

**MYTHOLOGY AND  
FOLKLORE OF THE HUI,  
A MUSLIM CHINESE PEOPLE**

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**To the Memory  
of  
Martha M. Metz (1896–1986)  
and  
Mahmoud Abu Saud (1914–1993)**

separated them and placed Adan in the east and Haierma in the west. God made them miss each other, and they could not come together.

Adan had no idea where Haierma was, nor did Haierma know where Adan was. Every morning Haierma combed her hair by the sea. A swallow carried some of her loose hair to the place in the east where Adan was. Likewise, Adan washed his face every morning. The swallow carried the beard hair, which he had washed out, westward to Haierma. Observing the direction from which the swallow flew, Adan reasoned that Haierma must be in the west. Haierma, likewise, realized that Adan was in the east. So they started to seek each other in the direction of the swallow's path. Eventually they came together. As a result of their long separation they had developed a deep longing for one another.

Many years passed and together they had seventy-two children, resulting from thirty-six births. The older sons married their younger twin sisters, and in this manner they multiplied.

Adan and Haierma, and their offspring, lived together at one place. They made much noise chatting and laughing. Allah became greatly annoyed by their hubbub. He therefore drove them to a place south of Tianshan Mountain, in Xinjiang. These are the ones who became the ancestors of the Hui people.

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## Muhammad and His Companions

### Origin of the Jujube Dates

Place: Southern mountain area, Ningxia

Narrator: Wang Yidi (Hui)

Recorder: Wang Zhengwei (Hui), 1981

People who have ever eaten a jujube date (*zao*) always ask about its origin. So it has been said that long, long ago, the Muslims once again had trouble with some pagans with whom they ended up fighting at close range. The chief of the pagans, with broadsword in hand, advanced toward Muhammad determined to kill him.

Seeing the man run after him with his sword, to slay him—and considering himself to be less strong—Muhammad kept running and turning right and left, to throw the pursuer off his track. At last he took off his blue gown—so as to be less recognizable—and sat down on a pile of dirt to rest, with his head bowed low.

After a while this pagan chief came running up to Muhammad, almost out of breath, and he asked, “Have yo-you seen a ta-tall fellow just pa-pass by?”

Keeping his head low Muhammad calmly replied, “Yes, he was running southeast.”

“Show me the way to him. Quick!” said the chief.

But Muhammad said, "Wait until I have eaten a date." And while speaking he tore a lump of cotton from the inside of his robe. He twisted and rolled it with his right hand and dug a hole in the ground. There he planted this lump of cotton.

The chief said, "You have just planted a seed. When will you have your date? Hurry! Do not dally!"

Muhammad smiled. "No need to rush. We shall have it immediately."

The chief did not believe it and said, "If I could eat your date that quickly, I would serve you as my master."

Muhammad said, "Let us see."

And no sooner had he finished these words when out from the ground sprouted a fresh jujube shoot.<sup>1</sup> Momentarily it grew a foot tall and brought forth two flowers. Before long these two blossoms bore two dates.

Muhammad said, "In the name of Allah," and began picking the dates off the little tree.<sup>2</sup> He ate one himself and gave the other to the chief.

Both dates were extraordinarily sweet and sticky. So, after having eaten, the pagan chief stared at Muhammad with amazement and thought to himself, "What an able man! He could make the jujube shoot bear two dates and share one with me! Hey-hey! Who might this be?"

Noticing the chief's bewilderment, Muhammad looked up and said, "I am the very Muhammad. In God's name! Kill me if you wish!"

The pagan chief looked him over, up and down. And after having thought again about having eaten the date, he dropped his sword. He stepped forward and grasped Muhammad's hands. "We should no longer be enemies. Henceforth I shall live in peace with Muslims."

From that moment on both were reconciled. The jujube tree that had been planted by Muhammad grew profusely, and all the people could eat delicious sweet dates. Muslims henceforth regarded these

<sup>1</sup>The Chinese date-like fruit, *zao shu niao* or jujube, grows on shrubs or trees. It belongs to the buckthorn family.

<sup>2</sup>*Taisimi* is a Hui transliteration from the Arabic *tasmiah*. Muslims usually start their activities, such as eating or putting on clothes, by way of saying *tasmiah*, that is, "*Bismi-Allah!*," which means "In the name of God," (Mahmoud Abu Saud).

dates as very precious things. They also use the kernels of these dates as beads for their rosaries, to count prayers.

## To Earn One's Livelihood

Place: Urumqi, Xinjiang

Narrator: Haidiche (Hui)

Recorder: Guo Xiumei (Hui), 1984

Long, long ago a young man named Musa left his home town.<sup>3</sup> He went idle and roamed about everywhere. He was unable to do large tasks and unwilling to do small ones, and he barely survived on the table scraps of others.

One day he begged from a family whose yard was filled with fresh flowers. Before he even knocked at the door the master of the house happened to emerge. He approached the young man Musa and looked him over, up and down. Then he asked with a smile, "Young man, what family property do you own?"

Musa felt embarrassed. "What property can I own? I only have an old felt pad for sleeping, a drinking bowl, and a rope for getting water."

"Ha hah!" laughed the host. "All right, young man, go and bring them here."

In a short time the young man came back with these three items. Then the master of the house and the young man together went to the market and sold these things. With the money they bought an axe. When they returned the host asked his worthy wife to provide a meal. He let the young man eat his fill and, in addition, wrap up some dry

<sup>3</sup>The name "Musa" is derived from the Arabic "Mousa," the biblical Moses. The story itself seems to be developed upon the basis of an alBukhari hadith: "It is better for one to earn his living by collecting firewood than to beg from others" (Mahmoud Abu Saud). Inasmuch as "Musa" in this story is the proper name of a person who is not the biblical Moses, it is left untranslated in its Chinese form.

provisions. After the meal the host wound a long hemp rope around the young man's waist and sent him to the mountain with his axe, to cut firewood. He expected to see him back again half a month later.

Having accepted the master's advice, Musa cut firewood sticks and sold them in the market. Soon he could not only eat his fill, but also put on new clothes, and still have some money left over in his pocket. Only then did he realize the host's intention, and from the bottom of his heart he began to feel grateful. It was he who taught him how to earn a living.

Half a month passed, and at the appointed time Musa returned to the master's house. The master was happy to receive him. After exchanging greetings the young man expressed his thanks and promised never to idle and to roam anymore.

Having heard this, the master spoke these memorable words, "Earning one's livelihood is better than begging."

The young man nodded and agreed. When his time had come to leave, he respectfully inquired about the name of his host.

Gently smiling the master replied, "My name is Muhammad."

## Potato Story

Place: Qinghai

Narrator and Recorder: Ma Jinxiang (Hui), 1985

It has been said that, once upon a time, when Muhammad led a holy war campaign, his entire army was surrounded and bottled up in a barren mountain valley. Soldiers and horses were awfully hungry and worn out. No grain was available. It appeared that the soldiers and horses would die of hunger. The holy man Muhammad had to face west and pray to Huda (Allah) for help.

After his prayer was completed, Muhammad showed his warriors to a ridge and asked them to build an oven shaped like a Chinese hearth. They took lumps of clay and piled them up in the shape of a shock of wheat—of one that sits like a cone. Into this hearth they

placed firewood and lit a fire. Nearby they gathered many stones, the size of a fist. Muhammad asked his men to fill the oven with these stones and to seal the opening with lumps of clay. Soon the lumps of clay were heated to a fiery red. The oven was tightly sealed with clay so that no air could escape; and the soldiers were baffled by all of this.

Two hours (a *shichen*) passed and Muhammad asked his men to remove the earth cover.<sup>4</sup> Immediately a sweet smell greeted everyone. And when they looked the stones had disappeared, and instead they saw some red- and brown-hued lumps. They broke them apart and tasted them. Wonderful! And so, in this manner, they cooked many more white stones for a big meal. The soldiers satisfied their hunger and afterward broke through the enemy lines.

Some time after the holy battle was over, a Muslim warrior came again to that place and smelled a pleasant fragrance. He found a leafy type of plant growing over a large area, of a kind he had never seen before.

Being curious he dug the ground with his fingers and discovered some things resembling those white stones which they had eaten earlier. He told other people to dig them out and to keep some for seed. These seeds have been passed down to us, year after year. They are the very potatoes we have today. In order to remember Muhammad's contribution, nowadays, Muslim children often roast potatoes in this manner to eat.

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<sup>4</sup>Two hours: a *shichen*, or one of twelve equal periods in a day, each comprising two hours. Traditionally in China, a day and a night together were divided into twelve units.

## The Mule and the Horse

Place: Qinghai

Narrator and Recorder: Han Changlin (Hui), 1980

Once, while on a mission journey, Muhammad was vigorously pursued by Jews. When he had nearly come to the end of his strength, he saw a mule grazing, just ahead of him. He implored the mule for help. Yet the mule continued eating and remained indifferent to his request.

Knowing that the Jews would soon catch up with him, Muhammad anxiously looked ahead and saw a horse standing in a plowed field. He ran up to it for help. With its hooves the horse dug a deep trench into the plowed field and Muhammad quickly lay down into it. The horse lay across the trench and pretended to be resting. After the Jews had run past, the animal stood up.

Then, to thank this horse, Muhammad promised that horses would be able to rest their hooves when they are tired. By the same token, as punishment, he did not permit the mule to give birth, not ever. Since that day, horses often lift up their hooves when they stop to rest; and mules have not been able to foal.

## The Festival of Ascent

Place: Yinchuan, Ningxia (known also in Shaanxi)

Narrator and Recorder: Ahong Ma Guang Wen, 1990

According to Yiben Abasi, a follower of the "Sacred Gate," the angel Gabriel (Zhebolayile), and the other angel [probably Michael], told the holy man Muhammad that in ancient times lived a hero

whose name was "Shemuernei."<sup>5</sup> He fought a thousand months for the Muslim people.

Shemuernei had the teeth of camels. When he was thirsty, sweet water would come forth through his teeth, and when he was hungry food would exude through them as well. With such teeth he was able to endure and to defeat many enemies, and no enemy was able to defeat him. Therefore his enemies solicited Shemuernei's non-Muslim wife to kill him. They promised that if she succeeded they would give her many treasures of gold and silver.

Once, while Shemuernei was resting she tied him up with the strongest rope available. When he awoke he wanted to know who tied him up. She said that she did it, because she wanted to know whether he could break this rope. Then Shemuernei tensed his muscles and the rope broke.

Another time she tied him up with iron rods. When Shemuernei woke up he wanted to know again who tied him up. She admitted that she had done it, and again he asked her for the reason. She said she wanted to know whether he had still greater strength.

Then Shemuernei divulged to his wife that he was the army general of Allah, "In this world no-one can defeat me, nor can anyone's strength match mine. Only my own strands of hair can bind me."

When his wife found out that only his own hair could bind him, she cut off his hair while he was asleep. And with it she tied him up. Then she invited his enemies into the house. The enemies tied him to a post, cut off his ears, dug out his eyes, cut out his tongue, and cut off his hands and feet.

After he had been tortured in this manner, Allah sent the angel Zhebolayile to see whether Shemuernei had any requests.

Shemuernei pleaded, "Allah, please help me move this pillar. Let this house fall down to kill my enemies and my wife."

So Allah gave him strength, and the house collapsed. His enemies and his evil wife were killed.

<sup>5</sup>"Yiben Abasi" is "Ibn Abbas," the first cousin of the Prophet. He is considered the most authoritative exegete of the Quran. "Zhebolayile" (Gabriel) is "Jibreel" in Arabic. (Mahmoud Abu Saud). This story obviously is a Hui variation of the "Samson" legend in the Hebrew Bible. See Judges 13-16.

Later Allah granted him again his ears, his eyes, his hands, and his feet. From that time on he continued fighting during daytime hours, and he prayed at night.

When holy man Muhammad heard this story, his admiration for Shemuenei was great. And he said, "Allah! My followers do not live long enough to do an adequate number of good deeds. How would it be possible for them to attain that higher level?"

Thereupon Allah granted to the holy man Muhammad the wonderful night, the Night of Ascent. And he told him:

"If your followers observe my expectations, tonight, they will attain the same level of perfection that this hero had achieved. They will even surpass him."

When he heard this, Muhammad was exceedingly glad, and he thanked Allah, endlessly.

It has been said that there was another reason for Muhammad's ascent. Earth and Sky quarrelled. The Earth said to Sky, "I am stronger than you, because Allah has bestowed on me seas, rivers, mountains, trees, flowers, and variously shaped things."

Sky was not convinced and said, "I am much stronger than you, because I am adorned with the sun, with the moon and the stars."

The Earth retorted, "But I have the Kaaba, which all the holy men and their followers come to visit the year-round."

Sky was speechless and then begged God, "Allah! You are the Lord who has promised to answer all prayers. Please have the holy man Muhammad ascend to me, so that by way of becoming associated with him I might receive the same honor as Earth."

Allah granted his request. He ordered Zhebolayile and the other angel to get the Burelai, a heavenly horse, to carry Muhammad to heaven.<sup>6</sup>

Zhebolayile put upon the horse a saddle inlaid with red gems, and a yellow jade bridle as well. He led this horse to the gate of the sage Muhammad, in Mecca. Thereupon the sage Muhammad was

<sup>6</sup>The heavenly being "Burelai" is "alBuraq" in Arabic. The other angel alluded to may be the one mentioned later as "Weicayilai" (Mahmoud Abu Saud). All angels in this story, and elsewhere in this collection, are thought of in Chinese fashion as *tiexian*, that is, as some kind of "heavenly beings." These are called *tiexian* in Han mythology.

awakened, and Zhebolayile said, "Sage, please get up. This is going to be a wonderful night for you. You are to these sincere people like the sun, and you are like the full moon on the fifteenth night."

Upon hearing these words, Muhammad got up quickly and opened the door. The angels Zhebolayile and Weicayilai stood by the door.<sup>7</sup> Zhebolayile told Weicayilai: "Go get some *zamzam* water and I will wash the heart of the holy man Muhammad."

He opened the chest of the sage and washed his heart three times and then led him to the Zamzam spring. There he told the guardian of that spring, "Get some *zamzam* water for the sage to wash himself."

After Muhammad had purified himself, Zhebolayile told him that now he would take him to Allah. Muhammad got on the horse and followed Zhebolayile and, in this manner, they arrived at the gate of heaven. Zhebolayile knocked at the gate, and the angel who guarded the gate asked, "Who are you?"

Zhebolayile answered, "I am Zhebolayile, the great angel. And this here is the holy man Muhammad."

The first person whom Muhammad met in the first heaven was the sage Adan (Adam). Muhammad said, "Peace!" to him. Adan answered back with, "Peace," and then offered his congratulations.

Muhammad was then led to the second heaven, the sky of which was of iron. Zhebolayile knocked at the gate. Again a guardian angel asked, "Who are you?"

Zhebolayile answered, "I am Zhebolayile, the great angel. And this here is the holy man Muhammad."

When the great angel opened the gate, Muhammad saw two handsome boys and asked, "Who are these boys?"

Zhebolayile answered, "They are Yehaiya and Ersä (Jesus) who have been waiting at the gate to welcome you, Muhammad."<sup>8</sup>

They greeted each other with... "Peace."

<sup>7</sup>One may assume that Weicayilai is Michael who in the Quran (2,98) is mentioned together with Gabriel (Mahmoud Abu Saud).

<sup>8</sup>"Yehaiya" may be the biblical Isaiah. "Ersä" is the prophet Jesus, founder of Christianity.

Then Muhammad was brought to the third heaven, which had a copper sky. They knocked at the door. The door opened, and the angel who guarded the gate asked, "Who are you?"

They identified themselves. The angel opened, and they entered. There Muhammad saw a boy who looked like the moon on the fifteenth night. He asked Zhebolayile who he was. He was told that it was the sage Younusi (Younus). They extended greetings to each other.

Then Muhammad came to the fourth heaven, which had a sky of gold. They knocked at the gate and a guardian angel asked, "Who are you?" and then invited them to enter. Muhammad stepped into a very bright courtyard. On the wall was written: "There is no Lord but Allah, and Muhammad is Allah's messenger." Zhebolayile explained to Muhammad that this was the courtyard of the sage Yidereisi (Idris), and he introduced him, "This is the sage Yidereisi." They shook hands and greeted each other with "Peace."

Then Muhammad came to the fifth heaven, which had a sky made of green emerald. After their introduction to the guardian angel there they were permitted to enter. Muhammad met the holy man Harennai (Harun). They said, "Peace," to each other, and Harennai congratulated him, shaking his hand.

Muhammad then went to the sixth heaven, which had a sky of pearls and jewels. They knocked at the gate and introduced themselves to the guardian angel there. Upon entering Muhammad met a man, and Zhebolayile told him that this was the holy man Musa (Moses). Muhammad greeted him, and Musa congratulated him for having come to heaven.

Muhammad and Zhebolayile then entered the seventh heaven. The sky was brightly lit. After introducing themselves to the guardian angel there they entered. Muhammad saw an old man sitting on an imperial dragon bed. Zhebolayile introduced him: "This is your grandfather, the holy man Abraham." Muhammad said, "Peace," to him, and Abraham also responded with, "Peace."

Abraham then asked Muhammad to pass on his peace to his Muslim followers: "Please tell them that in paradise the landscape is beautiful, that the water is sweet, that the ground is level, and that the seedlings of grain grow sturdy. Praise the Lord for his bright splendor! All worship belongs to Allah! There is no god but Allah! Allah is greatest! Unless we place our trust in the almighty Allah, our sins will not be forgiven and our efforts will be without strength!"

After that, Muhammad descended one heaven after another. He came again to the holy man Moses. The latter asked Muhammad what Allah had commanded that his followers should do. Muhammad told him that God expected his followers to prostrate themselves [fifty times a day]. Moses suggested that he should go back and ask Allah to reduce this requirement, because he himself had tried this, when he required Israel to do that many prostrations. They had failed. And neither would the followers of Muhammad be able to do them all. So Muhammad went to see Allah and implored that the number of pious prostrations be reduced for his followers. Allah readily took off five.

When Muhammad returned to Moses, the latter told him that these were still too many to accomplish and on that account Muhammad went back to Allah again. Then another five were taken off. But when Moses heard about this he told Muhammad that this many were still impossible to do. And in this manner Muhammad begged Allah nine times in succession. Altogether Allah took off forty-five prayers of prostration. Only five remained.

The holy man Moses still insisted that Muhammad's followers were unable to do that many. But then Muhammad told him that he felt ashamed to beg for more reduction. This is why Muslims prostrate themselves for prayer five times a day.

In memory of that special night, however, the Muslims celebrate one day in the year which they have named the Festival of Ascent, or the Night of Ascent. On that night all Muslims, men and women alike, approach Allah and prostrate themselves [fifty times], they do something charitable, and they recite verses from the Quran.