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ORCID: 0000-0003-0807-5544 **Always the Villain: The Wife in Emirati Folktales.  
A Socio-cultural and Linguistic Reading****Abstract**

Folklore plays a crucial role in the preservation of the local heritage, and it can provide valuable information regarding cultural and religious norms, language, and environment of that people. The folktale is one of the many forms of folklore and it represents the product of the individual traditional heritage that originates from a population's collective cultural imagination and background. In the Arabian Gulf societies, the oral tradition of storytelling has been prominent for a very long time and it has somehow been preserved until fairly recent times. The folktale belongs to the Emirati intangible cultural heritage, and it constitutes a deeply rooted element related to Bedouin tribal clans and to the desertic and maritime environments which characterised the territory. The United Arab Emirates is very attentive to the conservation of their heritage, both at national and international levels. This study provides a socio-cultural and linguistic analysis of the Emirati folktale, based on a sample of three stories from Al-Ain, written in Emirati Arabic, which share a common feature: the wickedness of wives.

**Keywords:** Emirati Folklore, Folktales, United Arab Emirates, Oral Literature, Emirati Intangible Cultural Heritage, Arabic Dialectology, Emirati Arabic, Al-Ain



## Introduction

The study of a country's folklore can give us an idea of the lifestyle and traditions inherited from the past generations, and how they have helped convey cultural values that are, even today, socially accepted. Moreover, folklore is the solid foothold which enables individuals to cling to the society, by constructing their social identity, and the sense of belonging of a group of people to a peculiar *milieu*. However, as stated by the Russian scholar Vladimir Jakovlevič Propp, it would be fairly misleading to assume that folklore would directly reflect social relationships. In fact:

Folklore, especially in its early stages, is not a description of life. Reality is not reflected directly but through the prism of thought, and this thought is so unlike ours that it can be difficult to compare a folklore phenomenon with anything at all. (...) Space and time are perceived differently from the way we perceive them. (...) What we never consider real is considered real and vice versa.<sup>1</sup>

So, how can the word *folklore* be defined? Propp identifies folklore as 'the product of a special form of verbal art'<sup>2</sup> and he specifies that 'not only there is a close tie between folklore and literature, but folklore is a literary phenomenon.'<sup>3</sup> However, folklore and literature do have some differences: for example, literary work is unchangeable and it is represented by one or more authors, whereas folklore never has a specific author. In other words, it can be stated that the folktale is a product of folklore: it originates from a collective cultural background which promotes social, ethical, and moral values. Furthermore, it sets an example of how social norms should regulate the local community. Propp adds that 'the folktale is an ideological phenomenon, a reflection of the world in men's minds. It is not a reflection of itself.'<sup>4</sup>

Before getting into the core of the article, it is necessary to explain the concept of folktale as it is tackled in this study. According to Thompson and Propp,<sup>5</sup> the folktale is a traditional story, usually anonymous, that has been passed down orally from generations to generations. Thompson defines the folktale as follows:

Although the term 'folktale' is often used in English to refer to the 'household tale' or 'fairy tale' (the German Märchen), such as 'Cinderella' or 'Snow White', it is also legitimately employed in a much broader sense

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<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore*, Anatoly Liberman (ed.) and Ariadna Y. Martin and Richard P. Martin (trans.), Minneapolis 1984, p. 10. In this article, excerpts are quoted from the English version of the volume

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 125.

<sup>5</sup> Stith Thompson, *The Folktale*, New York 1946; Propp, *Theory and History*.

to include all forms of prose narrative, written and oral, which have come to be handed down through the years.<sup>6</sup>

Normally, there is not just one version of the folktale, but more variants can be found according to the local storytellers and settings which, in most cases, used to share features in contents and structure. Generally speaking, the folktale is told in third person narrator and the plot is simple as its aim is mainly to share moral values. The setting can be either unreal or indirectly real, and it may present cultural features of the local environment, although space and time may not be specified. Characters are usually good or evil, and there is a hero or heroine that turns an unpleasant situation around. The folktale<sup>7</sup> encloses the dichotomy between right and wrong according to the cultural and ethical values of the local community and the main themes are love, friendship, loyalty, bravery, justice versus wickedness, envy, deceitfulness, and disloyalty.

Despite the attempts of preserving it, folktale narration is slowly diminishing, especially among the younger generations. In his study devoted to the folklore in the Arab countries, Šawqī ‘Abd al-Ḥakīm stresses that thanks the folk memory nothing is historically and archeologically missing, as the missing can be clarified and verified through the persistent searching in the collection of folklore materials.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the studies about folktales – and folklore in general – are extremely important: on one hand they might help individuals acquire a deeper awareness of the cultural identity and history of their country and the society they belong to. On the other hand, they contribute to providing and preserving valuable resources and data for today’s and tomorrow’s scholars who investigate many fields of research, including – to name just a few – sociology, anthropology, linguistics, and dialectology.

### Folklore and Folktales in the United Arab Emirates

The government and the population of United Arab Emirates<sup>9</sup> are very attentive to preserve and create awareness of the local heritage of the past and traditional style of living. This is demonstrated by the creation and the foundation of a large number of institutions<sup>10</sup> and activities regarding Emirati folklore and folklife. In addition, several volumes dedicated to the folklore and cultural heritage of the Emirates have been published, to name but a few the studies of Ibrāhīm Aḥmad Malḥam and the work of al-Ḥāšimī and

<sup>6</sup> Thompson, *The Folktale*, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> For further reading see also Claude Lévi-Strauss, ‘La structure et la forme. Réflexions sur un ouvrage de Vladimir Propp’, *Cahiers de l’institut de science économiques appliquées* 9 (1960), pp. 3–36.

<sup>8</sup> Šawqī ‘Abd al-Ḥakīm, *Madḥal li-dirāsāt al-fulklūr wa-l-asāfir al-‘arabiyya*, al-Qāhira 2017, p. 135.

<sup>9</sup> Henceforth UAE.

<sup>10</sup> To name a few: Sharjah Institute for Heritage, Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture & Heritage, Dhakira Center for Heritage Studies in UAE.

Biłhaysr.<sup>11</sup> In the light of this, in his study Hurreiz stated something that should be taken into account:

Islamic traditions and traditional values of Bedouin folklife are appreciated more than artistic folklore genres. In fact, such genres are highly respected and idealized in the United Arab Emirates as long as they promote the traditional values of Bedouin folklife and a maritime environment.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the oral tradition of storytelling also represents a deeply rooted element in the Emirati intangible cultural heritage – as within the Arabian Gulf in general – related to the Bedouin tribal clans and to the desertic and maritime environments. In fact, during the era before the modernisation of UAE, the narration session was a way to entertain people during the harsh living conditions of the desert environment. Folktales used to be told during family and friend's gatherings (especially at night), and the storyteller used to be a woman (usually the mother and the grandmother). One of the main purposes of these tales was to spread education among families since they are those who teach the moral, ethical, and cultural values that have to be followed. Notwithstanding, it shall be noted that folktales are not particularly suitable for children, because they can sometimes be tragic and grim, as they were originally intended for an adult audience only. The folktale, known in Emirati Arabic<sup>13</sup> as *ħarrūfa*<sup>14</sup> (plural *ħarārīf*), was also told in the *maġlis* (*maylis* in EA) where families and tribes used to sit – women often had their own *maġlis* – and discussed community issues, while receiving guests, or socialising. The *maġlis*<sup>15</sup> represents an important place for local people and it contributes to transmitting their oral heritage; in fact, even today, a *maġlis* in modern Emirati houses is a large sitting room suitable for receiving guests and family members.<sup>16</sup> In referring to the traditional narratives, Hurreiz also highlights that they 'provide useful information about UAE society. Such information extends from environmental, social and religious values to local political realities and moral human values pertaining to human nature in general'.<sup>17</sup>

For the purpose of this study, three folktales in EA have been selected from the book *Hikāyāt ša'biyya min madīnat al-'Ayn* (Folktales from Al-Ain) by 'Ā'īša Ĥamīs 'Alī

<sup>11</sup> Ibrāhīm Aħmad Małħam, *Al-Fulklūr fī muġtama' al-Imārāt. Al-Ašāla wa-t-tanmiya*, Abū Ḍabī 2019 and *At-Turāt aš-ša'bī al-imārātī*, Abū Ḍabī 2017; Ibrāhīm al-Hāšimī and 'Ā'īša Biłhaysr, *Al-Mu'taqādāt aš-ša'biyya dawlat al-Imārāt al-'Arabīyya l-Muttaħida*, Abū Ḍabī 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Sayyid Hamid Hurreiz, *Folklore and Folklife in the United Arab Emirates*, Oxon and New York 2002, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Henceforth EA.

<sup>14</sup> In other Gulf countries, the folktale is called *hizzāya*: in Hurreiz, *Folklore and Folklife in the United Arab Emirates*, p. 73.

<sup>15</sup> The *maġlis* from 2015 is inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, Viewed 03 November 2022, <<https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/maġlis-a-cultural-and-social-space-01076>>.

<sup>16</sup> Maryam Ćum'a Faraġ, *Al-Hikāya š-ša'biyya fī dawlat al-Imārāt. Muqāraba bayna l-maħalliyya wa-l-'ālamīyya*, Dubai 2015, pp. 21–22.

<sup>17</sup> Hurreiz, *Folklore and Folklife*, p. 79.

al-Ḍāhirī,<sup>18</sup> in order to extrapolate, through the oral storytelling, useful data not only about the cultural values embedded in the Emirati society, but also some linguistic remarks of EA. It has been necessary to identify a single typology among all the stories proposed by Az-Zahiri, in fact three folktales with the same characteristics have been chosen: the wife has the role of the villain.

Az-Zahiri collected 27 Emirati folktales, which were recorded in Al-Ain, a city located in the Eastern region of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, on the border with Oman. Before going into a more detailed socio-cultural and linguistic analysis of the folktales, it is convenient to provide a brief outline about the geography and the history of UAE and its society – specifically about Al-Ain – in order to better understand some of the folktale contents and elements.

### Al-Ain, a Fertile Oasis in the Desert

The UAE economic and social history is divided into two main stages. The first stage is the pre-oil stage that was led by a traditional tribal society. The second stage is the post-oil stage, which started at the beginning of the 1950s, during which the UAE was undergoing massive changes. In fact, considerable progress was made on the level of economic and social life, just as it happened in the majority of Gulf countries. Most of the UAE includes inland populations, oases, and coastal settlements: during the pre-oil era, the life of the Emirati inhabitants living in the inland territories was deeply related to trade or agriculture, while the life of Emirati inhabitants living in the coastal regions was related to the sea and all the activities derived from it, such as pearl diving, fishing and navigation.<sup>19</sup>

The region where folktales were recorded by Az-Zahiri is Al-Ain, the inland city located in a fertile oasis at the foot of Mount Ḥafit.<sup>20</sup> In 2011, the Cultural Sites of Al-Ain became a UNESCO world heritage site which shows signs of the existence of sedentary human occupation of a desert region dating back to the Neolithic. In the nomination file submitted by the UAE to the World Heritage Center (UNESCO) it is possible to find a very clear description of the uniqueness of Al-Ain, as follows:

The story of Al-Ain is that of overcoming the limitations and restrictions of the place and its geographical and climatic constraints; it is about human ingenuity which allowed for the ancient communities of Al-Ain to move from a wandering nomadic lifestyle to a sedentary one, to farm the desert, irrigate fertile oases, organize and administer water rights, grow food and amass surpluses, establish Al-Ain at an important crossing point

<sup>18</sup> ‘Ā’īša Ḥamīs, ‘Alī Aḍ-Ḍāhirī, *Ḥikāyāt ša’biyya min madīnat al-‘Ayn*, Abū Ḍabī 2012. Henceforth Az-Zahiri.

<sup>19</sup> Frauke Heard-Bey, *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates*, Dubai 2004, pp. 198–204. The first edition was published in 1982 by Longman.

<sup>20</sup> It is one of the highest mountains in the UAE (about 1,250 m).

along the trade routes linking together the ancient cultures of the region: Mesopotamia, Persia and the Indus Valley.<sup>21</sup>

A distinctive feature of the Al-Ain site is the *aflāğ* (singular *falağ*) system which dates back to the Iron Age and which basically consists of an irrigation network that is made by water channels dug in the soil: it is gravity that brings water to the surface naturally from the underground sources or springs, so the use of machines is not needed.<sup>22</sup>

Thanks to the discovery of oil, the area underwent a huge urban and local development, which had a great impact on the entire region. Despite that, the green city of Al-Ain, which is rich in groves of palm trees and fruit, has been preserving its traditional identity and cultural features until today. Al-Ain is actually unique among the nearby futuristic cities like Abu Dhabi and Dubai.

Now that the environmental context has been presented, the folktale samples in this study will be analysed from a socio-cultural and linguistic perspectives.

### Folktales from Al-Ain

The collection of 27 folktales by Az-Zahiri is written in EA using the Arabic writing system and it includes a Modern Standard Arabic<sup>23</sup> shortened translation for each folktale. The folktales were recorded by eight informants, seven of which were women, and one was a man. In these folktales, the role of the villain is always played by women, represented mainly as evil stepmothers and wives. In each of the three folktales selected for this article, the evil character is the young wife and her victims are always the husband's sister or mother. The story develops around the evil stratagems of those ruthless wives.

In her introduction, Az-Zahiri<sup>24</sup> highlights the important role of the oral narration as a means to better realise the transformation of local communities and their environments over time, as well as the social functions of folktales within the modern society, as she affirmed:<sup>25</sup>

What is worth mentioning here are the social functions of those stories that have contributed in shaping Emirati people's visions of the world around; a world that is changing and transforming today into new worlds

<sup>21</sup> Visit – Viewed 15 January 2022, <<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1343/documents/>>, p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> Aḥmad Salīm al-Maršūdi, 'The falaj irrigation system and water allocation markets in Northern Oman', *Agricultural Water Management* 91/1–3 (2007), pp. 71–77, Viewed 15 January 2022, <<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0378377407001096>>.

<sup>23</sup> Henceforth MSA.

<sup>24</sup> Az-Zahiri, *Hikāyāt ša'biyya min madīnat al-'Ayn*, pp. 10–16.

<sup>25</sup> All citations from Arabic were translated into English by the article's author.

where media and modern entertainment are taking-over the tales and stories of aunts and grandmothers.<sup>26</sup>

In the above quote, Az-Zahiri mentions ‘aunts and grandmothers’, and that is not a coincidence. What she stated sheds light on the underlying involvement of women in this traditional role in the UAE. In fact, the storytelling was also used for educational purposes, since it was very common in the past for local people, especially women, to be illiterate. Nevertheless, the illiteracy rate began to shrink in the post-oil era because considerable sums of oil revenues were finally invested in education. Besides providing information on the role of women in the local environment, these Emirati folktales also supplied socio-cultural elements to be taken into consideration and to be reflected upon. Moreover, the EA used in the folktales provides linguistic data concerning the variety of Al-Ain.

The wickedness of wives emerged in three of the folktales called *Iz-zōġa ḍ-ḍālma*<sup>27</sup> (The Abusive Wife), *Iz-zōġa l-muḥāda ‘ā*<sup>28</sup> (The Deceiving Wife), and *Zōġat il-aḥḥ*<sup>29</sup> (The Wife of the Brother): these folktales exist because the evil is real. The storyteller ‘Ā’ida bint Sālim al-Bādī (b.1927) is the oldest one among the eight storytellers of the collection and she was recorded in Al-Ain by Az-Zahiri in 2007, when she was 80 years old. In the following lines a brief synopsis will be briefly presented in order to offer the reader the possibility to find the stories interesting from an interdisciplinary point of view.

The first folktale that will be analysing in this study is *Iz-zōġa ḍ-ḍālma* (The Abusive Wife). It is about wickedness evilness and jealousy. It presents the story of a wife that is very jealous of the relationship between her husband and his sister (both orphans). These three characters reside in the same house. One day, the evil wife asks her husband’s sister to accompany her to the palm grove to collect some wood. When they arrive at their destination, the abusive wife secretly collects three bird eggs and takes them with her to the home. When they arrive home, the wicked woman garnishes the eggs with butter and cream; then she asks her husband’s sister to swallow them. The sister obeys and swallows the eggs, which give her stomach ache. Then, the evil wife begins to inculcate into her husband’s mind that his sister is pregnant. At the beginning he seems to be hesitating, and asks his sister to do some housework under the sun, but the girl refuses because she is in terrible pain. The husband becomes convinced that his wife is right. Therefore, the husband decides to take his sister out to gather grass for the camels. When it gets dark, he suggests sleeping out in the desert. As soon as she falls asleep in his arms, he abandons her and goes back home. When she wakes up and finds herself all alone in the wilderness, she gets worried. She wanders around until she finds a camp of Bedouins who welcome her and put up a tent to give shelter to the poor woman. In the meantime, the eggs in the girl’s stomach begin to hatch: three birds come out of her mouth.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, pp. 10–13.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, pp. 52–57.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, pp. 71–74.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, pp. 75–79.

As soon as they are able to fly, the girl asks her baby birds to fly to her brother and ask him for an unguent to grease her hair. The man complies with the request. Then the girl asks them to go to him again and collect some meat for the feast. However, this time the brother decides to accompany the baby birds and take the meat to his sister personally. Finally, the two siblings meet again. The girl tells her brother what his evil wife did and now he wants to kill her, but his sister insists that a divorce is a fair punishment, so he does as his sister suggests. Then the brother gets married again, but this time with a good wife, who treats his sister affectionately, and they live happily, along with the three birds.

The second selected folktale is *Iz-zōḡa l-muḡāda`a* (The Deceiving Wife). This folktale is about the wife of a tribal chief's son. His mother is very old and he loves and respects her very much. Every day he hosts lots of guests and offers them a sacrificed animal. One day, he asks his wife to take his beloved mother a pot of rice and meat. Instead of doing so, she serves her burnt bread with hard and dry dates. However, before giving the old lady that food, the wife makes the mother-in-law sing and dance, just to humiliate her. And in order to be fed, the old lady has to obey the woman. After a couple of days, the son visits his mother and that's when the truth about the deceitful wife is revealed. The old lady asks her son why he is sending poor food. The son sees through it and decides to set a trap for his wife, asking his mother to keep it on the down-low. Before the wife arrives, the man hides to see with his own eyes what is going to happen. The evil wife arrives and orders the old lady to sing and dance as usual. The man watches the whole scene. When he returns to his house, he asks his wife to go and visit her family because her mother is ill. After that, the man sends his servant to hand the divorce letter over to the deceiving wife in order to get rid of her forever.

The third folktale tackled is *Zōḡat il-ahḡ* (The Wife of the Brother). This folktale is about two orphans who love and respect each other. The wife of the brother is envious and jealous of her husband's sister. One day, the wicked wife takes her sister-in-law with her to pick up some wood. While collecting the wood, the wife finds a snake egg which triggers her to do something with it. The wife takes that egg and, once at home, she stuffs it with sweet cream. Under false pretences, the wicked wife makes the sister eat it. The snake egg gives her pain and her stomach starts swelling. At this point, the wife convinces her husband that his sister is pregnant. Thus, he abandons her in the wild. The lonely girl starts wandering, until she finds a large tree (the Ghaf). She climbs it and takes shelter among its branches. A *sheikh* arrives with his guests and they start feasting, dancing, and singing right under the tree where the girl was hiding. Suddenly, a piece of bark falls into the rice pot below. It is the girl, who accidentally drops it from above. So, the *sheikh* looks up and sees her. He decides to take her to his camp and marry her. Once there, his father refuses, because the girl's health is getting worse. Due to her bad health conditions, the *sheikh* hops on his horse and rides it as fast as he can, in order to collect the animal's sweat, put it in a cup and make the girl drink it. When the girl swallows the horse's sweat, she immediately throws up the snake that had hatched in her stomach. The girl is now saved: she writes immediately to her brother who rushes to her and starts discussing the possibility of taking



revenge on his wife. The girl is reluctant about punishing the brother's evil wife. She decides to forgive her instead, while her brother vows to kill her and bury her body under the doorway, so that everyone would step on her while entering or leaving the house.

### Socio-cultural Elements in the Emirati Folktales

It is worth analysing the socio-cultural elements in the sample folktales. As mentioned above, folktales usually share common features concerning structure and functions<sup>30</sup> regardless of their geographical and cultural backgrounds. This means that the folktale's structure could be set, but the elements which constitute the structure can vary according to where the folktale was formed, that is to say the local environment and culture. In fact, Propp states that 'the pattern of daily living to folktales do exist; but this pattern is only indirectly reflected to them.'<sup>31</sup> Moreover, since the folktale does not have a specific author, it is dynamic and its details can change, according to the storyteller's background. In the following sections, the study seeks not only to identify the patterns of daily living in folktales related to socio-cultural Emirati setting and language, but also to focus on the wickedness of wives in the light of this context. In fact, the three selected folktales enclose socio-cultural elements that are related to the desert environment and the daily social life of tribal clans in the UAE.

However, it should be prefaced that, it is not possible to define when a folktale was originated for the first time, as the time setting is unspecified, but it is still to be found, throughout the sample tales, lots of references to Islamic festivity and Allah expressions: this means that the storyteller set the story during the post-Islam period. In fact, it is not so unusual to find a natural connection between religion and folktale, as folktales do include traces of religion.<sup>32</sup>

The prologue of the three folktales is very similar, it is a kind of standard formulas – as 'once upon a time'<sup>33</sup> – that is *wāḥid 'and-ah* (there is one who has), *hunāk wāḥid u- 'and-ah* (there was one who...) or *fī marra wāḥid 'and-ah* (once there is one who has). It is interesting that the inception always highlights the male character (*wāḥid*), even if the folktale revolves around the female character. Moreover, it is not surprising that in the stories direct speech is very often used, dialogues are brief and simple, and usually characterised by repetition. To show some examples, in the folktale *Iz-zōḡa ḡ-ḡālma*<sup>34</sup> (The Abusive Wife) it was found:

<sup>30</sup> Propp in his renowned study *Morphology of the Folktales*, defines more than 30 functions that could be found in folktales. Even if the morphological analysis of the folktale is not one of the objectives of the article, in the sample Emirati folktales the article's author has mainly identified as common the following functions: absence, violation, delivery, fraud, villainy, victory, return, punishment.

<sup>31</sup> Vladimir Propp, *The Morphology of the Folktale*, Svatava Pirkova-Jakobson (ed.) and Laurence Scott (trans.), The Hague 1958, p. 96. The original work was published in Russian in 1928.

<sup>32</sup> Propp 1958, p. 96.

<sup>33</sup> In MSA, the formula most common translation of 'once upon time' is *kān yā mā kān*.

<sup>34</sup> Az-Zahiri, p. 55.

قالولها: زين.

*gālū-lha: zēn.*

(They told her: fine.)

قالولها: شو نقوله اذا شفنناه؟

*gālū-lha: šu niğūl-ah ida šifnā-h?*

(They told what shall we tell him if we see him?)

قالتلهم: يوم بتشوفوه قولوه «السلام عليكم خالي»

*gālat-lahum: yōm bitšūfū-h gūlū-lah «is-salām ‘alē-kum ḥālī».*

(She told them: when you see him, tell him «Hello uncle».)

Furthermore, as it commonly happens in the Gulf oral heritage and literature, desert and sea are two recurring elements in the local environment and they play an important role, as Az-Zahiri emphasises in her book introduction, where she affirms that the folktales also reflect the popular imagination of the people of the Emirates and the people of the Gulf in general, as well as they reflect the perception of the cultural visions that permeate the environment surrounding the community.<sup>35</sup>

However, the plots of the three folktales develop in the desert: the sea is not mentioned. Concerning social and daily activities in the desert environment, in both *Iz-zōga ḍ-ḍālma* (The Abusive Wife) and *Zōgat il-ahḥ* (The Wife of the Brother) the wicked wife invites her husband's sister to collect palm wood. Then, it was found that the male character used to meet and discuss with people every day regarding several issues in the *mağlis*, the sitting room introduced above. Other local activities are mentioned like, for example, preparing the camel, riding and watering the horses, and collecting water at the *falağ*, the waterway. Thus, the setting recalls wilderness and civilisation represented by the Arab Bedouins with their tents and straw houses. As known, Bedouin tribes in UAE established the roots of the local society and it is essential to consider their cultural values and traditions for studies concerning the UAE. It should be highlighted that the Bedouins also played an important role in the transmission of oral storytelling long before the Islamic era.<sup>36</sup>

In the sample folktales, traces of Arab-Bedouin life were found. At the beginning of *Iz-zōga l-muḥāda ‘a* (The Deceiving Wife), the evil wife's husband is a son of *sheikhs*, who used to receive guests every-day, and sacrifice an animal and offered it to them: just like in *Zōgat il-ahḥ* (The Wife of the Brother) beasts are commonly killed to feed the Arabs who gathered to sing and dance. All of that indicates some of the Bedouins' core values: hospitality and generosity, besides solidarity, as demonstrated in *Iz-zōga ḍ-ḍālma* (The Abusive Wife) when the Arabs build a tent for the abandoned girl. Moreover, in *Iz-zōga*

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem, pp. 13–14.

<sup>36</sup> For further reading see also Elizabeth Rainey, 'The Art of Storytelling in Bedouin Society: a 21 st-Century Ethnographic Collection of Poems from the United Arab Emirates', *Revue de la culture matérielle* 82–83 (2016), pp. 143–159.

*l-muḥāda‘a* (The Deceiving Wife) the husband instructs his wife to take some food to his old mother, then he visits her: showing respect towards the elders is another important moral value connected to Arabs, and to Islam in general. Another detail emerges when in *Zōḡat il-aḥḥ* (The Wife of the Brother), when the young *sheikh* tells his father that he wants to marry the abandoned girl: his father does not agree and replies ‘you have so many female cousins!’ (*‘ind-ik banāt ‘am wāyidāt*).<sup>37</sup> Within tribal communities, when it comes to choosing a wife, the preference for marriages is usually for the members of the same family, both for economic reasons, and to preserve the family reputation.

In the folktales, when the Bedouins gather to eat together, the typical foods that are mentioned in the stories are meat, date, bread, rice, and butter.<sup>38</sup> Food is very important, as dining was a real priority in the local society because of the harsh desert conditions that used to complicate the search for food and water difficult. This is one of the reasons why the Bedouins of the UAE were mainly semi-nomadic and they used to move in flocks, according to the seasonal conditions. Some animals related to the desert environment, such as camels, hyenas, poisonous insects, horses, and small birds were mentioned in the book by Az-Zahiri, while the vegetation in the three folktales are the palm trees and the Ghaf tree (*ḡāfa*), described in *Zōḡat il-aḥḥ* (The Wife of the Brother). The Ghaf tree, whose scientific name is *prosopis cineraria*, is the national tree of the UAE and symbolises peace and harmony. It is the tree under which the Bedouins used to gather, because its foliage offers shelter from the scorching sun, as well as from animals. Its pods are edible and both pods and leaves can be used for medicinal purposes, as they have antiseptic and antifungal properties.<sup>39</sup>

By extrapolating all these elements, it is possible to find in folktales what Propp defined as the ‘very little pertaining to everyday life.’<sup>40</sup> But is it really so little? Inevitably, all these details bring us back to the origins of the local culture and this might help the reader and the scholar to better understand the peculiar characteristics that have contributed in building the identity of today’s Emiratis. The UAE, like many other Gulf countries, have undergone a rapid modernisation process that has created a deep rift between past and present, between old and new generations: this rift can be bridged also by the society cultural heritage, understanding what its roots are and which are the left traces that contributed to create the identity of contemporary Emirati society that seems to have found a balance between traditional heritage and modernisation.

<sup>37</sup> Az-Zahiri, p. 78.

<sup>38</sup> In other stories of Az-Zahiri book also fish is included.

<sup>39</sup> David Gallacher, ‘Status of *Prosopis cineraria* (ghaf) tree clusters in the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve’, *Tribulus* 15/2 (2005), pp. 3–9, Viewed 29 January 2022, <[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281589738\\_Status\\_of\\_Prosopis\\_cineraria\\_ghaf\\_tree\\_clusters\\_in\\_the\\_Dubai\\_Desert\\_Conservation\\_Reserve](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281589738_Status_of_Prosopis_cineraria_ghaf_tree_clusters_in_the_Dubai_Desert_Conservation_Reserve)>.

<sup>40</sup> Propp, *The Morphology of the Folktale*, p. 96.

## Every Man for Himself! Evil Wives

Women in folktales are usually depicted through stereotypical models, where passivity is connected to goodness and beauty and wickedness to power. This is the case of a variety of fields, not only in the Emirati context.

As specified above, one typology of stories was chosen for this study, in fact the sample folktales share a common feature which is the wickedness of wives. These evil women lead the development of the story, through their wicked stratagems, on account of other women, who are good-hearted and passive. The causes of their grudge are envy and jealousy since their husbands love and respect their sisters or mothers. The three stories share other features as well. First of all, the female characters are victimised by the evil wives and it all begins with an act that represents the initial means to carry out their wicked intentions: the force-feeding act. It is about eggs in the *Iz-zōġa ḍ-ḍālma* (The Abusive Wife) and *Zōġat il-aḥḥ* (The Wife of the Brother) while in *Iz-zōġa l-muḥāda'a* (The Deceiving Wife) the old lady is deprived of good dishes and is forced to eat mouldy food. Then, the central idea of deception adds up: in *Iz-zōġa ḍ-ḍālma* (The Abusive Wife) and *Zōġat il-aḥḥ* (The Wife of the Brother) the evil wife intentionally convinces her husband that his sister is pregnant, because she has a stomach ache caused by the force feeding. In *Iz-zōġa l-muḥāda'a* (The Deceiving Wife) the wife makes her husband think that she is taking care of his elderly mother, while she is humiliating the old lady instead, by forcing her to dance and sing in exchange of some poor food, violating a very important value of the local society, that is courtesy towards the elderly. The three victimised women are thus strongly mortified and these outcomes trigger a psycho-physical pain: on the one hand it is psychological because it is caused by the sense of abandonment by the male reference figure (brother or son). On the other hand, it is physical because in *Iz-zōġa ḍ-ḍālma* (The Abusive Wife) and *Zōġat il-aḥḥ* (The Wife of the Brother) the girl gets tangible stomach ache, while in *Iz-zōġa l-muḥāda'a* (The Deceiving Wife) the elderly mother suffers from hunger.

The last common point in the three folktales is that the wives' evil actions are revealed by their respective husbands who then think about an exemplary punishment: in both *Iz-zōġa ḍ-ḍālma* (The Abusive Wife) and *Iz-zōġa l-muḥāda'a* (The Deceiving Wife) the punishment is the divorce, in some cases prompted by the victimised woman herself, while in *Zōġat il-aḥḥ* (The Wife of the Brother), the husband swears he will kill his wife and bury her body under the threshold of the house so that it is constantly trampled by those who come and go as a gesture of ultimate humiliation. The two stories *Iz-zōġa ḍ-ḍālma* (The Abusive Wife) and *Zōġat il-aḥḥ* (The Wife of the Brother) also share the presence of quite magical events, namely the eggs' hatching in the stomach of the husband's sister who, in the first story, gives birth to three little birds coming out of her mouth (and they can even speak!). In the second folktale, the egg generates a snake that is vomited after the girl has drunk the sweat of the *sheikh's* horse.

Concerning the characters, it is possible to notice that in the three folktales most roles are quite flat or static, and usually do not have a name, as they are called just *flān* or *flāna*

(term used to indicate a random or unknown person). The only name that is mentioned is in *Zōgat il-ahh* (The Wife of the Brother) that is *sheikh* Qinā' bin Rāšid. The vitality of characters emerges only in the evil wives, whose wicked actions set the plot dynamism. The good-hearted characters are passive: they basically seek refuge and food, or wait for a man to help them, or even save themselves from a dramatic situation. The reward of the victimised women is to find again the love and respect of their male reference figures.

In conclusion, in the three selected folktales the evil characters are women who mistreat other women by humiliating them. And those mistreated women, in turn, are abandoned in the desert or nearly condemned to starvation. The wife is always evil and tricks her husband to the point that he ends up being her second victim, as he blindly trusts his wife. However, in the end, the husband is the one who delivers the punishment by divorce or killing. It is indeed a male character that takes action to stop the wife's evilness: this aspect may partially reflect the local reality of tribal patriarchal societies in the past, where men solved problems. Nevertheless, it should be underlined that also in many European folk or fairy tales, evil women are usually punished by men. Due to an exacerbated idea of women that was very widespread especially until the Enlightenment era, women were often associated with the evil and magic.<sup>41</sup>

The issues and values addressed in the three folktales are love, loyalty, and respect towards the blood family, as opposed to evilness, dishonesty, and lack of morality. At the end, as it usually happens in tales (also because of the influence of religion), good triumphs over evil. In the Emirati context, the folktale becomes a means for shaping the collective consciousness as it shows what happens to those who do not obey the local and tribal traditions and customs.

### Linguistic Remarks on the Folktales

EA belongs to Gulf Arabic which is considered, according to Arabic dialectology' studies,<sup>42</sup> a sort of *koine* that includes spoken varieties in Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, UAE, southern Iraq, and eastern region of Saudi Arabia. However, even if those varieties belong to the same linguistic group, the differences between them cannot be ignored. Thus, Gulf Arabic includes EA which, in its turn, according to Leung et al., consists of:

<sup>41</sup> Indeed, it is important to stress that since the foundation of the UAE, the late Sheikh Zāyid bin Sulṭān Āl Nahyān believed that Emirati women would play an essential role in building the country. Today, local women hold key positions in all fields, as also reported in UAE Annual Yearbook 2016, United Arab Emirates. *An introduction to its origins and phases of development in various spheres of life*, Abū Ḍabī 2016, p. 102.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas M. Johnstone, *Eastern Arabian Dialect Studies*, London 1967; Hamdi A. Qafisheh, *A Basic Course in Gulf Arabic*, Tucson 1977; Bruce Ingham, *North East Arabian Dialects*, London 1982; Clive Holes, *Gulf Arabic*, London 1990, and by Clive Holes also *Dialect, Culture, and Society in Eastern Arabic, Volume I: Glossary*, Leiden-Boston 2001; Holes, *Dialect, Culture, and Society in Eastern Arabic, Volume II: Ethnographic Texts*, Leiden-Boston 2005; Holes, *Dialect, Culture, and Society in Eastern Arabic, Volume III: Phonology, Morphology, Syntax, Style*, Leiden-Boston 2016.

Grammatical properties of smaller varieties within the UAE, mainly of tribal nature, which may be grouped roughly into three broader subvarieties: the first spoken in the Northern Emirates of Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm al-Quwain, and part of Ras al-Khaimah; the second in the eastern part of the country, mainly in the Emirate of Fujairah, the Khawr Fakkan region, and the eastern part of Ras al-Khaimah; and the third in the Abu Dhabi region, including the oasis city of Al-Ain.<sup>43</sup>

The dialectological-linguistic analysis deserves a separate study, to be examined in depth, concerning morphology and syntax of Al-Ain folktales. Therefore, a further study will be available soon by this author. Thus, in the following lines the focus will be on orthographic and phonological remarks, besides lexical hints, where lexemes were chosen especially for their link to the cultural references found in the texts. The main works concerning EA, which this section is based on, are Johnstone, Qafisheh, and Al-Rawi<sup>44</sup> whose studies include linguistic notes and texts from Abu Dhabi. Furthermore, personal communications and readings from Emirati speakers from Al-Ain, that were acquired during a research fieldwork in the UAE were used.

It should be specified that the phonological inventory is missing, due to the lack of systematically transliterated version.<sup>45</sup> In fact, Az-Zahiri provides the written version of folktales she recorded by using the Arabic writing system. Thus, concerning the orthographic components, it often results in no correspondence between the graphematic and the phonological level. This is due to the fact that short vowels and other diacritics are rarely indicated and there is no consistency in the vocalisation system criterion,<sup>46</sup> for example بَرُوح (I go) but then a few lines below we find بروح (I go). Long vowels ( $\bar{a}$ ,  $\bar{i}$ ,  $\bar{u}$ ,  $\bar{e}$ ,  $\bar{o}$  were  $\bar{e} < ay$  and  $\bar{o} < aw$ ) of course are always written, as in the verb سار (to go). Concerning consonants, it should be highlighted that Az-Zahiri adds a short guide of EA consonants,<sup>47</sup> which aims to help the reader in interpreting some Emirati graphemes that differ from MSA. Its explanation is assumed from *Mu'ğam al-alfāq al-'āmmiyya fī dawlat al-Imārāt al-'Arabīyya l-Muttaḥida* by Fāliḥ Ḥaṭṭāl (1998). Unfortunately, this section provided by Az-Zahiri covers only 13 graphemes, which phonematically are: ⟨ا⟩, ⟨ب⟩, ⟨ت⟩, ⟨ث⟩, ⟨ج⟩, ⟨ح⟩, ⟨د⟩, ⟨ز⟩, ⟨س⟩, ⟨ش⟩, ⟨ص⟩, ⟨ق⟩, ⟨ك⟩ where ⟨ث⟩, ⟨ج⟩, ⟨ش⟩, ⟨ق⟩, ⟨ك⟩ require a closer attention. Az-Zahiri specifies that for the interdental phoneme  $\underline{t}$  the grapheme ⟨ث⟩ is used as in ثياب *tyāb* (clothes), however Az-Zahiri writes that when ⟨ث⟩ is preceded by ⟨ب⟩ thus  $\underline{t} > h$  as in اثنتين *iṭnatayn* > ثنتين *tintēn* > هنتين *hintēn* (two<sup>f</sup>).<sup>48</sup> Actually, Behnstedt and

<sup>43</sup> Tommi Tsz-Cheung Leung and Dimitrios Ntelitheos and Meera Al Kaabi, *Emirati Arabic, a Comprehensive Grammar*, London 2021, pp. 3–4.

<sup>44</sup> Johnstone, *Eastern Arabian Dialect Studies*; Qafisheh, *A Basic Course in Gulf Arabic*; Rosina-Fawzia B. Al-Rawi, *Studien zum Arabischen Dialekt von Abu Daby*, Heidelberg 1990.

<sup>45</sup> However, the author's choice is perfectly understandable if related to the purpose of her work which is not to analyse linguistic data. In this article, the scientific transcription follows the system of ISO 233-2 (1993).

<sup>46</sup> All the examples presented in this paragraph are taken from Az-Zahiri, pp. 17–21, 52–57, 71–74, 75–79.

<sup>47</sup> Az-Zahiri, pp. 17–21.

<sup>48</sup> Example from Az-Zahiri 2012, p. 18.

Woidich<sup>49</sup> attested *hintēn* in the dialects from Yemen to Bahrain but they do not list *hintēn* as present in the Emirates. In fact, the lexeme *hintēn* was recently attested by Wilmsen and Al Muhairi<sup>50</sup> who noticed a systematic use of the numeral ‘two’ in its feminine form pronounced as *hintēn* in the recordings of northern Emirates speakers. The grapheme <ج> as /ǧ/ is maintained [dʒ] or it is realised as the gliding sound [j]<sup>51</sup> for example واید *wāyid* (very, a lot); the same grapheme <ج> is used in the folktales for the realisation of a phoneme which does not exist in MSA, that is [ʃ]. However, it was noticed that [ʃ] is also written with the graphemes <ش> or <چ>, for example إيدش > يدك *īdič* (your<sup>f</sup> hand); It should be highlighted that the *-(i)š* form of the feminine singular possessive pronoun is attested in the dialect areas near to Oman. Holes<sup>52</sup> states that ‘the UAE is a border area, with some communities having the fricative *-(i)š*, and some the affricate *-(i)č*’. The inconsistency in notation by Az-Zahiri and the impossibility of listening the recordings leave us in doubt as to whether <ش> can reflect the realisation of the feminine pronoun as *-ič* or a faithful realisation as *-iš*. Moreover [ʃ] is sometimes the realisation of *k*, such as in *kān* كان > *čān* جان (he was)<sup>53</sup> In addition to this, <ج> as [dʒ] is one of the *q* realisation (whose grapheme is <ق>) as الشارقة *aš-šāriqa* > الشارقة *iš-šārgā* (Sharjah). However, <ق> is mostly realised as [g], for example فوق *fōg* (on, upon). The graphematic rendering of some other consonants show the same inconsistency found in the short vowels. Lastly, it was observed the occurrence of two distinct graphemes <ظ> and <ض> as in ظهر (to appear) and بيضة (egg) but they are both realised in EA as [ð<sup>s</sup>]. Regarding the feminine morpheme *tā’ marbūta*, it is mainly written as <ة>, for example: حجره (room), although sometimes it occurs as <ة> as in زوجة (wife).

However, it should be noted that without the oral version or transliteration of texts it is not possible to precisely state the realisation of some phonemes in the storytellers’ original recordings, despite the support of the dialectological literature consulted for the purpose of this study related to Abu Dhabi region and personal communications by Emiratis.

Concerning lexicon, it is interesting to highlight the lexemes that typically belong to the Emirati tradition and culture which are often related to the local activities and environment. Rosenhouse reported that:

Many lexical items of daily life distinguish Bedouin from sedentary dialects. Differences are found in all the vocabulary domains, including

<sup>49</sup> Peter Behnstedt and Manfred Woidich, *Wortatlas der arabischen Dialekte. Band III: Verben, Adjektive, Zeit und Zahlen*, Leiden Boston 2014, pp. 612–614.

<sup>50</sup> David Wilmsen and Fatimah Al Muhairi, ‘Infixes -nn- in Northern Emirati Arabic’, in: *Studies on Arabic Dialectology and Sociolinguistics. Proceedings of the 13th International Conference of AIDA held in Kutaisi in June 10–13, 2019*, eds. Guram Chikovani and Zviad Tskhvediani, Kutaisi 2022, pp. 289–290.

<sup>51</sup> Johnstone T. M., ‘The Sound Change ‘j > y’ in the Arabic Dialects of Peninsular Arabia’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 28/2 (1965), pp. 233–241; Clive Holes, ‘Phonological Variation in Bahraini Arabic: The [j] and [y] Allophones of /j/’, *Zeitschrift für Arabische Linguistik* 4 (1980), pp. 72–89.

<sup>52</sup> Holes Clive, ‘The Arabic dialects of the Gulf’, in: *Arabic Historical Dialectology. Linguistic and Sociolinguistic Approaches*, ed. Clive Holes, Oxford 2018, p. 124.

<sup>53</sup> However sometimes <ك> is maintained and written, for example ك in كان for example.



items characteristic of obsolete Bedouin life. In narratives (folk-stories, legends, etc.) and poetry, certain formulaic expressions and Classical Arabic items are also characteristic.<sup>54</sup>

Terms referring to pottery were found in the sample of folktales chosen in this study, for example the *yihla* < *ḡihla* (جِحلة < بِحَلَه) which is a small baked clay vase used to contain water, while the *hars* (حَرْس) is a vase to store food like dates that are called *siḥḥ* (سَح).<sup>55</sup> As far as the environment is concerned, the dwelling *irīš* (عريش) was found, that is the typical old Emirati building made of palm fronds. This term is replaced by *ḥēma* (خيمة) in the MSA translation, as in the following sentences found in the folktale *Iz-zōḡa ḡ-dāлма* (The Abusive Wife):

EA: بنولها العَرَب عريش في نخلمهم (the Arabs built her a house in their palm grove)

*banū-lha il-‘arab ‘irīš fī naḥal-hum*

(The Arabs built her a house in their palm grove)

MSA: بنوا لها خيمة خاصة بها

*banū la-hā ḥayma ḥāṣṣa bi-hā*

(They built a tent for her own)

The *falaḡ* > *falay* (فلج < فلي)<sup>56</sup> the typical irrigation system of that area is also mentioned. Concerning local animals, besides the terms camels – *nāga* (ناقة) and *ḡimāl* (جمال) – the term to indicate a caravan of camel occurs, that is *bōš* (بوش) while the *hōš* (هوش) is a herd of cattle, sheep or goat.

Also, some lines are expressed in chants as it happens in *Iz-zōḡa ḡ-dāлма* (The Abusive Wife) and in *Iz-zōḡa l-muḥāda ‘a* (The Deceiving Wife), as follows:

طَلَع نور الله، طلع ذكر الله، طلع اللّٰي ياتس ما مستانيس

*ṭala ‘nūr Allāh, ṭala ‘ḡikr Allāh, ṭala ‘illi yānis mā mistānis*

(The God’s light has risen, the God’s remembrance has appeared, the one who is happy has appeared.)

قوم ارقص جان تبي القرص، قوم ارقص جان تبي القرص

*gūm arguṣ ḡān tibī l-ḡarṣ, gūm arguṣ ḡān tibī l-ḡarṣ*

(Dance if she wants the loaf, dance if she wants the loaf)

<sup>54</sup> Judith Rosenhouse, ‘Bedouin Arabic’, in: *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics*, 2011, eds. Lutz Edzard and Rudolf de Jong, Viewed 29 January 2022, <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1570-6699\\_eall\\_EALL\\_COM\\_0037](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1570-6699_eall_EALL_COM_0037)>

<sup>55</sup> Hamdi A. Qafisheh, *NTC’s Gulf Arabic-English Dictionary*, Chicago 1997, p. 312.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 484.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 519.



Furthermore, some of the typical Bedouin lexemes listed by Rosenhouse<sup>58</sup> were found in the three folktales. For example, as nouns were found *yed(d)* (hand), *'iyāl* (children); the adjective *zēn* (good) is mentioned, while concerning adverbs (*h*)*alḥīn* (now) and *hniy* (here) were reported, and the only particle is *kān, ḥān* (if).

In conclusion, other local worth mentioning words found in the three texts that are: *gšār* (قشّار) that means 'things'<sup>59</sup>, the *ḥuddār* (حُدّار)<sup>60</sup> are the 'guests', *mahr* (مهر) is the ring that can be used as a seal, *ašār* (عشار) means 'pregnant' and *ṣafāṣīf* (صفاصيف) found as variant of *'ašāfir* (birds).

## Conclusions

Despite the modernisation of the country, the UAE institutions and people really care about local traditions, and folklore represents an essential part of the Emirati identity. The folktale, as one of the many forms of folklore, encloses elements of the intangible Emirati cultural heritage which could be analysed in many research fields. This study has aimed at investigating socio-cultural and linguistic features of a sample of three folktales written in EA taken from the collection *Ḥikāyāt ša 'biyya min maḍīnat al-'Ayn* by Az-Zahiri, published in 2012, which have a common denominator, that is the wickedness of wives. Thus, through the analysis of the characters and of the setting, a number of socio-cultural values and elements linked to the desert environment and the daily social life of the past tribal clans have emerged.

Moreover, the collection of Emirati folktales is linguistically valuable, as it provides data about Al-Ain variety, which can be compared to the existing dialectological literature about Abu Dhabi.<sup>61</sup> Linguistic remarks concerning the colloquial variety of Al-Ain were presented through graphematic, phonological and lexical items, the latter when culturally related to the local collective experiences. However, it was noted that the morphosyntactic analysis of all the 27 folktales included in the book of Az-Zahiri deserves a separate study.

The study stresses the relevance of folktales not only as an important source of linguistics and dialectology, but also as a valuable starting point for collecting, recording and studying the oral heritage from different perspectives. Moreover, for local people it is a way to preserve the historical memory, which can unite old and new generations, and strengthen the identity of contemporary Emiratis. This observation is confirmed by the study of al-Aswad,<sup>62</sup> where it was concluded that both government institutions and local people nowadays tend to encourage the cyber-circulation of heritage, in order to hold on to the folk traditions and identities of Emirati society.

<sup>58</sup> Rosenhouse, 'Bedouin Arabic', Table 4. The words listed are transcribed as reported by Rosenhouse.

<sup>59</sup> Hamdi A. Qafisheh, *NTC's Gulf Arabic-English Dictionary*, p. 521.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 189.

<sup>61</sup> For Abu Dhabi variety literature mainly: Johnstone, *Eastern Arabian Dialect Studies*; Qafisheh, *A Basic Course in Gulf Arabic*; Al-Rawi, *Studien zum Arabischen Dialekt von Abu Daby*.

<sup>62</sup> Al-Sayyid al-Aswad, 'E-Folklore and cyber-communication among Emirati Youth', in: *International Journal of Intangible Heritage*, Volume 14 (2014), pp. 149–163.

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