

Yemeni Folk Literature: An Investigation of the History of Oral Poetry

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Abstract

The present article examines Yemeni folk heritage history and the many cultural and historical influences on Yemeni folklore and folk poetry. It explains how folk literature is passed down from one generation to the next, how it plays a significant role in transmitting the experience of the nation, and how these genres are relevant to modern life based on studies of folk literature scholars like Walter J. Ong, William John Thoms, Hardy Campbell, Michael Zwettler, and James Wynbrandt. The two most captivating types of oral poetry are Zamil and Sung Poetry. This study introduces much-needed criteria for research on a nation's varied legacy inherited from other cultures and countries. In order to adequately describe contemporary Yemeni folk literature, it is also helpful for readers to be acquainted with the nation's past.

Keywords: Yemen, Folk Literature, Music, Poetry, Cultures.

Introduction

Yemen is one of the most significant Arab nations and a cultural center for the Arab world. The country is always referred to as the origin of Arab ethnicity says one study about the first signs of human civilization on the Arabian Peninsula: "Archeological investigations all over the Arabian Gulf Coast have found remnants of the settlements of ancient peoples such as the Dilmun civilization, a Bronze Age trade center from approximately 3,000 BC" (Taibah & MacDonald ix). For centuries, Yemen was a hub for international commerce and cultural exchange between Egypt, India, and Africa. Elements of folk literature serve vital cultural and literary purposes and have been for a long time. Folklore is characterized by proverbs and other sayings that have been spoken to represent people's concerns for a long time and that have been passed down orally from an ancient source (Nnolim 16). Moreover, these literary components are inextricable from the human whole and must be understood as such. However, because of its central role in people's lives, literature of this kind cannot be understood in a vacuum.

Yemen's diversity in folk heritage sets it apart from other Middle Eastern cultures: "Yemen reached from the Indian Ocean and Red Sea coasts in a huge parabola across the middle of all Arabia, which is roughly the extent of pre-Islamic kingdoms like Sheba and Himyar and their client tribes" (Dresch 11). The country's strategic position made it an object of imperial interest and a melting pot for many cultures: "A Jewish monarchy existed in southern Arabia for more than a century prior to the birth of Islam. During the war between the Byzantine and Persian empires, Ethiopian Christians tore it down" (Wynbrandt 24-25). The influence of these cultures has resulted in a civilization rich in folk

traditions and customs that vary from region to region. Like India, China, Africa, and the Arab world, Yemen rose to prominence as a trading hub, attracting merchants worldwide.

Theoretical Frame

Different literary devices speak out in various contexts and roles. All literature fitting this wide and comprehensive category includes folk literature outside official records. Folk literature's goals are to provide amusement, spiritual enlightenment, and beauty to change people's attitudes and behaviors, to increase their knowledge, and to improve their character. It "serves to sanction and validate religious, social, political, and economic institutions" and "to play an important role as an educative device in their transmission from one generation to another," as one definition of the role of folk literature at the national level puts it (Bascom 284). What sets Folklore apart from other forms of literature is that it does not exist as a textual object. Folk literature, according to Ong, has "Oral structures" that "often look to pragmatics," but "[c]hironographic structures look more to syntactic" in written language (37).

What is the definition of folk literature, and how does it originate? The seemingly easy concept of "folklore" is somewhat complex. Investigations have not led to a clear and cemented definition of folklore from the initial systematic study of it, albeit not under this term, but it remained increasingly crucial. Long before the name was defined, William John Thoms (1802-1885) was the first to explore this topic. Thoms, a British writer and Folklore editor, began researching his people's ancient oral traditions, including their poetry, music, magic, superstitions, and stories. Several different terms for the same body of writing – "oral sayings," "oral traditions," "traditional art," and "the lore of the people," etc. confused him, so he set out to discover a simpler one. Thoms was a clerk and government worker with a heavy task; nonetheless, he researched many topics in the works of Chaucer, Jeremiads, and others and gained notoriety in the annals of traditional literature despite neither being a folklorist nor having produced a significant body of work in the field. He first used the term "folklore" to describe this genre of writing.

Folk tales are recounted as part of literature for spiritual enlightenment, amusement, beauty, expanding one's horizons, changing one's character, and refining one's mind. As an alternate mode of communication, Folklore serves as both a social science and a humanities discipline, stimulating us by addressing domestic social problems and immigrant cultural concerns. Furthermore, each folkloric element has its own meaning and cultural background and should be treated as such in the study of Folklore as an area of literary inquiry. As a result, the concept of Folklore became quite fluid as various forms served diverse purposes. Anthropologists study the impact of folklore on society as literature. However, literary scholars and critics see it as cultural (Ben-Amos 3). Even though their approaches to Folklore are complimentary, anthropologists and critics who are also folklorists have preferred to segregate their courses and techniques of the study and work separately rather than together.

Major Influences

Yemeni folklore is a complex synthesis of Bedouin customs and Islamic beliefs, strengthened by contact with other cultures: "Desert and Islamic stories, frequently told in poetic form, constitute the backbone of the Bedouin oral tradition, which includes poetry and storytelling. However, little details have been recorded on paper" (Ham, Shams, & Madden 38). Music, oral poetry, horse racing, camel racing, and falconry are all examples of traditions with deep roots in folk culture. But before discussing how Islam has impacted Yemen's rich folk legacy, this analysis will look at the many other causes that have helped to spread the region's unique blend of traditions.

Over the course of several centuries, Yemen maintained constant, direct contact with more developed countries, mainly for the reasons of commerce. Folkloric traditions benefited from this exchange and were incorporated into mainstream Yemeni culture. Similarly, the desert-dwelling Bedouins have had a significant impact on Yemeni Folklore. Many traditional Bedouin activities, such as camel racing and falconry, are now considered standard fare in Yemeni culture. Not only have these elements contributed to the diversity of folkloric

traditions but so have others, such as the social stability across various periods of history and the openness to other countries:

From the first to the second century BCE, Yemen flourished due to the incense produced there. The exotic fragrances traveled over land and sea to far-flung places like Rome in the west and India in the east. The trade's wealth created a cultural and economic renaissance in Yemen. (Tenorio 2022)

In the sixth and seventh centuries, Arabic was at the height of its strength and prestige in the Arab Peninsula. Poets from Yemen “were a proud and boastful people characterized by epic tales, heart-rending poetry, and eloquent prose” and “were the perfect speakers in the history of the standard Arabic language” (Iqbal and Saifullah 1999). After the seventh century, when the Quran was revealed, the Arabic language advanced, became flawless, and “became the model for the classical language” (Yushmanov 4). Several experts on history of Arabic language have discussed the role the Quran had in the language's development during the golden period of the 7th century: “The Quran has profoundly influenced the Arabic language in many ways. Because of this, the Arabic language became more dynamic. They improved the appearance of the Arabic language, which nomads and desert dwellers developed” (Gholitabar & Kamal 28). Poetry, bolstered by the pre-Islamic prominence of the spoken word and the Quran's linguistic impact, gave rise to an unparalleled golden age of Arabic literature.

Throughout contemporary Yemen's history, Islam has had the greatest impact on the country's moral fabric, social mores, and political climate. Since the spread of Islam, religious rites have been ingrained in many communities' Folklore, Music, and customs. Moreover, Islam represents the whole Yemeni cultural history, from which the country's rules, ethics, and values were developed. As a result, Yemen's current identity, folk literature, and cultural customs may be traced back to the country's religious past.

Folkloric Poetry or Nabati Poetry (*Zamil*)

The best creative manifestations among the country's nomadic and tribal communities may be

found in the oral poetry known as *Zamil*, Yemen's greatest folklore pearl: “The majority of traditional Yemeni poetry is written in the *Zamil* style... *Zamil* serves different functions at different times... First, it's a way to emphasize and strengthen core beliefs about living together” (Ibrahim 9). The most important piece of traditional Yemeni literature is *Zamil*. As a highly expressive literary form, poetry has long been integral to cultural life throughout the Arab peninsula, heavily affected by Yemeni cultural customs:

The nomads of the Arabian Peninsula, prior to the rise of Islam, regarded poetry as the pinnacle of artistic expression. Stories, frequently in the shape of poetry, were told from one generation to the next, passing on accounts of individual bravery and tribe victories. The Bedouins passed on their culture via song and poetry (Janin & Margaret 98).

Yemen *Zamil* was an intrinsic component of the oral culture of the nomadic Bedouins of the deserts, who were always on the move in quest of water and grazing. In the past, Bedouins would congregate in the desert to listen to poets perform poetry about their culture and history. The poets of Yemen, who took great delight in their work and built their reputations on the strength of its quality, often held contests to see who could write the most flawless poem. Zwettler believes, in light of current theories about *Zamil*'s dissemination, that “Arab poetry survived via generations of recitations in the oral tradition. Strengthening and training the memory to an unprecedented degree... The Arabs had a word for poets who memorized many songs; they called them *Rawis*” (14). Poetry has been used as a record of a tribe's history, morals, and social context for centuries before the advent of Islam and this practice persisted until the early 20th century. A poet is a respected member of society and represents the honor and bravery of the tribe.

Being a poet was a position of immense prestige... Arab poets were so highly valued that when one debuted in a tribe, people from neighboring tribes would go to congratulate the newcomers. In addition, he recorded heroic acts for posterity and spread their renown across the ages. (Janin and Margaret 98)

Zamil poetry, also known as *al-Shear al-Nabati*, is Yemen's most popular oral poetry. Despite the fact that it remained oral for lengthy periods and "had no written history until the mid-twentieth century, nabati has served to communicate and commemorate events, including issues related to tribal territories, watering holes, grievances, battles, and large and small matters" (Urkevich 16). This kind of poetry flourished in pre-Islamic Arabia, taking on a wide range of societal issues and topics, from love and praise to war and conflict. The creation of new Nabati music is ongoing. Typical Nabati music starts with a single phrase, backed by drumming and the group doing a sword dance. On the other hand, the solo dance is conducted in an informal setting, with the tribespeople gathering to observe the soloist recite the first couplet before the dancer begins. The Rabbah, a typical Bedouin string instrument that is a member of the lute and oud family but is played with a bow, adds a beautiful melody to the Music of Nabati poetry.

The following extracts are taken from a famous *Zamil* in the form of oral threat messages and replies to them. They were said by Yemeni King Ahmed Hameed Aldeen and the rebel Alqardai after the latter assassinated Ahmed's father King Yahya Hameed Aldeen in 1948 in Sana'a. In these lines, King Ahmed threatens Alqardai and promises to avenge his father:

"يا طير مهما طارت في جو السماء
لا بئس ما تنزل رضا والإصميل
من وين باتشرب اذا جاك الضمى
وان قلت ريشك يخزن الماء مستحيل"

(Ibrahim 2023)

King Ahmed:

O bird, no matter how much you fly in the sky,
You will come down to earth,
Where do you drink from if you are hungry?
If you say your feathers store water, it is impossible

"الطير حلف بالله وبالرب اقسم
ما طاعكم لو تشعل الدنيا تسحيل
ما دام له جنحين حاكم محكما
لافك ريشة يقطع الخط الطويل"

(Ibrahim 2023)

Alqardai:

The bird has made a decision,
And by God has sworn,
As long as he has two wings,
He can fly forever.

"خوفي عليك يا طير لا القاصن رما
لا مدهامن بندقة تصيح قتيل
بنون والاعراف وسورة مريما
لاقص مخالبك وريشكوالزجيل"

(Ibrahim 2023)

King Ahmed:

I fear if the sniper shoots,
And, the bird is shot down,
The shooter has taken an oath,
To cut the claws, the wings, and the head.

"الطير في عشه تحمي واحتما
ما يقتصممن هو من امالك ذليل
هل شي يعلمك طير قد صابه عمى
والابنى عشه على درب السبيل"

(Ibrahim 2023)

Alqardai:

The bird owns a protected nest,
A fowl snip cannot shoot,
Birds are never blind,
To build their nests on ground.

Poetry among the Bedouins has served several functions, including but not limited to social communication, cultural behaviors like dancing and battle, and the expression of feelings.

Folkloric Sung Poetry

The Bedouins, a people originally from the Arab Peninsula who worked as pearl divers, fisherman, and farmers, were instrumental in developing Yemeni musical poetry in the tribal regions. This poetic music offers a window into the ancient lifestyles of the Bedouin and other nomads. Furthermore, the historical impact of economies that dealt with the metropolitan regions of Yemen and had important touches with Africa and India. Thus, a musical style that owes much to African, Indian, and even Mesopotamian traditions developed in Yemen but is unmistakably its own.

Unlike the conventional poetry written according to the Arabic standards of language, the first sung voice is rhythmical poetry or *al-shi'ir al-nabati*, which has been highly widespread among tribes of the Peninsula. This poetry is performed at rituals and ceremonies, and its purpose is to express tribal solidarity, convey tales about the ordinary man, and commemorate special events like marriages. This poem uses a meter called seas, which (*buhur*). Each line is composed of two units and finishes with the same sound; this structure is called a "bayt" (*tafaelah*). A poet must adhere to a certain set of *tafaelah* for each sea. Until the 1950s, musical poetry was either a style sung by lone singers without any instrumental accompaniment or the *sawt*, which evolved in urban settings and is often performed with the guitar-like oud and a drum. The number of strings on an oud (or al-oud) varies from five to thirteen (Parfitt 2001). This type of Poetry diverged from that of the Levant and Egypt owing to fundamental distinctions in the societies of those regions.

The following lines are taken from a famous historical sung poem that was said by the two Yemeni tribes of *Aws* and *Khzraj* when Prophet Mohammed arrived in Medina in 622:

طلع البدر علينا ... من تيات الوداع
وجب الشكر علينا ... ما دعى الله داع
أيها المبعوث فينا ... جئت بالأمر المطاع
جئت شرف المدينة ... مرحبا يا خير داع

(Jaiusi 2021)

You the white moon ... Rising over us
We are grateful to God ... And we will remain so
You are the merciful messenger ... We are the obedient

You gave Medina honor ... You are Welcome!

This type of poetry is an important part of Yemeni folk heritage and is still sung today to celebrate occasions such as national holidays, school and university graduations. Each of these singing performances is called *saff*: "This general *saff* performance practice has been taking place for hundreds, if not thousands of years" (Urkevich 33). The singer is accompanied by a drum (*tablah*) for rhythm and by a flute (*oud*) for melody.

Conclusion

Yemen's most significant folk elements were oral poetry and Music. The two folkloric elements continue to play a significant role in social practices of daily life, despite the country's significant endowment from the subsequent Islamic solid regimes. A vast body of oral literature on several topics has been produced by Yemeni folklorists over the course of centuries, illuminating traditional and contemporary forms of social performance alike. Even though poetry and other forms of oral Folklore comprised most of this folkloric creation in Hijaz and Najd, they were kept alive via performances. Yemeni music, oral poetry, and other forms of oral sayings have been the cultural manifestations that best symbolize the component of personal elegance and the standard of the tribe's success for the complete culture for ages, from the pre-Islamic era to the modern day.

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