

THIRD INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF CUSHITIC AND OMOTIC
LANGUAGES

G.Kapchits

On Subjects and Motifs of Somali Folk-tales
(experience of cataloguing)

1. Creative endowments of the Somali people are apparent not only in traditional poetry, but also in narrative forms of folklore - folk-tales. Viewed from the positions of the general theory of cliché¹, the Somali narrative fund reveals works of different levels. Moreover, "the supra-phrasal clichés of transferred meaning - fablettes, fables and didactic animal, legendary and fairy tales - have as their counterparts structurally similar supra-phrasal units with directly motivated general meaning, viz., anecdotes, schwanks² and novellistic tales"³. There are also other types of clichés usual for world and African narrative folk-lore, in particular. The only exception are the myths understood as texts of direct meaning (not allowing broad interpretation) which describe and explain the world. It seems that they didn't remain in the Somali folk-lore. But there exist originated from the myths mythological folk-tales and adjoining aetiological folk-tales explaining the peculiarities of texture of the animals, their habits and distinctive features.

¹G.L.Permyakov. From Proverb to Folk-tale. Moscow. 1979.

²Plot anecdotes which consist of several episodes and are thereby different from ordinary (one-scene) anecdotes.

³Ibid. P.59.

Among the typical characteristics of the narratives of the Somalis one should take note of cycle recurrence, brevity, simplicity of composition and limited expressive means. In the Somali folk-tales there are almost no descriptions of nature, the subjects of material culture and detailed characteristics of the heroes. The fairy-tale action develops swiftly, which is achieved by quick (and often sudden) change of motifs. Many texts sparkle with humour.

By the efforts of several generations of scholars quite a number of Somali folk-tales were collected and published in Somali and some other languages (mainly in English, German and Italian). Among them there are such masterpieces as "Test of a Fortune-teller" (Faaliyihii la bilkeydey)⁴, "A Tragedy" (Hoog), "Human Trial" (Garta aadane), "A Rebuke" (Eed-sheegad), "Knocked out Eye of a Hyena" (Ishaa Cumar ka lulata), the cycles about legendary Arrawelo, madcap Wilwal, wise Ina-Sanweyne, cowardly Igal Shidad.

And yet this rich and attractive narrative material is almost unknown to readers outside of Somalia and is out of the sight of scholars whose interests are not limited by the folk-lore of one particular ethnos. This can be explained by the limited number of copies of publications containing Somali folk-tales, translated into foreign languages and by bibliographic rarity of Somali

⁴A detailed analysis of this folk-tale was done by a pioneer of the Russian Somali studies A.Zholkovski in his article "A Somali tale "Test of a Fortune-teller" (generative description experience)" - *Narodi Azii i Afriki*. 1970. N1. P.104-116.

manuals, in which folk-tales are used as illustrations and also by that regrettable fact that the knowledge of Somali is a property of a still narrow circle of individuals who are engaged in the study of the Somalian folk-lore heritage. This situation can be changed in two ways: by concentrating the efforts on publication in Somali and translated into major languages of the existing manuscript collections of Somali folk-tales and by the critical utilization of the experience of cataloguing, accumulated by the international folk-lore scholarship and summarized in "The Types of the Folk-tales" by A.Aarne and "Motif-index of Folk-literature" by S.Thompson. The possibility of incorporation of the subjects and motifs of the Somali folk-tales into the systems of classification of the narrative folk-lore offered by the indicated sources had been checked during the preparation for publication of the book "Somali Folk-tales"⁵ which included two hundred narratives of the Somali people.

2.Cataloguing of subjects. Only nineteen from the extensive list of subject types of Aarne completely or partly coincide with the subjects⁶ of the Somali folk-lore texts which were included in the book. Completely identical are N75. The Help of the Weak. The mouse gnaws the net and liberates the captured lion from net (A Somali tale "Libaax iyo jiir"); N110. Belling the Cat. The mice buy a bell for the cat but no one dares to tie it on her (A tale

⁵Somalijskiye narodniye skazki. Composition, translation from Somali into Russian, introduction, commentary and typological analysis of motifs by G.Kapchits. Moscow. The "Nauka" Publishers (in print).

⁶Only full-fledged subjects are meant here.

"Jiirar iyo Yaanyuur") and N1419H. Woman Warns Lover of Husband by Singing Song ("Dhagar Dumar"). The other subjects differ in details. Such are N41. Fox in the Orchard. Has overeaten and must fast six days so as to get back through the hole (In a Somali tale the same happened to the jackal who has overeaten hens - "Dawaco gaajeysan"); N52. The Ass without a Heart. The ass as toll gatherer is killed by the lion for asking for a toll. The fox eats the ass's heart. When the lion asks for it, the fox replies that the ass could have had no heart since he was such a fool as to ask the lion for a toll (In a Somali tale a heart of a silly ass who cried in a dangerous place was eaten by a dog - "Dameer iyo Eey"); N207A. Ass Induces Overworked Bullock to feign Sickness. Ass must do bullock's work and persuades bullock to return (The subject of the Somali tale is shorter. It mentions no bullock's return - "Dameer iyo Dibi"); N655A. The Strayed Camel and the Clever Deductions. Four men see the tracks of an animal and are able to deduce: a/ It was a camel, b/ It was one-eyed (grass is eaten on one side of the road only), c/ It was lame (because of its tracks), d/It was carrying oil (drops of oil are seen on the ground), e/ It had no tail (This is an Indian subject. In the Somali subject three brothers are able to deduce that the camel was one-eyed, overloaded and had no tail - "Ninba kaskii buu kor tagaa"); N285D. Serpent Refuses Reconciliation. Snake is given milk. Gives gold from tail as reward. Later man's son wants all gold at once and cuts the tail off. Boy is bitten by snake. Man tries to give snake milk again, but they can't be reconciled for each has injuries that cannot be forgotten (The Somali subject is no less dramatical: A nomad with his family who finds himself in the land owned by a snake is per-

mitted to stay only one night. He likes the place and decides to kill the snake. He strikes the snake sleeping on a stump with his axe. But the snake wakes up and escapes. At night the nomad's boy is bitten by the snake. In the morning the man offers reconciliation, but the snake refuses. It says: "Until I see the trace of your axe and you see the tomb of your own son there can't be peace between us" - "Damac"). The rest of the subjects from Aarno which are varied in the investigated tales are as follows: N62. Peace Among the Animals. The Fox and the Cock (The Somali tale "Diiq iyo Dawaco"); N288C*. The Deliberate Turtle ("Diin daanshay"); N157A*. The Lion Searches for Man ("Libaax"); N2042A*. Trial Among the Animals (The Somali cumulative tale "Garta Aadane" N1341. Fools Warn Thief What Not to Steal. Explain where everything is and where the key is kept ("Labo nacas"); N1339F. Strange Foods. Fool is unacquainted with figs (In the Somali tale "Timirtii hore dab loo waa" a simpleton does not know that dates need no cooking); N1624. Thief's Excuse (The Somali tale "Beeni raad ma leh"); N1920. Contest in Lying ("Been badanaa"); N1456. The Blind Fiancée. The search for the needle ("Wiil iyo Gabadh" in which an almost blind bridegroom takes part); N1353. The Old Woman as a Trouble Maker ("Belo habreed") and N926C. Cases Solved in a Manner Worthy of Solomon ("Labo dumar ah oo wiil isku haystay").

It is evident that the subjects of some mentioned Somali folk-tales are borrowed and the others are known worldwide. Such "wandering" subjects can be found in the narrative folk-lore of many peoples speaking different languages, living in different natural conditions and having no mutual historical roots and cultural traditions. But the majority of subjects from the

collection included into "Somali Folk-tales" found no place in Aarne's cataloguing. It can't be explained by the fact that Aarne's index is based on the narratives of the European area only⁷. It seems that the cataloguing of the international fairytale fund can not lean upon subjects in principle. For this purpose a subject is too large of a structure.

3. Cataloguing of motifs. There is no exact definition of a motif in scientific literature. According to S. Thompson, motifs are "those details out of which full-fledged narratives are composed"⁸. Here are some examples of motifs: Raising of the Sky, Origin of the Stars, Clouds and Rain (The Somali tale "Daldaloole", Battle Between Birds and Animals ("Bakayle iyo Digiiran"), Marriage Tests (found in many Somali novellistic tales).

The exposed motifs of the Somali folk-tales (their number is several thousand) belong to all chapters of Thompson's Motif-index. The only exception is "The Dead", marked by the Latin E, and consisting of the motifs, which concern resuscitation, ghosts

⁷Small effectiveness of Aarne's system for cataloguing of the non-european folk-lore was noted by many researchers and, in particular, by G. Levington - the composer of The Eskimo tales typological motif-index (In "Skazki i mifi eskimov". Moscow. 1985.) The same was mentioned by S. Thompson also: "Outside of Europe... Aarne's index is of little use. In the remoter parts of the world the European tale-types are applicable to very few stories" - Motif-index of Folk-Literature. Bloomington. 1955. Vol. 1. Introduction. P. 10.

⁸Ibid.

and other revenants, reincarnation and the soul. The motifs of the investigated texts the most fully are represented in the chapters Animals (B), Tabu(C), Tests (H), The Wise and the Foolish (J) and Deceptions (K). The most widespread motifs: H360-H389. Bride tests (the Somali tales "Gogol rag waa nabad", "Talo haween", "Naagta wanaagsan" and others), H580-H599. Enigmatic statement ("Wiil-Waal iyo ina-adeerkii", "Toddobo ayaa talo ka dhalataa" and others), H900-H1199. Test of prowess: tasks ("Tiir-rigii Gannaje", "Harag labada docoodba dhogor ku leh", "Hunguri" and others), J200-J499. Choices ("Ina hooyo waa uur habreed", "Guurdoon" and others), J1500-J1649. Clever practical retorts ("Dhurwaa iyo dawaco", "Saddex maanlaawe", "Labo kala daran" and others).

In Somali folk-tales there are motifs which are not fixed in Thompson's motif-index. Such are, for example, SA179.14⁹ God shortens hind legs of hyena (A Somali tale "Maxaa lugta dhur-waaga gaabiyey"), SA669.3. The heavens pity people ("Daldaloole") SA2494.3.6. Enmity between hyena and lion (Waxay waraabaha iyo libaaxu u coloobeen"), SD621.1.2. Lizard by day; woman by night (Caasha-badhi"), SF167.1.4.3. Camel in the sky ("Awrka cir"), SF531.6.4. Kind giant returns to the people the water taken away by wicked giant ("xabbad Ina-Kamas and Birir Ina-Barqo"), SG11.11.3. Cannibal woman with one ear very long ("Dad-qalato"), SJ99.4.1. Wisdom taught by proverb ("Meel hoo dooneysa hadal

⁹The Latin S before the number of a motif means that this is an original (Somali only) motif, introduced into the national motif-index, based on Thompson's system.

waxba kama taro") and many others. The original motifs are a valuable contribution of the creators of the Somali folk-lore to the whole body of traditional literature.

The cataloguing of motifs according to Thompson's system is not a simple thing. One of the difficulties is related to the possibility of different interpretations of the significant elements of a folk-tale and to some weak points of semantic harmony of the system itself. Thus, what happened to the jackal, who had changed his gait in order to walk like the Profet, but started to walk even worse than before (A Somali tale "Dawaco socodkeediir ka taktay, kii Nebigana gaari wayday") can be attributed to SA2272. 3. Animal characteristics: imitation of human-being, A2440. Animal characteristics: carriage, J512. Animal should not try to change his nature, or J2413. Foolish imitation by an animal.

Nevertheless, only after an accurate motif-cataloguing "will it be possible to make adequate use of the [Somali folk-tale] collections now existing in print and in manuscript"¹⁰ and to place them at the disposal of the scientific world.

¹⁰Ibid. Words in square brackets are inserted by G.K.

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