

Guest Editor's Column

The essays that make up this special issue of *Oral Tradition* deal with various aspects of oral tradition in Arab culture. Orality has always been an important mode of communication and of cultural transmission in the Arab tradition. Right from the earliest times in Arabia, long before the advent of Islam in the seventh century A.D., through the period after the promulgation of Islam and its dramatic geographical spread from the Arabian Peninsula to different parts of the world, and up to the present, orality has continued to be a well-known method of preserving Arab culture and transmitting it to succeeding generations. Even after writing had become common among Arabs, oral performance remained for a long time an acceptable way of passing on knowledge. This phenomenon might have been enhanced by the very nature of Arabic writing itself, which, though later perfected, was based on the consonantal representation of words, the short vowels not being written and remaining always in need of the oral sound of a performer or transmitter to specify them. Thus a word like *slm*, which could be pronounced in a variety of ways with different combinations of unwritten vowels, depending on the context, had to be orally heard to become authentically meaningful. This has been particularly significant in the oral transmission of the sacred text of the Qur'ān' and to a lesser extent in the transmission of Prophet Muḥammad's sayings in the *Ḥadīth*. A long chain of transmitters had to be authenticated before the correct text was established.

At a different level of meaning, orality among Arabs meant a heavy dependence on memory, whether in the recitation of poetry, epic narratives, romances, and proverbs or in the enumeration of genealogical data. Tribal lore, and historical or pseudo-historical events. Arab tradition abounds with stories of persons who had prodigious memories, equally amazing whether they specialized in religious knowledge or in secular matters.

At yet another level of meaning, orality among Arabs sometimes meant spontaneous extemporizing of verse in specific poetic duels or slanging-matches, and in social settings where improvising was required. The rich vocabulary of the Arabic language and its structural patterns helped to bring such impromptu oral composition within the reach of poets more readily than would have been possible otherwise, yet a long period of training was still necessary and the challenges of this orality delighted Arab audiences as they witnessed poets struggling to meet its demands.

Arab audiences have been noted for their strong inclination to rejoice in listening to the cadences and rhythms of their language as it expressed ideas or emotions with which they identified. They would be thrilled at the apt use of a word or an image and would respond with unrehearsed, uninhibited collective acclaim as the inevitable word or image is eventually used by the poet, particularly in a rhyming position, with unexpected ramifications of meaning. Arab audiences listening to epics or romances have also been described as identifying with the heroes or heroines of their oral tradition, the narrators often moulding their material to suit local needs or timely necessities either consciously or unconsciously.

In the final analysis it is verbal art at its best, in the oral tradition of Arab culture, with which the essays in this special issue deal. Frederick M. Denny begins with a study of the art of oral recitation of the Qur'ān—because of which practice, he believes, “Islam has retained a high level of orality in its piety and in its way of understanding the nature of things.” R. Marston Speight points to formulaic aspects of the Ḥadīth, orally handed down from the Prophet Muḥammad and the outstanding personalities of early Islamic history. James T. Monroe digs up some evidence for the oral origins of Hispano-Arabic strophic poetry, which, he concludes, “is learned development of the popular *zajal* in Arabic and Romance.” In similarly fascinating detective work, Muhsin Mahdi compares a tale in the *Arabian Nights* with an account of it transmitted much earlier as history, showing how audiences respond variously to fact and fiction, not always based on rational grounds but often on their willingness to believe.

Dwight F. Reynolds writes an introduction to the oral epic of Banī Hilāl and the scholarship that studied it as history and as text, and calls for more studies on its live performance and its significance. Bridget Connelly and Henry Massie highlight the psychological and social needs of local audiences that dictate the choice of themes in the oral performance of the Banī Hilāl epic by narrators, repeatedly emphasizing in Tunisia those related to repressed anxieties of social rupture between Berber and Arab. H. T. Norris explores the common elements of Arabic epics and European *chansons de geste* and, in spite of differences, establishes the possibility of borrowed content relating to detail and fantasy.

Saad Abdullah Sawayan depends on field research in Arabia to describe oral poets performing poetic duels accompanied by a chorus. Translating his own article from French, Simon Jargy offers a study of certain living genres of sung poetry from the present-day oral tradition of the Gulf region and the Arabian Peninsula, reported earlier by Western travelers and ethnographers. Adnan Haydar studies another living oral tradition, the *zajal* of Lebanon, and examines its genres and meters, following up the developments in improvised oral duels between *zajal*

poets. Dirgham H. Sbait discusses the living oral tradition of Palestinian improvised-sung poetry, analyzing its genres and their social functions. Teirab AshShareef presents the results of his field research in the Sudan regarding the classification of sung poetic genres in the oral tradition of the Banī Halba; he shows that tunes are the basis of such classification and that, within it, there are men's genres and women's genres. Finally, to end this special issue, George D. Sawa gives an account of oral transmission in Arabic music as performed in Baghdad in the heyday of medieval Arab civilization as well as in modern times.

There are many other aspects of the Arabic oral tradition that have not been treated in this collection. It is hoped that future issues of *Oral Tradition* will deal with some of them. Readers of *Oral Tradition* whose specialization is in fields other than Arabic will find in this special issue many affinities with their fields. It is my hope that the collection will help to enlarge the purview of comparative studies in oral tradition as it helps to advance scholarship in the field of studies in Arabic oral tradition.

Issa J. Boullata
Institute of Islamic Studies
McGill University, Montreal