⁴, and he complies by giving it to her.

In this version, the sexual encounter is subtly suggested through the narrative that she enters the prince's tent, receives a gift, and departs. By masquerading as the daughter of officials within the royal administration, rather than revealing her true identity as the economically self-sufficient daughter of a carpenter, she intentionally makes herself accessible for the encounter. The true nature of the encounter is revealed when it is discovered that the heroine gave birth to twins following their meeting.

In the Tetuani tale documented by Lebbady, Aisha willingly spends the night with the prince during three separate excursions (2009). However, Lebbady's version differs from Marchand's in that Aisha, upon receiving an invitation to visit him in his tent, explains that "it was not customary for a woman to visit a man but rather the other way round. So the prince put on his official outfit and then went to visit the mysterious woman in her tent." Aisha in Lebbady's version receives the prince in her own tent, her own space. Her reception protocol, where Aisha, a woman camping mysteriously alone, dictates the terms of engagement to the Sultan's son, a man of higher social standing and political authority, reverses the gender roles and power dynamics in the tale.

Another important distinction lies in the portrayal of the sexual encounter; Marchand's version briefly touches upon it, with only scant implications in the language used,⁵ whereas in Lebbady's account, the encounter is explicitly described. The text reads, "They talked, ate, and drank, and did not deprive themselves of any pleasure. In this way, they stayed together for three days. When the Sultan's son finally decided to leave, he presented Aisha with one of his rings" (2009).

While the prince believes he is indulging with a lady of unparalleled beauty, he is unaware that it is actually his wife in disguise, cleverly asserting the marital rights denied to her during her confinement in the *matmora*. In this twist, the perceived victim obliged to satisfy the prince's desires, emerges as the mastermind of seduction for her advantage, ingeniously flipping the power dynamics.

In the two Fassi tales recorded by El Fassi and Mernissi, Aisha proves to be a more formidable challenge and enforces a stricter protocol than her counterparts in Marchand's and Lebbady's versions. When the libidinous Sultan sends a messenger asking to meet her, Aisha insists that he must first spend three days in the city as a dung scavenger. Having fulfilled this initial condition, she further declares that she will not speak to him until he has a marriage contract made for them. The Sultan consents to her terms. Comparing the Tetuani and Fassi versions of the basil tale illustrates the transformation of the narrative as it migrates from the north of Morocco to Fez.

The newly married couple spends twenty whole days together without the Sultan recognizing the true identity of his bride. Their time together could have extended, but a messenger from the capital arrives, alerting the Sultan that he must return to his palace immediately due to an impending rebellion that threatens his rule. He leaves to save his kingdom, while his wife becomes pregnant.

In the Fassi tale, Aisha significantly transforms the Sultan's libidinous behaviour by channeling it into the sanctified institution of marriage. This strategic move not only legitimizes their sexual union within the bounds of wedlock but also serves to temper his previously unrestrained desires into a committed partnership. Utilizing her sexuality with ingenuity, Aisha effectively domesticates and enlightens the Sultan. Her stipulations that he engages in humble tasks such as dung collection, sweet selling, and tent cleaning are aimed at his social and political metamorphosis. These duties are designed to cultivate a sense of duty within him, promoting service to his wife, his community, and a keen awareness of his subjects' needs. The significance of his transformation is amplified by the narrative's warning of an impending rebellion, threatening his rule and life should he persist in neglecting his kingdom. This element underscores the transformation's vital role in securing his sovereignty and well-being.

The marriage trick is Aisha's most spectacular one. She escapes confinement, seduces, her husband to marry her three times, and becomes the mother of three children. This clever ruse is disclosed only at the narrative's conclusion. Interestingly, while the various tricks and counter-tricks unfold in the private space of the terrace, amidst their exchanges, the grand revelation that the prince has

⁴ *Tahlil* is a precious metal box intricately crafted for the safekeeping of the Quran. See Françoise Légey, *Contes et légendes populaires du Maroc* (Casablanca: Editions du Sirocco, 2010), p. 360.

⁵ In Marchand: no kiss, no vegetable penetration, the sexual excursions are merely hinted at

been duped into remarrying his own wife on three separate occasions, and that he is now the father of three children (two in some versions), is made public during his wedding festivities, before an assembly of diverse guests.

Aisha dispatches her children with instructions to interrupt the wedding, wielding the dowry gifts as evidence of their lineage to the king. Revealing and displaying is a spectacle. The ending reads:

Thus it was that the Sultan learnt that these were his own children. The whole tale was made clear to him, and he had to acknowledge that woman is much more cunning than man. He sent back the girl he was about to marry, and it was in honour of Lalla Aisha bent at-tajar that the festival preparation went forward (*Tales of Fez*, 2006, pp. 20-21).

Sexuality is deployed to educate and edify the Sultan, transforming him into a socially responsible and politically conscientious ruler and guiding him towards a more enlightened governance. His promiscuity is subdued, and the practice of polygamy is challenged. Now, he weds his own wife for the fifth time. Beyond his intention or control, the Sultan has miraculously become a father. Thus, to put it in the words of Dialmy, "Thanks to her children, she attained the rank of 'mother of believers,' the quintessential Muslim female archetype" (1991, p. 105).

The evolution of the tales to include elements like granary confinement, adventurous excursions, remarriage schemes, unknowingly fathering children, and the nuanced social and political implications on the dynamics between husband and wife, as well as the ruler and his subjects, are distinctive to the Moroccan basil tale versions. The omission of these elements in Euro-American variation is quite telling. Their occurrence in the Moroccan versions is likely due to the paths of the tale's circulation. Following the fall of the Muslim Kingdom of Granada and the establishment of the Spanish Inquisition, many Moriscos were sold into slavery within European markets to be shipped globally, particularly to Latin America, where Spain was expanding its empire, or they sought refuge in Muslim lands, especially Morocco. It was these Moriscos who transported the basil tale to their new lands of enslavement and exile. The basil heroine's efforts to enlighten the Moroccan Sultan and to advocate for a more democratic monarchy reflect her community's aspiration to contribute to the political fabric and nation-building of their new homeland.

5. Conclusion

The folktale of Aisha represents a compelling example of how stories traverse and adapt across various cultural landscapes, exemplified through its journey across North Africa and beyond. This narrative, in its essence, showcases the dynamism of cultural transmission and adaptation, highlighting how motifs and themes evolve to resonate with local contexts.

In Algeria, the tale takes the form of "La fille du marchand de pois chiches," where the narrative spotlights a prince challenging a girl's intellect with the question: "Ayya mûlât la - hbaq, asgih u-naqqfh u-addi asšhâl man urqa fih" translating to "Oh lady of the basil plant, how many can climb upon it?" This rendition underscores the intellectual test imposed by the prince, signifying the tale's emphasis on wit (Galley, 1985).

The Tunisian variant, known as "Le fils du sultan et la fille du Boulanger," introduces a unique twist with the maiden presenting the sultan's son with the seemingly impossible task of counting his father's beard hairs and the stars in the sky. This version not only continues the theme of intellectual challenge but concludes with the prince's marriage to her, interpreted as an act of retribution (Rebai, 1971).

Moving to Egypt, "Les trois filles du marchand de fèves" bears a resemblance to a European narrative involving three sisters and a seamstress, culminating in the notable sugar doll scene (Pacha, 1895). This version parallels narratives found in other cultures, further illustrating the tale's adaptability and universal appeal.

The global journey of the basil maiden story across Europe, the Mediterranean, and South America provides a fascinating lens to explore cultural transmission's nuances. This narrative's widespread dissemination showcases the complex ways stories adapt to reflect the social, gender, and political intricacies of their new locales. Such indigenization amidst globalization highlights the critical need to grasp how oral traditions and ideas navigate and morph, showcasing the intricate dance between global influences and local identities (Robbins, 2004).

The evolution and spread of these motifs underscore the dynamic relationship between universal human themes and specific local contexts. Folklore's flexibility in mirroring societal values and issues illuminates storytelling's pivotal role in navigating identity, morality, and power dynamics. Thus, the transnational flow of the basil maiden tale enriches our comprehension of the universal and unique aspects of human experiences, as depicted in the vast mosaic of global folklore traditions.

Lebbady's insights on the tale's origins provide a poignant example of this process, suggesting, "I believe they were introduced from Al-Andalus by Muslims exiled from Spain between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries" (2003, p. 31). This narrative's significant footprint in Morocco and its extension across North Africa, Europe, and the West Indies mirror the paths of the Moriscos, who, despite losing their freedom and possessions, carried their stories into their new exilic lands. Their tales, interwoven into the fabric of new communities' folklore, served as a vessel for preserving their cultural legacy as a vibrant memory.

This analysis highlights the dynamics of how cultural elements traverse and adapt as well as the friction and interactions sparked by global encounters (Tsing, 2005). It challenges prevailing perceptions of globalization, ushered in by the internet and modern transportation, by emphasizing the profound impact of past global interactions. A historical note, where "Charles Martel stopped Abd al-Rahman only three hundred miles south of Paris" (Trouillot, 2002, p.846), serves as a stark reminder. The narrative irony lies in the portrayal of Islam as alien to Europe, contrasting with its deep-rooted presence and influence on the continent for centuries, long before the advent of what is now considered the era of globalization. This perspective defies conventional narratives, suggesting that the interplay of cultures and the exchange of stories have always been pivotal, shaping identities and cultural landscapes far before the contemporary global moment.

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