

## ARAB AND ISLAMIC HUMOUR

Paolo Branca – Catholic University of Milan

The stereotype of the grim-faced Arab brandishing a scimitar is part of our collective imagination and is the result of centuries of struggle between the two sides of the Mediterranean. Over the course of time, Franks and Saracens, Crusaders and Turks, Venetian ships and Barbaresque pirates engaged in many epic battles, which have become mythical.

In more recent times these images have been replaced by the representation of the lustfulness of the harem, making the fortune of a whole host of painters, when the eastern countries were no longer an impending danger and could therefore give way to less bloody and more exotic representations.

All this has been replaced by the clichés put forward by travel agencies, where the Orient rhymes with sunny beaches, coral reefs, tourist villages provided with all the comforts and providing quick visits to the archaeological sites and some shopping at the local markets. And here tourists risk buying “local” handicrafts ... made in China.

In recent years the threatening aspect of the Orient and in particular of the Arab/Muslim world has had a dramatic revival.

The negative image has been strengthened by Islamic terrorism, the harsh disputes and the tragic facts following the publication of the *Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie, the Dutch documentary *Submission* whose director was murdered, the Danish satirical cartoons about the Prophet Muhammad and the violent reactions to the lecture Pope Benedict XVI held in Regensburg.

It is increasingly thought that an entire civilization is destitute of irony and of a light touch and can be summarized by the obtuse eyes of the fundamentalists, by the merciless harshness and the inarticulate quality of their ideology, by the inhuman ferocity with which they cut heads and hands and throw stones at the unfortunate who happens to be caught. It is an unreal image clashing with the overflowing humanity characteristic of towns and villages of the Middle East and of North Africa, which are far from being gloomy, not only thanks to the weather but also to the character of their inhabitants. In many ways they are similar to people living in places overlooking the Mediterranean.

The best effect has always been obtained when the characters combine political power and religious charisma.

“The Caliph Omar used to roam around the city of Medina in disguise to take stock of the situation. Entering a house by surprise, he found a man there in female company and, what’s more, with wine. ‘Sinner!’ he said, ‘did you think you could get away with this?’ The other man promptly answered: ‘If I have committed a sin, you have transgressed the law of God three times: God commands us not to spy, to enter houses by the door and to say hello when you go into someone’s home!’”

A caliph of Damascus, having reproached a courtesan for having spent 1000 silver coins on a turban got this reply: “But it’s for the noblest end of my body! What should I say about you? You spent 10 thousand on a slave for the end of the body that cannot be named?”

The very wives of the caliphs were no better: the wife of Yazid – he was very ugly – is said to have told him: “Woe betide you if our son looks like you.” “Woe betide you if he looks like someone else!” the husband is believed to have replied in a fit of pique.

A scrounger invited himself to dinner with some of the Prophet’s companions, asking: “What is there to eat?” “Poisoned fish,” they replied, annoyed. He began to eat in a seraphic manner saying: “Why stay in the world if the holy Companions of the Prophet die?”

All the entourage of the powerful were targeted with lewd stories: the terrible governor of Khorasan, al-Hajjà had a headache and a doctor prescribed a footbath. A know-all and hyper-critical eunuch

wondered what connection there could be between the feet and the head. “You haven't learnt anything from your experience? – the doctor asked him – When they castrated you, didn't the hairs fall out of your beard?”

It is often the weak who make fun of the powerful: a notable wanted to marry a young girl, but a young man from her tribe advised him against it, saying that he had seen her in the arms of another man. When the notable learned, later, that that very young man had married her, he sent for him to ask him how come he had married a dishonoured girl. He answered: “I didn't lie to you. It was her father!” Riské situations are sometimes solved with shrewdness, even in defiance of religious prescriptions: a girl possessed by a demon was brought to a man who was an expert in magic. When he was alone with her, he found out that she was no longer a virgin and was pretending to be mad in order not to suffer the consequences when her husband and family realized the truth. The good man informed her relatives that he could get the evil spirit out of the girl through her eye but in that case she would have lost it. Or through an ear, but she would be left deaf in that ear. Or through a hand but she would be paralysed or through a foot and she would be left with a limp. Getting the spirit out through the vagina she would lose her virginity but without any other problems. They chose this solution and the girl was safe.

The typical acts of Muslim worship could also be the occasion for amusing situations. The opportunity to meet foreign women during the period of the pilgrimage to Mecca even gave rise to a special type of poetry of courtship and the opportunities for brief encounters was not immune from irony: apparently a man, who had fallen madly in love with a pilgrim, declared his absolute and eternal love to her. ‘You should see how beautiful my sister is, she's down there’ said the woman provocatively. When he turned round out of curiosity, the man lost every hope of being taken into consideration by the touchy lady. The exaggerated scruples of some men who were questioning the experts of the law on extravagant cases did not fail to attract the attention of jokers: like when one asked an expert on the law: ‘If I get undressed to go completely into the water to be purified, do I have to stand facing Mecca?’ ‘You'd better stay with your eyes on your clothes - the wise man answered – otherwise you risk someone making off with them!’

Another man had heard that fasting on the day of ‘Ashura was equivalent to a whole year of fasting, so he did not eat until noon, concluding that "Six months are enough I think."

Lastly, one man, bored with reading the Sura of the Heifer (the longest Sura in the Koran), when he returned to the mosque and learned that the Sura of the Elephant (very short) was about to be recited, he ran off, exclaiming: “If it took so long for the Heifer, I can't imagine how long it will take for the Elephant!”

Another man was whipped because he was carrying a flask on his shoulder that could hold wine: “But it was empty!” the unlucky man complained: “Yes – the torturer replied – but it's still an instrument that can lead to sin.” “You also have an instrument that can fornicate and that you carry around with you all the time - said the first man, but nobody whips you for this!”

There are countless episodes of men who claimed to be Prophets and were brought before the authorities who unflinchingly asked them to perform a miracle not to be accused of imposture and then punished. One asked for a woman to be brought to him and he would have made her pregnant simply by looking into her eyes. As no women were available, they brought him a goat. He tried to make off but he was stopped and explained: “I was just going to tell the Angel Gabriel that you don't need a Prophet but a ram!”

Another was challenged to perform the miracle of Abraham who did not die when he was thrown into a fire. Or that of Moses who turned a staff into a snake. Or, in the last place, that of Jesus who brought the dead back to life. He decided to perform the last miracle and asked the chamberlain to be

decapitated, promising that he would have brought him back to life. The potential victim immediately said that he believed in his miracle-working virtues, arousing the hilarity of the whole court.

In a variant of this, the presumed Prophet asked to make the vizir's wife pregnant, with a miraculous child being born. "I believe you: no evidence is necessary – said the vizir – and let the man who has no faith in you lend you his wife for the experiment!"

Yet another one, who claimed to be Jesus, was told: "The only way you resemble him is because everybody knows who your mother is but nobody knows who your father is!"

Perhaps to console themselves for not having authority, some did not hesitate to show the bizarre sides of power, like the joker who asked Harun al-Rashid: "If you were without water, what would you give to have some?" He answered: "Half of my kingdom". "And if you could not empty your bladder, what would you give to be able to do so?" "The whole of my kingdom!" the sovereign quickly replied. "Is it worth killing yourself for a power, half of which is worth a drink and all together is only worth a piss?" asked the first man, making the caliph burst out laughing.

Children's nursery rhymes, popular sayings and jokes have always been the way the poor have taken at least some revenge on the powerful, often and at times going beyond the limits that otherwise common sense, decency and even the precepts of religious laws would deem insurmountable. Physiological needs and religious questions, as we have seen, are not absent from the repertoire, but it is certainly the sexual sphere that exercises the greatest attraction, multiplying the comic effect thanks to the strength of the taboos.

"A man complained about a boil that was giving him great discomfort. 'And what's more it's right on the most despicable part of my body!' he concluded. 'That's funny, - came the reply – we can't see anything on your face!'"

"After having made love to the maidservant, a master told her not to say anything to his wife. 'Of course not! – the girl answered – She's been having it off for five years with so-and-so... how could I complete with her for just one fling!'"

"A pious man ended up in a red-light district and was forced to go with a prostitute, Very embarrassed, but fearful of the consequences that he would have suffered if he refused to do the deed with her, he suggested pretending, but he heard the girl answer him: 'What sort of a pious man are you? You suggest lying and today's Friday!'"

"A caliph was wondering whether to buy a slave. 'Are you a virgin or what?' he suddenly asked her. 'My Prince... I am what'. And he took her for her cleverness"

"An absent-minded servant placed his hand on his master's thigh. 'What are you doing!' he exclaimed. 'I'm sorry, Your Excellency – the servant replied – I thought it was the mistress!'"

Two characters in particular, the first dear to Arab tradition (and common throughout the Mediterranean with similar names) Joha, the other, better known in Central Asia, Nasreddin, are the prototype of the simple man but not without a certain cunning, always ready to prove the gullibility of the poor and ignorant inhabitants of the country or their shrewdness, capable of saving them in the nick of time in harebrained and embarrassing situations.

The current political situation by no means excludes humour:

An American, a Frenchman and an Arab meet at an international medical conference and each of them starts to talk about the latest scientific achievements in their respective countries.

The American starts: "In America there was a blind man and do you know what we did? We took a cat's eyes and gave them to him in a transplant."

The others ask "And can he see now?"

The American answered: "Of course! He can even see at night now!"

The Frenchman says: "We've done some incredible things as well: we transplanted the liver of a pig into a man who had liver disease."

The others ask: "And how is his liver working now?"

The Frenchman: "He can even digest stones now!"

Lastly, the Arab says: "Well, we've also made incredible progress: a man had a defective brain and we transplanted a donkey's brain".

The others asked: "And how is he now?"

The Arab answers: "Very well! He became President and he's still in office!"

A certain minister had to spend a night in a hotel in Sharm al-Sheikh. His personal secretary sent a telegram to the hotel manager, asking them to prepare a nice room, a good meal, etc. etc. for His Excellency. As soon as the minister arrived at the hotel, the manager took him to a room where there were three lovely girls waiting for him. The minister asked who they were and the hotel manager said: - They're etc. etc. and etc.!

"God sends the angel of death to fetch the soul of an Arab President, as his hour has come. The angel sets off, but takes a long time to return. The Lord is annoyed by the delay and when at long last the angel arrives - on his own -, he has been beaten up, has a black eye and his wings are all broken. 'Where have you been? Why did you take so long? And where is the soul you were supposed to bring me?' 'Lord,' replies the angel, 'the Secret Services caught me. They beat me up and kept asking me: Who are you? Why have you come here? Who's sent you?'" God, frightened, asked him: 'I hope you didn't tell them?!'"

"An Arab president who had been in power for many years and was now elderly, was asked: 'Mr. President, the people want to know where and when you will make your farewell speech?' 'Farewell,' he asked in surprise. "What does that mean? Where are they all thinking of going?"

"An Arab minister visits an Italian colleague and sees that his home is very luxurious. He asks him how he can afford such a high standard of living.. 'Use your head!' the Italian replied. Then he showed him the drawings for a bridge, opened the window and there was a bridge but which differed slightly from the drawings. 'The difference between the drawing and the bridge is here,' he comments, patting his pockets. Some time later, the Italian returns the visit and notices that his Egyptian colleague is now even more well-off than he is. 'How did you manage to get so rich?' he asks him. The Egyptian shows him the drawings of a bridge, then he opens the window. 'But I can't see anything!' exclaims the Italian. 'Exactly!' cries his colleague. 'I used my head better than you did!'"

During a Parliamentary session, an Arab President cannot find the pen he always uses to sign documents. He asked the Minister for Internal Affairs to look for it, but when he goes home, he finds it in the middle of his papers, so he phones the Minister and says:

- It's all right, I've found the pen.

- But Sir, what do we do now with the ten men who confessed having stolen it?!

An Arab dictator has just ended up in Hell and, together with others who have been damned, is waiting to be tortured. When his turn comes, the guards make him go into a room where Marilyn Monroe is. At that point, the other damned souls start to protest and say:

- It's ridiculous that you want to torture him this way.

And the guards answer:

- But we don't want to torture him... we're torturing Marilyn Monroe.

In the middle of a square in an Arab capital there is the statue of a national hero. Addressing a passer-by, he complains: "Everybody else has a horse and I'm on foot!". Highly impressed, the passer-by tells the President of the Republic what has happened, but naturally he does not believe him. "Come with me then," the first man dares him, "and you'll hear with your own ears!" Irritated, the politician accepts and goes with the man to the square. Seeing him approach, the statue cries out: "I said I wanted a horse, not a donkey!"

In the bus:

"Excuse me, are you an officer?" "No"  
"Did you perhaps marry a soldier's daughter?" "No"  
"Do you perhaps have a relative in the army?" "No"  
"Then you idiot, stop treading on my foot this minute!"

Bush, Blair and an Arab President meet in Hell. The first, shocked to be with the damned, demands to be able to phone the CIA. Satan grants him his request but wants a million dollars. Reluctantly, Bush pays up. Blair makes a similar request and he is asked for a million pounds. He complains strongly because his currency is different but Satan will not listen to reason. In the end, the Arab also wants to ring home but the bill this time is only a few cents. When the others complain, Satan answers: "But it's a local call!"

Somebody asked an Arab doctor what new surgical techniques had recently been invented in his world, for once very advanced in this field. "Well, the latest progress is a system that allows, by passing through the anus and going through all the inner organs, taking out the patient's tonsils." "But wouldn't it be easier to operate directly from the throat?" they ask him, puzzled. "And who can open their mouths in our part of the world?"

"Of course you lost the war with Israel: you didn't move!"  
"We weren't not moving. We adopted a Russian tactic!" "What was that?"  
"We were waiting for it to snow!"

An Israeli is on a plane with two Arabs on either side. The flight is long and they all take their shoes off. At a certain point, to relax the tension, he offers to go and get them all something to drink. When they are about to land, they all put their shoes back on and the Israeli exclaims: "If one day we really want peace you'll have to stop peeing in our shoes... and we'll stop peeing in your orangeade!"

An Arab diplomat steps aside with the US President and asks him in confidence: "My son is crazy about science fiction films, but I don't know how to explain the fact that there are men of all races in them - except Arabs". Slightly embarrassed, the President begins to explain to him: "Well you know, they're set in the future..."

Naturally, the eternal war between the sexes is always a favourite subject:

An Arab rushes home after he has spent a night with his mistress. His wife asks him, "Where were you, Superman?" "Playing with my friends" answers her husband! "And did you win, Superman?" "Yes, but tell me why you keep calling me Superman?" "because you're the only one who wears his underpants on top of his trousers."

A child asks his father: "Daddy, but do DONKEYS get married as well? «No, ALL donkeys get married!"

A man, tired of seeing his wife weak all the time takes her to the doctor. After a complete examination, the doctor says: The only way to save your wife from death is to make love to her at least 6 times a day." When they left the doctor's surgery, the woman asked her husband: "What did the doctor say?" The man answered: "You're condemned."

An Iraqi and a Lebanese have lost their wives in the crowd.

The Iraqi asks: "Describe your wife to me."

The Lebanese answers "She's blonde, has green eyes, has make-up and wearing jeans and a silk shirt... And what's your wife like?"

The Iraqi: " To hell with my wife. Let's go and look for yours!"

"A husband, now well on in years, ill and still very jealous of his young wife said: 'If I were to die, would you remarry?' 'I don't know, dear, it depends...' the woman replied evasively. 'I wouldn't want him smoking my pipe!' 'Of course not dear' 'Could you ever let him get his hands on my stamp collection?' 'Of course not, I know how important it is for you!' "Then there's my car... you know I've never let anyone else drive it!' 'It would really be impossible for me to share all this with someone else", his wife reassures him. Slightly reassured, the man sighs: I really couldn't bear anyone else wearing my slippers...' 'You really don't have to worry about that," the woman lets slip, "you're not the same size!"

A very beautiful and uninhibited woman is sitting next to an Arab on a long flight. She confides in him that she likes Arab lovers best for their "dimensions" and Americans for the "preliminaries". Before they part when the plane lands, they introduce themselves and the Arab says: "Pleased to meet you... Omar Washington!"

Another genre makes fun of particular ethnic groups or the inhabitants of certain cities:

One Iraqi Kurd asks another: "Is Egypt very far from here ?"

The second answers: "I don't think so. My Egyptian colleague comes to work here every day by bike."

A girl says to her Saudi fiancé: "There's nobody at home. My parents are on holiday."

He answers: "There's nothing to be afraid of. Read the Koran."

To wallpaper a room in the White House, three estimates are given: one by an American and the other two by a Mexican and a Lebanese. The first asks 1000 dollars: 400 for the material, 400 for labour and 200 for himself. The Mexican asks for 700: 300 for the material, 300 for the labour and 100 for himself. The Lebanese asks for 2700. When the official asks him the reason for such an exorbitant estimate, he answers: "Buddy, 1000 for you, 1000 for me and we'll get the Mexican to do the work."

Two Syrians are strolling through Beirut and see in a shop window "Trousers 1 euro, shirt 3 euro". "Goodness!" they exclaim. "Those prices are really cheap. Let's buy a few and then we can sell them in Damascus!" They go into the shop but only one of them speaks because the other has a very strong Syrian accent. "We would like 30 pairs of trousers and 20 shirts." The shopkeeper looks at them in puzzlement and asks: "You're Syrian, aren't you?" "How do you know?" they ask in surprise. The shopkeeper answers: "This isn't a clothes shop, it's a drycleaner's!"

“A small Arab boy is questioned at school by his teacher: ‘What's your name?’ he answers: ‘Ahmed ben Nour!’ The teacher replies: ‘You can't live in France with a name like that: from now on you will be Amedeo Benoist!’ When he goes home, his mother calls him but he does not answer and in the end states: ‘I'm not called Ahmed any more, but Amedeo Benoist. I've become French!’ His mother tells him off harshly and his father even beats him. When he goes back to school in a sorry state, his teacher asks him what had happened. He answers: ‘I was French for only a couple of hours and two Arabs attacked me!’”

Not even religion is absent from the commonest topics for jokes:

A girl goes to an imam and asks him: "What is the punishment if I kiss a man?"

The imam answers: "Hell of course."

The girl: "And if I kiss an imam?"

Answer: "Clever girl! You want to go to Paradise..."

A peasant is praying and asks: "God, please make Ramadan like the World Cup: once every four years and in a different country each time!"

"One day, a father turns up at the registry office to register his newborn son, but he has not yet decided on a name for the baby. The official reminds him of his duty as a good Muslim: "Why don't you choose a name that ends in "Din" (= religion) such as Nur ed-Din, 'Ezz ed-Din or Badr ed-Din?" Encouraged by these suggestions, the father has made his choice: "Yes! I've got it! I'll call him James Dean".

A priest and an imam often meet in the streets of the city, both on a bicycle. One day, however, the priest is on foot and the imam asks him where his bike has got to. "I don't know what happened to it!" he replies "Perhaps someone stole it...". His colleague advises him to focus his sermons on the Commandments and to insist on "Thou shalt not steal!" Some time later, the two meet and both are on bikes. "So you took my advice," says the imam "and they gave it back to you!" "Not at all," admits the priest, "when I got to "Thou shalt not commit adultery!" I suddenly remembered where I'd left it!"

A teacher asks his pupil: "Who is the prophet who spoke to animals?"

The pupil answers: "Our Lord Tarzan, peace be upon him".

An imam often goes to a priest's house to chat and drink wine until the small hours in the morning. Once they were having more fun than usual but as it was getting very late, the imam said he should go as in a few hours he would have to get up for the dawn prayer. The priest reassures him and tells him he can sleep there, promising that the sacristan would wake him up in time. And he did but, still half asleep and drunk, the imam put on the priest's cassock instead of his own clothes. When he was in front of the mirror, he exclaimed: "What an idiot that sacristan is, instead of waking me up, he woke the priest!"

In Bahrain, where there is a large Shi'ite community, as the anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn approached (slaughtered by the caliphs of Damascus), the authorities tell the local Shi'ite imam: "In your sermon don't mention that it was the Syrians' fault, don't stoke up the conflict between the Sunnites and the Shi'ites, don't mention Christians or Jews and above all don't describe how he was killed." Dejected, the imam asks: "Should I say that he died because he was electrocuted whilst he was drying his hair?"

A pious Muslim had been looking for a parking place for a long time in vain. He is expected for some

important business and he begins to worry... "Oh God," he prays to himself, " if you help me find a place in 5 minutes I promise I will never eat anything forbidden again in the rest of my life". At that very moment he found a place and cried out: "You can stop looking, Lord, I've just found one!"

In Egypt, Copts and Muslims are arguing because the former want to build a church and the latter a mosque in exactly the same place. To avoid coming to blows, they agree to do this: each group will dig until they find something that indicates whether in the past the site was traditionally Christian or Muslim. After a long time and great efforts, the Muslims start crying out for joy: "Allahu akbar!" The Christians run up to them and ask: "What have you found?" "The cross that belonged to Prophet Muhammad!"