

ORAL TRADITIONS OF THE MASALIT

INTRODUCTION

The Masalit make a distinction in their language between 'heavy language' and 'light language' (*kana lere* and *kana walwala*), the former being more sophisticated and using more complex and intricate morphological forms, the latter using the simpler forms and freely adopting alien (mainly Arabic) lexemes. The latter is employed in everyday conversations, in the market-places and with non-native speakers of Masalit. The former is used in formal, respectful address with the sultan and his entourage, by older people when recounting histories and wisdom, and in the *xutba* (sermon) in the countryside mosques at Friday prayers. Use of the 'heavy language' is a mark of erudition and sophistication - the rapid manipulation of Masalit agglutinative verbal structures being far from a simple exercise.

The two distinct forms of oral tradition that I am aware of, 'sayings' and songs, are both in the 'light language' (as defined by the informants), using the usual Nom-subject Nom-object Verb syntactical order and the less complicated morphological forms of the language.

All the material was gathered between 1979 and 1983 from Masalit male students at Geneina High School (where I was a teacher) at my own home (i.e. out of the social context in which it would usually be produced and about which, unfortunately, I have no information).

SAYINGS

In response to my soliciting for 'proverbs' (using the Arabic term *maṭal* ² as most interviews were conducted in Arabic) the informants produced the following 'sayings', the specific Masalit term embracing all of which, *kana marka*, literally means 'found language/language that is found'. They are marked by their brevity and simplicity of expression, containing between one and three clauses. They may be divided into 'mythopoetic' and 'wisdom' groups (my own division, I do not know what the indigenous Masalit classification of *kana marka* is, if there is one).

The mythopoetic sayings (1-4 below) may provide a glimpse of remnants of pre-Islamic beliefs, notions and myths, and behind which may lie more detailed creation stories as a part of a more extensive 'cosmogony'. They are set in the far past (marked by the word **ale** 'early, at first, in the beginning') and take the form of highly compressed, allegorical anecdotes illustrating an order of beliefs which inform the hearers of the categorization and evaluation of their environment. They may also be employed as injunctions with an instructive purpose, though whether this is their primary function or not was not made clear to me. All follow the same 'story pattern': ① in the beginning the environment and its inhabitants were not as they are today (in their pristine state, maybe); ② an event occurred occasioning the change to ③ their present condition.

1) At first there were no wadis. But they came about by the coming and going of the elephant's feet.

madaldi ale k'oyere. lakin mungitan jota takakono madaldi tuka.

2) At first the moon had no dark patches. (Then) it fought with the sun and was burnt/hurt.

ayitan duni tene ila ale k'oyere. ayingembo osorona tumona.

3) Sheep go about with bowed heads because their ancestor lost the dog's needle.

ajeici osonagono iyegu ale uwawini ibro injetan tindiana inken osoke.

(An injunction to be heedful, as the results of heedlessness may endure?)

4) At first the monkey was human. (Then) it bathed itself in milk. (So) God changed it into a monkey.

gurgi ale kangitere. jimbo du tukuna. mola gurgo tusare.

(An injunction against extravagance?...shades of Cleopatra!)

The wisdom sayings are timeless in that they do not refer to one specific sequence of events which took place at some point in the past, but rather are concise expressions of widely accepted truths (using the 'simple present' tense in most cases). Some take the form of simple, one-clause statements explaining specific 'physical' phenomena (5-7 below); others

explain or are statements about 'behavioural' phenomena (8-11 below); others take the form of conditional statements (using the **ba /verb base/-an** construction) linking two 'logically' related events (12-17 below).

5) The six-fingered one ate (her/his) twin.

nyagaramta iti nenegi seniru tin yana.

(The twin became the sixth finger).

6) A long-armed person is born in the rainy season.

kangi koro cukangi xarifu unyansre.

7) The sun trembles/dances on the day of the Hajj sacrifice (Ar. 'iid).

ayinge leila iide dehiyem temi.

8) One who feels sleep(y) does not choose a mat to sleep on.

taani tiye baju tenderlende.

(If one is tired enough one will sleep anywhere).

9) Whatever they cover a hedgehog with, it escapes.

dumsangumi ganimbo orocankwe, ting tike.

(One cannot trap a tricky fellow).

10) The latecomer knows the play (dance).

warañ nara jaaro toose.

(Alludes to those who come late to a dance) ³.

11) The tree-planter leaves and dies.

singo nundunyuna le tiisi.

(Trees will outlive those who plant them; in general the Masalit do not plant trees, it is considered to invite misfortune).

12) If a rabid dog bites a person it gives birth to children in their head.

inje jakumun kango (ba) tiifjen kimin kujum tunye/tundunye.

(An observation that those bitten by rabid dogs become rabid themselves; also an explanation of the symptoms - quite accurate as it is the invasion

of the CNS by the rabies virus, and its multiplication therein, that causes the symptoms).

13) If a stray dog comes (to a house) it will not leave until it has eaten.
inje alongo ba taran karaamo tinyenkede telesinde.

(Perhaps this reflects a social rule that unsolicited guests may stay until they have been offered some measure of hospitality).

14) If a thief tastes the food (of the victim, by invitation) it (will) find (him out).

harami lingo ba tijerinen tarkice.

(Referring to a traditional method of detection where thieves would be judged on the evidence of their reactions to certain foods).

15) If you dip (your hands) in water (the liar will) pull theirs out dry.

sam liqen fero toyora.

(A method of lie detection: water (symbolizing goodness) will not adhere to the hands of a liar). ⁴

16) If they put a weed under the beer pot the beer will not rise/ferment.

budo ba dokoro madani gonyim ondowonen mada ornanjinde. ⁵

(Badness affects its environment ?)

17) If the sun has a shadow (eclipse) a great person has died on that day.

ayings ba asro teinan leila ilu kang'i kudi tiyarc.

(Eclipses are portents of important events).

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