



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Folk Literature as an Important Type of Literature: An Investigation of Oral Poetry and Folk Tales in Arabia

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This study delves into the cultural viewpoints that have shaped Arabic folklore and the ways in which folk components have been passed down. To determine how a nation's collective memory responds to outside influences in order to preserve and retrieve folk aspects, this study compiles and analyzes research from folk literature experts throughout the globe on the topic of folk stories' effects on the formation of national identity. Preserving and re-enacting traditional narratives from one's country as a means of protest and self-expression. Arab folklore and poetry reflect a rich cultural history that has shaped numerous historical and cultural factors. Following the arguments put forth by scholars such as Walter J. Ong, William John Thoms, Hardy Campbell, Michael Zwettler, and James Wynbrandt, this study delves into the transmission of folk literature from one generation to another, its significant role in transmitting the nation's experience, and the relevance of these genres to modern life. Zamil and sung poetry are the two most interesting forms of oral poetry. The study's new standards for studying a country's diverse heritage as a result of contact with different civilizations are much needed.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Literature serves several purposes via the various forms it takes. Of course, this covers both the written and unwritten works of literature from all countries, since all kinds of literature fall under this broad category. The goals of folk literature include societal transformation and personal development via the dissemination of spiritual delight, beautiful expressions, wisdom, and knowledge. Additionally, this literary style serves a vast array of national and regional purposes. William R. Bascom argues that folk literature "works as an instructional tool in the transmission of religious, social, political, and economic institutions from one generation to another" (1953:284). Folklore differs from other forms of literature in that it does not have a tangible form, like text, which is inherent to oral literature. The two discourses are distinguished in a more general sense by Walter J. Ong, who calls folklore "Oral structures" that "often look to pragmatics" while "[c]hirographic structures look more to syntactic" in written discourse (Anon 25).

The cultural masterpiece of ancient countries, which allowed for the transfer of knowledge from one generation to another, includes oral folk components. In places where people were interested in learning about their history "as a subject reflected of national events, resulting in a catalog of local occurrence" (Hobbs. 4), this literary style helped bring enlightenment. Tales, oral poetry, rituals, myths, legends, fairy tales, anecdotes, stories, wisdom, and a great deal more fall outside of this vast folk genre but are nevertheless an important part of literary legacy. For Benjamin A. Botkin (1938),

folklore "is a body of traditional beliefs, customs, and expressions, handed down largely by words of mouth and circulating chiefly outside of commercial and academic means of communication and instruction" (1). The "unofficial, non-institutional" nature of folk literature as a cultural artifact and its role in passing down oral "knowledge, understandings, values, attitudes, assumptions, feelings, and beliefs" set it apart from other literary forms (Brunvand. 20). Folk forms, with their varied degrees of complexity, have a commonality with all kinds of literature: the recounting of cultural tales. Folk literature has always been and will always be an integral part of literature and a significant part of any nation's cultural heritage and sense of self. In addition to being a cultural circulation mechanism that helps keep traditions alive in the face of challenges like colonialism, cultural and political hegemony, and other outside influences, it serves as a wellspring for nationalism.

Activities with similar cultural aspects are known as folk elements and are present in all civilizations. The parallels in substance and function between various genres have been shown by comparative research. "Everyone who tells a story shapes it to their tongue and to their mouth, and every listener shapes it to his ear" (viii), says Lester Julius, an expert in cross-cultural communication. Similar to how folk literature in one culture may "give people a way of communicating with each other about each other's fears, hopes, dreams, fantasies, giving their explanations of why the world is the way it is" (vii), this function is widespread across cultures. William Bascom, a renowned expert in cultural studies and Yoruba culture in particular, examined the function of folklore writing in his 1953 book *Anthropology. Folk components*, in his view, fulfill double duty as a teaching tool for the transfer of religious, social, political, and economic institutions from one generation to the next and as a means of sanitizing and validating these institutions (284). Amusement, cultural validation, instruction, and sustaining conformance to recognized patterns of behavior are the four purposes of folklore that Bascom describes in his renowned and later work, *Four Purposes of Folklore* (1954) (339). Folk legacy, which has been shaped by the accumulation of human experience and interactions over many years, is polished and cleaned up via the transmission of the necessary components so that subsequent generations may identify what works for them.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAME

British antiquarian William John Thoms, who was among the first to examine this subfield of literature, coined the term "folklore" in August 1846 to describe the field, which had been elusive, defined, and redefined for decades. Worldwide, academics have been studying folklore for some time, but not under this name. They have tried to classify it using terms like "popular antiquities," "popular literature," "oral sayings," "oral traditions," etc., but no one has been able to settle on a single name. William Thomas, however, was the one who first used the word "folklore" to describe this emerging literary subgenre. While Thoms' primary occupation was that of a government clerk at Chelsea Hospital and then of a Deputy Librarian in the House of Lords, in his spare time he began to research what he termed "onerous official duties" by delving into folklore, traditions, superstitions, and past legends. 'Folklore' he scrawled on the description he sent to his friend G. L. Gomme in 1846, catapulting him to notable prominence in a field he had never experienced before.

If you would fain know more

Of him whose Photo here is

He coined the word Folk-Lore

And started Notes & Queries (Dundes. 10)

In different settings and with different characters, different literary methods shine. This broad and inclusive category encompasses all forms of literature, including folk literature that is not part of official records. The purpose of folk literature is to entertain, educate, and beautify the human condition in order to bring about positive social change, intellectual advancement, and personal growth. National folk literature, according to one description, "serves to sanction and validate religious, social, political, and economic institutions" and "to play an important role as an educative device in their transmission from one generation to another" (Bascom 284). The fact that folklore is not a physical text is what distinguishes it from other literary genres. Ong claims that in folk

literature, "Oral structures" "often look to pragmatics," but in written language, "[c] hirographic structures look more to syntactic" (37).

Al-Shear al-Nabati, or oral poetry, is the most well-liked kind of poetry in Arabia. "Nabati has served to communicate and commemorate events, including issues related to tribal territories, watering holes, grievances, battles, and large and small matters" (Urkevich 16), and it remained oral for extended periods. Poems of this kind were popular in pre-Islamic Arabia and dealt with everything from love and praise to strife and war. Brand new Nabati music is being composed all the time. Nabati music often begins with a single line, accompanied by drums and the sword dance of the group. In contrast, the solo dance takes place in a more relaxed environment, with the tribespeople assembling to watch the dancer recite the opening couplet. The Nabati poetry's musical accompaniment features the traditional Bedouin string instrument, the Rabbah, which is similar to the oud and lute but played with a bow. Among the many roles that poetry has had in Bedouin culture, some of the most important include conveying ideas and emotions, facilitating social interaction, and enhancing traditional practices like dance and fighting.

Folk literature, what is it, and where does it come from? The idea of "folklore" is more complicated than it first seems. From the first systematic study of folklore—which did not use this term—onwards, investigations have failed to provide a clear and established definition of folklore, despite the term's growing importance. The first person to investigate this matter was William John Thoms (1802–1885), long before the word was coined. Poet, musician, magician, and chronicler Thoms (British writer and editor of *Folklore*) set out to study the long-lost oral traditions of his people. He was bewildered by the fact that the same corpus of literature might be referred to by many names: "oral sayings," "oral traditions," "traditional art," "the lore of the people," etc., so he set out to find a more straightforward title. Thoms, despite not being a folklorist and not having written much in the subject, became famous in the history of traditional literature for researching numerous subjects in the writings of Chaucer, Jeremiads, and others. He was a government clerk with a heavy workload. He first used the word "folklore" to name this kind of literature.

Spiritual enlightenment, entertainment, beauty, broadening one's perspectives, character development, and mental refinement are all goals of telling folk stories as literature (Altwaiji, 2019; 2020; 2023). Folklore is an alternative form of expression that stimulates us by tackling social issues at home and the cultural concerns of immigrants; it is also a field of study in the social sciences and the humanities. The study of folklore as a literary discipline also requires an appreciation for the unique cultural significance of each folkloric element. Therefore, the idea of folklore became more malleable as different forms fulfilled different functions. Folklore is a kind of literature that anthropologists examine for its social effects. Cultural factors, nevertheless, are what literary critics and academics see (Ben-Amos 3). Anthropologists and critics who are also folklorists have opted to work alone rather than collaborate, despite the fact that their approaches to folklore are complementary.

### **Major influences in Arabia**

The Bedouin oral tradition, which encompasses storytelling and poetry, is built upon the foundation of desert and Islamic tales, sometimes expressed in poetic form; this synthesis of traditions and Islamic beliefs has been reinforced via interaction with various cultures, and the result is Arabic folklore. Nevertheless, there is a lack of documentation about these features (Ham, Shams, & Madden 38). Folk customs have their origins in things like music, oral poetry, falconry, horse racing, camel racing, and many more. This examination will first examine the many different factors that have contributed to the dissemination of the distinctive mix of traditions in the Arab world, before moving on to examine the influence of Islam on this rich folk heritage.

Arabia had continuous, direct interaction with more advanced nations for many centuries, primarily due to trade. As a result of these interactions, traditional Arabic practices were more integrated into contemporary Arabic society. Similarly, Arabic folklore has been greatly influenced by the desert-dwelling Bedouins. Camel racing and falconry, two ancient Bedouin traditions, are now part of Arabic

culture. These factors, along with others like societal stability across time and international openness, have led to a variety of folkloric traditions.

While the Arab Peninsula was experiencing its golden age in the sixth and seventh centuries, Arabic was the *de jure* language of choice. Arabian poets "were the perfect speakers in the history of the standard Arabic language" and "characterized by epic tales, heart-rending poetry, and eloquent prose" (Iqbal & Saifullah, 1999). The Arabic language flourished and reached perfection with the revelation of the Quran in the seventh century, at which point it "became the model for the classical language" (Yushmanov 4). According to several scholars who have researched the Arabic language and its history, the Quran had a significant role in the development of the language during its golden phase in the 7th century. This contributed to the Arabic language's increased vitality. "Nomads and desert dwellers developed the Arabic language, and they improved its appearance" (Gholitabar & Kamal 28). Thanks to the Quran's linguistic influence and the pre-Islamic importance of the spoken word, poetry flourished throughout an unmatched golden period of Arabic literature.

Islam has been the most influential religion in modern Arab history, shaping morality, society, and politics. Since Islam flourished, Islamic ceremonies have been deeply embedded in many communities' folklore, music, and traditions. Furthermore, Islam embodies cultural heritage, which is the wellspring from which the nation's laws, morals, and principles were fashioned. Thus, the religious heritage of an Arab nation may be linked to its folk literature, cultural practices, and contemporary Arab identity.

### **Folkloric poetry or nabati poetry (*Zamil*)**

*Zamil*, the biggest folklore pearl in Arabic, is an oral poetry form with roots among the country's tribal and nomadic populations. "The bulk of classical Arabic poetry is composed in the *Zamil* style... *Zamil* fulfills various purposes throughout history... Initially, it's a means of highlighting and reinforcing fundamental principles regarding coexistence" (Ibrahim 9). In classic Arabic literature, *Zamil* stands head and shoulders above the others. Arabic cultural practices have had a profound impact on poetry, a highly expressive literary genre, which has always played an important role in Arab cultural life:

The nomads of the Arabian Peninsula regarded poetry as the pinnacle of artistic expression. Stories, frequently in the form of poetry, were told from one generation to the next, passing on accounts of individual bravery and tribe victories. The Bedouins passed on their culture via song and poetry (Janin & Margaret 98).

Nomadic Bedouins from the deserts, who were always moving in search of water and pasture, included Arab *Zamil* in their oral tradition. Bedouins used to gather in the desert on a regular basis to hear poets recite poems that touched on their heritage and culture. Poets in Arabia regularly competed in competitions to see who could compose the most perfect poetry. They took great pride in their work and were famous for its high quality. According to Zwettler, "Arab poetry survived via generations of recitations in the oral tradition," which aligns with the present hypotheses of the spread of *Zamil*. The Arabs had a term for poets who remembered numerous songs; they called them *Rawis* (14). This strengthened and trained the memory to an unparalleled degree. Before Islam came into the picture, tribes would utilize poetry to document their past, present, and future, and this tradition lasted until the early 1900s. A poet is an esteemed community member who personifies the strength and courage of their people.

Being a poet was a position of immense prestige... Arab poets were so highly valued that when one debuted in a tribe, people from neighboring tribes would go to congratulate the newcomers. In addition, he recorded heroic acts for posterity and spread their renown across the ages. (Janin and Margaret 98)

*Zamil* poetry, also known as *al-Shear al-Nabati*, Arabic oral poetry is quite popular. Even though it "had no written history until the mid-twentieth century, nabati has served to communicate and commemorate events, including issues related to tribal territories, watering holes, grievances,

battles, and large and small matters" (Urkevich 16), the Nabati language was largely spoken for a long time. Pre-Islamic Arabia was a fertile ground for this poetic style, which dealt with everything from love and praise to strife and bloodshed. Brand new Nabati music is being composed all the time. Nabati music often begins with a single line, accompanied by drums and the sword dance of the group. In contrast, the solo dance takes place in a more relaxed environment, with the tribespeople assembling to watch the dancer recite the opening couplet. The Nabati poetry's musical accompaniment features the traditional Bedouin string instrument, the Rabbah, which is similar to the oud and lute but played with a bow. Among the many roles that poetry has had in Bedouin culture, some of the most important include conveying ideas and emotions, facilitating social interaction, and enhancing traditional practices like dance and fighting.

## Poetry

Bedouins, a nomadic population hailing from the Arab Peninsula who farmed, fished, and scuba-dived for pearls, had a significant role in the tribal areas' musical poetry development in Arabic. The lyrical music of the Bedouin and other nomadic peoples sheds light on their bygone ways of existence. Economies that interacted with Arab urban areas and had significant contacts with Africa and India also had historical impacts. So, Arabia gave rise to a distinct musical style that draws heavily on Indian, African, and Mesopotamian traditions.

The earliest sung voice is rhythmical poetry, also known as al-shi'ir al-nabati, which has been extensively practiced by Peninsula tribespeople and differs from conventional poetry composed according to Arabic rules of language. Poems like this are spoken at ceremonies and rituals to honor significant occasions like weddings, celebrate the common man, and show tribal unity. The meter used in this poem is seas, which is pronounced buhur. The "bayt" (tafaelah) structure is characterized by lines that consist of two units and end with the same sound. Every sea has its own unique set of *tafaelah* that poets must follow. Musical poetry existed in two forms up until the 1950s: sawt, which developed in urban areas and is often performed with the oud, a kind of guitar, and a drum, or solo singing without instruments. An oud, sometimes called an al-oud, may have anywhere from five to thirteen strings (Parfitt, 2001). Distinct cultural differences between the Levant and Egypt caused this style of poetry to develop independently. The two Arabic tribes of Aws and Khzraj sang the following lyrics from a well-known historical song poetry upon the arrival of Prophet Mohammed in Medina in 622:

You            the            white            moon            ...            Rising            over            us  
We are grateful to God ... And we will remain so

You    are    the    merciful    messenger    ...    We    are    the    obedient  
You gave Medina honor ... You are Welcome!

National holidays, high school and college graduations, and other similar events still call for this kind of poetry, which is an integral aspect of Arabic folklore. "This general staff performance practice has been taking place for hundreds if not thousands of years" (Urkevich 33), and each of these singing performances are referred to as staff. Drums (tablah) and flutes (oud) provide rhythm and melody to the singer's performances, respectively.

## CONCLUSION

Music and oral poetry are the two most important aspects of Arabian folk culture. The traditional components of poetry and storytelling are deeply ingrained in everyday social activities, even though the nation has benefited much from the succeeding Islamic stable administrations. Throughout the years, Arabic folklorists have compiled a mountain of oral literature on a variety of subjects, shedding light on both ancient and modern social performance. Performances ensured the survival of Arabia's folkloric creations, even if they mostly consisted of poetry and other types of oral folklore. From the pre-Islamic period to the contemporary day, Arabic music, oral poetry, and other types of oral sayings have been the cultural representations that best represent the element of personal elegance and the standard of the tribe's prosperity for the whole civilization.

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