

## RECENT BOOKS

### A POETIC UNIVERSE: THE *QAŞĪDA* IN MULTI-LINGUAL PERSPECTIVE

*Qasida Poetry in Islamic Africa and Asia*, ed. by Stefan Sperl and Christopher Shackle, Leiden: E.J. Brill (Studies in Arabic literature) 1996, 2 vols; I: *Classical Traditions and Modern Meaning*, II: *Eulogy's Bounty, Meaning's Abundance. An Anthology*.

These two volumes are the outcome of a conference which took place at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London in July 1993. By bringing together the different strands of contemporary research on the *qaşīda* literature in Arabic, Persian and several other languages they seek to provide, probably for the first time, a comprehensive overview of this core *genre* of Islamic cultural expression. It might also be the first time that *qaşīda* poems from the Islamic periphery, written in Arabic but also in other languages like Hausa, Swahili, Urdu or Malay (to mention only a few), are given full coverage along with those belonging to the grand literary traditions in Arabic, Persian, or Ottoman Turkish.

The first volume covers the thematic and regional contributions of the participants of the conference, together with some chapters which were added later. The second volume consists of a commented anthology of the sample poems which were presented and discussed by the authors. It also includes a very substantial introduction by the editors. This describes the evolution of the *qaşīda* as a literary *genre* and attempts to provide a synchronic analysis of its determinants, covering performance practice, themes, motifs, structure and poetic form. This introduction is best read before delving into the

rich content of the two volumes. Based on the various individual contributions, it establishes a very systematic and coherent framework which gives the whole collection a special value for further research.

Perhaps the most important result drawn from the presented material is the close generic relationship between the different *qaṣīda* traditions, so that 'the conclusion is almost inescapable that they represent aspects of a single literary genre' (II, 3). This brings a whole range of not only languages, but also historical periods into a joined literary focus. The generic norm is not restricted to basic formal properties like length, monorhyme, and a single metre. Following concepts mainly developed by Bakhtin and Todorov, editors and contributors describe the *genre* as determined by a set of textual and cultural norms (see below). These constituents are 'not in themselves immutable but are subject to a continuing process of transformation, adaptation and amalgamation' (II, 4). Four distinct normative sets characterize this evolution: 'the pre-Islamic *qasida*, rooted in the ancient Arab tribal code; the panegyric *qasida*, expressing an ideal vision of just Islamic government; the religious *qasida*, imparting different types of commendable religious conduct; and the modern *qasida*, influenced by secular, nationalist, or humanist ideals'. All these types deeply influenced the development of public discourse in many Muslim societies.

The astonishing fact that the pre-Islamic *qaṣīda* with its thoroughly 'pagan' character has remained a core element in the literary canons of religious Islamic learning is discussed several times. Much attention is paid to the *murūʿa* virtues which were adapted to new cultural settings. It might be added that the medieval Christian communities also kept reading Homer and Virgil along with the psalms, deriving most of their basic literary education from the old pagan epics. In the early Arab society of the *amṣār* this attitude was perhaps less religious than cultural. Whereas Arab poetry had clearly diminished in importance under the first caliphs it was revived

by the Umayyads, and the emergence of the Arab 'classics' had perhaps more to do with the Shu<sup>ʿ</sup>ūbiyya onslaught on Arab culture in the early Abbasid period than with the development of religious learning. A spirited defence of the poetic ingenuity of the bedouin Arabs, presented as bordering on divine inspiration, can be found especially in the writings of al-Jāhiz, which bear lasting testimony to this process of cultural self-assertion. Arabic poetry came to be adapted to the growing power and sophistication of the Islamic state. The old motifs and textual norms were adapted to a multitude of different contexts and gained in allusive and intertextual symbolism. A seminal panegyric *qaṣīda* written by Abū Tammām (d. 845) links the description of the beauty of springtime to the divinely inspired guidance of the caliph (II, 11). This can be seen as the starting point of the triumphal career of the courtly panegyric poem. Its most elaborate type became the 'Persianate *qaṣīda*' (including poetry in Persian, Turkish, Kurdish, Pashto and Urdu) which is particularly well covered in the anthology. The imagery of nature, garden and flowers symbolizing the power of the sovereign, and the celebration of the creative union between poet and patron—frequently expressed in highly erotic terms—are both central motifs in this later poetry.

The Arabic religious *qaṣīda* (II, 15ff.) was fully developed mainly from the 12th and 13th centuries onward. Despite the famous early poems praising the Prophet, such as Ka<sup>ʿ</sup>b b. Zuhayr's *Bānat Su<sup>ʿ</sup>ād*, it is a fact that religious themes such as Sufism, eulogies of the Prophet and pious admonition gained popularity and a certain predominance only during that later Sunnī revival which followed the Shi<sup>ʿ</sup>ī cultural and political hegemony. The new poetic trend was clearly connected with the consolidation of organized Sufism and with the growing significance of public preaching which is so well attested for Baghdad since the 11th century. It remains to be discovered how far this new focus on the Prophet was directed against the flowering praise of the rulers, a panegyric that was taking on more and more cosmic dimensions. As in the case of the

*mawlid al-nabī*, a reactive adaptation of Shī'ī patterns of piety may also have played a role in the development of the devotional poetry in Sunnī circles. It was to have tremendous influence on the literary development in Muslim India, but even more so on the Malayan archipelago as well as on Swahili and Hausa poetry in East and West Africa. It seems remarkable that in most of these languages—with the exception of Urdu—the panegyric court *qaṣīda* of the 'Persianate' type was not developed, even in cases where the Iranian epic tradition did find local adaptations. This might perhaps be due to the urban background of the patrons of this kind of religious poetry. The different social settings of the different *qaṣīda* types are in any case significant.

The modern development of the *qaṣīda* since the nineteenth century (II, 28ff.) shows major dramatic changes which were brought about by the challenge of the growing European hegemony. The search for new and more authentic voices led to the emergence of a neoclassicist orientation in Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Urdu. The new poetic idiom was designed to avoid the rhetorical ornament and hyperbolic imagery of the courtly panegyric and frequently again sought inspiration from the early Arabic *qaṣīda*. A strong nationalist sentiment came to dominate the neoclassical poetry, transforming and even violating its code of values and at the same time showing the resilience of the *qaṣīda* as a medium of public expression. The political turn in the development of the Hausa religious *qaṣīda* (with authors like Sa'adu Zungur and others since the fifties) might provide another example of this transformation. Comparable public functions seem to have emerged with the 'modern *qaṣīda*' (*qasidah modéren*) in Indonesia, a highly popular type of Islamic songs which was developed by the new Islamic movements for *da'wa* purposes, and which, by its distinctly Arabic features as well as by its content, serves as an expression of a cultural fusion of Islam and modernity (Bernhard Arps, I, 389-409).

The formal revolutions in Arabic and Turkish poetry which

led to the abandonment of the old meters make the *qaṣīda* ‘an emblem of memory’, an ambiguous symbol of the past. Nevertheless some of the best examples of Arabic free verse, such as al-Sayyāb’s ‘Rain song’ constitute an intense dialogue with the *qaṣīda*. Social criticism, related to the present as well as to history itself, remains a basic element of this dialogue, which also finds its expression among contemporary Turkish and Iranian authors.

From the diachronic survey a considerable number of features come out which together constitute the textual and cultural norms of the *genre* (II, 32ff.). These are brought into a tripartite continuum of ‘core’—‘intermediate’—‘peripheral’ features which are then listed in their relation to performance, moral code, purpose, register, lexicon, motifs, structure, and form (34f.). The moral code focuses on ancient Arabian virtues, on Islamic rulership, and on general Arabo-Islamic morality in its Sunnī form. One wonders, incidentally, about the omission of the Shī‘a from this code. Praise, blame and admonition are listed as the core purposes (*aḡhrāḡ*) of the *genre*. A serious gap can be noticed in the field of love poetry which, at least with some of its exponents like Ibn Zaydūn, clearly belongs to the *qaṣīda genre*. As much of the imagery of the panegyric as well as of the mystic poetry is erotic, love poetry itself would also deserve some accommodation within the generic norms of the *qaṣīda*. That would also give more weight to the personal dimensions of loyalty and allegiance which come out so clearly in several of the contributions. The intricate linkage of the individual and the public can be regarded as another core feature of the *qaṣīda genre* itself.

It is impossible here to do justice to the impressive range of contributions which have informed this seminal introduction. Salma Khadra Jayyusi (I, 1-19) in her introductory chapter takes the development of the modern Arabic free verse movement as a starting point, something which she terms ‘the most radical revolution in the history of Arabic poetry’ (p. 4). Dem-

onstrating the danger of monotony and aesthetic fatigue which has accompanied the new poetry at least as much as the *qaṣīda* itself, she goes on to ask about the reasons for the persistence of the *qaṣīda* form, which despite all criticisms has lost only part of its former magic. She sees the reasons for this persistence in its cyclical, wave-like structure which despite all its strictures always allowed for considerable inventiveness from the side of the poet. The clusters of two-hemistich monorhyme poems could easily be arranged into dynamic climactic sequences for building up and releasing emotional tensions. Jayyusi points to the different revolutionary changes within the history of the *genre* which clearly show its adaptability to new social and cultural developments.

Renate Jacobi (I, 21-34) presents her theory on the origins and development of the *qaṣīda*, which shows it growing out of the earlier monothematic poem (*qitʿa*) and the sequence of *nasīb* and *raḥīl* as its earliest combination. The classical tripartite structure only took shape towards the end of the Jāhili period. This structure was fully developed into a panegyric whole only in the Umayyad period, and according to Jacobi it is rather the Umayyad than the pre-Islamic *qaṣīda* which underlies Ibn Qutayba's famous description of the *qaṣīda* as consisting of *nasīb*, *raḥīl*, and *madīḥ*. Jacobi also stresses the therapeutic function of the old Arabic *qaṣīda* which leads from the description of an emotional crisis to a renewed self-assertion of the author and his group.

The social functions of the panegyric as a means of political allegiance are analyzed by Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych (I, 35-63). Her interpretation is based on Mauss' model of the ritual exchange of gifts which involves mutual obligations of giving, receiving and repaying whereby rank and dignity of both patron and client are vitally at stake. Two poems by al-Mutanabbi serve to demonstrate his shift of allegiance from Sayf al-Dawla to Kāfūr, then his disappointment with and denigration of his second patron which has had such a devastating and lasting effect on the historical image of that otherwise

rather impressive ruler of Egypt. It is an interplay of poetic and political power which underlies the Abbasid panegyric and which makes it 'paradigmatic for all the patron's subjects and clients' (p. 62), reaffirming or denying the allegiance upon which legitimate political power is established. 'What we term "power" with regard to the poetics of ritual efficacy, we will in aesthetic terms call "beauty"'. This would seem to apply to much of the panegyric poetry in the different parts of the Islamic world.

The analysis of the panegyric poem, 'the finest gift of all' (Julie Scott Meisami, I, 144), is developed in an exemplary way in the sections covering the 'Persianate' *qaṣīda* in Persian, Urdu, and Ottoman. In this poetry the court of the ruler is presented as the centre of the whole world. Its favourite image is the garden, at the same time a reflection of Paradise and of the creative power and justice of the king himself. The panegyric here also serves to link Islamic and Iranian traditions of kingship. As Michael Glünz shows (I, 183-203), it was even adapted to the praise of Sufi leaders who had come to wield immense power in the Timurid period. At this period the epithets of the mystical lover were easily transferred even to the rulers themselves.

Mogul and Ottoman court poetry pushed the panegyric imagery even further. The Ottoman examples presented by Walter G. Andrews (I, 281-300) demonstrate the intense competitiveness of that poetical form, which was caused by the endless struggle to win the attention and affection of the ruler. The 'politics of power and the politics of love' which were closely interwoven made an Ottoman panegyric *kasīde* as much a gift from client to patron as an intricate metaphorical play between the nightingale and its rose. In the later periods of imperial decline the politics of poetic allegiance became even more complicated, something which brought the self-consciousness of the poets much more to the open as it had been vis-a-vis all-powerful rulers like Selim or Süleyman in the 16th century.

Iranian, Ottoman and Moghul poetry not only represent

the most refined types of the courtly panegyric. They also provide important examples for the neoclassical reaction that was brought about by the various kinds of confrontation with European political and cultural hegemony. This neoclassicist trend can be found with Namık Kemal and other Young Ottoman poets who created a new rhetoric for important public issues and who frequently sought inspiration from the 'purer' forms of the Arabic *qaṣīda* (Andrews/Kalpaklı, I, 307-14). It finds a stimulating analysis in Christopher Shackle's treatment of the Urdu poet Ḥālī (1837-1914), who was a fervent follower of Sayyid Aḥmad Khān (I, 234ff.). Ḥālī's poetry is remarkable for his idealization at the same time of early Arabic and contemporary English literary norms. Based on a concept of neoclassicism developed by C. Rosen, Shackle stresses the inherently explosive mixture of repression and self-denial which goes with the cult of the 'natural' both in poetry and in music. This mixture makes Ḥālī's poems highly experimental and innovative despite his rigid doctrinal stand. The parallel developments within Arab poetry deserve further discussion even if Shackle himself shows his reservations in this respect (I, 234f., n.29).

John Hunwick's overview of the Arabic *qaṣīda* in West Africa (I, 83-97) remains the only contribution with a focus on the regional Arabic literatures that have been almost entirely neglected in the history of Arabic literature. The West African example shows many characteristics of a religious literature that was mainly developed by religious scholars. Besides a highly developed devotional poetry with its intricate patterns of *takhmīs* and *tarbīʿ*, it nevertheless includes a wide range of topics and forms beyond the purely devotional *qaṣīda*. Local literary developments had their own internal dynamics and were not directly affected by the cultural changes in the Arab heartland. This has made their assessment difficult, and they were all too easily discarded as belonging to that infamous heritage of 'decadence' (*inḥitāt*) which many Arabs were proud to have broken out of. The cultural and sometimes even directly political relevance of

this literature is nevertheless obvious, and its contribution to the emergence of other literary languages (like Hausa, Fulfulde, Swahili and others) was equally crucial.

The attested local literature in Swahili starts toward the end of the eighteenth century with translations of al-Būṣīrī's *Hamziyya* (M.H. Abdulaziz, 1, 412). The fact that the author (Sayyid Aidarus of Lamu) belonged to a local branch of the famous al-°Aydārūs Sayyids of south Arabia testifies to the important role of those Arab families as mediating groups in the cultural life of the East African coast. Another branch of the same lineage was apparently also involved in the writing of Malay poetry as late as in the early 20th century (al-Sayyid Muḥammad b. al-Sayyid Zayn al-°Ābidīn al-°Aydārūs (Idrus), mentioned by Vladimir I. Braginsky, 1, 381). Parallels between Malay, Swahili and even Hausa religious poetry are, however, not restricted to the presence of such august families alone. The strikingly common educational canon, the range of Arabic religious literature and of Islamic legends, stories and motifs that is taken for granted among the authors and their audience and which is constantly referred to in most of the poems, would still require some kind of explanation, perhaps in terms of a generalized pattern of Islamic mass education which had been established by growing interregional contacts in the course of the 17th-18th centuries and which had reached even the most distant regions of the Islamic world.

The steps from leading from a primarily Arabic expression towards writing in Hausa and Fulfulde can be observed in the *jihād* movement of °Uthmān b. Fodiye. The various dimensions of *jihād* poetry which frequently combined religious topics with social criticism and which was of a largely mobilizing character are described by Jean Boyd and Graham Furniss (1, 429-449). The fact that Fulfulde and Hausa had to be equally accounted for in this chapter points to the multilingual setting of the early *jihād* movement in the northern and central parts of Nigeria, which even made use of other languages like Tamasheq, Nupe, and Yoruba. The translation of sermons

and poems became a regular practice. The local Arabic *wa'z* literature of the 17th and 18th centuries was fully adapted to local languages by the preachers and scholars of °Uthmān b. Fodiye's community. The crucial but rather neglected role of his daughter Nana Asma'u in this literary development appears so far without parallels in other comparable Islamic movements.

Whether the *jihād* authors were the first creators of a written literature in Hausa, is still a debatable question, as the authors admit (p. 431, quoting M. Hiskett). Metric poetry based on the Arabic system is indeed attested somewhat earlier. One of the scholars of that period, Shi'tu b. °Abd al-Ra'ūf (d. c. 1834) who lived in Katsina and Yandoto and later went to Zaria, had certainly written his Hausa version of the *Mukhtaṣar Khalīl* before the *jihād*, as he dedicated it to the last Sultan of Katsina. He is also the author of some *wa'z* poetry both in Arabic and Hausa.<sup>1</sup> But it was nevertheless only with the movement of °Uthmān b. Fodiye that this literature became an crucial medium of public discourse in Hausa society. Religious *wa'z* poetry with its didactic and mobilizing qualities continues to function within the political arena of northern Nigeria up to the present day.

It is indeed a wide range of literary forms and topics that has been touched by the *qaṣīda*. Whether its functions can be fully covered by describing the *genre* as a 'discourse on power' which came to be sacralized by Islam (J.C. Bürgel, I, 451-74) might still be open to discussion. As stated above, the pervasive individual expressions of love, loyalty or piety might still call for a more adequate treatment. Power as addressed in the *qaṣīda*, be it royal or divine, political or religious, is not an abstract but a highly personal relationship.

But that is more of an addition than a critique. Both the contributions to the conference and the theoretical framework which was drawn from them by the editors can be regarded

1 About him, M. Hiskett, *A History of Hausa Islamic Verse*, London 1975, 80f., 226f. and *ALA*, II, 368f.

as highly significant steps into a new direction in Islamic studies, which open up new horizons beyond the limits of the prevailing regional and monoliterary perspectives. The image of the ocean, a central topos of the panegyric as well as of the mystical *qaṣīda* literature which is referred to so frequently in both volumes, also evokes the flux and reflux of literary contacts and influences over long periods and vast distances which was characteristic for the evolution of this literary *genre* which is rightly described by the editors as ‘an entire poetic universe’ (II, 1). The collection shows that, despite the enormous dimensions and difficulties of such a comparative approach it can yield very exciting and thought-provoking results.

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