

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF PRE-ISLAMIC POETRY: POETIC IMAGERY AND SOCIAL REALITY IN THE MU^cALLAQAT

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INTRODUCTION

THE CORPUS OF JĀHILĪ POETRY compiled during the first two-hundred years of Islamic history is the product of a creative and selective process that spanned centuries of historical and religious change. It is at once the result of a pre-Islamic poetic tradition, the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the Near East and the religious vision of a nascent Muslim orthodoxy. Hobbled by a dearth of historical sources for comprehending pre-Islamic Arab society, how should scholars contextualize the poetry and shed light on the *Jāhili* worldview?¹ The classic collection of seven *qaṣīda*'s (*al-Mu^callaqāt al-sab^c al-tiwāl*) offers an arguably reliable sample of pre-Islamic work. The anthropological study of pastoral-nomadic societies in the Middle East provides a useful lens for interpreting the social content of these *Jāhili* odes and its relevance to the culture that composed them. Applying this approach to the themes of feud and food sharing prominent in the *Mu^callaqāt* suggests that common scholarly views on these two issues may reflect pre-Islamic Arabian society's perceptions of itself rather than a more methodical and precise understanding of that society. When cast in the light of well-documented societies, the singularly hyperbolic language of the *Jāhili* literary world reveals its realistic underpinnings in their common pastoral-nomadic lifestyle. Moreover, placing the seven odes in a pastoral-nomadic setting helps reconcile the dissenting social messages within the poems. This paper suggests that scholars can utilize these anthropological methods to augment historical and comparative poetic approaches in describing *Jāhili* society and determining poetry's place in it.

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THE PROBLEM OF LITERARY AND HISTORICAL SOURCES

Studies of pre-Islamic Arab society and its poetry rarely occur separately. Indeed this era presents a field in which literary and socio-historical study often intertwine to the detriment of their respective methodologies. Although the sources that inform modern scholarship about pre-Islamic life and culture originally drew on varied traditions such as *akhbār* (as in al-Iṣbahānī's use of al-Baladhurī's works), eighth and ninth century genealogists such as al-Kalbī, Ibn al-Kalbī and Ibn Yaqqān, collection of proverbs and *ḥadīth* as well as the explanations that later Muslim scholars such as al-Zawzanī provided for the poetry, much of our information about the society that produced the poetry comes from the poetry itself.² Ibn Sallām al-Jumāḥī's (d. 232AH / 846CE) *Ṭabaqāt fuḥūl al-shu'arā'*, one of our earliest works in the *ṭabaqāt* genre, demonstrates the early roots of this reliance on poetry for information about the poets and their lives. The *akhbar* that the author includes to reconstruct the personalities of early Arab poets are little more than commentary on verses of their poetry. Ibn Sallām's confidence in the biographical value of poetry appears even more clearly when he identifies poets by their literary claims. He thus calls Labīd b. Rabī'ā "he who fed [the hungry] when the cold Eastern wind blew," referring to the poet's description of his own generous behavior.³

An examination of the case of *maysir* provides a useful example of this reliance on poetry. Western studies of *Jāhili* poetry and society have taken the definition and social functions of *maysir* for granted.⁴ They share these notions with well-known Arabic works seeking to illuminate the nature of *Jāhili* society such as Aḥmad al-Ḥūfī's *al-Ḥayā al-ʿarabiyya min al-shiʿr al-jāhili*, Shawqī Ḍayf's *al-ʿAṣr al-jāhili* and Mahmud Shukri al-Alūsī's *Bulūgh al-arab fī maʿrifat ahwāl al-ʿarab*.⁵ All three of these works rely heavily on poetry to describe life in pre-Islamic Arabia.⁶ Al-Ḥūfī states that his study focuses on poetry as a "powerful echo of Arab life" and thus avoids relying on "*tārīkh*" (a vague term presumably subsuming the above mentioned sources) alone as a source for representing the *Jāhili* world. Yet his study consists of little more than using the amorphous body of a priori statements about *Jāhili* society found in these un-cited "*tārīkh*" sources to confirm or interpret the meaning of poetic verses.⁷ In fact, in his illustration of *maysir* he either cites poetry or defers to the work of al-Alūsī, who in turn relies heavily on poetry as well as Ibn Qutayba's unique book, *al-Maysir wa al-qidāh*. As a result both their explanations of *maysir* and its social uses either turn directly to poetry or duplicate Ibn Qutayba's writing.

Ibn Qutayba himself, however, admits that his quest adequately to define the rules and social uses of *maysir* as well as the manner in which it was played hinges on pre-Islamic poetry. He states that one cannot find such detailed information either among scholars or narrated reports, for "God cut it [*maysir*] off with Islam, and all that remains of it among the Bedouins is the trifling word '*yasīr*'." As a result, he resorts to collecting and examining all the verses of poetry concerning *maysir*, a methodology that he himself criticizes.

Meter and rhyme, he states, not factual accuracy, truly determine the shape of poetry.⁸ It is thus clear that the extra-textual information employed (in the case of most scholars to explain poetic references to *maysir* and, in al-Ḥūfī's case, using poetry to affirm presupposed impressions of *Jāhilī* culture) descend to a large extent from the poetry itself.

This poses a problem for those who seek to contextualize *Jāhilī* poetry using independent socio-historical data. Of course one could argue that the received notion of *maysir* emerged from the same milieu that transmitted and read the poems. The true issue at hand would thus be the interaction between the texts and its eighth and ninth century readers. If one takes this stance, however, one should make no pretense of studying *pre-Islamic* poetry and society (as several notable scholars have done).

It may seem that our consensus on the place of *maysir* in *Jāhilī* society could easily be inferred from the poetry alone and that such sensible deductions require no outside information. Indeed even a cursory reading of the *Mu'allaqāt* suggests that *maysir* served as a way of dividing up food. Yet here the distinction is blurred between what modern scholars might infer from explanatory material drawn from such quasi-literary sources as poetic exegesis (itself un-cited and probably extracted from contemporary scholarly discourse on the topic and lexicography) and that derived from *Jāhilī* poetry alone. What would the poetry have suggested to us if we had first read it in a contextual vacuum? Modern scholars have been very critical of both pre-Islamic poetry and the Islamic historical tradition. Expedience, however, often supercedes discipline when scholars collapse the distinction between text and context, deriving the latter from the former. It is difficult to resist this temptation or challenge scholarly consensus on issues such as *maysir*, but doing so would at least avoid inconsistency at a theoretical level.

VARIOUS APPROACHES TO STUDYING JĀHILĪ ARAB SOCIETY

Modern Western and Arabic studies of pre-Islamic Arab society and its poetry fall into four methodological categories.

Source Approach

This approach entails an essentially uncritical view of *Jāhilī* poetry as a source for describing pre-Islamic society. A scholar can thus translate sentiments or ideas expressed in the poetry into social statements with a minimal interpretive risk. The widely-published Egyptian author Shawqī Ḍayf cites the following verses of the pre-Islamic poet Durayd b. al-Ṣimma:

Then we, no doubt, are meat for the sword, and, doubtless,
sometimes we feed it meat.

By a foe bent on vengeance we are attacked, our fall his
cure; or we, vengeance bent, attack the foe.

Thus have we divided time in two, between us and our foe, till
not a day goes by that we're in one half [*shat'r*] or the other.⁹

Dayf then concludes that "all the Arab tribes were like Durayd's, for they are food for the sword...they are always either attacked out of vengeance or taking vengeance themselves, and their lives are divided along these lines and into these two halves.¹⁰" Although Dayf is a primarily a literary scholar, he nonetheless chooses to make such sweeping statements about the character of pre-Islamic Arab society without considering the vast differences between literary expression as a cultural product and the culture that produced it.

In his article on the ethics of brigand poets (*al-ṣā'ālīk*) in pre-Islamic Arabia, Adel Sulaiman Gamal adopts the same approach. While claiming to look beyond these poets' anti-societal identity and demonstrate their strong morals, Gamal does little more than accept the poetry wholesale.¹¹ Based on a verse in which a poet-bandit chastises a fat man for scolding him, Gamal asserts that some of these poets made concerted attempts to attack well-fed, fat opponents because their girth symbolized the greed that these hoods despised.¹² He thus makes no distinction between the literary or rhetorical boasts of a poet and the activities of a segment of pre-Islamic Arab society.

Literary Approach

This approach consists of scholars who make no claim of describing *Jāhilī* society but treat the poetry as a literary subject only. A reliance on the problematic literary and socio-historical information found in exegetical works such as al-Zawzanī's, however, presents a matter of contention.

*Source and Tradition Critical Approach*¹³

Here scholars accept that the extant corpus of pre-Islamic poetry is the product of a compilation and editorial process that extended into the early Abbasid period. Any attempt to use it as a source for *Jāhilī* Arab history must proceed from this premise. As G. Lecompte states in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, the vast majority of Western scholars have agreed on this approach.¹⁴ Although accurate, it does not provide alternative methodologies for studying pre-Islamic Arabian society.

Critical Alternative Approach

After accepting the constraints inherent in the Source and Tradition Critical Approach, the recourse is to alternative disciplines that compensate for the lack of historical material. Unfortunately little work has been done in this direction. Suzanne Stetkevych states that "modern critics from both the East and West have yet to formulate a poetics through which to analyze and evaluate¹⁵ pre-Islamic *qaṣīda* poetry. Her comment applies aptly to the use of

this poetry in the study of pre-Islamic society. In a field where historical sources are sparse, Stetkevych looks to the anthropological study of human ritual to determine the structure of the poetry, its place within the social conscience of *Jāhili* Arabs and its function in their communities.

PREMISES: THE *MU^ʿALLAQĀT* AS A RELIABLE SOURCE

In the study of *Jāhili* poetry and society, scholars have faced difficulty separating textual interpretation from the social environment that they have envisioned surrounding the literature itself. The absence of any extant period sources providing a comprehensive picture of pre-Islamic Arab society has hampered the attempts of both Muslim and Western scholars to reconstruct that world. The editorial role of the early Islamic scholarly tradition that bequeathed us both *Jāhili* poetry and the entire corpus of Islamic historical material have further encumbered such efforts.

This paper proceeds from a well-founded assumption about the nature of pre-Islamic poetry, particularly the classic collection of the seven *Mu^ʿallaqāt*,¹⁶ and the character of historical and literary transmission in the early Islamic world. Although the process of compilation and editing almost certainly contributed some apocryphal material, we should view the form and content of the *mu^ʿallaqāt* as "fixed, if not stereotypical, specimens of a poetic tradition - already very old [read pre-Islamic] - vigorously flourishing in different parts of the Arabian Peninsula."¹⁷

This thesis affirms that the *Mu^ʿallaqāt* should be viewed as reliable written examples of the pre-Islamic oral poetic tradition. Although transmission and recension must have left some imprint on these classic works, to the Arab Muslims who conveyed and compiled them they were the epitome of a literary era still fresh in their minds. M.J. Kister's work on the origins of the *Mu^ʿallaqāt* collection supports this notion, as he states that the poems were collected as early as the reign of Mu^ʿāwiya in order to instruct Umayyad princes about their pre-Islamic heritage.¹⁸

TRIBAL PASTORAL NOMADIC SOCIETIES: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH TO *JĀHILĪ* POETRY

This article is not an attempt holistically to reproduce *Jāhili* society on the basis of a handful of literary products. Rather it extrapolates from numerous twentieth century studies of pastoral-nomadic, segmentary lineage¹⁹ societies in order to frame specific themes of pre-Islamic poetry in a social context. This paper examines the relationship between well-documented societies' "native" self-perceptions, the manner in which they view and explain themselves, and the realities lying behind those perceptions. It then extrapolates from these societies to pre-Islamic Arabia and its native self-perceptions as expressed in the *Mu^ʿallaqāt*.

Using such case studies, however, and the broader conclusions that they have yielded is a delicate task. Such analogies depend on effectively defining the subjects under comparison in order to provide accurate deductions. In any case they can only serve as models or approximations.

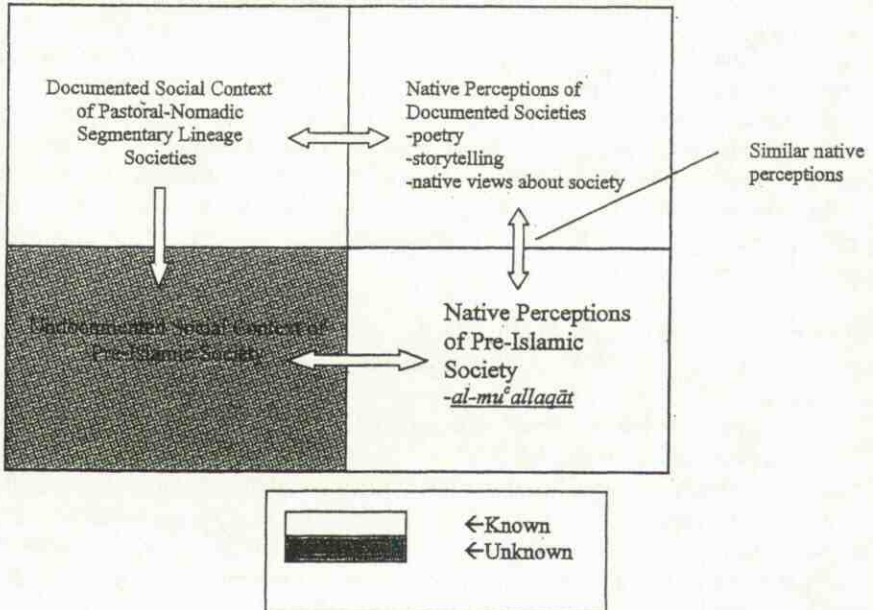
The case studies involved in this paper cover the following societies:

The Bedouin of the Negev and Syrian Deserts: these Arabic speaking, pastoral nomadic tribes live in arid and desert areas. Limited agriculture, goat and sheep herding are their principle food sources.

The Bedouin of Cyrenaica and their cousins in the Northwestern Desert of Egypt: these Arabic speaking pastoral-nomadic tribes (under the overarching *Sāda* clan that includes the *Awlād ʿAlī* in Egypt) live between the sparse desert lowlands in southern Cyrenaica and the coastal highlands. They depend on limited agriculture, goat, sheep and camel herding.

The Shammar, *Rwala* and *ʿAnaza* tribes in Northern Najd: these Arabic speaking pastoral-nomadic tribes inhabit the arid and semi-arid region surrounding Jabal Shammar in north-central Saudi Arabia. The scant rainfall is still sufficient for forage growth for goats, sheep and camels. Jabal Shammar also has many wells, so oasis agriculture has been a mainstay for the people.²⁰

The Ogaden nomads of the south-eastern Somali highlands: these Somali speaking, Sunni Muslim pastoral nomads raise sheep, goat and camels and cultivate limited crops in arid and semi-arid environments.



ANALOGY BETWEEN KNOWN AND UNKNOWN

The former diagram demonstrates the process of analogy and extrapolation used in this essay:

1. Studying the relationship between a documented society's native self-perception and its social context.
2. Finding the same native self-perception in an undocumented society.
3. Extrapolating the social context of this native self-perception into the undocumented society based on strong structural similarities between the societies.

This process is certainly controversial. At its heart lie the contention that "Bedouin society never changes" and the bipolar division of history into pre-modern and modern communities.²¹ No one will ever be able to prove conclusively that pre-modern *Najd* or Egypt's Western Desert breed societies similar or identical to those of pre-Islamic Arabia. Yet the crucial question is thus not whether societies have changed, but whether or not those changes affect the structural comparisons being made. Despite the tremendous socio-economic changes that the people of Central Saudi Arabia have undergone in the past forty years, one can nevertheless state that marriage customs in *Najd* have demonstrated remarkable continuity until today. Najdī Bedouins may now live in spacious houses, receive university educations and drive Mercedes, but marriage outside a limited number of families (and certainly outside the ranks of tribal *Najdī's*) remains highly unlikely for women.

The most glaring distinction between *Jāhilī* Arabia and twentieth century Arab societies is the presence of Islam itself. While this no doubt appears to constitute a huge societal change, a closer examination reveals that it may have little to do with many aspects of society. Most importantly, many Muslim Bedouin societies had little regard for Islam until the expansion of the Wahhabi and Salafī movements. Alois Musil, a Czech ethnographer who traveled throughout northern *Najd* following the First World War, noted that the *Rwala* nomads felt that "Islam is weak, as it cannot free the settlers [settled peoples] from their miseries." He further describes the *Rwala* notion of Paradise as a place "below ground" where all the *Rwala* live prosperously. A scholar comparing Northern *Najdī* Bedouins with pre-Islamic Arabs would thus conclude that orthodox Islamic dogma or even a general reverence for the faith pose no barrier between the two societies. Moreover, even the Muslim identity of a more pious Bedouin society may have no affect on its social structure. Although they are Muslims, it is blood relations, marriage and client-patron relationships that dictate social structure among the *Awlād 'Alī* Bedouin of Egypt.

It is also important to note that the livelihood of pastoral nomadic societies does not depend entirely on animal husbandry. Although meat, milk and other animal products play an important role in their lifestyle, they need the grains and manufactured products that are available only in settled agricultural

settings. Pastoral nomadic societies thus include settled and semi-settled communities, spanning a spectrum from those Bedouins solely occupied with herding to oasis farmers. Although tribes such as *Shammar* certainly include nomads in the traditional sense of the word, they also contain more settled agricultural communities. Even within a lifetime poverty or famine may force a nomad to seek work or refuge in the settled areas of his tribe.²²

The forced or voluntary settlement of nomadic communities has been an important feature of modern state-building in the Middle East. King °Abd al-°Aziz of Saudi Arabia understood that corraling armed Bedouin and bringing them under government rule was crucial for his strong central rule. With the exception of a minority, the Bedouin of Egypt's Western Desert have also settled and accepted state authority.

This does not undermine the use of case studies, however. Emrys Peter's research in Cyrenaica predates serious mass sedentarization. Also, the study on *Najd* Bedouins (carried out in the 1960's) used in this paper focuses only on customs and social institutions that present distinct continuities with pre-settled Saudi Arabia. Regardless, these case studies encompass both settled and un-settled nomadic groups. As the sedentary lifestyle of seventh-century Mecca clearly demonstrates, pre-Islamic Arabia was a land of nomadic and settled activity. Despite the striking desert imagery that sets the *Mu°allaqāt* apart as literary wonders, the society that produced them was one of both steppe and sown.

With the exception of the Somali-speaking Ogaden nomads, all the above mentioned groups are Arabic speaking pastoral-nomadic societies consisting of segmentary lineage groups. Moreover, they trace their descent, customs and cultural sensibilities to the same peninsular Arab environment that hosted pre-Islamic Arabian society. In the case of *Shammar*, *Rwala* and °*Anaza* the physical environments are effectively identical, although flora, fauna and have probably decreased since pre-Islamic times. The coastal highlands of the *Hijāz*, with their arid environment and *wadi*-based grain and date agriculture are also similar to Egypt and Cyrenaica's northwestern desert coasts.²³ The combined study of Egyptian/Libyan nomads and those in *Jabal Shammar* and Northern *Najd* thus effectively bracket the geographical setting of pre-Islamic Arab society. In addition, the macro-level of technology and infrastructure present in Cyrenaica during Emrys Peter's fieldwork there after the Second World War and in *Jabal Shammar* until the late 1940's resembled those in pre-Islamic times. Medicine, communications and transportation means remained essentially unchanged.²⁴

Differences between these groups and their topographical and demographical features do exist, but they are insignificant for the scope of this paper. Emanuel Marx admits the serious differences between the *Rwala* nomads living in the Syrian Desert in the present day and their ancestors who lived near *Khaybar* in the *Hijāz* until at least the early twentieth century.²⁵ Such emphasis, however, is misleading for the scope of this paper, as Marx uses various nomadic groups including the *Rwala* to reach conclusions about pastoral-

nomadic tribes in the greater Middle East, a geographical area larger and even more diverse than the one covered in this paper.

Conversely, Michael Meeker's study of literature and violence among the *Rwala* Bedouins represents the other extreme in social comparison. He states that the nomads of Cyrenecia are not comparable to the *Rwala* because the former live in a closer and more productive relationship with the land.²⁶ This statement is only correct, however, if you limit the definition of "*Rwala*" to the more purely pastoral-nomadic sections of that society and ignore the Cyrenacian nomads who practice no agriculture at all. The scope in which one defines societies thus determines the extent of their comparability. This paper relies only on broad conclusions like those of E. Marx, not characteristics specific to certain tribes or local environments. It makes no attempt to argue global structural comparisons between societies. Rather, the comparison between pre-Islamic society and these relatively modern peoples depends on specific socio-economic, climatic and cultural similarities.

FEUDS: NATIVE AND OUTSIDE VIEWS

Muslim and Western scholarly consensus on the character of pre-Islamic Arabia describes a society plagued by constant blood feuds and inter-tribal wars. For authors like Dayf and others this notion stems from the extensive body of poetry and *ayyām* literature collected and appreciated in the early Islamic cultural milieu. These sources transmit the voices of pre-Islamic poets and storytellers themselves, depicting their world and social reality as they perceived it. To heed what anthropologists term "native descriptions" alone, however, ignores the paradigmatic bounds that constrain a society's ability to accurately portray itself.²⁷ While anthropologists may not grasp all the important aspects of social function and structure, that society's self-image is not necessarily more comprehensive or impartial.

Case studies conducted on the nomadic tribes in Palestine, Libya and *Najd* portray groups that define crucial dimensions of their native identity in terms of feud and conflict but also realistically depend on peaceful relations and cooperation. Emanuel Marx states that Middle Eastern Bedouins "usually represent their society as a series of discrete and disputing groups...torn by violent conflicts and by the relentless pursuit of revenge." The author later adds that the native identity of pastoral-nomadic society hinges on this notion of a warrior people. "The nomad, steeped all his life in this ideology, sincerely believes that this is the real essence of his society...."²⁸

Emrys Peters arrives at a similar but more specific conclusion in his study of Cyrenaican Bedouins. Describing the nature of feuds between secondary tribal groups²⁹ Peters stresses the native insistence that any killing between such separate groups must be due to similar killings in the past. Drawing some real or imagined link between the latest killing and some distant act of violence, the pastoral-nomad affirms that such conflicts are ancient and endless. Peters explains this phenomenon by saying that exaggerated, timeless

feuds between secondary tribal groups are essential for these groups to justify their existence as two distinct, corporate bodies. In the absence of some feud, how could the nomad explain why these two groups of relatives, joined by the sacred bond of blood, have parted ways or fallen out?³⁰

In his study of oral historical narrative among the *Shammar* and *°Anaza* tribes in *Najd*, Saad Sawayan notices a similar phenomenon of anchoring disagreements in past conflict. He focuses on the manner in which story tellers recited tales (*sālfih*) about the fight between a *Shammarī* warrior and a hero of *°Anaza* as well as the subsequent attempts at revenge. Although this conflict occurred in approximately 1835 during the establishment of the Rashīd dynasty in *Jabal Shammar*, poets and amateur storytellers still invoked it during 1960's. Despite the end of inter-tribal fighting with the consolidation of the Saudi state, minor disagreements over land still spark poetic and narrative exchanges between members of these two tribes. Both sides invariably refer to the victories they won and the slights they suffered in that distant feud. Even in 1968, the publication of a book that seemed to favor the *°Anaza* led *Shammar* bards and poets to disseminate their version of the conflict more actively.³¹

These studies provide a clear social context for a vast portion of *Jāhīlī* poetry. Given the important role the feud plays in Bedouin self-image as well as their method of explaining social relations and conflict, poems such Durayd b. Šimma's should not be treated literally.

In stark contrast to the native view of feuds found in much of *Jāhīlī* poetry, the pastoral-nomads in *Najd*, Palestine and Libya have found cooperation indispensable. Excessive violence threatens the access to shared pastures and resources essential to survival and may also endanger important social institutions. Marx states that the nomadic need to migrate in search for water and pastures requires different sections of tribes to share grazing land. In fact notions of kinship are sometimes determined by such needs.³² When strong clans control access to an area of pasture in the Negev desert and Libya only groups related by blood or marriage receive permission make use of these resources.³³ For lesser clans it is thus family and specifically marital relations that enable survival, not martial prowess. The *Mu°allaqa* of al-Ḥārith b. Ḥilliza thus takes on different significance in this light. He extols the might and skill of his tribe's warriors claiming:

53. And we struck them with our spears with such force that
the shafts wobbled in their bodies as a bucket wobbles in a
deep well.

54. And we disposed of them in a manner that only God can
comprehend, and there is no blood vengeance left to be taken
by those who fought.³⁴

In his attempt to seal a treaty with the enemy tribe of *Taghlib* under the auspices of the king *°Amr* b. Hind, however, the poet makes a veiled plea to the

distant marital relations between his tribe and the king's ancestors.³⁵ He then proceeds:

62. [Relations] such as this bring forth friendship to the tribe, a tract of desert and beside it deserts more.³⁶

Despite the bloody and stylized inter-tribal violence that characterizes much of al-Ḥārith's poem, he calls upon the king to heed less masculine bonds. Furthermore, his analogy turns on connected tracts of land (and water, presumably), the true issue at stake in pastoral-nomadic society.

Peters also states that groups located next to each other and sharing resources are much more likely to resolve conflicts or homicides quickly and peacefully than those with less frequent contact.³⁷ A murder involving two members of tertiary groups sharing resources should be paid for immediately with blood money. In order to prevent the outbreak of a feud, both parties will deny any connection between subsequent crimes and the original murder even if they are clearly related.³⁸

Beyond disrupting cooperation and shared pasture, feuds and violence can threaten the social fabric of tribal society. Peters states that any murder that occurs within a tertiary tribal group, the smallest corporate unit in the Bedouin social structure, is kept private and dealt with quickly. For these nomads, any such clashes within the unit charged with providing itself with daily needs in addition to a common defense from outside threats is unacceptable and must not deteriorate into feuding. Similarly, any set battles between groups from the same tribe were fought with sticks or other non-lethal weapons in order to minimize damage to the tribe.³⁹ Ṭarafa b. al-ʿAbd's prodigal behavior towards his family and his slaughter of an old man's (presumably from the same clan) she-camel thus stands in stark contrast with incident that sparked the famous pre-Islamic War of Basūs. In response to Ṭarafa's crime, the old man only laments:

90. No, by your life...what do you make of this hardened drunkard heaping his willful excesses upon us?

91. Let him go, they said, let him take what he's taken, but keep the kneeling troop [of camels] away or he'll go on killing.⁴⁰

The wayward poet's excessive behavior and his act of theft are therefore tolerated. Between the large tribes of *Bakr* and *Taghlib*, however, one tribe's killing of the other's stray camel precipitated the legendary forty-year war of Basūs.⁴¹ Whether this conflict was magnified in hindsight or whether it actually reached such a bloody extent is immaterial; to the *Jāhili* society that produced the legend of Basūs it was conceivable for two tribes to make war over such an issue. The old man robbed of his she-camel by one of his kin in Ṭarafa's poem did not.

The *Mu'allaqāt* contain other glimpses of these more realistic mores and offer an alternative vision of pre-Islamic social ethics more compatible with those of Middle Eastern pastoral nomads. In the didactic proverb movement that distinguishes Zuhayr b. Abī Sulma's *mu'allaqa* from the other classic odes, the poet cautions his audience:

And he who doesn't conduct the bulk of his affairs with diplomacy and compromise; he'll be ground up by the camel's teeth and crushed by its hooves.⁴²

This advice diametrically opposes Ṭarafa's anti-social behavior as well as ʿAmr's declarative warning to his enemies on behalf of his tribe:

Then let no one deal brashly with us, for we'll respond with brashness dwarfing even the most impudent and impetuous folk.⁴³

This disparity comes as no surprise, for these three poems play two different rhetorical roles. Reflecting the grazing and cooperative demands governing pastoral-nomadic society, Zuhayr's ode praises the two shaykhs who negotiated an end to tribal strife and pleads with the tribes' young firebrands to respect the truce. ʿAmr's bombastic statements, however, may reflect the converse role of feuds in pastoral-nomadic segmentary structure. Like the *Shammar* poets and storytellers or the Cyrenaician Bedouins, ʿAmr's poem seems to use epic language to make social sense of the conflict between *Bakr* and *Taghlib*. The ubiquitous descriptions of battles, killing and revenge should be viewed as the self-proclamations of a "warrior society," not descriptions of pre-Islamic Arabia.

SCARCITY AND GENEROSITY

Like pastoral nomads in other desert climates, life for the people of the northern Arabian Peninsula during pre-Islamic times was harsh and depended on subsistence herding and agriculture. This continued until recent times, for elderly inhabitants of *Najd* and *Jabal Shammar* still recall the frightening poverty of pre-oil Saudi Arabia.⁴⁴ The anthropological study on the effects of food deprivation and famine on societies, however, has faced the practical and moral difficulties inherent in the subject; in such times of hardship it is difficult to isolate social science variables and impossible to refrain from intervening with support. Nonetheless researchers have documented various societal reactions to both perennial scarcity and years of extreme famine.⁴⁵

While family bonds generally remain intact despite severe shortages, food sharing with relatives and friends decreases significantly. "Individuals drop friends and extended kin from food-sharing networks," states Robert Dirks, "restricting generalized reciprocity to close relatives." Despite their

predictability, annual food shortages can also lead to a "sociology of hoarding" in which food stores are hidden or denied to all but the closest kin. This even occurs in societies that pride themselves on generosity.⁴⁶ When deprivation exceeds the expected perennial difficulties and the community enters into an unusually harsh famine, food-sharing can dwindle even further. M. J. Murray notes that among the famine-stricken Ogaden nomads in Somalia:

family groups...tended to shun all others...The effects of these attitudes were striking, the worst being the complete disregard for the health and welfare of immediate neighbors who did not happen to be members of the family.⁴⁷

The case of Somali nomads housed in famine shelters is certainly extreme, but it illustrates the harshest end of the famine spectrum.

Generosity and hospitality have always featured prominently in Arab nomadic values, constituting an important aspect of *murū'a* (manliness) and *'ird* (honor).⁴⁸ Labīd b. Rabī'c extols his generosity, proclaiming:

And how many a chilly morning in which the reins of the cold had fallen into the hands of the frigid North Wind, have I [eased the people's suffering] with food.

Speaking of his munificence when distributing food by *maysir*, he adds:

I tell the [*maysir* players] to slaughter a she-camel, barren or pregnant, her meat given to all our neighbors.

Finally Labīd honors his tribe as a whole:

They are Spring to those around them and the client-farmers when their year grows long (i.e. when their food stores dwindle).⁴⁹

To Labīd this generosity is crucial for asserting both his own greatness and that of his tribe. Much like the role that reanimating an ancient feud allowed *Shammar* poets to underscore their honor, so does such proverbial generosity exist in the liminal area between real actions and rhetoric. Labīd gives food both on a daily basis and in times of need. Moreover, his tribe is a refuge for the cultivators whose harvests have proven feeble.

One of the salient features of pre-Islamic poetry, however, is its penchant for hyperbole. °Antara's descriptions of battles and °Amr b. Kulthūm's tribe strapping pack-loads of skulls to their camels⁵⁰ clearly belong to realm of literary devices and not accurate descriptions of reality. Given the tendency of human societies to limit food-sharing during perennial shortages, Labīd's boasting should be interpreted as the hyperbolic expression of an ideal and not

necessarily as common practice. The same approach applies when °Amr b. Kulthūm avers:

104. [And all the tribes of *Ma'add* know] that we are those who protect [the hungry] in every year of famine⁵¹, and that we are givers to those who ask gifts of us.⁵²

If in a year of famine a clan or family tends to collapse inwardly and limit its food-sharing to a circle of close relatives, °Amr's grandiose statement seems unrealistic. It stresses his tribe's proximity to the society's professed values as opposed to actually describing their actions. That material constraints and not the ideal of munificence actually determine food-sharing appears later in the °Amr's *mu'allaqa*:

95. [And all the tribes of *Ma'add* know] that we are those who feed others when we are able, and that we are the destroyers when tested.⁵³

Even the hyperbolic tone of the *Mu'allaqāt* thus has its limits. As a result, poetic claims such as those of Labīd and °Amr should be viewed in the same light as other exaggerated and hyperbolic *topoi* in pre-Islamic poetry. Zuhayr's didactic *mu'allaqa* again confirms this perception. He counsels his listeners:

51. And he who has great fortune and withholds it from his clan is cast aside and derided...And he who gives their due to those who do not deserve it (*fī ghayri ahlihi*) their praise will be his demeaning and he'll regret it.⁵⁴

These two verses straddle the obligations and limits of generosity within the pastoral-nomadic social paradigm. Distributing wealth and food, to relatives (Zuhayr is not specifically concerned with famine) is obligatory, but generosity beyond these bounds incurs material and societal risks. This distinction may explain the semantic overlap between *ahl* as "kin" and "something that deserves or merits something."⁵⁵ For the native perception of values in tribal, pastoral-nomadic Arabia, social obligation and family relations were identical. Resources must be kept within the kinship group. Even the praise that a hero like Labīd seeks with his magnanimous poetic claims will therefore turn to criticism if transferred to the desert's harsh social terrain. That °Amr's poem specifically deals with feeding outsiders places further it in the realm of literary imagination.

CONCLUSION

Like the study of Biblical literature, traditional Muslim and Western scholarship on pre-Islamic poetry has often lapsed into circular reasoning. Regardless of the paucity of extra-textual sources, one cannot plumb the text of a poem for the socio-historical context needed to interpret it. Although scholars may be comfortable with many of the conclusions drawn through this method, in theory it remains highly problematic. Yet few scholars have offered alternative methodologies. Suzanne Stetkevych has proposed that structuralist theories of ritual can help us understand pre-Islamic poetry, but many social scientists fault applying such universal thinking to specific cases. By limiting our comparison to societies that share socio-economic, climatic, linguistic and cultural characteristics with what we do know of *Jāhili* Arabia, however, we can extrapolate social context without excessive generalization. Our understanding of historically well-documented societies can thus help explain the poetry of a vanished era.

While the seven classic odes do not represent all aspects of *Jāhili* society, many scholars believe that they are essentially authentic. Along with other genres of *Jāhili* poetry, the *Mu'allaqāt* sing of a society in which killing was rampant and extreme generosity the plain mark of honorable men. Studying the place of feuds and food-sharing within nomadic societies, however, undermines these literary claims. For the nomads of Cyrenaica, *Najd* and the Negev feuding can explain social relations rather than disrupt them, and promoting cooperation often outweighs honor. In poor societies plagued by famine, sharing food may be a rhetorical boast more than a practice. That voices, such as Zuhayr b. Abī Sulma's, within the *Mu'allaqāt* echo these realistic social constraints reinforces the conclusions drawn from the case studies. Contextualizing these voices can help scholars distinguish between literary product and social reality.

ENDNOTES

1. The terms *Jāhili* and pre-Islamic will be used interchangeably in this essay. Also, it should be noted that the corpus of pre-Islamic poetry deals only with Northern and Western Arabia from the sixth century CE on. Any references to pre-Islamic Arabia or its culture should be considered within this geographical and chronological context.

2. For a summary of the assumptions found in secondary source literature on the subject of late pre-Islamic Arabia (sixth and seventh centuries CE) see Robert Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs* (London: Routledge, 2001), 9. Fully two-thirds of Hoyland's citations concerning pre-Islamic society consist of poetry.

3. Ibn Sallām al-Jumāhī, *Ṭabaqāt fuḥūl al-shu'arā'*, Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākīr (ed.), Vol. 1 (Cairo: Dār al-ma'ārif li-al-Ṭabā'a wa al-Nashr, 1952), 114.

4. In his *Arabia and the Arabs*, Robert Hoyland addresses picking lots as a religious affair and not in the social context referred to in pre-Islamic poetry. Hoyland relies on information from Ibn Hishām's *Sīra* and Ibn al-Kalbī for this information. See Hoyland, 155-156.

5. I was unfortunately unable to find a copy of Nāsir al-Dīn Asad's important work *Maṣādir al-shī'r al-jāhilī wa qimatuḥā al-tārikhiyya* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1962).

6. These were the only works I found dealing with life in pre-Islamic Arabia as more than a tangent of historical study. It is no coincidence that attempts at studying Jāhilī life, not history, cannot be separated from the study of poetry, for it provides the only non-hadith, tangible reference to pre-Islamic life.

7. Aḥmad al-Ḥūfī, *al-Ḥayā al-ʿarabiyya min al-shī'r al-jāhilī* (Cairo: Maktabat Nahḍat Miṣr, 1962), 3-4.

8. 'Abd Allah ibn Qutayba, *al-Maysir wa al-qidāh*, Muḥibb al-Dīn Khaṭīb (ed.), (Cairo: al-Maṭba' al-Salafiyya, 1385H.), 26.

9. Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 63.

10. Shawqī Ḍayf, *al-ʿAṣr al-jāhilī* (Cairo: Dār al-ma'ārif, 1962), 64.

11. Adel Sulaiman Gamal, "The Ethical Values of Brigand Poets in pre-Islamic Arabia," *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, 5-6 (1977): 290.

12. Gamal, "The Ethical Values of Brigand Poets in Pre-Islamic Arabia," 292, n. 5-6.

13. This term is borrowed from Fred Donner's description of the most historiographically sensitive approach to the sources of early Islamic history. It not only maintains a critical approach to the textual sources of that history, it also treats the development of the Muslim historiographical tradition and its effect on maturing sources as a factor in shaping perceptions of Islamic history. See Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1998), 13.

14. G. Lecompte, "Mu'allaqāt," *El'2*, Vol. 8: 255.

15. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*, xi.

16. Although other mu^ḥallaqāt collections contains nine or ten odes, they always share seven common poems: those of Imru' al-Qays, Ṭarafa b. al-^ḥAbd, Zuhayr b. Abī Sulma, Labīd b. Rabī^ḥa, ^ḥAmrū b. Kulthūm, ^ḥAntara b. Shaddād and al-Ḥārith b. Ḥilliza. This paper focuses on these seven poems only.

17. Lecompte, *EP*, 255.

18. See M.J. Kister, *Studies in Jahiliyya and Early Islam* (London: Variorum, 1980).

19. The concept of segmentary lineage theory has spawned fierce debate within the discipline of anthropology since the 1930's. Initially segmentary lineage theory described tribal, stateless societies as a "form of ordered anarchy" in which groups tracing their ancestry back to a common progenitor effectively order their society by balancing their interests in a common effort to use shared resources and provide security from outside threats [Roger Webster, "Hijra and the Dissemination of Wahhabi Doctrine in Saudi Arabia," in *Golden Roads*, ed. Ian Richard Netton (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1993), 16]. Later work revealed that, although these segments of society considered themselves social equals in relation to their common descent, some clearly exercised more power and influence than others. Segmentary theory was thus too simplistic. The discrepancy between how anthropologists applying segmentation theory believed these societies should function and their actual behavior was later explained by recognizing the myriad of other social institutions at work. Factors such as marital bonds and client-patron relations thus proved as important as the agnatic and patrilineal order that anthropologists had used to predict social activity. References to this debate can be found in seminal works on the subject such as Evans-Pritchard's study of the Nuer of the Upper Nile and Emrys Peters' work on the Bedouin of Cyrenaica as well as a host of other books and articles.

20. Helen Chapin Metz, (ed.), *Saudi Arabia: a country study* (Lanham: Bernan Press, 1993), 58.

21. Michael E. Meeker, *Literature and Violence in North Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 23-24, 105. Cited from Musil.

22. For more detail see Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, 81 for a discussion of the settled/nomadic spectrum as well as the definitions of agropastoralism, transhumance and nomadic pastoralism.

23. The Awlād ^ḥAli Bedouins of northwestern Egypt rely on sparse rainfall, rainwater wells and run-off courses for their grain and fruit production.

24. A 65 year old Shammari woman recalls that the first electric generators were for government use only. Even after the introduction of such

limited infrastructure, it was years before larger sections of the public were able to use it. Interview: December, 2001.

25. Emanuel Marx, "The Tribe as a Unit of Subsistence: Nomadic Pastoralism in the Middle East," *American Anthropology* 79 (1977): 348.

26. Meeker, *Literature and Violence in North Arabia*, 193-4.

27. For a usage of the concept of a native view as opposed to an outside anthropological description see Marx, "The Tribe as a Unit of Subsistence: Nomadic Pastoralism in the Middle East," 355, No. 79.

28. Marx, "The Tribe as a Unit of Subsistence: Nomadic Pastoralism in the Middle East," 355-6, No. 79.

29. Secondary tribal groups are the segmentary group made up of several tertiary groups and composing the primary clan groups of the tribe. Tertiary groups are the minimal lineage group, the smallest corporate entity that lives and migrates together and is responsible for communal defense and revenge. The tribe is the maximal lineage group, the largest kinship category in which the individual places his identity.

30. Peters, *The Bedouin of Cyrenaica*, 67. The poet Tufayl's verse also seems pertinent here: "our two tribes have always been enemies and always will be; to this day we have never started any relationship with you, nor do you find any with us tracing back our genealogies." Cited from Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, 116.

31. Saad A. Sowayan, *The Arabian Oral Historical Narrative* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992), 11-12.

32. Marx, "The Tribe as a Unit of Subsistence: Nomadic Pastoralism in the Middle East," 351, No. 79.

33. Marx, "The Tribe as a Unit of Subsistence: Nomadic Pastoralism in the Middle East."

34. Ibn Aḥmad al-Zawzanī, *Sharḥ al-mu'allaqāt al-sab' al-tiwāl* (Beirut: Dār al-Arqam, n.d.), 248.

35. Capt. F.E. Johnson, trans., *The Seven Suspended Poems* (New York: AMS Press, 1973), 228-229.

36. Al-Zawzani, *Sharḥ al-mu'allaqāt al-sab' al-tiwāl*, 249.

37. Peters, *The Bedouin of Cyrenaica*, 63.

38. Peters, *The Bedouin of Cyrenaica*, 64-65.

39. Peters, *The Bedouin of Cyrenaica*, 68.

40. Michael Sells, trans., "The Mu'allaqa of Ṭarafa," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 17 (1986): 21.

41. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 208.

42. Al-Zawzanī, *Sharḥ al-mu'allaqāt al-sab' al-tiwāl*, 135.

43. This translation is not exactly literal, as the repetitive nature of Arabic emphatics do not suit English stylistics. The text of the verse is: *alā lā yajhalan aḥadun ʿalaynā – fanajhala fawqa jahli al-jāhilīnā*. Al-Zawzanī, *Sharḥ al-muʿallaqāt al-sabʿ al-tiwāl*, 204.

44. Interviews conducted with two families originally from Jabal Shammar whose parents were born in the late 1930's.

45. Robert Dirks, "Social Responses during Severe Food Shortages and Famine," *Current Anthropology* 21 (1980) 22.

46. Dirks, "Social Responses during Severe Food Shortages and Famine," 28, no. 21.

47. Dirks, "Social Responses during Severe Food Shortages and Famine," 29, no. 21. Cited from M.J. Murray et als., "Somali Food Shelters in the Ogaden Famine and their Impact on Health," *Lancet* 1 (1976):1285

48. B. Farès, "Murūw'a," *Et'* Vol. 7, 636-638.

49. Al-Zawzanī, *Sharḥ al-muʿallaqāt al-sabʿ al-tiwāl*, 179-184.

50. Al-Zawzanī, *Sharḥ al-muʿallaqāt al-sabʿ al-tiwāl*, 190.

51 *Ibid.*

52. Johnson, *The Seven Suspended Poems*, 163. This verse is not included in al-Zawzanī's recension.

53. Al-Zawzanī, *Sharḥ al-muʿallaqāt al-sabʿ al-tiwāl*, 210.

54. Al-Zawzanī, *Sharḥ al-muʿallaqāt al-sabʿ al-tiwāl*, 150.

55. See *Al-Qāmūs al-muḥīt* (Beirut: Dirasa, 1996), 963-964.

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INTERVIEWS

65 year-old Shammari woman and family: Washington, D.C., November 2001.

57 year-old Nejdi woman: Washington, D.C., November 2001.

10 informal individual and group interviews with Awlad Ali men, ages 20 to approximately 60 years-old: Marsa Matruh and environs, Egypt, July 2000–June 2001.

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