

# *Text and Tales*

Jarich G. Oosten ed.



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**STUDIES IN ORAL TRADITION**

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## CONTENTS

Introduction (Jarich Oosten) . . . . .	5
The tale of the Giant Rice-Kernel and the Cursing Widow (Baas Terwiel) . . .	10
The Ngaju Kaharingan religion. Interaction between oral and written tradition (Sri Tjahjani Kuhnt-Saptodewo) . . . . .	24
But his stripes remain. On the symbolism of the tiger in the oral traditions of Kerinci, Sumatra (Jet Bakels) . . . . .	33
Between myth and ritual among the Karo Batak (North Sumatra, Indonesia) (Juara Rimantha Ginting and Beatriz van der Goes) . . . . .	52
The Bedouin. Oral tradition as a literary product and historical source (Saad A. Sawayan) . . . . .	66
Relevance and significance of the Sunjata epic (Karim Traoré) . . . . .	79
The mother-son and the brother-sister relationships in the Sunjata epic (Ed van Hoven and Jarich Oosten) . . . . .	95
The dynamics of 'Sunjata': Reports about the past in Kela (Mali) (Jan Jansen) . . . . .	107
Violent words and evil actions populate the sky: the creation myths of the Inuit of North-East Canada (Jarich Oosten) . . . . .	116
Bibliography . . . . .	132

# THE BEDOUIN ORAL NARRATIVE AS A LITERARY PRODUCT AND HISTORICAL SOURCE

SAAD A. SOWAYAN

## DEFINITION OF THE GENRE

There is an oral historical narrative genre in Arabia called *sālfih* (pl. *suwālif*) a term derived from the verb *salaf*, meaning 'to have happened in the past' (a legal precedent is also called *sālfih*). The *suwālif* deal with real events and factual 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 *suwālif* (sing. *sūlāfih*) which are less credible and less dignified; i.e. idle talk.

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. 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 (*al-clūm*) 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 the historical event into an artistic product. Artistic form is essential for 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. 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* 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. Each 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 (*tidāham b-ṣadruh*) 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 carīdih*). 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's 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. 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 in the narrative 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's stand than about the personality of the character. 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. Also, the wording of poetic verses that intersperse the narrative are generally fixed.

#### PERFORMANCE OF THE NARRATIVE

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 a nomadic tribe would come together, congregate around their tribal wells and start exchanging news (*clūm*). The bearer of any news would usually communicate his report, the news (*clūm*) in the form of a *sālfih*. One is tempted to say that this is how a *sālfih* germinates. 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.

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.

In a *sālfih*, the narrator usually perceives himself as a link in a chain of trusted oral transmitters. He tries to project himself as a faithful conveyor of what he has seen or what he has heard. Thus, the formulas *wallāh al-cadīm ya-r-rabi* *innuh šōfi b-cēni* or *samci 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 transmitter might appeal to his source, authority, either by citing the name of a specific person or by appealing to a class of specialists. But in most instances, the transmitter simply invokes the traditional formula *yigūlūn* ('they say'), or *yigūl* ('it is said').

Usually, a respected transmitter 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 savour 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 mati'raḍ ʿala gēr ahalha* ('*as-suwālif* 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'.

#### THE ORAL SYNTAX

The style and syntax of the *sālfih* is affected to a great extent by the oral mode of its delivery.

Oral delivery in the presence and full view of an audience allows for much pointing and gesturing on part of the performer. We see only faint traces of this in a transcribed, even recorded, text. Aside from the prevalence of demonstratives, we find gesture words like *hāk* 'like this, so,' *hal-l-lōn* 'in this fashion,' etc. Without ever being present at a performance, we expect appropriate gestures to accompany the utterance of such phrases as *min hān* 'from this side,' *ha-t-ṭūl* 'this long,' *hāda kibruh* 'so big,' *min hna li-hnāk* 'from here to there,' etc. All this is part of the narrator's effort to incorporate the



presence of his audience in the verbal and kinetic structure of his narrative. The narrator is concretely aware of, and completely in touch with his audience. This is exhibited by such interjections as *wallah ya-r-rabic* 'by God, comrades', *wallah ya-jimācih* 'by God, honored assembly.' The incorporation of the audience, as well as the formulaic diction of the *sālfih*, are no more evident than in such terms of address and expressions of courtesy such as *as ya-bu flān* 'father of so and so', *ṭāl cumrak* 'may God give you long life' *sallamk allah* 'may God preserve your life', *bārik allah b-ayyāmik* 'may your days be blessed' etc. Such expressions have no function in the narrative except to cement the rapport between the performer and the recipients of his message. When passing over passages of good or bad fortune, the narrator makes the appropriate supplication to God, extending the benefits of such supplications to himself and to his entire audience. Regardless of how large the audience is, the narrator delivers his *sālfih* using expressions of courtesy and forms of address as if he were talking to one and only one second person; one principal listener might have been the tribal chief in olden days, or the fieldworker in modern times. Perhaps it is not far fetched to think of the principal listener to whom the narrator addresses his words, for whom he performs, so to speak, not so much as a real person but as a postulated idealized abstract listener, a poetic motif like the deputy (*an-nidīb*), the confidant (*an-nidīm*), the blamer (*al-cadūl*), and the rest of the stock characters. In other words, this addressed person is a cognitive paradigm, an image stilled into a frozen verbal fresco. He is an abstract listener existing in the underlying deep structure of the oral narrative event, an event which the performer cannot imagine performing alone. The abstract listener is a component of the minimal dyad of speaker and listener, the necessary number of persons to effect an oral narrative performance.

Through the use of what I call the *-k* pronoun of courtesy, the oral narrative syntax formally projects this minimal dyad which in turn projects the oral nature of the narrative performance. For example, expressions of courtesy such as *ṭāl cumrak* and *sallamk allah* are used only with the masculine singular second person pronominal suffix *-k*, or what the Arab grammarians call *kāf al-muxātabah* (the *-k* pronoun of addressing) and which here I call the *-k* of courtesy. This pronominal suffix is frequently attached to the verbs where it has no apparent meaning or function except to express cognisance of and courtesy to the listener. Such examples constitute evidence for proposing the concept of a postulated, abstract listener existing at the deep structure of the narrative performance and projected into the surface syntax of the narrative language.

Redundancy is one of the most intrinsic and prevalent stylistic features of the *sālfih* and it is manifested in various ways. Overuse and overextension of techniques of disambiguation, disequivocation, and intensification of meaning lead to the proliferation of redundancies in the *sālfih*. One manifestation of redundancy is the doubling of the demonstrative pronoun and the framing of a clause by two identical independent pronouns

referring to the same subject. A somewhat different manifestation of redundancy is the noticeably frequent addition of the independent subject pronoun to the verb even in cases where conjugation and context make it perfectly clear who the subject is. Use of synonyms is yet another manifestation of redundancy. Instead of using synonyms to express the same idea twice, one may do the same by using different syntactic constructions, saying the same thing in different ways.

Redundancies and repetitions function primarily as disambiguators and means of contrast, emphasis and intensification of meaning. But, with overuse and overextension in oral narratives they begin to lose their rhetorical force and power of signification and assume new functions in the narrative process. They become verbal crutches—a part of the formulaic back-up system. When the *sālfih* is transformed from an oral performance to a written text, such verbal crutches are put out of context and out of action. They are not so much part of the narrative content, they are part of the narrative process, the elusive dimension, which defies transcription and translation.

In a fixed, written text, redundancies are just that, redundancies. But in a fleeting oral performance, they offer brief respites for the narrator and his audience to relax their concentration without losing hold of the narrative thread. They serve to facilitate the extempore creative effort of the narrator and, at the same time, to ease the strain on the audience's attention. The narrator saturates his communicative message with redundant symbols to give himself some relief and to give his audience leeway, a latitude to follow clearly through a fast-moving and vanishing oral performance.

#### NARRATIVE AND POETRY

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. 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 its *rdwi*, 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. The more remote the poem becomes in time and place, 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 honour 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 its 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.

#### ORAL HISTORY CRITICISM

The content of a poem is expressed mostly in figurative language with standard literary motifs that have no direct historical connection to the events celebrated by the poem. Some narrators, however, take such images and metaphors as facts and impose a literal interpretation upon them. They take them to be the factual truth and reiterate them in the narrative associated with the poem as actual happenings.

We see then that a literal interpretation of standard poetic motifs affects the narrative. Of no less consequence is the endeavour 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 artistic creation in a memorable form to ensure 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.

Furthermore, there is always the unconscious desire to add epic qualities to the narrative and add a flavour of super-heroic boldness to the characters. 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. The 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. 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.

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.

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. 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 feelings towards the characters. To turn the story around and make it serve their interests, narrators from the opposing side need not deny the facts. They would simply emphasize certain details and give their own interpretation of what had happened. Another strategy they can also resort to is to ignore an unfavourable story altogether and give a completely different one instead in which they have the upper-hand over their adversaries. Generally speaking, a group only perpetuates stories that would serve its own political interests and fulfill 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 facts.

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 *amīrs* 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 dishonour 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 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.

#### ORAL NARRATIVE AS AN ETHNOGRAPHIC SOURCE

Having examined the *sālfih* as a historical document, we now turn to look at it as a repository of ethnographic data on life in the desert.

The *sālfih* is more reliable as an ethnographic source than other genres of oral literature such as epics, legends, myths and folktales. Such fictional genres are made up of literary motifs and themes of universal distribution and of an archetypal nature. Their message is symbolic and allegorical. In order to decode them one must appeal to all sorts of mentalistic and psychological analytic procedures. The content of the *sālfih*, without saying that it is devoid of any symbolic meaning and literary devices, is mainly realistic and direct. The bulk of its message, drawn generally from the practices of the people and the incidents of their daily life, is quite apparent. Its interpretation is less affected by theoretical orientation and differences of opinion.

An intrinsic feature of the *sālfih* is the interpolation of background information, exegetical remarks, graphic details, and depictions of scenes and characters. The infusion of such commentaries, which are superimposed on the narrative thread and interlaced with it, become all the more necessary as one moves away in space and time from its original context. A gifted and experienced narrator can sense to what extent his listeners are removed from the milieu of the narrative, linguistically, culturally, socially and historically. Accordingly, so that the audience might be able to follow the narration, he makes sure to interject the necessary interpolations to clarify archaic expressions, forgotten practices, vanishing institutions and unfamiliar persons and places, though this should not be overdone so as not to lose the thread of the narrative. Such information about ancient heroes and the general conditions of life in the past has its own value and special interest, which, for a keen listener, makes it no less appealing than the plot of the story. For the general audience, the interpolations and the episodes of the narrative bolster one another to fulfill the general function of socialization, enculturation and entertainment. For the researcher, these elements present an artistic portrayal of desert life. From this standpoint the *sālfih* becomes an eloquent expression of the Bedouin's

worldview and an ethnographic reflection of the socio-cultural realities of nomadic existence. The task of poets and *rāwis* is not only to keep a historical record of past events. Of equal importance is the perpetuation in memory of all sorts of useful knowledge, especially traditional values and customs. This is in conformity with the encyclopedic nature of the oral tradition and its function as a model for action and a validation for cultural norms.

Due to the nature of ethnographic material, the *sālfih*, in certain respects, is more reliable as an ethnographic source than it is as a historical source. Historical information constitutes the manifest content of a narrative which is within easy reach of the informant's consciousness and, hence, manipulation. Furthermore, the dramatic development of a long *sālfih* is, in a sense, the unfolding of a series of historical incidents. In order to bridge any gaps in the narrative, a narrator who is primarily concerned with the entertainment value of the *sālfih* might be tempted to fill the gaps with any episode that would suffice. Ethnographic material, on the other hand, does not, for one thing, have an overt literary function in the episodic development of the narrative. Moreover, ethnographic data lies, in part, hidden as the latent content of a narrative. This means that it is not as open to the manipulation of the performer since the discovery of this latent significance calls for resorting to careful analytic procedures. Besides, the general application and universal distribution of a social convention or a cultural norm makes it less amenable to distortion or falsification than a historical incident which is a unique occurrence of a restricted and circumscribed nature. The occurrence of a particular and specific event might be open to question, but manners, customs and modes of living are collective and persistent phenomena adhered to by members of the society as sanctions and beliefs which regulate daily conduct and govern ongoing relationships. In other words, the ethnographic aspects of Bedouin existence are practically timeless and enduring. These aspects are universal among the tribes of Arabia, if not throughout the whole Arabian cultural complex. This means that ethnographic material does not constitute a bone of contention between various tribes. It does not provide a field of action wherein one tribe can claim to have superiority over the other.

Unlike historical content, which deals with tribal conflict, the ethnographic content of the *sālfih* does not in any way, jeopardize national unity and tribal harmony at the present time. By talking about Bedouin customs and practices, informants are not stirring up tribal hostilities. As a consequence, they are not as subjected to the pressures of the various socio-political forces which, in the case of tribal histories, compel them to skew certain details and suppress certain facts at times. On the contrary, throughout the ages, Bedouin life has been associated with the egalitarian and free life of the desert in the minds of the urban population. It has been idealized by the settled aristocracy and regarded with romantic nostalgia as being the pristine, unadulterated cultural stage in its most authentic and genuine form. More than anything, it is this romantic idealization

which one must guard against if one is to avoid blurring the true cultural picture and biasing the ethnographic material.

Ethnographic data culled from the *sālfih* is likely to be more reliable than facts obtained through direct questioning. When people are directly solicited for information about their social institutions and cultural norms, they talk about them in the ideal, not actual, forms, and out of their socio-cultural context. In fact, most of the ethnographic works available on Bedouin institutions talk about them in this static, ideal form. They rarely talk about these social formations in their operative state, or as a means of social control and vehicles for political action utilized by different groups and individuals according to their interpretation and self-interest. Most writers on Bedouin life seem to be oblivious to the crucial role played by rhetorical skills and political maneuvers in the swaying of public attitude and sentiment towards desert codes. How these desert codes are influenced by the shifting power politics of Bedouin society is a question not yet posed by scholars. The ethnographic facts which a *sālfih* contains may, or may not, happen in connection with the characters and incidents in exactly the same way mentioned in the *sālfih*. Whether they did or did not, happen in a particular situation does not diminish their ethnographic and evidential value in any way. It is enough to know that such things can happen and that they are part and parcel of a total, nomadic cultural complex. This is, then, how ethnographic elements in the *sālfih* differ from historical elements.