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From Tibet to Nigeria via Hollywood:
travels of Chaucer's 'Pardoner's Tale'

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Roger Blench

The paper reports a new Nigerian version of the 'Tale of the three robbers' similar to that narrated by the Pardoner in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. It describes the diffusion of the story, originating as a birth narrative of the Buddha in the Himalayas, spreading westward to India, Persia and thence to Western Europe, where it was recorded as a folktale in Portugal in the last century. West African versions of the story are recorded among the Fulbe pastoralists of the Fouta Jallon, and among the Nupe and now the Kamuku of Nigeria. More surprisingly, it has also been recorded among the Sakata of the southwest DRC. Its most plausible source is the Swahili inland trade, since there is a

Swahili version which resembles the Persian versions. Its most recent re-incarnation has been the film, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, 1948, starring Humphrey Bogart. The constant re-invention and reframing of the core narrative suggests an attractive meme which has been transmitted across many centuries.

The Prologue

Geoffrey Chaucer, despite being inflicted on generations of disgruntled schoolboys, and cancelled by some university departments, survives. His ability to meld high and low culture and his humour and engagement with popular culture remains worth celebrating.



Photo 1. The Pilgrims gather, Caxton printing 1483

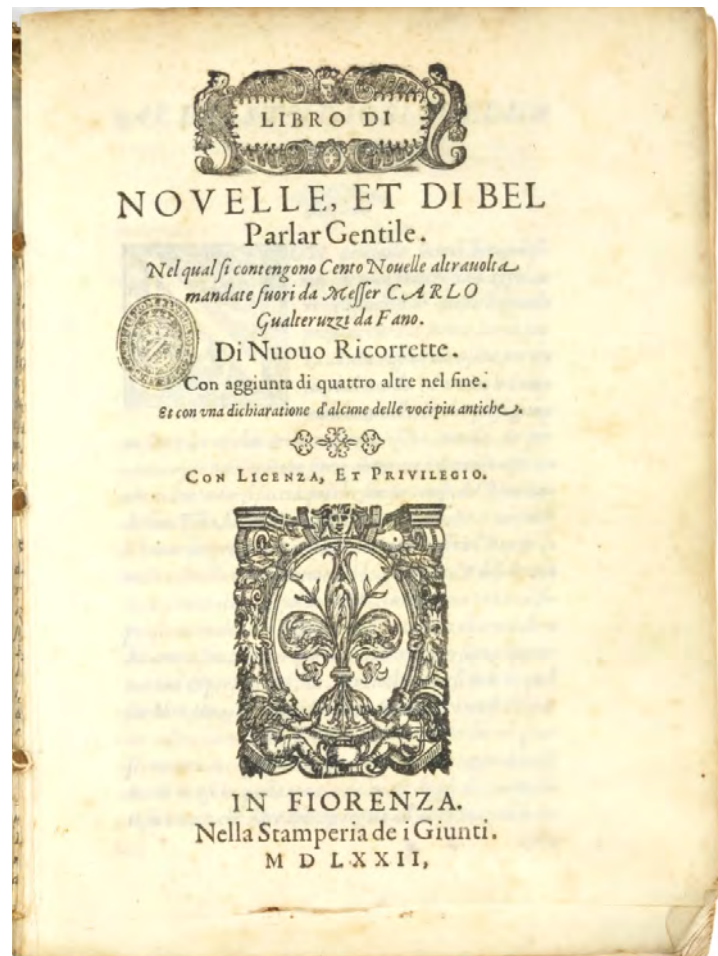
One of his tales, 'The Pardoner's Tale', the story of three men who go seeking Death, draws on early Asian traditions. Surprisingly, though, it also turns up in Sub-Saharan Africa in widely scattered locations as well as being transmuted by Hollywood into a morality tale. The report of a previously unknown version from the Kamuku people in northwest Nigeria provides a motivation for this essay, which traces its origins in the Himalayas to its appearance in the savannas of West Africa.

The striking aspect of this story is that its core narrative remains broadly similar, with the pleasing symmetry of the three 'riotours' who all die by a twist worthy of a modern techno-thriller. However, as it passes from Buddhism to Islam to Christianity and on to African religions, it gains a variety of framing devices, which are then discarded as it is re-invented. Exactly how it has travelled remains a mystery, since it surfaces in widely scattered locations. But perhaps this is a good illustration of the deep rivers of oral tradition, which transmit ideas and narratives across centuries, and which only surface sporadically in written sources.

2. Geoffrey Chaucer

The Pardoner's Tale is one of the most popular of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, which were written between 1387 and 1400. Pilgrims heading to Canterbury meet at an inn and compete to tell tales (Photo 1). The basic story told by the Pardoner is of three 'riotours' seeking to meet with Death and kill him. An old man points to a tree whereunder lies death. Under the tree they find great wealth and initially agree to share it. However, two of them plot to kill the third and so send him to town for food. He in turn decides to poison the other two. When he returns, they kill him and then eat the poisoned food and also die. According to the Pardoner, himself a greedy

Photo 2. Title page, *Cento Novelle Antiche* 2nd Edition, Source: CC



swindler, the moral of the tale is *Radix malorum est cupiditas* (Greed is the root of [all] evils).

Chaucer's source material has been much debated, but one of the earliest versions of this fable in the European tradition is in the *Cento Novelle Antiche* [The Hundred Ancient Novels] (also the *Novellino*), a collection of Italian stories and folktales which dates from the second half of the 13th century. It was only published for the first time in 1525 in Bologna by Carlo Gualteruzzi. Photo 2 shows the title page of the second edition, published in Florence in 1572. Clearly Chaucer had no access to the printed form, nor indeed to Boccaccio's Decameron, one of his other sources. Whether he had a manuscript to hand or merely drew on oral tradition is unclear.

Evidence that similar fables survive in European folk tradition comes from Portugal. Another version appears in the compilation of Portuguese stories by José Leite de Vasconcellos (1963) (Photo 3). Dias-Ferreira (1977) summarises this version and connects it with Chaucer's narrative. In this tale, Jesus plays a rather ambiguous role in luring men to their death. Walking along with St Peter, they come across a heap of gold along the path. Jesus says 'Let us leave, for here is death!'. As they go on their way, they meet two men and warn them

about the gold. Needless to say, this merely attracts the men and they then poison one another according to the narrative formula.

Photo 3. Title page of Leite de Vasconcellos (1963)

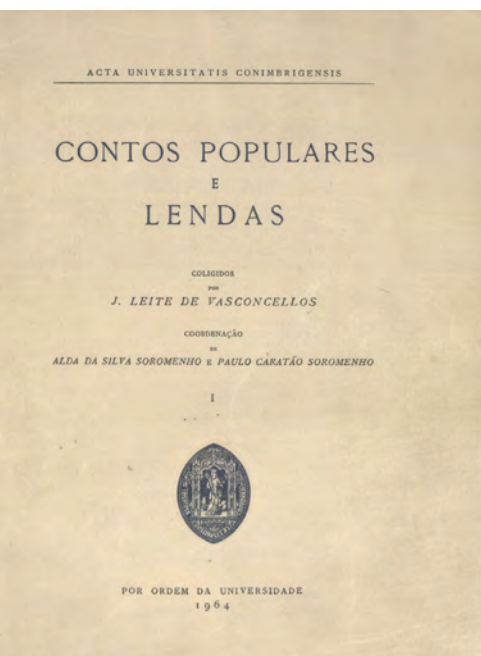
St Peter is confused and asks Jesus how gold could be death, so Jesus leads him to where the corpses lie and says 'Here lies death'. It is safe to say that even the Apocrypha missed out on this edifying tale.

3. African versions

3.1 Nigeria

This trail began with a story told among the Cinda people of northwest Nigeria and I am indebted to Katharine Mort for drawing my attention to it, and for sending me the original text. In this version, there are originally six brothers, but three die, inspiring the three remaining to seek death and kill him, while also looking for money. They meet a dirty old man, who asks them their mission and when they tell him, he points to a tree where death is sitting. Under the tree are three thousand pieces of money, which they decide to share equally. As they are hungry, they decide to send the junior brother into town for food. The other brothers decide to kill him and share the money. However, the junior brother buys poison and puts it in the food. When he returns, they kill him, but eating the poisoned food, they also die. The story has no moralising framework except for the statement 'See, they found death'.

A similar story was recorded among the Nupe, who live immediately south of the Kamuku by Leo Frobenius (1924: 133-134). The Nupe are today almost wholly Muslim, but they were only converted from the end of the 18th century, so it is quite possible this story was transmitted in a much earlier period.



3.2 Pastoralists from the Fouta Jallon

Another, rather similar story was recorded among the Fulbe pastoralists in the Fouta Jallon, now in the Republic of Guinea (De San-deval 1882). A slightly more extended version can be found in Giraudon (1924). The Fulbe are herders who nomadise across an extended region of the Sahel from Senegambia to Lake Chad. They are today all Muslims, although the nomadic herders had a former reputation as unbelievers. In various areas, notably Nigeria and Guinea, they have settled, and form Muslim urban elites. In the Fulfulde version, there is no prologue and the robbers immediately find the treasure on the road and plan to kill one another. Murder and poisoning ensue. When the three corpses are lying on the road, an old man and son pass by. They moralise over the vanity of riches and urge the poor to keep this in mind. This is extremely similar to moralising of Jesus at the end of the Portuguese version (S2 and Dias-Ferreira 1977).

3.3 DRC/Swahili

The other surprising African record for this story is among the Sakata people of the DRC. It was first recorded by a Belgian missionary, Father Leopold Waterval, in 1975, and published in a rather obscure journal, *Mission-hurst*. The original text is in Waterval (1987) but a more accessible translation appears in Hamel & Merrill (1991). The narrator of the fable, *masapo*, was a man named Ipan from the village of Beronge and his version is resolutely modernised, including metal trunks, microbes [!] and rifles. It is framed as the answer to the question 'Why do people die?' and the lure is set intentionally by the chief, who fills a trunk



Photo 4. Lac Mai-Ndombe

Photo 5. Thangka scroll representing the *jatakas*



with desirable goods to entrap the unwary. As expected, the three men come across it and in conspiring to cheat one another, poison each other and all die.

The Sakata people have a complex history, since they are presently located in the southwest of the modern DRC, in Mai-Ndombe Province (Photo 4). However, they originate from the Bandundu area whence they were displaced. Their basic ethnography is covered in Bylin (1966) and their oral traditions in Colldén (1979) which includes another version of this story, missed by Hamel & Merrill (1991).

The origin of this story is perplexing, since the Basakata are far from possible Arabic influ-

ence which may account for the dispersion of the story elsewhere. However, as Hamel & Merrill (1991) point out, the structure is closer to the Swahili version highlighted by Werner (1911) and may somehow result from contact with the traders who once dominated the trade routes of the former Congo. This version is free from any Islamic moralising and has been adapted radically to Sakata culture, so the diffusion of the core narrative cannot be very recent.

4. High Tibet

The most likely ultimate origin of this story is one of the tales surrounding the birth of the Buddha, the Jatakas (जातक). These were first compiled from the 4th century BC onwards and have many analogues in folk narrative traditions across Eurasia. Photo 5 shows a 19th century scroll, likely painted in Thimphu, Bhutan, showing the Buddha surrounded by images of the Jatakas. The tale of the *Three Robbers and the Treasure Trove* is found in the 48th Jataka, the *Vedabbha Jataka*, first published by the Bishop of Colombo in 1884. A comprehensive edition in English was first published by Cowell (1895) and more recently Gaffney (2018, 2019) goes back to the original Tibetan sources.

Needless to say this version is nested within a fantastical tracery of elaboration relating to Buddhist theology which has little to do with the core of the story. In this version, the Bodhisattva is travelling with companions and they are set upon by robbers seeking ransom. The Bodhisattva is sent away to find the ransom, but in the meantime, the robbers are set upon by another more powerful gang and only two are left alive. The plot thus strongly resembles 'No orchids for Miss Blandish' where an heiress is kidnapped by criminals who are promptly

Photo 6. Cover *No orchids for Miss Blandish*



overwhelmed by a more powerful gang (Hadley Chase 1939) (Photo 6). From this point the Jataka story follows the conventional narrative with one bandit killing the other and being poisoned in turn. The moral of the story is rather unusual since the Bodhisattva scoops up the treasure left by the dead bandits and carries it away;

Tree fairies who heard the Bodhisattva speak shouted applause. He took the treasure home and spent the rest of his life giving alms and doing good deeds.

This is a curious denouement for a European moralist, since surely preventing this mayhem in the first place might have been more humane.

5. The Persian version

It is presumed the story then spread via Sanskrit into Persia, as it is also recorded in Kashmir. The Persian text first appears in the *Proverbiorum et sententiarum Persicarum centuria collecta* published in Leiden by Levin Warner (1644) apparently based on his doctoral thesis of 1642 (Photo 7). See Shurgaia (2012) for a modern summary. The core narrative is the same, but it is framed within a moral commentary by Jesus, as envisioned by the Koran. As he sees the dead bodies of the robbers, Jesus says;

Haec est conditio mundi! Videte quomodo ternos hosce tractaverit, et ipse tamen post eos in statu suo perseverit. Vae illi qui petit mandum ex mundo!¹

The story then appears in a different form in the *Kitab-i Masibat Nama* or Book of Calamities, compiled by the Sufi philosopher Šaiḥ Farīd-ad-Dīn

¹ This is the condition of the world! See how these three were treated, and yet he himself persisted in his own way. Woe to him who seeks power in the world!

in the 12th century, the manuscript of which is lodged in the Gotha library at the University of Erfurt. A metrical translation into German was published by Rückert (1860) and was given an English version by Clouston in 1882.

6. Humphrey Bogart makes an appearance

The Treasure of the Sierra Madre is a 1948 film written and directed by John Huston, adapted from Ben Traven's (1927) novel of the same name, set in the 1920s (Photo 8). Although there is no explicit Chaucer reference, the basic similarity of the narrative structure argues they cannot be unconnected. Two prospectors who have

Photo 7. Title page of Warner (1644)

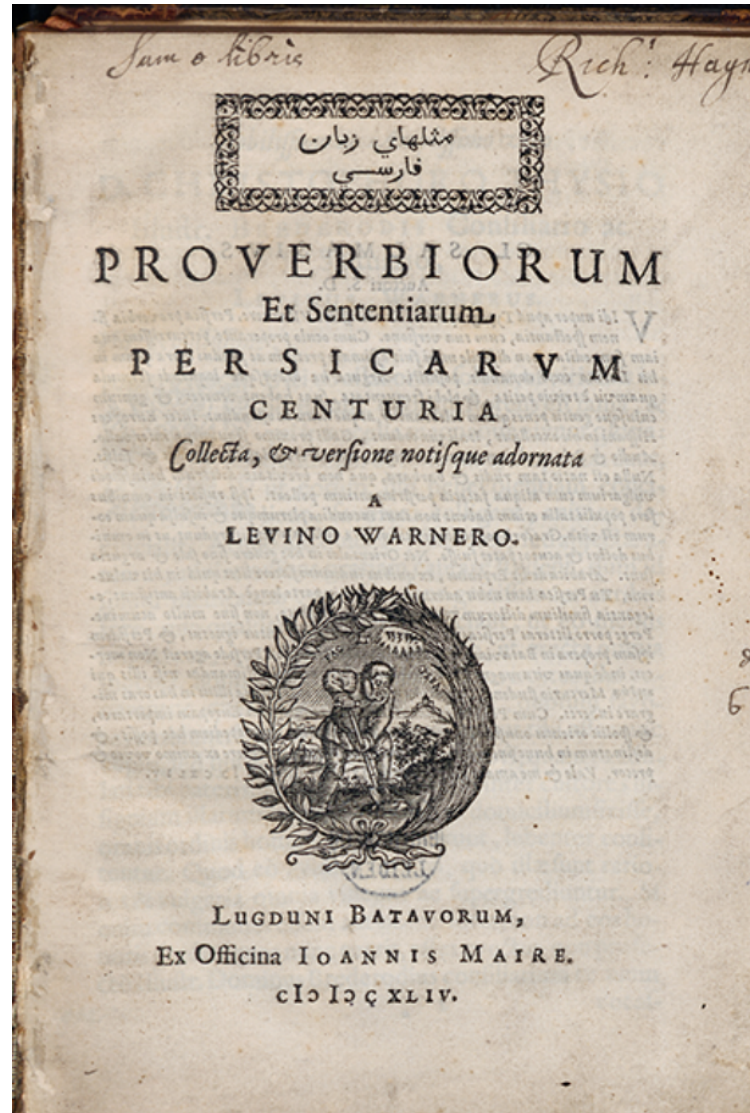




Photo 8. 1947 film poster for *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*

been cheated of their pay encounter an old man who claims to have knowledge of the location of gold lodes. Luck enables them to finance a prospecting trip and the three set off into the Sierra Madre, where they do indeed find a vein missed by others. However, the gold they accumulate leads to internal divisions and treachery, when they are attacked by a more sophisticated band of robbers. Eventually Dobbs (Humphrey Bogart) is killed and the others badly injured. Moreover, the gold dust they have accumulated is mistaken for sand and allowed to blow away.

7. How has it spread around the world?

The dispersal of this folktale is quite remarkable, even given the propensity of the genre to travel. Of course folktales do have underlying themes, which have been mapped by folklorists for more than a century. Still, the specificity of this narrative and the way its core has remained unchanged across such different cultures, argues that in modern terms it is a meme, a story that is so attractive it keeps spreading. Had social media been operative in the Himalayas in 300 BC, no doubt its global coverage would have been still more rapid.

The first part of its diffusion is relatively transparent, originating as a story around the birth of the Buddha in the Himalayas. From there it spread into mainstream Hindu culture, and was transmitted westwards via Kashmir into Persia. In turn it spread into Western Europe and was picked up in Portugal and thence to Geoffrey Chaucer's energetic pen. However, it also spread to East Africa via the Indian Ocean trade, first to the coastal culture of the Swahili and then along the inland trade routes, reaching the ears of the Sakata. The Sakata version remains perplexing, since it is so geographically remote from any possible Swahili source. It has been comprehensively adapted to its environment, and yet it is hard to see any other possibility, unless it was transmitted by an early missionary and its source forgotten.

By African standards, it is an extremely unusual story, with elements that are dissonant in comparison to more usual narratives. It is a moral tale, with a concluding element, which is distinct from the rather more standard episodic narrative. It does not include songs, common in typical folktales, and it does include elements of modernity, notably

money, which was not widespread in this region of Africa until recently. Although Islam is the plausible vector of the story, it never surfaces in standard Arab folktale anthologies, and the Kamuku version includes no Islamic elements. Nonetheless, since it is also recorded among the Nupe, southern neighbours of the Kamuku, who were converted to Islam from the end of the eighteenth century, and it most plausibly spread from them. It is most likely a medieval Arab folktale which crossed the Sahara with the trading caravans. Hence it also reached the western Fulbe, perhaps with Islamic moralising tacked on as an afterthought.

Map 1 shows a rather preliminary map outlining the possible routes of diffusion of the story of the three robbers, from its origins in the Himalayas across Eurasia and into West and Central Africa.

From Tibet to West Africa is quite a remarkable journey and reminds us that oral cultures value good narratives, and that they can spread over vast distances without the benefit of modern written culture. Even so, the present picture is full of lacunae, which suggests that it must be more widespread still and other versions remain to be recorded in different African societies.

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Map 1. Spread of the story of the three robbers



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² Count Aimé Olivier de Sandeval

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