

ARABIA

KURPERSHOEK, P. MARCEL. *Oral Poetry & Narratives from Central Arabia I: The Poetry of ad-Dindān, Bedouin Bard in Southern Najd*. Studies in Arabic Literature Volume 17/1. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994. xxii + 368 pages. Photographs, text and translation, glossary, appendix, references. Cloth Nlg 185,00; US\$105.75; ISBN 90-04-09894-1; ISSN 0169-9903.

In 1989 P. Marcel Kurpershoek, a career diplomat in The Netherlands foreign service who had studied Arabic language and literature at the University of Leiden, was granted permission by Saudi Arabia to extend his stay in the country for the purpose of researching oral traditions among the tribes of central Arabia. He collected the poetry of an aged and proud but nearly penniless bard, nicknamed ad-Dindān, of the Duwasir tribe.

The result is a valuable anthology of thirty-one poems, recited by ad-Dindān during a six-week period. The detailed introduction contains a touching biography of the poet's life, an informative discussion of poetic conventions (especially as these relate to the predominant genre of Arabic poetry, the *qaṣīdah*), and notes on the poet's Bedouin dialect, especially as it affects the scansion of meter and other aspects of versification. A lengthy glossary enhances this book's usefulness as a reference work.

Despite my admiration for the careful and detailed scholarship of this book, I found myself becoming increasingly impatient with some of its underlying assumptions. Note, for example, the author's justification for publishing this book when, as he readily admits, a printed anthology already exists in Arabic (the result of the efforts of Saudi Arabian scholar Abdullah ad-Dōsirī). Kurpershoek noticed discrepancies between this printed text and the versions he collected in the course of recitation — apparently the city-based Abdullah ad-Dōsirī, fearing that the sensibilities of urban, educated readers might be offended by the Bedouin poet's perceived lewdness and irreverence, had altered the poetry accordingly. What Kurpershoek had stumbled upon was a fascinating problem in folklore studies — the "hegemonic" control of print-based literacy over oral tradition. But instead of analyzing this phenomenon, the author feels the need to apologize for it: "One should not forget that it has taken Western enlightenment and liberalism centuries to free its literary expression from the dictates of political or religious and moral authorities" (71). Though perhaps well-intended, this statement smacks of extraordinary condescension, not to mention naiveté where modern Western scholarship is concerned.

But such lost opportunities for innovative research are symptomatic of a scholarship that sees itself as a kind of "salvage" operation, an attempt to rescue an oral tradition from its supposedly destructive encounter with modernization. Kurpershoek's text, however, contains indications that the tradition is not as passive as he assumes it to be. He admits, for example, that "there are signs that it also tries to adapt itself to the new environment [of modernism]" (58). But these signs are never seriously pursued, perhaps because for the tradition to adapt and change in response to historical circumstances would mean for it to betray its "essential" character as a fossil of an archaic classical tradition.

Arabists have persistently investigated Bedouin or tribal traditions on the Peninsula in the (one might say "romantic") hope of shedding light on pre-Islamic or even Biblical times. This might not be objectionable if the assumption were merely that a historical connection exists between the poetic system of ad-Dindān and that of, say, the *mu'allaqat assaba'at*, or "seven pre-Islamic odes" (hanging in the Ka'ba), but so much of this scholarship is "Orientalist" precisely because it assumes that the culture has remained static for a thousand years or more, frozen in time as a result of its isolation from the rest of the world (with which it had to be in contact, presumably, in order to change at all). For example, in the author's opinion ad-Dindān "was a living representative of the same past I was trying to discover . . .

a powerful symbol of a culture that had remained largely unchanged for a thousand years or more but is now rapidly fading" (ix; see also 57 and 58). This assumption about "timelessness" has been called into question by anthropologists and historians studying many societies around the world; it is sad to see so much of Arabian scholarship so out of touch with the new ways of thinking. What is the sort of question that might take us beyond dubious and by now shop-worn assumptions of the "archaicness" of central Arabian Bedouin culture? The question of censorship raised in Kurpershoek's book is one, but there are others. Central Arabia has had a turbulent history from at least the late eighteenth century, when Abdul-Wahhab spread his religious reforms with the help of the ambitious House of Saud — an expansion that reverberated throughout the Peninsula and well beyond. It would be interesting to see how the poetry responded, if at all, to these changing historical contexts. That question may now be answerable in terms of archival scholarship in Saudi Arabia, but it requires the scholar to see poetic traditions not simply as conservators of ancient tradition, but as dynamic entities in dialectical relationship with the forces of history.

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