

Arabic Traditions

The many-layered nature of Arabic has traditionally divided Arabic language and literature into two streams: the formal, written, literary, classical language, called *fushḥā*, and the many spoken regional and national dialects. These dialects can themselves be subdivided; colloquial Egyptian Arabic, for example, encompasses Cairene Arabic, Ṣaʿīdī southern Egyptian Arabic, and so on. A long-standing bias elevates the literate, written classical tradition, while Arabic vernaculars are frequently and mistakenly characterized as corrupt variants of Islamic high culture, language, and religion.

This complex sociolinguistic situation in the Arab world affects the transmission, reception, and editing of oral literature, because this literature is most often performed in dialect and yet written in classical Arabic. When scholars write down oral texts in classical Arabic, they employ a range of strategies, from approximate transcription of the dialect to partial transformation into a “corrected” literary language to direct translation into classical (or modern standard) Arabic. Such folk literature texts often achieve currency thanks to the

legitimizing force of written usage. In contrast, scholars who transcribe oral vernacular traditions according to the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) use Roman transliteration, a system not easily accessible to the Arabic-language reader.

The linguistic relation between the formal, written language and the spoken is complex; so too are the connections between oral and written narrative. It is noteworthy that exceptions to the dichotomy of oral-dialect versus written-classical Arabic abound. Orally performed traditions such as Quranic recitations (Nelson), religious praise songs, sermons, political speeches, and even formal, prepared poetic declaiming are pronounced in classical Arabic. Nonetheless, Egyptian folklorist Hasan El-Shamy characterizes oral narratives as a cognitive system separate from any written ones when he discusses the production of Egyptian oral folktales (*Folktales* 1-li; Slyomovics, “Death-song”).

The Arabian Nights

This essay focuses on English-language research that provides both text and performance contexts from oral traditions such as *A Thousand and One Nights* (on frame tales, see Irwin, this volume), the genres of folktale and epic, and the heritage of Arab vernacular poetry. Although the interactions between the written and the oral are not our primary concern here, the history of *A Thousand and One Nights*—since its appearance in Europe in 1704, the best known work of Arabic literature in the West—reveals much about overlaps between authentic oral variants and written versions. Scholars have argued whether the written collection is made up of tales of oral provenance or, conversely, of tales never recited or performed but rather consciously molded by an editor-redactor to mimic oral storytelling style (Slyomovics, “Performing” 390–93). These issues of Arabic linguistic and literary variation and interaction affect the many available editions and influence the reader’s choice of English translations. Other factors are a varied manuscript tradition, linguistic registers from classical Arabic to dialect, and even idiosyncratic editorial emendations, the most notorious instance being Sir Richard Burton’s

eroticizing alterations. Here are some recommended texts available in paperback. The two-volume translation by Husain Haddawy, *The Arabian Nights* and *The Arabian Nights II: Sindbad and Other Popular Stories*, based on a fourteenth-century Syrian manuscript, recounts 271 nights. *Thousand Nights and One Night*, the four-volume English translation of Joseph Charles Mardus's French text by Edward Powys Mathers, based on the later Egyptian Bulaq and second Calcutta editions, consists of the canonical thousand and one storytelling nights. N. J. Dawood's "*Aladdin*" and *Other Tales from the Thousand and One Nights* translates selected tales (see also Dawood, *Tales*). *Arabian Nights' Entertainment* (R. Mack), the earliest English-language translation (1706–12), based on Antoine Galland's French text (1704) and produced by an anonymous Grub Street translator, has enjoyed a wide readership from the early eighteenth century.

Epic Tradition

Other tale cycles that recount adventures of historical and legendary heroes and heroines are part of the Arab *sīra* or epic tradition: *Sīrat 'Antar ibn Shaddād* tells about Antara, the black warrior hero of pre-Islamic times; *Sīrat az-Zāhir Baybars* tells about the medieval Egyptian ruler az-Zāhir; *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* relates the wars of the heroine queen *Dhāt al-Himma* against the Byzantine Empire; *Sīrat al-Malik Sayf Ibn Dhī Yazan* relates the wars of a south Arabian king against the Abyssinians; *Sīrat az-Zīr Sālim* is about the bedouin Arab hero az-Zīr Sālim; and *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* is the epic of the Banū Hilāl tribe (for historical and bibliographical materials, see appropriate entries in *Encyclopedia*). These epics exist in both oral and written forms. Numerous handwritten manuscripts are located in libraries throughout Europe and the Arab world; printed editions can still be purchased cheaply in many Arab countries.

Of all the epics, *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* continues to be the most widely performed by poets, storytellers, and singers from Iraq in the east to Morocco in the west, in the Arabian peninsula, and in parts of Sudan and central Africa. Contemporary bards consider the Hilali epic the true history of the Arabs. 'Awadallah, an Egyptian epic poet who

sings the Hilali tales in dialect, also proclaims the uniqueness and intelligibility of epic performance in all forms of Arabic: “Blessing the Prophet is beneficial before all / my speech is earnest, my art is Arab / northwards and to the east of my words, / my art only Arabs understand” (Slyomovics, *Merchant* 112). The Hilali epic is based on historical events—the migratory waves of the Banū Hilāl bedouins leaving the famine-ridden Arabian peninsula for the verdant shores of North Africa from the eighth to the eleventh century. History and legend have become so intertwined that we know only one certain fact about the transmission of this epic: the earliest oral versions still extant were written down by the famed medieval scholar Ibn Khaldūn, who collected Hilali tales from bedouin tribes in North Africa around the fifteenth century (Rosenthal 3:412–40).

The importance of contemporary Egyptian reciters and narrators in preserving the Hilali epic is reflected in the scholarly literature.¹ Performance texts of the oral Hilali epic tradition are available in Susan Slyomovics’s *The Merchant of Art*; in Dwight Fletcher Reynolds’s *Heroic Poets, Poetic Heroes*; and in Bridget Connelly’s *Arab Folk Epic and Identity*. These are versified narratives by Egyptian poets sung over many nights to the accompaniment of the *rabāba* (spike fiddle) or the *tār* (drum). Excerpts from the opening section of the Egyptian Hilali cycle, the birth of the hero sequence, are translated by Reynolds and Slyomovics and appear in John Johnson, Thomas Hale, and Stephen Belcher’s anthology of African oral epics. Versions by J. R. Patterson in the Shuwa Arabic dialect of Nigeria and by Sayyid Hurreiz in Sudanese Arabic demonstrate the Arab-African cross-fertilizations. For additional Arab epics in translation, M. C. Lyons has compiled brief prose versions of twelve epics, and Lena Jayyusi has translated and adapted the epic of *Sayf Ibn Dhī Yazan*.

Folktale

The long-standing idea that the literate, written culture is innately superior to the oral, often illiterate, heritage affects the collecting of folk literature. The folktale in the Arab world, like its European counterparts, has endured rewriting, simplification, and censorship

as it moves from oral rendition to written text. Rarely do Arab folktales, whether they are collected in Arabic or Western languages, preserve an authentic oral form. Two exceptions are the Egyptian collection by Hasan El-Shamy (*Folktales*) and the Palestinian collection by Ibrahim Muhawi and Sharif Kanaana.² Both provide biographical information about the tellers, ethnographic description of the storytelling context, and comparative annotation linking the tales to international tale types and their Arabic variants. Finally, in an effort to organize and structure the huge domain of Arabic folktales, epics, and legends, El-Shamy's two-volume guide (*Folk Traditions*) classifies Arab oral literature according to the standard Stith Thompson system of motifs (*Motif-Index*).

Folk Poetry and Gender

A consideration of performed folk poetry introduces yet another layer to the perceived dichotomies of written and oral, literate and illiterate, classical and vernacular Arabic: the role of gender (see Weigle, this volume). Lila Abu-Lughod's work on bedouin women of Egypt proposes that the oral composition and recitation of love poetry by women is a defiant move by the powerless against the powerful. These women use a poetic language to subvert social demands for modesty and denial of women's sexuality. Abu-Lughod's fieldwork demonstrates that paradoxically the poetry through which women (and another powerless group, young men) express subversive views is also highly valued by the community. Two ethnographies about male poets in the Arabian peninsula, on Yemeni tribal poets (Caton) and Saudi vernacular poetry (Sowayan), confirm the value and power of orally performed poetry among its practitioners and listeners.

Folk poetry is a key cultural event in Arabian society because it is an integral part of political, social, and religious institutions. Poetry, and by extension folk narrative, is central because it is also a form of political rhetoric—a means to persuade, to mediate, to praise, and sometimes to subvert. At certain times and places in the

Arab world, folk narrators and singers, such as Egyptian epic poets, are a specially trained, hereditary class, valued yet apart. In other times and places, as among Egyptian bedouin women or in premodern Arabia, dynamic tradition created a nation of folk poets. The oral literature of the Arab world is a primary literature; one cannot hope to approach the richness of Arabic literature if one remains bound to the classical tradition alone.

Pedagogical Approaches

Texts from the Arabic-speaking world introduce American students to the study of a living, oral tradition of “troubadours” and performers from the Middle East and North Africa. To illustrate the qualities of oral epic poetry from a fully comparative perspective, course syllabi may employ, for example, the ancient Greek epics as well as the medieval (written) and modern (orally performed) epics from the Arab world. Conflicts, cross-influences, and contacts between the Islamic and European epic traditions are reflected both in French and Spanish medieval epic texts and in poetry from the Arab world. A case of special interest is the Bosnian Muslim poetry composed and performed in the former Yugoslavia.³ This poetry has been intensively studied by Milman Parry and Albert Lord in connection with their theories of Homeric oral composition, but it could be systematically related to the Middle Eastern tradition as well. Epics are also versions of national myths that retain their power and help in understanding the background to modern ideologies and fictions of national identity. By connecting Arabic material on epic, romance, folktale, and performed poetry to the mainstream traditions of classical Greek and other national literatures, the cross-disciplinary approach to oral literature will remain at the heart of the comparative folk literature enterprise.

Notes

1. I confine myself to English-language scholarship; French-language studies have concentrated on the Maghrebi (North African) versions.

2. These tales represent accurate translations from their respective dialects; Muhawi and Kanaana also transliterated one Palestinian Arabic tale in Roman transcription.
3. See Alexander, this volume. See also Foley, *Traditional Oral Epic*, chs. 5, 8, 10; *Immanent Art*, chs. 3, 4; *Singer*, ch. 4.