

Sung Poetry in the Oral Tradition of the Gulf Region and the Arabian Peninsula

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Historical Background

As far back as we can go in the past history of the Arabs and Arabia, we find poetry present as a huge memorial to their real and imaginary heroic exploits, as a witness to their way of life and feelings, and most of all as an expression of the deepest roots of their soul. Being essentially oral in its origins and developments, this poetry, with its rhythms, intonations, accents, and long or short syllables fitted in quite naturally with music. In the old classical Arabic terminology, poetry (*Shiʿr*) identifies with song (*Nashīd*): reciting it is synonymous with singing it (*Anshada al-Shiʿr*). This bond between *Shiʿr* (poetry) and *Inshād* (chant or recitative) still has the same meaning in the spoken Arabic of the Peninsula and the Gulf region where *Nishīda* (song) is synonymous with *Giṣīda* (poem).

In pre-Islamic Arabia, *Inshād* likely had a dual function: religious and social. Both stem from the rhythmical syllables of the Arabic language (rhymed prose: *Sajʿ*, and metrical poetry: *Shiʿr*), as well as from rhythmical movements of camels. Coming from ancient times, this is the *Ḥidāʾ* (literally “stimulating the camel’s step”) that the Bedouin sings following the steps of his camel and for his own entertainment. It has survived in the actual form we call “recitative” or “cantilena,” as the common *Ḥadwā* still designates, in the spoken Bedouin dialect of the Gulf, the folk songs of both the desert and the sea.

With the creation of the enormous Arab-Islamic empire, the classical culture, including its musical expression, came under various influences, making the gap deeper between “literary poetry” and the original Bedouin poetry that survived through oral tradition and came to be known, in modern times, under the generic name of *Nabaṭī* poetry. Paradoxically, scholarly discovery of this rich legacy of Peninsula *Nabaṭī* poetry is relatively recent. In fact, until the nineteenth century, literary and musical

historians, philologists, and other Orientalists concentrated almost exclusively on the classical poetry, considered as an object of real interest. And here one could dare to say that European scholars who started to pay attention to the popular poetry and music since the nineteenth century, collecting and studying it, were the first to give a real impetus to folk and oral tradition researches and studies, and created a new consciousness of their value even inside the concerned Arab countries themselves.

In this respect, one should honestly emphasize the role of precursors played by the Western travelers of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries in this field. When the Swiss Arabist J. L. Burckhardt (1748-1817) reached Arabia for the first time, well acquainted as he was with the Arabic classical poetry and haunted by the beauty of great poems such as the *Mu^callaqāt* of Imru' al-Qais, *Labīd*, *Antara*, and other Golden Age poetry, he was expecting to find it living in all memories and recited everywhere. Quite the contrary, the great Orientalist tells us of his surprise on hearing poetry more commonly recited and sung not in the *Fuṣḥā*, but in the spoken Arabic very familiar to everyone. This discovery is that of *Nabaṭī* poetry, and its cradle is still, as in olden times, the Najd Province.

One cannot believe that this poetry came into existence suddenly and so late. If we refer to older Arab authors, such as Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī and many others, we find some references to this kind of literature being aimed at popular classes and using vernacular language and metrical verses different from those of classical poetry. We discover this developed expression through the actual traditions performed in the *Sāmrī*, *Mawwāl*, *ṣawt*, and so on. This article, however, will be restricted chiefly to the sung poetry of Bedouin origins called *Nabaṭī*, leaving aside the extremely valuable sea-folk tradition, which deserves a long dissertation of its own.

Structures and Characteristics

Excluding the useless and sterile discussions on the etymology of the term *Nabaṭī*—which, by the way, is almost unknown to Bedouin poets themselves¹—we come first to a very interesting testimony from one of the few European travelers who first underlined the distinct characteristics of this poetry from both metrical and rhythmical aspects. Being at al-Ḥufūf (al-Ḥasā province) in 1862, W. G. Palgrave noticed first the “passionate love” of the people there for poetry: “They are passionately fond of

¹ Sowayan (1982:72-73) makes this remark based upon his research on the field: “*Nabaṭī* poets rarely use the term *nabaṭī* in reference to themselves or to their poetry and many of them do not even know this sense of the word.” The use of this term, applying to the Bedouin poetry in colloquial Arabic, originated relatively recently.

literature and poetry, whether it be according to the known Arabic rules and metre, or whether it follow the *Nabtee*, that is, the Nabathean versification.” Then he analyzes basic structures of this sung poetry:

This latter form of composition, occasionally met with even in Nejed, but rare, becomes here common, more so indeed that the Arabic scansion goes by accent, not by quantity; the metre is variable, even in the same piece, and the rhyme, instead of being continuous, is alternate. In a word, this class of poetry presents in form a strong resemblance to the ordinary English ballad, and, like it, is the popular style of the country (1865:II, 158).

This analysis gives us precious elements of the fundamental characteristics of *Nabaṭī* poetry. Palgrave’s notation about scansion deserves an initial and brief expansion: the tonic accent is certainly essential to the *Nabaṭī* poetry. But it is not different basically from the classical Arabic tonic accent, in that it also combines pitch and intensity (as in Italian and English). However, its place is not identical to the one assigned to classical Arabic by the tradition.² As to the quantitative rhythm, which *Nabaṭī* poetry does not follow, according to Palgrave, one should make a distinction between recited or declaimed *Nabaṭī* poetry, and sung verse based upon measured rhythm. One can hardly agree, in the first place, that *Nabaṭī* poetry does not follow quantitative rhythm;³ as for the latter, this poetry is syllabically structured to follow the rhythmical tune attached to it. One can, however, agree with Palgrave about the metrical differences between classical and *Nabaṭī* poetry. This same observation is made by contemporary Arab authors themselves, such as ʿAbdullāh B. Khamīs and, most strikingly, Saad ʿAbdullah Sowayan.⁴

The conclusion of the British traveler touches a more interesting point: bringing together *Nabaṭī* song and English ballad—this latter being originally divided into stanzas of four verses each and sung on an invariable melody—is more significant for our subject. In Palgrave’s nineteenth-century milieu, the term ballad designated love songs of popular origins (Honegger 1976:I, 67). Even if we exclude a complete identification of the European model ballad with sung *Nabaṭī* poetry of the same period, we can still say that the division into stanzas and verses, indefinitely repeated, characterizes Bedouin and even sedentary folk sung

² We still need deeper comparative phonological research of both classical and *Nabaṭī* poetry. Such research could take advantage of electronic measuring instruments which contemporary technology has made available.

³ Cf. Sowayan (1982:79): “Like that of the classical Arabic poetry, the metre of *Nabaṭī* poetry is quantitative.”

⁴ When they try to establish a parallel between classical meters (*Buḥūr*) and those of *Nabaṭī* poetry, Arab authors end in a deadlock (Sowayan 1982:79).

poetry today.

Popular in its meaning and forms, *Nabaṭī* poetry underwent sociological dichotomy through its long evolution. This phenomenon should be briefly recalled in order to apprehend adequately the essential character of oral traditions of sung poetry. As a general poetic expression, *Nabaṭī* poetry benefited partly from the high admiration Arabs have always had for poetry: like war, this activity was considered as man's noble art. Even when Islam came to reprove poets and poetry as a pagan secular expression—according to some Qur'anic verses (XXVI:224)—still this expression remained privileged as the highest literary form within Arab civilization.

This position is different when we consider the same poetry associated with music, and worse with dance. Even before Islam, music was somehow despised and even feared because of its supposed relations with devil magic. Islam, as early Christianity before it, was hostile to the musical art, even if such hostility varied in tone from one theologian to another.⁵ Consequently, musico-poetical traditions were almost monopolized by slaves and outcast tribes. The most famous of those nomadic lower classes were the *Ṣuluba*, who became the most qualified professionals of singing, playing *Rabāba*, and dancing. The same traditions also became the art of another professional social group: the Tziganes, ethnically non-Arabs but arabized by language; named *Kawliyya*, they are wonderful singers and dancers and are spread all over the eastern Mediterranean area. When we go more deeply into this subject, we find that the religious anathemas have not been very effective. The Arabian Peninsula has kept alive its musico-poetical traditions, mostly sung poetry, in the eastern and southern provinces as well as in the Gulf area.

The expansion of the Wahnābī religious doctrine (eighteenth through twentieth centuries) has, as in early Islam, brought some new restrictions. But despite this modern prohibition—which has surely obliterated part of those venerable musico-poetical oral traditions—a sort of Renaissance beginning in the 1950's has initiated a new consciousness among Arab folklorists, and official institutions materialized with the creation of several folk groups of tale-tellers, musicians, and dancers as well as specialized centers. Most strikingly, the *Nabaṭī* literature has finally been introduced into the University of Wahnābī, Saudi Arabia.⁶

⁵ The Prophet's traditions (*Ḥadīth*) referring to music include texts condemning it as well as others admitting it; hence one cannot find a well-defined position among Muslim doctors of religious law.

⁶ We have, for another example, the Department of Oral Literature in the Arabian Peninsula, at the University of King Sa'ūd, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Genre Analysis

Nabaṭī poetry has functioned as a basis for the Bedouin cantilena, with or without *Rabāba* accompaniment, in its three principal forms: *Hjīnī*, belonging to the *Ḥadū* traditional genre, *‘Arḍa* (war-song), and *Sāmri*, which designated a cycle of syllabic songs performed by sedentarized Bedouins at their weddings or other occasions of entertainment and rejoicing at feasts. These genres deserve more detailed analysis.

1) *Ḥadū* (classical: *Ḥidā’*): After having been applied originally to the camel-driver’s chant—the ancient Arab chronicles suggest its triple-measured rhythm—the term *Ḥadū* was used for various war-songs, as testified at the beginning of the nineteenth century by the Swiss Arabist J. L. Burckhardt, who observed (1831:86-87):

The war-song of the Arabs is called Hadou[. . .]. If a tribe march against an enemy, the first line is composed of horsemen, whom camel-riders follow, and the Bedouins on foot bring up the rear, armed with sticks, lances, kolongs, etc. If the enemy be near, the foot-soldiers accelerate their pace, and often run to come up with the advanced columns. On this occasion, they sing the famous hadou . . .

Yet Burckhardt underlines the social function of *Ḥadū* as being sung by the camel-driver in order to stimulate the step of his camel, giving a short example which attests that the war theme is valid in modern times.

This primitive camel-driver’s song has kept its original character in another genre familiar to the Bedouins—the *Hjīnī*. Under the transcription “Hodjeiny,” Burckhardt presents it as the Bedouin’s national love song. In fact, its themes variously deal with love and war, depending on circumstances of the *Shā’ir*’s own inspiration. The essential characteristic of *Hjīnī* still remains its rhythm—frequently that of triple time—associated with syllabic poetry. It is usually accompanied by an old string-instrument, the *Rabāba*, and presents numerous variants depending on localities or traditions belonging to different tribes.

I had the opportunity to record interesting examples of those variants, named *Freisnī*,⁷ in Jahrah, a Bedouin village west of Kuwait City. The example under consideration is a choral song on the general theme of *Ghazal* (love poetry), based on a syllabic and measured rhythm, and performed by two choirs singing alternately. The metrical structures make up two verses with double-rhyme, composing what is called *Bait* (literally

⁷ The term *Hjīnī* or *Hujaynī* obviously refers to a dromedary (classical: *Hujūn-Hijān*) and to its driver, while *Freisnī* (classical: *Faras*) indicates a mare and its rider, a favorite theme of Arabic poetry. We notice a variant of this term, *Freinsī* (by metathesis), used in Kuwait.

“dwelling, home,” and here “stanza”). Each verse is repeated as a solo, then sung five or six times by one chorus or the other. A special dance underlines the rhythm, the strong time being beaten by the feet of the dancers, knocking on the ground as in the well-known *Dabka* of the Middle and Near East area; one difference here is that men, hand in hand, are facing each other, sometimes advancing, sometimes going back according to rhythmical movements.

Both recorded examples below, performed by folk groups of Fanṭās and Jahrah, give us interesting information on variants existing within the principal genre and its fundamental and invariable characteristics. So the song itself differs according to the text; in the second example it follows the *Sāmri*. In the same way, the metrical structure of the poem is not identical over the texts, the only invariable element being the double-rhyme pattern constituting the distich (*Bait Shiʿr*). Although dealing with *Ghazal* (love), the theme itself does not seem to involve any determined function implied by the sub-genre appellation. Finally, the theme remains invariable all over the pattern songs. Accordingly we may have love (*Ghazal*) or panegyric (*Madīḥ*) or even religious poems sung with melodies belonging to war-songs, while some wedding or religious melodies may be associated with war poems. So there is no set of absolute rules or any systematic codification for genre nomenclature. The only classification should be an empirical one.

Here is the first example of *Bait* pattern:

ʿĀ/ra/ḍhat/nī Wa/-nam/shī (7 syllables)
Fā/yi/tin Bīṭ/-Ṭirīj (6 syllables)⁸

I met her, going my way,
Wearing her crepe ‘*Abā* (veil).

* * * * *

I said: hello . . . dost thou not need a companion?
Give me the “*Id’s*” kiss; this will be thy present.
Fine are her lips, luminous her smile.
The fringes of her robe wrinkle with her hip movements.
I am exhausted, walking all the day around her tent.
Seeing her breaks my heart;
My spirit is dried, like an herb to be consumed,
I am hung up on her lips. Don’t blame my soul.

⁸ For the long and short vowels, we follow the conventional classical Arabic transcription in order to make the text more easily intelligible. But it is obvious that, when applied to *Nabaṭi* sung poetry, those vowels follow essentially melodic and syllabic rhythm, and not that of classical meter. One can also note that the last verse forms a sort of refrain, the last rhyme being “*tj*.”

As for most of those songs, the same pattern goes with other syllabic poetry on the basis of various metrical schemes and melodies, as in this second example of *Freisnī*: (Pattern-stanza: double-rhyme [*Winnī*-*'Āyā*]: this is a model from *Dūbeit* of eleven syllables for each verse, repeated five to six times):

Wa-nā l-Bāriḥā Sāhirin Wa-Winnī (11 syllables)

Wu-lā Ḥadin Fizi^c Lī Min Danāyā (11 syllables)

Wa- a - nā-l Bā - ri - ḥā Sā - hi - rin Wa - Win - ni

Wu - lā Ḥa - din Fi - zi^c Lī Min Da - nā - yā

Yesterday, sitting up and groaning
Without help coming from anyone.

* * * * *

I saw her eyes enveloping me
Like a goatskin bottle's folds wrap the thirsty,
Burning my heart like a spark,
While her veil waved in the wind.
Welcome to the waving veil
Giving brightness to the universe and the star constellation.⁹

2) *Arḍa*: *Arḍa* is one of the most important genres of folk musical-poetry known all over the Peninsula. It certainly belongs to the Bedouin *Ḥadū* cycle, as J. L. Burckhardt observes, but it has in fact become an essential part of the popular traditions of both Bedouins and sedentaries.

By origins, *Arḍa* is unanimously considered to be preeminently the Arab's war-song. This classification originates from the movements, gestures, and weapons which accompany *Arḍa* performance: singers, in two groups supposed to represent vanquishers and vanquished, hold up

⁹ Because of the metaphors and alluding procedure very frequently used by the Bedouin poets, the meaning of this last verse is difficult to understand. One could posit a different interpretation.

swords and bucklers, sometimes guns, and move in simulated war operations.

This warlike function may be traced back to the important pre-Islamic poetic genre, both classical and popular, that was named *al-Hamās*. But still the terminology remains an enigma for its etymological meaning as well as for its historical context. The ʿARD root indicates both “to counter,” “to be opposed to,” and “to show,” “to parade.” But the feminine form of ʿARDA, “parade,” seems more consistent with the modern function of this song, as is suggested as well by the performances, under the same word, of similar songs and dances in other Arab Near East areas, such as Syria for example.¹⁰

Western travelers of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries refer sporadically to this poetry of war-songs performed in Arabia. So Richard F. Burton gives us, in 1855, this short notice (1924:I, 418-19):

A well-mounted party of fine old Arab Shaykhs of the Hamidah clan, preceded by their varlets, performing the Arzah or war dance,—compared with which the Pyrenean bear’s performance is grace itself,—firing their duck-guns upwards, or blowing the powder into the calves of those before them, brandishing their swords, leaping frantically the while, with their bright coloured rags floating in the wind, tossing their long spears tufted with ostrich feathers high in the air, reckless where they fall; servants seeking their masters, and masters their tents, with vain cries of Ya Mohammed . . .

More recently, in the twenties of this century, another very reliable witness, H. R. P. Dickson, a British resident in Kuwait for many years, describes performance of the ʿArḍa in great detail; the warlike character is still present (1967:222-23). However, the actual performance of the ʿArḍa does not correspond completely to those descriptions, in that we can no more classify it as a pure war-song. More precisely, we note for example that sticks have replaced swords, bucklers, or guns. We see them no more, other than in some very few official ʿArḍa, performed on certain formal days by high personalities of royal families. Sometimes a young man, raising a sword, stands in the middle of folk singers, simulating some warlike symbolic movements. That demonstration is just for show. In the same way, the gestures of vanquishers and vanquished have been replaced by dance movements which singers perform, divided in two ranks and moving forward and then backward.

If we consider melodies or texts, again we do not find the specific

¹⁰ Cf. chiefly Lecerf and Tresse n.d. Although the authors link Syrian ʿArāḍa to war-song, they prefer not to give a clear etymological meaning for the term itself. One regrets the absence of musical notation that would give more accuracy and permit better scholarly comparison with the ʿArḍa of the Arabian Peninsula.

characteristics of a war-song. The rhythm is rather slow and quiet, sounding more religious than martial. The poetry itself, apart from brief allusions to the chieftain's or the prince's warlike exploits, expresses mostly the performer's distress appeased by invocations and prayers to God.

Here the problem of criteria again arises: what essentially characterizes *ʿArḍa*? One of the first characteristics is the conjunction of measured melody with metrical poetry divided into strophes, together with dance movements—though we can find those three elements in other Bedouin songs also. However, the original rhythm that underlines dance movements remains the most typical characteristic of the *ʿArḍa* beyond its variants. Such variants can give different names to the same cycle as in the case of *ʿAyyāla* and *Razḥa*, two song-dances known mostly in southeastern Arabia, United Arab Emirates for the former and Oman for the latter. According to the Gulf authors, they too belong to the *ʿArḍa* genre.

3) *Sāmri*: More specific to the oral Bedouin heritage is the genre named *Sāmri*. The etymology of the term itself refers most likely to the classical root SMR, literally “to converse with, to recite poetry or tales during vigils.”¹¹ Hence, the name *Sāmri* designating a poet or singer entertaining those nightly assemblies is very common in the desert.

Early travelers to Arabia who visited Bedouin tribes and knew much about their customs talk of those nightly assemblies gathered around a chief or notable of the desert. Even though we do not have a very old testimony dealing with the specific genre of songs performed during those assemblies, historical documents of early Arabia and of the beginning of the Islamic era do mention those assemblies of singing poetry. This tradition became progressively the prince's, governor's, or tribal chief's privilege all over the Islamic empire. The most valuable and detailed information about this tradition is given by J. L. Burckhardt, with his perfect knowledge of Arabic and good musical learning added to his varied education (a combination of abilities which was not typical of other Western travelers who specialized in geography, archaeology, ethnology, anthropology or were simply merchants or businessmen). Burckhardt's precious information can be found in the first volume of his *Notes on the Bedouins and Wahabys* (1831:I, 83); so also this following notice:

Besides the “kaszide,” the Arabs have different national songs. Those of the Arab women are called “Asámer.” On the occasion of feasts and rejoicings, the women retire in the evening to a place at some small distance behind the tents. They divide themselves into choruses of six, eight, or ten women: one party begins the song, and the other in turn repeats it; this is called “el benát yelaboua el asámer.”
The song is always in praise

¹¹ *Al-Samar*: literally “nightly talks, tales, or reciting poetry in the moonlight,” hence *Al-Samra*: “nightly legend telling” (*Al-Muʿjam al-Wasīṭ*, 1960:I, 450).

provided sporadic information about them. One could deduce from those indications that, beside *Shā'ir* sung poetry or recitative with the accompaniment of the *Rabāba*— a permanent and general practice in the Bedouin desert—there is a collegial sung poetry that the Bedouins perform nightly for their entertainment or that of their audience. These poems are composed of measured rhythms with dance, the theme being war exploits or praise of the tribe's chief. The pattern is basically identical; that is, it consists of a responsorial song performed by two choruses alternating with each other. The text itself is composed of one verse of syllabic meter and repeated several times according to the chief conductor's wish.

Today oral tradition assigns the *Sāmrī*'s origins to Saudi Arabia. Some Arab authors even certify that this tradition came to the Gulf through migrations of Bedouins belonging to the Dawāsir tribe (inhabitants of Wādī al-Dawāsir) who lived a sedentary life all along the coasts of the Gulf. But we may see this tradition rather as a group of songs, designated by the very far-reaching title of *Sāmrī*. Consequently, we have today, as in Burckhardt's nineteenth century, a great variety of *Sāmrī* whose specifications depend on the geographical, social, or ethnic origins of the poets and singers. Some of those latter have even created a very modern genre of *Sāmrī* more in tune with urban audiences. These popular songs are called *muṭawwara* ("evolved"). One should accordingly confess that today *Sāmrī* has but a few similarities to the old Arabian tradition, even if we refer to the information going back only as far as the eighteenth or the nineteenth century. Hence the difficulty of analyzing this song in order to underline its specific characteristics. Here again we should distinguish between basic and, as such, invariable elements on the one hand, and changing and variable ones on the other.

One of the fundamental characteristics of *Sāmrī* is its language: this is constant in *Nabaṭī* sung poetry. But still the problem remains as to whether this poetry is based on a quantitative meter as in classical *Qaṣīda*, or on strophic poetry with syllabic meter. It would be tedious and unuseful for this article to go into details about the different views expressed on this problem by contemporary Arab authors. One could summarize by saying that prosodic construction of *Sāmrī* follows two patterns, according to the singing form: one is similar to classical *Qaṣīda* with quantitative meter and uniform rhythm; the other is structured syllabically and composed of two to four strophes that repeat the last verse as refrain. The latter form is illustrated in the following short example:

Shi/rāy/ Yāh/li l/-Ha/wā/ Shi/rāy
 Esh/-Shōg/ °Az/zam °A/lā/Ghir/bā/li
 Shi/rāy/ Yāh/li l/-Ha/wā /Shi/rāy

This process of repetition which is typical of *Sāmrī* song as it is

performed today is quite an interesting element of this oral tradition in general. Its function seems obviously to facilitate memorization, but also to give rhythm its predominance and color. This observation could be applied to most rhythmic songs associated with individual or group dances: the poetic text and thematic content seem to have a minor role in this respect. The author of this article, for example, has been struck by the fact that when he asked chief conductors of folk groups to recite the poetic text without melody and rhythm, they could hardly proceed beyond the first verse, although when singing with their groups they could go for hours reciting those verses they memorized easily.¹²

The minor function of the literary text in this song genre has another consequence: the frequent use of short meaningless syllables or onomatopoeia comprising sometimes a complete stanza. Those syllables are repeated by the chorus even when the chief singer introduces new verses, as we notice in this following example of women's *Sāmri* recorded in Qaṭar:

Yā Lā Lā-Yā Lā Yā Lī	(twice)
Lā Lā Yā Lī	(twice)

Finally, one could consider the fundamental characteristics of the *Sāmri* as being essentially those of choral song, with a specific collective execution mode and dance movements. That attribution means that it would be hypothetical to classify this genre in fixed or synthesized patterns. In such an evolving field, one should be very careful not to formulate absolute rules or to present as an authoritative synthesis what is essentially changeable. More modestly, we should limit observation and analysis to the samples recorded and studied on their own, but also compare them to other samples so diversified in this area of the Peninsula.

Orality and the Living Magisterium

This approach could be applied to the more general field of oral traditions in the Arab area at large: firstly, we should recognize that the sung poetry of the Peninsula is part of a wider Arab-Islamic heritage; secondly, we should never omit the essence of this heritage, that is, orality based on the living magisterium. In the heart of this orality we find the *Shā'ir*, at once poet, rhapsodist, singer, and musician, sometimes even composer. He is an integral part of the collective popular spirit and it

¹² According to a Qaṭari television interview given by Muḥammad al-Musulmānī, in "Funūn Sha'biyyā min Qaṭar" ("Folk Arts from Qaṭar," 1983).

matters little if those who contribute to it are well known or not, because the *Shā'ir* receives this inheritance as a sacred trust from a master who precedes him. Certainly, he may add his own creative and adaptational talent, but only if he does not transgress the oral tradition which was given to him. Thus he will not be allowed to modify the archetypes constituting the essence of sung poetry.

Those archetypes, shaped according to paradigms or schemas transmitted by tradition but based on certain fixed rules, nevertheless give free scope to the *Shā'ir's* own adaptation and improvisation. This tension underlines the importance of the living magisterium expressed through relations from master to disciple, the essential channel of transmitting oral traditions to new generations. When one interrogates any popular *Shā'ir* about his knowledge, he will reply that he inherited it from a father, mother, uncle, aunt, grandfather or grandmother, or simply from an old master, sometimes even from a sort of divine inspiration: "*Min Allāh*" ("From God"), as is often spontaneously said.¹³ A *Shā'ir* may accordingly be as distinguished a transmitter of oral tradition as he is a talented poet or singer. In his turn, he will become an authorized transmitter or master attracting young disciples and a public audience. The consequence will be a kind of selection of the most qualified masters, this hierarchy being ratified by tacit consensus.¹⁴

As another consequence, oral transmission hardly fits in with any kind of written transcription or musical notation. The major reason is that there is no system of transcription or musical notation able to reproduce adequately the phonetic or morphological particularities of *Nabaṭī* poetry, not to mention the complexity of musical sounds and intervals. Paradoxically, classical Arabic writing used by Arab authors to transcribe folk sung poetry seems much more inadequate than the Latin alphabet itself. The Arabic system, perfectly adapted to the literary language, has no consonants and vowels able to reproduce the most complex sounds of the spoken or colloquial Arabic, mostly Bedouin in the case of sung poetry.¹⁵ Until now, the transliteration system adopted by western Orientalists, going back to the nineteenth century, is a more or less

¹³ Muḥammad al-Musulmānī, basing his conclusion on his research in the field, asserts that all poet-singers were previously educated in their art by an old master ("Funūn Sha'biyyā min Qaṭar").

¹⁴ In each town, village or country, the public audience knows its most qualified poets or singers. Elders who die become reference points, renowned masters imitated by their disciples.

¹⁵ The problem of transliterating folk poetry has been lengthily discussed at an international symposium gathered in Doḥa (Qaṭar) and sponsored by the Arab Gulf States Folklore Centre (November 4-8, 1984). A final resolution called for an expert commission to study this problem and give its conclusions.

adequate reproducing method, short, of course, of the new possibilities of sound-recording available through modern technology. This latter should receive priority over all other means of transmission.

The transmission phenomenon has another corollary: the popular sung poetry of the Peninsula and the Gulf Region still remains alive. As such, it plays, or rather until recently has played, a social, cultural, and spiritual role, a basic characteristic of oral traditions in general. One could say, by the way, that this characteristic is often lacking when we consider the folk songs of modern industrialized countries, such as children's and workers' songs; or those of birthday, circumcision, marriage; as well as war-songs, or specific songs by women, religious songs, and so forth. Of course, this essential function, which has remained unchanged for centuries, is disappearing under the impact which modern industrialization created in this area during the oil era. As many economic or social activities have disappeared, the corresponding sung poetry cycles are heading into oblivion, or if still performed, it is mostly through official channels for entertainment, in order to keep alive some old traditions.

Here appears another phenomenon which may be called "transfer." The popular genius is so strongly rooted in the souls of these peoples that the musico-poetical traditions have progressively assumed another function: one of keeping their spirit alive through the link to an old and permanent tradition to avoid losing all the roots threatened by the turmoil of modern technology. Having left divers' boats, cultivated fields, Qur'anic schools, caravans, and *Ghazū* operations, makers or transmitters of those oral traditions sense now an imperative to gather in the *Dūr*—a sort of patio-house—in order to sing and dance, maintaining their folk heritage. On days of festivities such as *Ramaḍān*, *Mawlid*, or *Aḍḥā* feasts, they assemble, for the same purpose, in public places, or at governors' or princes' palaces, singing and dancing for several days and nights. All those having the opportunity to visit this area may enjoy such very colorful gatherings, which continue to stand as living testimony to an ancestral legacy.

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