

### 3. ORAL NARRATIVE AS A LITERARY PRODUCT AND HISTORICAL SOURCE

The story of Hidlūl aš-Šwēhri is an example of the oral narrative genre in Arabia called *suwālif* (sing. *sālfih*), a term derived from *salaf*, meaning "to have happened in the past" (a legal precedent is also called *sālfih*). The *suwālif* deal with historical events and biographical or social circumstances connected with the immediate, or remote, past. The relating of *suwālif* is the domain of adult males; just as folktales (*sibāhīn*, sing. *sibhāniyyih* or *sibhūnih*), are the domain of women and children. The ethnic distinction between the generic categories of *sibāhīn* and *suwālif* is the distinction between fiction and history. While *sibāhīn* tell about *jinn* and marvels, *suwālif* relate the deeds of noble men and heroes. *Suwālif* are not to be confused with *suwālīf* (sing. *sūlāfih*) which are less credible and less dignified; i.e. idle talk.

There is no special time of the day or season in the year for narrating *suwālif*, though one would suppose that in the past this activity flourished in the summer, the time when various segments of the tribe would come together, congregate around their tribal wells and start exchanging news (*ʕlūm*). As a common practice, the *suwālif* are usually narrated in the presence of a large assembly of men. For example, in the large multi-poled tent of the tribal chief where men of the tribe gather to sip coffee and hear the latest news on rain, the conditions of desert pastures and intertribal raids. Imagine the scene in our narrative when the Šammari messenger arrives at the tent of ʕGāb al-ʕWāji to warn him about the impending raid by Hāyis al-Gʕeṭ <428ff>. Better yet, picture the scene of the Šammari messenger sent by Hidlūl aš-Šwēhri approaching the tent of Hāyis to deliver the news of Hidlūl's death at the hands of ʕGāb to him <379ff>. The bearer of the news would communicate his report, the news (*ʕlūm*) in the form of a *sālfih*. One is tempted to say that this is how a *sālfih* germinates. It is conceivable that the messenger adds to his report the two

poems by Ršēd ibn Ṭōḥān and Mbērīc at-Tbēnāwi which lament the death of Hiḍlūl and urge vengeance against ḤGāb.

There are no specialists in the narration of *suwālif*, though some are recognized to be better narrators than others. When men come together, they start talking, each taking his turn and contributing to the conversation. The session does not have to be devoted completely to the telling of *suwālif*. To bring home a certain issue or emphasize a certain point, an interlocutor could very well resort to the telling of an illustrative *sālfih*. At times, it is not easy to distinguish between the two activities of narration and conversation. Actually, the verb *ysōlif* simply means "to talk," or "to converse." On the other hand, there are times when an exceptionally gifted and respected narrator dominates the assembly. He assumes the role of performer and the others become his audience. The audience, however, are not mute, passive recipients. The narrator does not hesitate to appeal to members of his audience to vouch for the veracity of his words or to remind him of forgotten names or episodes; to help him patch up his narrative texture. The audience are more than willing volunteers. It is completely in the hands of the audience either to enable the narrator to carry out his narrative to a successful completion or to foil the project from the start. As a matter of fact, should the narrator prove ineffective, a "*coup d'état*" could easily take place with a member of the audience taking over and assuming the narrator's role (7).

In a *sālfih*, the narrator usually perceives himself as a link in a chain of trusted oral transmitters <6>. He tries to project himself as a faithful conveyor of what he has seen or what he has heard. Thus, the formulas *wallāh al-Ṣaḍīm ya-r-rabiṣ innuh šōfi b-ṣēni* or *samṣi b-idni* ("I swear by the Great Lord, dear comrades, this is what I saw with my very own eyes" or ". . . what I heard with my very own ears"). The transmittor might appeal to his source, authority, either by citing the name of a specific person <566> or by appealing to a class of specialists <2,5>. But in most instances, the transmittor simply invokes the traditional formula *yigūlūn* ("they say") <102,517,518,531,531>, or *yigūl* ("it is said") <215,452, 453> (cf. classical Arabic, *yuqāl* ).

Usually, a respected transmittor would not volunteer to narrate lest he risk demeaning his art and jeopardizing his trustworthiness. Before starting to narrate, he must be asked and coaxed by his audience. In this way, he establishes his worth and his authority among the audience who would then imbibe his every word. An experienced narrator would not tell his narrative to any audience. Rather the audience must consist of well-bred connoisseurs who know the etiquette of listening to *suwālif* well and who can savor the deeds and words of worthy men (*kalām ar-rjāl*). One always refrains from telling *suwālif* to uncouth churls (*ad-dhūš*) who cannot fathom the profound significance of the narratives. The saying goes *as-suwālif ma tiṣraḍ Sala ġēr ahalha* ("as-swālif are not to be presented to those who are unworthy of them"). It is hard even for the most gifted *raconteur* to tell a story by simply being asked to do so. A narrator is inspired to perform only when he is surrounded by an assembly of appreciative and discerning audience; especially in the presence of other outstanding performers who refresh his memory by their accounts and stir him to perform, for *as-suwālif tijīb as-suwālif* "stories bring to mind other stories".

A *sālfih*, unlike a poem, a folktale, or any other work of fiction, has no moment of inception. It is never conceived and created full-blown at a moment of inspiration because the events which make up its episodes are the actual events which happen in real life and, thus, take time to take shape and be actualized. These may span the entire life of an individual and beyond, as in the story of Hidlūl aš-Šwēhri. Each event in the life of an individual or group constitutes an episode which is the kernel for an independent *sālfih*. As time goes by, such events accumulate. Thus, the episodes associated with them also accumulate and cluster together to form a longer *sālfih*.

While an event is in progress and right after it happens, everybody talks about it in a news-like fashion. At this stage, its linguistic form is not important. What is important is the information it contains – the report. Through the passing of time, news (*aḷ-ṣlūm*) becomes history (*suwālif*). After gathering all the

information about the event, after gauging public opinion towards it, skillful oral performers start the process of transforming history into poetic versions of what happened. These versions begin to take an artistic shape (8). Artistic form is essential in sustaining public interest in past events and propagating them through time and space. It gives symbolic significance to an event and helps to make it memorable. It is for this very reason that non-literate societies are careful to report important events in poetry (9).

Also, unlike a folktale or other works of fiction, the *sālfih* is discursive and loosely structured with no fixed beginning or end. It usually consists of several episodes which the narrator weaves together in a clustered fashion as he goes along. He does not necessarily adhere to any predetermined order. There is no established sequence in which the episodes must follow one another. Chronological order is not always observed. Once the narrative begins, it can be developed in any of several possible directions, depending on the performance context, the reaction of the audience, and the narrator's skill, memory and personal disposition. A small detail, a tangential remark, a digression could easily be developed into a full-blown episode.

The ethnic technical term *as-suwālif ba-t-tfiṭṭin* <402> gives us an inside view of the native conception of the mechanics of oral narration. It shows that, besides the logical and chronological arrangement, the sequence of narration is also governed by the process of remembering; as the various incidents and episodes come into one's memory, as one remembers, one narrates. *as-suwālif ba-t-tfiṭṭin* is said by a narrator when he suddenly remembers an episode or an incident which he should have mentioned before.

A gifted narrator might entertain his audience for an entire evening, wandering over a wide range of interrelated incidents, and it would be almost impossible for a listener to determine where one narrative ended and the other began, or whether the whole thing constituted one, single narrative.

For example, the story of Hidlūl aš-Šwēhri starts with the incident that triggered the dispute between him and ibn Gdūr and

ends with the killing of ʿGāb. But, it could just as well have started with how ibn Gdūr became the chief of as-Swēd or how he obtained the *xāwih* of aš-Šarārāt. By the same token, the story could continue to relate how Hāyis al-Gʿeṭ was killed by Ġnēm ar-Ribbiḍa and then how Ġnēm in turn was slain by Miṭni ibn Šrēm from ʿAbdih. In fact, the story could have been expanded to include the whole history of the conflict between ʿAnazah and Šammar, or it could have been contracted to include only the Kihlih raid. Each narrator has his own style of constructing the story. One narrator might develop an episode more fully, while other narrators might choose to mention it in passing or neglect it altogether.

The narration of a *sālfih* is not a recital. It is a creative process. The linear stringing of its episodes and the establishment of connections between its events is complex and trying. The task is made more difficult by the fact that various events are intertwined like a grid, forming a complex network of episodes interconnected in a crisscross fashion. Actually, a long narrative is a cluster of smaller narratives which are imbedded and interlinked with each other. The swarming of the various narratives to the narrator's mind as he starts, and the disentanglement of the various episodes as they come in the way of one another and crowd in his breast "*tidāḥam b-ṣadruḥ*" can be likened to the flocking of thirsty camels to the drinking-trough at a water well, or as they say "*as-suwālif tirid*". Only a competent and experienced herdsman can water the jostling camels in an orderly way. By analogy, only a skillful narrator can tell an extended, complex narrative in a coherent linear fashion. At times, stories come in the way of one another and the narrator may find himself compelled to suspend an ongoing story in the middle to tell a different one. This situation is expressed by the saying *ḥālat sālfitin dūn sālfih*. This is because narratives are plentiful and interconnected (*as-suwālif tiwilitin ṣarīḍih* <2,3>).

Memory, eloquence and the ability to gauge audience reaction are the necessary qualifications of a gifted narrator. Memory is essential for the storing of names of persons, places, lineages and

other kinds of information, not to mention poetic lines, polished idioms, formulaic phrases, and other literary devices which function as canons of taste and enter into the narrative to give it grace and elegance. An eloquent narrator makes proper use of such oral stylistic devices in articulating a coherent narrative which appeals to the artistic sensibilities of his audience. To maintain the interest of his audience, a narrator must possess the ability to sense listeners' reactions and arrange the scenario of his narrative in a way befitting the performance context. He might also inject life into the characters of his narrative by putting words in their mouths and having them give speeches and engage in dialogues. The story of Hiḍlūl aš-Šwēhri is sprinkled throughout with long speeches and extended dialogues, such as the dialogue between Hiḍlūl and ibn Gdūr or that between him and ʿGāb al-ʿWāji. These are not necessarily the exact words uttered by the characters. They are simulated by the narrators to express the intentions and the motivations of the characters, and to move the narrative action in a dramatic and engaging manner. Moreover, the narrator resorts to such simulated speeches in order to express in an indirect way his sentiment towards persons and events and thus exercise an emotional influence over his audience. Actually, conversations and speeches put in the mouth of a character by a narrator may tell us more about the narrator than the character. Take as an example the way Mašcān aš-Šarḡi tells Siʿdūn al-ʿWāji about the death of his two sons, ʿGāb and Hjāb <555-556>. The narrator makes him deliver the news with malice instead of condolences, which is most unlikely. It is almost certain that the gloating words used by Mašcān are put in his mouth to express the joy and pride of the narrator over the killing of ʿGāb. This is, of course, not to deny that certain utterances can be attributed directly to the characters. They could have been memorized and passed on because of their own special significance, literary or historical. This can be determined by context and frequency of occurrence. An utterance which keeps appearing in the same narrative slot and in the same form throughout the different versions is almost certain to be the exact one uttered by the character to whom it is attributed.

The narration of *suwālif* is frequently interspersed with poetic recitations. A poem is considered to be a document that perpetuates an event and proves that it happened. A poem is a guarantee against denial or wrong attribution of a *sālfih*. Each group is anxious to claim for itself every *sālfih* that celebrates a heroic act or a noble deed. Disputes over such matters are usually settled by appealing to the poem which documents the incident. Such a poem is said to be like a brand that protects a camel from being lost or mixed up with the herd belonging to another man. An event which is not recorded in poetry is easily effaced from public memory.

The value of oral poetry as a historical record among illiterate people such as the Arabians cannot be overestimated. However, poetry is a work of art before it is a factual report of historical events. Instead of giving a detailed account of what happened, a poem only makes vague allusions and cryptic references to the events themselves (10). To illuminate these allusions and put the poem in its proper social and historical context, the reciter spins a *sālfih* around it which outlines to the audience the occasion (*mnāsibih*) and motives behind its composition. When the poem is recited for the first time by its creator or his *rāwi*, the introductory narrative, *sālfih*, may not be necessary because the listeners themselves are likely to be well-informed about, or active participants in, the events celebrated by the poem. Take, for example, the two poems composed by Ḥsēn aḍ-Ḍnēb to celebrate the Kiḥlih raid, i.e., that against aš-Šarārāt and the subsequent killing of the ḌAnazah men at Kiḥlih, as given in the narrative text. Ḥsēn did not have to explain to Hiḍlūl and his comrades the circumstances leading to the composition of the two poems, since they were all participants in the raid and knew exactly what had happened. The more remote the poem becomes in time and space, the more urgent becomes the need for commentaries and background details which are composed in a prose narrative of flexible structure. The *sālfih*, in a sense, is an exegetical commentary on the poem. Thus, the two, *giṣīdih* and *sālfih*, are interdependent; the existence of the one is tied to the other.

Because of this organic interrelatedness, any change in the wording of the poem could trigger a corresponding change in the associated narrative.

We can get a glimpse of this interdependence of poem and narrative by examining the thematic structure of Arabian vernacular poetry. A poem might be addressed to, or composed in honor of, a certain individual who is separated from the poet by great distances. How the poem is to be transmitted from its composer to the intended recipient is generally spelled out in the opening lines of the poem and integrated into it as part of the overall thematic development. If the poet cannot deliver the poem himself, he may entrust the task to a deputy who is described in the poem as an intelligent, alert, bold, articulate and eloquent man who traverses desert wastes on a noble mount to deliver the poetic message. The criteria for choosing the deputy is ability to memorize the poem, and eloquence to present it in a proper light through an appropriate introductory narrative. As described in the introductory lines of many a poem, when the deputy arrives at the place of whoever the poem is intended for, he is served water, coffee and food to allay his thirst and hunger. After this routine hospitality, his fatigue dispelled, the deputy is besieged by questions from the host and assembled guests who are always eager to hear fresh news. At this point and before reciting the poem, the deputy assures the good reception of the poem by highlighting its theme through telling his audience the motivation for the poem's composition.

Even in its original form, the content of a poem is expressed in figurative language with standard literary motifs that have no historical connection to the events alluded to in the narrative. Some narrators, however, take such images and metaphors as facts and impose a literal interpretation upon them (11). Take for example the poem by Falāḥ ibn Faḍīl al-Ġēṭī cited at the end of our narrative. The poet describes the horses of Šammar as being trained to trample upon fallen enemies and kick them with their hooves. In the fourth line, he describes the horse of Mfīz ibn Habdān as a wiry and bold mare that "jumps seven measures."

Narrators take this poetic image to be the factual truth and reiterate it as an actual happening in the part of the narrative describing how the Šammari raiders chased and killed ʿGāb and Hġāb <516>.

This is how a literal interpretation of standard poetic motifs affects the narrative. Of no less consequence is the endeavor by narrators to compose a beautiful and polished prose narrative – a work of art. In his double role as artist and historian, an illiterate composer casts his poetic creation in a memorable form to insure its preservation in public memory. This compels him to resort to preexisting patterns, preconceived motifs, standard formulas, as well as other oral stylistic features and mnemonic devices which might compromise the accuracy of the historical information (12). For instance, in describing the final battle scene in the narrative, we are told that Mfġz ibn Habdān hurled his spear at ʿGāb "with such might that the latter was flung by the thrust from the back of his horse and fell the distance of a rein's length" <513>. This conventional image appears constantly in battle descriptions. Another literary device which has no historical basis is the formula uttered by Hāyis when he saw from a distance the emissary bearing the news of Hidġlūl's death. The minute Hāyis perceives the emissary he senses an evil portent and says to those sitting with him, "Begone, you rider on that gaunt camel yonder. Surely, you are not bearing glad tidings" <381>. It is almost certain that these are not the words of Hāyis because this is a formula which is frequently employed in similar narrative slots. Recurrence of the figure forty in our narrative <49,68,286,408,423> shows that it is not an exact figure but a formulaic number (13).

This tendency to slip from actual events to literary motifs, from the factual to the pictorial, plays an important role in the eventual transformation of oral history into legend. Earthly deeds are exaggerated into epic and super-heroic actions. Other factors contribute to this transformational process. Among them is the oblivion of non-literate people towards remote historical times and their inability to recollect distinctly events of the distant past and arrange them in the proper chronological order. Thus, in the

absence of written records, history and legend intersect and overlap as one goes further back in historical memory. Needless to say, narrators are mostly unaware of the operations of such subtle mechanisms which are intrinsic to the style of oral historical narratives.

It should be obvious that the flexible structure and the unfixed language of the *sālfih* can give rise to the proliferation of versions (14). Every individual narrator has his own loosely arranged version of a *sālfih*, but no two narrators will have identical versions. Even a version by the same narrator will exhibit verbal and stylistic divergences from one performance to the next. The listeners contribute to the shaping of the narrative and to some extent direct its development by asking for missing details and by injecting comments and expressions of approval or disapproval. Audience participation in developing the narrative contributes further to the divergence of one version from another. This divergence is made even more pronounced when the narrators have partisan attitudes towards the events and characters of the narrative (15).

As we have seen in the previous section, versions by narrators from the same tribe who are partisans of the same cause will exhibit differences in details without substantial contradiction. Informants essentially agree on the thematic skeleton and general outline of the story and none would seriously challenge the veracity of the versions related by others. Each of them would be willing to benefit from the others, and, when convinced, to correct a mistake or include a detail missing from his own version. Transmitters may engage in lively discussions concerning the name or genealogy of a certain character or the time of a certain event, each citing the chain of authorities through which he received his information. It is generally conceded that the most reliable information comes from those who are the closest genealogically, spatially and temporally to the characters and events concerned. For example, most of the informants from whom I collected the story of Hidlūl aš-Šwēhri said that Ćan<sup>c</sup>ān was the brother of Hāyis al-G<sup>c</sup>ēṭ and that Hāyis launched a raid against <sup>c</sup>Gāb al-<sup>c</sup>Wāji

immediately after hearing of Hiḍlūl's death. While writing this chapter, I was fortunate to meet Ḥsēn ibn Šibil ibn Mḥammad ibn Naṣṣār ibn Hāyis al-G<sup>c</sup>ēṭ, a direct descendant of Hāyis, and he corrected the information I received from the other informants. He said that Ān<sup>c</sup>ān was the nephew, not the brother, of Hāyis. The father of Ān<sup>c</sup>ān was <sup>c</sup>Abbās. <sup>c</sup>Abbās and Hāyis were the sons of <sup>c</sup>Yādiḥ. Ḥsēn al-G<sup>c</sup>ēṭ also pointed out that it took Hāyis some time to hear of Hiḍlūl's death, and then it took him two years of preparation before launching his raid against <sup>c</sup>Gāb. Hāyis even asked the help of Ṣfūg al-Jarba, but Ṣfūg did not show any enthusiasm for the project. Because of the close genealogical relationship of Ḥsēn to Hāyis, we are justified in assuming that his version is the correct one, especially since it is obvious that Ḥsēn's intention is simply to set the historical record straight, not to glorify his great-grandfather. Here we may ponder for a moment over what the other informants said about Hāyis' answer to the appeal of Hiḍlūl aš-Šwēhri. This might not be an innocent oversight. It might be the result of an unconscious desire to add epic qualities to the narrative and add a flavor of super-heroic boldness to the character of Hāyis. Hyperboles of this sort accumulate as time goes on and as the narrative moves away from its place of origin. Eventually, there comes a point when history is transformed into legend.

We see, then, that versions of the same narrative related by informants who belong to the same group and share the same interests do not necessarily contradict but often complement each other. Contradictory versions arise when the narrative is told by informants with conflicting interests (16). In this case, informants on both sides might very well agree on what had happened, but they would most certainly disagree on how and why it happened. Their conflicting interests and opposing attitudes affect their interpretation of the events and shape their feeling towards the characters. The facts related in the story of Hiḍlūl aš-Šwēhri are not denied by the poets of <sup>c</sup>Anazah. Instead they are given different interpretations. They say, for example, that Hāyis al-G<sup>c</sup>ēṭ did not launch a raid against <sup>c</sup>Anazah in answer to the invocation

of Hidlūl. Rather he was simply looking for camels to plunder, and ʿGāb, along with his brother Hġāb, lead a troop of horse riders to retrieve their looted camels from Hāyis. According to the ʿAnazah version, the troop of horsemen caught up with Hāyis, retrieved their camels, and took the mounts of the Šammari raiding party to boot. While the ʿAnazis were busy dividing the booty, ʿGāb and Hġāb followed Hāyis and his party in hot pursuit. When Hāyis saw ʿGāb and Hġāb alone, separated from their troop, he turned to his men and urged them to kill ʿGāb and Hġāb. By way of encouragement, he incidentally reminded them of the shedding of Hidlūl's blood by ʿGāb (17).

The ʿAnazah informants would also find an explanation for the conduct of ʿDbēb and ibn Nōbān (considered treacherous by Šammari informants) and would find a way to present them in an agreeable light. To turn the story around and make it serve their interests, ʿAnazah informants need not deny the facts. They would simply emphasize certain details and give their own interpretation of what had happened (18). Another strategy they can also resort to is to ignore the story altogether and give a completely different narrative instead in which they have the upper-hand over the Šammar. Generally speaking, a group only perpetuates stories that would serve its own political interests and fulfill a positive psychological and sociological functions for its members.

By no means should this be taken to imply that there is a deliberate attempt on the part of oral narrators to falsify history (any more than learned historians). But, even in a non-literate society, people are keenly aware of the value and power of information. They manipulate it and dispense it only in such a way as to serve their interests. Each group looks at a given situation and evaluates it from its own perspective. Social milieu and vested interests no doubt influence people's perception of reality and the way they process and organize life-experiences and social forces.

Just as it is important to know to which group an informant belongs, it is equally important to know what type of informant he is. Informants differ greatly in their abilities, as well as in the handling of their material. There are those who focus on the

allegorical and moral aspect of a narrative. There are those who focus on entertainment. And there are those who are indiscriminate rhapsodists and do not differentiate between mere tales and serious narratives. On the other hand, some informants are very keen on ascertaining the accuracy of their testimonies and they will make special efforts to check the historical veracity of any narrative before they admit it into their repertory and start telling it to others.

Informants may include professional *rāwis* who collect all sorts of poems and narratives from different sources for the purpose of entertaining amirs and wealthy aristocrats. Some professional *rāwis* do not hesitate to compromise historical accuracy either for artistic effect or in compliance with the bent of their patrons. Information obtained from this type of informant is useful, but it must be scrutinized and cross-checked against the testimony of other informants.

A tribal *rāwi* is very cautious when reciting the history of his tribe, especially to outsiders. He is very careful to give out only such information that would serve tribal interests and present his tribe in a good light. He would hold back any information that deals with internal squabbles, fights over leadership or any other information which would in any way dishonor the tribe, lest he incur the wrath of his kinsmen. Such information might be obtained from sources outside the tribe or from professional *rāwis* possibly induced by handsome gratuities. A tribal *rāwi* is, in a sense, the official spokesman of his tribe. Therefore, he only sings its praises. He is always ready to find excuses and justifications for its faults.

The bit of information concerning why Ḥṣēn ad-Ḍnēb did not accompany Hidlūl aš-Šwēhri on the raid in which the latter was captured and killed is revealing. It shows how different informants handle the same incident in varying ways; each according to his own design. Here Ḥmūd ibn ʿUmrān, in the presence of another principal informant, Xfēj ibn Badhān, says that Ḥṣēn was not available to go with Hidlūl <245-247>. But Firtāj ad-Ḍnēb, the great grandson of Ḥṣēn says that Ḥṣēn and Hidlūl were not on good

terms <248-252>. Why this disparity? Did Ḥmūd really believe that Ḥsēn was not available at the time to go with Hidlūl? Or did he deliberately slight the truth because he thought it improper to tell outsiders that the two characters, who were members of his clan, had a disagreement? Firtāj is a simple old man, while Ḥmūd was younger and more shrewd.

The testimony of an informant is affected by his view of the interviewer and by the performance context. For example, if the interview was conducted in the tent of the chief of the tribe, the informant would most likely praise the lineage of the current chief and ignore mention of any previous chiefs from different lineages. Should the informant perceive the interviewer as being a representative of the government or from TV and radio stations, he would give suitable information that everything was well and harmonious. In compliance with the general policy of fostering national unity and eradicating all traces of past intertribal and interregional discord, informants are very hesitant to talk openly about past hostilities. It takes a great deal of trust and rapport for them to divulge crucial information of that sort.

We need not dwell on the well-known effects of political transformation, religious reform, cultural change and other social forces such as those taking place now in Saudi Arabia that contribute to the neglect and obliteration of the past in popular memory in the absence of written records.