Introduction and Study

1 Preliminary Comments

The purpose of this study is to document and analyze the endangered oral literary tradition of Chaouen, northern Morocco, a vehicle for the transmission of a local culture and language, before it disappears without record.1 In a relatively short time a way of life that had been maintained for generations has been altered and its linguistic and social characteristics obliterated. What remains now of the speech and cultural traditions of Chaouen, and perhaps of many other large and small Moroccan cities, is being preserved by a handful of elderly men and (particularly) elderly women, who are par excellence linguistically and culturally associated with oral literature, and to whom the preservation of skills of oral narration, transmission, and preservation is entrusted2 (unfortunately often only by default).

The present study has two objectives: (1) It seeks to preserve the oral tradition in its form of storytelling in the vernacular language in which it has been transmitted, presenting the original texts without any alterations, or creative or editorial changes, to assure the accuracy and the representativeness of the oral tradition and the verbal art embodied in the language and socio-cultural information carried in them. This includes philological commentary on the Moroccan Arabic used in these stories. (2) To present an English translation of the two sets of stories, with footnotes on the cultural, literary and linguistic matters necessary for understanding this body of oral literature. I wish to preserve the cultural setting of the stories, and provide the tools for understanding them in their cultural context. My working assumption has been that the oral tradition is a part of a “cognitive-behavioristic” system, and that such a system includes the sentiments of the narrator and the audience concerning the

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1 See Nicolaïsen (1990), 41; Finnegan (2003), 77–78, 217; and the biographical data of both informants below. For a completely different point of view, see the introduction by Lafkioui and Merolla to the collection of folktales from Rif (northern Morocco) by Boughaba Maleem (2007), vi: they claim that the tradition of folktale narration remains vital in both the villages and the cities of Rif despite television.

2 This situation is common in many other Arab countries: see for example the comments about Bāb al-Shaykh (Iraq) by Abu-Haidar (1988), 154 and (1991), 29, 37. Concerning Morocco see for example Sadiqi (2003), 246; idem (2010), 42–46; and Vicente (2009), 23–24 and the bibliographical references there.
verbatim texts involved and their variants. A combination of disciplines is applied when dealing with the linguistic and literary features of the present corpus.

2 Anthology and Recording

This anthology contains thirteen folktales and two poems narrated by a man, and nine folktales, four lullabies, and one song told by a woman. This is the maximum I could record from these two narrators, given their advanced age and their problems in recalling all the details of the large corpus of stories they used to narrate with devotion and high professionalism (though both of them were solely amateurs and not professional tale-tellers). Both endeavored to narrate with great efficiency and without hesitation. The man narrator repeatedly exclaimed to me, “Oh! Aicha, you should have come to ask me for tales years earlier: I could then have filled an entire book for you.” Nevertheless he displayed great narrative skill and the ability to shift from one situation of thought to another adeptly. Moreover, he was able to interrupt his narrative of even a highly complicated tale, interject a comment or ask a question completely out of context, and then resume without hesitation the thread of the narration from the point where he had left it. The woman narrator complained of being tired, and she regretted her weakness. But both of them were aware that this time their artistic narrations and the oral tradition and literature they had embraced since childhood would be perpetuated, and that future generations would tell their stories, and they showed an immense gift, enthusiasm, strength, passion, and happiness in assuring the continuance of an oral tradition that only they knew, being the oldest people with such a talent still living in the whole city of Chaouen. I keenly felt the urgency of this project. The aware-

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3 For a significant and extensive commentary on the theoretical approach see El-Shamy (1967), esp. under Part II; idem (1986), 41; idem (1999), 5–6, 20–21 n. 11–21 and the copious bibliographical references mentioned there; and Dégh (1990), 161–173, and Voigt (1990), 403–414 and the bibliographical references in both. Also see Finnegan (2003), 104–111.

4 I saw the need to revise, newly edit, translate, and republish two of the tales, tale no. 20, “bînt s-sûltân / The Sultan’s Daughter” and tale no. 21, “ṭ-ṭâyûr l-mḥâddoš / The Talking Bird,” told by the woman narrator to Moscoso, DACH, 254–269, who did not ask the storyteller whether or not she wished to be anonymous but kept her so. My intention had been to newly record these two tales in full; but, due to her delicate health, the narrator could not entirely recall them. She was the one who suggested taking them from Moscoso’s dissertation.