

## Epic and History in the Arabic Tradition

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Poetry has been celebrated in Arab culture from the earliest periods onward as its most prominent and most respected art form – music, painting, architecture, and other forms of literature have never come close to rivaling its status. But to understand poetry purely as an “art form” would be a grave misinterpretation, for in early Arab culture poetry played a highly significant role as a mode of communication that was considered more reliable than prose and which therefore occupied a noteworthy place in the transmission of oral history. The role of poetry as an authoritative voice in the oral performance of historical narratives greatly influenced the overall development of Arabic written literature and imbued early Arabic historical writings with certain very distinctive characteristics. Arabic epic poetry, which appears to have emerged in the tenth to twelfth centuries CE, continued to use a number of these “oral” characteristics, while the writing of history developed in new ways that were more purely literate in nature.<sup>1</sup>

Ancient Arabic poetry was composed in some 15 different meters (defined as recurring patterns of long and short syllables), in verses of two equal hemistichs separated by a medial caesura, with mono-endrhyme. The same meter and rhyme were maintained throughout each composition; multi-rhymed poems were unknown, as were compositions that included more than one poetic meter. Since in modern times end-rhyme has become so widespread that it is often thought to be virtually synonymous with the concept of poetry, it should be noted that Arabic was unique in the ancient world in its use of obligatory end-rhyme. Although a number of the surrounding societies used various types of meter in the composition of poetry, none of the neighboring cultures or languages – Akkadian, Aramaic, Babylonian, Berber, Coptic, Egyptian, Greek, Hebrew, Hittite, Latin, Persian, Sanskrit, Sumerian, and so forth – used end-rhyme in a regular manner. Among the ancient Arabs the repetition of a rhyme-word was deemed a “weakness” or “fault” (unless it was used

with an entirely different meaning), which led to a natural limitation on the length of individual poems. The longest of the ancient Arabian odes that have survived range from 80 to somewhat over 100 verses in length. Some sense of the overall attitude towards poetry in ancient Arabia can be detected in two early terms: poetry was known as *kalām manzūm* (organized words), in contrast to prose which was referred to as *kalām manthūr* (scattered words). Both of these terms ultimately derive from the image of pearls being “organized” or “strung” onto a string versus unstrung pearls which were “scattered” or “loose.”

Given the strictures of fixing utterances into both meter and rhyme, the ancient Arabs correctly understood that poetry was more easily memorized and underwent far less change in transmission than prose. It is not surprising therefore that the oldest historical narratives preserved in Arab culture were composed in *prosimetrum* (alternating passages of poetry and prose).<sup>2</sup> These early tales of tribal raiding, battles, and other significant events were transmitted orally for a period of one to three centuries before being written down in the eighth and ninth centuries and compiled into anthologies known as the “Days of the Arabs” (*Ayyām al-‘Arab*) because each discrete narrative had been given a title such as “The Day of Basūs,” which most often referred to the geographic locale of the central event.<sup>3</sup> The narratives are recounted primarily in prose, but at key junctures verses composed by one of the participants or by a witness describing the events are quoted, sometimes at length. The poetry, understood to be historically more trustworthy than prose because it changed less in oral transmission, added authority to the prose narrative it accompanied, while the narrative provided the context for the composition of the poems and the details which allowed them to be fully and properly understood. The authenticating verses tended to draw from a rich traditional repertory of poetic imagery, while the prose accounts carried much of what would now be termed the historical information. The two modes existed in complete symbiosis.

Although no society can endure for centuries without undergoing transformation, the social conditions of the tribal communities of the Arabian Peninsula remained remarkably little changed from the pre-Islamic period until the end of the nineteenth century, and poetic traditions very reminiscent of these ancient prosimetric narratives have been collected there and studied by modern scholars. Much as the fieldwork of Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord (Lord 1960/2000) provided new ideas about the composition of ancient epic poems, recent ethnographic research has brought dramatic new insights to the study of ancient Arabic poetry. The role of poetry in tribal histories was summed up in a remarkably succinct manner, for example, by a Jordanian Bedouin sheikh speaking with anthropologist Andrew Shryock. While arguing that his clan’s history was true whereas the narratives of a rival clan were clearly falsified because they were not accompanied by poems to demonstrate their veracity, the sheikh stated categorically: “il-gissa illay ma ‘ind-ha qasīd kidhib,” “The story that doesn’t have a poem is a lie” (Shryock 1997: 258).

From the work of Saad Sowayan (1985) on the colloquial poetry of the Arabian Peninsula it has become clear that the preservation of historical events in poetry occurs not only because poetry is considered more reliable and enduring, but also

because in tribal settings poetry is an integral part of the events themselves. In one series of poems analyzed by Sowayan, recounting events from the nineteenth century, the sheikh of a tribe who had been removed from power sent to his two sons to come and help him regain his position. The message to his sons was itself initially couched in poetry so that it could be transmitted faithfully by a messenger; for this very reason it also survived and lived on in the historical memory of the tribe. When the sheikh and his two sons did indeed prevail and he was returned to power, an announcement of their victory was sent out to all the neighboring tribes – in poetry, of course. When drought then threatened and the sheikh decided to invade the territory of a neighboring tribe, he first sent an ultimatum – in verse – to that tribe, ordering them to cede their pasturelands or prepare for battle. After the battle had been fought and the new territories had successfully been seized, the sheikh sent yet another announcement in verse to the surrounding tribes declaring his dominion over the area he had won in battle. Although these poems were composed in the late nineteenth century, they help us understand the well-known phrase in Arabic, dating back some 1300 years or more, that “Poetry is the registry of the Arabs” (“al-shi‘r dīwān al-‘Arab”). We might even translate this statement as “Poetry is the writing of the Arabs,” for whenever one might in other circumstances expect a written document of some sort – such as a declaration of war, an ultimatum, an announcement of victory, or a plea for help – these oral tribal histories instead present a poem in which these statements have been preserved. In such social contexts it is easy to understand that a historical narrative unaccompanied by poems might well be suspected of being a lie.

The study of living poetic oral historical traditions has also demonstrated the variety of textual transformations that can occur in oral transmission from reciter to reciter and generation to generation. Though poems tend to be transmitted as coherent units over time, a poem can occasionally slip free of its original context and mistakenly be cited in the context of a different historical event, or, if its original context has been forgotten, a new narrative might be created retroactively to explain the events recounted in the poem (Bailey 1972). These and a variety of other processes of oral composition and transmission assist in explaining a number of textual problems in the early Arabic historical tradition where the same poem can occur in more than one historical narrative or the same narrative at times occurs in different sources with different poems at key points. One explanation of this “slippage” is that the poems are often of a rather generic or even formulaic nature – descriptions of battles where swords flash in the sunlight, the dust from the horses is so thick that it darkens the sky at high noon, and warriors sell their dear souls for the cheapest of prices, are easily applicable to any number of events. It is usually the prose narrative that carries information which is difficult to versify, such as full names of persons, tribes, and geographic locations. As Sowayan notes (1985: 52):

Although nomadic poetry deals mainly with tribal raids and forays, it is not straightforward historical narrative. Poets make only allusions and cryptic references to the incidents celebrated in their poems. Therefore, a poetic reference usually alternates

with a prose narrative which recounts the raids and battles celebrated in the poetry and serves to put the poetry into its proper context and to illuminate its allusions. The poetry does, however, serve as an authentic document substantiating the incidents in the narrative and enhancing their circulation and preservation in public memory.

What is most significant for the purposes of my present discussion, however, is that in the early Arabic tradition poetry was not held to be in opposition to history but rather was an integral part of it. Not only were critical statements and declarations in daily life made in poems but poetry was preserved in early historical narratives as a particularly authoritative and trustworthy voice – indeed, the voice that gave the accompanying prose narrative its claim to veracity.

## Early Genres of Arabic Historical Writing

With the spread of Islam and the rapid expansion of Arabic literacy in the seventh to ninth centuries, new genres of historical narration emerged in Arabic. One of the first new types of narrative was the *ṣira*, the earliest example being that of the Prophet Muhammad (Guillaume 2001). The term derives from a verb meaning to go or to travel, but the nominal form *ṣira* referred not only to a path or way, but also to a person's conduct, behavior, and deeds, and is therefore often translated into English as “biography.” These lengthy biographical narratives, however, were relatively rare and the figures about whom they were composed were almost all religious figures or political leaders. The term seems to have implied not simply a biography, but rather the narrative of an “exemplary” life, the life of someone worthy of being imitated, and it is probably in this sense that, beginning in the Middle Ages, the term also came to be applied to heroic epics.<sup>4</sup>

Other forms of historical narration focusing on political and military events were collectively known as *ta'rikh*, a term that originally had to do with setting the first day of the lunar month, and a related body of biographical information was referred to as *‘ilm al-rijāl* (lit. “knowledge of men”). One of the most striking aspects of these early historical accounts is the enormous efforts expended in the preservation of the first-person voice in the form of the original quotations uttered by participants and witnesses. In historical and religious writings, for example, a highly developed tradition of oral transmission and written documentation evolved. When first-person quotations were cited, they were accompanied by a scholarly apparatus that gave the names of each of the transmitters – the *isnād* – from the speaker (or hearer) of the original statement to the author, followed by the phrase “He said,” which introduced a verbatim first-person statement, as if we the readers were present at the event and hearing the original speaker's voice. It is clear from the widespread use of this technique that the first-person voice was the voice of authority in early Arabic oral and written culture. Third-person narration appears to have been regarded as somewhat suspect and whenever there might be question or doubt about a detail of history, religion, poetry, law, or even grammar, writers resorted to the citation of

first-person statements from respected sources as the ultimate means of asserting the authority and veracity of the information they were presenting.

Another noteworthy aspect of the early Arabic historical tradition is its multivocality, for historians often juxtaposed conflicting first-person reports about a given event in their works.<sup>5</sup> It was not uncommon for a historian to collect from both oral and written sources a dozen or more versions of a single significant event and make only the briefest statement about which of these he himself found to be the most reliable. The art of writing history was the craft of compiling all the potentially veracious accounts of history and presenting them to the reader. What modern Westerners consider "normal" history, that is, univocal narrative history in which the author speaks through an omniscient, anonymous voice, was a later development in the Arabic tradition, and for quite some time was considered a derivative, secondary literary form, a type of "summary" of the more authoritative sources that offered conflicting first-person accounts attributed to specific individuals with full documentation of their transmission.

The use of poetry as a means of documenting and establishing the veracity of historical narratives began to diminish in written historical accounts with the growth of a truly literate culture in the ninth and tenth centuries, although it has continued to appear in Arabic historical writings in this role, or as an occasional embellishment, until the present. By the ninth and tenth centuries, however, the records of the new Islamic empire were being kept primarily in written form so that historians could now in many cases turn to documents for the texts of important messages, declarations, and so forth, and written letters had superseded memorized poems as the primary means of communication among leaders and their functionaries. Veracity and authority could now be claimed through the verbatim quotation of written documents, and the role of poetry as the raw material of history began to wane. By the late Middle Ages writing history in the voice of an anonymous, omniscient third-person narrator had become quite widespread, as had another relatively new genre in Arabic, the chronicle.

## The Arabic Epic Tradition

Arab culture possesses a particularly rich tradition of epic poetry with well over a dozen examples, thousands of pages in length, found in late medieval manuscripts (Lyons 1995). Arabs do not, however, seem to have composed works of this prodigious size in the pre-Islamic period; indeed, the first textual references to these epics do not appear until the eleventh century, and the oldest surviving manuscripts date to the thirteenth. In many ways, however, the epics can be seen as a continuation of the earliest oral historical traditions for they are composed in prosimetric form with alternating sections in prose and verse like the ancient "Days of the Arabs." Also like the early Arabic tradition, first-person utterances by characters within the epic are often cited in verse prefaced by formulae such as "Listen now to what he said," or "And he said," followed by a statement in the present tense ("O men of the

Banī Hilāl, harken to my words!") so that we the readers are "present" at the event itself. A number of these epics recount the deeds of early Arab heroes from the pre-Islamic period, and they eventually came to be referred to generically as *sīra*, or "exemplary biography," the same term that had earlier been used in reference to the biography of the Prophet Muhammad.

The majority of the Arabic epics appear to have been composed from three to five centuries after the death of their main characters (though it is also possible that they existed in purely oral form for substantial periods without leaving traces in the written record), and nearly all of them are indeed based on historical figures. All but one of the epics focus on the life and deeds of a single hero (similar to *Roland* or *Beowulf*, for example), while the "Epic of the Banī Hilāl" (*Sīrat Banī Hilāl*) presents a tribal history centering on a constellation of principal heroes (more comparable in that regard to the *Iliad* or *King Arthur*). It is intriguing, therefore, that it is this latter poem that is now the last surviving epic in oral tradition in the Arab world. Already in the 1830s the British Arabist Edward W. Lane reported that there were some 50 professional epic-singers who performed the *Epic of the Banī Hilāl* in Cairene cafés, 30 more who performed the *Epic of al-Zāhir Baybars* (a thirteenth-century ruler of Egypt), and only three who performed the *Epic of 'Antar ibn Shaddād*, a pre-Islamic hero (Lane 1846). Performers of the *Banī Hilāl Epic* sang their poems to the accompaniment of the Egyptian *rabāb* (a one- or two-string spike-fiddle) without the use of a written text, while those of *al-Zāhir Baybars* recited their tales in a regular speaking voice rather than singing, and raconteurs of the *Epic of 'Antar ibn Shaddād* read their narratives aloud from books – three completely different modes of epic performance co-existing in a single context! Although there is ethnographic evidence of performances of the *Banī Hilāl Epic* throughout the Arab world as late as the end of the nineteenth century, by the second half of the twentieth sung versified performances of the epic were found only in Egypt in two distinct regional traditions: in the south the epic is sung in short-versed (8–10 syllables) rhymed quatrains, while in the north it is sung in lengthy (26–30 syllables), mono-endrhymed, medial caesura verses, which is the basic form of classical Arabic poetry dating back to the fifth and sixth centuries, and is also the only form attested in the manuscript tradition of the epic (Reynolds 1995; Slyomovics 1987).

## The Banī Hilāl in History

Historical references to the Banī Hilāl Bedouin tribe are scattered and sparse except for the one cataclysmic event for which they are best known, their conquest of North Africa in the eleventh century (sometimes referred to as the "second Islamic conquest") and their dominion over much of what is now Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria for just over 100 years before they themselves were destroyed by the eastward-moving Moroccan Almohad dynasty in the 1160s. Their conquest and brief reign are credited by some historians with having abruptly broken the economic and social progress of North African culture and so devastated the region that it never fully



recovered, and by others with having "arabized" and more profoundly "islamicized" many regions, particularly the hinterlands of the coastal areas which to that point had remained essentially Berber and became Muslim only somewhat superficially. Many scholars also believe that all the Arabic-speaking nomadic tribes of North Africa are in some way descendants of the Hilālī invasion. It remains difficult, however, to assess the impact of the Banī Hilāl on the region, because all historical documents relating to their migration, conquest, reign, and final destruction were written by or for their enemies and successors. To the best of my knowledge, there exists not a single written document composed by a leader of the Hilālī tribal confederation. Written history, therefore, not surprisingly offers a decidedly negative view of the Banī Hilāl, while oral tradition, ironically, has transformed them into some of the best known and most widely celebrated heroes of Arab culture!

The single most important historical source for the conquest of the Banī Hilāl and their century-long period of power is the *Kitāb al-Ibar* (*Book of Admonitions*) by Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406).<sup>6</sup> According to Ibn Khaldūn, the Banī Hilāl were first displaced from their homeland in the Arabian Peninsula in the region of the Hijāz and the Najd (near the cities of Medina and Mecca) by the Egyptian Fatimid caliph to punish them for having taken part in the Qarmatian rebellion against the Fatimids. They are said to have been relocated to the southernmost region of Egypt, even though this did great damage to the area. The Cairo-based Fatimids were then faced with another rebellion, this time in North Africa in the region of modern Tunisia, on the part of their vassal Mu'izz ibn Bādīs, who had transferred his loyalty from the Fatimid caliphate to the rival 'Abbasid caliphate of Baghdad. The Fatimid vizier al-Yāzūrī is said to have come up with the idea of sending the Banī Hilāl off to North Africa to fight Mu'izz ibn Bādīs and his allies, the Sanhāja Berbers, with the offer that they could then rule as vassals of the Fatimids over all the territory they conquered. Legend has it that the Fatimid caliph al-Mustansir offered a gold coin to every able-bodied man who would cross the Nile and invade North Africa. When the advance forces of the Banī Hilāl had achieved their first victories and won great amounts of booty, word of this went back to the remaining Hilālīs in Egypt who then wished to join them. But the Fatimid government now *charged* every individual a gold coin for transportation across the Nile, thereby (as Ibn Khaldūn notes approvingly) more than recouping the original investment they had made by paying the earlier forces.

The Sulaym tribe from the Hilālī confederation remained in what is now Libya, but the others pressed on to Tunisia in the year 1051–2 and descended upon it "like a swarm of locusts damaging and destroying all that lay in their path" (Ibn Khaldūn 1847–51: I, 34). The Riyāh clan were the first to reach the region and the ruler, Mu'izz ibn Bādīs, tried to win them over by inviting their leader, Mūsā ibn Yahyā, to his court, giving him his own daughter in marriage, and then attempting to turn them against rebels in the western part of his realm. Mūsā is said to have agreed, but the Banī Hilāl instead began to rampage through the countryside and defy the army of Mu'izz ibn Bādīs. In retaliation, Mu'izz ibn Bādīs arrested the brother of Mūsā ibn Yahyā and held him prisoner. In the meantime Mu'izz rallied together what

forces he could from throughout his territories, including a force of 1,000 horsemen from the Zanāta Berber nomads.

Mu'izz ibn Bādīs went out with his assembled forces to face the Banī Hilāl; however, those of his troops who were of Arab blood (descendants of the first Arab invaders of North Africa four centuries earlier) soon betrayed him and crossed over to the Hilālī side. The battle was fierce and the Sanhāja Berbers alone are said to have lost 3,300 men. Here Ibn Khaldūn stops his prose narrative to validate this information by referring to a poem:

It was about this day of battle that 'Alī ibn Rizq of the tribe of Riyāh uttered his poem (though some say it is by Ibn Shaddād [great-grandson of Mu'izz ibn Bādīs]) which begins thus:

*The image of Umayma [my beloved] came to me;  
[but I had departed] and our mounts were galloping at fast pace.  
Yes, the son of Bādīs is an excellent king!  
By my life, however, he has no [true] men!  
Thirty thousand of them met us [in battle], but  
Three thousand of us defeated them – what a delusion!*  
(Ibn Khaldūn 1847–51: I, 33; Ibn Khaldūn 1971: VI, 15)

In effect, once the tide of battle began to turn, the Berber tribes of the Sanhāja and Zanāta also abandoned Mu'izz, so that he had no choice but to flee and to barricade himself within the city walls of Qayrawān. There he was trapped while the Hilālīs laid waste to the surrounding countryside. The Hilālī clans divided up the territories previously controlled by Mu'izz ibn Bādīs. Eventually an agreement with the Sanhāja Berbers was reached in which they ceded all of the countryside, but themselves retained control of the cities and paid tribute to the Hilālīs. Having neutralized the Sanhāja Berbers, the Hilālīs now turned their arms against the Zanāta Berbers of western Algeria. The Zanātī ruler of Tlemcen sent his vizier, Abū Su'dā Khalīfa with a major force to halt their advance, but they were routed and he himself died in the battle (in the epic tradition, Abū Su'dā Khalīfa has been transformed into the most powerful enemy of the Hilālī tribe and the narrative's greatest villain).

Ibn Khaldūn reports, "All of these events deeply disturbed the prosperity of North Africa, devastation spread everywhere, and highwaymen cut off the main routes and robbed travelers" (Ibn Khaldūn 1847–51: I, 37). He later describes the period of Hilālī rule as a period of injustice and pillage and refers to them as bandits and highwaymen, decrying the lack of a centralized government and a single leader: "This Arab race never had a leader capable of controlling and containing it" (ibid.: 44).

In 1152–3, the Moroccan Almohad dynasty invaded and captured much of Ifrīqiyyā. For several years, the Banī Hilāl endured their domination but then revolted in a great battle against the Almohads. Having decided to win or die, legend has it that they hamstringed their mounts so that they would have no means of escape and for three days they held fast in fierce fighting. But on the fourth day, having suffered

enormous losses, they retreated in complete disorder. The Almohads captured their womenfolk, their animals, and their most famous leaders and warriors. In addition, they pressed their pursuit of the battered retreating forces of the Hilālī tribe for a great distance until there was nothing left of the previously invincible fighting force. Thereafter the Hilālī tribal confederation ceased to exist and the surviving groups were forced to recognize the authority of the Almohads, and indeed, they later fought as devoted partisans of their cause. A number of them traveled to Spain and fought for the Almohads against the Christians there. In an interesting observation, Ibn Khaldūn notes that, "The calls that [the Almohad leader] 'Abd al-Mu'min sent to them to urge them to participate in this religious act were sometimes composed in verse" (Ibn Khaldūn 1847–51: I, 47).

Throughout his account of the history of the Banī Hilāl, Ibn Khaldūn makes reference to poems as critical statements or utterances (such as the call to arms mentioned above, or the promise of North Africa by the Fatimid Caliph before their migration) or as an authenticating source for his information. When he gives the names of the Hilālī leaders, for example, he concludes his list with the statement: "All of the persons we have just named are mentioned in the poems of these Arabs" (Ibn Khaldūn 1847–51: I, 38). A number of these figures are also characters in the Hilālī epic poem, including Hasan ibn Sarhān, Salāma ibn Rīzq (better known as Abū Zayd), Diyāb ibn Ghānim, Zayd ibn Zaydān, Zayd al-Hajjāj ibn Fadl, and others. In fact, the degree to which Ibn Khaldūn's historical narrative is or is not drawn from the oral materials he collected from remnants of the Banī Hilāl tribe remains unclear.

But Ibn Khaldūn did not blindly accept all information that reached him in verse. In the following passage it is evident that as a historian he grappled with the issue of how much credence to give to the oral legends and poems that had emerged among the fragmentary Hilālī groups in the two centuries since their defeat at the hands of the Almohads. On the one hand, he was fascinated by these materials and collected them assiduously; on the other, at times he found them unbelievable, deemed the poetry to be corrupt, and dismissed it as a reliable basis for writing history. His thoughts and arguments straddle the two (at times conflicting) worlds of literate historiography and oral epic narrative:

Among the Hilālīs there are preserved very strange tales about their arrival in Ifrīqiya [modern Tunisia]. They hold that the Sharīf ibn Hāshim, ruler of the Hijāz (called, according to them, Shukr ibn Abīl-Futūh), contracted an alliance with [the Hilālī leader] Hasan ibn Sarhān, whose sister, al-Jāzya, he married, and from that marriage there was born a son named Muhammad. Quarrels and disagreements having arisen between the Sharīf and the members of the [Hilālī] tribe, the latter decided to migrate to North Africa. But first they used a ruse in order to bring [al-Jāzya], the wife of the Sharīf, with them. Upon their advice, she asked permission from her husband to visit her parents. He consented and accompanied her to the place where the [Hilālī] tribe was encamped. They then departed, taking the Sharīf and his wife with them, with the supposed intention of traveling to a place where they would, the following day, devote themselves to the pleasure of the hunt, and they would rejoin the camp as soon as the tents had been

set up there. As long as they were in the territory of the Sharīf they concealed their true intentions, but as soon as they reached lands that were beyond his jurisdiction, they sent him off [alone] in the direction of Mecca, his heart filled with sadness at seeing the person he so loved taken away from him. His wife continued to feel for him a love as strong as that which tormented him, and she eventually died, a victim of her love.

Even today, among the Hilālī tribe, they tell stories of these two lovers [so beautiful] as to make one forget those of Qays and Kuthayyir [famous Arab lovers of the pre-Islamic period]. They recite as well a large number of verses attributed to the Sharīf and his wife. Despite the fact that these fragments do not lack a certain regularity and cadence, as well as a certain facility of expression, one does notice in them interpolations, alterations, and falsified passages. The grammatical rules of case-endings are completely ignored (though we have already established in the introduction to this work that the absence of grammatical inflection in no way hinders precise expression of thought). It is true that educated people, city dwellers, do not like to listen to such poems, because the grammatical case-endings are not always correct. Such a fault, in their view, radically subverts precision and clarity – but I am not of their opinion.

As we have already stated, these poems include numerous interpolations and, in the absence of any proofs that could attest that they have been transmitted without alteration, one should not lend them any credence. It would be completely different if we were certain of their authenticity and had the assurance that oral tradition had preserved them with their original integrity, because then one would find in them passages which would confirm the stories of that tribe's wars with the Zanāta, and help determine the names of their leaders and establish the circumstances regarding them. In our opinion it is impossible to accept that the texts of these poems have been preserved intact; we even believe that any cultivated person would easily recognize some of the interpolated passages. That is all that can be said on the subject.

Whatever the case may be, the members of the Banī Hilāl tribe are in agreement, and have been for several generations, that the story of the Sharīf and al-Jāzya is true, and whosoever would be so brazen as to contest its authenticity or even express any doubts, would risk being accused of madness or ignorance, so widely believed is this tradition among them.

(Ibn Khaldūn 1847–51: I, 41–2; Ibn Khaldūn 1971: VI, 18)

In the modern epic version of this tale, the "ruse" that is used to lure the Sharīf out of his territory is more elaborate. The Hilālīs camp each night at a spot in the desert where there is a small body of water and a palm tree. Each day the Hilālī men accompany the Sharīf out hunting, but while they are gone, the womenfolk pack up the camp and move further into the desert, carrying with them the palm tree and many skins filled with water with which to recreate the pond. At the end of each day, the Sharīf returns from the hunt near nightfall believing himself to be back at the same place because he finds the same palm tree and same small pool of water near his tent. Once they have lured him beyond his realm, the trick is revealed and he is forced to return alone, without his beloved al-Jāzya. This may in fact be the version that Ibn Khaldūn heard among the Arab nomads outside the walls of Tunis six centuries ago, though his summary of it does not include all of the details. It is noteworthy that Ibn Khaldūn cites this love story as one of the legendary aspects of oral tradition that

he finds problematic, for one of the primary differences between written history and oral epic is precisely that the epic offers a more personalized version of history where the motivations for great events are often rooted in the emotions and desires of individuals, whereas the written accounts see the same events as the result of political struggles among larger social units such as tribes and kingdoms.

Ibn Khaldūn was not only the author of the primary historical source for the Hilālī conquest of North Africa, but he was also the first writer to transcribe fragments of the Hilālī epic itself. His "Introduction" (*Muqaddima*), to which he refers in the quote above, is a remarkable study of the philosophy of history and the study of human civilization (Ibn Khaldūn 1958). Long before Spengler or Toynbee, Ibn Khaldūn developed a theory for the cyclical rise and fall of civilizations based upon the concept of *ʿasabiyya* which can be translated as "group feeling" or "social cohesiveness." His observation was that new dynasties typically arose among "barbarians" or "tribal groups" who came from the deserts and attacked the urban centers. They managed to conquer these fortified cities and their well-organized armies due to their group's superior sense of "social cohesiveness" in which individuals worked fully for the larger social unit of the tribe. After conquering these centers of urban culture, however, they eventually grew soft and lax and lost the "group feeling" and "cohesiveness" necessary to keep them in power, so that they in turn later fell victim to the next wave of conquerors from the deserts whose tribal cohesiveness was stronger than theirs.

Although this is the central thesis of Ibn Khaldūn's famous "Introduction," he also touches on many other aspects of human culture. Towards the end of this work he makes what was then a very radical argument, namely, that colloquial Arabic poetry, though it did not use the strict meters and case endings of classical Arabic poetry, was nevertheless beautiful and expressed deep thoughts. To demonstrate his point that colloquial poetry could be equally as beautiful as classical poetry, he cites as examples several pages of poetry about the heroes of the Banī Hilāl tribe that he had collected outside the city walls of Tunis, including fragments from the tale of the Sharīf and al-Jāzya (Ibn Khaldūn 1958: III, 415–23). These are the "strange tales" and poems that he refers to in the long quotation cited above. Although it is unclear whether at that point these poems were individual poems and tales or whether the overall structure of the epic had already emerged, the fragments he cites are so clearly from the epic tradition as it has come down in oral tradition until today, that specific scenes and even specific oral formulae and verse fragments can be matched up with recordings made in Egypt in the late twentieth century.

After the initial fragments transcribed by Ibn Khaldūn there is a lack of written evidence about the epic for several centuries. Around the end of the eighteenth century, however, thousands of pages of manuscript from the epic were written down, most probably in the region of Tunisia (Ahlwardt 1896; Ayoub 1978: 347–63). Given the dialectal features, unusual misspellings, and orthographic errors in these texts, scholars have concluded that they were most probably taken down from oral recitation, rather than being a text redacted by a literate author. At this point the narrative is indisputably an epic, and it closely resembles the epic as it was performed

in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in various regions of the Arab world. The most likely trajectory for the growth of the epic is that it had its earliest roots in the tribal poetry and oral historical narratives of the Banī Hilāl themselves. Normally, of course, members of one tribe do not memorize and recite or sing the poetry of another tribe, but the near total destruction of the Banī Hilāl confederation at the hands of the Almohad dynasty seems to have made their tales available and appealing to diverse populations of the Arab world. In retelling the story of the Banī Hilāl, one was not praising an existing opponent but rather praising the feats of bygone heroes. It is unclear from the examples transcribed by Ibn Khaldūn in the fourteenth century whether the oral tradition at that point more closely resembled tribal historical narratives interspersed with poems, or a full-fledged epic. The poems he cites have a decidedly more narrative form than the descriptive lyric poems of the ancient Arabs; so it is possible that he captured the tradition in its period of coalescing into a massive, overarching poetic narrative. Whatever the case with his examples, it is clear that by the eighteenth century this transformation had taken place and that the larger narrative structure now dominated and organized the individual scenes, poems, and tales.

## The Epic in Performance

In the village of al-Bakātūsh in northern Egypt there were, in the early 1980s, 14 households of hereditary professional epic singers, families in which epic singing was the sole occupation of the menfolk, though females supplemented the family income with a variety of odd jobs such as selling vegetables in the marketplace or weaving baskets from palm fronds.<sup>7</sup> The form of performance practiced in this region was prosimetric (alternating passages of spoken prose and sung poetry) in which the poet accompanied himself on the two-string coconut-shell spike-fiddle (*rabāb*), occasionally with a second *rabāb*-player for larger performances. The epic was nearly always performed interwoven with other genres of poetry, particularly songs of praise to the Prophet Muhammad (*madh*) and a short lyric form known as *manwāl*. The poetic form of the epic was that of classical Arabic poetry (lengthy verses divided into two equal hemistichs by a medial caesura with mono-end rhyme), but the language used was the local colloquial dialect. Because two different dialectal pronunciations were common in the region, the poets were adept at singing in both (for example, with the letter *qāf* pronounced either as a glottal stop or as "g").

It was widely recognized that poets were of different quality, and only five poets in this community were considered to be "master poets," in part because they were believed to control the repertory of the entire epic, which ran anywhere from 80 to 140 hours in length of performance. The epic appears never to have been performed from beginning to end, however, but rather in episodes which lasted anywhere from four to 12 hours depending upon the complexity of the narrative and the amount of detail given by the poet. Thus the "length" of the epic as a whole is in some sense a purely theoretical construct; the figures cited above are the result of adding together the total number of hours of various poets' episodes sung on different occasions. In



the past, poets had sung in a wide variety of contexts including harvest festivals, saints' festivals, weddings, in private homes, cafés, and other public spaces, but by the 1980s they were surviving almost entirely from performances at weddings and in private homes. It was typical for poets who had been engaged to sing for more than one night to break off the story at its most dramatic moment in order to lure the audience back the following evening. All the poets expressed a strong aversion to singing during daytime; traditionally the epic was sung only at night. Electricity arrived in the late 1970s and television followed only a few years later, greatly diminishing the demand for evening performances of the epic. Public schools provided new opportunities for the children of epic singers and made it impossible for young boys to spend years as apprentices traveling to performances with their fathers or other male relatives. By 2000, there were no longer any performing epic-singers left in the village.

Very similar to the Yugoslavian traditions studied by Parry and Lord (Lord 1960/2000), the poets did not "memorize" the epic, but rather learned a massive amount of information – such as names, places, events, and plots – and became adept at re-composing the tales with more or less variation depending upon the circumstances. Somewhat surprisingly, "hack poets" who had only learned a few episodes of the epic tended to sing their repertory with little variation, at times achieving nearly verbatim repetition even in performances separated by several months. The "master poets," on the other hand, produced fascinatingly fluid performances in which they would readily interweave improvised greetings to audience members, expand or contract scenes at will, retell the same scene in an entirely different "tone" (comic, serious, or romantic, for example), and even manipulate the plot of the epic in order to comment on local social or political situations. As one poet stated regarding a lengthy sequence of battles between one of the main heroes and the seven kings of an opposing tribe, "I can kill them off in half an hour or take a whole night doing it!" At the same time, in interviews and discussions of performances they maintained a clear idea of what was, and what was not, part of the epic.

Within the epic material itself, there was also a distinction between what might be termed "recitativo" – passages that describe stock scenes such as journeys, battles, banquets, messages, marriages, horses, or maidens – and "arias" – those passages which recount the most dramatic scenes of the epic. Although master poets constantly adjusted the amount of detail in the "recitativo" passages, they would usually sing the "arias" nearly verbatim and would defend their versions of those significant scenes against criticism from the audience (whereas criticism of the "recitativo" material would sometimes result in the poet re-singing a passage according to the dictates of an audience member who might have complained, for example, that the poet had left out some detail). Thus a well-known scene such as the dramatic poem of grief that the hero Rizq, the Valiant Son of Nāyil, sings to a wolf in the desert when he believes his wife and son to be lost forever, varied far less from one performance to another by the same poet, and even from poet to poet within this community, than other more generic passages. Such scenes were also at times sung alone, detached from the larger narrative of the epic, at the request of audience members.

This may lend credence to the theory that some narrative ballads originated as scenes in longer poems.

Of particular interest is the fact that these poets were able to sing their narrative with a focus on one or another of the main heroes. For Egyptian villagers the main hero of the epic is without question Abū Zayd, the witty, cunning, well-spoken, "Odyssean" figure of the tale, one of whose most common epithets is "father of ruses" (*abū l-hiyāl*). But in neighboring Libya and among certain Bedouin groups in Egypt, there is a much stronger appreciation of Diyāb, the hot-headed, temperamental, fearsome warrior who represents a more "Achillean" figure. The poets of al-Bakātūsh said that they were adept at recounting certain episodes, so that Diyāb figured more prominently than Abū Zayd, when they sang for a group of migratory Arabs from the eastern Sharqiyya province, who crossed the Delta region twice each year with their flocks and set up tents in the open lands when they stopped near the village. These Arabs were also the only audience for whom the poets occasionally sang during daytime because at their weddings and other celebrations the nighttime was devoted to dancing "the striking of palms" (*ḍarb al-kaff*), in which the men formed lines and sang as a chorus while keeping time by clapping their palms together, and the young women took turns dancing in front of them. Although I was never able to attend or record such a performance, it seems clear from the poets' testimonies that they could produce on demand a closely related version of the epic that shifted the heroic focus of the narrative from one main character to the other.

These epic singers used a limited repertory of a few dozen melodies which they varied at will. There was no sense among them that a particular passage in the epic should be sung to a specific melody. However, part of the knowledge of the epic trade internalized by singers as children during their period of apprenticeship was the rhyme scheme of every episode. It was widely known, for example, that the episode of the "Birth of Abū Zayd" began on the rhyme –āXih (where X represents any consonant, so that *rāyih*, *wādih*, *fālih*, etc. are all acceptable rhymes) and continued in that rhyme until the scene where the Qadi (religious judge) Fāyid makes a speech to the Sharīf of Mecca proposing that the hero Rizq, the Valiant Son of Nāyil, marry the Sharīf's daughter, at which point the rhyme changed to –ālhā (*nālhā*, *hālhā*, *majālhā*, etc.). The "oral formulaic" system of these poets did not generate the same ideas in different metrical contexts (as Parry and Lord defined the oral formula in the Yugoslavian tradition), but rather generated the same ideas with different end-rhymes. Stock scenes such as battles and desert journeys were found in a variety of rhyme contexts using slightly different vocabulary, different metaphors, or merely different word-order to generate similar descriptions with different end-rhymes.

At one point in my field research I was able to provoke and record the transformation of one such scene from one rhyme-scheme to another. Using a somewhat dishonest pretext, I would occasionally ask a singer to re-sing a scene claiming that the tape had gone bad or that I had forgotten to flip it to the other side. One time, however, I asked the poet with whom I worked most closely and who acted as my primary teacher not only to re-sing the scene he had just sung (a desert journey), but to do so on a *different* rhyme. He looked me squarely in the eye and asked me what rhyme

I wanted. He had sung the scene on the rhyme -ām and I asked him to sing it on the rhyme -ār. He put out his cigarette and, without hesitating, picked up his instrument and re-sang about 20 minutes of poetry, changing the end-rhyme of each verse while retaining the ideas and most of the same images. I was fascinated and immediately wanted him to sing it again on yet another rhyme, but the audience members objected saying that they had already heard this section twice and did not want to hear it again. When I listened to the recording the next morning I discovered to my chagrin that my teacher had deftly reprimanded me in the opening verses of the second version for interrupting the performance, but I had been too taken up with listening to the rhymes to catch this. I later apologized and our sessions continued normally after that.<sup>8</sup>

## History According to the Epic

Modern Egyptian performances of the epic recount much the same basic history as that summarized in the works of the fourteenth-century historian Ibn Khaldūn: the tribe's departure from the Arabian Peninsula, their migration and conquest of North Africa, and their eventual annihilation. It is not entirely possible, however, to separate the written historical version and the oral epic since it appears that Ibn Khaldūn himself drew extensively upon oral tradition (a technique, we saw, that was common in Islamic historiography of the period). Nevertheless, the historical version and the narrative of the epic differ on several major counts. The epic, for example, states that the motivation for the great westward journey of the Banī Hilāl was a prolonged drought in their homeland in the Arabian Peninsula. It does not mention the Qarmatian rebellion or the forced migration to southern Egypt ordered by the Fatimid caliph of Cairo. Nor does it contain the famous scene in which the Fatimid Sultan offers the Banī Hilāl fighters a gold dinar to cross the Nile and invade territories further west; this anecdote, however, may be a later embellishment: it first appears in Ibn Khaldūn's work some three centuries after the supposed event (above). At the very end of the tale, the epic also makes no mention of the Moroccan Almohad dynasty; its conclusion is even more tragic in that civil war breaks out among the clans of the Banī Hilāl and they destroy each other in a cataclysmic Armageddon-like battle. Since it is quite possible, however, that internecine quarrels were part of the reason that the Almohads were able to defeat the Banī Hilāl, the two versions are not necessarily irreconcilable.

To understand these "erasures" of medieval dynasties, such as the Qarmatians of the Arabian Peninsula, the Moroccan Almohads, and even the Fatimids (who ruled in Egypt but practiced a form of Shi'ite Islam rather than the Sunni Islam of modern Egyptians), we need to consider the context of oral folk history in Egypt. Since these dynasties have almost completely disappeared from the corporate popular memory of the Egyptian rural and working classes in all genres of oral tradition, it is hardly surprising to find that their traces have dropped out of the historical narrative of the epic as well.

A more intriguing aspect of this phenomenon of "erasure" is that Egyptian versions of the epic retain no sense of the fact that the wars of the Banī Hilāl in North Africa were waged by invading Arabs against indigenous Berbers. Since there are no Berbers in Egypt (except for a tiny population in the Siwa Oasis in the western desert), this ethnic dimension of the central struggle in the epic is not tied to any modern reality or concern and thus is simply not relevant to Egyptian audiences. In North Africa, however, where the struggle between Berber and Arab cultures remains very much alive, stories of the Banī Hilāl retain this ethnic confrontation as a primary element of the narrative.

Conversely, memory of the Crusades has been embedded and preserved in the epic, though only tangentially: in their long, circuitous route towards Tunisia, the Banī Hilāl tribe passes through the Crusader kingdom of Jerusalem and fights the "Franks." While the fame of the Qarmatian, Almohad, and Fatimid dynasties faded in popular memory for lack of relevance, the Crusaders left a far more permanent imprint on the Middle Eastern imagination. For this conflict resulted in the (albeit temporary) loss of Jerusalem (the third holiest city in Sunni Islam after Mecca and Medina) to invaders of another religion and in the emergence of a new Muslim hero of legendary proportions in the figure of Saladin. We might well hypothesize that the Crusades continued to function in Arab folk history as a symbol of the Arab struggle with the modern West that gained new prominence with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 and the ensuing spread of Western colonial control. There are no modern descendants of the Qarmatians, Almohads, or Fatimids whose presence would render their memory relevant to modern Egyptian audiences, whereas the "descendants of the Crusaders" continue to be perceived as a threat to Arab identity and Islam.

Returning to history as reported by Ibn Khaldūn, we observe a complicated interrelation between even some of the finer details of the historical account and the narrative of the epic. As noted above, a number of the primary characters of the epic are mentioned by Ibn Khaldūn, though in some cases their roles are rather different. For Ibn Khaldūn, for example, Abū Su'dā Khalīfa was the vizier of the Sultan of Tlemcen in western Algeria, whereas in the epic he appears as the ruler of Tunisia and the primary foe of the tribe. Yet in both cases it is the defeat of Abū Su'dā Khalīfa that marks the completion of the Hilālī conquest of North Africa. Ibn Khaldūn reports that Diyāb was the guide who led the Banī Hilāl in their migration and conquest, but in the Egyptian versions of the epic this role is attributed to Abū Zayd; yet evidence for competing versions of the epic focused on these two heroes perhaps suggests that Diyāb was accorded a central role in the region of Tunisia, as he still is today, while Abū Zayd occupied the place of honor in Egypt.

Perhaps the most significant overall difference between the written and oral versions of the history of the Banī Hilāl is that the oral epic's tale relentlessly focuses upon individual heroes rather than corporate social units such as tribes and dynasties. It tells of the births of these heroes and their youthful exploits fighting battles and wooing beautiful maidens whom they bring back to the tribe as brides. The motives



for their adventures are rooted in individual honor, glory, jealousy, lust, retaliation, and so forth. While the written historical narrative provides glimpses of the role of individuals (for example, when Mu'izz attempts to win over Mūsā by giving him his daughter in marriage, and later imprisons Mūsā's brother when he fails to live up to his part of their agreement), it is primarily a tale of politics and military encounters described in terms of larger social units.

Three basic principles can thus be extracted regarding the relationship between the oral epic tradition and the medieval written historical accounts. First, the epic has not preserved the memory of some of the most powerful political dynasties involved in the history of the tribe, probably because, no longer tied to a reality that concerns modern audiences, they lost relevance in the popular historical imagination. Second, some details (such as names, places, or battles) known from the medieval historical works are found in the epic as well, though frequently displaced or reassigned to different roles. And finally, even where the epic retains elements of the accepted political history of this era, its version constantly valorizes personal motives and characteristics (like bravery, cowardice, jealousy, love, or honor) over political maneuverings or power strategies. In short, the epic retains a reflection of history that focuses on events and lessons that are relevant to its current audience, issues of ethical personal behavior, perseverance against misfortune, and the preservation of one's honor. Written history narrates the rise and fall of dynasties, the epic the rise and fall of individual heroes.

## Conclusion

Written historical sources about the Banī Hilāl tribe were composed by or for their opponents and successors; the Hilālī voice is absent from the written record. In medieval documents they are universally portrayed as rapacious desert Arabs who laid waste to much of North Africa after defeating the two great Berber confederations of the Sanhāja and the Zanāta, but were eventually themselves subdued by the more powerful Almohad Berber Empire. The written record recounts primarily a political narrative of corporate entities such as tribes, clans, and kingdoms, with only occasional focus on individuals. The epic tradition in contrast, portrays the Banī Hilāl as heroes (though not without certain human flaws) and is above all the story of a constellation of individual characters from their births to their inevitable deaths. In the epic, history takes place, but it is heroism that moves individuals (and, by extension, tribes) to act. Most importantly, the epic can never be separated from the context of its performance (or its transcription or redaction in the case of written versions), for as shown above, it possesses a certain amount of fluidity while at the same time maintaining a core narrative remarkably unchanged over time. It is precisely the epic's ability, in performance by a master poet, to change, absorb, and react to current situations while continuing to relate a tradition that its audiences know and appreciate, that has allowed it to survive through the centuries as a living, vibrant tradition.

## Notes

- 1 All dates cited hereafter are CE. For information on the development of the Arabic historical tradition, see Dūrī 1983; El-Hibri 1999.
- 2 For a cross-cultural survey see Harris and Reichl 1997.
- 3 The best studies of these early narratives are Caskel 1930 and Meyer 1970.
- 4 For a discussion of the development of *sīra* and related genres of historical and biographical narrative, see Reynolds 2001: 38–43.
- 5 For a detailed analysis of this technique, see Hodgson 1974: I, 352–7.
- 6 Widely available in a French translation titled *Histoire des Berbères* by Baron William MacGuckin de Slane (d. 1878) which was first published in 1847–51 in Algeria by the French Ministry of War as part of their campaign to publish texts critical to consolidating their hold on Algeria which they had invaded in 1830 (Ibn Khaldūn 1847–51).
- 7 The information summarized here is presented in much greater detail in Reynolds 1995.
- 8 Sample verses from these twin performances are analyzed in “Bani Hilal” in Allen and Richards 2006: 307–19.

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