

The King who Wished to Marry his Daughter

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

*Teine Dé dha do bhus!
Rug do mhàthair-chéile luch.
Thug thu fhéin a-mach an gur,
Busan dubh an dranndain!*

“Ringworm be upon your snout! Your mother-in-law has borne a mouse. You yourself have had a hatching, you black snoutie of the growling!”

This is presented in the fourth volume of “*Carmina Gadelica*” as a rhyme used by children for taunting unfortunate playmates about their skin conditions. But it would make better sense if it had serious adult origins. It looks to me like a woman insulting another woman’s husband and wishing syphilis on her.

It also brings us back to mothers-in-law. I’m going to explore what primitive societies saw as the *consequences* of a man looking at his mother-in-law, and we’ll see where it leads us.

The aborigines who lived on the Tully River believed that if a man spoke to his mother-in-law his teeth would rot out. Conversely, in the Kulin nation, as in Australian tribes generally, if a woman looked at her daughter’s husband, or spoke to him, it was thought that her hair would turn white. If a man sent a present of game to his father-in-law, the mother-in-law would rub charcoal over her face (and especially her mouth) before taking any of the meat. That done, she could eat it safely without her hair blanching.

Similarly, in south-west Australia, the women thought their hair would turn grey if they spoke to their sons-in-law, and the men thought they would become bald if they looked at their mothers-in-law.

It gets worse. The Baganda of Central Africa practised “mother-in-law avoidance” in its classic form, and any breach of the customs was supposed to be punished by nervous debility, with tremors in the hands and other parts of the body.

In North America, from the time a Navaho brave was married he and his mother-in-law might never look each other in the face again, or they feared they would go blind. So they never sat in the same room, and if they met by accident they got out of each other’s sight as fast as they could. Their word for “mother-in-law” was *doyishini*, “she whom I may not see”.

Among the Indians of Yucatan in Mexico, if a betrothed man saw his future father-in-law or mother-in-law at a distance, he turned quickly, believing that meeting them would prevent him having children. This was pretty close to the bone, as we will see.

So much for the “natural” consequences. Now for the man-made ones.

Among the Murring and Yuin of south-eastern Australia, a man might not look at his mother-in-law or even in her direction. If so much as his shadow fell on her, he would have to leave his wife, and she would have to return to her parents.

That was the least of it. Among the tribes of the Gwydir and Hunter Rivers, any man who spoke to or held any communication with his wife’s mother was put to death. In due course, however, the death penalty was commuted into a severe reprimand and temporary banishment. The guilty party would leave the camp and pitch his shelter of branches and bark some distance away. There he remained in seclusion till the taint was purged.

In Africa and North America, where anthropologists tended to find customs further advanced than those of Australia, there was no trace of the death penalty. Among the Upoto of the Congo, for example, if a man met his mother-in-law by chance he turned his head away. If he were rude enough to look at her, he would have to pay her a fine.

For Angola and the Congo generally, we’re told that if he saw her coming and failed to slink out of her way, public opinion would oblige him to send her a goat as a peace-offering and beg her pardon.

The next stage was to develop strategies by which the taboo could be dispensed with altogether. All of these come from Africa and North America. Central Angoniland in Africa offers the simplest: the restrictions ended as soon as the son-in-law brought his mother-in-law her first grandchild, along with a present.

The way it was done by the A-kamba of Uganda was for the man to give due notice of his intention to get rid of the restriction. On the day appointed, the people assembled at his mother-in-law’s village. There they danced and feasted at his expense, and he formally presented a blanket both to his father-in-law and to his mother-in-law. After that he could mix with them freely.

In North America the gift was the main thing. Among the Arapaho a man could speak to and look at his mother-in-law provided he gave her a horse. In the Dakotan tribes the gift was an enemy scalp.

There was also a device by which the whole problem could be avoided from the start. Again, this was found only in South Asia, Africa and North America, not in “backward” Australia. It was for the man to marry the mother first, making her “also a wife, thus,” as Sir James Frazer put it, “disarming her of her terrors”.

This was done “sometimes” by the Apache and the Navaho. One reason for the “sometimes” was presumably that she must be a widow, or at least divorced. One passage of his book “Totemism and Exogamy” (1910) in which Frazer discusses this is of particular interest. Frazer believed that what underlay “mother-in-law avoidance” was fear of incest, and he says: “We have met with some tribes which allow a man to marry his own daughter, and with others which allow a man to have sexual intercourse with his daughter-in-law, his son’s wife; but we have as yet met with none which allows a mother to marry or have sexual intercourse with her own son.

“However, it is reported that among the Tinneh Indians of North-West America sons sometimes cohabit with and even marry their mothers; and among the Wahehe of German East Africa a man must sleep with his mother-in-law before he is allowed to cohabit with her daughter.”

I’m sure Frazer was right in believing that fear of incest was the reason for the taboo. In that respect I find these words of his very telling, where he speaks of it as practised by the aboriginal tribes of south-western Victoria: “They might not look upon each other even when one of them was dying. After death, however, the living looked upon the dead.”

I dare say Frazer was also right to deduce that traditional taboos against fathers or fathers-in-law sleeping with daughters or daughters-in-law were somehow not as strong as those against mothers or mothers-in-law sleeping with sons or sons-in-law. There’s actually a story in that Victorian classic, “Popular Tales of the West Highlands” (1860), entitled “The King who Wished to Marry his Daughter”. Hector MacLean got it in Islay from Ann Darroch, who got it from an old woman called Margaret Connel. John Francis Campbell also heard it in South Uist, from a drover called Donald MacCraw or MacRae, and again the source was female: “a girl then in the inn at the sound of Benbecula”.

Briefly, this is how it goes. A king and queen have one child, a daughter. The queen dies, and the king insists he’ll only marry a woman whom his late wife’s clothes fit. His daughter tries them on, and they fit perfectly. The king decides to marry her.

Sobbing, she consults her *muime* (foster-mother), who says: “Tell him you won’t marry him unless he gives you a dress of swan’s down (*guthann de chlàimhe na h-eala*).”

At the end of a year and a day he produces one. She goes back to her *muime*, who says: “Tell him you won’t marry him unless he gives you a dress of bog-cotton (*guthann de chanach an t-sléibhe*).”

At the end of a year and a day he comes up with this too. The same thing happens with: a silk dress that stands up on the floor with gold and silver (*a sheasas air an làr le òr ’s le airgead*); a golden shoe and a silver shoe (*bròg òir ’s bròg airgid*); a kist that locks outside and in, and is just as good on sea as on land (*ciste a ghlaiseas a-mach ’s a-staigh, ’s as coingeis leatha bhith air muir no air tìr*).

That buys her five years. She now puts all the beautiful clothes in the kist, climbs into it herself, and asks her father to push it out to see how it would float (*feuch dé mar a shnàmhadh i*). So she escapes.

Across the sea, a shepherd’s son finds the kist and lets her out. The shepherd works for the king of that country, and gets her a job in the palace kitchen.

Next Sunday when everyone is going to church (*dol don t-searmoin*), they ask if she is coming too. “No,” she says. *Tha beagan arain agam r’a dheasachadh*. “I’ve some bread to bake.” When everyone is gone, she rushes back to the shepherd’s house where she is staying, pulls out the dress of swan’s down, puts it on, goes to church, sits opposite the king’s son, leaves before the end of the service, rushes home, and changes back into her servant’s clothes. The king’s son falls in love with her.

Next Sunday she does the same with the dress of bog-cotton. By now the mysterious lady is the talk of the kingdom.

On the third Sunday it’s the silk dress and the shoes. A guard is put on the church doors but she slips out through a *fruchag* (cranny), losing her silver shoe in the confusion.

Yes, she’s turned into Cinderella, and you know the rest. The silver shoe fits no one but her, and the Islay version ends: *Cha robh ach fios a chur air ministear, ’s phòs i fhéin is mac an rìgh*. “There was nothing to do but send for a minister, and she and the king’s son were married.”