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SPECIAL ISSUE: ARAB FOLKLORE

Foreword

Southwest Asia—Mesopotamia, the Levant, and the Arabian Peninsula—possesses cultural traditions of great richness, diversity, and historical depth. Embedded in the cultural mainstream of these regions one finds hints of foreign customs, strands of unusual beliefs, and relics of the ancient past.

In Southwest Asia, as in the ancient world generally, there are two aspects of culture: the folkloric/popular aspect, which permeates the normal, daily activities of the common man; and the official/elitist aspect, which is fostered by the bureaucracy, the educational establishment, and the official media. A certain tension always exists between the two aspects, with the elitists taking an ambivalent and often suspicious view of folk culture. Folk culture, it is true, is spontaneous, creative, and resourceful, but it is also ephemeral, unorthodox, and dangerously disintegrative. Great expenditures of energy and money are thus made in an attempt to suppress it and indoctrinate the people in the creeds and dogma of the official culture.

It could be argued, however, that this tension between the popular and official aspects of culture is simply a reflection of the tension between the social classes and the gap that separates the masses from the sources of economic influence and political authority. In other words, the differences separating the official and the folkloric brands of culture may be merely apparent, not categorical or generic, and may disappear under scrutiny. At first glance there appear to be clearly demarcated folkways, well-defined cultural boundaries, and unmistakable

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linguistic diglossia, but with a closer second look the boundaries and demarcations begin to blur and phase into one another. A critical examination of the entire situation shows that elements in one area of culture cannot be explained without taking elements in the other into account. The articles presented in this issue illustrate this interlocking relationship between the official and folkloric.

Arab folk culture has been suppressed and denied by Arab intellectuals and largely ignored by Orientalists and foreign scholars. The amount of serious research in this area is negligible considering the richness and complexity of the field. Virtually no university courses on Arab folklore are offered, and specialized journals are very few both in the Arab world and out of it.

It has generally been assumed that the key to understanding Arab culture lies in the study of its classical heritage. This view is mistaken on at least two accounts: 1) the classical heritage forms only a part of the overall totality—in some cases a manufactured, synthetic part; 2) the classical heritage may be classical only in retrospect, for in olden times the "classical" heritage was often part of the contemporary folk tradition. Hence some of the mysteries of the classical heritage can be unlocked by examining them from an oral, folkloric perspective. We can thereby establish two links between the classical heritage and modern folk culture. Modern folk culture becomes not the antithesis but the natural continuation of the classical heritage, one that takes into account all of the linguistic and other changes to which any living tradition is subject over the years. Along with this are the interlocking relations that connect the two traditions in modern times, as alluded to above. According to this view, whatever scientific progress we make in either of these areas comprises a valuable contribution to our understanding of the other. Academic research and scientific insight thus enable us to bridge the ideological gap separating classical from folk, and thereby resolve the tension between the official and popular aspects of culture. This objective is well served by studies of the sort presented in this special issue.

Space limitations restrict me to this rather staccato explanation of these ideas. I would simply like to point to another possible line of research for folklorists in the Arab world, one that goes beyond the collection and analysis of raw material to an examination of the general intellectual attitude towards folklore material and scholarship. What, for example, are the sociocultural and sociopolitical causes for the pervading uneasiness regarding this field? Are there parallels to this situation anywhere else? How can we trace the links between current folk culture and the classical heritage of the Arab world?

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I would now like to briefly introduce the articles in this issue.

Three of the articles deal with the oral literature of inner and northern Arabia. Bruce Ingham discusses the process of narration, the techniques of the narrators, and the blending of prose and poetry in the Bedouin narrative. Marcel Kurpershoek discusses the process of poetic composition as articulated by the poets themselves in the introductory lines of their poems, and tries to relate the topoi of this theme to the classical tradition. Heikki Palva tackles the problem of the prosodic irregularities that arise when the poems cross dialectal boundaries.

Ḍirgham Sbait's article focuses on poetic dueling at Palestinian weddings, showing how such poetry reflects current social and political issues that are of concern to the contending poets and their audiences. The article by Dan Varisco deals with the traditional star calendars used in highland Yemen to define the seasons and determine the timing of agricultural activities; this article provides a good illustration of the intermeshing of the oral and the literary in Arab culture.

I would like to conclude this introduction by thanking the editorial board of *Asian Folklore Studies* for honoring me with the position of guest editor for this special issue on the folklore and folklife of Southwest Asia. I extend additional thanks to my esteemed colleagues who so graciously responded to my solicitations and contributed the articles presented herein.