

PLANTS IN ORAL LITERATURE: A BEDOUIN SONG

Some references to plants in Bedouin oral literature are mentioned in section 5.3 of the printed volume. The sound file here, which makes mention of an important desert plant, is a Bedouin song performed by ʿAlī ibn Muḥammad al-Ghaythānī of the Ghayāthīn section of the tribe of Āl Murrah.

I made the recording 8 July 1997 at a location about 100 km inland from the oil town of Dhahran. There, on the northern edge of the 'Ain Dar oil field, Bedouins of the Āl Ḥurayr subsection of the Ghayāthīn section of Āl Murrah have summer-camped since about 1950 to take advantage of a drilled water well required for oil field development. The writer first became acquainted with the group in the 1960s when several of them were employed as geographical name consultants for an oil company mapping program. The tribe of Āl Murrah (the name means "the people of Murrah"-- Murrah being an ancient eponymous ancestor) have traditionally followed an unusually wide range of seasonal movements. They sometimes travel from as far south as the lower margins of the Rub ʿ al-Khālī sands in the southern Peninsula to the Kuwait border in the north in search of winter grazing. They are renowned as desert trackers of both men and animals, and some of them have regular jobs in law enforcement, where their testimony in court is accepted with the same degree of trust as a fingerprint expert's is in Western practice.

The place of this musical encounter was al-Ḥārrah, a tiny hamlet which takes its name from a government-drilled water well near a sandy track in open, rolling desert country carrying scattered bushes of *thmām* (*Panicum turgidum*) and ʿabal (*Calligonum comosum*). The name al-Ḥārrah means "the hot (one)" and refers not to the quality of the present well water but to an earlier well drilled nearby by the oil company. This had penetrated a hot water aquifer at greater depth. After the newer well was drilled it became a place popular with local Bedouins for filling their tank trucks, and a tiny general store had become established there. A small mosque was built with government assistance. The only other building there, which surprised me by its appearance in 1997 after my absence of a few years, was a rather large concrete block-walled area containing two whitewashed houses. One belonged to my 1997 host, Nāṣir ibn Ṣāliḥ al-Ghaythānī, the other to his brother. Bedouins in this area in earlier years had always lived in their traditional black tents, and Nāṣir's new house was an unusual sight for me. He paid for it mainly from a government housing allowance and wages received as a watchman at a desert oil facility some 30 km to the south.

The Genre:

Bedouin songs are usually musical versions of traditional Bedouin poetry. The style is generally associated with non-literate composers and performers and is thus strongly oriented toward oral performance from memory, or to on-the-spot composition. A clear borderline between poetry and song hardly exists; a poem may be spoken as rhythmic speech, chanted in a musical style of narrow scalar range in a mode somewhat similar to the traditional "recitation" (actually better described as chanting) of the Qur'ān, or put into song forms of greater range and expression. Reciting a poem as speech is a rather stylized performance, the speaker using an elevated, often somewhat tense, tone with little emotional variation and adhering strictly, almost mechanically, to the meter.

The composition will be laid out as a series of couplets, or paired lines, each pair called a **bēt** ("house" or "household"). Rhyme is an essential element, and alternating lines generally rhyme throughout the piece. A poem will generally exhibit two rhyme sounds which repeat themselves alternately throughout the composition. Such verse may also sometimes employ a single rhyme for all lines. In either case, the aural effect is a regular (and to the connoisseur very satisfying) repetition of the same final line-end sounds throughout the performance. The length of a poem usually ranges between 10 and 50 verses.

Following is a transcription in Bedouin colloquial speech, with translation, of our sound file song example. The piece has no formal name and is generally referred to simply by the first two words of the first line, **ḥanna galbī**, "my heart yearned."

Sung from memory by 'Alī ibn Muḥammad al-Ghaythānī, of the Ghayāthīn Āl Murrah, at al-Ḥārrah, eastern Saudi Arabia on 8 July 1997. One can discern immediately from the steadiness of his line (and despite the fidelity limitations of this recording) that he is a highly skilled singer, at least compared to others I have heard:

- 1 **ḥanna galbī ḥann mōkin 'alā ṣabr al-'aja --- al**
- 2 **'ashshag as-sawwāg wal-ḥōḍ (a-) fōghā gad malā --- h**
- 3 **in tasannad 'ashshaguh ilēn yalḥagah ad-daba --- l**
- 4 **w-in taḥaddar rayyaḥu ilēn yalḥaga mintahā --- h**
- 5 **ḥayyahu 'ugdin janūbin 'alā jālah 'aba --- l**
- 6 **ṭayyib lil-bil wa rā'ih mā yagṭa 'aḍ-ḍamā --- h**
- 7 (spoken): **as-salām 'alēkum** (spoken reply): **wa 'alēkum as-salām**

1 My heart yearned the yearning of a great truck building speed
2 The driver has shifted gears; he has filled the water tank on top
3 When it goes up [on rising ground] he shifts it [down] until he reaches the lowest gear
4 When it descends [a slope], he gives it ease until he reaches the end
5 Hasten to the pasture dune in the south, beside which [grow] the *'abal* shrubs
6 Good for the camels and their herdsman; [and with] water that quenches thirst
7 (spoken by the singer): May peace be upon you (spoken by me): And upon you peace

Notes

The hyphens used near the ends of lines indicate syllables that are very prolonged to fit the melodic line. The performer has also inserted a few "helping vowels" (usually a short "a" at the end of some words to help smooth the line. Not all of these are shown in the transcription above.

I used to hear the melody of this short piece around sunset when a camel-mounted herdsman would ride out from his tent to round up his grazing camels and bring them back for the night. The tempo is slow and rocking, akin to the motion of a riding camel at a slow walk. The performer used the term *ṣōṭ ṭawīl*, "long voice," when referring to the style of this piece, and this is the Bedouin name for the melodic genre. The long, droned, terminal notes have a special quality when heard outdoors at distance, fading in and out with wind, that is absent from this near-microphone recording. The grazing camels appear to recognize the sound and to head back toward the tent spontaneously as the herdsman approaches. The long notes could perhaps play a role in this apparent communication. Now that Bedouin herdsman are more likely to be driving Datsun pickups than riding camels each evening, this evening song is heard less often. A driver, however, may produce it at the wheel in a burst of exuberance upon starting out on a journey by car. An approaching vehicle itself more recently seems to have become a go-home signal to camels at day's end. I have on several occasions myself unintentionally precipitated a herd move when approaching camels slowly in a car for casual observation.

A song of this type in pre-industrial Arabia would traditionally take as subject a description of a fine riding camel, its beauty and points of conformation, and would use camel travel images to evoke its mood and message. Today, as in this song example, the motor vehicle may also be a source of inspiration. To many Westerners, a truck may be anything but poetic, but discussions with young street-corner American males will show that cars do have their romantic qualities even in a land of their production. Nor does it take much imagination to sense the "yearning" feeling in the sound of a distant "semi-" working up through the gear ranges and gaining speed on a lonely road or desert track at night.

The term **mōk** (here with an added indefinite suffix marker **-in**) glossed in line 1 as "a great truck" originates as the English word "Mack", as in "Mack truck" (manufactured by the Mack company). Arabian automobile terminology, not unexpectedly in a land where practically no motor vehicles were seen until the 1930s, is largely of foreign origin and has arrived through a mixture of languages. Spark plugs are **būjī** (from the French *bougie*); a distributor is a **dalkō** (from the American parts manufacturer, Delco); distributor points are **blātīn** (from French *platine*); a starter is a **salf** (from English "self-starter") or **bandaks** (from the American Bendix company's name). Parallel to **mōk** or **māk** as a "big truck" (of any make), we have **hwayat** (plural **hwayatāt**) for "water tank truck" (of any make), from the name of the long-important American tank truck manufacturer, White). The term for "lowest gear" in line 5, **dabal**, is also a loan word, from English "double" (double or compound low-range) gear. Use of the compound low gear range also usually involves the engagement of four-wheel drive, and **dabal** is also used as a term for that action.

A consultant later explained that the expression **‘alā ṣabr al-‘ajal** in line 1 meant "increasing in speed," but it would seem more literally to mean "being patient with," or "enduring" speed.

The **ḥōḡ** in line 2 is, literally, the round, livestock watering basin traditionally made of leather on a wooden framework. An example is shown in photo CD.24 of this CD. It is also visible in the second frame of the slide show that accompanys the song clip. of Carrying a **ḥōḡ** full of water in a moving vehicle is totally impractical, and the word here is used in a more generic sense, referring to the metal tanks of various sorts in which water is carried on trucks.

The term in line 2 used for shifting gears in a motor vehicle, **‘ashshag**, is a good example of Arabic's potential for lexical innovation. The classical Arabic verb **‘ashiqa** means "to love (another) passionately," from which are derived secondary connotations of "closeness" or "binding together." Put into the second (causative or intensive) verb form, here **‘ashshag**, the meaning becomes "to cause to bind together", hence to "engage" the gears.

The parallel verb pair in lines 3 and 4, **tasannad** and **tahaddar** mean not only simply to "go up" and "go down", respectively. Throughout eastern Arabia they are used also in the sense of going inland (or up, to a higher elevation) and coastward (that is, down toward the coast). The simpler gloss is more probable here, in view of the association with physical challenge and gear shifting.

The term *ʿugd* in line 5 (with indefinite marker suffix *-in*) means literally "a knot". But the term among Bedouins is also a topographical one, referring to a sand area with dense vegetation. The *ʿabal* bushes (line 5) in this southern context are certainly *Calligonum crinitum* subsp. *arabicum*, although Āl Murrah use the name also for a more northern species of the same genus, *Calligonum comosum*. Both shrubs are found in deep sand habitats. They are grazed by camels, and their twigs in earlier days were used for tanning hides. They also have astringent medicinal properties. Above all, however, they are prized as firewood that burns with a long-lasting flame. Finding a camping spot that has both grazing plants and good firewood, and if possible with water within easy reach, is always the Bedouin ideal. It has been achieved here.

The fact that the camping spot is (line 5) "to the south" (*janūbin*) is also not without significance. The Āl Murrah tribe's main home territory has long been in the north-central parts of the Rubʿ al-Khālī sands, to the south of the group's more recent settlement sites, such as al-Ḥārrah. They had, at a much earlier date, moved east from western Arabia.

The object of the composer's "heart's longing" is thus clearly an idealized camping ground in the old Āl Murrah heartland of the Rubʿ al-Khālī.

In line 7 the singer indicates the end of his performance by an abrupt shift into a normal speaking voice and uttering the common Muslim salutation "May peace be upon you [pl.].". The standard reply is spoken automatically here by myself, "And upon you peace." I have heard this ending form on other occasions, including the recitation of poems.

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