Cultural, Social, and Political Perceptions in the Folktales of Libyan Jews

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Life in a Tale

By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary descriptions, news items, travel reports, memoirs, interviews, and political archival documents are all important resources for the study of any group of people. These sources, though, often focus on events—particularly political and economic—or personal points of view, and much less on a group's feelings, attitudes, beliefs, customs, and social life. An important source of information about these latter topics can be found in literature: fiction, poetry, and drama (including motion pictures). And while modern literature often derives from the personal views and impressions of an individual author, folk literature is more reflective of opinions and attitudes of a group: stories were told and retold by various narrators over time to listeners, who were often well acquainted with the stories, which thus reflect traditional attitudes, generational modifications, and regional flavors. As Alan Dundes stated "folklore ... represents a people's image of themselves. The image may be distorted, but at least the distortion comes from the people, not from some outside observer armed with a range of a priori premises".[1] He also noted that "folk groups are those of an ethnic, racial, religious, or occupational character. Each ethnic group has its own folklore"[2] and "it is in folklore that folk groups are defined".[3]

Folk literature is therefore an important source for learning about views, beliefs, customs, attitudes, values, and social conventions of the people to which the narrators belong. It might, however, also expose hidden yearnings which are contrary to the group's self image, being too embarrassing to state openly, or can put individuals and the group in danger due to political and social conditions. According to Dundes "folklore provides a socially sanctioned outlet for the expression of what cannot be articulated in the more usual, direct way".[4] It is true that many motifs occur in the folk

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[1]Alan Dundes, *Interpreting Folklore* (Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1980): viii.

[2]Dundes, p. 7.

[3]Dundes, p. 12.

[4]Dundes, p. 36. As stated by Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2002): 6 "folk tales were part of communal property and told with original and fantastic insights by gifted storytellers who gave vent to the frustration of the common people and embodied their needs and wishes in the folk narratives. Not only did the tales

literature of numerous groups worldwide, yet their manifestations are often unique to specific communities and reflect their worldview and aspirations, while not contradicting their general principles. This includes Jewish folk literature,[5] which exists throughout the world and builds on Jewish tradition as well as on particular geographic settings and people outside the community with whom local Jews came in contact: the indigenous gentile population, rulers, and foreigners, including Jews from other regions. This study focuses on Libyan Jews and examines how social, cultural, and political concepts are reflected in their folk literature.[6]

Jews settled in Libya apparently as early as the period following the destruction of the First Temple of Jerusalem (586 BCE). Important waves of Jewish immigration occurred as a result of the expulsions of Jews from the Iberian peninsula from the fifteenth century on. Consequently, the Jews of Libya consisted of veteran groups and immigrants from various Jewish diasporas, mainly of Sephardi origin. Libyan Jews, who numbered about 32,000 by the late 1940s, did not split based on place of origin, but there were differences resulting from local settings in Libya, whether the community was urban or rural, Tripolitanian (of western Libya) or Cyrenaican (of eastern Libya). This reflected the length of their stay in the region and also the different levels of their exposure to external influences

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serve to unite the people of a community and help bridge a gap in their understanding of social problems in a language and narrative mode familiar to the listeners' experiences, but their aura illuminated the possible fulfillment of utopian longings and wishes which did not preclude social integration". With regard to Jewish folk literature, see Reginetta Haboucha, "Societal Values in the Judeo-Spanish Folktales", in Frank Talmage (editor), *Studies in Jewish Folklore* (Cambridge, MA: Association for Jewish Studies, 1980): 153–80; Yona Sabar, "Kurdistan Realia and Attitudes as Reflected in the Midrashic-Aggadic Literature of the Kurdish Jews", in Frank Talmage (editor), *Studies in Jewish Folklore* (Cambridge, MA: Association for Jewish Studies, 1980): 287–96.

[5]On Jewish folk literature, see Dov Noy, *Folktales of the Jews* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2006–11); Raphael Patai and Haya Bar-Itzhak, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Folklore and Traditions* (London & New York: Routledge, 2015); Eli Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Raphael Patai, *On Jewish Folklore* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983); Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003); Tamar Alexander and Yuval Harari, "Jewish Folklore: Ethnic Identity, Collection and Research", *European Journal of Jewish Studies,* 3 (2009): 1–17.

[6]For a preliminary study on the subject, see Rachel Simon, "Literature as a Source for the History of Libyan Jews During the Ottoman Period", in Yedida K. Stillman and George K. Zucker (editors), *New Horizons in Sephardic Studies* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993): 83–91.

by local gentiles as well as by foreigners. Most Jews lived in urban centers on the Mediterranean coast, mainly in Tripolitania, but a significant number resided in the hinterland in small towns and villages. The Libyan society at large, living mainly on the Mediterranean coast, is composed of Muslim Arabs and Berbers, as well as Christians, mostly Italians, whose numbers temporarily grew during the first half of the twentieth century. In modern times the region was under the rule of the Ottoman Empire (1551–1911), Italy (1911–42), and British Military Administration (BMA, 1942–51), gaining Arab independence in late 1951. Most Jews left Libya during the mass Jewish emigration of 1949–51, mostly to Israel, and the rest moved mainly to Italy and Israel following the Arab-Israeli 1967 Six Day War and the Libyan 1969 Qadhdhafi Revolution. [7] This historical, political, socioeconomic, and cultural background had an impact on Libyan Jews and their civilization, customs, beliefs, and folk literature.

The main corpus of the folk literature of Libyan Jews is found in the Israel Folktale Archives (IFA) at the University of Haifa, Israel.[8] Out of some 25,000 tales assembled by IFA collectors, more than 285 were told during 1955–67 by over twenty Libyan Jews (including several women), who moved from Libya to Israel, mainly in the early 1950s. Most of the tales were told in Hebrew (and not in Judeo-Arabic or Italian, which by the mid–twentieth century were the languages most common among Libyan Jews)[9] to several IFA collectors, the majority of whom were born in Libya. This study is based on about one hundred and twenty published tales, some eighty of which were selected from the IFA.[10] Other stories were published

[7]On the political history of the Jews of Libya, see Renzo De Felice, *Jews in an Arab Land: Libya, 1835–1970* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); Maurice M. Roumani, *The Jews of Libya: Coexistence, Persecution, Resettlement* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2021). For a social-anthropological examination, see Harvey E. Goldberg, *Jewish Life in Muslim Libya: Rivals & Relatives* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990).

[8]On IFA, see https://ifa.haifa.ac.il/index.php/en/

[9]Several tales were told in Judeo-Arabic by a grandmother to her Tripoli born granddaughter, who translated them into Hebrew. See Dov Noy, *Jewish Folktales from Libya* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Hotsa'at Bi-Tefutsot ha-Golah, 1967) [henceforth: Noy, 1967]: 162.

[10]Tales by Libyan Jews from the IFA collection were published in Noy, 1967; Dov Noy, *Folktales of Israel* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963) [henceforth: Noy, 1963]; Zalman Beharav, *Mi-dor le-Dor: Sipure-'Am mi-Pi 'Adot Yisra'el [From Generation to Generation: Folktales of Jewish Communities]* (Tel-Aviv: Tarbut ve-Hinukh, 1968) [henceforth: Beharav, 1968]*;* Zalman Beharav, *Shishim Sipure-'Am [Sixty Folktales]* (Tel-Aviv: Ya'ad, 1977) [henceforth: Beharav, 1977]: 25–52; Dan Ben-Amos (editor), *Folktales of the Jews, volume 3: Tales from*

by a woman whose mother retold stories narrated by her mother.[11] Included in the study are tales with or without salient Jewish characteristics, those with traditional Jewish background, and some within a specific Libyan context. Being often retold during gatherings of relatives and friends, many of whom were familiar with the tales, the latter can, to a large extent, be considered as reflecting the essence of the original folktales and their intended messages. Even tales which do not explicitly refer to Libyan Jews can echo their societal and moral values.[12] The study examines relationships between couples and family members, as well as attitudes toward women and the "other" in its broad sense.

Arab Lands (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2011). For details on IFA, the storytellers, and the collectors, see: Noy, 1967, pp. 9, 24, 161–71.

[11] Ines Refa'el (editor), *Agadot Ṭripolita'iyot: Sipure Yaldut Sheli [Tripolitanian Legends: My Childhood Stories]*([Israel] : Hotsa'at Milah Ṭovah, 2015). Many tales in Refa'el's collection emphasize women's smartness as well as women being maltreated by men.

[12] Heda Jason, *Studies in Jewish Ethnopoetry: Narrating – Art – Content – Message – Genre* (Taipei: The Chinese Association for Folklore, 1975): 67, 125, 174.

CHAPTER ONE

MARRIAGE MADE IN HEAVEN? GETTING MARRIED AND MARRIED LIFE

Couples are the stem from which a family grows. They are a major topic in folk literature worldwide, with stories describing how couples came into being and how their relationships evolved over time. What follows is an examination of how couples [1] —be they Jewish or gentile, real or imaginary—are portrayed in the folk literature of Libyan Jews and to what an extent they reflect their views concerning couples in general and Jewish couples in particular.[2]

Choosing a Spouse[3]

Jewish parents in Libya played an important role in the marriage of their children.[4] The folk literature of Libyan Jews, however, includes stories in which the children's wishes prevailed and their expressed preferences as to the desired spouse were based mainly on appearance, much less than on personality or qualifications. This might reflect people's aspirations as well as a phase in the spouse selection process.

Appearance

The Libyan Jewish folk literature points to beauty as the most common

[1]In the folk literature of Libyan Jews, a couple is viewed as composed of a man and a woman.

[2]For a partial examination of the topic, see Aliza Shenhar, "Family Stories in Libyan-Jewish Folktales" [in Hebrew], in Michel Abitbol (editor), *Judaisme d'Afrique du Nord aux XIXe–XXe siecles* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1980): 172–92.

[3]For proverbs on this topic, see Abraham Stahl, *Pitgame 'Adot Yisra'el [Proverbs of Jewish Communities]* (Tel-Aviv: 'Am 'Oved, 1975): 220–23.

[4]On marriage customs and practices among Libyan Jews, see Rachel Simon, *Change Within Tradition Among Jewish Women in Libya* (Seattle: The University of Washington Press, 1992) [henceforth: Simon]: 45–66.

reason a person voiced for choosing a spouse.[5] One hears more of men's wishes in this regard than of women's, and most of the resulting marriages were initiated by men. Stories describe how men were drawn to certain women because they either actually saw them, viewed their image or heard rumors about their beauty: most men did not have any previous contact with these women or prior knowledge about them. According to one story, a prince fell in love with a beautiful foundling, who grew up in the governor's house,[6] another prince desired a beautiful girl, who was on her way to her mother's tomb,[7] and a third man agreed to give up his own wealth and a rich woman's property, which he had won, in order to marry the woman's beautiful daughter, when he saw her for the first time.[8] It also happened that men were drawn to a beautiful woman, though she was the one to scrutinize her suitors and decide who will marry her; in that case, no marriage took place and no parents' involvement was mentioned. Later on, a prince was greatly impressed by her beauty and he decided to cancel his planned marriage to his cousin, and eventually managed to convince his parents to accept his decision, when they saw her. At this point, no mention was made of the woman's opinion.[9] Even demons were not immune to beauty and one of them fell in love with the king's beautiful daughter.[10] Conversely, a man stated that he would rather die than marry an ugly princess, who was also blind in one eye, even though marrying her might have eventually made him king.[11] Similarly, a bride, chosen by a man's father and successfully avoided by his already married son, was described as “ugly as a fast day”, in contrast to the son's beautiful wife.[12]

At times, rumors, pictures or objects were sufficient for men to wish to marry a certain woman. This happened to a prince, living in faraway Istanbul, who decided to marry a girl, who was rumored to be beautiful.[13] It

[5]This is the reason given in most stories in Refa'el's collection, all told by a woman. For example, in Refa'el, p. 46 (“The azure eyed”) both man and woman fell immediately in love when they saw each other for the first time.
[6]Noy, 1967, p. 35 (“The 'Chestnut-Girl' in the palaces of kings”—story told by a woman).
[7]Noy, 1967, p. 154 (“Measure for measure”—story told by a woman). Another prince decided to marry a beautiful maid and asked his mother for her permission: Refa'el, pp. 117–18 (“The bewitched cat”—story told by a woman).
[8]Refa'el, pp. 133–34 (“The magic feather”—story told by a woman).
[9]Refa'el, pp. 57–61 (“The black dog”—story told by a woman). Because of her sisters' envy, her grooms had left her and she had to seek her fortune in another way.
[10]Noy, 1967, p. 121 (“The princess who would not speak”—story told by a woman).
[11]Noy, 1967, p. 152 (“The chest of bones”—story told by a woman).
[12]Noy, 1967, pp. 147–49 (“The beauty and the eagle”—story told by a woman).
[13]Noy, 1967, p. 33 (“Jasmine in exchange of eyes”—story told by a woman).

was also told that a king fell in love with the beautiful wife of a merchant after seeing her picture and being told by his servants that she was seventy seven times more beautiful than his queen.[14] Another story somewhat refers to beauty: according to it, a man had found a very long hair and vowed to marry whoever it belonged to:[15] long hair being a major mark of beauty.

At times, both beauty and character played a role. According to one story, which emphasizes a woman's smartness, a prince, who was impressed by her character, courage, wisdom, and beauty, asked her to marry him after she had managed to solve the king's riddle.[16] In this story, told by a woman, the woman's smartness is highlighted as are the man's motivations for marrying her. According to another story, a man, who had found a beautiful deserted baby girl, brought her to his mother, where both of them took care of her, and when she grew up and become a beautiful well-educated woman, he told his mother that he wanted to marry the girl, who happily agreed.[17]

Women also referred to men's beauty as a reason for wishing to marry them, although this is mentioned much less. It was told that Princess Zohara wanted to marry a man whose eyes and hair were as black as coal, whose face was pink and delicate as blood, and whose teeth were white as snow: she was told that only Prince Ali matched this paragon of beauty. The princess even wrote to him, describing how handsome he was and her desire to meet him.[18] Another woman, who heard about an eagle, who turned out to become a handsome man, demanded to be brought to him and after introducing herself to him, they got married.[19] In both cases, the women initiated the meeting with the men they wanted to marry because of their beauty.

All these stories emphasize the appearance and rarely refer to other qualities or characteristics of the desired partners as reasons for wanting to marry them. In addition, almost nothing is mentioned about a person's feelings toward those who coveted them. The emphasis on appearance may reflect the common state of relationships between men and women among Libyan Jews until the beginning of the twentieth century. At the time, at least in the cities, the youth had very few opportunities to meet and interact in public, and therefore could judge the future partner only by sight; additional details about the couple's personalities could have been exchanged between

[14]Noy, 1967, p. 43–46 and Ben-Amos, pp. 447–50 (“Who can find a woman of valor”—story told by a man).
[15]Noy, 1967, p. 139 (“The girl swallowed by the stone”—story told by a woman).
[16]Refa'el, pp. 28–30 (“The king's riddle”—story told by a woman).
[17]Refa'el, pp. 33–34 (“The night's daughter”—story told by a woman).
[18]Noy, 1967, pp. 141–42 (“Princess Zohara and Prince Ali”—story told by a woman).
[19]Noy, 1967, pp. 147–48 (“The beauty and the eagle”—story told by a woman).

their parents at family and social gatherings. Only on one occasion were urban Jewish youth in Libya able to observe each other in public rather than in a family setting, although even then they could not interact with one another. It happened in Tripoli, at the Festival of the Roses, right after Passover, when young women, who were standing at the gate of their house, tried to look their best, while men were strolling around. Here, too, appearance was a major factor in a man's desire to marry a certain woman and it was the man who initiated the process. However, in the village, since most of the community members were relatives, the youth could meet publicly at the well, which young women regularly visited to draw water.[20]

Personality and Intelligence

Stories rarely mention women's character, personality and intelligence as a reason why men wanted to marry them. An exception could have been the case of Prince Ali, who agreed to marry Princess Zohara only after she performed the difficult tasks he demanded of his future wife; thus, in fact, he was looking for a smart woman as a wife, while she was looking for the best-looking man.[21]

This issue is presented in the story about the clever daughter of a sheikh, who provided a vizier with ideas on how to perform various tasks, which the King of Libya had ordered him to perform. When the king heard about her involvement, he met her and was impressed by her wisdom—as well as by her beauty—and asked her to marry him. But lest her intelligence challenged his, the king warned her, that he would divorce her if she ever interfered in his decisions.[22] Here, the woman's intellect was valued, as long as it did not overshadow or compete with that of the man.

More complicated is the story of a prince, who managed to obtain a hair ornament, a ring, and a mirror of a princess. Contrary to his assumption, that he was able to get close to her, she actually deceived him: she hung her hair ornament on a horse's tail, put her ring on a radish, which was carved in the shape of a finger, and it was her maid, who spent the night with the prince in her bedroom, allowing him to obtain her mirror. While the prince used cunning to acquire these private objects and thus intended to show his wisdom by being able to get very close to the princess, she actually outwitted him and made him feel embarrassed and foolish. The princess

[20]Simon, pp. 47–48, 88–89.
[21]Noy, 1967, pp. 141–46 (“Princess Zohara and Prince Ali”—story told by a woman). See above, note 18.
[22]Beharav, 1977, pp. 53–56 (“The clever daughter of the sheikh”—story told by a man).

agreed to marry him only when she proved that she was smarter than him.[23] Another princess, who tricked a guy to think she was a man, disclosed a year later her true identity in a note that she had sent him. Struck by her courage and audacity, he decided to marry her.[24] While rumors about yet another woman's beauty might have driven a man to seek her, the former's actions were in fact what brought about their marriage. This happened when a poor man heard of a woman's beauty and decided to meet her. When she realized how incompetent he was in slaughtering and cooking his lamb, she volunteered to help him and invited him to dine with her and her father, resulting in their marriage.[25] Thus, while most women emphasized their beauty or remained passive, there were few who agreed to marry those men who had been impressed by their wisdom or who were less competent.

Efforts to Get Married

According to the folk literature of Libyan Jews, some people had found it easy to marry the person they desired, while others had to overcome difficult obstacles to achieve this goal. In addition, it was more acceptable for men than for women to freely travel, socialize, and search for a spouse. Consequently, while there are several stories detailing the efforts made by men in order to marry a particular woman, there are fewer stories elaborating women's endeavors in this regard.

Women Seeking Husbands

Only a small number of stories describe women's initiatives to marry certain men, and most of them relate to upper-class women. Such was the case of Princess Zohara, who, in order to marry Prince Ali, wrote him about it. Then, on her own initiative along with her father's approval and financial support, she set out to perform the difficult tasks that the prince demanded of his future wife.[26] According to another story, the daughter of a wealthy man heard a description of a handsome man, and ordered to be brought to him. She was not bothered by her father's possible negative reaction, if he found out that she had contacted a strange man, announcing that she was

[23]Refa'el, pp. 11–17 (“Hand of radish”—story told by a woman).
[24]Refa'el, pp. 55–56 (“The green diamond”—story told by a woman).
[25]Noy, 1967, p. 47 (“The peasant's daughter and the poor boy”—story told by a man).
[26]Noy, 1967, pp. 141–46 (“Princess Zohara and Prince Ali”—story told by a woman). He, too, acted on his own, but with his sister's support. See also above, notes 18 and 21.

responsible for herself.[27] On the other hand, it was told that a princess was impressed by the industrious son of a gardener, who helped his father while he was on leave from his studies. The more she talked to him, the more she admired him and then fell in love with him. Her father, on the other hand, was against their relationship and even tried to get rid of the man.[28] In these stories, the women tried—with, without, and even against their fathers' approval—to meet handsome or smart men whom they wanted to marry.

Chance was also a factor in choosing a spouse. This happened when a king set the stage for his daughters to choose their husbands, in which they did not pick a particular person and, in fact, one of them even tried to evade her fate. On that occasion, three princesses, who had no suitors, threw oranges at men, who gathered at a party, which their father had organized for that purpose. The eldest daughter's orange hit the king's son and she married him, the middle daughter's orange fell on the vizier's son, while the youngest sister threw an orange three times and each time it fell on a poor baker, whom she was forced to marry.[29]

It also happened that a woman would act on the initiative of a relative to get acquainted with a man. It was told that a woman courted a man at the request of her brother-in-law, who wanted her to marry his friend. She frequented the friend's store and eventually told him that she wanted to marry him, and only then did she contact her parents, who agreed to the marriage.[30] In this case, the initiative was of a third-party, who had felt obligated to return the favor to a friend.

The folk literature admits that some women took very drastic measures to marry a specific man. A rather horrifying story tells of a widow who took advantage of a girl's longing for elegant clothing. At first, the former demanded that in order to get a robe, which the girl fancied, the latter should kill her mother. However, even when this was done, the widow insisted that in order to finalize the deal, the girl must convince her father to marry the widow.[31] The attitude toward both women is negative: while the widow managed to get married, she was ultimately severely punished, and the girl did not get the robe and was maltreated by her stepmother for a long time.

Still, not all women were successful in their efforts to marry the men they desired. Such was the fate of a maid, who wanted to marry her rich master's son. He, however, preferred to die rather than marry her, while she begged every night at his grave, trying to convince him to marry her,

[27]Noy, 1967, pp. 147–49 (“The beauty and the eagle”—story told by a woman).
[28]Refa'el, pp. 18–23 (“The princess and the gardener's son”—story told by a woman).
[29]Noy, 1967, p. 33 (“Jasmine in exchange of eyes”—story told by a woman).
[30]Beharav, 1968, pp. 151–55 (“Friendship that stood the test”—story told by a man).
[31]Noy, 1967, pp. 153–54 (“Measure for measure”—story told by a woman).

otherwise he will remain dead.[32]

Thus, only one story describes difficult tasks a woman had to perform in order to win a man's—not his father's—consent to marry her. The rest of the stories emphasize the persistence, chance, and manipulation of women, as well as following the instructions of a relative, who wanted to help a friend. Not only were there few stories of women's efforts to marry a particular man, but failure was also mentioned—when a woman tried to marry-up—and dishonesty and cruelty were eventually punished.

Men Seeking Wives

A common theme in folk literature around the world is the difficult tasks that fathers of upper-class women required men—including royalty—to perform in order to marry their daughters.[33] This theme also appears in the folk literature of Libyan Jews and several stories—none of which are about Jews—tell of complicated actions that fathers forced men to carry out in order to marry their daughters. Thus, for example, a man had to eat a hundred cows, drink two tunnels, which were filled with honey and butter, and finally find out who the desired princess was among a hundred women, all of whom were fully covered.[34] Another prince had to get the princess to talk to him and he managed to do so for three consecutive nights.[35] In one case, however, a prince, posing as a merchant, was able to complete the required tasks, but was actually outwitted by the princess. Later on, the king accepted him without checking if he had performed his tasks, because he was of royal origin. Nonetheless, the king insisted on asking his daughter if she was ready to marry the prince, who had not seen her until the wedding.[36] It also happened that a prince had to prove his worth both before and after marrying the woman he wanted: her father demanded that whoever married his daughter pay him seven sacks full of silver every year.[37]

Some princes, on the other hand, found it easy to marry the women they fancied, when the latter were—or were perceived to be—of a lower status. For example, a prince sent seven ships full of silver and gold to a low-class

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[32]Noy, 1967, pp. 144–45 (“Princess Zohara and Prince Ali”—story told by a woman).
[33]Shenhar, pp. 175–76, states that due to hidden sexual desires which fathers had toward their daughters, they aimed to prevent men from meeting their daughters by forcing these men to perform impossible tasks.
[34]Noy, 1967, pp. 31–32 (“The predestined wife”—story told by a woman).
[35]Noy, 1967, pp. 116–22 (“The princess who would not speak”—story told by a woman).
[36]See above, note 23.
[37]Refa'el, pp. 45–51 (“The azure eyed”—story told by a woman).

woman and she agreed to let him marry her daughter.[38] Another prince fell in love with a foundling, who was raised in the governor's house, and the governor's wife agreed to let him marry the girl.[39] Yet another prince wished to marry a girl, who was on her way to her mother's tomb, and her father gave her to him in marriage.[40] In these cases, princes could marry women of their choice, who lived among the lower class: they did not have to perform any task, but had to get the consent of the women's parents or guardians. In general, the opinion expressed in these stories was that most high-ranking men could easily marry the single women they desired.

The folk literature even stated that good deeds and strengthening the faith of another person can reward a man with a wife. It was told that a rich Jew, who was unable to marry, helped a poor family, and then returned the father to Orthodoxy, and as a result, with the latter's consent, the benefactor could marry their daughter.[41] Here, there is no indication that the rich man was interested in the particular woman, who was given to him as a reward for his good deeds.

Only demons and robbers are mentioned as kidnapping women whom they wanted to marry. One story is about a demon who kidnapped a king's daughter and kept her secluded in his palace in the depths of the sea.[42] Another kidnapper was a giant black commander of robbers.[43] Decent human beings, apparently, were not supposed to act this way.

Not all-powerful men were able to get hold of the women they wanted. Such was the fate of a king, who sent messengers in an effort to win a merchant's beautiful wife, when her husband went on a business trip and was imprisoned by the king. She, however, managed to outwit the messengers as well as the king.[44] This story, told by a man, may indicate that it was unacceptable—especially for men—that anyone, even the most

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[38]Noy, 1967, p. 33 (“Jasmine in exchange of eyes”—story told by a woman). She was the daughter of a princess, who had married a baker and lived in poverty.

[39]Noy, 1967, p. 35 (“The 'Chestnut-Girl' in the palaces of kings”—story told by a woman). She was the sultan's eighth daughter, whom he had banished when she was born.

[40]Noy, 1967, p. 154 (“Measure for measure”—story told by a woman). In this case, the mother was murdered by her daughter.

[41]Refa'el, pp. 128–31 (“The wicked man”—story told by a woman).

[42]Noy, 1967, p. 121 (“The princess who would not speak”—story told by a woman).

[43]Noy, 1967, p. 79 (“The poor Jew who searched for his luck”—story told by a man).

[44]Noy, 1967, pp. 43–46 and Ben-Amos, pp. 447–50 (“Who can find a woman of valor”—story told by a man). Shenhar, p. 181, states that stories regarding the faithful wife, who acted cunningly against troublesome men, emphasizing women's supremacy over men, were popular among eunuch and female storytellers in the harem.

powerful men, could get hold of a married woman.

Rarely do stories tell about the reaction of the women, that men wanted to marry. Although men were primarily focused on appearance, some women insisted to be treated as human beings in order to accept marriage proposals. Thus, a man, who had secretly witnessed a hen turning out to become a beautiful woman, kept the hen in a special house, but she refused to expose herself to him as a woman. Only when he was advised to treat her as a person and not as a hen did she agree to present herself to him as a woman and to marry him.[45]

What all these stories have in common is that royalty and rich people of both genders were usually able to marry the person they wanted, sometimes without even having to prove themselves: their status was enough to allow them to marry any single person they wished. In some cases, achieving this goal was based on special cunning, help from supernatural forces or sound advice. A lower-class person may, on the other hand, find it almost impossible to initiate marrying-up. Seducing a married woman, however, was unacceptable, regardless of the man's rank.

Inter-Class Marriages

The dilemma of whether to marry within the same class or seek an inter-class marriage is presented in the folk literature of Libyan Jews. Several stories reflect the desire to maintain marriage within the same class and even within the extended family. Therefore, some parents wanted their children to marry their cousins,[46] although this did not always work out.[47] In addition, there were friends who wanted to solidify their relationship through the marriage of their children. This is described in a story about a father of three sons who wanted them to marry his friend's three daughters, although the friend hesitated, because he was aware of the bad character of his daughters.[48] These stories reflect the wish for marriage to be within the same class. Nevertheless, marrying down by men—but not by women—was accepted, although this happened in both cases.

Some stories convey the view that princes could easily marry any single woman they wanted, regardless of class. In several cases,[49] the women were poor and thought to be of humble origin, but were, in fact, of royal descent.

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[45]Refa'el, pp. 96–100 (“The hen”—story told by a woman).
[46]Refa'el, pp. 74–75 (“The blessing that was accepted”—story told by a woman).
[47]Refa'el, pp. 60–61 (“The black dog”—story told by a woman). He preferred another woman rather his cousin, whom his parents wanted him to marry.
[48]Refa'el, p. 107 (“Three sisters”—story told by a woman).
[49]See above, notes 38–39.

Thus, even though the princes were willing to marry beautiful women of a lower rank, the listeners knew that the brides were really equal in status to the princes. Some of the women were indeed of a lower class, as in the case of a prince, who despite his parents trying to match him with his cousin, decided to marry a beautiful non-royal woman, who provided the palace seamstress with a unique green thread.[50] There were men who even saw an advantage in marrying women of the lower class, such as a king, who preferred his maid, who always pampered him, over his self-centered wife, whom he divorced because she did not satisfy him.[51] The parents' decision to choose a lower-class woman as a bride could also be due to the unusual appearance of the groom. Thus, a woman, who gave birth to a rooster, convinced a poor woman to let her beautiful daughter become the woman's maid, and then persuaded the latter to marry her son.[52] There were, however, men who refused to marry down, such as the one who preferred to stay dead rather than marry the family's maid.[53]

Some parents worried about the consequences of their daughters marrying down. It was told that a rich and stingy man was afraid that his daughter might fall in love with a poor man, that the father would have to support, and as a result he prevented her from meeting people.[54] Even worse was the attitude of a king, whose daughter fell in love with the gardener's son, who was sent by his father to pursue higher education and during his vacations helped his father and thus met the princess. The king objected to this relationship and sent the man on a dangerous trip during which he would probably had been killed. The young man, however, survived thanks to his wisdom, good nature, and the help of a benevolent witch, and as a result the couple decided to depart and leave the king forever.[55] In this story, although the man was of lower rank, he was highly educated and capable of getting a well-paid job, which allowed the couple to leave and lead a happy life, causing the king to lose his mind, due to the departure of his beloved daughter. Disapproving of women marrying down was not limited to their parents. Accordingly, a suitor was upset that his beloved was given in marriage by her parents to a man of a humble origin rather than to him or to another suitor of noble origin. Still, he respected the parents' decision, even

[50]See above, note 47.
[51]Refa'el, pp. 101–2 ("What the heart loves"—story told by a woman).
[52]Refa'el, pp. 24–26 ("The power of jealousy"—story told by a woman).
[53]Noy, 1967, p. 144 ("Princess Zohara and Prince Ali"—story told by a woman).
[54]Noy, 1967, p. 88 and Ben-Amos, p. 606 ("The partnership with Asmodeus"—story told by a man).
[55]Refa'el, pp. 18–23 ("The princess and the gardener's son"—story told by a woman).

though he always longed to be with his beloved.[56]

Although it was quite rare, a lower-class person might marry royalty by chance. This is what happened to a poor baker, who married a king's daughter as a result of an orange she threw during a party and it fell on him three times. Still, the socioeconomic status of the baker did not improve as a result of the marriage and the couple suffered from a life of misery and family estrangement, until their luck improved following the birth of their daughter, who had miraculous qualities.[57]

Most of the Jews in Libya were poor and usually remained in the same class they were born into, despite possible longings for a better future. Their folk literature may reflect this situation: only a few stories describe true inter-class marriages, which seem to have been frowned upon by the family and implicitly by the society at large. Only a few men actually married down, and of the women who did, one was murdered, another became impoverished and estranged from her family, and only the third led a happy life.

Incest

The issue of incest appears in few stories—all told by women—although it is not always clearly presented as such. In one story, a prince married a foundling, who was the sultan's daughter, who was abandoned at birth.[58] Although the events took place in the same area, it was not made clear whether the prince's father—referred to as the king—was the same person as the sultan, who was the father of the abandoned girl, who was therefore the prince's sister, but from a different mother. Another king's daughter found her husband by throwing an orange at partygoers: the orange fell on the king's son, and they were married.[59] Here, both are clearly referred to as children of a king, but it is not indicated that they may be siblings. In these two stories, no objection was made to the marriage.

The attitude is quite different when it comes to relations between father and daughter or daughter-in-law. According to one story, a man, who saw a very long hair on the ground, vowed to marry whichever woman it belonged to, be it even his daughter Fatima. After searches throughout the city, it turned out that it was indeed Fatima's hair. All the pleas of the family, including those of Fatima, that the father would go back on his vow, were

[56]Noy, 1967, p. 112 (“The investigation of the murder”—story told by a man).
[57]Noy, 1967, p. 33 (“Jasmine in exchange of eyes”—story told by a woman).
[58] Noy, 1967, p. 35 (“The 'Chestnut-Girl' in the palaces of kings”—story told by a woman).
[59] Noy, 1967, pp. 32–33 (“Jasmine in exchange of eyes”—story told by a woman).

in vain, and the preparations for the wedding continued, even though everyone was crying. One day, Fatima left the house with her little brother, and while looking at a rock, she wished to be swallowed by it—which indeed happened—whereupon the whole family asked Fatima to open the rock and let them see her. She refused her mother, who would become her rival wife, or her sister, who would become her daughter, or her father, who would become her husband, had she married him. She accepted, however, her little brother, who would always remain her brother,[60] and did not represent any sexual threat, unlike any other adult male relative. In another story, a widower king decided to marry his daughter, when she grew up and resembled his late wife. The princess, however, managed to escape, married a prince, and although her father later found her and cursed her to be insane for a year, she eventually recovered and the king did not get her.[61]

Relations between a man and his daughter-in-law were also frowned upon. This is demonstrated in a story about a quarrelsome woman, who falsely accused her father-in-law of improper behavior toward her.[62] Similarly, a father, who lusted after his son's bride and plotted to kill him to get this woman for himself, was sentenced to death by the king's council.[63]

In the first two stories, in which marriages took place, sibship might have been hinted at. In the other stories, in which potential sexual relations between father and daughter or father and daughter-in-law were clearly stated or suspected, no marriage took place, expressing widespread societal opposition to incest. It was recognized, however, that some men may sexually desire their daughters or daughters-in-law.

Marital Relationships

Wives Behavior During Husbands' Absence

The character of many stories is anti-feminist, reflecting the superiority, mastery, and responsibilities of the husband.[64] This could be seen on various occasions, whether the couple were together or not, since there were cases in which wives were left alone at home. In Libya, as elsewhere, it was not

[60] Noy, 1967, pp. 139–40 (“The girl swallowed by the stone”—story told by a woman). Earlier on, the mother reproached Fatima, regarding her as a potential rival. See also Shenhar, p. 177.
[61] Refa'el, pp. 62–65 (“A father's desire”—story told by a woman).
[62] Refa'el, pp. 108–9 (“Three sisters”—story told by a woman).
[63] Beharav, 1977, pp. 122–29 (“The king's son, the robber, and the girl who was as beautiful as the moon”—story told by a man).
[64] Shenhar, p. 182.

unusual for men to have to travel for business,[65] but despite their absence, husbands were still responsible for the behavior of their wives. This is illustrated in a story told by a man about a newly married Tripolitan Muslim man, whose wife seduced former suitors while he was on a business trip. The husband was sentenced to seven years in prison with hard labor because he neglected his wife by leaving her alone, even though it was only for a few days. It was believed that his absence made her bored, with her dreams about married life unfulfilled, and as a result she was ready to seduce other men. At the trial, the judge stated that the Qur'an forbids a man to leave his young wife alone during the first year of their marriage, just as the Jewish religion forbids a man from going to war during this period of time.[66] Although this prohibition does not appear in the Qur'an, some common customs in the Muslim World prohibit husbands from leaving their wives unattended or abandoned.[67] In this story, told by a man, the husband is punished even more severely than the lovers,[68] because he acted irresponsibly and contrary to societal expectations: it was thought that he, in his behavior, had enabled his wife to seduce other men—although it is clear that the latter were willing to be lured. On the other hand, a poor Jew, who had left home to seek work elsewhere, used to send his business

[65] Shenhar, p. 181 states that the fact that the husband left home, even due to economic hardships, testifies to an *a priori* tension within the family. It should be remembered, though, that many Jewish men in Libya, working as peddlers, were away from home for lengthy periods of time, but usually returned home for the High Holidays and Passover; see Rachel Simon, "Jewish Itinerant Peddlers in Ottoman Libya: Economic, Social, and Cultural Aspects", in C.E. Farah (editor), *Decision Making and Change in the Ottoman Empire*, (Kirksville: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1993): 293–304. For stories on Jewish peddlers in Libya, see Noy, 1967, p. 55 ("Favorites which are not forgotten"—story told by a man), p. 67 ("The fateful contents"—story told by a man) and p. 103 ("The living dead"—story told by a man).

[66] Noy, 1967, pp. 107–14 ("The investigation of the murder"—story told by a man). The husband's trip was cut short after three days due to his wife's murder. The Biblical source is *Deuteronomy*, 24:5.

[67] I would like to thank Prof. Michael Cook (Princeton University) and Prof. Samy Ayoub (University of Texas at Austin) for insights regarding this issue. According to private communication, customs in various regions in the Muslim World forbid husbands from leaving a newlywed wife for periods of time ranging from a week to several months. Some jurists believe that a husband cannot leave his newlywed wife unless he can find an agreeable female companion to stay with her, while other customs decree that if a woman is deprived of sexual intimacy or is abandoned for a certain period of time, she is entitled to a divorce and the rest of her financial rights.

[68] See below, note 116.

earnings to his wife, whom he trusted and who remained loyal to him.[69] In the last story, which was also told by a man, neither the husband nor the wife were harmed and even prospered, since they acted according to the accepted norms: the wife resisted temptations and remained faithful to her trusting and supportive husband.

While temporary business trips were often necessary, some women took pains to ensure that their husbands did not abandon them. Thus, a woman began to sleep on the corner of her husband's robe to prevent him from going to his father, who planned his son's marriage to another woman. The husband, on the other hand, managed to cut the robe and leave home.[70] Here, a female narrator describes the efforts made by a wife to ensure that her husband stays with her and would not marry another woman, chosen by his father, juxtaposing this with the husband's willingness to obey his father, rather than stay with his wife. It was not only women who tried to prevent their spouse from leaving: it could also be the other way around. A demon, who kidnapped and imprisoned a princess, placed guards around her and held her long hair in his hand while she slept, to prevent her from escaping.[71]

Dedication, Trust, Cooperation—and Suspicion

The folk literature provided mixed messages regarding spouses' feelings toward each other. On the one hand, a man may state in public that his wife was his enemy, but later, in private, tell her that he loved her, and without her his life was worthless.[72] Being told by a woman, this story could reflect women's notion that men may express themselves differently about their feelings toward their wives, depending on the immediate circumstances. As for the attitude of wives to their husbands, it was believed that some women tied their fate to that of their husbands and were ready to follow them in any situation, especially to escape danger. One story tells that a wife followed her husband, who left to live in the desert to evade the method and the predicted date of his death. When that day passed, his wife warned him that this date may simply have been postponed. They stayed put, until one day an eagle dropped a heavy horse on their green tent, which it mistook for pasture, resulting in the man's death and the woman's inevitable lamentation.[73] Another story, told by a man, indicates that for some women,

[69]Noy, 1967, pp. 78–79 and Ben-Amos, pp. 492–95 (“The poor Jew who searched for his luck”—story told by a man).
[70]Noy, 1967, p. 148 (“The beauty and the eagle”—story told by a woman).
[71]Noy, 1967, p. 121 (“The princess who would not speak”—story told by a woman).
[72]Refa'el, pp. 105–6 (“The king's decree”—story told by a woman).
[73]Noy, 1963, pp. 31–32 (“No escape from fate”—story told by a man).

their husband was the most precious thing in their lives, reflecting the view of male prominence in the family. According to this story, when the king of Libya divorced his wife, she took him with her when she left, because according to their prenuptial agreement, if he divorced her, she could take with her whatever was most precious to her, and this was her husband.[74]

On the other hand, some stories describe spouses as equals, cooperating financially and consulting each other on how to improve their lives. For example, a couple of beggars, who operated in different parts of the city, used to count their proceeds at night. As time passed, they worried that it might not be safe to keep their money in their tent, which was close to other dwellings, and the woman suggested to hide the money near her grandmother's grave. They acted accordingly, but a grocer who overheard them. stole their money. To discover the thief, the husband went begging, while his wife observed the expressions of the people who gave him alms. After a while she realized who the thief was, and they used cunning to lure him to return the money, and subsequently they left town.[75] Here, the couple appears as equal partners: both contributed to the family's income, discussed how to protect their money, and cooperated in order to recover the theft. Cooperation between spouses to overcome financial hardship was not limited to lower-class people. It was told that when a prince could not provide the annual payment that his father-in-law demanded, the couple decided to move to another town, where the husband could find gainful employment. When his earnings were not enough, his wife augmented their income by selling napkins, which she had embroidered.[76]

Some sort of coordination took place between Rabbi Frigia Dabbush (1815-40, who headed the Rabbinical Court of Tripoli) and his wife. He used to do all the family shopping every Thursday: it was customary at the time for men to do the shopping in the market, and Jews did it on Thursdays, in preparation for the Sabbath. After a while, his wife informed him that the amount of food he used to buy was enough for one day less each week, and as a result he set out to discover the reason for the worsening situation at home and how to fix it.[77]

Sometimes, couples were described as making efforts to help each other.

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[74]Beharav, 1977, pp. 57–58 (“The clever daughter of the sheikh”—story told by a man).

[75]Noy, 1967, pp. 122–24 (“The cunning store-keeper and the two beggars”—story told by a man).

[76]Refa'el, pp. 45–51 (“The azure eyed”—story told by a woman).

[77]Noy, 1967, p. 74 (“The hand of the curse”—story told by a man); Frigia Zuaretz (editor), *Yahadut Luv [Libyan Jewry]* (Tel-Aviv: Va'ad Kehilot Luv be-Yisra'el, 1982) [henceforth: *Yahadut Luv*]: 414.

One man was willing to pay huge sums to cure his sick wife,[78] while the wife of a Jewish janitor, who was imprisoned because of his economic activities, requested the governor's mother to ask her son to pardon this Jew.[79] It was also believed that mutual help between husbands and wives could continue after death. It was reported that during a severe typhus epidemic in Tripoli, the widow of Rabbi Shalom Tito (1788-1877, a leader of the Tripolitan community), managed to cure sick children after her late husband revealed to her in a dream, that she should collect the accumulated water on his tomb, give it to mothers of sick children to rub it on their bodies in order to heal them. Over time, only a little water remained on the tomb, and the widow poured it into a well and blessed it. As a result, all the well water became beneficial, and since then it has been considered a cure for the sick.[80]

Trust between spouses could even overcome witchcraft. Two sisters, who had married a camel, laughed at it, when it asked for its pajamas and as a result it kicked and killed them, but the third sister responded lovingly, gave it pajamas and slippers, and miraculously the camel turned out to become a handsome man.[81]

Several stories show that husbands were the ones in charge of the family. For example, they were considered the guardians of their wives' personal property. Such was the case of the chief of merchants, who used to keep his wife's dowry, jewels, and possessions in a box. Once, after a week's absence, he realized that the box was empty, and asked the sultan and the judges to find the thief. There is, however, some ambiguity as to how the husband viewed his relationship to this property, because in the trial he also referred to it as his own.[82]

In some cases, husbands made decisions unilaterally. This is told in a story about a poor couple who had six children, and the father could not properly take care of his family, because he had no profession. After a long period of hardship, he told his wife that they should move to another town, where their fate might improve.[83] In this story, told by a man, and possibly reflecting a male point of view, the responsibility for the family's well-being,

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[78] Noy, 1967, pp. 89–90 and Ben-Amos, pp. 605–6 (“The partnership with Asmodeus”—story told by a man).
[79]Noy, 1967, p. 58 (“Thanks to Rabbi Shalom Agib”—story told by a man).
[80]Noy, 1967, p. 158 (“The waters of healing and salvation”—story told by a man); *Yahadut Luv*, pp. 412–13.
[81]Refa'el, pp. 110–14 (“The camel”—story told by a woman).
[82]Noy, 1967, pp. 128–29 (“The verdict of the clever sheikh”—story told by a man).
[83]Beharav, 1977, pp. 130–31 (“Whoever changes his residence changes his luck”—story told by a man).

as well as the decision on what actions to take, rests with the husband.[84]

The attitude toward couples who keep secrets from each other was not equal. Some men—but no women—were described as keeping secrets from their family, including their wives. Thus, a poor shoemaker, who had a locked box, refused to tell anyone, not even his wife, what he kept in it.[85] While this was a self-imposed secret, in other cases men were ordered to keep secrets or suffer death. One man, who was taught the language of animals by King Solomon, was forbidden by the king to reveal this knowledge to anyone, otherwise he would die. The man's wife pestered him to tell her why he laughed when he was surrounded by animals, and despite his hesitation he persisted in keeping his knowledge a secret.[86] Another man, who was forbidden to reveal his name, turned on his wedding night from a rooster into a handsome man, but instead of revealing his name, when pressed by his wife, he preferred to drown himself and die.[87] Similarly, a Muslim man, who decided to convert to Judaism, did not take his wife into his confidence and divorced her.[88]

The assumption was that wives are the ones to be blamed for the deterioration of family relations, and in these cases the husbands are justified in how they treat them.[89] This is reflected in a story about a husband who was disappointed in his wife, who did not live up to his expectations. Here, a prince, who wanted to marry a girl with miraculous qualities, was deceived by the chaperon, who accompanied his bride-to-be, and replaced the latter with her own daughter. The prince was disappointed when he realized that his wife lacked miraculous qualities and therefore neglected her in favor of substitutes, which were actually reincarnations of the woman he wanted to marry.[90]

It was also believed that financial difficulties could destroy family

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[84]A shorter version of this story, as published in Beharav, 1968, p. 37, states that the husband decided together with his wife to search for their luck in a faraway city. Some details are missing in this shorter version.

[85]Noy, 1967, pp. 138–39 (“The inheritance”—story told by a man).

[86]Noy, 1967, pp. 95–97 (“What did the animals teach the man who understood their language”—story told by a man).

[87]Refa'el, pp. 26–27 (“The power of envy”—story told by a woman).

[88]Mordecai Hacohen, *Higgid Mordecai* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1978) [henceforth: *Higgid Mordecai*]: 93–96 mentions the man's mother and sister and that he divorced his wife who hated the Jews; *Yahadut Luv*, p. 406 (“Abraham the convert”) mentions the man's mother, sister, and two sons, and that he divorced his wife, whom he did not trust.

[89]Shenhar, p. 181, states that these notions reflect the social system in which the woman's status was lower than the man's.

[90]Noy, 1967, pp. 33–34 (“Jasmine in exchange of eyes”—story told by a woman).

relationships and harm personal behavior, as was demonstrated in another story about a man who could not find a job when his workplace was shut down. He became poor, angry, and aggressive, quarreling with his family, friends, and neighbors, until the family had to move to another town, where their situation did not get better. However, the family's fortunes and the man's behavior improved as a result of the intervention of a rich man, who for his own personal reasons, helped them financially and spiritually.[91] This story, told by a woman, is a rare case in which a man is blamed for the deterioration of family relationships.

Although the relationship between couples could be very bad, it is indicated that there were still those who managed to reconcile. It was told that a quarreling Jewish couple, who was on its way to the rabbinical court to get a divorce, made peace after a passer-by had talked with each of them separately.[92]

Entertaining, Dining, and Home Structure

Folktales of Libyan Jews depicting couples appearing in public places of entertainment or eating together may present an anachronistic description of life in Libya. One story tells about a husband, who took his wife's body—pretending she was alive—to a coffeehouse, where he asked for two cups of coffee,[93] falsely implying that couples visiting coffeehouses was considered an acceptable behavior at the time. Another story describes the family of the nineteenth century Tripolitan Rabbi Frigia Dabbush as being accustomed to dine together.[94] However, many reports, even from the mid-twentieth century, show that these behaviors were not common in Libya: women did not frequent coffeehouses and they usually ate separately after the men had finished their meal.[95] As for the structure of the house, it was reported that Rabbi Shalom Agib and his wife had separate bedrooms.[96]

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[91]Refa'el, pp. 128–31 (“The wicked man”—story told by a woman). See above, note 41.
[92]Noy, 1967, p. 93 (“The victory of the man who was content with his share”—story told by a man). The peacemaker was also paid by both parties.
[93]Noy, 1967, pp. 64–65 (“Two brothers and eight asses”—story told by a man).
[94]Noy, 1967, p. 74 (“The hand of the curse”—story told by a man); *Yahadut Luv*, p. 414.
[95]Simon, pp. 24–25.
[96]Noy, 1967, p. 72 (“Rabbi Shalom Agib's dream-question”—story told by a man).

Restraining Wives

Some stories present husbands, both human and non-human, as complaining about quarrelsome, mean, and ugly wives, so much so that they even lost the will to live and decided to commit suicide. One story is about a Libyan Jew, who kept failing in business and was married to an ugly and pugnacious woman, who did not give him much pleasure. She was described as having the form and character of a predatory animal and a bird of prey: when she attacked her husband, her eyes were protruding, her mouth full of curses, and she roared like a lion. She always scolded him when he came home tired after a hard day's work. He was willing to commit suicide, but the King of Demons, Asmodeus,[97] prevented him from doing so, and asked him for the reason for his behavior. When Asmodeus heard of his torment, he admitted that he had similar problems with his own wife, Lilith,[98] and the two males agreed to become business partners. Following successful enterprises, the man decided to go on his own and used cunning in order to get rid of his partner: when the latter heard the roar of cannons, the man told him that this was the voice of Lilith, who was looking for him—whereupon Asmodeus escaped in fear and the man returned home as a rich person.[99] This story, told by a man, probably presents the husband's point of view, and lacks any explanation for the wife's behavior. The fact that the husband returned home as a rich person may imply that poverty could have been a reason for the wife's behavior. While stories depicted some men in negative terms, they were not portrayed as ugly or compared to animals.

The wife's duty to obey her husband was emphasized in another story, which stated that men should learn from animals, who know better than human beings how to deal with shrews. The story is about a Libyan man, who was taught the language of animals and birds by King Solomon, but was forbidden by the king to reveal this knowledge to anyone. As a result, the man was willing to die, rather than reveal his secret ability to his nagging wife. However, he changed his mind when he heard the rooster tell other animals that this foolish man really deserves to die: while it, the rooster, knows how to control its fifty hens, this man could not handle even one woman. When he heard this, the man changed his behavior: he returned home and beat his wife with a whip until his hand grew tired. As a result, his wife repented, asked for his forgiveness, and has been obedient ever

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[97] "Asmodeus", *Wikipedia,* Asmodeus - Wikipedia (viewed April 21, 2024).

[98] "Lilith", *Wikipedia, Lilith - Wikipedia* (viewed April 21, 2024).

[99] Noy, 1967, pp. 87–90 and Ben-Amos, pp. 605–6 ("The partnership with Asmodeus"—story told by a man); Shenhar, p. 182. It was not told what happened when the husband returned home.

since.[100] This story, told by a man, makes it clear that if a wife behaves in a way that her husband objects to, he may teach her a lesson by any means, including severe corporal punishment.

Some folktales depict women as foolish, and show how men could act in extreme ways when they felt their wives behaved foolishly and did not fulfill their obligations. Thus, we hear that all the Jewish men in Kusabat (in eastern Tripolitania) divorced their wives because they were angry with them for not preparing the Sabbath on the eve of Hanukkah, but gossiped idly and hoped to prolong the day by catching the sun in a bucket of water.[101] While the story portrays women as foolish, it also shows how easy it was for men to divorce their wives. In this case, the female narrator may attest to women's criticism of the ease with which men could divorce them, but admits that in this case, the women acted foolishly and did not follow societal norms regarding their responsibilities in the household.

The attitude to self-indulgence was gender-based. Wives were accused of focusing on themselves and neglecting their husbands, who were consequently seen as entitled to divorce them and marry more obliging women. This was the fate of a queen, who was too preoccupied with her appearance to spend time caring for her husband: since she completely ignored him, he decided to divorce her. Moreover, he chose to marry and crown his black maid, who always looked after him and pampered him, as if he were her husband.[102] This story, told by a woman, shows what may be a common phenomenon: a low-class woman, whose job was to care for the needs and wants of her male master, was preferred by him over a self-absorbed woman, perhaps of a higher rank. Moreover, men may have felt entitled to be the center of attention and to be inherently of a higher status than women.

Punishing Daughter-Bearing Wives

The negative attitude of husbands to wives who gave birth to several girls—but not to boys—is reflected in a story told by a woman. A sultan, who already had seven daughters, told his pregnant wife, that if this time

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[100] Noy, 1967, pp. 95–97 (“What did the animals teach the man who understood their language”—story told by a man); Shenhar, p. 181.

[101] Noy, 1967, p. 156 (“Sabbath of divorces”—story told by a woman); Shenhar, p. 182. Consequently, the Sabbath prior to Hanukkah was known in Kusabat as “The Sabbath of Divorces”. Another story regards the whole Jewish population of Kusabat as stupid; see below, Chapter 4, note 84. For proverbs regarding the stupidity of women, see Stahl, pp. 234–35.

[102] Refa'el, pp. 101–2 (“What the heart loves”—story told by a woman).