INTRODUCTION

THE CORPUS OF JAHILI 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 Jahili worldview? (1) The classic collection of seven qasida’s (al-Mu c allaqat al-sab c al-tiwal) 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 Jahili 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 c allaqat 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 Jahili 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 Jahili society and determining poetry's place in it.

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 akhbar (as in al-Isbahani’s use of al-Baladhuri’s works), eighth and ninth century genealogists such as al-Kalbi, Ibn al-Kalbi and Ibn Yaqzan, collection of proverbs and hadith as well as the explanations that later Muslim scholars such as al-Zawzani provided for the poetry, much of our information about the society that produced the poetry comes from the poetry itself. (2) Ibn Sallam al-Jumahi’s (d.
Tabaqat fuhul al-shu'ara', one of our earliest works in the tabaqat 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 Sallam’s confidence in the biographical value of poetry appears even more clearly when he identifies poets by their literary claims. He thus calls Labid b. Rabi'a "he who fed [the hungry] when the cold Eastern wind blew," referring to the poet’s description of his own generous behavior.

An examination of the case of maysir provides a useful example of this reliance on poetry. Western studies of Jahili poetry and society have taken the definition and social functions of maysir for granted. They share these notions with well-known Arabic works seeking to illuminate the nature of Jahili society such as Ahmad al-Hufi’s al-Haya al-arabiyya min al-shi’r al-jahili, Shawqi Dayf’s al-Asr al-jahili and Mahmud Shukri al-Alusi’s Bulugh al-arab fi ma’rifat ahwal al-arab. All three of these works rely heavily on poetry to describe life in pre-Islamic Arabia. Al-Hufi states that his study focuses on poetry as a "powerful echo of Arab life" and thus avoids relying on "tarikh" (a vague term presumably subsuming the above mentioned sources) alone as a source for representing the Jahili world. Yet his study consists of little more than using the amorphous body of a priori statements about Jahili society found in these un-cited "tarikh" sources to confirm or interpret the meaning of poetic verses. In fact, in his illustration of maysir he either cites poetry of defers to the work of al-Alusi, who in turn relies heavily on poetry as well as Ibn Qutayba’s unique book, al-Maysir wa al-qidah. As a result both their explanations of maysir and its social uses either turn directly to poetry of 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 'yasir'." 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. 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-Hufi’s case, using poetry to affirm presupposed impressions of Jahili culture) descend to a large extent from the poetry itself.

This poses a problem for those who seek to contextualize Jahili 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 Jahili 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 Muʾallaqat 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 Jahili 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 of challenge scholarly consensus on issues such as maysir, but doing so would at least avoid inconsistency at a theoretical level.

VARIOUS APPROACHES TO STUDYING JAHILI 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 Jahili poetry as a source for describing pro-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 Shawqi Dayf cites the following verses of the pre-Islamic poet Durayd b. al-Simma:

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

By a roe 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 [shatr] 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-sa'c alik) 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 scorning 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 Jahili 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-Zawzani’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 Abbassid period. Any attempt to use it as a source for Jahili 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 evaluate (15)" pre-Islamic qasida 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 Jahili Arabs and its function in their communities.

**PREMISES: THE MU'C ALLAQAT AS A RELIABLE SOURCE**

In the study of Jahili 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 Jahili 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 c allaqat, (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 c allaqat 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 c allaqat 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 c allaqat collection supports this notion, as he states that the poems were collected as early as the reign of Mu c awiya in order to instruct Umayyad princes about their pre-Islamic heritage. (18)

TRIBAL PASTORAL NOMADIC SOCIETIES: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH TO JAHILI POETRY

This article is not an attempt holistically to reproduce Jahili society on the basis of a handful of literary products. Rather it extrapolates from numerous twentieth century studies of pastoral-nomadic, segmentary lineage (19) 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 c allaqat.

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 of 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 and 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 Sada clan that
includes the Awlad c Ali 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 c Anaza tribes in Northern Najd: these Arabic speaking pastoral-nomadic tribes inhabit the and 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 and and semi-arid environments.

ANALOGY BETWEEN KNOWNS AND UNKNOWNS

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 of 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. Najdi 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 Najdi’s) remains highly unlikely for women.

The most glaring distinction between Jahili 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 Salafi 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 Najdi 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 Awlad c Ali 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 of voluntary settlement of nomadic communities has been an important feature of modern state-building in the Middle East. King c Abd al-c Aziz of Saudi Arabia understood that corralling 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, the, se case studios 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'allqat 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. More, over, 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 c Anaza the physical environments are effectively identical, although flora, fauna and have probably decreased since pre-Islamic times. The coastal highlands of the Hijaz, with their and 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 Hijaz 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 Cyranecia 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 socioeconomic, 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 intertribal wars. For authors like Dayf and others this notion stems from the extensive body of poetry and ayyam 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 of 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 as a similar but more specific conclusion in his study of Cyrenaicean Bedouins. Describing the nature of feuds between secondary tribal groups (29) 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 c Anaza tribes in Najd, Saad Sowayan notices a similar phenomenon of anchoring disagreements in past conflict. He focuses on the manner in which story tellers recited tales (salfih) about the fight between a Shammmari warrior and a hero of c Anaza as well as the subsequent attempts at revenge. Although this conflict occurred in approximately 1835 during the establishment of the Rashid 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 c 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 Jahili 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. Simma’s should not be treated literally.

In stark contrast to the native view of feuds found in much of Jahili 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-Harith b. Hilliza 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 c 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-Harith’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) Tarafa b. al-c Abd’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 Basus. In response to Tarafa’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 Basus. (41) Whether this conflict was magnified in hindsight or whether it actually reached such a bloody extent is immaterial; to the Jahili society that produced the legend of Basus 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 Tarafa’s poem did not.

The Mu c allaqat 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. Abi Sulma’s mu c 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 Tarafa's anti-social behavior as well as c Amr'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. c Amr's
bombastic statements, however, may reflect the converse role of feuds in pastoral-
nomadic segmentary structure. Like the Shammar poets and storytellers of the
Cyrenaician Bedouins, c Amr'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 hording" 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 muru’a (manliness) and c ird (honor. (48) Labid b. Rabi c a 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 Labid 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 Labid 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. Labid 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. c Antara’s descriptions of battles and c Amr b. Kulthum’s tribe strapping pack-loads of skulls to their camels (50) 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, Labid’s boasting should be interpreted as
the hyperbolic expression of an ideal and not necessarily as common practice. The same approach applies when c Amr b. Kulthum avers:

(104.) [And all the tribes of Ma c add know] that we are those who protect [the hungry] in every year of famine (51), 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, c 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 c Amr’s mu c allaqa:

(95.) [And all the tribes of Mac 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 c allaqat thus has its limits. As a result, poetic claims such as those of Labid and c Amr should be viewed in the same light as other exaggerated and hyperbolic topoi in pre-Islamic poetry. Zuhayr’s didactic mu c 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 (fi ghayri ahlihi) their praise will be his demeaning and he’ll regret it. (4)

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 Labid seeks with his magnanimous poetic claims will therefore turn to criticism if transferred to the desert’s harsh social terrain. That c 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 Jahili 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 Jahili society, many scholars believe that they are essentially authentic. Along with other genres of Jahili poetry, the Muṣallaqat 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. Abi Sulma’s, within the Muṣallaqat 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 Jahili 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.


(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 Hisham’s Sira and Ibn al-Kalbi for this information. See Hoyland, 155-156.

(5.) I was unfortunately unable to find a copy of Nasir al-Din Asad’s important work Masadir al-shi c r al-jahili wa qimatuha al-tarikhiyya (Cairo: Dar al-Ma c arif, 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 Jahili life, not history, cannot be separated from the study of poetry, for it provides the only non-hadith, tangible reference to pre-Islamic life.


(10.) Shawqi Dayf, al- c Asr al-jahili (Cairo: Dar al-ma- ma c arif, 1962), 64.


(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. Ir 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 c allakat," EI 2’ Vol. 8:255.

(15.) Stetkevych, The Mute Immortals Speak, xi.

(16.) Although other mu c allaqat collections contains nine or ten odes, they always share seven common poems: those of Imru’ al-Qays, Tarafa b. al- c Abd, Zuhayr b. Abi Sulma, Labid b. Rabi c a, c Amru b. Kulthum, c Antara b. Shaddad and al-Harith b. Hilliza. This paper focuses on these seven poems only.

(17.) Lecompte, EI 2, 255.


(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 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.


(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 Awlad c Ali 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 Shammar 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.


(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.
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.

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.


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

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


Al-Zawzani, Sharh al-mu c allaqat al-sab c al-tiwal, 249.

Peters, The Bedouin of Cyrenaica, 63.

Peters, The Bedouin of Cyrenaica, 64-65.

Peters, The Bedouin of Cyrenaica, 68.


Stetkevych, The Mute Immortals Speak, 208.

Al-Zawzani, Sharh al-mu c allaqat al-sab c al-tiwal, 135.

This translation is not exactly literal, as the repetitive nature of Arabic emphatics do not suit English stylistics. The text of the verse is: ala la yajhalan ahadun c alayna--fanajhala fawqa jahli al-jahilina. Al-Zawzani, Sharh al-mu c allaqat al-sab c al-tiwal, 204.

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

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


(49.) Al-Zawzani, Sharh al-mu' allaqat al-sab c al-tiwal, 179-184.

(50.) Al-Zawzani, Sharh al-mu' allaqat al-sab c al-tiwal, 190.

(51) Ibid.

(52.) Johnson, The Seven Suspended Poems, 163. This verse is not included in al-Zawanis recension.


(54.) Al-Zawzani, Sharh al-mu' allaqat al-sab c al-tiwal, 150.

(55.) See Al-Qamus al-muhide (Beirut: Dirasa, 1996), 963-964.

ENGLISH AND FRENCH LANGUAGE SOURCES:


ARABIC LANGUAGE SOURCES


INTERVIEWS


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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