Abdullah al-Tayyib, Sudanese Folk Riddles, 5th ed. Khartoum University Press, 2008.

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Book
Review

Today, when the term Sudan is mentioned, the simultaneous emergence of associations related both to Africa and to the Arab–Islamic world is by no means coincidental. This circumstance is closely connected not only to Sudan's geographical location but also to the multilayered character of its anthropological, ethnic, and cultural structure. Sudan is a country with a historical depth that cannot be adequately understood within the narrow framework of a modern nation-state. Extending back at least four millennia before the Common Era, this geography has historically been regarded as one of the principal centers where ancient African civilizations intersected with the Arab–Islamic cultural sphere. In this respect, Sudan is recognized as one of the rare cultural spaces that simultaneously embody a sense of belonging to both Africa and the Arab–Islamic world.

This historical and cultural depth has played an undeniable role in the formation of Sudanese literature and culture. Sudanese culture and literature have largely been shaped through oral tradition, with stories, folktales, legends, and riddles transmitted from one generation to another. Sudanese Folk Riddles, published by Prof. Dr. Abdullah al-Tayyib in 1977, should be regarded as one of the foundational sources for the documentation of this oral heritage and its transfer into written culture. The work examines twenty-one folk narratives and riddles recounted across different regions of Sudan; through these narratives, the value system, moral outlook, and collective memory of Sudanese society are rendered visible.

The significance of this work extends beyond its being a mere literary compilation that brings together folkloric narratives. Abdullah al-Tayyib approaches these narratives as cultural documents that reflect Sudanese customs, traditions, social practices, and value systems. It is important to emphasize here that an examination of the meanings and values embedded in the twenty-one stories included in the work requires not only a brief evaluative commentary but also a more profound and comprehensive scholarly study. This is because the messages each story seeks to convey—through its narrative themes, concepts, and characters—as well as the values and meanings it aims to instill in children, are distinct and multilayered.

The author's birth in 1922 in the city of Ed-Damer in northern Sudan, and his residence in various regions of Sudan throughout his educational life, enabled him to compile these narratives not as an external observer but as an individual deeply embedded within this cultural milieu. Indeed, the work contains narratives collected from a broad geographical expanse, ranging from Kassala and Port Sudan in eastern Sudan to the Gezira, Khartoum, and White Nile regions in central Sudan, and extending even to southern Sudan. This diversity indicates that the work offers a pluralistic and polycentric cultural representation rather than a homogenizing vision of Sudan.

Abdullah al-Tayyib explicitly states his motivation for classifying and recording these narratives: the gradual disappearance of stories transmitted through oral culture as a result of modernization, and the risk of their complete loss in the near future. From this perspective, Sudanese Folk Riddles should be regarded as a written repository of collective memory, preserving narratives that were traditionally conveyed—largely in the evenings—by grandmothers and elderly community members for the purposes of educating and entertaining children. Nevertheless, these narratives do not merely serve functions of amusement or consolation; rather, they assume a formative, educational, and moral mission. Core values such as generosity, courage, tolerance, political acumen, cunning, patience, and social solidarity are transmitted through the stories within an implicit pedagogical framework.

The texts also offer rich sociocultural details concerning the everyday life of Sudanese society. Practices employed during periods of war, wedding customs, social rituals, neighborhood life, and popular beliefs are vividly reflected in the narrative background. Moreover, while benevolent heroes and angels are portrayed as representatives of goodness, the ways

in which evil infiltrates human life are symbolically explored through extraordinary beings, demonic forces, and metaphysical elements. Within this narrative universe, the social role and status of women in Sudanese culture are also prominently addressed; the female figure is frequently positioned as a bearer and guardian of the moral order.

From the perspective of language policy, Sudanese Folk Riddles consciously maintains a balance between poetic and colloquial (vernacular) Arabic and Classical Arabic, while remaining faithful to its original stylistic character. Although Abdullah al-Tayyib privileges Classical Arabic in order to reach a broad Arabic-speaking readership, he deliberately preserves certain local words and expressions within the text. This choice reflects a clear stance regarding the historical and philological legitimacy of Sudanese Arabic. The author does not regard Arabic usage in Sudan as a "corrupted" dialect; rather, he situates it as a living linguistic variant that maintains continuity with Classical Arabic. In this way, language in the work functions not merely as a narrative medium but also as a fundamental component of cultural identity.

In conclusion, Sudanese Folk Riddles is not simply a collection of folk tales; it is a multidimensional cultural document that reveals the cultural strata, value systems, and educational and moral frameworks of Sudanese society. The work is particularly significant in that it challenges the tendency in the modern world to reduce African societies to narratives of "ignorance" and "lack of education," demonstrating instead that the Sudanese people possess a deeply rooted and functional moral and cultural system of education. Through this study, Abdullah al-Tayyib not only recorded Sudan's oral heritage but also made a lasting methodological and theoretical contribution to the cultural history of both Africa and the Arab–Islamic world.