

HISTORY OF SAUDI FOLKLORE AND FACTORS THAT SHAPED IT

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Abstract. This study investigates the history of Saudi folk heritage as well as the different historical and cultural factors that shaped Saudi folklore. Based on studies by eminent scholars of folk literature, such as William John Thoms, Walter J. Ong, Campbell, James Wynbrandt and Zwettler Michael, this study explains how folk elements pass down from generation to another, how they function significantly as a vehicle to transmit the nation's experience and demonstrate how such genres are relevant to the present human life. Saudi Arabia is a rich country in folkloric elements represented by the two most compelling folk genres of oral poetry and music. This research opens much-needed criteria of research on diverse heritage of a country that inherited from different cultures. Discussion in this study helps familiarize the readers with history of this country because an account of modern Saudi Arabian folk heritage without discussing these realities would be incomplete.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, folklore, music, poetry, Najd, Hijaz, cultures

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...folk tales, stories from the oral tradition, are all of them the most vital connection we have with the imaginations of the ordinary men and women whose labor created our world.

Angela Carter

1. Theoretical frame

Literature utters its voices in different forms for different functions. This encompasses written and oral forms of literature deviated from this broad and general category which, of course, includes the unofficial and unrecorded literature of the people. As a part of literature, folk literature is supposed to create

spiritual edification, entertainment and beauty, broaden knowledge, reform personalities and refine our psyches. Further, folk literature has a wide range of functions on national levels. According to William R. Bascom, folk literature “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” (1953:284). The nonexistence of the physical manifestation of oral literature, text, is what distinguishes folklore from other literature. Walter J. Ong differentiates between the two discourses in a broader way by referring to folklore as “Oral structures” that “often look to pragmatics” while written discourse as “[c]hirographic structures look more to syntactic”:

Written discourse develops more elaborate and fixed grammar than oral discourse does because to provide meaning it is more dependent simply upon linguistic structure, since it lacks the normal full existential contexts which surround oral discourse and help determine meaning in oral discourse somewhat independently of grammar (Ong 1982:37).

So, what is folklore and how is this genre created? The definition of folklore looks simple yet challenging. Since the earliest systematic study of folklore, though not under this name, investigations had not resulted in a fixed and solidified definition, however it remained more critical. Before the term was coined, William John Thoms (1802–1885) was the first to investigate this area as a part of literature. Thoms, British writer and editor of traditional tales started investigating his society’s old oral poetry, music, magic, superstitions and oral tales. He was trying to find a simple term to replace many phrases given to the same genre of literature such as “oral sayings”, “popular antiquities”, “oral traditions”, “traditional art”, “the lore of the people”, etc. Thoms was mainly a clerk and a civil servant and had a tough workload but in his free time from what he described as “onerous official duties” he went on investigating several issues in the work of Chaucer, Jeremiads and others. Though Thoms was not a folklorist and did not have a major work in traditional literature he acquired fame in the history of this genre. He is the one who coined the name “folklore” for this part of literature. The term is taken from the following lines he drew on his own Photograph that he gave to his friend G. L. Gomme:

*If you would fain know more
Of him whose Photo here is-
He coined the word Folk-Lore
And started Notes and Queries (Dundes 1999:10)*

Folk heritage includes the unrecorded traditions like oral poetry, tales, music, dance, magic, legends, myths, omens, superstitions, fictional adventure...etc., conveyed by anonymous tellers and moved orally from generation to another usually in the same ethnic group of people. According to Jan Harold Brunvand, folk literature refers to “the traditional, unofficial, non-institutional part of culture. It encompasses all knowledge, understandings, values, attitudes, assumptions, feelings, and beliefs transmitted in traditional forms by word of mouth or by

customary examples” (1978:20). All these forms of folklore are indispensable parts of oral literature and all are very important tools of communication between generations and experience baskets of the old to the new.

As a part of literature, folk literature is told to create spiritual edification, entertainment and beauty, to broaden knowledge, reform personalities and refine our psyches. Further, the dual function of folklore with social science on the one hand and with humanities on the other is its prime feature stirring us by tackling social issues at home and cultural issues related to the immigrants as an alternative technique of expression. Further, in the study of folklore as a field of literary scholarship, each form of folkloric elements should be examined as a unique form having its own message and cultural origin. Hence, the definition of folklore became very varied due to the different functions of its versions. For example, anthropologists look at folklore as literature and investigate its influence in social life, however, literature people consider it as culture (Ben-Amos 1972:3). Therefore, anthropologists and literary critics who are both folklorists tended to separate their courses and methods of the study and work independently rather than together, though their approaches to folklore are complementary (Bascom 1953:283).

Folk literature has long been an important literary expression having a valuable meaning and function of which the teller may not be conscious. The most common part of folklore is the sayings handed down by oral tradition from a more or less remote antiquity and usually told to express issues related to the common folk (Nnolim 1999:16). It is generally agreed that these forms of literature cannot be interpreted and appreciated as isolated beings but rather as part of the human entity and the totality of human experience. Similarly as an inseparable part of people’s life and belief, this literature cannot be taken in isolation from the situation and the context in which it is created.

2. Factors that have influenced Saudi folklore

Saudi Arabia is a major Arab country and the most influential country in the whole Islamic world, the birth place of Islam, one of the world major religions. Deserts constitute the major parts of this country. In his book *Brief History of Saudi Arabia*, James Wynbrandt notes that “[t]he first inhabitants are estimated to have arrived in the peninsula between 15,000 and 20,000 years ago, near the end of the last Ice Age. Evidence of human habitation throughout the Stone Age has been found, though little archaeological work has been conducted in the kingdom” (2010:7). According to sources, the first concrete evidence of human civilization on the Arabian Peninsula dates back 3000 years: “Archeological digs all along the Arabian Gulf Coast have revealed remains of the towns of ancient peoples such as the Dilmun civilization, a Bronze Age trading centers from around 3,000 BC” (Nadia Jameel Taibah, Margaret Read MacDonald 2015:ix).

The history of Saudi Arabia is rooted in the earliest civilizations of the Arabian Peninsula. Over the centuries, Najd and Hijaz, modern Saudi Arabia, had been

centers of civilizations and important destinations for Arab traders and center of trade with the external world such as Egypt, India and Africa. Najd and Hijaz are always mentioned together in history books, they constituted the most important cultural and economic component in Saudi Arabia and “served as a crossroads for the spread of species between Africa and southwestern Asia during the Miocene period. It is thought that animals used an isthmus across what is now the mouth of the Red Sea to expand or move their habitat between these continents” (Wynbrandt 2010:7). Najd which is equivalent to “Plateau” and lies in the north-central area of the kingdom had been dominated by Bedouins and was a less traded and travelled region. Contrary to Bedouins or nomadic tribes of Najd, Hijaz had been a “commercial center since the middle first millennium” (Wynbrandt 2010:26) and traditionally been associated with stability of its inhabitants because “[t]he population of Hijaz had always been distinguished from Najd by its heterogeneity” (Al-rasheed 2010:30). The region of Hijaz constitutes today's most modern cities of Mecca and Medina and the port of Jeddah:

The relations between Hijaz, the most settled and travelled region along the west coast, and Najd, the arid interior dominated by bedouins, were frequently hostile. Hijaz exhibited the influence of a succession of outside rulers: Umayyad, Abbasid, Egyptian, and (later) Ottoman, as well as that of untold numbers of pilgrims. Najd had never come under foreign domination or influence, and its people regarded themselves as the more authentic Arabian culture (Wynbrandt 2010:69).

Diversity in folk heritage gives Saudi Arabia unique distinctiveness that distinguishes it from other cultures of the Middle East. The location of the country made it a destination for imperial ambitions and a scene of diverse civilizations: “More than a century before Islam’s rise, a Jewish kingdom had been established in southern Arabia. It was destroyed by Ethiopian Christians during conflict between the Byzantine Empire and the Persian Empire” (Wynbrandt 2010:24–25). Exposure to these different cultures resulted in a society replete with a myriad of cultural and folk heritage that varies from province to another within the Kingdom. Similarly, with the advent of Islam, Saudi became a basket of abundant divine practices and the most important destination for Muslims.

Saudi folklore is a blend of Bedouin practices and Islamic beliefs and is enriched by interaction with different civilizations: “Bedouin poetry and storytelling are part of a rich oral tradition with desert and Islamic legends, often in poetic form, at their heart. However, little has been committed to written form” (Anthony Ham, Martha Brekhus Shams, Andrew Madden 2004:38). Among these folkloric elements are music, oral poetry, horse racing, camel racing, falconry sport. Before referring to the influence of Islam on Saudi folk heritage, however, the study will examine different factors that contributed to the furtherance of Saudi folklore multiplicity. Over centuries, Saudi Arabia was always in direct contact with more civilized nations, mainly for trade purposes. This contact resulted in cultural influence on Saudi Arabian society, mostly in terms of folkloristic practices and enriched different practices within the realm: “[M]erchants were part

of a far-reaching trade network that extended to south Asia, the Mediterranean and Egypt. They served as a vital link between India and the Far East on one side, and Byzantium and the Mediterranean lands on the other” (Myers 2015:2). Similarly, the nomadic Bedouins, who lived in deserts, have great influence on Saudi folklore and several Bedouin practices such as oral nomadic poetry, music, dance, camel racing, falconry are incorporated in the mainstream folk of ancient Saudi Arabia. In addition to these influences, several factors, e.g. the political stability during a succession of Khalifahs and the openness to other nations after conquering neighboring lands have diversified folkloric practices:

The Golden Age reached its high point during the reign of Harun al-Rashid, the Abbasid caliph, and his immediate successors. This was a time, contemporary chroniclers said, “when the world was young,” reflecting the age’s feeling of growth and possibility. Al-Rashid’s son, Abu al-Abbas Abdallah al-Mamum, was perhaps the greatest of all Abbasid caliphs. In 830 he established the Beit al Hikmah, or “house of wisdom,” in Baghdad, which served as a university, library, and translation bureau (Wynbrandt 2010:75).

Islam had been the most powerful pervasive influence in the moral bonds, social conduct and political scene of modern Saudi Arabia. Islam was spread as a universal message between 600–631 A.D by Prophet Mohammed who briefly unified Najd and Hijaz and established the first Islamic state on the lands of today’s Saudi Arabia. Prophet Mohammed was a social and political leader. Soon after his death, Khalifahs continued spreading the message and conquered non-Islamic areas. Therefore, the early Saudi national state was based on antecedents in Islamic history. Therefore, Islam embodies an entire cultural heritage that served as a source of values, norms and ethics of Saudi society. This era in the history of Saudi Arabia has consolidated its modern identity.

3. Poetry

Najd and Hijaz’s greatest folkloric jewel, of course, was the oral poetry that is characterized by the highest artistic expressions among nomads and tribes of the two territories. It is the most significant contribution to Saudi folk literature. In the whole Arab peninsula region that was largely dominated by Najd and Hijaz tribes, poetry had long been an important part of cultural life due to the meanings a poem conveys in a highly expressive literary language:

In pre-Islamic days, poetry was the highest form of art in the Arabian Peninsula, appreciated and loved by the nomads ... Tales of personal exploit and tribal conquests were passed down from generation to generation through stories, often in the form of poetry ... storytelling and poetry became a Bedouin heritage and legacy (Janin, Margaret 2003:98).

For centuries prior to the birth of Islam, Najd Bedouins of the deserts were travelling constantly searching for water and grass and poetry was the oral inseparable part of their life. Bedouins used to gather in desert around the poets

who recites their experience or issues related to the tribe in latest poems. In Macca, competitions of achieving perfect poems were common among Arab poets who took pride and acquired reputations through using high-standard and perfect language. According to the modern views on how Arab poetry of Najd and Hijaz was shared and conveyed, Zwettler opines that “[t]h poetry of the Arabs, in the ages which preceded the rise of Islamism, was perpetuated by oral tradition ... memory was exercised and strengthened to a degree now almost unknown ... [T]here lived reciters, or Rawis, as the Arabs called them, who got by heart numerous songs of their poets” (1978:14). For centuries before Islam, poetry serves as a record of a tribe's history, values and social background and continued to do so till the late twentieth century. A poet is the tribe's chivalry and brave knight who holds a high rank in the social structure of the tribe:

To be a poet was to hold a post great honor...whenever a poet emerged in an Arab tribe, other tribes would come and offer congratulations, for the poet was a defense to their honor, a protection for their good repute. He immortalized deeds of glory and published their eternal fame (Janin and Margaret 2003:98).

The 6th and 7th-century Arabic language was highly powerful and exercised the greatest reputation in Najd and Hijaz. Arab poets too were the perfect speakers in the history of the Arabic standard language and “were a proud and boastful people who were characterized by epic tales, heart-rending poetry, and eloquent prose” (Iqbal and Saifullah 1999). With the revelation of the Quran in the seventh century in Hijaz, Macca today, the language is taken to higher levels, demonstrated perfectness and “became the model for the classical language” (Yushmanov 1961:4). Different scholars referred to how the Quran contributed to maturing the language in the 7th century, the golden age of Arabic language: “The Quran has had a significant impact on Arabic language in various ways. It influenced the dynamism Arabic language ... beautified the Arabic language as Arabic was originally used by nomads and desert settlers ... aroused the grammarians to establish some principles and grammatical rules for this language” (Gholitabar, Kamal 2012:28). Together with the power of the word that prevailed before Islam and the influence of Quran, poetry became the best and ultimate embodiment of the language and set a scene for unique and incomparable era of writing in Arabic.

The sung poetry is the dominant Bedouin oral poetry that is known as *Nabati Poetry*, *al-Shear al-Nabati* in which solo or collective songs are played. This genre of poetry prospered in pre-Islamic Arabia and adopted a variety of social themes and subject matters such as love, praise, fights ... etc. The production of *Nabati* songs continues even today. *Nabati music* generally begins with a single line accompanied by drum beats and a sword dance of the group. However, the solo dance is performed in a casual way as the tribe's members gather to watch the soloist start reciting the first couplet before the dancer starts. *Nabati* poetry music becomes more melodious when it is accompanied by *rababah*, a common Bedouin string instrument which belongs to the lute, *oud*, family, but is played with a bow.

Though it remained oral for long periods, *Nabati Poetry* or *al-Shear al-Nabati* had been historically highly functional and served as a record of historical events:

“a great deal of the Najd had no written history until the mid-twentieth century, so *nabati* has served to communicate and commemorate events, including issues related to tribal territories, watering holes, grievances, battles, and large and small matters” (Urkevich 2015:16). An event example that took place as a reaction to a poem was the famous war fought between two tribes of Juddais and Tasm. This poem has the most provocative and inflammatory words in which the bride Ofaira Bint Abad, from Juddais tribe, calls on her tribe to avenge her honor besmirched by the king of Tasm who raped her on her wedding day. In this poem, Ofaira mourns the shameful silence of her tribe, Juddais, to the oppression, injustices and mistreatment of women by the king of Tasm tribe.

لَا أَحَدٌ أَذْلُ مِنْ جَدَيْسٍ ... أَهْكَدَا يُفْعَلُ بِالْعَرُوسِ
None is more humiliated than juddais
How shall a bride be raped?
يَرْضَى بِدَا يَا قَوْمَ بَعْلٍ حُرٍّ ... أَهْدَى وَقَدْ أُعْطِيَ وَسَبِيقَ الْمَهْرِ
Does an honorable bridegroom approve it?
The man who gifted, gave and paid dowry
أَتَرْضَوْنَ مَا يُفْضَى إِلَى فَتَيَاتِكُمْ ... وَأَنْتُمْ رِجَالٌ فِيكُمْ عَدَدَ النَّمْلِ
Do you accept that your girls be raped?
Though your number is as big as ants
وَتُصْبِحُ غُفِيرًا بِالدَّمَاءِ غَرِيقَةً ... جَهَارًا ، وَقَدْ رَفَتْ عَرُوسًا إِلَى الْبَعْلِ
Shall Ofaira be drowned by blood
in public, before she reaches her groom?
فَلَوْ أَنَّا كُنَّا رِجَالًا وَكُنْتُمْ ... نِسَاءً لَكُنَّا لَا نَقْرُ لَذَا الْفِعْلِ
If we were men and you were
women, we would reject the act
وَإِنْ أَنْتُمْ لَمْ تَغْضَبُوا بَعْدَ هَذِهِ ... فَكُونُوا نِسَاءً لَا تَغْيَبُوا مِنَ الْكُحْلِ
If you have no anger to this,
you shall be women and get your eyes kohled
فَمَوْتُوَا كِرَامًا أَوْ أَمِئْتُوَا عَدُوَّكُمْ وَدَبُّوَا لِنَارِ الْحَرْبِ بِالْحَطْبِ الْجَزْلِ
You better die with honor or kill the enemy
and get prepared for war fire

Though the poem is contextually translated, the lines do not do justice to these old powerful meanings of an Arabic poem in which truth of Ofaira’s artistic expression led to the deadly ethnic cleansing war between Juddais and Tasm tribes that ended in the full destruction of Tasm tribe.

In addition to having been a demonstration of literary and linguistic abilities of the nomads, poetry has been a part and parcel of social communication, folk practices such as dance and warfare and an expression of emotions among the Bedouins. In the following couplets, the famous poet of Najd, Qays expresses his emotions when he meets a beautiful girl named Laila and the two fall madly in love. Though the two have not seen each since the first glance their emotions continue and are unknown and unnoticed by anyone. When Qays eventually learned that Laila had to marry a man she did not love, he uttered the following lines:

يقولون ليلى بالعراق مريض ... فيا ليتني كنت الطبيب المداويا!
 They say Laila is sick Iraq
 I wish I were the doctor who treats!
 فشباب بنو ليلى، وشباب ابن بنتها،... وحرقة ليلى في الفؤاد كما هيا
 Laila's sons and grandsons might mature
 Yet love for her shall continue inflaming my heart
 علي لئن لاقيت ليلى بخلوة... زيارة بيت الله رجلا حافيا
 If I ever could meet her in private
 I would offer a visit to Qa'aba bare feet
 فزني بعينها كما زنتها ليا... فيا رب، قد صيرت ليلى هي المنى
 God! For you made Laila my entire dream
 Let me be her dream too
 وإلا فبغضها إلي وأهلها... فإني بليلى قد لقيت الدواهيا
 If not, make her and her family heinous to me
 Since my end shall come from Laila
 يلومون قيسا بعدما شفه الهوى... وبات يراعي النجم حيران باكيا
 They blame Qays after he was consumed by love
 And kept waiting stars dispirited and skeptical

4. Saudi music

Saudi Arabia has a rich heritage of folk music genre which varies from region to another according to factors that shaped them. Saudi music of tribal areas of Najd “arose from the Bedouin, an ethnic group from the Gulf countries, pearl divers, fishermen and farmers” (Campbell 2009). This music reflects the traditional subcultures of the Bedouin and nomadic areas. However, Hijazi music is colored by “transcontinental touches” and reflects the traditional influence of economies who traded with urban areas of Hijaz that has “touches of African and Indian qualities due to the immense trading and traveling” (Campbell 2009). As a result, a rich and diverse yet distinctly Saudi Arabian musical sound flourished and is indebted to African, Indian and even Mesopotamian music:

Each subculture nurtured several music forms, many of which have not yet been fully studied and cataloged. While each musical subculture is distinct, none developed in a vacuum since they all garnered influences from each other and from neighboring musical cultures ... The voice predominates over richly syncopated rhythm, and in traditional performance venues the distinction between performer and audience is blurred as everyone in attendance participates by singing, clapping and sometimes dancing (Campbell 1996).

Melodic voice has been an essential component of life of Najd and Hijaz areas. The earliest sung voice in the regions of Najd and Hijaz is rhythmic poetry, *al-shi'ir al-nabati*, has been very common among tribes of the Arabian Peninsula and differs from the standard poetry written according to the early modern Arabic rules of grammar and literature. This poetry is sung to perform collective activities and tribal rites, expresses tribal unity, tells stories of common man and celebrates

weddings. The meter of this poetry is known as “seas” or (*buhur*). Every line, a couplet known as (*bayt*) has two units and ends with the same sound (*tafaelah*). Every sea has a certain number of *tafaelah* that a poet has to follow. Saudi music traced till the 1950s has been either lyrical voices in a form of poetry unaccompanied by musical tools or the *sawt* that was developed in urban areas and accompanied by *oud*, an instrument that looks like a guitar, and a drum. The *oud* (or *al-oud*) has five to thirteen strings depending on the region and the cultural differences (Parfitt. 2001). This kind of music differed from what was prevalent in the Levant and Egypt due to the social makeup and cultural differences. Other types of music include songs of pearling music, camel drivers and fight songs. The melodic qualities of these songs give Saudi music a distinctive impact to the listener.

Female music is an important part of Saudi folk heritage and is still played today. Saudi women have their own way of singing to celebrate occasions such as national holidays, school and university graduations and female parties such as wedding parties, *hafalatalzefaf*, inherited from antecedents. Each of these singing performances is called *saff*. “This general *saff* performance practice has been taking place for hundreds, if not thousands of years. In fact, on Saudi rock carvings dating back to the Neolithic era (from 10,000 BC), there are images of figures standing close together with their hands held before themselves as they engage in line song-dance” (Urkevich 2015:33). Female music in Saudi Arabia was shaped by mainstream music of the country that was largely shaped by the Bedouin and nomadic life: “Bedouin women historically sang a variety of work songs and lullabies ... Traditionally, like Bedouin men, women do not play instruments but form two facing lines and present poems and texts through the singing of simple repetitive melodies” (33). Unlike other female parties in other Gulf countries, music parties are performed by groups of singers whose “primary social music entails collective arts” and are exclusively attended by females only.

Hijazi female music is quite different from what prevailed in the Bedouin areas due to the diverse nature of Hijazi area, mainly Macca and Madina, whose inhabitants came from Egypt, central Asia, Africa, Turkey and other parts of the Muslim world. Hijazi female music is usually headed by the female singer called *mutribah* or *mughaniah* who plays the *oud* and sings with ensembles. Female singer is accompanied by a drum (*tablah*) for rhythm and by a flute (*oud*) for melody. Like Bedouin music, Hijazi music is composed of poetry and accompanied by dance.

Arabic music of Najd and Hijaz provides a pioneering picture of the folk music of the area as well as the folkloric practices that prevailed and accompanied this music such as the pearl fishing rituals. Saudi Arabia has 2640 km of coastline area on the Red Sea and the Arabian Gulf which attract a wide variety of marine life. Prior to large-scale discovery of oil, the nation lived on fishing pearls until the collapse of the pearl market in 1929 (Zuhur 2012:8). People and the crew of pearl diving sang unique music of the pearl season that usually lasts for six months called *al-ghaws al-kabîr*, which extends from April to September:

Pearling ship captains hired a lead singer, a nihâm, whose musical leadership kept the pearlers motivated throughout the arduous process of pearling. Led by the nihâm, the crew and divers sang specific songs to mark the stages of their work, such as leaving their home port, setting sail, approaching the pearl beds and dropping anchor at the beds (Campell 1996).

Life was a struggle in both nomadic as well as urban areas of Najd and Hijaz, however pearl fishing music was exclusively associated with the Hijazi people who lived in towns and coastal areas. Historically, Bedouins of the interior areas defined themselves by their livelihood and the way of existence: “They descend from recognized purebred tribes; their ancestors regularly engaged in raiding and warfare; and their lives were centered around camel breeding (qtd. Urkevich 2015: 14). Hence, practicing fishing was one of the professions that were undervalued: “The Bedouin considered themselves superior to farmers and townsmen because of their perceived genealogical and linguistic purity, their courage, resourcefulness, hospitality and generosity ... Their integrity, courage, friendship and hospitality were beyond reproach, and it was among the Bedouin that the poets, tellers of epic stories, sportsmen and hunters were to be found” (Urkevich 2015:4).

5. Conclusion

Oral poetry and music had been the *magnum* opus of Najd and Hijaz. Though the country's culture has a rich inheritance from the consequent powerful Islamic states, Hijazi and Najdi oral poetry and music continue to play a tremendous role in social practices of everyday life. Throughout centuries of Hijazi and Najdi folkloric production, there has been a huge volume of oral literature on a variety of themes and subject matters that provide a clear view of modern social performances. Although the majority of this folkloric production of Hijaz and Najd was oral, performances that used poetry and other oral folklore helped folklore to survive. For centuries, extending from the pre-Islam to the modern time, oral poetry and music have been the cultural expressions that represent the ideal component of personal elegance and ideal standard of the tribe achievement for the whole culture.

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