

On the Tapestry of the Imaginary: Wefts and Meshes of the Arabian Tales in the Teaching of Elementary Education

Maria Luiza Borghi
University of São Paulo, Brazil

Abstract

This paper encompasses part of the author's master thesis that reviewed some of the ways by which the *Arabian tales*, interwoven with mythical and magical elements, can motivate 9 and 10 year old children to encounter the Other and enhance their self-awareness and awareness of the other. The author and her students will represent the phases undergone by these children in the course of this process, in the form of an analogy with the process of weaving a tapestry. We presuppose that the Arabian narratives form a symbolic footing that may lead to identify opportunities for diversity, tolerances and the manifestation of otherness.

The Tapestry

For peoples in the Middle East--and for many in the West--the tapestry is not just an object of adornment or decoration. Rather, it is an important cultural element, whether on the personal, familiar or tribal level. It serves as a material symbol that conveys the sacred character of one's dwelling place and thus represents the temple of prayer and the garden of heavenly contemplation. In the *Arabian Tales*, the tapestry is given lightness, locomotion and magic, and it then turns into an object with power for transformation, displacement, and circulation among universes. It is said to disperse tradition, the tales and even the concept of the settled land for those nomads with little sense of belonging to a place. However, even for peoples characterized by this strong and unique identity, a sense of belonging may be instilled by the soft, cuddlesome, pretty, light, and easy-to-carry tapestry. For every tapestry woven in the Middle East, there is a memory patch in mankind to match with the story and identity of a given nation, tribe, clan, and many individuals whose lives are interwoven. It is in the tapestry itself and in the art of its weaving that its *interdiscursive* character becomes apparent, for once opened it provides the setting for dialog, and ensures, in the interplay of opinions, a restricted and protected physical space in which the relations of otherness may be exercised.

The Tapestry of the Imaginary accounts for years of reflection, conversations, wills, desires, and dichotomies. In this study, it is expected to fly and tell the story of social-historic groups. Its diversified weft is interlaced with multiple-textured wools and threads, colors and sizes, all selected on the day-to-day practice and reality / dream-state mode. For the meshing that supports its plot, we interlaced it in many repeated loops knots that made our experiences fixed and our purposes firm. We spread this tapestry out so that sitting on it we may tell our stories and explore our differences, ideas, questions, and inquiries. We spread this tapestry out so as to circumscribe on it something from our existence in the world. Then, it is spread out

over the gap that sets itself between nature and culture. It thus develops a suturing mode, a chance to conciliate the opposing sides, the ground as fickle and multicolored as the world it tries to recreate.

From Thread to the Texture – Classroom Methodology

Our research project originated in a third-year grammar school classroom and stemmed from a practice that made us think about its process and the results triggered by it. This required us to set up a theoretical framework providing localization and interacting with our interpretations, taking as a starting point our observation as to how the children were when they first entered the classroom, at the opening of the school year. The students, children aged 9 and 10 from the upper and upper middle class, showed fear and anxiety as they looked into the forthcoming challenges of the start of the new school year and of the changes that were likely to take place within the group throughout the academic year. These students comprise a permanent group during their first and second years, with groups containing as many as 25 children. As they enter their third year, the groups change their configuration. Consequently, the resulting pluralities and the personal differences and the challenge for establishing new bonds demand special attention from everyone concerned. In order to form a new cohesive group, it was essential to consider work that enabled students to respectfully meet the *other*. We know that when we meet the *other* in person, we have a better chance of getting to know him/her better. But how does one communicate this to the children, when they are so anxious and insecure in the new situation being proposed to them? This real question is complicated by the children's verbal expressions of fear not being able to find in the 3rd year the same space for their dreams, fantasies and experiences they were entitled to in the preceding years: in other words, a time and place for play, fun, and make-believe. Their concern was — and very rightly so — about losing contact with the imaginary, the ludic and the enchanted aspect of the school experience. They also complained about painstakingly listening, reading and telling stories about animals (fables) and fairy tales. They wanted to be told new adventure stories, with fresh original rather than very familiar narratives. Thus, they asked for some contact with the new and the different. On the very first day of class, the children were received by the first narrator, the *Sheherazade*¹, who welcome them and made them realize that a sea of stories was in store for them to pass through rather than just a list of hard new materials. Their worries gave way to multiple images that helped them assure their space in school where their sensitiveness for the imaginary can be exercised.

In hopes of demystifying this feeling of anxiety involving the third grade experience, a grade often regarded as the most difficult in the fundamental cycle and to ensure their space for the imaginary as children, our choice for the inauguration of the academic school year was the beautiful *Arabian Tales*. That was how our *tale hour*² was established and it has been respectfully followed as a daily ritual held at the beginning of every class ever since. In other words, through the reading of Arabian tales we present a work with cultural diversity within an ethnically sensitive classroom environment. This is achieved via discursive interaction and

¹ In his book *Jardim dos arabescos: uma leitura das Mil e Uma Noites* (Arabesque Garden – a reading from The thousand and One nights), Wajnberg (1997) keeps the spelling *Sheherazade*, in Portuguese, as given by the translator Antoine Galland, from the Arab *Shahrâzâd*.

² The *tale hour* is the term I used in my daily class plan in order to organize when and which narratives to tell.

exposure to emotionally touching universal images. It's our understanding that the questions / differences underlying the daily school routine emerge naturally and when banalized, they will become generators of the exclusion processes. In view of that, we create a space for intercultural dialog, an exercise that is neither ethnocentric nor relativist, insofar as it is an articulator of basic features of culture as a symbolic process (Ferreira Santos, 2004).

Story-Telling: The Meshing

The spinner prepares the threads, selects their color and texture, and sets them on the loom. As the rhythmic movements flow, the narrative thread (a lead thread) is pulled, opening a space so that other threads may overlap and interlace. A fabric is created, coherent with interlayers and interlaced meanings. For the listening child, the story seeks to establish balance through stability and safety while avoiding tedium and immobility. The teacher changes her role from spokesperson for the official contents to mediator for classroom relations. She is the storyteller and caretaker of the symbols, the one who enlightens and represents culture as a transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary element. Every day, the acts of story telling and listening are repeated, and thus the myth is updated by performing the ritual and activating the symbolic universe. However, entertained in her rhythmic movement, the spinner (teacher) becomes aware that she must stop. The class is already taken in by her, but she must break away and resume her official role, as director of the school required curricula. Nevertheless, the groundwork for the later stage of experience has been laid, and the child is thus more open and receptive to the systemized knowledge, which s/he can now experience as culture and symbols. After listening to over fifty stories from the Arabian oral tradition during a two-month timeframe, the children become gradually acquainted with the stories' narrative structure. Most of the stories selected stick to a prescribed model for balance, and common elements are: (1) the appearance of the conflict, (2) the solution of the conflict with the magic element being present, and (3) the re-setting of a newly formed balance by seizure of the magic, the *other*, the different, and the unconscious. Consequently, students end up willing to create their own "Arabian" stories, or by bringing to the classroom other tales yet untold, they also can plunge onto the world as storytellers. They, themselves adapt, improvise, and retell their favorite stories over and over again, without ever exhausting the power of the original stories. They spot Brazilian stories that are similar to the Arabian tales that is their interdiscursiveness³ — and so the stories travel, beyond the classroom, far from the school, and then back to their original reality.

Let's contemplate these narratives and bear in mind that every story brings a symbolic question to light. The narrator, in this case, the Sheherazade, has the role of preserving and renewing a knowledge from remote times. The Sheherazade narratives— *A Thousand and One Nights* — bring to light deep-level elements of a culture: the way its peoples are and the ways they were able to get organized and set relations in a spatial and temporal context, so as to build their culture and defend it from the risks of dissolution. Such tales crossed seas and times until they finally arrived straight into the hands of nine or ten year-old third graders, in 21st Century, Brazil. Here, they were "snared", so to say, — in much the same way as the sultan was charmed by the princess, his narrator — by countless mythical and magical elements, helping them to enlarge their own imaginary, by that contact. This way,

³ *Interdiscursiveness* is the term used by Bakhtin (1992) to explain the dialog between the discourses, which in his view is also a text, and the social, political, historical, and psychological undertone surrounding such texts.

Sufi⁴ traditional tales and other Arabic oral traditional tales were analyzed and recognized within these children's universe backed by the *Anthropology of the imaginary* by Gilbert Durand (1997).

Wool shearing

Tales from the Arab oral tradition often follow a simple narrative line: initial situation, conflict, actions taken to solve the conflict, a final position and an outcome. Some redundant elements characterize its structure. The spaces where the stories take place clue their origin and source in different ways. Therefore, regions like Persia (now Iran), Iraq, South Arabia, Morocco, Egypt, India and China, and cities like Baghdad, Mecca, Fez and Cairo are always mentioned. These spaces provide the reader with signals as to which world is he going to travel. A tale often starts in internal spaces and structures, such as palaces, caves, markets, suqs⁵ (12 km-long by six km-wide bazaars), medinas, harems, mosques, caravansaries (large inns usually for the overnight accommodation of caravans and travelers), bathhouses and tea / coffee houses; or it may begin in external places such as yards, streets and deserts, which usually involve situations of intense performance for the characters and are often intended for solving the conflict at hand. Passing through such spaces, we were able to penetrate the Arabian cultural universe, since a trait common in the tales of said tradition is the dialogue among the characters in the marketplace for bargain prices. When these tales began to circulate in the Arab-speaking countries, the inhabit grasp the Islamic mentality via the attitudes conveyed by the characters, whose will is subject to that of Allah. That is how we found outward indications of typical religiosity and some of the pillars sustaining Islamic⁶ faith shown in the characters' daily actions.

Another outstanding element has to do with the characters. There are different designations by which to refer to the religious political leader: the caliph, the army's chief and defender of religion, to guide the community, follow the Alcoran and take inspiration from the life of Mohammed, the sultan, likewise a military leader or chief; the sheik and the shah, supreme rulers of their respective kingdoms; the grand vizier, counselor and collaborator to the government; and the qadi or judge. In addition, there are royal figures, merchants, tailors, fishermen, hunters, caravaneers, woodcutters, weavers, jewelers, calligraphers, prophets,

⁴ According to Prieto (1999), in the ancient Sufi tradition (Sufism is an ascetic, mystical Muslim sect of the Sufis), wisdom takes lodgings in the stories. When someone became insane a storyteller was usually summoned for the cure. Stories and more stories were supposed to be told to the mentally deranged one until that person's capacity to "think the world" is regained.

⁵ (Moktefi, 1993: 35)

⁶ The five pillars are the five fundamental acts or the five obligations a faithful Muslim must observe: the first act is *chahada*, a profession of faith, declaring that no God exists other than Allah and acknowledging Mohammed as His messenger; the second is prayer, to be said five times a day; the third is alms-giving as an obligation, or *zakat*, a kind of "solidarity tax", for the relief of the poor; the fourth is the observance of a one-month fast. During Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim calendar, when the Alcoran was revealed to Mohammed, the daily fast is rigidly enjoyed from dawn until sunset. The whole year during this period, adults enjoying good health abstain from drinking and eating. At night, the fast can be broken; a pilgrimage to Mecca, in Arabia, is the fifth pillar of Islam. Every healthy Muslim and with some money is required to do it at least once in his/her lifetime. (Moktefi, 1993: 8).

copyists and hawkers, street peddlers traveling all over the city streets. The Bedouins or nomadic Arabs who lead the caravans, travelers and merchants express the wisdom they have acquired through their travels. As they run errands among very different kinds of peoples they meet, they often appear in the narratives as having moved away from their family routine for long periods, whereby causing anguish to those waiting for their return. Slaves also take part in the narratives, since most of the time there is trusted female slave at the service of the queen or princess. The young females slaves were entitled to a fair treatment, as determined by the Islamic religion; they were allowed to learn music, dance, song and poetry, and they usually had an important role in their master's life. The profession of each character held both economical and social clues for the reader.

Women, shown under a romantic idealization in these narratives, are depicted as being very skillful and clever, and their rights are differentiated with regard to those of men. They appear to be submissive to men's will, whether they are their father, husband or brothers. Only through the Alcoran's laws could a woman have some protection, for in pre-Islamic (pagan) Arabia, namely, the birth of a daughter was regarded as an added burden to the household. The father used to be entitled to get rid of her, a practice that in some eastern cultures such as that of India and China, is still adopted to this very day. Islam put an end to such a practice with the commandment "you shall not kill your children" and taking it further, acknowledged a woman's entitlement to share her parents' heritage. The Alcoran also allows polygamy, where a man is allowed to have as many as four wives at one time, provided they all treated equally. A woman, when ousted by her husband, may get divorced. The Alcoran, however, requires that she behave with dignity and be faithful to her husband. That rule might have been a likely cause for the institutionalization of the veil. According to Juliette Mincea (2002), a social scientist born in France who studied the symbolic value of the veil, the Alcoran dictates that women must have their necks covered as well as their jewels, because these things help women appear more attractive. In the Muslim world, the veil is a way of protecting men from being seduced by women and protecting women from men's lust. In the Arabian tales, women frequently appear in prenuptial situations where, on the matter of choosing a marriage partner, their parents decide. An agreement is signed and a dowry (money, goods or estate) is set and delivered by the husband to the bride's father.

We also find in these narratives different social strata among women and the diversity of family relation roles they play. Rich women, for instance, have access to literature and are knowledgeable in the arts and music. We also know that they can spend a great amount of time on their own embellishment, for which they frequently attend bathhouses and greatly enjoy going to beauty parlors for hairstyling and makeovers. As for less wealthy women, apart from their household chores, they must earn a living through meshing or working as slaves, a condition that allows them become educated. Since a woman is the protagonist of many tales, these elements are usually clearly explained.

Wool carding

There were many reasons for selecting those Arabian tales: one story continues into another; suspense is created by a stopping point before the story's ending; the conflict is solved by the magic element, which is familiar in the fairy tales; the story's structure allows modifications, inventions and improvisations; the intertextuality of the texts; the tales are similar to the Arabian ones found in the Brazilian culture; the images created by the text and their moral subtlety, etc. Each and all of these reasons fully justify the presentation of the

wonderful Arabian tales in the classroom. In this context, the student can learn how the cultures are produced by the social groups through their histories, their forms of subsistence, and in the organization of their social and political lives. In short, through their relationship with the environment and with other groups, driven by skills, they ultimately realize that the difference between the cultures derives from the very same singularity existing in every social group.

The Arabian narratives, so rich in their elements, lead to many pedagogical actions that effectively develop the children's written and oral expression. Students, for example, compare different versions of books, stories and movies, rewrite tales, create and recreate their own texts, and are encouraged by that contact. Apart from taking several activities, school-based or otherwise, they experience interdisciplinary work with the fields of Arts, Mathematics, Portuguese, History, Geography and Science as they research the Arabian culture in their classroom activities. Such work also favors the introduction of other discourses not present in school: the child sets out in the pursuit of further information, making use of as many resources as possible, such as newspapers, the Internet, magazines, books and travel guides, videos, or even makes researches with relatives and acquaintances. It is quite common to observe an awakening toward one's ancestral sense when the child realizes and appraises his origin by interacting with parents, grandparents and other relatives, in the pursuit of old/new family love and adventure stories. Based on that experience, students record their findings, and rewrite stories of their ancestors who migrated to Brazil, later sharing the results of that personal and family quest with the school community.

Based on our observations over the years, we believe that contact with a diverse culture, based on other paradigms, may offer the children a perception that skin-deep differences actually conceal a common human and ancestral identity. The reading exceeds the knowledge of the actions and situations that construct the Arabian narratives, expanding toward values that stimulate other searches beyond the ancestral stories: that of self-knowledge and the knowledge of the *other*, a process that alternates the perception of the differences as much as the original identity connecting the species.

Wool Spinning and Thread Twisting

By resuming our symbolic ritual, it's worth reiterating that the *tale hour* in the classroom is respected everyday. If man is a fellow who says and knows himself and the other by telling, we then presuppose this to be an established form from which the child can get to know himself and the other. Telling is the recapturing of the dimension of orality set in on the "once upon a time" of every human being. It is then possible to create a space where a great number of different voices make themselves heard, be they the voice of the telling professor or that of the author being read, or that of the child retelling in his own way the stories whose first narrator likely was the Sheherazade. Making up material for our analysis were the productions of the children carried out from classroom activities. In the stories, the paintings, as well as in the drawings created by them, we interpreted what permeated their imagination, after the contact with that *extra* and *intercultural* data, observing and considering in that production the emergence of the elements present in the Arabian narratives: characters, stage scenarios, magic objects, the time and space gathered by them.

Part of our procedure was to identify in the Arabian tales and in each of their amplifications the main, nuclear psychic polarities involved, and the anthropological course

expressed by the actions of the characters, which provide a basis for inferring the situations experienced by the child on its own journey. In the drawings, written production and statements of the children we appraised something from their symbolic resonance of these tales on the psyche. That part of the research provided subsidies for us to check or not our initial hypothesis — namely, that the Arabian tales call on the subject to acknowledge, legitimize and include the Other, appraising his differences.

The Tapestry Sewing/Trajectory (Experience and Process)

The class group records its imaginary by drawing and painting and representing what was learned through song or drama. They learn about the *other* culture, inviting lecturers who can teach the Arabian cooking, show objects, photos, tell other stories, talk about their religiosity and ancestors. The class group welcomes special guests, as for instance the musician who plays Arabian instruments, dancers and other storytellers and visits typical spaces, external to the school and creates of the Arabian carnival. Early 2004, I heard the following news report on TV: "Thousands protest against the Islamic veil prohibition." The news about the fact that nearly 5000 people were protesting in Paris against the initiative of the French government to prohibit students from the Islamic religion to wear the veil in public schools. It was soon known that similar protests broke out in London, Berlin, Baghdad, Beirut and in Srinagar, in India, in front of the French Embassy. When I was informed of this fact, I was able to recall a real-life situation I watched with my students four years ago at the start of the school year, just days before the carnival holidays. Having proposed to the children that they could come to school dressed up as Arabian tale characters with which they were quite familiar, and with the purpose of closing the week with impersonation of one of the most significant popular celebrations in our country, the Carnival, I suggested that each student devise their own apparel. Most of the girls arrived at school that day dressed up as Odalisques --the female manifestation of power of seduction at its fullest. The boys, in turn, chose to impersonate sheiks or grand viziers-- in a male display of wealth and power principles. When meeting them at the school entrance, I realized in the joy of the children the pleasure of bringing to life characters of everyone's choice, expressed with brilliant-colored outfits.

Even when improvisational elements are accounted for, an unexpected event always happens. The possibilities are many: it may come from the boy who refused to wear the new sheik's cloth and, in its place, the cooperative student preferred to adopt the simplicity of the costume of a lamp peddler. Or it is maybe the case of the girl who asked her mother for a special help because she wanted to dress up as a common woman. It was precisely Maria Sophia, "the common woman", who merrily arrived at school, all dressed in black, with just an opening for the eyes on her veil, her face being covered with a *chador*.⁷ Impressive in the impersonation of her chosen character, she was received by an audience that was startled. Her classmates started to called her aggressively "Muslim woman" in clear disapproval of her impersonation, even in a symbolic merrymaking, of the character of her choice. With sensibility, Maria Sophia was experiencing the different, leaving the commonplace aside and inhabiting foreign lands. She had been looking forward to the chance to make her unusual choice and was compelled by something much greater than herself to try a new path. She was saddened and was frustrated, because she had envisioned a respectful attitude regarding the difference and an acknowledgement of beliefs and usages that are different from one's own. What she found was neither tolerance nor openness.

⁷ The *chador* is an accessory veil Islam women are supposed to wear to hide their face.

This defining experience unfolded into deep subtleties, brought not only to me but to every child in that class a unique opportunity to get in touch with our limits, projections, insensitiveness and lack of humanity in the face of the differences pointed out and assumed by the other. Even before the previously arranged Carnival celebration started, the group felt the need to talk, and think about attitudes that are frequently impulsive. In "thinking aloud", they discovered hurting people we live with, feelings of inferiority and exclusion. Everyone began to think of and voice his/her own experiences and the group concluded that we could effectively invite into our classroom a student from the Islamic religion who wore a veil. Some children also spoke on the possibility that children from other regions and cultures may find the cap-wearing habit of Western children strange. It was an exercise that confirmed the possibility for us to achieve our initial goal: legitimize and recognize the other's place in our interpersonal relations. The dialog established with the group coagulated in each one of us in the 'islet' of our conscience, in the immense sea of collective psyche. We realized how important it is to share emotions and reactions, trying not to ascribe hierarchies or value judgments to them, and to recognize that we really don't deal as well with the different, as we believe we do.

Who would ever imagine that such wonderful Arabian tales could open spaces for what Jung called *the exercise of psychological tolerance*? Once our focus of the fear we have of the unknown, of what intrigues us has been expanded, we are led to 'demonize' a universe unknown to us, such as that of the Eastern culture. That reflection space has proved to be so important that American motion-picture producers B. Z. Goldberg (Jude journalist who lived in Israel) and Justine Shapiro and the Mexican Carlos Bolado, in the documentary *Promises*, 2002, followed seven Palestinian and Jewish children living in Jerusalem and its outskirts to record dramatic and thrilling statements from each of them about the Jewish and Palestinians living together. The motion-picture producers arranged a meeting with some of those children to show that behind the ethnic groups, cultures and religions, childhood remains as a universal datum and can overcome the diversities (and adversities as well). This example affirms the supposition that conflict and intolerance are mutually supportive, not so much because of the cultural differences but because of the equality in attitudes.

It would be interesting to observe the unfolding of Brazilian, African and other similar kinds of folktales encouraging readers to live experiences similar to the ones we live. Arabian tales carry within them a wealth of symbolic elements that open doors for effective dialog between differences and tolerance. The current world scenario, particularly after September 11th, makes it imperative for teachers to cultivate tolerance in our classrooms. To extend the themes and symbolism of the tales, I was able to gradually find paths and clues to which the children let their imagination adhere. I never tried to saturate or exhaust them. Instead, I plunged them into a sea of possibilities. With this multitude of experiences, the children also built their own identity in the adventure of their encounter with the other, with the other culture, by means of the Arabian narratives, in infinite mirror-reflection exercises, and they were able to acknowledge that that distant other contributed to and enriched their lives. As they found themselves different, too, they could open spaces to the possibility for communion. They learned that we are all possibilities for a challenge, acceptance, alliance, but also for rejection, division, and consequently, for exclusion. As for tolerance, we learned that just accepting the differences isn't enough; it's up to us to promote its existence by way of an enlargement of the process of "*hominization*". Perhaps, that's the only way to access the different without making it unequal and to understand it as one's own possibility. The

Arabian tales aid individuals in formation of their *identity*. Through them they keep in contact with the best aspects of their culture via self-identification and understanding of their origins. On the other hand, our success in understanding another culture, its behaviors, beliefs, customs, and groupings, does not make us capable of living together in harmony. We teachers must always be sensitive in our praxis, and analyze and discuss the parameters on which our passionate statements are based. It would be a start should we distinguish the tolerable from intolerable by showing that wealth and diversity must promote humanization.

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