

(Barasisi) (the legend)
II.

The legend of Barsisa (the Arabic becoming Barasisi in the Swahilicised form), is associated by early Islamic tradition with Quran lix,16, "Like the devil when he saith to man, Be thou an infidel; and when he is become an infidel, he saith, Verily I am clear of thee, for I fear God, the Lord of all creatures." But the story is older than Islam, though its pre-Islamic history is not clear. It appears to have been taken over from Jewish legendry; it is reputed to have been related by Ibn Umama as from the lips of the Prophet; and at least from the early IXth century down to recent times it has been recounted in the works of numerous Moslem authors until it has become current throughout the Moslem world and, penetrating into Europe by translation and otherwise, it has formed the source of at least one romance of modern authorship.

Of the man Barasisi little is known except that he is reputed as a religious devotee, some say of Israelitish origin, others of Syrian; that he lived as a recluse, immersed in his devotions, or that he was the leader of a devout school, his followers numbering "more than six thousand, whose multitude amazed the angels," and that, for sixty years or more his piety had withstood the wiles of

Satan whose final triumph in Barasisi's downfall the legend relates. The Arabian authors recount the story with variant detail upon the same theme and copies of at least three works containing versions of the legend, al-Mustatraf, Majalis-al-Saniyy and Arba'in Hadis, exist in the archives of mosques and in private ownership on the Swahili coast. It is from such a source, probably Arba'in Hadis, that Sayyid Abdallah Masu'ud drew his material, as he avers in st.5 of his poem:-

Bwene chuo makutubu kwa lugha ya kiarabu,
Nami yakanijibu hapenda kuwandikia.
I possess a book written in the Arabic language,
And it impels me with desire to write to you of it.

His Swahili version adheres closely to Arabic sources. Satan espying Barasisi's piety, assembles his myrmidons and from amongst them despatches one, Baidhi, to betray the monk. He visits Barasisi disguised as a devotee, vies with him in devotion and teaches him a prayer which, Baidhi claims, will cure the sick. He then causes a young woman to become siezed of an evil spirit, upon which calamity her brothers seek the advice of a diviner, whom they find in Baidhi disguised, who sends them to Barasisi, saying that only he can cure their sister. Barasisi objects that he knows nought of medicine, but Baidhi, again disguised, intervenes and overrules the monk's protests, and effects that the brothers bring their sister to live with the monk that he may cure her. At first he fails to exorcise the spirit, but is urged to further

effort by Baidhi, when the girl in her frenzy prostrates herself before the monk who succumbs to the solicitations of her possessive evil spirit, none other than Baidhi, and falls to her seduction. Then, the shame of his sin and of his ward's condition overwhelming him, Barasisi is again visited by Baidhi in disguise, with the advice that to conceal the sin the girl must be murdered, her brothers to be told that the demon possessing her had spirited her away. The girl is thus killed and buried, but Baidhi, leaving a clue at her grave, hastens to acquaint her brothers, by means of dreams as they sleep, of their sister's true fate. They visit Barasisi, the crime is revealed and the monk is hailed before a judge, again Baidhi disguised, and, after being reviled for his apostacy, Barasisi is put to death.

From its wide diffusion over a long period of time, the story would seem to have had a strong appeal elsewhere in the Islamic field; but it seems never to have gained popularity amongst the Swahili. No manuscript copies of the Swahili version have been found to exist either in Mombasa or Lamu, nor was the poem known there to native authorities otherwise well versed in their national literature, except for the Arabic versions already mentioned.

From that it is not necessarily to be assumed that Sayyid Abdallah's utenzi marks the introduction of the

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legend to the Swahili; the story may have had earlier oral currency, but its unfamiliarity on the Coast does not support that view and there is no evidence that it existed in Swahili form prior to Sayyid Abdallah's composition in the early part of the XIXth century.

The theme of this utenzi may account for it being little known. The frequent mention of evil spirits, as understood in the terms shaitani, iblis, pepo, must have restricted, if not prohibited, its recital at social and other gatherings where stories are customarily read aloud for the entertainment of the company. But in a land where it is recognised as of daily occurrence for people to be harmed, distressed or siezed by evil spirits, where malignant and mischievous jinn eavesdrop at the huts, lurk in the palmgroves, roam the dark night streets and lay in wait for unwary wayfarers in markets, on the seashore, along bush-trails, in fruit gardens, even on the very threshold of the home; and where not only jinn, but wizards and witches practising fearful mysteries in league with these same jinn, may be amongst the passersby, even in the company assembled, it is both unsafe and unmannerly to speak of evil spirits. The recital of a work making frequent mention of them could not fail to alarm fear in some and affront susceptibilities of others in a Swahili audience; it would, indeed, be an unusual gathering at which some of those present had not themselves

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the passers-by, even in the company assembled, it is both
anxiety and necessity to speak of evil spirits. The recital
of a work making frequent mention of them could not fail to
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in a Swabian audience; it would, indeed, be an unusual
gathering at which some of those present had not themselves

experienced once or oftener the rigours of seizure by an evil spirit. The poem assumes that such a condition, as well as the steps to be taken for its diagnosis and cure, are matters of common knowledge; as they are throughout the Islamic East, with the Swahili and amongst the majority of African tribes. The legend has thus been adopted into Swahili without obvious African impress unless this be found in the manner of Barasisi's execution, death by spearing, as expressed by the now almost obsolete verb kufumaniwa (st.214). The Arabic versions noted above agree that he was bound to a tree and left to death by exposure.

Pre-Islamic paganism no doubt accounts for the sadistic theme of the legend, for although the Quran holds murder and fornication as heinous sins of the first degree, yet the denial to the monk of repentance, emphasised in some versions, is in ill accord with Quran xxv.71 and ii.160 and still less with xii.87, "for none despairs of Allah's mercy except the unbelieving people."

Diem, appears to be the Arabic source recording the legend of Barasisi. Barasisi supra.

B. For bibliography and chronology see Barasisi, I, p. 257 and

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experienced ones or otherwise the rigours of seizure by an evil spirit. The poem assumes that such a condition, as well as the steps to be taken for its diagnosis and cure, are matters of common knowledge; as they are throughout the Islamic East, with the Swahili and amongst the majority of African tribes. The legend has thus been adopted into Swahili without obvious African impress unless this be found in the manner of Barasa's execution, death by asphyxiation, as expressed by the now almost obsolete verb kuhamama (at.214). The Arabic versions noted above agree that he was bound to a tree and left to death by exposure. Pre-Islamic paganism no doubt accounts for the realistic theme of the legend, for although the Quran holds murder and fornication as heinous sins of the first degree, yet the denial to the monk of repentance, emphasised in some versions, is in full accord with Quran xxv.71 and xl.180 and still less with xii.87, "for none despairs of Allah's mercy except the unbelieving people."

(Barasisi)

Footnotes.

(the legend)

1. Cf. Sale, G: The Koran, p.406. Some commentators refer this passage as applying (a) to man in general or (b) to the story of how the devil misled Abu Djahl at the battle of Badr (Quran, viii, 50.), or to the Bani Hainuqa whom Muhammed plundered and drove into exile (Muh. Ali, Quran, lix, 16, n.); but according to Prof. D.B. Macdonald in Ency. of Islam, I. 667, s.v. Barsisa, "the older exegetical tradition prefers" reference to the Barsisa legend.
2. Ency. Islam. supra; and this is held by literate opinion in East Africa, according to Kadhi Ali al-Amin who says, "the legend is amongst those taken over by the Arabs from the Jews who were converted to or professed Islam." See footnote 8.
3. Al-Baihaki, al-Kitab al-Mahasin-al-Masevi, ed. Dr F. Schwally, Giessen, 1902.
4. Abd-al-Razzak ibn Hammam (A.H. 211--A.D. 826) in his Al-Djam, appears to be the first author recording the legend; cf. Ency. Islam supra.
5. For bibliography and chronology see Ency. Islam, I. p. 667 seq.
6. Goldziher, I. in Die Legend vom Mönch Barsisa gives three versions of the story and it has been elsewhere treated; see note 9.

(Harsais) Footnote (the legend)

1. Cf. Sale, G.: The Koran, p. 408. Some commentators refer this passage as applying (a) to man in general or (b) to the story of how the devil misled Adam and Eve at the battle of Israh (Quran, viii, 30-31), or to the Beni Hameza whom Muhammad plundered and drove into exile (Kah. Ali, Quran, lix, 16 n.); but according to Prof. H. H. Macdonald in Ency. of Islam, i. 667, s. v. Harsais, "the older exegetical tradition prefers" reference to the Harsais legend.

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3. Al-Bihar al-Khatib al-Mubashir al-Masvi, ed. Dr. F. Schlegel, Giessem, 1902.

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6. Goldziher, I. in Die Legende vom Mönch Harsais gives three versions of the story and it has been elsewhere treated; see note 3.

7. Lewis, M.G.: Ambrosio, or the Monk.
8. In Arba'in Hadis Barsisi is referred to as of the Bani Israel.
9. Buttner, C.G.: Anthologie der Suahelie Litteratur, Berlin, 1894, briefly refers to "a poem about Barsisa, a Syrian monk and local saint" giving no details; and Hartman M. Der Islamische Orient Berichte und Forschungen, I.23 seq., found the legend localised in the Syrian province of Aleppo.
10. As in Arba'in Hadis and this Utenzi.
11. As in Al-Mustatraf and Majalis-al-Saniyy, in which, also, Barasisis disciples are said to have been able to raise themselves into the firmament "like birds" to the amazement of the angels; but Allah said, "Be not amazed; for all his piety his end will be evil and he will die the death of an infidel." Iblis, overhearing these words, departed to betray the monk. In the Arba'in Hadis version, as in the Utenzi, Iblis determined of his own accord to encompass his downfall.
12. Ibshaihi (Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Ibshaihi) Al-Mustatraf, (a miscellany of prose and verse from classic authors) Cairo, A.H.1292 (A.D.1875)
Majalis-al-Saniyy,
Arba'in Hadis, (Forty Stories).

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9. Brunner, O.G.: Anthologie der Syrischen Literatur, Berlin

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13a The belief that evil spirits, demons, jinn, can assume human form is widespread in northern Africa. Cf. Westermarck, E.: Pagan Survivals in Muhammedan Civilisation, London, 1938, "They (the jinn) often look like men; among the people of the market-place, for instance, there are numerous jinn disguised as human beings. Many a man has, by mistake, married a female jinn or jinniya. Very frequently the jinn shew themselves in the guise of an animal." The Swahili, while accrediting the existence of numerous kinds of spirits, not all malignant, (Ingrams, W.H. "Zanzibar, its history and People", London, 1938, mentions twenty different kinds), do not appear to share the belief that spirits appear in human shape, but in monstrous form, such as the half-man or kinyam-kela, or else that, like pepo, the spirits which commonly cause possession, they are invisible. Werner, A.: Myths and Legends of the Bantu, London, 1934 gives instances. In Swahili stories jinn which assume human guise would seem all 24. to Asiatic mythology, while Swahili spirits are essentially Bantu in form and behaviour. Thus, in Lamu and elsewhere owls are associated with evil spells and children falling sick in the 6th, 7th, 8th and 9th months of the Swahili year are said to be "seized by an owl" (kushukwa bumu); charms and fumigation are used as a cure and scarecrows are fixed on the house roofs to frighten owls away.

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14. See Lane, E.W.: Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians and Westermarck, E. op.cit. It is commonly held is Islam (and elsewhere) that prayers, spoken or written, can avert sickness and evil spirits. Prayers and often incanted during exorcisms, or may be written on paper, in soot or lampblack on a plate, and either burned or washed off and swallowed as a specific. Many Swahili wear a charm (hirizi) consisting of a written Quranic passage, to avert the evil-eye and the attentions of jinn.

15. The symptoms of seizure vary considerably but are usually manifested in women by a sudden hysterical outburst and in men by violent or brooding dementia. No satisfactory medical diagnosis or explanation of "possession" as one finds it in Africa seems yet to have been advanced. It may be induced and indeed is sometimes deliberately sought by persons who desire to effect contact with the spirit world. See Beech, M.W.H., Aids to the Study of Kiswahili ~~pp. 124-125~~ London, n.d. (1912) pp. 134 seq.; Craster, The Spice Island of Pemba, London, pp. and Junod, H. Ph. Les Cas de Possession et l'Exorcisme chez les Vandaou, in Africa, vol. VII, p. 270 seqq., and Ingrams, op.cit.; Stigand, Land of Zinj, London, 1913, p. 124 seq. Hichens, W. African Demon Dances, in Discovery, Vol. p. and Westermarck, op.cit.

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16. Sicknesses of various types are attributed to super-

natural influences and the aid of a diviner (mganga wa falaki) is sought to diagnose them. Various methods of divination are used (for which see the authorities noted in n.15 above) including kupiga ramli, as in this utenzi, a method making use of marks made in sand upon a board, or ash.

17. During exorcism the spirit is said to mount to its victims head and, there seated, converse with the exorciser; cf. Beech, op.cit.

18. Dreams are commonly interpreted as the visitations of spirits; see Lane, op.cit; and Werner, op.cit.

19. It is customary for Swahili households to close their doors at 10.p.m. (4.a.m. Swahili time) and not to open them to or answer callers after that hour since it is common for people to roam the streets by night and knock at people's doors. A kinyamkela (half-man spirit) is said to have caused many deaths at Lindi, Tanganyika Territory, in 1916 by so doing; and a warning on the custom is given by Mwana Kupona to Binti Sheikh in st.45 of her Utendi (q.v.,p.)

Wala sikae ndiani saa ya'ne ikasia.

Do not loiter by the way when the fourth hour has passed.

20. See Beech, op.cit. and Ingrams, Craster, &c. op.cit.

21. Execution by binding the victim to a tree, to die of exposure and attacks by birds and insects was the method applied by some Bantu tribes, e.g. the Aniramba of Tanganyika

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Kapona to Binti Sheikh in 1915 of her Uchani (p.v.p.).

Hele akia njiani see ya ne ikasia.
Do not follow by the way when the fourth hour has
passed.

20. See Beach, op.cit. and Ingram, op.cit.

21. Execution by binding the victim to a tree, to die of
exposure and attacks by birds and insects was the method
applied by some Bantu tribes, e.g. the Aniambe of Tanganyika

Territory to punish "raindoctors" (usually chiefs whose tribal responsibility it was to intercede with Mbula, the rain-god) for failure to "bring" rain.

22. In the Majalis-al-Saniyy, Mustatraf and other versions the devil outvies Baraisa in fervour of devotion and advises the monk that the way to greater piety is to commit a crime and then seek repentance. Cf. Quran, xxv.71 and ii.160. The monk is thus induced to visit a drinking-house, where he falls to the wiles of a woman and murders her husband who catches them flagrante delicto. In several versions the monk is offered escape from the death penalty if he will bow in worship to Satan, which he does, whereon the devil triumphantly reviles him and leaves him to his doom. This is so in the Arba'in Hadis version, but has not been taken into Sayyid Abdallah's utenzi.

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