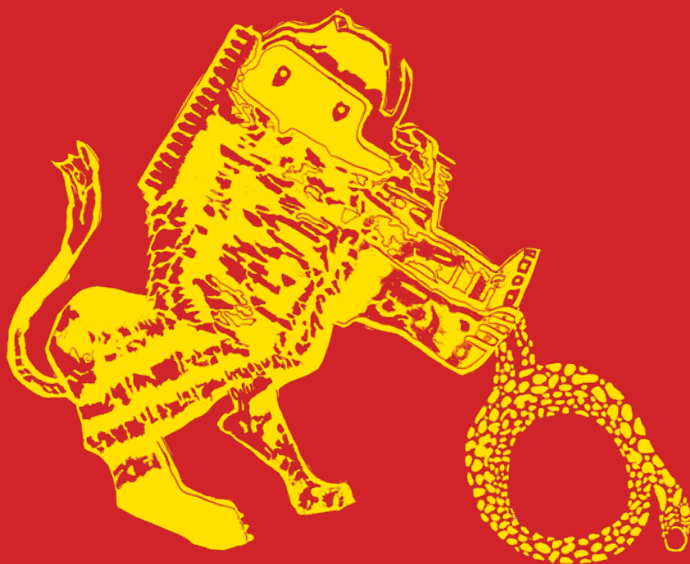




Elham Rokni
The Iblis, the Girl, the Sultan,
and the Lion's Tail

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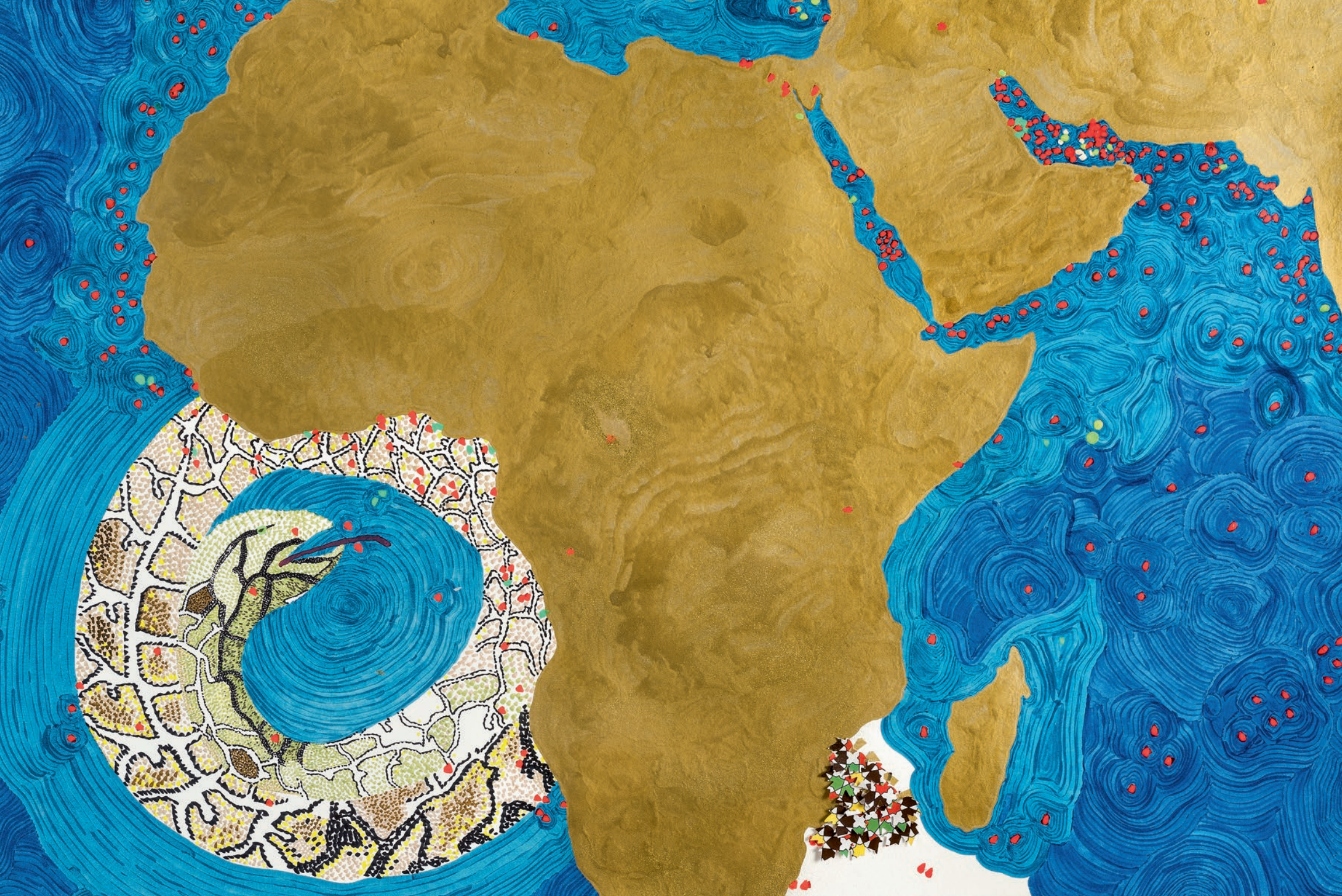
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Elham Rokni

The Iblis, the Girl, the Sultan, and the Lion's Tail

Folktales from Eritrea and Sudan



The Iblis, the Girl, the Sultan and the Lion's Tail

Elham Rokni 2018

This book was published within the framework of the artist's solo exhibition at CCA, Tel Aviv, January-March 2018; Curator: Sergio Edelsztein.

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Preface

The book you are about to read includes eighteen folktales from Eritrea and Sudan, presented together with my drawings, which were inspired by these very tales. From 2015 to 2016, I collected these stories over the course of my many encounters and conversations with Sudanese and Eritrean refugees, currently the two largest asylum-seeking communities in Israel. I met and came to know these men and women through the stories they shared with me in Tel Aviv, in Jerusalem, and at the Holot detention center in the Negev.

This book is an artist's book, serving as the accompanying publication to my solo exhibition at the Center for Contemporary Art in Tel Aviv, it is also a classic book of folktales.

In order to create an official book of folktales, I registered this work at the Israel Folktale Archives (IFA) at the University of Haifa. This significant and affecting process served as the main inspiration for this three-year project. The IFA collects, documents, preserves, and researches oral folk narratives from new and existing communities of all ethnic backgrounds in Israel.

In 2014, the Haifa Museum of Art invited me to create a work of art inspired by the folk tales in the IFA. Rather than engaging with the existing collection, I decided to make a new contribution to the archive and to build my work around that. Living in South Tel Aviv, near the new communities of asylum seekers, I felt a natural and pressing need to hear them and find a home for their tales. The archive was happy to open its doors and welcome them in. Mostly recorded on video in their original language, Arabic and

Tigrinya, I only came to know the full meaning and depth of each narrative later on, when they were transcribed, translated, and edited—as presented in these pages. Therefore, each tale appears in four languages: Arabic, Tigrinya, Hebrew, and English.

The propagation of oral history, the act of telling and hearing stories received from one’s ancestors, is a revivifying process that links people to each other and to their past. Through the inclusion of Sudanese and Eritrean folktales in these archives, I am following the mission of the IFA: to validate and give voice to these souls currently living in Israel.

This collective document required all of its contributors to search their memories of the home country and to breathe life into the remnants of a closed past. Their work stands as a societal preservation and cultural investment which will give the next generation and other communities access to their people’s past and enrich their future. Some of the storytellers featured in this work no longer live in Israel and have continued their journey elsewhere.

Elham Rokni

Dedicated to Ari, Rei, and Amir Jonah

Contents

The Seven Abdulkarims	9
The Story of Kor-Barya	12
Age and Wisdom	16
The Pigeon and the Fox	18
The Buffalo	20
Sultan Faruk	24
The Vixen and the Hyena	28
A Tuft of Hair from a Lion’s Tail	30
The Wise Killer	34
Fatima and the Servants	36
The Bound Donkey	39
The Verdict of the Vixen	42
The Three Pieces of Advice	44
Iblis	49
Om Dahiboun	51
The Bride of the Nile	54
The Boy and the Tree	56
“Better to Be Eaten by Your Own Village’s Hyena!”	58



The Seven Abdulkarims

Told by Omar Issa (born 1990, Kara, Darfur, Sudan)
on August 2016 in Jerusalem, Israel. IFA 24930.

Peace be unto you! My name is Omar Issa, and I want to tell you the story of the seven Abdulkarims, or the seven Addas as they're nicknamed in Darfur.

In our village, the name Abdulkarim was given to seven people.

A man from the village had traveled to Libya and come back home to a region we call Kura. On his way back, the man brought many woolen blankets and other such goods. As is known in Darfur whenever a *zool*,¹ a person of good qualities, goes to Libya, he brings back many things, such as blankets, mattresses, etc.

Some of the villagers wondered about this man, asking, "Where could he have gone?" Some said he went to Libya. Everyone in the village said, "Adda, why don't you go to Libya too?" So every Adda, all seven of them, got up at once. They said they would go to Libya and return with blankets and mattresses.

The villagers gave them *kisra*² and other supplies for their journey.

The Addas packed their knapsacks and set off to Libya.

They left their village, located near Mount Marrah, and marched toward Libya.

What direction did they take? They headed northward. After walking for some time, they reached Ein Sira, Ein Fara,³ and other places with running water.

¹ As an aside, the storyteller compared the Sudanese *zool*, a person endowed with good qualities and virtues, to the Israeli *Ashkenanzi*.

² *Kisra* are thin, flat Sudanese breads or pies, made from corn, wheat, yeast, and oil.

³ An *ein* is a spring or water source.

They said, “There is no God but Allah! We are really close to Libya now, finally! Let’s sit down and eat our *kisra*.”

They found a wide clearing with lots of water. It was a round body of water, surrounded by many rocks as though it were a man-made well. However, it was God who made it that way.

They said, “Good, let’s throw our *kisra* into the well and wet it. Then we’ll eat it. We’re very close to Libya, anyway. We can reach Libya without the *kisra*!” So, they threw all of their *kisra* into the well. But the *kisra* began to sink lower and lower, until it disappeared completely, and it could no longer be seen. As is well known, *kisra* sinks when it absorbs water.

Dear Zools, these Addas dove into the water!

The first Adda, who was very hungry, jumped into the water. However it was very deep, just like a well. So after he plunged in, he was no longer able to get out.

The others waited and waited for him, and wondered, “How come Adda isn’t back yet? He is a *zool*!”

The man died shortly afterward and resurfaced with a bloated belly and his mouth wide open. The others said, “Look at this Adda! He ate a lot of *kisra*, and now he is trying to fool us by playing dead.”

The second Adda dove into the water in just the same way, and he too resurfaced with a bloated belly and an open mouth. The others repeated, “No way! This Adda also ate so much and is now trying to fool us.”

The third and fourth Addas died the same way, and the fifth followed suit.

Two Addas remained. At this point, they had finally come to understand that their friends were actually dead. Realizing that they were unable to pull their friends’ bodies from the water, they said, “Let’s just leave them here. We’ll keep walking and find another place. We should go to Libya, full-bellied or not.”

They walked for a long time and finally reached a village. They were starving by now, and yet they were nowhere near Libya!

The two Addas eventually found a sheep and stole it, having decided to eat it somewhere else.

One of them said: “Adda, let’s eat this sheep in a place where there are no flies.” So they went off searching for such a place. But each time they

thought they had found one they would suddenly see a fly, and one of them would say, “Let’s go somewhere else where there are no flies.”

The two Addas kept on walking, climbing up and down some slopes, crossing forest after forest, until they finally reached a spot that seemed perfect. They looked right and left and found no flies.

They said, “Great, let’s slaughter the sheep right here. There aren’t any flies here. This is the place.”

So they immediately slaughtered the sheep. However, in less than a minute, a fly appeared and flew into one of the Addas’s nostrils. The other grabbed a stick and, meaning to kill the fly, hit his friend so hard in the nose that he “sent him back to God.”⁴ The Adda died, and his friend remained alone. He had killed his friend instead of the fly, which flew away unscathed.

The remaining Adda lit a fire and roasted the meat on it. As he began to eat, a falcon swooped down beside him. The Adda said, “I swear to God, falcon, if you come closer, I will kill you!” As he drew his knife, he repeated, “I swear to God, I will slaughter you with this very knife, just like this,” and he brought the knife to his own throat to simulate the action, slitting his own throat in the process and leaving all the meat behind.

And thus was the end of the seven Abdulkarims.⁵

⁴ He killed him.

⁵ Having finished his story, the storyteller explained that the people in Darfur were so marginalized and unaware of what was going in the world, that they didn’t even know where they lived or how far away Libya was. The mountain people, according to him, were naïve people with little understanding. He also emphasized that life in Darfur was very different from elsewhere.



The Story of Kor-Barya

Told by Awet Asheber (born 1980, Dekemher, Eritrea)
in May 2016, in Tel Aviv, Israel. IFA 24964.

There is a village in Eritrea called Kor-Barya. A long time ago, before the village got its name, its inhabitants had a unique custom which was not common anywhere else.

Every year, a serpent near the village demanded to be fed with a first-born daughter. The villagers feared the serpent would destroy their village and kill them should they not provide him with this yearly sacrifice.

One day, a man came to the village from a distant place called Ethiopia and learned about the custom.¹

He said to the villagers, “Give me one of your daughters in marriage, and I will kill the serpent, saving you from having to sacrifice your daughters every year.”

The villagers held a lengthy discussion on the man’s offer and finally decided to accept.

“We’d rather give one of our daughters to this slave than sacrifice any more to that cruel serpent every year,” they said.

So they told him that if he killed the serpent, they would give him one of their daughters.

The man from Ethiopia was strong and wise, and he killed the serpent as promised.²

¹ The village of Kor-Barya is located on the Eritrean side of the over-a-thousand-kilometer-long border between Eritrea and Ethiopia. That Ethiopia is referred to as a faraway land attests to a different and earlier perception of distance, back when travel was arduous and rare.

The villagers too kept their promise and gave him one of their daughters in marriage.

They also gave the serpent-slayer and their newly-married daughter a piece of land where they could live at a distance from the village. They had not chosen this place randomly, but rather had intentionally selected a malaria-infested area. As their daughter was born and raised in the village, they were sure that she would survive the malaria, whereas the man would die.

But their daughter saw through their scheme, and she advised her husband to abandon the plot of land the villagers had given them and to live elsewhere, up on a steep hill, or a *kor*.³

Her husband heeded her advice, and they did as she suggested. And so, the man was saved from malaria and death, and they lived in the village, which was later named Kor-Barya, meaning Hill of the Slave.⁴

² In this version of the story the dramatic slaying of the serpent is not detailed. Other versions tell that the man fed the serpent a hot rock which instantly killed it.

³ Malaria is transmitted by the female *Anopheles* mosquito, which lives and breeds in low, wet areas. Higher areas are less prone to malaria because of the stronger winds and the distance from low-lying, wet breeding grounds.

⁴ Some people claim that the present inhabitants of the village are descendants of the slave, while others maintain that he only lent the village its name.

Age and Wisdom

Told by Tesfa Gabriel Asfaha (born 1979, Tserona, Eritrea)
on July 2016 at the Holot detention center, Israel. IFA 24927.

The moral of this story is: Don't ask a gray-haired man; consult a wise man! Throughout the highlands of Eritrea, this story is widespread. I want to present it as it is told by the elders.

In southern Eritrea there is a small town called Tserona. A long time ago, in one of its surrounding villages, there lived a childless woman.

Praying to God, she vowed that if He would give her a child, she would sacrifice a cubit-long-eared goat to Him. Within a year of her vow, she gave birth to a child.

To keep her vow, she searched everywhere for such a goat, but she could find none. She inquired of everyone, and especially the elders, what she should do.

Everyone told her that she should have promised something she knew could be done. They assured her that there did not exist a goat with cubit-long ears, and she lost all hope of keeping her vow.

In despair, the woman made her way back home. On the way, she saw an old, gray-haired man sitting in the sun with his grandson. She told the man her story. The man said to her, "My poor daughter, there is no point in looking for a goat with cubit-long ears. Such a goat doesn't exist!"

The old man's grandson, who until now had been listening in silence, asked her, "When you made the vow, by whose arm did you think to measure the cubit?"

"I just promised a cubit. I didn't consider the length of anyone's arm," she answered.

He said to her, "If so, you can measure the cubit by your baby's arm. If you

do that, you'll find many goats with cubit-long ears, even in your own yard."

Back at home, she measured the ears of her goats by her child's arm and found that all of them had cubit-long ears. She sacrificed one and kept her vow.

From that day onward, people say, "Don't ask a gray-haired man; consult a wise man!"



The Pigeon and the Fox

Written by Mutwali Mohamedein (born 1983, El-Obeid, Sudan)
on April 2016 in Tel Aviv, Israel. IFA 24974.

In a thick forest, on top of a tall, shadowy tree, a pigeon built its nest. Every day, the pigeon would fly around for many miles searching for food for her little ones. One night, a fox came and stood below the tree, and loudly called out to the pigeon, "Wake up, sleeping pigeon, and throw down a nestling for me to eat, before I climb up and devour you all."

Upon hearing the fox's words, the pigeon trembled with fear, throwing the fox one of her little ones. The fox picked it up, devoured it, and went on his way.

The following morning, the fox came back and repeated the same call. So the pigeon threw him another nestling. Later, when the pigeon had left the nest in search of food, a shoebill¹ spotted her. He approached the pigeon and asked, "Why are you so sad, poor pigeon?"

The pigeon told him of her encounters with the fox, and the shoebill gave her the following advice: "Foxes cannot climb trees. If the fox returns, do not throw him any of your little ones!"

So the pigeon flew back home and went to sleep reassured. That night, the fox came back and cried out once again. But this time, the pigeon refused to give him what he wanted, crying, "Well, come on up if you can!"

The fox stood there thinking for a moment, then asked, "Who told you I cannot climb trees, o pigeon?"

"It was the shoebill," she replied.

The fox returned home with an empty stomach. At daybreak, he went to

the beach and stood there, watching the horizon. After a while, the shoebill landed beside him. The fox approached him, saying, "I was wondering about something, dear friend. See, I have a beautiful home where I hide in autumn. But what do you do, dear bird, when the rain pours down in buckets, or when the wind blows so fiercely? How do you protect your head?"

"I hide it beneath my wing," the shoebill answered.

"I do not understand what you mean by that, dear friend. Maybe it's because I don't have wings like you do. I wish you could show me how it is done!" the fox replied.

The shoebill then hid his head under his wing to show the fox how it is done. But just as he did, the fox pounced on him and, devouring him, said, "You may have taught the pigeon a lesson, but you forgot to learn it yourself."

¹ A very large, stork-like bird.



The Buffalo

This story was told by Jamal Omar (born 1980, Kereink, West Darfur, Sudan)
on June 2015 at the Holot detention center in Israel. IFA 24929.

Did you know?¹ Once upon a time, there lived a woman who had been married for a long time. Yet her husband did not love her. In the town they lived in, as in most African towns, there lived a wise man, a sheikh—do you know what a sheikh is? A sheikh is a person who is engaged in witchcraft. The woman went to the sheikh and said, “My husband does not love me. I have come here to ask you to put a spell on him which will make him love me.”

The sheikh said to her, “Find me some sour buffalo’s milk!” Of course, buffalo’s milk is extremely hard to find—unless you kill the beast first. The woman wondered how she might get her hands on some buffalo’s milk.

“Go on and try. Think for a while, and bring me back some buffalo’s milk! After you do that, I’ll be able to help make your husband fall in love with you.”

“Will do,” she said and left.

The woman went to the forest, where the buffalo usually roamed. She walked around, searching for buffalo. Finally, she found a female buffalo. In the days that followed, the woman would go to the forest every day with some fodder and water and walk alongside the buffalo.

This beast had just given birth to a calf, and its udders were full of milk. The woman tried to befriend it, and she would give it the rations she brought every day.

Feeding it in this manner on the first day, the second day, the third day, the fourth day, and so on, she eventually managed to touch the buffalo. Sometime later, she managed to take hold of the buffalo and milk it. Milk in hand, she returned to the wise man.

“How did you come by this buffalo milk?” he asked her.

“I milked it myself,” she answered.

“Aha! How did you do it?”

“Each morning I would wake up early, walk to the forest with a bit of fodder and water, and give it to the buffalo. I have been doing this every morning for some time now—over a week—until I was finally able to touch the buffalo.”

“Aha! And what did you do after you touched it?” he asked.

“I let it go. The next time I went back, I was able to take hold of it, guide it along, and milk it. And this is the same milk I have brought to you.”

“Well,” said the wise man, “if you love your husband, getting him to love you won’t be as difficult as milking a buffalo. Buffalo live in the wild, and no one herds them. Your husband, however, lives at home with you, even though he does not love you and you want him to. So, every time your husband goes off to work, or away to visit some friends, welcome him when he returns with some water, food, and tea. And talk to him! The man will fall in love with you in a heartbeat.”

And so she did. Each time her husband would go off to work, or away to visit his friends, she would welcome him home with water, tea, and food upon his return.

The man began to think to himself, “How can it be that I do not love this woman? She has changed quite a bit. She was not like this before. How can that be?” He thought about how each day she would treat him a bit differently compared to the day before, and he said to himself, “In fact, I never think of anyone but this woman.”

And so, they grew close and remained married. They had many children, and lived a very happy life together.

¹ A conventional Sudanese folktale opening.

