Poetry and Politics in Contemporary Bedouin Society

Yā Kundalīzza Rāys!

Clive Holes & Said Salman Abu Athera

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and

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Foreword

This is an extremely important collection of popular Arabic poetry, and for a number of reasons. Let us start with the poetry in its English versions: the Arabic originals have been translated – and idiomatically translated at that – into English rhyming couplets. By any evaluative yardstick that one wishes to use, that in itself is a virtuoso exercise in translation, one that involves literally "carrying a work across" the boundaries of two languages and cultures. The resulting English versions, "liberal" though they may be (in the words of one of the authors), succeed magnificently in conveying to a reader of the English texts the sense and spirit (often highly critical and sarcastic) of the original poems.

A second reason is that the selected poems, orally composed by contemporary poets from the South of Jordan and Sinai, take as their subjects a wide variety of political and social issues, both domestic and international. There are trenchant comments about poverty, corruption, and the violation of traditional space (a particular concern to the Bedouin peoples of the region), but there are also equally barbed remarks aimed at those external forces that have seen fit to interfere with and even invade areas within the broader Arabic-speaking region. The poems thus make mention of the various Palestine-Israel conflicts, the Gulf War(s), and the American "coalition's" invasion of Iraq. This volume thus affords its readers, and in one of the most traditional modes of expression – that of improvised oral poetry – invaluable insights into the "view from the other side" in the contemporary Middle East. Perhaps one of the most revealing features of this poetry is the way in which the propagandistic rhetoric of the Western world finds itself parodied through the filter of the relentless gaze of the Bedouin poet.

The authors of this volume provide a wealth of introductory and explicatory materials to help the reader contextualize the performances involved and appreciate the nuances of the original poetry. There is copious reference to the tradition of oral poetry (known in Arabic as "Nabati" poetry), the levels of language that are adopted, the role of structure and imagery, and an explanation of the prosody and metrics involved, all couched in language that happily avoids the often complex terminology of much contemporary literary-critical discourse.

Above all however, it is the sheer excellence of the resulting English translations that linger in the mind, providing the reader with a clear picture of a brilliant and continuing tradition of popular improvised poetry that today maintains and fosters a heritage stretching back for centuries (at least to the 5th century of our era). Poetry in the Arabic-speaking world has always been and still is socially and politically central to cultural life. These excellent English versions of five popular Arab poets can thus be read, among other things, as highly relevant commentaries on a complete breakdown of cultural competence among Western decision-makers that has tragically led to recent incursions into this crucial and much abused region.

Professor Roger Allen, University of Pennsylvania

Preface

This book is about *nabaṭī* poetry, the Bedouin oral art of Arabia and the surrounding areas. *Nabaṭī* poetry, like other types of poetry composed in the vernacular, is a neglected subject: relatively little serious scholarly attention has been paid to it, either in the Arab world or the West. The reasons for this are well rehearsed, but in the view of the writers of this book, wrong-headed: colloquial Arabic has been around for as long as the Arabs themselves, and it shows no signs of displacing the Classical language as the vehicle of pan-Arab elite literary culture, learning, and religion. Nor has any serious attempt ever been made, whether by cunning colonialists or Arabs of dubious political intent, to depose Classical Arabic and elevate an Arabic colloquial to the status of a national or official language. Nonetheless, these chimeras have troubled many Arabs, and combating them has even formed part of the credo of some political parties. In the West, where the orientalist tradition has generally shared the same preconceptions as the Arab literary tradition about what is and is not worth studying, there is the additional handicap that most Arabic specialists do not know the dialects well enough to research the cultures that produce dialectal poetry. And what one cannot understand, one often does not value.

But there is nothing to fear from open minded engagement with the dialects; in fact quite the opposite, since it rapidly becomes clear when one studies them that the dividing lines between the two forms of Arabic, and the verbal art forms expressed through them, poetry, prose or oratory, have never been, and are not now, sharp. There is a seamlessness to Arab oral art that needs to be recognised. A more holistic mind-set would be particularly beneficial to the study of the history of Arabic poetry. The more one reads *nabaṭī* verse, the more one comes to see that, as Albert Socin first proposed more than a century ago, it is the distant but recognisable descendant of the pre-Islamic tradition, which it eventually supplanted in the same geographical space. There is a shared set of genres, of topoi, of artistic sensibilities, and, most strikingly of all, a shared vocabulary. Not to mention a shared landscape: notwithstanding the puzzlement of both the early and later commentators as to what exactly these place-names referred to[1], the towering basalt outcrop of *ḥawmal* and, some 16 kilometres to the west, the well at *ad-daxūl* (now called *ad-dixūl*), both mentioned in the opening line of Imrulqais's *Mu'allaqa*, are still known to Bedouin of south western Najd by the same names, and can be inspected in the photographs taken of them by Marcel Kurpershoek (Kurpershoek 1995: fig. 3 and 4). Pre-Islamic poetry was long ago elevated to the status of a cultural icon, but it should not be forgotten that it too, once upon a time, was part of an oral tradition, reflective of the culture of its time, in very much the same way as *nabaṭī* poetry is now. It is interesting to note that the Arab philological pioneers who studied this oral tradition in the early Islamic centuries, before it had substantially changed, adopted the same ethnological approach to collecting, recording and explicating it as modern researchers who collect and interpret its *nabaṭī* descendant.

This book is not, however, a work of literary history. It is a study of how *nabaṭī* poetry has evolved over the last half-century as a means of expressing the opinions, often dissenting, of the people who compose it, a people increasingly marginalized from mainstream Arab society. The period since the Second World War has seen the Arab countries of the Middle East become fully independent states, at least in theory, and actors on the international stage. Economic and political power has shifted to the newly powerful cities, and the rural Bedouin, having once been a powerful force with economic and even military muscle, have become bit-part players, divided, ruled, and at the back of every queue. Our book looks at how they have reacted to this downturn in their fortunes, and at how they view the new map of the Middle East beyond the borders of the particular state in which they live. The poems in this book come from Sinai and the northern and southern regions of Jordan.

A word about the methods used to gather the data and write this book is in order here. All the poems were recorded by SSAA from recitations by the poets themselves, and have been selected for their subject matter from an archive of recorded and transcribed Bedouin poetry, which includes most of the compositions of 'Unayz and Barrāk, and many hundreds by other Bedouin poets from the area, which SSAA has been working on for many years. The poems were discussed individually with the poets, and all references and obscurities clarified.

Some of the poems by ʻUnayz and Barrāk were presented in SSAA's 1995 PhD thesis. However, the verse translations of these poems in this book are completely new. One or two of the poems by Ḥağāyā have been published in the Jordanian press, but we have used versions recorded by SSAA directly from the poet, which show occasional deviations from the published versions. The subsequent division of labour in the production of this book was as follows: SSAA produced an Arabic script version of each poem to accompany the recording; SSAA and CH then discussed the meaning of each poem line by line; CH transliterated the poems and translated them into English verse with linguistic and cultural annotations, which were checked by SSAA for accuracy. CH wrote the contextualising material, the introductory essay, and compiled the language notes and glossary. SSAA produced the fair-copy Arabic script versions of the poems. CH and SSAA together paid visits to two of our five poets, Ḥağāyā and Šbaylāt, at their homes in Jordan in the summer of 2005 at which they discussed some of the poems. CH back-translated into Arabic some of his English translations (none of the poets knew any English) to check that he had captured not just what they had said, but how they had meant to say it. Unfortunately it was not possible to track down the most elusive of our poets, the Sinai-based Tayāhā during that field trip; and ʻUnayz and Barrāk were by that time already dead. Ten of the forty-one poems (two by each of the five poets) recited by SSAA can be heard at: http://tinyurl.com/ya-kundalizza-rays. SSAA is himself a Bedouin, and a *nabaṭī* poet, and we thought it better to provide studio recordings done by him than to edit the field recordings, which are of variable quality, and full of interruptions and extraneous noises.

Our conclusion from this *modus operandi* is that a native expert on *nabaṭī* poetry and a non-native expert on Arabic dialectology with an interest in translation issues is the ideal combination of skills for this kind of work. We hope you, the readers, agree.

NOTE

1 See e.g. ʻAbd al-Salām Hārūn's edition of Al-Anbārī's *Sharḥ al-Qaṣā'id al-Sab' al-Ṭiwāl al-Jāhiliyyāt*, Cairo, 1980, pp 19-20.

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Thanks go first and foremost to our five poets and their families for allowing us to record and translate their work, their willingness to spend time with us explaining it and talking about *nabaṭī* poetry in general, and for their generous hospitality. Thanks too to the long-term supporters of this project, in particular Deidre Holes and Annie Hudson, whose encouragement kept us going over several years. We are very grateful to the Centre for British Research in the Levant, who gave us modest but important financial support at a key stage in our work, and invited us to contribute a feature article on it to the CBRL Newsletter, putting the portrait of one of our poets (much to his delight) on the front cover. The British Society for Middle Eastern Studies also helped to spread the word by inviting CH to give its Annual Lecture in 2007 on the subject of Arabic popular poetry. All of this more than made up for the disappointingly lukewarm support from some of the 'expert' (but anonymous) referees employed by one of the major UK grant-giving bodies to evaluate our application for major funding. Despite that setback (or rather because of it), we pressed on, firm in our conviction that the neglected field of Bedouin oral art, especially in its modern manifestation, is an important one, and worthy of study both because of its qualities as poetry and because of the place it occupies in the lives of ordinary people. And thanks too to our publishers, Garnet, who needed no persuading to agree to publish this book. Last, but not least, we would like to thank the Jordanian political cartoonist Jalal al-Rifai for the cartoon on the cover: a picture, as they say, is worth a thousand words! *ǧazākum allah xēr*, *kullakum!*

Plates

1 Left to right: SSAA, ‘Awda Ṣabāḥ (a poet), ‘Unayz, and Jum‘a Ḥammād.
2 ‘Unayz with one of his sons.
3 ‘Unayz with one of his daughters.
4 & 5. Tayāhā at home in al-Guṣēma, Sinai.
6 Barrāk
7 Šbaylāt at home in al-Mafraq, Jordan.
8 Ḥağāyā
9 Talking *nabaṭī* poetry in southern Jordan. Left to right: SSAA, Ḥağāyā, CH.
10 Ḥağāyā, a fellow poet, and the British MP George Galloway in Jordan. Ḥağāyā is on the left of the picture.

Chapter 0
Introduction

The aim of this introductory essay is to present a brief account of the current practice of popular Bedouin poetry in the eastern Arab world, and highlight the main thematic and structural aspects of the selection of poems which are the object of this study.

0.1. Definitions

If ‘popular’ in ‘popular poetry’ is taken to mean ‘appealing to popular taste’, then it is clear that limiting the qualifying material to that which is composed in vernacular Arabic would exclude quite a lot that undeniably appeals to (Arab) popular taste. For instance, the songs of Umm Kulthūm are prime examples of ‘popular culture’, but some of the poems that form her lyrics are in an elevated (*faṣīḥ*) Classical Arabic (CLA) by such poets as Aḥmad Shawqī and Nizār Qabbānī. In the field of devotional literature, the same could be said of Bū Ṣīrī’s *qaṣīdat al-burda* – a poem that is widely celebrated by literate and non-literate Muslims alike, but written in CLA. Nor, to take another field of verbal art, oratory, would anyone claim that the speeches of the modern Islamist orator ‘Abdulḥamīd Kishk (d. 1987) are not ‘popular’, even though they too are delivered in flawless CLA: the mass Egyptian audiences Kishk aimed at and attracted, and the sales of his cassettes, show clearly how ‘popular’ he was. Part of the problem is that the word *šaʻbī*, which most often translates ‘popular’ in phrases such as ‘popular culture’ and ‘popular poetry’ has at its core an implication of ‘linguistically non-standard’, and alludes to the diglossic split that has permeated all heartland Arabic speech communities over the whole of their recorded history. But just as something linguistically *faṣīḥ* does not automatically mean that it is exclusively elite in cultural terms, so something *šaʻbī* does not mean that it is irredeemably plebeian. As we shall see, people at the very apex of the social hierarchy can and do produce *šaʻbī* poetry. In this book, following the lead of the two recent major survey articles on Arabic popular poetry by Margaret Larkin (Larkin 2006) and Marilyn Booth (Booth 1992a), ‘popular’ is used in the sense in which *šaʿbī* is used in modern Arabic writing on the subject, that is with reference to its *language*. But when applied to poetry, the term rarely, if ever, refers to the language of ordinary speech, but to a wide range of language varieties all of which, to a greater or lesser extent, employ a mixed vocabulary and syntax, and cover everything from the quasi-Classical – for example, many of the poems in Ṣafīy ad-Dīn al-Ḥillī's mediaeval treatise on the seven poetic arts (Hoenerbach 1956) – to the street argot of a 20th century urban popular poet like the Cairene Aḥmad Fu'ād Nigm.

As well as by the generic term *šaʿbī*, the general type of poetry we will be dealing with here is variously referred to in the literature by the adjectives *nabaṭī* 'Nabatean', *ʿāmmī* 'colloquial', and *malḥūn* 'ungrammatical' in the sense of not conforming to the rules of CLA. These terms are not completely synonymous and the first and last are regional. The first, *nabaṭī*, is the one most commonly used in the Arabian Peninsula and neighbouring areas to describe the non-Classical Bedouin poetry of that region, but is not used elsewhere, even in neighbouring Iraq[1]. It is not to be understood as 'Nabatean' in any literal historical or ethnic sense. The connection with the ancient Nabateans, if there is one, is via a transfer of the connotations of the term: the Nabateans are supposed to have spoken an impure, broken dialect of Arabic, and it is this latter sense of the word that has been transferred to refer to the 'incorrect' grammar of *nabaṭī* poetry, if it is judged by the grammar of CLA (Sowayan 2000:74-75).

Some modern colloquial Arabian poets, however, especially those of Gulf States such as Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar which have a longer history of sedentarisation than central Arabia, prefer to refer to their work by the more generic terms *ʿāmmī*, or *šaʿbī*, which refer both to the non-classical form of its language, and the non-elite social circles in which it was originally composed. Compared to traditional Arabian *nabaṭi* poetry, this type of Gulf poetry deals more with the everyday concerns of the townsman than of the nomadic pastoralist. Typical examples are the Bahraini poet ʿAbdurraḥmān Rafīʿ (Rafīʿ 1970) and the Qatari ʿĪd bin ʿṢalhām al-Kubaysī (al-Kubaysī 2005). Their works deal, often in humorous fashion, with matters such as the difficulties of getting enough money together to get married, discipline problems in schools (Rafīʿ was a school-teacher), high prices in the market, employment problems at the oil company, the stagnant market for pearls (al-Kubaysī had worked in both industries). Both *ʿāmmī* and *šaʿbī*, unlike *nabaṭī*, are widely used throughout the Arabic-speaking world and can refer to any kind of poetry composed in a non-CLA form of the language[2]. The term *malḥūn* literally 'ungrammatical' is used in North Africa to refer to any non-CLA poetic form. The non-CLA nature of the language used in Arabic 'popular/*šaʿbī*' poetry, of whatever provenance, is thus its defining characteristic.

The term 'Bedouin' refers both to the lifestyle of those who originally composed the kind of poetry referred to by it, and to the tribal genealogical structure that was one of its main reference points. Nowadays, of course, no one in Arabia and its contiguous territories leads a life of seasonal migrations and pastoralism, but some members of the older generations still remember (just) a time when they did, and others from more recent generations who remember nothing of the old way of life, nonetheless retain a set of social and moral values, an outlook on life, and an artistic sensibility which they inherited from their forefathers, reinforced by attendance from an early age at tribal *mağālis* where such poetry is often recited and discussed. And while the tribal structure is undoubtedly weaker than it was in political terms, it remains a major formative element in the social structure of all Arabian societies and in many of those that border it.

'Bedouin' poetry involves not just inherited tribal memories and values, but a special vocabulary, a distinctive poetic diction, a range of imagery and a set of poetic genres, which are to a large degree shared by all Bedouin communities, wherever they live. That is of course not to say that the subject matter and the diction of Bedouin poetry have not changed in the modern period: they have, and illustrating and documenting the kinds of changes that have occurred is one of the objectives of this book. The area in which Bedouin poetry is still a living art is vast: Najd (the central region of Saudi Arabia), the Gulf States and Yemen, and the desert areas to the north of peninsular Arabia in Jordan, Syria, Iraq, and Sinai. It is still a popular art form, and a protean one, to which the large stocks of the *dīwān*s of local poets in the bookshops of these countries, and the output of local radio and TV stations attest[3].

0.2. Previous studies

European interest in Bedouin poetry began in the mid-19th century and was initially philological in orientation: orientalists were often more interested in evidence of the preservation of Classical Arabic structures and vocabulary in Bedouin poetry than they were interested in it as art. The Finnish Arabist and explorer August Wallin published in 1851-2 the texts of a few poems gathered in northern Arabia together with a linguistic commentary (Wallin 1852). The first full-length study, by Albert Socin (Socin 1900-1), came fifty years later. Socin collected just over a hundred poems from Bedouin informants in Baghdad and Sūq as-Shuyūkh and published a three-volume study of the texts, German translations, a glossary and extensive linguistic notes. Socin was the first orientalist to claim a direct link between modern Bedouin poetry and that of pre-Islamic Arabia[4]. In 1935, the French Arabist R. Montagne published a short study of 'poetic stories' (*sawālif*) (Montagne 1935) – that is, tribal narratives in which poetry is a main structural component – collected from Bedouin tribes on the Syrian-Iraq border. But the publication in 1928, under the auspices of the American Geographical Society, of the Czech anthropologist Alois Musil's study of the Rwala Bedouin of northern Arabia (Musil 1928) marked a radical change of approach. Musil's work is a classic piece of ethnography, and the large amount of Bedouin poetry it contains is not there for what it tells us about an artistic tradition, or possible links with pre-Islamic poetry, but reflects the central functions of poetry in early 20th century everyday Bedouin life. This shift towards studying the cultural functions of poetry within Bedouin society has continued in recent decades in works such as Abu Lughod 1986 (Egypt), Lavie (1990) (Sinai), Meeker 1979 (North Arabia), Caton 1990 (North Yemen). Marcel Kurpershoek's monumental five-volume study of the poetic tradition of the Dawāsir of southwestern Najd (Kurpershoek 1994-2005), totalling two thousand pages, is a modern landmark in the field both because of the literary richness of the material he uncovered and the acuteness of his observations on the changing role of this type of poetry in modern Saudi society, a product of his many years of residence in the country. There have also been shorter studies, in a similar vein, by Bruce Ingham (Ingham 1986) on the oral tradition of the Ḍhafīr of northern Arabia, by Clinton Bailey (Bailey 1991), of particular relevance to this study, on the poetry of the Negev and Sinai Bedouin, by Heikki Palva (Palva

1992) on poetry and tribal oral narratives from the Balqā’ region north of Amman, and by Saad Sowayan (Sowayan 1985) on every aspect of the practice of the Najdi *nabaṭī* tradition and its historical connections with the poetry of pre-Islamic Arabia.

Some of this work (Bailey’s in particular) has a valedictory feel to it, and publication was inspired, at least in part, by a desire to preserve for posterity what seemed to be a dying art. Indeed, Bailey concludes his book (Bailey 1991:429) with the thought that ‘With the Bedouin episode of human history now ending, we have at least one affirmation of Macaulay’s famous dictum: ‘As civilization advances, poetry declines.’ ’ What Kurpershoek has shown, however, is the ability of this ancient poetic tradition to reinvent itself: today’s poets think nothing of taking traditional forms, diction and topoi, and unceremoniously recycling them for new purposes. In many of its genres, the traditional Bedouin *gaṣīda* was often, to use a modern buzz-word, *multazima*, ‘engagée’, and its modern descendant still can be, but nowadays the field of engagement is not the contested issues and ‘contentious multivocality’ (Shryock 1997:313) of local tribal history, but national issues such as rural poverty, government corruption, and favouritism, or international ones such as the recent American invasion of Iraq. In terms of poetic structure too, the modern poet does not hesitate to innovate and take a traditional element of composition such as the *riḥla* (cf CLA *raḥīl*), and instead of having the imagined deliverer of his poem mount a young thoroughbred camel that needs no stick to urge it on its way, replace it with a ‘Toyota LandCruiser VX-R’ or a ‘GMC pick-up truck’ (Kurpershoek 1999:110-114). To paraphrase Mark Twain, rumours of the death of Bedouin poetry have been greatly exaggerated. The thought occurs, in fact, that this would be a perfect sandpit for European post-modern literary critics to play in. Unfortunately (or on second thoughts perhaps fortunately), however, none of them seem to know any Bedouin Arabic.

The Arab cultural and political establishment has an ambivalent attitude towards Bedouin poetry – as, indeed, it does towards popular literature in general. Literature that is not composed in the standard form of the language is anathema to many critics, and dismissed as too local in linguistic expression, too banal in subject matter, and too ephemeral in its reference points to have any lasting literary value. Others do not confine their criticism to literary matters: they see the non-standard language as an insidious cultural and religious threat, believing that the long-term result of any chipping away at the pre-eminent position of CLA and its modern form, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), would be to cut the Arabs off from centuries of Arabic literature, in a way similar to what happened in Turkey after the abandonment of the Arabic alphabet in the 1920s, which rendered the whole of Ottoman Turkish literature incomprehensible to subsequent generations. Even more seriously, any promotion of the dialects, goes the argument, might in the end make the language of the Qur'an inaccessible to Arabic-speaking Muslims, rather in the way that Latin became a dead language for Christians as its Romance offshoots developed and established themselves as national vernaculars. Moreover, though they are every Arab's native language, the dialects are seen as politically divisive: however fragmented the Arabs may be, CLA/MSA is a potent symbol of a long-lost political unity that many, at least in theory, would like to restore. Encouraging the study of popular literature and the dialects is hence typically dismissed as a 'colonialist scheme' (*dasīsa istiʿmāriyya*) dreamt up to divide the Arabs and 'accepted by a few people terrified by the call of Islam'[5], and those Arabs who express any sympathy for this enterprise are regarded as fifth columnists. 'Official' culture, in short, will have no truck with the idea that the Arabic that people actually speak, or something akin to it, can qualify as an object worthy of study, or any art form that uses it (Saʿīd 1964). One consequence is that there is no Arab university where it is possible to study *nabaṭī* poetry or any other form of popular literature, still less the colloquial language and culture in which it is grounded.

On the other hand, there are some who take pride in this ancient form of oral art. Unsurprisingly, most of them are from a Bedouin background themselves – indeed, the rulers of some Gulf countries were and are noted *nabaṭī* poets[6]. But in the countries where *nabaṭī* poetry still flourishes, there are potential risks if its publication is uncontrolled. In Saudi Arabia in particular, the home of the tradition, the ancient tribal *ʿaṣabiyya* and values that some of this poetry expresses are seen as inimical to the creation of a unified nation in which tribalism, until recent decades such a potent force for fragmentation, can have no place. Moreover, the rampant individualism and lack of respect for the new national orthodoxies – religious ones among them – that are typical of some *nabaṭī* poets is similarly frowned upon as unruly, even anarchic. And since it is the centralised state that controls the means (other than word of mouth) by which poets reach their audiences, it has been possible to censor, even mangle beyond recognition, the printed versions of the work of many of the older generation of poets before it reaches a wider readership (Kurpershoek 1994:71ff). Serious academic studies of the tradition in Arabic do exist, but tend to be written by critics from the region where the poetry is composed – again, especially Saudi Arabia (the earliest is Khamīs 1958). But most critics are content merely to compile collections of the 'best' of this or that poet or region's poetry, with a prefatory nod to its Bedouin *aṣāla*, and explain the difficult vocabulary in footnotes. However, one western-trained Saudi anthropologist, Saad Sowayan, has recently produced a major work in Arabic on *nabaṭī* poetry (Sowayan 2000) to complement his earlier English-language study, which includes a detailed critique of the negative indigenous attitudes towards it, discusses its historical connections with pre- and early Islamic poetry, and presents a detailed study of some major poets from the Najdi tradition. One of his major concerns is the wrong-headed stance of those who condemn the *nabaṭī* tradition, from both a literary-historical and a linguistic point of view, as a 'corruption' of CLA and its literature. On the contrary, he argues, an unprejudiced examination of the *nabaṭī* tradition, informed by an understanding of the literary and linguistic evolutions that have occurred in Arabia just as they have in other human cultures, shows that *nabaṭī* poetry and its language, far from being corruptions, are natural developments of what went before. The critics' stance is, in his view, ahistorical, unscientific, politically motivated, and elitist (*nuxbawī*) (Sowayan 2000:7-25).

0.3. This collection

This collection consists of forty-one *nabaṭī* poems by five poets, two of them from southern Jordan, one from northern Jordan and two from the Sinai Peninsula. Individual biographical details are given in the chapter devoted to each of them, but here some general remarks about their poetry will be made.

The main reasons for choosing these regions on the northern fringes of the Arabian peninsula are, firstly, access: one of this book's authors, SSAA, lives in Jordan, is himself of Bedouin origin (the

Negev), and has ready access to the poets who live there. Secondly, Sinai and Jordan suffer from poverty and political problems, which gives rise to poetry that is contentious in subject matter, treatment and style. Thirdly, the poetry of this region has been much less studied than that of Najd. Najd is the original homeland of *nabaṯī* poetry, and of all the most renowned poets (Sowayan 1985:1), and there is a saying current among the Bedouin of Sinai themselves on the relative quality of poetry from different regions (Bailey 1991:425-426 has a slightly different version):

> *šiʿr aš-šarg gaṭfin min zahar*; *šiʿr al-gibla nagšin min ḥağar*; *u šiʿr al-ġarb fattin min baʿar*

'The poetry of the east (Syria, Jordan, Iraq) is a bunch of flowers; the poetry of the south (Arabia) is engraving in stone; and the poetry of the west (Negev, Sinai, Egypt) is camel droppings'

Whatever the truth of this adage, we had no difficulty in assembling a collection of recent *nabaṭī* poetry, some of it from the area of 'camel droppings', which we think is of high quality. But this was not just our opinion. In the summer of 2005, one of our poets, Muḥammad Fanāṭil al-Ḥajāyā (Abū Sāmir), participated in a week-long festival of Bedouin arts (poetry, horse-riding, camel-racing) organised by the Egyptian North Sinai Governorate. Bedouin poets attended from Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. One of the poems Abū Sāmir recited (poem 5.1. in this book) won first prize in the poetry competition – no mean feat in a large gathering of past masters of *nabaṭī* poetry from several Arab countries.

Our five poets are:

'Unayz Abū Sālim Swaylim al-'Urḍī from the Ḥasāblah section of the Tarābīn tribe of N.E. Sinai, b. c.1920, d. 1999 (henceforth "'Unayz").

Ḥusayn bin 'Īd bin Ḥamad bin Miṣliḥ bin 'Āmir al-Tayāhā of the Banī 'Āmir section of the Tayāhā tribe, N. Sinai, b. 1960 in al-Ḥasana, Wādī al-'Arīš, N. Sinai (henceforth "Tayāhā").

Barrāk Dāġiš Ğāzī Abū Tāyih of the Furayjāt section of the Ḥuwayṭāt, from al-Jafr, S. Jordan, b. 1925, d. 1999 (henceforth "Barrāk").

Ghassān Surūr al-Šbaylāt from the al-'Uwaysāt section of the Banī Ḥasan tribe, originally from al-Zarqā', now living in al-Mafraq, N. Jordan, b. 1954 (henceforth "Šbaylāt").

Muḥammad Fanāṭil al-Ḥağāyā of the Ḍayġam section of the al-Ḥağāyā tribe, from Sulṭānī, S. Jordan. b. 1955 (henceforth "Ḥağāyā").

0.4. Themes

The poems selected deal exclusively with political and social issues (*gaṣāyid siyāsiyya u iğtimā'iyya*), and their dates of composition cover the half-century 1956-2006, though all of our poets have composed extensively in other genres: love poetry (*ġazal*); natural descriptions, especially of animals (*waṣf*); panegyrics (*madḥ*); tribal boasting (*faxr*); satire (*hiğa*); and elegy (*riṯa*).

The Arab-Israeli wars of 1956 and 1973, the post-73 Peace Process, the Gulf War of 1990-1 and the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 are the subject of several poems by three of the poets ('Unayz, Barrāk, Ḥağāyā). Novelties are two poems by Ḥağāyā in praise of the British Respect MP George Galloway, long time supporter of the Palestinian cause and vehement critic of American-British policy towards Iraq. Much of the poetry on war is concerned with the weak leadership and betrayal of the Arab cause, rather less with direct criticism of Israel and the West. While the ordinary Arab soldiers are praised for their courage, their political leaders, at least those of the last three decades, are castigated for their cowardice and treachery. The Gulf rulers in particular, but also the 'turncoats' Mu'ammar al-Gaddafi and Bashar al-Asad, are criticised and lampooned for their subservience to the West (Ḥağāyā 5.1., 5.2., 5.3.), while Egypt and Syria are taken to task for their self-serving actions during the 1990-1 Gulf War, and for not having the political nous to resolve what are seen as domestic Arab problems without bringing in outsiders (Barrāk 3.2.). The two exceptions to this catalogue of international failure are Saddam Hussein and King Hussein of Jordan. Saddam is above criticism: apotheosised as the shining epitome of Arab heroism, he is portrayed as having been left in the lurch by lily-livered 'allies' to face the enemy on his own (Barrāk 3.2., Ḥağāyā 5.3., 5.8.). King Hussein, seen by the Bedouin of whatever nationality as one of their own ('Unayz 1.7.), comes across as a kind of *Ur*-Bedu father figure, full of wise counsel (Barrāk 3.1., 3.2.) over the whole fifty year period from Suez onwards, his influence and role exaggerated, even falsified (Unayz 1.1., Barrāk 3.1.) for politeness' sake.

Domestic issues are also addressed: Bedouin poverty and social marginalisation (Tayāhā, Ḥağāyā); the oppression of the Bedouin by the Egyptian police (Tayāhā); rough treatment at the hands of Israel (Tayāhā); Jordanian government corruption, incompetence, hypocrisy and nepotism (Šbaylāt, Ḥaǧāyā), the pandering of the official Arab media to those in power (Šbaylāt); taxes and the cost of living (Šbaylāt) and some reflections on the wages of sin (in this case smuggling) to which the poverty-stricken Bedouin have been driven (Barrāk). Betrayal – by national political leaders, but also by the Bedouin's own tribal sheikhs, co-opted and seduced by the central government and all too suggestible and keen to get their noses into the trough of government largesse, forsaking the interests of their tribesmen for the flashy perquisites of centralised state power (Barrāk 3.4.) – is another common thread that runs through the poetry collected here. One of Šbaylāt's savage lampoons of the 1980s (4.2.) mocks this shallowness and cupidity with verses which echo the words and rhyme of a jingoistic song of the 1960s, familiar to all Jordanians, which glorified King Hussein's army. Even worse, betrayal can come from within the Bedouin's own rank and file, as in Tayāhā's poem on prison life in Israel (2.2.), in which it seems he was betrayed to the Israeli border guards by a Bedouin tracker in Israeli pay.

Another common motif is the violation of Bedouin personal space and honour. The main culprits here are police and border guards, whether Egyptian (Tayāhā), Israeli (Tayāhā), or Saudi (Barrāk) whose behaviour often offends against the Bedouin sense of personal propriety (again sometimes with sexual connotations) and restricts their accustomed freedom of movement. A typical case is retailed in a poem by Tayāhā (2.1.) in which the poet voices his affront at the mistreatment of aged Bedouin men and young girls following the shooting in Sinai in 1982 of a UN peacekeeper who had been propositioning Bedouin women. The sense of shame stems from the menfolk's emasculating inability to protect their women from the casual mistreatment meted out by the Egyptian police. But what the Bedouin perceive as police persecution can take other forms: they control every strategic high point and pass and make smuggling a risky business (Barrāk 3.6.). But the police and other uniformed agents of the state are also masters of graft and corruption themselves, as Šbaylāt sarcastically points out (4.4.) in a poem about the feelings of a Jordanian returning home after the freedoms of Europe.

We chose to limit our selection in this way because it is our impression that the modern use of *nabaṭī* poetry to express opinions and emotions on topics of this kind, with the poet acting as a ‘communal voice’ on behalf of an oppressed group is on the increase, perhaps at the expense of traditional poetry on more individualistic topics. We also felt it would come as a surprise to Arabists and others outside the field of popular literature (not least Western political observers of the Arab World) to see the degree to which this kind of poetry has become a means for voicing political dissent, and how far individual poets are prepared to speak out beyond the confines of state-controlled media, sometimes at considerable risk to themselves.

0.5. The Bedouin ode: *riḥla, nasīb*, ‘message’

Traditional *nabaṭī* poems generally have a single topic and are usually between fifteen and thirty lines long. Often, the topic is cast in the form of a message that the poet sends via a camel-rider, whom he addresses at the beginning of the poem (*ya rākib / rākbin alli...*, ‘O rider of the one that…’), then describing, sometimes at length, the camel on which he is mounted, and instructing him on the route along which he is to direct his camel through the desert (*laggih / sugha...* ‘Direct it…’). This opening section, the so-called *riḥla*, an echo of the CLA *raḥīl*, may be quite short or run to seven or eight lines. The recipients of the message at the messenger’s destination (*malfa*, *manṣa*), sometimes named, sometimes not, will then be described in stock epithets as chivalrous men of high pedigree (*aḥrār*, *grūm*, *manāʿīr*). There is then an abrupt transition to the message itself, which the messenger is instructed to deliver with the simple imperative: ‘Tell him/ them…’(*gūl lih/ lihim...*). At the conclusion of the message, the poem ends with a short religious *envoi*.

A stereotypical example of this structure is Tayāhā’s poem 2.2., in which he bemoans the harsh conditions he suffered during a period of incarceration in Birsheva jail and the treachery of the Arab trackers who helped put him there. The poem opens with a short *riḥla* section:

ya rākib alli ma yiʿūzak itḥirrah	O rider of a noble mount that needs no camel-stick –
ṣāfi walad ṣāfi u ba ṭ-ṭabʿ maydūb	A thoroughbred of thoroughbreds that does not buck or kick –
laggih iblād at-tīh zēnah igfirrah	To desert lands in fair Sinai direct your camel’s rein,

followed by a description of the recipients of the poem:

u talga ‘iyāl imḥarrara ma bha ‘yūb	You'll find free men of pedigree, unblemished, without stain.

Tayāhā then issues his instructions to the messenger:

min yis'alak ‘inni gul lih u ḥirrah	If anyone asks after me, relate the painful facts:
inni b šidda, min al-bēn mašhūb	By ill omen I'm branded, by adversity I'm racked.
u gul lih in ib siğn as-saba‘ šuft mirrah	And tell them – in Birsheva jail, a bitter draught I've drunk:
fi ġurfat it-ta‘ḏīb ‘an iz-zād maḥğūb	Deprived of food and tortured – that's how low my life has sunk.
u gul lih inni mrabbaṭin bi l-ağirrah	And tell them that I'm tied in chains, my feet, my hands as well,
wa ṯ-ṯalğ fi zinzāntin lī maṣbūb	And tell them they poured ice on me as I lay in my cell.

After a dozen more lines describing the inhuman treatment in prison – the poem's ‘message’ – Tayāhā pledges revenge on the Bedouin trackers in the pay of the Israelis who helped them find him, since, as the Bedouin saying goes, *al-mi yi‘ūd il maqarrah* (‘water returns to its level’[7]). The poem then concludes abruptly with a single line of routine religious sentiment:

allāh ma a‘ṭa li l-maxālīg sirrah	To mortals God has not vouchsafed His plan and His intent,
w axtim kalāmi bi ḏikr wāḥid lih intūb	And so I end my speech with Him to whom all men repent.

Another common opening topos has the poet climbing to the top of a local hill or mountain (*ašraft riğmin...* ‘I ascended a peak…’) in contemplative mood, rather as in the CLA *nasīb*, but in the *nabaṭī* tradition the purpose is to give free rein to his poetic talent to shape the emotional turmoil bubbling away in his breast, and deliver the carefully crafted verses that follow. The motivation for this prelude can be, as in the CLA tradition, amatory, but in modern *nabaṭī* poetry this is not usually so: often the poet simply broods on his own disturbed emotional state, confronted by intractable problems of war, poverty, marginalisation, etc.

The *riḥla* and *nasīb* are of course not to be taken literally: there is no longer a real camel journey (as there once was), and the climb too is imaginary, though climbing such peaks, whether for poetic inspiration or as a look-out point (*mirgāb*) was a common enough practice until recently. A third type of opening is one in which God is the addressee of the poem (*ḏikr allah*), and the invocation is made in terms suitable to the theme of the poem (sender of rain in a time of drought, for instance). But there are no hard and fast rules of composition: one or more of these elements may occur in a single poem; sometimes what we are calling the *nasīb* involves not a climb, but a sleepless night in which the poet has been wracked by mental pain; sometimes the poet simply plunges straight into his subject 'The poet says…' (*gāl al-migaṣṣid...*), 'The wise man (i.e. the poet) says… (*gāl al-fahīm...*); in yet other cases he asks an imagined scribe to pick up a pen and write (*gum*, *ya xaṭīb...*), or begins with extended musings on the art of poetry composition itself (e.g. Barrāk's poem 3.6.) before turning to the main subject. However, a comparison between different poets suggests there may be personal preferences. In the *dīwān* of 'Unayz's poetry (Abu Athera & al-Ḥaššāš 1998), nearly half of the total, 42 out of 104 poems, begin with the 'messenger' motif (*ya rākib...*), and only 3 with the 'climb' (*ašraft riğmin…* or similar). In the collection of poems by the Najdi poet 'Abdallah al-Dindān (Kurpershoek 1994), also illiterate and about the same age, these statistics are reversed: 15 out of the 31 poems begin with the 'climb', and only 3 with the 'messenger' motif. Both poets have a small number of poems with openings in the *ḏikr allah* category, or the *gum ya xaṭīb...*. Both these poets were illiterate, but the 'Writer, take up your pen and write' opening is by no means confined to those who could write, like Ḥağāyā. As with the address to the camel-rider, it is a poetic formula. The statistical difference may in part be a reflection of differences in topic and mood: Dindān's poetry is, more often than 'Unayz's, introspective and elegiac in atmosphere, and his subject matter perhaps more suited to the 'lonely mountain' scene. But having said this, it is still not obvious why one opening should be so consistently preferred over the other by either poet. In virtually every case, though, the traditional *gaṣīda* ends with a line or two praising/thanking God and His Prophet for His bounty.