

Original in French

SUSAN SLYOMOVICS

Approaches to Transcription and Translation of Oral Epic

Performance (Sīrat Banī Hilāl)

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In this essay I discuss the history of several translations of oral versions of the Bani Hilal cycle. I begin with texts collected by means of hand-written dictation. I end with my own translations, which are based on material I collected by means of a tape-recorder. I wish to analyze the ways in which specific linguistic and cultural assumptions influence the transformation on to the printed page of a recited story or sung tale. I hope that by discussing problems attaching to certain past approaches, I will point to what might be done differently in the future.¹

In 1892, A. Vaissière, "capitaine au service des affaires indigènes," published in Revue africaine, an ethnographic monograph about the Arabic-speaking Berber tribe, the Ouled-Rechaich of the Aurès Mountains, Algeria.² In detail, Captain Vaissière described the geography, geology, population, industry and commerce of the region. In the section entitled "manners and customs," he writes of the Ouled-Rechaich tribe's incurable laziness, its endurance, passivity, and lack of industry. All these, he notes, further the successful colonizing efforts of his French compatriots:

C'est qu'on oublie que "si le génie de l'Europe est l'industrie, la génie de l'Orient est l'oisiveté," suivant le mot de general Daumas, et que les indigènes rachètent cette oiseveté par des qualités de sobriété et d'endurance que nous ne possédons pas. Ne devront-ils pas du reste plutôt s'en rejouir? C'est qui nous livrera le pays quand arriveront nos premiers colons après la constitution de la propriété individuelle; la lutte ne saurait être longue entre les deux races, dès que l'element européen sera suffisant pour que nos compatriotes puissent grouper leurs efforts.³

Vaissière's condemnation of the subject peoples under his military jurisdiction, does not extend to the land they inhabit. For Vaissière, and for many other travelers and colonialists to North Africa, the Sahara Desert evokes passages of lyrical description:

Le Sahara, avec ses horizons infinis, son silence imposant, ses couchers de soleils merveilleux, ses effets de mirage qui surprennent toujours, sa lumière si intense qu'elle donne aux montagnes qui le bordent les colorations de grenat et met des paillettes d'or et d'argent jusque dans le sable qu'on foule aux pieds, avec les caravanes pittoresque qui traversent de loin en loin, avec ses troupeaux de gazelles qui bondissent et semblent défier le chasseur, exerce sur tous ceux qui l'ont parcouru une attraction puissant.⁴

I quote Vaissière at such length not for the purpose of pointing up his colonialist mentality, but, rather to identify the ways in which Vassière's distinction between the lands and the people of Algeria corresponds to the split he establishes between the texts of the Bani Hilal epic that he collected, on the one hand, and the people and poets who create them, on the other. The land and, according to the analogy that governs Vaissières's thought, the text, both speak -- the people, in contrast, do not. The ability to separate the text off from its poet-transmitter inevitably affects the techniques of collecting texts, as well as subsequent redaction, transcription and translation of such folklore material. The example of Vaissière is particularly rich, for my purpose, because he contextualizes his Bani Hilal tales within a gen-

eral survey and overview of the Berber tribe under ethnographic examination. Vaissière discusses his ^{use} of oral "native" sources, at the same time as he effectively elides them. Rendering his informants mute, his discourse remains firmly situated within the descriptive domain of a soldier's viewpoint.

The Bani Hilal tales are reported in section seven, under the heading, "origins of the Ouled-Rechaich." Vaissière prefaces the tales with a long footnote in which he articulates several important points that represent a specific theory of folklore transmission -- a theory still consistent with his political attitudes. First, he writes, Arabs have borrowed many heroic ideals, ("nos moeurs chevaleresques") from the French, though nowadays the natives do not exhibit the chivalrous respect for women that their tales of earlier times depict. In the amorous encounter between the two lovers, Diyab and Jazya, we hear the feeble echo "de nos cours d'amours." The issue for Vaissière is the French impact upon Arabic poetry, for his claim is that the two peoples, in contact for a long period of time, have influenced each other -- with one especially significant difference, however, namely that the Arabs could not have attained the elevated ideal of love that Vaissière's French ancestors achieved, since Arabs know only sensual love (but, Vaissière says, with what accents of love do they find to sing it).⁵

In Vaissière's exposition, we encounter a configuration of attitudes which folklore studies defines as a theory of degeneration, devolution, or decay through historical time:⁶

The most common devolutionary notion is that folklore decays through time. Another notion is that folklore "runs down" by moving from "higher" to "lower" strata of society. These two notions are by no means mutually exclusive since one can without difficulty imagine that if folklore really moved from "higher" to "lower" strata, it could easily undergo textual deterioration at the same time...Folklorist Walter Anderson believed that folktales moved from "culturally higher" to "culturally lower" peoples.⁷

Thus, there is not only, within French history, an internal loss of the heroic ideal between the chivalrous age of Vaissière's French ancestor up to his own days, there is also a secondary superimposition upon this specifically European decay: the higher French stratum, which is also the original, better, ur-source of literary production, has, in addition, undergone a textual, and, for Vaissière, also moral deterioration as it travelled downwards from French culture to Arab culture. What further reinforces Vaissière's sense of this entropic decline is the difference Vaissière identifies between the oral form of the tales collected among the Berber and the "more complete and somewhat different" printed version of a Cairo chapbook that Vaissière cites. From civilized to indigene, from French to Arab, from written to oral, a series of negative, degenerating steps have been taken toward fragmentation, loss, and disintegration.

What does this mean in terms of the manner in which data are collected, texts reproduced and presented? In the case of Vaissière, long narrative portions in French are interspersed with brief lines in Arabic script, these Arabic verses then followed by French translations. Vaissière's text does not value or stress the linguistic or poetic style of the whole, but is concerned, rather, on a more abstract level, with the narrative content of the tale. The content, or story line, is thereby divorced from its language and from what we know to be its crea-

tor and its people. Moreover, in a monograph characterized by lengthy lists of names of rivers, streams, wadis, mountains, hillocks, Roman roads, and pathways of the Ouled-Rechaich region, the absence of human names, the name of the teller of tales, is particularly striking.

There is an immediate contradiction that confronts the devolutionary theorist, namely, whereas heroic epic, and even the Arabs themselves, are a devolutionary phase of European civilization, simultaneously, however, heroic epic exists as a living oral tradition in the Arab world, though long dead in western Europe. Vaissière and others must look backward to an earlier, better, glorious literary epoch -- but one whose presence is only attested to among the "lower" strata. According to Alfred Bel, another collector of oral versions in North Africa, and "professeur à la medersa de Tlemcen," the story of Jazya ⁸ is comparable to the French "chansons de geste" of medieval troubadours and trouveres. Bel's attitude towards those who recite and listen to the Bani Hilal tales is evident from his opening paragraph:

Les musulmans de l'Afrique du Nord, nos sujets algériens, les Tunisiens, les Marocains, que l'on désigne à tort sous le nom commun d'Arabes, parce que sans doute ils ont adopté la religion et la langue de leurs conquérants du moyen âge, sont, comme tous les gens d'esprit simple, fort amateurs de contes merveilleux, de récits fantastiques, de légendes extraordinaires.

Les lettrés et les gens de villages eux-mêmes, à de rares exceptions près, ne sont pas exempts d'une haute dose de crédulité et d'un penchant presque incroyable à accueillir volontiers comme autant de vérités les récits les plus invraisemblables.⁹

If the western poetic past is heroic, not the past as such but the poetry of the past, what happens, and what does it mean, when this heroic poetry is preserved and recited by clearly "non-heroic" people and poets in the present? The "degenerate" Arabs of the present embody, in the

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present, the very ideal from which they are supposed to have degenerated. Their "deplorable" present is somehow indistinguishable from our "heroic" past.

This familiar contradiction, characteristic of a utopian, colonializing sensibility, is neither explicitly addressed nor resolved by either Vaissière or Bel, and the same kind of contradiction manifests itself, I want to suggest, in the methodological assumptions of the devolutionary hypothesis, where again we discover a confusing criss-cross of past and present. For example, the theme of devolution is explicitly stated by Bel when he takes the story of Jazya to illustrate the involuntary corruption engendered by oral transmission. His initial point is that the mutilated texts we now possess are far removed from those from which they descend. Bel further says, however, that we can read these texts historically to learn about the character and aspirations of Arab nomads transplanted to North Africa. Despite their degeneracy, the texts here serve Bel as historical documents which truthfully depict the past, and close readings of which will open up the true mentality of the eleventh century Bedouin Arab, his passions, his vices, the specificity and texture of his everyday way of life, his customs and his manners.¹⁰ The contradiction is clear: a mutated version of the past is at the same time a transparent representation of the past. The degenerate living epic of the present inexplicably recreates its own dead past. This last is only one anecdotal example, but it reflects a constant problem attaching to devolutionary theory which assumes that a heroic epic cannot be about nor speak to present day history and life. For such a theory, an epic is not an evolving, creative, poetic and historical creation, but merely a decayed remnant of the Arab past. (This corresponds, we can add, to a more general bias towards the written and against the oral. In general, devolutionary theory assumes that the Arabs sing their tales because they were too uncivilized to have ever

written it down. Orality is its own devolutionary proof.)

In contemporary folklore theory, in contrast, the continued existence of an item of folklore, the very dynamic of its oral transmission from one generation to the next, is understood to be itself evidence that the text reflects the present along with the past. As Abderahman Ayoub has demonstrated in oral collections from Jordan, Abu Zayd does not carry a sword but a klashen (kalishnikov), or in Libya, Umar al-Mukhtar, the Libyan national hero who waged guerilla warfare against the Italian colonialist power, rides alongside and is identified with the Hilali warriors.¹¹ Similarly, Ahmad Rushdī Ṣāliḥ explicitly relates themes of Arab nationalism, local historical conditions, and the oral poets stated intentions to discuss current politics, to the oral texts he collected in Menya.¹² In my own discussions with poets of Upper Egypt, who requested anonymity concerning political views emerging from the Bani Hilal recitations (and this request attests to the power the poets ascribe to the explicitly political import of their words), one poet identified Abu Zayd with Sadat and Khalifa Zanati with Gamal Abd al-Nasser. Abu Zayd was a liar, a trickster, and cunning. He would disguise himself as a poet, a woman, or an old man. Khalifa Zanati was a hero, an honorable fighter, defending his homeland and resisting invasion. Another poet stated the opposite point of view, and here the folk iconography of the death of Khalifa Zanati is crucial, because Khalifa could only be assassinated by a spear piercing the eye. A third example of the popular perception of contemporary history through the epic, concerns the genealogy of the Tunisian kings of North Africa. The four original kings of Tunisia were overthrown by Jaber Qurayshi, a Muslim belonging to the tribe and army of the Prophet Muhammad. Here we have Islam arriving in and conquering North Africa. Jaber Qurayshi in turn

was defeated by Khalifa Zanati, the great anti-hero of the epic and the opponent of the Hilali tribes. Killed and deposed, Khalifa Zanati was succeeded by the Bani Hilal sultans in the third section, al-Taghrība. The last Arab king to rule Tunisia was Musa, son of Dyab, whose rule was marked by fighting and internal disunity among the Arabs that enabled the French to enter and subsequently to colonize North Africa, ruling Tunis until this century when a Muslim Arab, a descendant of the Hilali, re-established an Arab state. According to this illiterate, elderly poet, the name of the true descendant of Hilali lineage, is Habib Bourguiba, President of Tunisia. The poet has never travelled outside Egypt, but he knows who the French are -- usurpers, eventually defeated, of the independent kingdoms of Arab lineage.

For Bel, and for others who see the Hilali epic as a way historically to reconstruct the past, modern intrusions, for example, lexical items, are coded as anachronisms. Bel footnotes the use of the word "muskets": "cet anachronisme prouve suffisamment l'alteration du texte primitif."¹³ Another unnecessary modern intrusion is the poet or reciter. Bel's Jazya text is the "definitive" one that he, Bel, established on the basis of words redacted from an old taleb, Si Bou Chentouf, and, secondly, on another version supplied by one of his students, "un jeune Mascarién, Moutfa bel Khodj, élève à la medersa de Tlemcen, qui la recueillit pour moi de la bouche d'un taleb de son pays."¹⁴ Bel's collation of two texts, one of which was mediated by a third person, raises serious linguistic issues concerning possible regional and dialectical variation among the three informants. Many of his footnotes reflect the devolutionist and the historicist's quests, as well as Bel's own ambivalent attitudes toward Arabic folk literature in particular and Arabs in general.

Finally, the devolutionary position also insists on the imminent disappearance of the particular item of folklore. In 1902, Bel writes about the urgency of his mission, since native Algerian informants knowledgeable about the Hilali tales are quickly disappearing: "celles qui subsistent aujourd'hui se font de plus en plus rares et il faut se hâter d'en recueillir les dernier débris avant leur disparition définitive."¹⁵ We should note that in the 1970's Anita Baker collected approximately seventy hours of taped oral renditions of the Hilali in southern Tunisia, and collectors continue to note extensive samples.¹⁶

Turning from oral versions collected from territories occupied by the French, there is also an English translation entitled Stories of Abu Zeid the Hilali in Shuwa Arabic, produced by J.R. Patterson, District Officer, Bornu Province, Nigeria, with a Preface by H.R. Palmer, Lieutenant-Governor of the Northern Provinces.¹⁷ The original purpose of the Arabic texts was to¹⁸

provide a Reader for use in Schools where Shuwa Arabic is one of the languages spoken. A translation has been added in the hope that it may render the book of service to students of Shuwa Arabic which is one of the languages recognized by the Nigerian government for certain qualifying examination which officers of some department are required to pass.¹⁹

If the purpose of the French military officer is to study his subjects' past by means of folktales, the purpose of the British military officer is to govern his subject people's future. Oral folk texts neither provide a key to the past nor are they useful because they reflect the past; instead, they serve to train generations of qualified English overseers conversant in local dialect. In both cases, whether future or past oriented, the poet or reciter is not mentioned but, rather, "s Patterson puts it: "the stories were first reduced to writing by a Shuwa Arab 'Mallam'. Much of his transcription of them was simply a phonetic

rendering in Arabic characters of spoken words and it has been revised to produce the present version."²⁰ Like Alfred Bel's student, Moçtfa Bel Khodja, or Vaissière's nameless teller (perhaps even redactor?), Patterson's Nigerian 'Mallam' is the privileged informant and transcriber, acculturated to his colonizing master, who feels free to alter the text according to different canons of correctness -- for Bel a "definitive" text would be established by an idiosyncratic collation of two versions; Patterson in contrast, establishes a text by reference to classical Arabic ideals:

Considerable difficulty has been experienced over the revision of the original document in deciding how far to go in making the forms of words coincide with the classical forms where such existed. The final result is in the nature of compromise. The aim has been to preserve, wherever possible, the regular forms of words which can be traced back to Classical arabic roots. On the other hand, no attempt has been made to adhere so closely to classical forms that the Shuwa idioms would thereby be obscured.²¹

It is interesting to note that Edward Lane in his Manners and Customs of the modern Egyptians, reverses Patterson's method. Lane provides detailed descriptions of performances and poets, but almost nothing of their texts, deeming the recited poems of little literary merit. Lane does provide a paraphrase of contemporary written editions.²²

Although Patterson raises crucial questions concerning the nature of text transcription using the Arabic alphabet, the original draft of the 'Mallam' remains a more valuable document to the researcher for it provides, however dimly, an opportunity to examine an example of "the folk" transcribing their own lore. One can only speculate whether 'Mallam' would have divided the sections into prose and poetry, eliminated repetitions, or provided alternate versions.²³ Fortunately, there now exists a scholarly consensus concerning the importance of oral literature in the colloquial language and the folly of "improving" orally

performed and collected material into literary Arabic. Such critical evaluations of these earlier collected oral texts serve mainly to emphasize changing practices in field techniques brought about not only by the presence of tape-recorders, film, and video-cassette, but also by a widening perspective of what constitutes the tale within the context of performer and performance. What I wish to suggest is that the same linguistic scrupulousness attached to text collecting and transcription be applied to a larger consideration of what constitutes a "text." In the second section of this paper I am concerned here with the contextual nexus of poet, performance and audience, and with the ways in which the recognition of this nexus can generate more successful and valuable translations and transcriptions.

Performance-centered approaches (Performer-Audience-Performance)

Textual transcription of non-elicited performances in their natural settings have been the subject of much theoretical evaluation in the past decade, see Richard Bauman, Verbal art as Performance, (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1977); Dan Ben-Amos and Kenneth Goldstein, eds. Folklore: Performance and Communication, (The Hague: Mouton, 1975); Dell Hymes, "In vain I tried to tell you: Essays in Native American Ethnopoetics", (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981). In Hilali scholarship, Anita Baker's collection is a rare, excellent evocation of performances that include audience reactions (vol. 1, pp. 163, 312, 315), poets' glosses and asides to the audience (pp. 271, 274, 307), the effect of her own presence on the process of recording (p. 206), and stylistic notes when a session was interrupted and then repeated (p. 322).

As an example of this kind of performance-centered approach, I would like to conclude with a transcription of a recording session in

the field. This reflects some of the research I discuss in more detail in my dissertation. The poet is ^ᶜAwaḍallah ^ᶜAbd al-Jalīl, Aswan Governorate, recorded March 1983. This example suggests the literary flexibility and stylistic possibilities available to the poet in a specific contextual performative occasion: when a member of the audience is inattentive. Here the insertion of a praise-poem (madīḥ) is intended to reprimand the obstreperous listener, more than it is intended to praise God. Without the performance context, the poet's interpolation of a different genre remains textually inexplicable. No oral formulaic analysis, no strictly philological or narratological study, no study of structuralist poetics could recognize, let alone integrate this contingent aspect of the text within their differing accounts of the text. To this extent, all these approaches fail to characterize or to address an aspect of the text which is of crucial importance both to the poet and the audience. Abstracted from the reality of its performance, the text ceases to speak, or at least ceases to speak for itself.

^ᶜAWADALLAH:

my words return to the hero Abu Zayd

AUDIENCE:

he still has not come upon the scene

^ᶜAWADALLAH:

he is Salama, partisan of the beleaguered
defender of the Zoghba tribe with the Derēd

(^ᶜAwaḍallah calls the name of an inattentive listener)

O Abu Zaki!

AUDIENCE:

he's with you, he's with you -- he is the one fighting

[Drumming begins]

^cAWADALLAH:

Healer of wounds
sprinkle healing upon our village
upon our worthy people
aware of art and meaning
my Lord is Present, my Lord is Present
the munificent, generous One
I swear by the Lord who is Present
none but You understands meaning.

Abu Zayd cried out: "O Yunis
hear us when an elder speaks."

[Drumming ends]

The plot of the text tells us that Abu Zayd, disguised as an epic poet, reprimands his nephews. The performance context obliquely, but quite forcefully, reinforces the reprimand of a poet, ^cAwadallah, singing about a poet, Abu Zayd, rebuking. On the multiple levels of text and context, reader and listener, for that matter, scholar and performer, we are urged: "Hear us, when an elder speaks."

NOTES

¹ For a general survey of oral texts of Sīrat Banī Hilāl, see Bridget Connelly, "The Oral-formulaic tradition of Sīrat Banī Hilāl. Diss. University of California, Berkeley, 1974, pp. 1-40 and "The structure of four Bani Hilal tales: Prolegomena to the study of Sira literature," Journal of Arabic Literature, 4 (1973), pp. 18-47. For a bibliography and discography on Egyptian oral material, see Giovanni Canova, Egitto: Epica. I Suoni, Musica di Tradizione Orale, 5, Milan, 1980. I have used the same small corpus of oral texts, analyzing them from the critical viewpoint of folklore theories and current techniques of ethnographic field-work.

An English version of this paper was presented at the Second International Conference on the Arab Folk Epic, Cairo University, January 2-7, 1985.

² A. Vaissière, "Les Ouled-Rechaich," Revue africaine, 36:206 (1892), pp. 209-243 and 36:207 (1892), pp. 312-314.

³ Vaissière, p. 328.

⁴ Vaissière, pp. 215-216.

⁵ Vaissière, p. 243, footnote 1.

⁶ For a critical discussion of this theory, see Alan Dundes, "The Devolutionary Premise in Folklore Theory," Journal of the Folklore Institute, 6 (1969), pp. 5-19. The more complex issues, of which devolutionary theory is an instance, have been addressed by Edward Said in Orientalism, (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

⁷ Dundes, pp. 18-19.

⁸ Alfred Bel's introduction, text in Arabic script and French translation appeared in the Journal asiatique, ser. 9, vol. xix (March-April 1902), pp. 289-347; ser. 9, vol. xx (September-October 1902), pp. 169-236; and ser. 10, vol. i (January-February 1903), pp. 311-366 respectively.

⁹ Bel, (March-April 1902), p. 289. Also cited by B. Connelly, p. 31.

¹⁰ Bel, pp. 300 and 309.

¹¹ Abderrahman Ayoub, "The Hilali Epic: Material and Memory," Revue d'histoire maghrébine, 35-36 (1984), pp. 207-210.

¹² Ahmad Rushdī Ṣāliḥ, Funūn al-'adab al-sha'bi, (Cairo: Dār al-fikr, 1956), vol. 2, pp. 76, 89.

¹³ Bel, (March-April 1902), p. 331.

14 Bel, pp. 326-327. For a quite opposite assessment of the linguistic authenticity of Bel's text, and his annotations, one that does not take account of the mediation I discuss above, see B. Connelly, p. 30.

15 Bel, p. 320.

16 See Anita Baker, "The Hilali Saga in the Tunisian South." Diss. Indiana University, 1978 and Lucien Saada, "Documents sonores tunisiens concernant les geste des Banu Hilal," Actes du 2ème Congrès internationale d'études des cultures de la méditerranée occidentale, II, Algiers, SNED, 1978.

17 Published in London, Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1930.

19 Patterson, p. 17.

20 Patterson, p. 18.

21 Patterson, p. 18.

22 Lane, (London, Ward, Lock, n.d.), chapters 21-23.

23 For indigenous interpretations of oral materials, see Michael Hertzfeld, "An indigenous theory of meaning and its elicitation in performance context," Semiotica, 34 (1-2), pp. 113-141; Dell Hymes, "In vain I tried to tell you: Essays in Native American Ethnopoetics" (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981) and Gary Goosens, "Chamula Genres of Verbal Behavior," in Americo Paredes and Richard Bauman, eds, Towards New Perspectives in Folklore (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972).