

a larger frame than that which evokes either fascination or horror. In the first part of her book she deals with the motivations that lead Sleeman to propose a campaign and the British government to support it, and establishes that these lay outside the rubric of “colonizers bringing order in chaotic colonies.” She advances her study with an “etymological” analysis based on the words of the secret language of the Thugs, *Ramasi*, as collected in the lexicon *Ramaseeana* by Sleeman. In this admirably detailed analysis, the author attempts to construct the worldview of the Thugs from their dictionary and brings forth many interesting aspects of the same. It is of particular importance here that the dictionary of the Thugs does not corroborate as strong a connection between the Thugs and religious institutions. Indeed, the Thugs were religious in their social and criminal life, and did seek divine engagement by the observance of a large number of omens (considered directions from the goddess), yet their language does not affirm the kind of “cult of Kali” as signified by Sleeman and his contemporaries. Another important point that the author establishes is that the Thugs did not live as “community” but came together for a specific reason, and could belong to any religion, caste, or community. Van Woerkens deconstructs Sleeman’s imagining by the study of his motivations, the political dynamics in India at the time, and the possible groups from where the Thugs may have come, and by the study of *Ramaseeana*. In the second part of her work she studies literary and cinematic representations of the Thugs, most importantly the novel *Confessions Of A Thug* (1839) by Meadows Taylor, a colleague and competitor of Sleeman. She juxtaposes this to Sleeman’s “imaginings” and comes up with interesting observations—which further leads to the question regarding the “reality” of Thugs: what, exactly, was it? This is something we may never know. I wonder if this is strictly a problem of the lack of sources other than “colonial imaginings” or a problem inherent in the method of deconstruction—which “deconstructs” the elements of the colonizers’ imaginings, but is unable to offer an alternative image.

Van Woerkens’s work also delves into the popular fiction produced in France, and the Hollywood films on Thugs, but these happen to be the weaker sections of this book and the author depends on available literary/film critics and theoreticians. Contemporary scholars consider historical documents also to be “constructs,” but these have essential differences from literary “constructs,” which in turn also differ from audiovisual representations, and necessitate different methodological tools.

The title of the book *The Strangled Traveler* (the same in original) is misleading—as the book is certainly not about the *travelers* strangled by the Thugs, about whom information is nearly impossible. Ironically, it plays on the same attractive elements—horror and fascination—which were the leitmotiv of the colonial imaginings.

This book has been excellently translated by Catherine Tihanyi and is a pleasure to read.

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NEAR EAST

KURPERSHOEK, P. MARCEL. *Oral Poetry and Narrative From Central Arabia, 4. A Saudi Tribal History: Honour and Faith in the Traditions of the Dawāsir*. Studies in Arabic Literature 17/4. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2002. 1022 pages. Illustrations. Cloth €225.00; US\$261.00. ISBN 90 04 12582 5.

This hefty volume presents the Dawāsir tribe and their valley of Wadi ad-Dawāsir as an integral

part of the history of Najd. It provides an in-depth analysis of the oral traditions and the performers of the abovementioned tribal confederation within the social-cultural-religious-political context. This scholarly work of Kurpershoek is in line with the pioneer works of Saad Sowayan; both aim at presenting the literary oral traditions of the Arabian Peninsula within the context of the social-cultural-folkloric traditions. It is done in a scholarly fashion to research, record, study, and preserve such traditions before they disappear due to the inevitable social changes and trends of modernity. Volume 4 of Kurpershoek's series provides an in-depth understanding of the complexity of the social traditions and also entails a thorough account of the Dawāsīr's folk literature as performed in the local vernacular Arabic.

The author acknowledges that oral narratives and poems contribute to the creation and maintenance of a common culture (10). In the absence of formal historical and literary records, the narrators, poets, artists, oral transmitters, and other intellectuals of such an isolated area provide an alternative to a formal historical account all through their narratives (*ḳalam*) and poetry (*ḡol*) (a form of oral history of the entire community of Wadi ad-Dawāsīr). Otherwise, that history and its related social and moral values may be lost forever. The author confirms this conclusion saying, "None of these factors are mentioned in the chronicles written at the state's center, but their traces have been clearly presented in the Wadi's oral traditions" (14), and "the only source for records of the local view is oral traditions" (15). This literary work does justice to the Bedouins (*baduw*) of that region, who were previously stereotyped, ignored, or marginalized.

The author's "Preface-Introduction" is an eloquent and detailed survey of his ongoing research that took many years, and was occasionally marred by difficulties and interruptions. This introduction refreshes the memory of the reader, provides a useful summary of several critical issues, and guides the reader through the "maze" of the volume. For the most part, the poetry and narratives produced by the poets and narrators of ad-Dawāsīr are a "recycling of traditional narratives and poetry with occasional additions of new materials" (6). This is perhaps what kept this tradition alive for hundreds of years. One could argue that even the most rigid tribal traditions might not be able to indefinitely sustain the blowing winds of change and modernity. Thus it is important, and surely pressing, to safeguard this literary practice and heritage before it diminishes. The literature produced in the social assemblies (*adab al-majlis*), the oral poetry of Arabia (*ash-shi'r an-Nabati*), the Lebanese popular Arabic poems in strophic form (*az-zajal*), the improvised-sung folk poetry of the Palestinians (*ash-shi'r al-murtajal al-mughanna*), and other forms of oral folk traditions commonly practiced in Arabia and improvised in the local spoken Arabic of the region are prone to gradual disintegration. Therefore, the works of Kurpershoek and other scholars who deal with existing (as well as Andalusian and classical) traditions of oral Arabic poetry and folktales produced in the vernacular Arabic are no longer inferior (see list of references below). They represent a significant part of the Arab heritage and the ways of the common people vs. the formal literature produced in the literary (*fus-hā*) Arabic by professional writers and "elite" intellectuals. This volume is an additional testimony to that effect. The only concern about "adab al-majlis," and the oral traditions of the Bedouins of the Dawāsīr is that they are produced by and mostly represent the male composers and their audience. To be fair, researchers need to look for any opportunity to include women's folk literature, even if it is considered by some individuals to be "marginal" or of a "lower standard."

Writing a concise review for this gigantic volume is similar to putting a genie in a tiny bottle. Due to the fact that each chapter is loaded with information dealing with the various aspects of the colorful cultural life, legends, and poetry of the Dawāsīr, I would do injustice to the book by attempting to sum up each chapter individually.

The first part of the book provides a lengthy historical survey and a wealth of information

about the Wahhabi rule, Islam in Wadi ad-Dawāsir, the ongoing struggle between the Bedouins and the Sedentary (*hadar*), the principal religious and political figures and dogmas, and major historic events of the region within the context of the entire peninsula.

In the chapter, "Methods of Research and This Edition," the author offers helpful and detailed information, particularly in his explanations of the various titles used in the book.

The major part of this book is "Text and Translation." It contains over five hundred pages of transliterated and translated texts that initially frustrated the author due to lack of good recording. This is certainly one of the most impressive portions of the entire volume giving the reader insight into the oral literature of the Dawāsir. It includes an ample number of poets and transmitters, who presented the heritage of the Dawāsir, portraying the social, artistic, and aesthetic aspects of the Bedouins' life in that region.

Historically speaking, the majority of Arabists (formerly called Orientalists), as well as native Arab writers who published their academic works in English or other Romance languages used transliteration to present the quoted Arabic texts. This book would have gained extra strength had the author provided the original Arabic texts in Arabic script.

The author provides a lengthy and meticulous glossary, giving careful attention to the details and the depth of the local idioms of the spoken Arabic of ad-Dawāsir; all are cross-referenced to the quoted texts and the cultural context of the narratives and poetry included in this volume. This glossary is almost a dictionary in itself.

In short, this solid academic work represents a remarkable effort of a fully dedicated and able scholar. It is a welcome contribution and addition to the other recent scholarly works in the field of folk and oral literary traditions of the Arab World. It also provides evidence of the endurance of a tolerant foreign researcher, an unbeliever "kafir" who managed to survive in a rigid, sometimes "hostile," but mostly hospitable environment, and produce meaningful research about a group of "faithful believers" (*mu'mineen*) to benefit their culture and to serve the cause of scholarship and humanity. He represents the virtues of genuine scholars, their sacrifice and vision for a more peaceful world.

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