

# ARABIC FOLK LITERATURE AND POLITICAL EXPRESSION

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Unlike written literature—whose received form and contents are, by virtue of being written, fixed—orally transmitted and preserved folk literature readily lends itself to spontaneous adaptation. As a result, such oral literature, no matter how traditional and familiar, frequently serves as a vehicle with which to express opinions about contemporary events. Such topical allusion is, in fact, one of the special pleasures an audience derives from oral performance. In the local, parochial context of an oral performance in a village, the reciter will characteristically insert variations into his text so as to comment on both more and less remarkable aspects of local, everyday life, for example, insults or praise directed towards well known figures in the audience, or gossip about mundane scandals. So too, the reciter will regularly inflect his text so as to express opinions about national matters, especially political and economic predicaments.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, because the reciter of oral folk literature regularly exploits the allegorical potentialities of the narratives he expositis (for instance, interrupting his narrative in order to gloss the significance of particular actions), and because he regularly exploits and remarks on the multiple significances of the figurative language he employs (through implicit and explicit stress on puns, lexical double entendres, etc.), the audience for such performances is accustomed to attributing implicit, unspoken meanings to the narrative it hears.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, such performances lend themselves to oblique expression of ideas and opinions whose utterance would otherwise be censorable or dangerous. In the context of contemporary Arabic folk literature, this kind of provocatively suggestive political discourse, registered by all even when altogether implicit, is especially important. Moreover, because Arabic oral performance is by its nature both more ephemeral and relatively unsusceptible to policing surveillance, such oral performances characteristically essay bold and explicit political commentary.

There is, of course, a vast corpus, in many dialects, of Arabic oral folk literature. By discussing a few examples, I want in this paper to give some sense of the range and variability of topical and political allusion that is typically evident in such orally performed literature. My examples are drawn from two genres, *sīra* and *dōr*. For the most part, I rely upon my fieldwork

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research in Upper Egypt, where I recorded various performances by epic poets (*shā'ir*), by storytellers (*rāwī*), and singer entertainers (*gawwāl*).<sup>3</sup>

There is a cycle of folktales, songs, and epic recitation known throughout the Arabic-speaking world as *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* (the saga of the Banū Hilāl tribe). These stories chronicle the historic migrations of the Hilali tribe, which was driven out of the Arabian peninsula by famine. In the eighth and ninth centuries the Hilali tribe marched westward through the Levant, the Sinai peninsula, and Egypt, and across North Africa to Tunisia. Along the route the tribe made a southerly loop as far as Sudan and the shores of Lake Chad. In the same way that the Hilali wandered over a wide geographic range, so too have tales about the tribe diffused throughout many Arabic-speaking areas. To some tellers and listeners the stories related in *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*—about the legendary hero Abu Zayd, the historically attested hero Diyāb, and the beautiful heroine Jāz (Zazyā in North Africa)—tell the true history of the Arabs. To others these stories survive as entertaining legends and superstitions. Though the tales surely contain some considerable amount of legendary material, there is good reason to believe that some of the material reflects historical events. The question of whether the tale is history or legend has much occupied *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* scholarship.<sup>4</sup> Whatever amount of medieval history survives in the epic, it is surely the case that references to a good many modern historical personages and artifacts are incorporated into contemporary renditions of the epic. For example, in versions of the story collected in Palestinian refugee camps in northern Jordan (tales collected in the 1970s), the hero Abu Zayd no longer brandishes the curved medieval sword, but rather defeats his enemies by means of the *klashen*, the Arabic form for the Russian machine-gun, the *kalashnikov*, the weapon of the Palestinian fedayin. The anachronism is ostentatiously foregrounded, but is accepted on the grounds of political and ideological relevance. A similar example occurs in versions of the Hilali story collected in Libya, where 'Umar Mukhtār, the Libyan national hero who waged a twenty-year guerrilla war against the Italian colonialist government, rides and fights alongside the Hilali warriors. Though the audience knows very well the real historical fate of Mukhtār, who was publicly hanged by the Italian Fascist government as an object lesson to the Libyan people, his heroic stature and memory nevertheless allow him to be identified in the narrative with the martially victorious Hilali.<sup>5</sup>

Not just the spoken renditions of the Hilali adventures, but also folk art drawings of the final mortal combat on horseback between the hero, Abu Zayd, and the villainous enemy, Khalīfa Zanāti, ruler over Tunis, have also been appropriated to illustrate and comment on contemporary political situations. Among reciters of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* in Upper Egypt, one poet identified the hero Abu Zayd with the political hero of Upper Egypt, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, whose origins are also Upper Egyptian. Correspondingly, the villain Zanāti was identified with Anwar Sadat. The traditional folk

iconography in these pictures reinforces the comparison by drawing on contemporary details. The hero Abu Zayd could bring about his enemy's death only by piercing his eye with a sword. So too, I was told, Sadat could be killed only by a series of bullets to the eye. The poet took this to be proof of the popular sentiment that all who follow the villainous Khalīfa Zanāti (like Sadat, a usurper, in the poet's opinion) will come to the same end. The poet predicts much the same end for the current president of Egypt, Husni Mubarak, who like Sadat is from the north, and who is perceived in the southern regions of Upper Egypt as a politician in no way different from his assassinated predecessor. Pictures of the epic hero thrusting a sword or lance through the eye of the enemy sultan can be found in books, cloth paintings, and postcards throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

Nationalist sentiments expressed in the national Arab epic of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* have been documented by writers and folklorists such as 'Abd al-Hamīd Yūnis, Fārūq Khūrshīd, 'Ahmad Rushdī Sālīh, and 'Abd al-Hamīd Būrayrū, the latter describing the role of the indigenous, oral, colloquial, nationalist epic during Algeria's war of independence from France.<sup>6</sup> Such a vision of contemporary North African independence movements in terms of the Hilali warriors' military successes is evidenced by an illiterate Upper Egyptian epic poet's version of current history. According to the poet, after Abu Zayd defeated the Tunisian rulers, fratricidal warfare among the victorious tribes weakened the Arabs to such an extent that the French were able to invade and control North Africa. They ruled many generations until a Muslim Arab descendant of the Hilali tribes arose this century to re-establish an Arab state. The name of this Hilali descendant is Habib Bourguiba, President of Tunisia since 1956, when he led his country to independence against the French.<sup>7</sup>

These examples of the way in which the frame story of the Hilali epic can be adapted to express or to explain popular political sentiments are relatively straightforward and clear cut, no doubt because in all these examples the poets articulate common political points of view. The situation becomes somewhat more complicated and delicate when the point of view to which the poet gives expression is more particularly or individually focused, or when what the poet wants to say is more resistant to or subversive of popularly shared beliefs. Here, whether praising or insulting, the poet must be more circumspect and subtle. For a sense of some of the verbal means available to the poet for accomplishing this end, we can turn to examples of political rhetoric in the genre known as *dōr*.

The *dōr* is a poem, a verse, or a stanza that in performance signals a break. The break may be initiated by a member of the audience who shouts out: Say (or sing) a *dōr* about so-and-so (*gul dōr 'ala...*); or it may be part of a performance during which insults, banter, and praise take place between the singer and his audience. For example, when listeners are too talkative or inattentive, the gifted performer inserts a separate rhymed section, the *dōr*,

clearly set apart from the main body of the recitation both musically and thematically, which is a short insult poem. The insult will include the full name of the listener along with stock oral formulaic phrases. This insulted listener's name is not part of the customary poetical play on words. In the two examples that follow, the first *dōr*, an insulting one, demonstrates the substitutability of the form: any person, in this case a man named 'Abd al-Jalīl, a powerful member of the village elite in the poet's area, fits the name slot that signals the butt of the insult:

ʔeh ṭabīb li -jjarāyih DA FANNI fēn fēn \*  
 Healer of wounds, THIS IS MY ART, where, where?  
 'arab intu tizīn ilwajāyib  
 Arabs, you adorn social duties,  
 ya -xsāra la -yrūh fanni  
 O, a pity lest my art go,  
 li 'abd ijjalīl yiskin liḥōd ittarāyib  
 lest 'Abd al-Jalīl dwell in a dusty tomb,  
 kām kām ya 'ēni  
 how much more, how much more, ya 'ēni.

In the second example the poet chooses to honor a member of the audience by exploiting the poetic possibilities of punned rhymes that refer to the honoree's name. The man's name, 'Abd al-Min'im Ibrahīm al-Sāwi, will have multiple meanings. The name Ibrahīm is compared to the word for "salve, ointment," *brahīm* in Upper Egyptian dialect, and the name al-Sāwi puns with the word *insawi*, "we compose":

kalām l- ilḥabāyib JAMA'NA (aside) JĀ? MA'NA  
 Words to loved ones BROUGHT US TOGETHER (aside) GIVE MEANING,  
 kalām l-ilḥabāyib JAMA'NA  
 words to loved ones brought us together,  
 mita -shshart wi murr I DA XILLA  
 when there are bitter conditions, } THERE IS FRIENDSHIP,  
 } WITHIN ONESELF  
 yōm 'īd illi jama'na  
 a festive day brought us together,

\* Capital letters are used in these excerpts to indicate punning. Also, for technical reasons it has been necessary to use the combination "sh" in place of the conventional sign for this sound.

ʔimsāy li kull ilʔaxilla  
 my evening greetings to all close friends.  
 masāy ʔala -nnās zēnin  
 My evening greetings to all good people,  
 ʔarab bayyaḍ alla tanāhum  
 Arabs, may God make pure their honor,  
 yimurru ʔala -lgēs wi -llīn  
 they spurn the unworthy and weak,  
 ḥalafu ma fātu ʔidāhum  
 they swear not to ignore their enemies.  
 ṭabīb li -jjarāyih BRAHĪM  
 Healer of wounds, A SALVE  
 w- ana -lgōl ʔindi ʔinsāwi  
 and as for me, speech is what I compose,  
 ʔin massa jīb l-ibrahīm  
 if the son of Ibrahim gives evening greetings,  
 min aṣl min ilʔab sāwi  
 he whose origin is the father al-Sāwi.

In contrast, the *dōr* can also be used by the performer to warn and admonish a government leader. In the following example, the voice of the dead president of Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser, speaks to the then reigning Egyptian leader, Anwar Sadat. Here it is not the poet, but Nasser, who speaks, through the speech and song of the poet. (This kind of framing device—"I say that he says to someone else that . . ."—is very common.) In Nasser's name, the poet urges Sadat not to give up any territory in negotiations with the Israeli government:

jamāl yigūl ya sadāt  
 Jamal says, O Sadat,  
 ʔiw'a taxūn ilʔahd min ba'di  
 beware of betraying promises after me (i.e., after my death)  
 wi ʔana ʔadēt lak il ʔamāna  
 and I gave you the trust  
 wi ʔinta takūn il ʔamīn min ba'di  
 and you will be the trusted one after me,  
 wala ʔitfarriṭ ya sadāt  
 nor cede, O Sadat,

fi hubbit raml ‘arabiyya  
a single grain of sand of the Arabs

lēshmat fīna ibn ilhafīyya  
lest the worthless ones (literally, “shoeless ones,” i.e., the Israelis) rejoice  
over us

yixushsh il ʔard min ba’di  
and take over the land after me.

The *dōr* is also employed in the service of a poem of praise to a national political leader, rather than to a member of the local political elite. The man poetically honored in the example below is ‘Abd al-Ḥakīm ‘Āmir, a general who also headed the project to build the Aswan Dam. The *gawwāl* puns on both parts of the general’s personal name, the first part, ‘Āmir, which means “bountiful, flourishing,” and the second part, Ḥakīm, which means “just.” As is customary among Egyptians, the second name is also the name of one’s father. Thus the poet honors the man, his name, and his father:

‘abd al-ḥakīm ‘āmir kalāmu zōg wi ḥakīm  
‘Abd al-Ḥakīm ‘Āmir whose word is choice and just,  
ʔabu kalām ‘ala -lkull ‘āmir  
a man of words, over all bountiful,  
raḥmatu -llāh ‘alēh ‘abd ilḥakīm  
God’s mercy upon him ‘Abd al-Ḥakīm  
rājil jadd ya jīb ‘āmir  
a worthy man, the offspring of ‘Āmir.

Yet another instance of Nasser continuing to speak through the voice of a poet to his people after his death occurs in the example below. In these verses, Nasser laments the death of General ‘Abd al-Min‘im Riyād, who was killed in an Israeli bomb attack on the Suez Canal:

bagūl-lak jamāl irraʔis gāl  
I say to you (I sing to you) that Jamal the President said:  
ya ʔasafī ‘alēk ya riyād  
O my regrets about you, O Riyad,  
ma ḥsabsh ilmanīyya  
death did not take into account  
ḥatīnhik ‘an garīb ya riyād  
your life ended so soon, O Riyād,

wi ?ishsha'b wi -jjēsh biyibku 'alēk ya riyāḍ  
 the people and the army weep over you, O Riyāḍ.

The singer gains rhetorical authority by his ability to voice the speech of the revered deceased Nasser. The singer becomes the medium through which Nasser utters his thoughts in order to continue the fiction of the dead leader's presence among his folk. At the same time, blame for the composition cannot be readily assigned to the singer. There are other ways to disavow responsibility. In the following example, the poet explains that he was "drugged on hashish," vaguely suggesting, given the context, that he does not altogether vouch for the claims he makes:

yōm 'ashra ramadān  
 On the tenth of Ramadan,  
 madāfa'na ḍarabit min ba'īd min miyyit mitr  
 our cannons struck from afar, from one hundred meters,  
 kassarit iddushn wi -ṣṣūr  
 breaking aircraft hangars and the wall (i.e. the Bar-Lev line)  
 wi ?adi mūsa dayān  
 and here is Moshe Dayan,  
 ?asḥaḥ xaṭīru maksūr  
 he himself became broken,  
 wi ?adi gōl dam'i tigūl da ghshīsh  
 and here my tears speak of betrayal  
 wi ?ana kunt ?axḍar ktīr min ilḥashīsh  
 and I was very "drugged" on hashish.

This brief sketch of some modes of political and topical allusion in Arabic oral folk literature is not meant to be exhaustive. However, since it is often erroneously assumed that oral folk literature, oral epic in particular—because it is constructed out of conventional epithetic formulas and repeated narrative archetypes, because it was originally addressed to a primarily illiterate audience, because it is an expression of a pre-industrial and pre-capitalist socio-cultural context, and, most of all, because it continues to recall the values and mores of a heroic but no longer vital pre-modern epoch—is a conservative aesthetic entertainment, it seems important to identify at least a few of the ways in which such literature acquires a significant amount of its energy and interest from its ability to bring present and past into active conjunction.

## NOTES

1. For the use of oral poetry by South African blacks to revolt against the establishment of black Bantustans, see Archie Mafeje, "The Role of the Bard in a Contemporary African Community," *Journal of African Languages* 6 (1967): 196-204; Sayyid Hamid Hurreiz, "The Use of Folk Poetry in Political and Social Protest of the Shukriyya," in *Directions in Sudanese Linguistics*, ed. Sayyid Hurreiz and Herman Bell (Khartoum: University of Sudan, 1976), 123-131; and 'Abd al-Hamid Hawwas, "al-Hukūmah fī al-thaqāfah al-sha'biyah," *Qadāyā fikriyah* 1 (July 1985): 160-169.

2. See my article "The Death-Song of 'Amir Khafāji: Puns in an Oral and Printed Episode of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*," *Journal of Arabic Literature*, in press.

3. For further descriptions of performance, context, and fieldwork methodology concerning examples in this paper, see my "The Merchant of Art: An Egyptian Oral Epic Poet in Performance." (Diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1985).

4. Jacques Berque, "De nouveau sur les Banī Hilāl?" *Studia Islamica* 36 (1972): 99-111.

5. Palestinian and Libyan examples are from the research of Abderrahman Ayoub in his article "The Hilali Epic: Material and Memory," *Revue d'histoire maghrébine* 35-36 (1984): 189-217.

6. 'Abd al-Hamid Yūnis, *al-Hilaliyah fī al-ta'rikh wa-al-adab al-sha'bi*. 2nd ed. (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 1968); Fāruq Khurshīd, *al-Sīrah al-sha'biyah*. 2nd ed. (Cairo: 1980); Ahmad Rushdī Ṣalīh, *Funūn al-adab al-sha'bi*. 2 vols. (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr, 1956); 'Abd al-Hamid Burayru, in *Collected Papers of the Second International Conference on the Arab Folk Epic*, organized by Cairo University and the International Association for Mediterranean Studies, Cairo, January 2-7, 1985 (Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organization, in press). Ethnographers and scholars have long noted the use of an oral poetical language for political persuasion. Not only a leader's ability to exploit poetic genres has been documented, but also the use of oral poetry by a poet to affect an audience towards or sometimes away from war, for example, see Michael Meeker, *Literature and Violence in North Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Steven Charles Caton, "Tribal Poetry as Political Rhetoric from Khawla n At-Ṭiyāl Yemen Arab Republic" (Diss., University of Chicago, 1984); and Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

7. According to Cathryn Anita Baker in her collection of Tunisian Hilali tales, many Tunisians proudly claim descent from the Hilali invaders. See her "The Hilali Saga in the Tunisian South" (Diss., Indiana University, 1978). Perhaps Bourguiba does also.