

Folk Poetry and Popular Genres in the Arab World

Popular poetry. The high art of the pre-Islamic Arabs was poetry, and poetry remained the prestige genre in Arabic literature until it was overtaken by the novel in the twentieth century. Oral poetry played important roles in popular culture, in which it took on a variety of forms and was used in many contexts for diverse purposes. In her book *Veiled Sentiments*, Lila Abu-Lughod wrote of the *ghinnawa*, a genre of lyrical couplets used by Bedouins of the Libyan Desert in northwestern Egypt to express deep personal emotions. The *zajal* is popular in Lebanon and Syria and is often performed in competitions in front of a larger audience. The Egyptian *mawwaliya* is a plaintive lament, a stanza of four lines that usually involves multiple puns. There are many specific genres—we will explore just a few in detail.

The folk epic. One particularly interesting genre of oral poetry is that of the folk epic, termed *sirah* in Arabic, which usually recounts the exploits of a hero. Many such epics were popular in pre-modern times, including the epic of `Antar, the epic of the Banu Hilal tribe, the epic of Sayf ibn Dhi Yazan, the epic of Baybars, the epic of `Ali al-Zaybaq, and others. The plots of 12 well-known epics are summarized in M.C. Lyons' work listed below. From travelers' accounts and works such as Lane's *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* we know that storytellers performed these epics regularly in coffeehouses and other venues for the entertainment of rapt audiences. This practice continued into the twentieth century, and one of Naguib Mahfouz's novels, *Midaqq Alley* (1947), shows just such a storyteller being replaced by a radio at Kirsha's café, a sad transition that happened elsewhere throughout Egypt and the Arab world. There are still a few places in Egypt, Tunisia, and other Arab nations where the epic of the Banu Hilal tribe is performed, and Dwight Reynolds provides a fascinating description of a modern performer in the Nile Delta village of Bakatush. The *sirah* is a long series of poems describing various scenes and events, connected by prose narrations, often rhyming and rhythmical prose as well.

The Epic of Banu Hilal is a very long epic that has a cast of many characters, including not just one but several heroes. An interesting feature of this epic is that it portrays its heroes not as perfect but as psychologically flawed, and also includes an Amazon-like woman warrior names al-Jaziyah. It tells the story of the great migration of the Banu Hilal tribe from Arabia, through Egypt to North Africa, where they nearly succeeded in establishing a kingdom but then were over-run, after which the tribe was scattered throughout North Africa.

The Epic of Sayf ben Dhi Yazan. The epic of Sayf ben Dhi Yazan, like many of the other popular epics, is based on historical events. Sayf ben Dhi Yazan was the Yemeni commander credited with ending the Ethiopian occupation of Yemen a century prior to the advent of Islam. Curiously, he is mentioned at the beginning of Ibn Hisham's *Sirah* of the Prophet in a manner that suggests that the rise of Islam was intimately related to Yemeni political history and the revolt of Sayf.

Questions

Explain the form, social context, and main themes of one form of popular poetry in the Arab world.

How are modern popular forms related to the divide between classical Arabic and local dialects of Arabic?

What are some of the religious purposes that popular poetry serves?

What are some famous epics from around the world? What characteristics do they have in common? How are their heroes portrayed? What specific qualities do they have? Compare and contrast with the Arabic epics.

Which elements of *The Adventures of Sayf ben Dhi Yazan* are reminiscent of *The 1001 Nights*?

What is the structure of the epic?

How is Sayf portrayed as a hero?

Discuss one salient theme of the epic.

Reading

Reynolds, *Arab Folklore*, pp. 29-77.

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Folktales.

Arab Folktales. Folktales form a very large corpus of material and have been categorized according to types and motifs. In *Types of the Folktale in the Arab World*, Hasan El-Shamy has divided folktales into five broad types: 1) animal tales, 2) ordinary folktales, 3) jokes and anecdotes, 4) formula tales, and 5) unclassified tales. Certain cycles of folktales also form more specific genres, featuring recurring characters like Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox of American folklore, as well as conventions of plot and message. This week we will read examples of a number of different types of folktale in Reynolds' *Arab Folklore*, as well as a collection of tales about Juha, the most famous Arab folkloric character of all. In 1956, Egyptian essayist `Abbas Mahmud al-`Aqqad (1889-1964) published a book entitled *Juha al-dahik al-mudhik* (Laughing and Entertaining Juha). While it includes a section devoted to anecdotes of the folkloric character Juha, the book is actually a general work on humor, drawing on such theorists as Bergson and others, with some focus on Arab and Egyptian humor in particular. The choice of title reflects not merely a ploy on the part of the publisher to sell more books by referring to a popular folkloric character but also recognition of Juha's status as the leading representative of folk humor in Arab societies.

Juha as Everyman. Juha is at the same time ubiquitous and relentlessly local. He is found in every region of the Arab world, in medieval Persian literature, and in the modern folklore of southern Italy and Sicily, where, like couscous, he stands as remaining evidence of the intense but sparsely documented medieval cultural contact between the Arab, Islamic world and Christian Europe in the region. His name varies slightly from place to place. In the thirteenth-century Persian *Mathnavi* of Rumi he is *Juhi*, in Egypt *Guha*, in North Africa *Zheha* or *Si Zha*, in Sicily and southern Italy *Giufà* or *Giucà*. Yet everywhere he appears, he is portrayed as local and typical of the region. In Iraq he is Iraqi, in Egypt, Egyptian, and in Morocco, Moroccan. He is a Muslim among Muslims, but a Christian in Sicily, and a Jew in Sefardic tales throughout the Mediterranean. He represents the character of Everyman, the local peasant or villager with no education or attainments to speak of, limited resources, and a humble social position.

A Fool's Long History. The character of Juha may have originated in Iraq in the early Islamic centuries or may go back even further to Arab lore that precedes the Islamic period. Whether Juha was a historical person or simply a mythical figure has been the subject of some debate. Juha is supposed to have been a real man, a native of Kufa in southern Iraq by the name of Abu 'l-Ghusn Juha of the Arab Fazarah tribe. This would fit with what is known of other famous paragons of specific character traits in Arab lore, such as gluttony, avarice, generosity, and so on. Just as Hatim al-Ta'i is the archetype of the generous host in Arabic lore, so is Juha the archetypical fool, and the adage "More foolish than Juha" appears to be quite old. Stories about Juha have been recorded for over a thousand years. He appears already in a verse attributed to the Umayyad poet `Umar ibn Abi al-Rabi`ah, who lived in the seventh century: "You have so addled my mind and toyed with it / that, in my madness, it's as if I were Juha." If the attribution of this verse, or Juha's historical reality, is not entirely sound, the ninth-century author al-Jahiz (d. 255/868) certainly mentioned Juha as a famous example of a fool. In the late tenth century, the Baghdadi scholar Ibn Nadim (d. 990) listed an anonymous work by the title *Kitab nawadir Juha* (Book of the Anecdotes of Juha) in a section of his *Fihrist* (Catalogue) devoted to entertaining tales. Al-Maydani (d. 1124), the author of a collection of proverbs compiled in Iraq in the eleventh century, reproduces several anecdotes about Juha the fool, including the following:

One example of [Juha's] foolishness is that `Isa ibn Musa al-Hashimi passed by him while he was digging in an area on the outskirts of Kufah. He asked him, "What's the matter, Abu al-Ghusn?" He answered, "I buried some silver

coins in this desert, but I can't find the correct spot." He said, "You should have marked it with a sign." He said, "I did." He asked him, "What was [the sign]?" He replied, "A cloud in the sky which was shading the spot. But now I don't see the sign."

These anecdotes and many others portray Juha as a simple fool. Upon being asked, "What day is it?" he replies that he's not from around here. On one occasion, he supposedly got rid of some annoying street urchins by telling them that there was a feast, but then followed them because he is hungry. Another anecdote relates that he inherited half of his father's house, but wanted to sell that half so that he could buy the other half and then own the whole house.

Trickster and Wise Fool. To limit Juha to the role of fool would be to do him an injustice. Everywhere where Juha figures in local folklore, and as far back in history as the sources reveal, Juha's stories embody two other character types in addition to that of the fool: the trickster and the wise fool. The trickster proves wiser than his interlocutors, despite his lack of formal education or status. It is said that a poor man would stand by the shop of a kebab seller, eating bread but smelling the roasting meat that he could not afford. Annoyed by his constant presence, the kebab seller demanded payment from the poor man, who asked Juha to intercede. Juha agreed to pay the main, shook a few coins in his hand so that they jingled, and said to the kebab seller, "Do you hear that? That's your payment!" The wise fool is wise naively, as if by accident rather than cunning. A characteristic feature of wise fool stories is the difficult or impossible question. As a jest, members of the public ask the fool a question, expecting to stump him or to get a nonsensical, humorous, or ridiculous answer. The wise fool, however, answers the question in an unexpected way that not only sidesteps its difficulty but also says something profound about social life or the world. For example, it is commonly reported in Egypt that people demanded of Juha, "Count the waves." After consideration, he answered, "The ones coming are more than the ones going." He thus avoided giving a definite and patently wrong answer to an impossible question. In addition, his answer is an aphorism meaning that future opportunities will outnumber the missed ones of the past. In another anecdote, people ask Juha, "What town are you from?" and he answers, "I haven't married yet." While this sounds at first like a non-sequitur, it conceals an important point: the customs and behavior of a family, and perhaps their social ties as well, often depend more on the wife than on the husband, despite the patriarchal social systems found in the Arab world. As the saying goes, "Take wisdom from the mouths of madmen." All three versions of Juha's character coexist in the tradition, broadening the multifarious applications of his lore to social life.

Questions

How do fairy tales begin and end in English? What do these conventional beginnings and endings signal to the audience? What are the Arabic equivalents to these beginnings and endings? Compare and contrast their literal meanings. Do they convey some different sense to the audience?

What is the difference between a folktale and a legend?

What are the supernatural creatures that appear in Arabic folktales, and what are their characteristics?

How would you interpret the two tales involving a *ghula* (female ghou) (pp. 93-98). What do the similarities between the tales reveal about Arab folklore or about these particular folktales?

Who are the other characters that appear in Juha stories, and what are their characteristics?

Identify several stories in which Juha appears as a fool. In which stories does he appear as a trickster or clever man? In which stories does he appear as a wise fool?

Analyze two Juha stories that are meant to deliver a moral message.

Analyze two Juha stories that are meant to comment on an aspect of social life.

Do Juha stories have a unified ideology?

Are there any hints about historical period, geographical region, or social environment in the Juha stories? Can you detect different layers or categories of tales?

Reading:

Reynolds, *Arab Folklore*, pp. 77-110.

Jayyusi, *Tales of Juha: Classic Arab Folk Humor*.

Further Reading

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El-Shamy, Hassan. *Folktales of Egypt*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

Muhawi, Ibrahim and Sharif Kanaana. *Speak, Bird, Speak Again: Palestinian Arab Folktales*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1989.

Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.

Popular Speech Genres

Speech Genres. Every linguistic community shares not only a grammar and a vocabulary but also a repertoire of formal types of spoken utterances that follow certain rules and conventions. One may label these types “speech genres”, just as the written language has a repertoire of written or literary genres. Usually, the existence of a particular genre is signaled by the existence of a title or generic label that refers to that particular formal type. Thus, we know that American English has a genre of “jokes” because people use this term to refer to the genre, and within that larger category there exist many specific sub-categories, with specific generic labels such as “knock-knock joke”, “dead baby joke”, and so on. Some genres, such as greetings, blessings, curses, oaths, proverbs, lullabies, fairy tales, and jokes, are found in nearly every language, but others are not. Knock-knock jokes do not exist in any of the Arabic dialects, and jokes about the ant and the elephant, which are popular in Egyptian Arabic, are not a significant category in American English. The formalist Russian literary critic Mikhail wrote the seminal article “On Speech Genres” in 1952. In his view, the complex form of the novel is made up of smaller units that derive from spoken genres. Since then, linguists, folklorists, and anthropologists have done interesting work on speech genres—the work of Dell Hymes stands out as crucial—but the field remains in its infancy.

Conventional Rules. Speech genres are conventional, meaning that, when using them, speakers follow certain rules that society has somehow agreed on through repeated usage. Thus, when an Egyptian greets someone in the morning, saying *sabaah il-khayr* “morning of goodness”, the usual answer is *sabaah in-nuur* “morning of light”. When a special guest comes to the house, the host may say *khatwa `aziiza* “a precious step” or *zarna n-nabi* “the Prophet has come to visit us.” These rules may change over time, and they may be adjusted or violated by individual speakers under certain circumstances, but they are nevertheless identifiable through observation. The investigation of Arab speech genres has not produced a substantial body of scholarship to date. Folklorists have paid attention to certain genres such as the folktale and the proverb. Textbooks of Arabic, even those that focus on the dialect of a particular Arab nation, only give the most rudimentary description of greetings and politeness formulas. Many dictionaries only give limited information about speech genres, even when they contain expressions that appear only in one highly demarcated speech genre. Speech genres therefore have tended to fall in between other areas that are studied with more care, such as lexicon, which involves the study of individual words, and grammar, which involves the study of sentences. According to Bakhtin, the basic unit of the speech genre is the utterance, which may be a fragment of a sentence or a speech that lasts hours. These units have not been well studied, and grammar books generally do not have chapters that explain how to complain, whine, cajole, insult, threaten, seduce, shoot the breeze, and so on, even though one may detect through observation their generic conventions and rules, including set expressions and vocabulary, regular structures, definitions of typical or appropriate performers and contexts, rhetorical strategies, and underlying concepts, or ideologies.

Proverbs, riddles, jokes, and more. Bakhtin points out that a catalogue of speech genres does not exist and that we do not even have the principles on which to construct such a catalogue. Politeness formulas and jokes are fruitful ground for the investigation of the workings of speech genres because they have many well-defined and highly structured sub-genres, each with its own rules. This week, you will read about proverbs, riddles, curses, and greetings in Reynolds’ book, as well as several articles on Arab humor, politeness formulas, blessings, and curses as an introduction to the speech genres of the Arabic dialects.

Questions

What are the identifiable genres of jokes in American English or in your native language? What are the required elements in these jokes? Do they adopt a particular structure? How do they function? Who tells them, and in what context?

What are the rules for greetings in Egyptian Arabic?

What are some of the main types of jokes in Arab nations? Interview a native of any Arab nation to find out. What are the conventions of such jokes? Who tells them? When, and where? How do they work? What are their structural features?

Do jokes express an ideology? Are they based on unstated cultural assumptions?

Proverbs have often been seen as expressing the genius or mentality of a folk or nation. What do you think of this? What should one make of proverbs that appear to be contradictory?

What structures do proverbs adopt? What key elements make a proverb memorable? Compare and contrast Arabic and English proverbs.

Discuss the function of blessings and curses.

Reading

Reynolds, *Arab Folklore*, pp. 110-33;

Stewart, Devin J. "Root-echo Responses in Egyptian Arabic Politeness Formulae." Pp. 157-80 in *Understanding Arabic: Essays in Contemporary Arabic Linguistics in Honor of El-Said Badawi*. Ed. Alaa Elgibali. Cairo: American University Press, 1996;

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Jordanian/Palestinian Proverbs: http://www.freewebs.com/arabic_raed/arabicproverbs.htm
Egyptian Proverbs: http://arabic.desert-sky.net/coll_proverbs.html

Further Reading

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Tribal Poetry

Distinct culture. Yemen remains something like the Wild West of the Arab world. Its mountainous terrain, lack of the oil wealth of its neighbors in the Arabian peninsula, relative lack of infrastructure, and the strength of tribal allegiances have made it difficult for central governments to control. It is very common for Yemeni tribesmen in vast regions of the country to appear in public with their *jambiyyah* (a dagger worn in the belt at one's side) and machine gun. Yemen differs from most of the Arab world in climate, having tall mountains, in some areas watered plentifully by rainfall, so that they have traditionally engaged in terraced farming on the hillsides, growing coffee and *qat*, a leafy green plant that is a mild narcotic and chewed by Yemenis in afternoon social sessions. Yemen also boasts a very distinctive architecture; the Yemenis excel in building strikingly lofty mud-brick houses three, four, or more stories high. These and other aspects of Yemeni culture make it look physically quite different from many other areas in the Arab world.

Divided history. Yemen has been the site of important civilizations since the second millennium B.C.E. The Queen of Sheba is mentioned as a wealthy monarch from the region in the time of King Solomon of Israel, and Yemen was famed throughout the Ancient Near East for the perfumes frankincense and myrrh. The ruins of fortresses and temples dot the landscape, and many bear ancient inscriptions in South Arabian languages. Yemen, especially the port of Aden, was a crucial way station for Indian Ocean trade of spices and other luxury goods in the high Middle Ages. The British East India Company occupied Aden in 1832 to serve as a coaling station on the route to India, and a British Protectorate over Aden was established in 1839. This resulted in a historical divide between South Yemen and North Yemen, which had different experiences with the colonial powers. The British considered South Yemen part of the colony of India until 1937, when they declared it a crown colony in its own right. In 1967, the British withdrew from South Yemen, and the People's Republic of South Yemen was formed. The Zaydi Imam of the family of al-Mutawakkil ruled North Yemen after the Ottomans lost control in World War I. This kingdom came to an end in 1962 when, with Egyptian support, the Yemeni Arab Republic was established in North Yemen. In 1990, North and South Yemen were officially unified, a move that appears to be successful despite a civil war in 1994.

Poetry. Caton's work treats the social and political uses of poetry in a North Yemeni tribal region, Khawlan al-Tiyal, in the hinterland of San`a'. It brings into relief the tremendous importance of poetry in Arab culture among the various verbal forms of art. Whereas the novel has replaced poetry as the prestige literary genre in many Arab societies, poetry still holds pride of place in most nations of the Arabian Peninsula, including Yemen. Caton's study may be viewed as studies of the oral performance of specific genres. Mikhail Bakhtin drew attention to what he termed speech genres, formal categories that resemble literary genres but that occur in speech and are in some cases never written down. Anthropologists and folklorists such as Dell Hymes and Gumperz worked on the ethnography of communication beginning in the 1960s, and Bauman, Sherzer, and others have since investigated specific genres in Mayan, Indonesian, and other languages. Caton's account enables the reader to understand in detail the social setting of several genres of oral Arabic poetry, termed *balah*, *zamil*, and *qasidah*, in this tribal context. Caton observed these types of poetry being performed in all-male gatherings, and his account provides little idea of what poetry women might be performing in these same communities. The most surprising element of his work, to many, is the crucial role that poetry plays in resolving serious legal and political disputes.

Questions:

1. Describe the *balah* poetic form. What are the building blocks of the poem, the rhyme scheme, and its other formal conventions? What are the usual themes? On what occasions is it performed? How?
2. Describe the *zamil* poetic form.
3. Describe the *qasidah* form.
4. How is the *qasidah* form used in dispute mediation and politics? Does this strike you as odd?
5. What ideological messages do these forms of tribal poetry convey?
6. How is this poetry related to identity?
7. Can an understanding of modern tribal poetry help scholars understand classical and medieval Arabic poetry?

Reading

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Further Reading

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