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Once upon a time: Telling a story in Bashkardi

Agnes Korn

In recent years, I have been visiting the Trust repeatedly to work on recordings of the Bashkardi language (or rather, group of dialects) that Ilya Gershevitch made in Southern Iran in 1956 (see *Indiran* 10, 2015: <https://www.indiran.org/about/trust-publications/newsletter/>). The recordings include various types of text: procedural texts (e.g. how to make a certain type of bread), dialogues and folktales.

Readers might expect that a Bashkardi folktale would start with an equivalent of the formula *yekī būd, yekī nabūd*, ‘Once there was, once there was not’, which is well-known from Persian and also found in many neighbouring languages such as Turkish (*bir varmış bir yokmuş*) or Georgian (*iqo da ara iqo ra*). However, in spite of the far-reaching influence that Persian has exercised on the minority languages of Iran, this formula is not found in the Bashkardi material, nor is it found in the Balochi data from Iran on which I have worked with Maryam Nourzaei.

What we do find are adaptations of Persian *rūzī (būd), rūzgār-ī (būd)*, ‘It was a day, it was a time’, which is a less frequent alternative to *yekī būd*. One of the Bashkardi tales recorded by Gershevitch – featuring a jackal as the main character – begins with *rūza rūzahā-ī bū, bū kakā-ī o nauk-ī*, ‘Once upon a time, there was an old woman and her grandson’.

However, more often Bashkardi folktales start with ‘There was’, introducing the main characters without a specific formula. One folktale has *hast-a ya maldār-ē. ya maldār-ē hast-a, hast-ar-ī ya sālāl*, ‘There was a rich man. There was a rich man; he had

[lit. to him was] a shepherd’.

The form *hast-a (hast-ar* if a vowel follows) is linguistically very interesting: *hast* alone already means ‘there is’. The element *a(r)* means ‘s/he was’ and corresponds to the Balochi *a(t)* (*t* following a vowel yields *r* in North Bashkardi). The origin of this form is not clear, which makes the fact that Balochi and Bashkardi share it all the more remarkable. The form *hast-a(r)* thus contains two finite verb forms, ‘there is’ and ‘was’.

The form *bū* in the formula quoted above is a variant of *būd* found when a vowel follows. Given that Bashkardi has *r* after vowels where Balochi has *t*, *būd* cannot be a genuine Bashkardi form (vs. Balochi *būt*). Thus, differently from *yekī būd, yekī nabūd*, for which neighbouring cultures have versions in their own languages, the formula *rūza rūzahā-ī būd* is not a translation, but has been borrowed as a whole from Persian. This is confirmed by a parallel phenomenon found in Balochi: one of the folktales that Maryam Nourzaei recorded in Iranian Balochistan starts with *hast-a deya ya rōč-e rōzegār-e, hast-a ya bādešāh-ē a*, ‘Then there was one day, one time, there was, there was a king’. Here, we see an adaptation of the Persian formula, combining *rōzegār*, which is borrowed from (classical) Persian, with *rōč*, the Balochi cognate of *rōz*. Interestingly, the Balochi expression combines the Persian formula with the *hast-a* form mentioned above.

The two introductions also differ in another aspect: the one with *būd* introduces two characters together, while the one with *hast-a* introduces them one by one, and this continues in the next sentences, where each point is mentioned separately: *ī sālāl-ī fakīr a. ī fakīr do tā čuk-ī hast-ī a o ya zā*, ‘This shepherd was poor. The poor man had [lit. to him were] two children and one wife’.

Introducing characters and features

one at a time is typical of oral-style storytelling, and this tale, introduced by a Bashkardi formulation, is of an oral style throughout, while the jackal story, introduced by the Persian formula, is more reminiscent of literary style.

It seems to me that the way a folktale is introduced goes with the structure and contents of the tale. The story of the shepherd is a long text composed of a whole series of motifs. While the individual motifs have parallels in folktales from other cultures, the way they are interwoven, some also rather loosely combined, is I think likewise characteristic of oral-style storytelling, and this particular tale might be specific to Bashkardi, or perhaps even composed spontaneously on the specific occasion when Gershevitch recorded it.

The text starting with the Persian formula is quite different, and of a ‘classical’ folktale type: A jackal steals yoghurt from an old woman. She cuts off his tail in order to stop him stealing her yoghurt, and demands that he brings her milk in exchange for his tail. The jackal thus goes to the goat to ask for milk; the goat promises milk under the condition that he brings some leaves; the tree promises leaves in return for a bird’s nest, the bird demands grain, and the field wants water. Having watered the field, the jackal goes on the reverse journey to bring the required items to everyone and get back his tail.

This chain of events will surely remind readers of similar folktales from other countries. These are called ‘cumulative tales’ in folklore studies. While cumulative tales are not particularly frequent in Persian according to Ulrich Marzolph, who studied a corpus of some 1300 folktales (*Typologie des persischen Volksmärchens*, Beirut 1984), his inventory does include a close parallel to our tale, which is similar

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not only in the items constituting the chain, but also in the event which sets it in train. Here, it is a cat (or mouse) stealing milk from an old woman, who tears off its tail. The cat is then obliged to replace the milk, the goat demands to be fed, the meadow wants water, etc.

The typology of folktales known as the 'Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index' (Helsinki 2004) shows that this tale

is found in many parts of the world from Europe to East Asia, East Africa and the Americas. The Bashkardi version and the jackal it features could now be added to this list.

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rūza rūzahā-ī bū, bū kakā-ī o nauk-ī. ... halā bogom? xāb.

A snapshot of the the Bashkardi linguistic data being analysed using ELAN software



Indiran is the newsletter of the Ancient India and Iran Trust.

The Trust is an independent educational charity, established in 1978 to encourage the study of the early civilisations and languages of the Indian subcontinent, Iran and Central Asia.

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