Dundes and Folklore in the Qur'an A Review

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Abstract

Fables of the Ancients? Folklore in the Qur'an is Alan Dundes' first published work on an Islamic subject. The author introduces "Oral-Formulaic" theory and uses it to examine the Qur'an from a literary point of view with primary emphasis on oral and verbal (as distinct from written) aspects of language. Dundes uses general concepts of oral literature such as narration, transmission forms, recitation, divine origin and revelation. In Dundes' account, there are specific features of oral literature, which can verify the folkloric nature of the Qur'an. These features include: proverbs, folk tales and ancient myths. The advantages of Dundes' work as discussed in this article include: a new approach to understanding the terms "folklore" and "myth", high accuracy in locating the repetitions in the Qur'an, accurate references to the similarities between the Qur'an and the Christian holy scripture and using the right order of chapters (Surahs) and Verses. The disadvantages of the book consist of: numerous typographical errors, wrong or incomplete references, insufficient use of Muslim writers' works, incorrect interpretations, bringing up unnecessary theological subjects, making inconsistent statements, comparing three Qur'anic tales with Aarne -Thompson index and ignoring certain Islamic premises.

Keywords: Alan Dundes, Fables of the Ancients, Folklore in the Qur'an, A Review.

Introduction

Mythology is the scientific and historical study of myths. It's a field of study and interest for anthropologists and mythologists. Alan Dundes (1934 – 2005) is one of the most prominent contemporary folklorists of the world with many credible publications in his field of profession. Dundes was one of the many researchers who showed interest in Islamic-Qur'anic topics and published his book, *Fables of the Ancients? Folklore in the Qur'an* in 2003. The book consists of 104 pages and is published by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc.

It is traditionally believed that the Qur'an is the literal word of Allah. In recent decades, certain theories have been proposed particularly by western theoreticians such as André Chouraqui (in his French translation of the Qur'an) and Angelika Neuwirth suggesting that Qur'anic terms have Hebrew, Aramaic and Syriac roots. Dundes, who examines the Qur'an from a literary and folkloristic point of view, believes that God has used Arab people's proverbs, stories and set of beliefs to speak to them and that the folklore of the 6th century Arabia has been remarkably reflected in the Qur'an's oral language. Additionally, he argues that the Qur'an is not only a written passage but also an oral tradition. After the publication of Dundes' work, the book was examined and criticised by seven western critics. In this essay, we will examine the book and will point out criticisms which have not been noted by other critics[1].

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[1] It may be worth noting that one of the authors of this essay (M. H. Golzar) has also translated Dundes' book to Farsi, which will be published in Iran in the near future.

1- General remarks

The book is printed in octavo size. It doesn't seem to be written for educational purposes such as serving as a course book in universities. The book consists of 104 pages and includes table of contents, preface, acknowledgments, conclusion, bibliography and index along with a short biography of the author at the end.

In the book's preface, the author explicitly and concisely explains what motivated him to write the book:

'After the publication of *Holy Writ as Oral Lit: The Bible as Folklore* in 1999, in which I sought to demonstrate how traces of original oral transmission could be clearly discerned in both the Old and New Testaments, I began to wonder about other sacred texts that had a possible debt to oral tradition. One of the texts that aroused my curiosity was the *Qur'an*[2].'[3]

The book includes four main chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter of the book, 'What is the *Qur'an*?' (pages 1 – 15) opens with a verse from the Qur'an. The author then mentions the belief that the Qur'an is true word of God and emphasizes on its original oral structure before it was written on paper. Later, in order to describe the Qur'an for his western readers, the author points out controversial topics (such as sorcery, poetry and illiteracy) among Muslim commentators and Non-Muslim critics. As Neal Robinson (from the University of Leuven) has correctly pointed out, this chapter is probably the weakest part of the book for referring to less credible sources such as Beljon, Freemon and Sprenger.

In the second chapter of the book, "Oral Formulaic Theory" (pages 15 – 23), Dundes gives a concise background of Milman Parry and Albert Lord's works on the subject from 1930's to 1990's. Then, he explains what 'oral formulaic' means

for him and in his own theory. He makes it clear that by oral formulaic, he doesn't refer to a set of repetitive clichés that have turned to be trivial (as he seems to concur on the holy origin of the Qur'an). What he calls cliché is rather the repetition of certain lingual expressions in a text minus the triviality element. In Dundes' opinion, enumerating methodological technique is usable to authenticate the oral roots of a text when its orality is disputed. It is also a useful technique to look for end rhymes to find clichés in a given text. In this chapter, he also uses the "20 percent straight formulas" criterion as a minimum threshold figure to establish orality of a text (and mentions *Song of Roland* with a formula density of 35.2 percent as an example) to prove that the Qur'an, in which the density of formulas exceeds 20 percent, has definitely oral roots. Andrew Rippin believes that Dundes' work 'lacks any sophistication in approach and it has no theoretical depth.'[4] The authors of this essay do not believe that Dundes' criteria and methods are applicable to the Qur'an either.

In the third chapter, "Oral Formulas in the *Qur'an*", the author emphasises on the important elements in a true oral formulaic study of the Qur'an: 'ideally, a true oral-formulaic study of the Qur'an should take account of the formulas in Arabic with due attention paid to such poetic features as end or internal rhymes, metrics, assonance, enjambment and so on'[5]. The chapter also includes a list of verses which are either fully or partly repeated in various chapters of the Qur'an as examples of oral formulas. More significantly, Dundes believes that if we omit such repetitions from the text, Qur'an's content will drop down to two third (if not less) of its current volume. We believe that the author's overemphasis on the same verses and examples repeatedly (such as 'O which

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[2] Italicized in the original text (all over the essay, we have not italicized 'Qur'an' unless it was italicized in the original text we quote from.)
[3] Dundes, *Fables of the Ancients*, p. x

[4] Rippin, Andrew, 'Review of *Fables of the Ancients?*', pp. 120 -122
[5] Dundes, *Fables of the Ancients*, p. 23

then of your Lord's blessings would you deny?'[6]), and over-magnifying repetitions in the Qur'an are disadvantages of this chapter of the book. However, Dundes has been at least successful in drawing the reader's attention to the very existence of such repetitions together with presenting precise references to them in the holy text.

The fourth chapter's title is 'Folktales in the *Qur'an*' (pages 54 – 64). In this chapter, the author introduces Aarne - Thompson tale type classification system and identifies three Qur'anic stories with three of the tale types in that index. What seem to be neglected even by the seven western critics who reviewed the book are the author's inconsistent statements in this chapter. First and Foremost, as the title of the chapter indicates and as Dundes has explicitly written in the book's conclusion, he believes that the Qur'an does include folktales. Moreover, Dundes has made it clear that he regards folktales as fiction. He writes: 'Folktales, as opposed to other genres of folk narrative such as myth and legend, are clearly regarded as fiction.'[7] He even emphasizes that the story of The Seven Sleepers or *aṣḥāb al kahf* is a folktale. However, later in the text, he quotes Bφdker to support the alternate theory that the story might be a 'migratory legend'[8]. In the same context, he says:

'In this case, a **legend**[9] found in the *Qur'an* has in theory the chance if not likelihood of containing an element of historical truth, whereas a **folktale**[10] would not. Nonetheless, whether "The Seven Sleepers" story is a folktale or migratory legend, the fact remains that it clearly belongs to the realm of folklore'[11].

The author's confusion is evident in the quoted lines. By 'Legend' Dundes

probably refers to a story whose protagonist had once been a historical character, but has gradually enriched with lots of fictional elements.[12] It is also worth noting that in a true believer's view, the Qur'an cannot contain any legends or folktales.

In response to Mahmoud Omidsalar who has praised Dundes' book in his review[13], we should ask which one of the book's inconsistent statements should be taken seriously? Admitting that the Qur'an is the true word of God or the claim that it contains fictional folktales with no historical truth? How is it possible to reconcile those two contradictory standpoints?

2- Content Evaluation
2-1) Logical Coherence
The book's overall presentation style is appropriate particularly for western readers who are the book's main audience. Despite the existence of some inconsistent statements and claims, certain dubious interpretations of the Qur'an and bringing in unnecessary theological subjects, which could damage the book's coherence, the author's acceptable knowledge of the Qur'an and the Old and New Testaments (and the ways to compare them with each other) definitely compensates those disadvantages. Moreover, the countless examples of formulas from inside the Qur'an presented in the book make Dundes' work a handy and useful reference for any future research.

2 - 2) Continuity
The book doesn't have sections and sub-sections within its chapters, but as mentioned in the 'Logical Coherence' section above, the contradictions in the author's statements and arguments has harmed the continuity of the book's main

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[6] Ibid, p. 55
[7] Ibid, p. 55
[8] Ibid, p. 58
[9] Bold font in the original text
[10] Bold font in the original text
[11] Ibid, p. 58

[12] Cf. Anoosheh, *The Encyclopaedia of Persian Literature*, p. 32
[13] Omidsalar, Mahmoud, 'Review of *Fables of the Ancients*', pp. 113 - 6

chapters and its conclusions. Moreover, some of the arguments in the book are multi-dimensional and have hidden layers, which in their turn make it hard to detect a clear continuity and relevance between premises and conclusions.

As an example of inappropriate theological talk in the book, we can draw the reader's attention to the author's use of the expression 'physical throne' on page 49 of the book, which implies that Dundes has interpreted the throne as physical or empirical; whereas, it's generally accepted that God's throne is not a physical object. Even the *Salafists* or the *Mu'tazila* did not say that the throne was empirical.

Another remarkable problem is the author's lack of competence in Arabic language. As an example, Dundes translates (part of) a verse to English in an unacceptable way: 'We created the heavens and Earth and all that lies between them'[14]. He has translated the verse into a positive sentence; whereas, according to Arberry, Pickthall and Shakir translations, it should have been translated into a negative sentence (We did not create…). Somewhere else in the book, the author writes about Pharaoh threatening Moses and the Israelites to 'cut off their hands and feet on alternate sides'[15] and refers to the verse (5:33) which is totally irrelevant to the topic. He has clearly mixed and confused this verse with three other verses, namely (7:124), (20:71) and (26:49) he had relevantly mentioned in that context.

As a similar example, on page 40 of the book, Dundes refers to (2:264), (4:38) and (5:29), which are all about not believing in God and the Last Day and connects those verses to a previous topic on the same page irrelevantly. Even more surprising is his reference to (4:169), (33:65) and (72:23) in the context of never-ending life in paradise on page 44, while those verses are actually about the interminable life in hell!

2-3) Credibility of Sources and References

Almost 182 first hand sources written by western and non-Muslim researchers have been used in this book. However, according to Neal Robinson (from Leuven university of Belgium) 'Although well documented and tightly argued, it reads more like a foray into unknown territory than a thorough survey of the terrain'[16]

Another problem which has damaged the book's credibility is that despite listing numerous sources in the bibliography, very few works of Muslim authors have been used in creation of this book. The author has neglected the fact that presenting a new theoretical approach to a field of study that touches the religious beliefs of the Muslim community, requires the researcher to acquire an acceptable level of knowledge about those beliefs and to give priority to using sources created and written by Muslims. Non-Muslim literature should have been used only as complementary and secondary reference.

2-4) Novelty and Authenticity of Sources

Referring to new, original and hard to find books and documents are very well noticeable throughout the entire book and particularly in chapter 2.

2 - 5) Citation and Reference List

The author has used In-Text citation in the book. The Reference List follows The Chicago Manual Style standards appropriately.

2-6) Accuracy and Reliability of Citations

Since we do not have access to all of the original sources Dundes has used, it is not possible for us to judge the accuracy of citations with precision, but considering the huge number of references in the book (and providing references even for short entries) and taking into account the number

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[14] Dundes, *Fables of the Ancients*, p. 48
[15] Ibid, p. 29

[16] Robinson, Neal, 'Review of *Fables of the Ancients?*', p. 240

of people mentioned in the book's 'Acknowledgments' section, we can make a fair assessment that the citations are accurate and that almost no entry has been left without reference. Nonetheless, we found a few exceptions. Dundes has claimed that he used *A Concordance to the Qur'an*, by Hanna E. Kassis[17], translated to English by Arthur J. Arbery; but, we found cases in which the English equivalents of certain Qur'anic terms Dundes has used do not match with Arbery's translation: On page 70, while referring to (2:26), the author quotes 'Behold' when there is actually no word like *Onzor* or any of its derivatives in the verse. On page 32, referring to (46:10) and (61:5), Dundes has used 'evil doers' as the equivalent for *dhalimeen* and *fasiqun*; whereas, the equivalents of those words in Arbery's translation are respectively 'evil doers' and 'ungodly'. On page 43, he has used the term 'wrong doers' as equivalent for *dhalimun*, *mujrimun* and *Kafirun*; whereas Arbery's translations for these terms are respectively 'evil doers', 'sinners' and 'unbelievers'. On page 45, Dundes has used 'supreme triumph' to refer to *fouz-ul-azeem*; while Arbrey and Kassis have preferred 'mighty triumph'.

After observing such differences and inaccuracies as well as some verses which were paraphrased by the book's author, we decided to do a thorough comparison between the book and Arbery's translation. After corresponding with Professor Kassis to get access to *A Concordance to the Qur'an*, it was concluded that those problematic translations in the book were not precisely taken from Arbery's translation or Kassis' *A Concordance to the Qur'an*. With these inconsistencies, the reliability and accuracy of the quotes and citations in the book was at least partially undermined.

2 - 7) Methodology

The arguments in the book as well as the author's claim about empirical analysis of the available information and data all indicate a merely scientific approach neglecting the fact that from a Muslim's point of view, the sacred nature of the Qur'an puts it in a position that is beyond such empirical methods of data analysis. Even though it can possibly open up new horizons in semantic analysis of certain terms for Mythologists or lead to interesting anthropological studies in relation to the Qur'an, the book has generally neglected Islamic premises. As an example, the author's method of comparing Qur'anic tales with the Aarne-Thompson index is highly debatable.

In addition to questionable quotations in the first chapter of the book, which should be criticized separately, it is worth noting that Dundes has not properly used his own criticisms to other people properly. One such example is when he criticizes Norman O. Brown's viewpoint of Barbarossa being a folktale with the code D1960.2. On pages 61 and 62 of the book, Dundes argues that

'D1960.2 *Kyffhäuser* is, first of all, a *motif* number in Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* and, not a *tale type* number in the tale type index, and secondly, the story of Barbarossa is definitely a legend, not a folktale'[18].

2-8) Scientific Objectivity and Impartiality

Even though Dundes declares his impartiality in the book's preface with these words 'I hope in any event that I, who am neither Islamophile nor Islamophobe, will have shown that Qur'an is hardly "a wearisome confused jumble" as Carlyle contended so many years ago'[19], leaving Carlyle's words without an answer as well as quoting other similar comments show that the author of the book, at least to

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[18] Dundes, *Fables of the Ancients*, p. 62
[19] Ibid, p. xi

some degree, leans towards those anti-Islamic opinions. When Dundes feels obliged to give an answer to Brown's opinion about Babarossa legend (which is not really an important issue), it is reasonable to ask why he did not find it necessary to respond to commentaries of others like Baljon, Freemon and Sprenger about the Qur'an or Islam's prophet.

2 - 9) Innovation and Creativity

Noticeable attributes of oral literature (such as narration, transmission forms, recitation) in the Qur'an, the verbal transmission method of the Qur'an (from Angel Gabriel to the prophet and from the prophet to his companions), the prophet's emphasis on the necessity of memorizing verses and transmitting them to later generations, the existence of repetitions in verses and tales in various chapters of the Qur'an and even the use of Arabic language, are all undeniable implications of the existence of folktales and oral literature in the Qur'an from Dundes' point of view.

As far as innovation and novelty is concerned, the attributes of oral literature mentioned by Dundes had all been appreciated in the past (at least in regard to Farsi literature). However, from a believer's point of view, some of those attributes do not apply to the Qur'an. Folktales and works of Oral literature (unlike their counterparts in written literature) do not have fixed and known authors. Besides, works of oral literature are subject to change and modification both in form and content due to oral transmission through centuries. This is what Dundes cunningly conveys and implies about the Qur'an, sometimes explicitly, sometimes through quotations and sometimes even with contradictory commentaries.

2 - 10) Opening new semantic horizons

One good aspect of the book is that it has opened new horizons in researching the semantic contents of terms like 'folklore', 'myth', 'folktale', 'legend' and the like. This however, is not merely for what Dundes has written in the book, but also for the motivation it inspires to the reader for researching the meanings of those terms in other encyclopedic sources and comparative study of religions. For instance, we will examine the semantic content of 'myth' and 'folklore' in this essay:

'Myth' is a multivocal and multisided term with meanings that are sometimes even inconsistent with each other. The term's origin returns to the Greek word 'muthos'[20]. In Arabic, the term's root is saṭara, which means 'writing'[21]. It has also been considered to be the plural form of *Astar*, meaning false statements and imaginary writings[22]. Farsi speaking men of literature have used the word in various senses like legend, story or even 'a true account of eternal and sacred events'[23].

From an anthropologist point of view, the word 'mythos' has also a deep idiomatic meaning, which has been used in Philosophy of History and Religious Studies in a technical sense quite different from the way the term is used in natural language[24]. In this particular sense, the word does not refer to an untrue or fictional story, but to statements which express different levels of truth[25]. In a more precise idiomatic sense, 'mythos' refers to a set of religious statements ('religious' in a wide and general sense of the word) in narrative form and pattern to tell about personages and stories of antiquity with supernatural or miraculous characteristics. Mircea Eliade believes that mythos is a code in need of being deciphered. Malinowski thinks of myth as a narration that gives life to an authentic

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[20] Bolle, 'Myth', p. 261
[21] *Al Farahidi*, *Al Ayn*, saṭara entry.
[22] *Bin Faris*, *Mu'jam* Maqayis *al-Lughah*, saṭara entry
[23] Anvari, *Farhange Sokhan*, 'Myth' entry
[24] Cf. Meier, *Wirklichkeit und Legende*, p. 30
[25] Neuwirth, 'Myths and Legends in the Qur'ān', pp. 477 - 479

truth and satisfies deep religious needs which match with the norms and practical needs of the human community.[26]

The second term we study here, 'Folklore', was firstly coined in 1848 by the English antiquarian William John Thoms (writing under the pseudonym of Ambrose Merten)[27]. Tacitus was also the first who introduced 'folklore' as a superstitious concept to the Christian world. According to Mircea Eliade in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 'folklore' is a Latin word, which implies superstitious and absurd beliefs (which are actually implications of 'lore').[28] This interpretation of the concept has implied a negative meaning of the word for many people in the past (maybe even today).

The hardest attacks to superstitions were made by the philosophers and thinkers of the Enlightenment period in the 18th century. They hold that the folkloric beliefs do not have rational or scientific base. However, that kind of approach changed after the Romantic Movement. The new approach was influenced by the works of Giovan Battista Vico, a great specialist in cultural studies. His comprehensive researches in 1725 had resulted in the conclusion that people's ideas and beliefs which could enter their culture independently are valid. In Vico's account the fact that similar folkloric beliefs had been generated in different human communities (with no cultural relations or transmissions with each other) shows that those beliefs had genuine and valid sources, which can explain why those beliefs and rituals (despite their antiquity) had survived through the history of many generations.

All in all, it is evident that the meaning of term 'folklore' has changed through

history of its use. For example, in the Oxford Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend, twenty one different meanings can be found for this word.[29]

The set of traditional beliefs, legends and customs of a community of people can be taken as a commonly accepted meaning of the term 'folklore'. Considering the roots of the term in English language, which is the combination of 'folks' (meaning people) and 'lore' (meaning knowledge or learning)[30], the term may refer to the study of the traditional set of beliefs in a given community. In Farsi language, the word can refer to the whole collection of people's traditional knowledge. In other words, 'folklore' can either refer to a community's 'traditional beliefs' or to 'the study' of those traditional beliefs.[31] UNESCO has defined 'folklore' as 'intangible cultural heritage', which includes the totality of tradition-based creations that transmit through generations as oral literature without having been printed in a tangible form[32]. The term can also refer to a sacred narration of how man and world have reached their current status and situation[33]. The bottom line is that the evolution of the term's meaning indicates that nowadays the word is used by anthropologists in a totally different sense than before.

2 - 11) Using the Oral Formulaic Theory

The second chapter of the book, titled 'Oral Formulaic Theory' and the third chapter, titled 'Oral Formulaic in the *Qur'an*' are both dedicated to a study of repetitive verses in the Qur'an to conclude that it has an essentially oral structure. However, as Uri Rubin has correctly noted, Dundes has used Arthur John Arberry's

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[26] Cf. Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, p. 29
[27] *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "folk dance", http://www.britannica.com/art/folk-dance. Also, Ruh Al Amini, *The Anthropological Bases of 'Around The Town with A Lamp'*, p. 147
[28] Cf. O'connelly, 'Folklore', pp. 363-370

[29] Mihandoost, *General Investigation on Folklore*, endnotes page.
[30] Hajizadeh Meymandi, *Research Pattern in Folklore*, p. 47
[31] Ibid, pp. 56 - 57
[32] Ibid, p. 49
[33] Chipman, Adam and the Angels', p. 4

unreliable English translation of the Qur'an to find and quote those alleged repetitions[34].

2 - 12) Applying the Aarne - Thompson system to three Qur'anic stories

Aarne – Thompson classification system has been named after Antti Amatus Aarne (the Finnish Folklorist) and Stith Thompson (the American scholar of folklore). The system was created first after the publication of Aarne's monograph, 'Verzeichnis der Märchentypen' (Index of Fairytale types) in 1910. Later in 1928, Thompson introduced the motifs index, categorizing tales by their different themes, ideas and protagonist types in an alpha – decimal coding system. At first, the system was just confined to European tales, but it was later extended to cover stories of all nations. Later in 1961, the second and revised catalogue which included 2500 basic story themes was published. The Aarne – Thompson index of folktale types classifies all stories into five main categories: Animal tales (types 1 – 299), Ordinary Folktales (types 300 – 1199), Jokes and Anecdotes (1200 – 1999), Formula Tales (types 2000 – 2399) and Unclassified Tales (types 2400 – 2499). Each of those main categories, however, consists of smaller subcategories. For example, the second main category (Ordinary Folktales) includes 'Tales of Magic', 'Religious Tales', 'Aitiological Tales', 'Romantic Tales' and 'Tales of the Stupid Ogre'.

Dundes holds that applying Aarne – Thompson classification system to the Qur'an can reveal the existence of at least three of those tale types in the Qur'an. In his account, the following tale types from the categories of 'Tales of Magic' and 'Religious Tales' can be detected in the Qur'an: tale type 766, The Seven Sleepers, which matches with As-hab Al Kahf story; tale type 759, God's Justice Vindicated (or the Angel and the Hermit), which matches with *Musa and Khidr* story and finally, Solomon's knowledge of Animal's language (*Mantiq Al Tayr*), which in Dundes' opinion, fits well with tale type 670, namely, The Animal Languages.

In a critique of the book, Ahmad A. Nasr has pointed out:

Dundes imposes Aarne - Thompson's categorization, which lacks universality, on the above tales and ignores other notable folkloric approaches to the issue, such as the native categorization and categorization in terms of people's attitude towards their tales. He disregards the way Muslims classify the Qur'anic tales.[35]

On the other hand, Neal Robinson believes that Dundes has classified the tales correctly, even if the unique features of the Qur'anic versions of those stories were neglected: 'He has probably classified them correctly, but his analysis is superficial. He does not pay attention to the unique feature of the Qur'anic versions and the way in which they are used as a vehicle for a specifically religious message.'[36]

We, too, believe that Dundes has applied the Aarne – Thompson system to the Qur'an (if not flatly imposed on it) with the purpose of implying that Qur'anic stories have been adopted from the existing folktales of other nations or from the scriptures of older religions.

2 - 13) Access to up-to-date information

Dundes has paid attention to the semantic evaluation of terms like 'myth', 'folklore', 'legend, and 'folktales'. The book also includes citations from new and recent sources. Therefore, we can safely conclude that the author of the book had access to (and used) up-to-date information.

3- Outsider's Evaluation

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[34] Rubin, 'Review of *Fables of the Ancients*', pp. 526 - 527

[35] Nasr, 'Review of *Fables of the Ancients*', pp. 165-166
[36] Robinson, Neal, 'Review of *Fables of the Ancients?*', p. 242

3-1) Assumptions and Premises

Even though the content of the book is more or less consistent with its own premises, it doesn't fit well with the religious assumptions and premises of Muslims. This is probably the book's most important drawback and downside. One possible cause of this problem is the existence of hidden layers (and contradictions) in Dundes' arguments. A more important cause of the problem is the ambiguity of certain words like 'folklore' and 'myth'. Therefore, it is not always clear whether the author has used this type of ambiguous words in a sense that corresponds with the religious beliefs of Muslims or in a sense that contradicts those beliefs. However, for reasons mentioned before, in most cases, we find the second possibility to be at least more probable.

3-2) Correlation between title(s) and content

There is an acceptable correlation between the book's content and titles of its various chapters. After introducing the Qur'an to the western audience in the first chapter, the author presents a list of oral literature attributes and offers the Oral-Formulaic theory in chapter 2. In chapter 3, he compares those attributes and characteristics of oral literature with the Qur'an and defends his claims about the existence of folklore in the holy text. Later in chapter 4, Dundes discusses the semantic evaluation of terms like 'folktale' and emphasizes on the existence of ancient fables in the Qur'an (as well as in the Bible). He also adds:

'The presence of ancient fables in the *Qur'an* (and in the bible) in no way diminishes the religious or moral value of these great sacred documents.'[37] One page later, he also says 'The presence of oral formulas and folktales in the *Qur'an* is by no means incompatible with its presumed

divine origin.'[38]

While these examples show an acceptable correlation between the book's content and titles, the line of the mentioned argument is definitely flawed from a hermeneutic point of view. 'No text is created in an empty background and independent from the spatiotemporal conditions of its time and the Qur'an is no exception to this rule.'[39] In other words, the conditions of use of the words 'ancient fables' have changed through history from the years of revelation to present. Consequently, it is by no means acceptable to indentify the meaning of 'ancient fables' attributed to the Qur'an by unbelievers on those early years (which is referred to in the Qur'an as well) with the sense mythologists prefer today.

In the 'Conclusion' of the book, Dundes has defined the two key questions of the book as follows: '(1) Are there oral formulas present in the *Qur'an*? And (2) Are there folktales contained in the *Qur'an*?'[40] Regardless of the validity and soundness of his arguments throughout the book, the author has made a relevant attempt. Hence, as far as the correlation between the book's content and title (and subtitles) is concerned, we can evaluate the book as 'acceptable'.

3-3) Formal Comprehensiveness

The book includes the key and main elements of formal comprehensiveness such as: Introduction, Definitions, Conclusion and the like. The author, however, has used his own personal judgment (rather than the reader's actual need) to use such formal instruments to convey the concepts and arguments he had in mind. For example, in the book's preface, Dundes tells us about receiving an invitation from Professor Monia Hejaiej to take part in the Second International Conference on Middle Eastern and North

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[37] Dundes, *Fables of the Ancients*, p. 68

[38] Ibid, p. 69
[39] *Abu Zaid, The Concept of the Text*, p. 13
[40] Dundes, *Fables of the Ancients*, p. 65

African Popular Culture held at the Hammamet International Center in April 2002, where he found the opportunity to present a preliminary version of the book. Nonetheless, we believe that the book has shortcomings in this part, especially in defining certain key words.

3-4) Lucidity of Terminology

The English equivalents of technical (Arabic) terms used in the book are comprehensible and more or less acceptable for the professional audience who are already acquainted with the subject. However, it is naturally expectable that the audience of a book like this, which addresses important questions about a religious text, will not be confined and limited to the qualified professional experts. For the interested Layman and inexpert reader, some of the technical terms used in the book do not seem to be clear and lucid enough.

On few occasions, the author has tried to clarify the meanings of certain words such as *suwalif* (on page 68) by mentioning that it is the plural form of *Salfih*, meaning 'tale' in modern Arabic language. The word is used in the Qur'an (43:56) in this sense as well. However, there are many other similar terms in the book, which would have definitely required to be clarified for the unprofessional audience. A list of such words contains but is by no means limited to 'Oedipal' (page 6), 'coda' (page 51), 'molasses' (page 64) and 'prosodic(al)' (page 68).

Conclusions

The Book's Conclusion: In the 'Conclusion' chapter, Dundes gives a similar and positive answer to both of the book's main and central questions.

'The two questions to be taken into account include: (1) Are there oral formulas present in the *Qur'an*? And (2) Are there folktales contained in the *Qur'an*? I should think that anyone with an unbiased mind, capable of objectively evaluating empirical data, ought to be able to see that the answer to both questions is a definite resounding "yes"'[41]

In other words, the massive repetitive sentences and phrases in the Qur'an leads the author to conclude that ancient fables and folklore exist in the Qur'an, but he also (refers to Gluck and) adds that the presence of such formulas and folktales in the Qur'an is not necessarily a problem, because it is one of the stylistic features of the Qur'an to allude to the tales already known to the listeners.[42]

Conclusion of This Essay: The book has a scientific and empirical approach using methods and means of modern literary criticism from an outsider and unbeliever's viewpoint. That much is enough to conclude that the book is not responsive to the needs and questions of believers and the Muslim community of the world today. Whatever scientific and empirical investigations show or suggest, Muslims will not be willing to abandon or change their set of beliefs about their inviolable sanctities. In any religion, the holy text is the fulcrum of the entire belief system and the Qur'an is by no means an exception and cannot be examined with means and methods of modern sciences like Mythology or Folklore Studies.

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[41] Ibid, p. 65
[42] Ibid, p. 66

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