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Doing an Ethnography of Poetry

One of the lasting memories of my childhood is an incident that occurred at the inauguration of John F. Kennedy. Robert Frost was supposed to deliver a poem. He stepped to the microphone and began to read, or was about to read, when disaster struck. I believe that a strong gust of wind blew the piece of paper on which the poem had been written out of Frost's hands and carried it high over the heads of the assembly and out of the reach of the security officers who were scrambling vainly after it. The poem was not heard by those at the inaugural or by the millions of people listening on television. Since the poet had not memorized the poem and had no copy of it in hand, he could not proceed. This accident struck me at the time as of course unfortunate, but with the passing of the years I have come to see it also as supremely ironic.

When I was watching the inauguration, I was just about to leave childhood. Perhaps I identified with the scene more and more deeply as time went on because I saw what happened as symbolic of something that was taking place in myself. As with many school children who learn to love literature, I was first enthralled by the beauty of language in reading verse out loud. Then, as is perhaps also true of many of us, I learned to shift my appreciation from verse to the silent reading of prose, particularly short stories, novels, and drama. But rather than supplement my love of verse, the shift to other forms of literature seemed to supplant it. Some of us continue to read and write poetry, but not the majority. It becomes yet another school exercise, more and more remote from our everyday imaginings, which, like childhood, we outgrow. Perhaps what bothered me about the in-

augural ceremony was a sense of incongruity at finding a poet—a craggy, white-haired old man at that—sharing center stage with the most powerful individual in the world, who happened to be youthful and handsome. The physical contrast embodied the discrepancy these two world-famous figures represented for me. Poetry was child's play, not the business of men, and certainly not the business of presidents.

There is always the suspicion in American culture, and to a lesser extent also European (though not Russian) culture, that political poetry, even in the hands of a master like Frost, can rarely rise above doggerel. A relatively famous American philosopher was once asked by a television interviewer why no great political poems had been composed in English literature. The philosopher did not contradict the assumption of the interviewer. His answer was that literature and politics had two different paymasters and could not mix.

About fifteen years after Kennedy's inauguration I found myself in Saudi Arabia. Again I am watching television, this time in an air-conditioned, prefabricated office in the middle of the capital. The scene: the king (who was Khālid at the time) has disembarked from his plane and is being greeted by a small crowd of well-wishers. In his entourage is his court poet. He holds his highness's attention for at least five minutes with a recitation of a poem. His highness does not seem impatient, and the poet is certainly not bashful or hesitant. The entourage listens respectfully, though I suspect that their interest (if not feigned) is more in the ceremony than in the meaning of the words. What interests me is that poetry should be tolerated, indeed embraced, by these dignitaries as though it were essential to the trappings of power.

I am next in a taxi, which is hopelessly stalled in traffic. To help pass the time, the Bedouin driver begins to recite a poem to himself. I have a hard time making out its meaning, but I think it is on the subject of love. I ask him to stop at a corner kiosk so that I can buy a newspaper, thinking it will provide more accessible entertainment than a poetic recitation, only to find displayed on the front page a text of a new poem about the Israeli-Arab conflict. My destination is the library of the University of Riyadh. As I walk down its corridors, I see public announcements about upcoming poetry recitations and contests.

After many such experiences I began asking myself: to what extent is poetry a key cultural event in this society, a part of its central

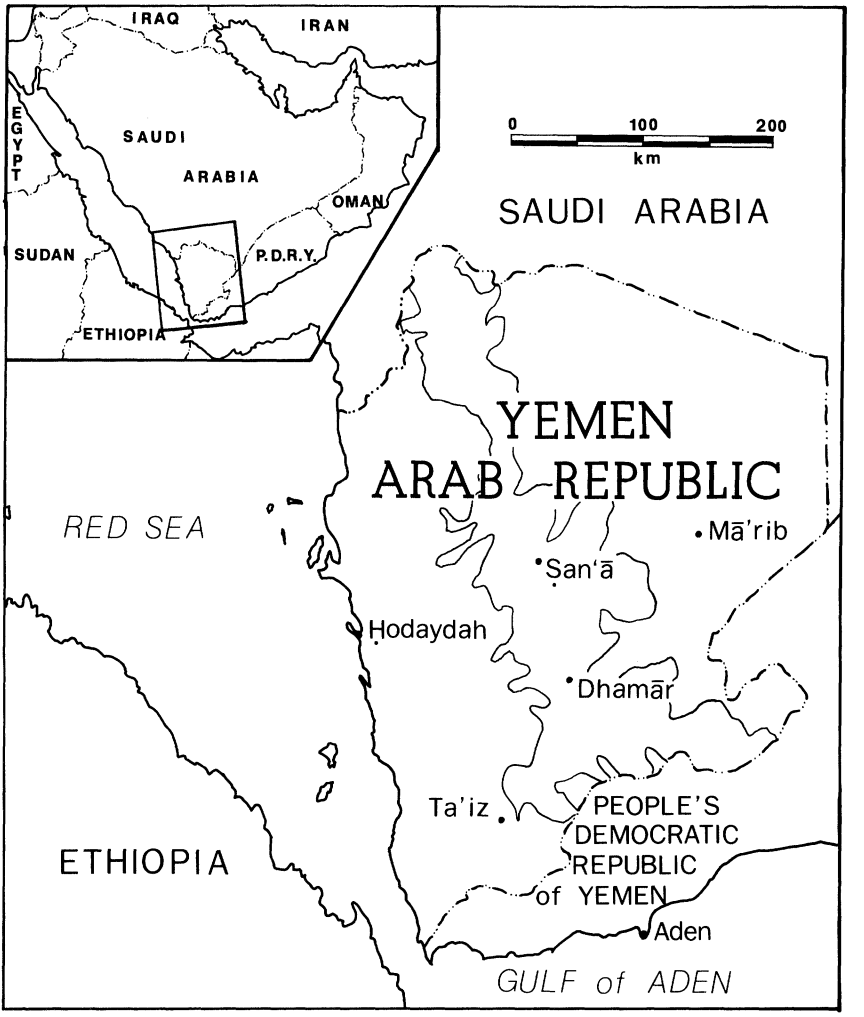
political, social, and religious institutions? To what extent is this poetry entirely different from the poetry I grew up with and learned to ignore?

I spent nearly five years trying to answer that question—in North Yemen, however, not Saudi Arabia. The reasons for transferring to North Yemen (officially the Yemen Arab Republic, or Y.A.R.) were various and complex. Suffice it to say that the two years I spent in Saudi Arabia made me aware of the significance of poetry in the lives of Arabs and provided me with the competence in spoken Arabic needed to study it in depth. After arriving in North Yemen in January 1979, I spent roughly the next three years trying to complete the project I had first envisioned in Saudi Arabia. Twelve months of those three years (from November 1979 through October 1980) I spent doing fieldwork in an eastern region of the country known as Khawlān aṭ-Ṭiyāl, which I had been told was "rich" in oral, and specifically tribal, poetic traditions. The prediction turned out to be truer than I had believed possible.

Khawlān aṭ-Ṭiyāl is a *manṭigah* (region) belonging to the Bakīl Confederation [see Map 2]. In their poetry Khawlānis call their region the "seven tribes," though there is disagreement over which tribes to include in the illustrious roll. The seven most commonly named are Banī Bahlūl, Banī Shadād, Suhmān, al-Yamāniyatēn, Banī Ḍubyān, Banī Jabr, and Banī Sahām. It is not obvious where the territory of one tribe ends and the next begins. Subsections of different tribes usually mix in the same geographic region, and tribal affiliation is not of much consequence anyway except in critical situations such as warfare.

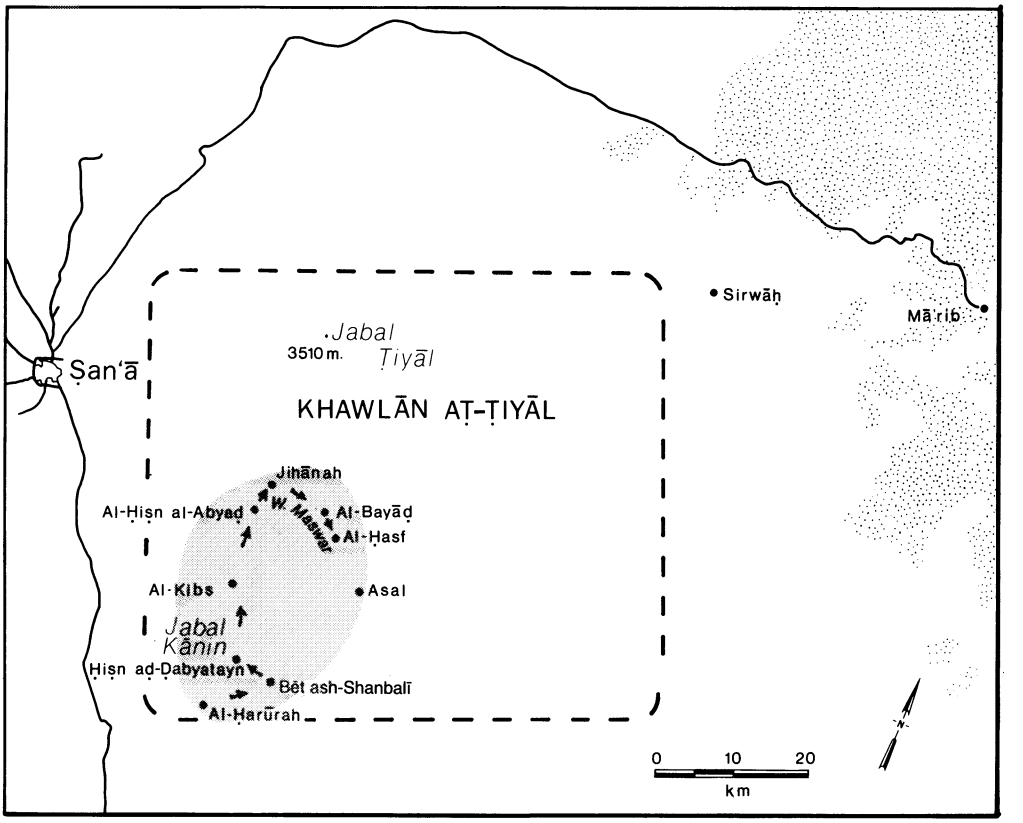
As one might expect in this part of the world, tribal social organization is patrilineal and patrilocal. Preferred marriage is with the patrilineal parallel cousin, though it is difficult to say how often the norm is carried out in practice. Except in the far eastern reaches of the country, tribesmen are sedentary agriculturalists who cultivate the many wadis of highland Yemen with a variety of crops including sorghum, barley, millet, vegetables, grapes, and the lucrative cash crop *gāt* (Catha edulis). Terracing is common, though not as dramatic as in other regions of Yemen. Irrigation is by rain water and well pumps.

Throughout Khawlān are to be found the religious elite known as *sādah* (sg. *sayyid*), who are reputed to be descendants of the Prophet



Map 1. Yemen Arab Republic.

Muḥammad. Though descent is important to their high social status, piety as well as religious and legal training are also essential, for the tribes look to them to solve some of their disputes (such as inheritance) according to the Sharīʿah. Most *sādah* live in one of the *hijrah* villages, a sanctuary set aside for them by the tribes, where they instruct the tribes on the credo and ritual of Islam, maintain a market where tribesmen may congregate without fear of blood feud because



Map 2. Khawlān aṭ-Ṭiyāl. The boundary is only approximate and is represented by a broken line. The shaded region is al-Yamāniyatēn, one of the "seven" tribes. The route of my poetry-collecting trips is marked by arrows.

fighting is off limits there, and preach to the tribes in the Friday sermons. In pre-Republican Yemen (before 1962) the religious elite acted as the administrative arm of the theocratic state and were often in competition with the sheikhs over the governance of the region. Though their political power has been greatly eroded, they still retain enormous spiritual authority and hence indirect political influence.

The other important social group in the area is the servants, who usually live in tribal villages and are known as the *khaddām* (not to be confused with the *'akhdām*).[1] Their origins are less certain, though I will consider some myths about their descent in the next chapter on ideology. They are of low status because they perform various menial

tasks considered too demeaning for tribesmen: butchering meat, circumcising the young boys, cutting hair, acting as masters of ceremonies at weddings, entertaining large gatherings with their drumming and other music-making, delivering messages to other villages, cooking and serving large ceremonial dinners, and so forth. In return for their services, the village households give them a small fraction of their agricultural products or else pay them a lump sum of money. Like the religious elite, they are under the protection of the tribes (each servant family becomes a client of a particular sheikh), but they do not carry weapons. They are not allowed to own tribal land, nor do their sons marry tribal women.

I will have more to say about one kind of servant, the *dōshān* (town crier), later in the book. He figures importantly in the production of tribal poetry, not as the composer of verse—for indeed he is excluded by his low status from taking part—but as a skilled musician who sings the verses of the highly prized *qaṣīdah* before a tribal audience.

The sanctuary in which I settled was located in a richly cultivated wadi. Nevertheless, aside from the grape arbors and fields of the ubiquitous and slightly narcotic *gāt* plant that checkered the flood plain and mountain terraces, there was little other vegetation. Except for a dusty clump of acacia nestled in the corner of some plot of land, nearly all the trees had been cut down for fuel long ago. Rainfall was not plentiful while I was in Yemen, and consequently the earth was desiccated. I was told that in wet years the wadi floor would be flooded in some places over a person's head; wild flowers would shoot up overnight from mountain crevices. At the sun's zenith, however, the hues that met my eyes were pallid and monotonous—mostly beiges, streaks of tan and gray. Only in the early morning and late afternoon light did the colors of the earth return to their deep chocolate browns and vibrant oranges and yellows. As if to offset the drabness of the earth, the sky was a dramatic canopy—alive with brilliant light, only occasionally blotted by dark clouds that massed behind the steep, volcanic mountains. At night the moon and stars were as intense as I suppose them to be anywhere on earth.

It was through this silent, nearly deserted landscape that I wandered alone from the sanctuary to neighboring villages where I hoped to meet poets or attend a wedding at which verse might be composed (see Map 2). The ground was hard and flinty. If one did not watch one's step, one could cut open a toe on a jagged edge; plastic sandals

provided little protection. Had I been able to afford it, I would have hired a car, but I often managed to hitch a ride anyway. Besides, I traveled light, carrying only a small backpack containing a canteen of water, a little food, some small spiral notebooks, my tape recorder, and my camera. If I could find the shepherds' paths that crisscrossed the mountainsides, I could often save time and distance.

When I arrived at my destination, I was greeted hospitably by all except the stray dogs barking madly on the village periphery. I would be led through a cool, dark, and dry interior into the men's sitting room, offered a modest but delicious lunch, some scented and refreshingly cold water, and eventually a cup of tea. Polite inquiries after my health and the health of various of our common acquaintances in the sanctuary having been concluded, the session would begin with a brief interview, some attempt at gathering biographical information, and then a taping of the poet's own selection of verse. Sometimes I would spend the night, if one afternoon session was not sufficient or a big wedding celebration was to be held in the same village the next day.

On Fridays, the Muslim holy day, I did not have to leave the sanctuary in order to meet poets, for they came to it as members of various tribal groups. It was there that I tried to make the acquaintance of the poets. A friend of mine owned a store, and he would invite me to stand by the counter or else sit with him in its dark, musty, and cramped interior, where we loudly sipped our tea and chatted. Whenever a man reputed to be a poet came up to the store front, my friend would introduce me to him, and I would try to carry the ball from there. Sometimes they knew me by reputation or else recognized me from a television interview I did in Ṣanʿā.

That was how I met my closest friend and best consultant for my research project, Muḥammad. It was he who introduced himself, expressing interest in the project and offering to help. We agreed to meet in my house that afternoon, and he showed up at my doorstep with some of his friends—poets all. From that moment Muḥammad was to be indispensable to my project.

To learn the poetic tradition as well as become better acquainted with the devices of poetic composition, I made an effort to memorize individual poems recognized to be masterpieces. When I recited these by heart to poets, they took the project seriously. I also made an effort, even though it proved more than once to be embarrassing, to

join in the chanting and composition of verse in public performances. I began by performing with the chorus in the wedding *bālah.* Linking arms with the young men of the village, I would join them in the circle in the middle of a large hall where the wedding festivities were held and chant with them the refrain line. This task is relatively easy and does not take much skill, though it is strenuous. While thus preoccupied, I could not, of course, tape the performances effectively or for that matter take photographs of the participants. The former duty was carried out by my friend Muḥammad, who soon became more adept than I at controlling the sound level and holding the microphone out of reach of the mischievous little boys who sought to sabotage the recording. Either I had become more confident, owing to a better understanding of poetic composition and delivery, or else I had become inured to my own embarrassment; in any case I threw caution to the winds and attempted one or two of my own lines. I learned more from making mistakes this way—because my friends were only too willing to gently correct me—than I did from listening to hours of tape recordings, and it always won the affection of my audience no matter how bad the verse sounded to their ears.

Had the opportunity presented itself, I would have apprenticed myself to a poet; unfortunately, all the poets with whom I was friendly were either too busy or else lived at too great a distance from my main field site to make such an arrangement practical.

I also initially regretted not being able to settle in a tribal village, for it would have given me a more intimate glimpse of everyday tribal life. But the sanctuary had its advantages. I was able to travel more freely because I was not tied down by specific tribal loyalties, and this freedom afforded me a better comparative perspective on the poetic system than I suspect I would otherwise have had. Then there was the tragedy that occurred to the sanctuary, a tragedy in which I was to be swept up. Ironically, it taught me more about the poetic system than years in a tribal village ever could have. But to understand that event, we have to backtrack a bit and fill in more information concerning Khawlān aṭ-Ṭiyāl.

The leading members of some "sheikhly" houses in Khawlān become chiefs of several villages in a given area. For example, in the territory belonging to al-Yamāniyatēn (see Map 2) there are approximately five major houses vying for this distinction. Not all tribal villages are under the authority of one of these sheikhly houses, for

some maintain their own counsel; nor can it be said that one of these houses is significantly more powerful than the others and acts as a superordinate regional authority. This decentralization of power is characteristic of Khawlān and indeed of the whole Bakīl Confederation (in contrast with its Ḥāshid counterpart). Ever since the death of Sheikh Nājī bin ʿAlī al-Ghādir (1972?) there has not been a *shēkh mashshāyikh* (sheikh of sheikhs) to lead Khawlān and the Bakīl.

Actually, the sheikh is no more than a first among equals (for another view, see Dresch 1984). His responsibilities are to collect taxes for the government, act on behalf of his tribe in matters concerning the state and the confederation, mobilize men of the tribe and lead them into war, and of course solve disputes he is asked to mediate. He gets paid for his services but spends a great deal of his income on the entertainment of guests, an important ceremonial function. Some cynics claim that sheikhs deliberately stir up trouble in the hope of being able to line their pockets with additional revenues earned in the arbitration of disputes, which, if they resolve them, also enhances their reputation; but this would be a shaky strategy at best for acquiring power and maintaining it. Nor is the central state at present in a position to impose its authority over the rebellious tribes, either by threatening a show of force or by buying their loyalties through oil revenues as the Saudi regime has successfully done (though the discovery of oil in North Yemen in 1984 might alter the situation somewhat).

By presenting these facts baldly, I do not want to give the mistaken impression that Khawlānis feel a weak state or a decentralized system of internal sheikhly authority to be disadvantageous. On the contrary: even in tribal disturbances that seemed to threaten the stability and security of the region, the people involved rarely deplored (to me at least) the lack of a strong arm to impose a peace on warring factions. Only in the case of a massive *external* threat might such a step be seriously contemplated (and was actually taken in the Yemeni civil war when Khawlān was invaded by Egyptian forces); otherwise, I was told, "Every tribe in Khawlān wants to depend on itself." In other words, even though the tribes realized that a hierarchy of sheikhs could facilitate their dispute mediation, they preferred their autonomy to the intervention of a potential autocrat and the threat to their freedoms he would surely portend. The relevance of this point to the study of poetry will become clear in a moment.

It so happened that a young *sayyid* man who was visiting his natal

village, the sanctuary in which I was living, stood accused by the tribes of absconding with two young tribal women. A war erupted between the religious elite and the surrounding tribe to which the girls belonged. This event was unprecedented because the religious elite are technically under tribal protection. I was in the sanctuary at the time of the abductions, busily collecting poetry that I began to notice was on the subject of the dispute. I saw outside my window the arrival of mediators, who were chanting verse exhorting the tribe to negotiate with the religious elite. The tribe responded with its own poems explaining why it felt it to be necessary to cleanse the stain on its honor by fighting it out with the sanctuary. This was the first time that I realized how important poetry is as a form of political rhetoric in dispute mediations.

But this use of poetry was not the only surprise. I began to understand too that warfare was far more complicated and subtle than the ethnographic literature on tribal societies in the Middle East had led me to expect.[2] More often than not, Khawlānī tribes tried to avoid exercising a kind of deadly brute force in which blood was spilled and men were killed; rather, they applied symbolic force, or a representation of the "real thing," whose aim was to achieve honor and not necessarily the liquidation of the opponent.

During the sanctuary's "war" with the tribe, *sayyid* marksmen kept watch on the roof of the house in which I was staying. I discovered, to my chagrin, that the house was directly in the line of enemy fire. At one point in the shooting I was summoned to the battlements to fulfill an unusual request: the marksmen wanted me to fix them some tea. One should never underestimate the Yemenis' wry sense of humor, especially their appreciation of the ludicrous, but I thought I had better show my solidarity anyway by brewing a fresh pot. Having heard what wonderful shots the tribesmen were, I crouched below the wall of the roof and inched my way forward apprehensively. Suddenly I noticed the look of nonchalance on my friends' faces and realized that the enemy bullets were missing their targets by a respectful distance of at least two feet. This shooting was no more than a game of violence, and it was explained to me as being necessary in order for the enemy to feel that it had reinstated the honor my village had besmirched. I hasten to add that the Yemenis were fully cognizant of the danger that symbolic force could evolve into a nasty war, but this oc-

curred only when the financial and political stakes were high enough to goad certain troublemakers into fanning the flames of the feud.[3]

Since there is no strongman or central government to impose a peaceful settlement on them, it is imperative that contending parties be brought together to arrive at such a settlement (temporary in many cases) through argument and persuasion. In the absence of coercion and monetary influence, it stands to reason that the exercise of power entails persuasion, and persuasion in turn must be linked to oratory or political rhetoric (Caton 1987b). Burckhardt, the great Swiss traveller in Arabia, articulated this insight most succinctly: "A shaikh, however renowned he may be for bravery, or skill in war, can never expect to possess great influence over his Arabs without the talent for oratory. A Bedouin will not submit to any command, but readily yields to persuasion" (1831, 250). What is at stake is the ability of the sheikh to persuade the opponents to accept mediation; then, once the arguments of the two sides have been heard, he formulates a legal opinion on the case according to the dictates of *'urf* (tribal customary law); finally, he must persuade the sides to accept the final judgment (in which usually both are found somewhat at fault). Throughout this process the sheikh cannot appear to be dictating terms to the parties involved, nor may one or both of these appear to be coercing its opponent or the intermediaries into accepting its position, for such tactics would be tantamount to bullying and hence dishonorable. Each side, including the mediating sheikh (or sheikhs) and other dignitaries, may hope to influence public opinion only by voicing its point of view in the most appealing manner possible.

In such a communicative event it is clear that all kinds of verbal suasion will be exploited by the participants to achieve their ends, a study of which has not yet been attempted but would more than recompense its obvious difficulties with deep insights into political rhetoric. I will be concerned solely with the use of poetry in mediation, laying aside for the moment the crucial questions, Why should poetry be used in this process? and, How is it used? which cannot be satisfactorily answered until we know a lot more about the cultural concepts of poetry. The point I wish to get across here is that the composition of poetry is embedded in an extremely important political process—the dispute mediation—in which power, such as it exists in this system, must be achieved through persuasion. As I have already

admitted, this interpretation has been complicated since the 1960s by the massive arming of the tribes and by economic development; but I believe that it still is basically true of the tribal system, though for how much longer is hard to say.

The significance of this point for the overall study cannot be overemphasized. What I wish consistently to demonstrate is poetry's centrality to the entire sociopolitical and cultural system, but this can only be done if the facts of tribal politics are examined within a theoretical frame that brings into relief this centrality. That is to say, I have argued for a concept of power to be understood essentially in symbolic terms, as persuasion (Caton 1987b); and insofar as this argument is convincing I must try to show that poetry is being used for persuasive purposes in the dispute mediation, a demonstration I will reserve for the chapter on the *zāmil*. But first I will set up an equation between power and a *culturally conceived* means by which to attain it, namely poetry.

A few months after the dispute broke out between the tribe and the religious elite, I had a distressing encounter with national security police, who quite naturally wondered what I, a lone American speaking Arabic, was doing in this politically turbulent region. To their credit, the police investigated my case with considerable kindness and dispatch, permitting me in fact to return to my field site to complete the study. When Muḥammad heard that I had been taken into custody by security police, he waited in the capital until I was released so that we could work together transcribing numerous poetry tapes.

Being held for questioning, though it should not have come as much of a surprise, was traumatic. I was depressed by the thought that my Khawlānī acquaintances must have complained about me or at least set me up to be taken. Perhaps I was naive to think that I could have ever won their trust, but the fact was that it bothered me terribly to realize that I had not. I also had to cope with the anxiety and sense of personal violation I felt when my notes, tapes, and photographs were confiscated, perhaps never to be returned—though in fact they were returned, every last item, and undamaged. Now I was haunted by a different question. Should I return to the same region or not? National Security asked me the same question, hinting that Khawlān was not the best place in which to conduct field research at that time. I could only answer them, and myself, by saying that I had already in-

vested an inordinate amount of time there on this project and that it would take too much time and energy to relocate. Very much wanting and needing a vacation, preferably outside the country, I nevertheless decided against taking one for fear that my time in Yemen was running out or that I might not be readmitted into the country later. These were irrational fears, perhaps, given the way I had been treated by the authorities; but then who was to say that the treatment would be consistent?

I naturally was apprehensive on my first night back in the sanctuary (the meaning of which had by now become deeply ironic). My trust had turned to wariness, my affection to animosity. But I knew that I would have to conceal these feelings if I were to get my neighbors and friends to help me conclude the project. The need for concealment made me remember all the times I had made up things about myself, petty and harmless lies or half-truths every field-worker manufactures in order to make life bearable (for instance, I could not tell them that I am an agnostic or they would have shunned me completely); somehow the present context magnified those falsehoods, and with them my guilt and dislike of myself. I had even lost my enthusiasm for the project, wondering whether it wouldn't be better to return to the United States and do a library dissertation. Then I would be overcome by a certain sadness about the way things had turned out and no doubt also by more self-pity.

The next morning I went into the market as usual. There were no children playing in the street because of the ongoing hostilities with their tribal neighbors. People who knew me well greeted me joyously, though in my present mood I was not able to reciprocate. I was polite but reserved. Eventually the conversation turned to my brush with the law and how sorry people were to hear about it. Embarrassment on their part registered in the inflection of every remark and gesture, embarrassment coupled perhaps with relief that National Security had found me innocent of wrongdoing. One of my closest friends in the sanctuary, a man whose intelligence, charm, and sense of humor I greatly appreciated, invited me to join him and his family for lunch that day. The conviviality and relaxation of that meal put me at ease again—a classic case of breaking bread together reestablishing harmonious relations. I gradually began to feel that my return to the village might be tolerable after all. Ironically, the incident with National Security worked in the project's favor, for people now joyously pro-

claimed, "But you're innocent, you're innocent." Then, as if to make up for their embarrassment at having ever doubted me, they chewed my ear off about poetry, proverbs, and stories until the information was coming in faster than I could record it.

After about eight months in Khawlān I had collected more than enough material to see the general outlines of the poetic system. I spent the remaining four months refining that model before returning to the capital, where I remained for another year. Throughout that period friends from Khawlān, especially Muḥammad, visited me and helped work on the materials we had collected together. In addition, I hired another good friend, Ṭāhā Shamsān, who was more sensitive than most city slickers to the nuances of tribal speech, to help me with the translations. It was a wonderful period in which to review what had been accomplished and what still had to be done: transcribing and translating poetry, compiling and writing up my ethnographic notes on tribal social and political organization, and preparing preliminary drafts of dissertation chapters. In October 1981, after nearly three years in North Yemen and two years in Saudi Arabia, I returned to the United States.

When I was in the field collecting poems, I felt there to be two distinct but interdependent processes of appropriation at work. Taking down a poem is only one moment in a long chain of *reported* speech—from the poet to the reciter, from the reciter to the ethnographer, and from the ethnographer to the reader—and in each instance of reporting the speech is remolded and appropriated by the quoter.

For the ethnographer, the first process of appropriation is *understanding*. It is essentially a problem of linguistic reconstruction, that is, of recording the poem phonemically; glossing hitherto unknown words or grammatical constructions; obtaining background notes on persons, events, or places mentioned in the text that are usually of public knowledge and can be gleaned from nearly anyone; and gathering information on cultural references to belief and ritual systems. Each one of these operations of understanding is complex. The recording of the poem is not simply a matter of listening to the words and transcribing them onto paper; it is far more interactive a process between ethnographer and reciter (and in some instances between reciter and overhearers who are also familiar with the oral tradition and

add their own two cents worth). Another major difficulty involves the difference in the appearance of the poem when it is chanted as opposed to when it is spoken. In the former mode the verse is more difficult to comprehend but at the same time its meter is more transparent (see Appendix B). Since music is an essential element of the aesthetic performance and since I was not yet certain whether the meter was essentially musical, verse-metrical, or some combination of music and verse rhythms, I was keen on transcribing the melody. But I was naive in thinking that this would be an easy task, for I discovered as many variants of a melody as there are, say, realizations of a phoneme, so that the musical transcription turned out to be an arduous task well beyond my meager musical training.[4]

How did I obtain a grasp of poetic form? In large part I culled it from the descriptions of informants who could tell me, for instance, that a poem called a *zāmil* has two lines, each of which is divided roughly into two parts and usually ends in a rhyming word. But on such matters of sound structure as metrical patterning informants could not articulate their knowledge. That the poem had a meter, and that the meter was regular, was almost invariably the extent of their comments.[5] Additional clues regarding the structure of verse were obtained by my "tampering" with lines and then asking informants whether one alternative was preferable to another (on analogy, it now seems to me, with the way linguists work on grammaticality judgments with native speakers). But the wonderful discovery was that the tradition has built into itself its own "response laboratory." In a dialogical routine two poets respond to each other's verse; the second poet must replicate as much of the form of the original poem as he can notice, and the audience criticizes the imitation if it finds it wanting. These reactions taught me how the native poet responded to the verse.

Given the impracticality of displaying all the collected variants of every poem discussed in this book, I have had to choose one text among several possibilities as representative of a particular poem. The question naturally arises as to the basis of this choice. In many cases I never came across significant discrepancies between variants of a poem; but if I did, I chose the variant that seemed to be the most generally known (if that could be ascertained) and provided notes on variant vocabulary and grammatical usage. Cases remain where the discrepancy is so great that several versions of the same poem must be represented.

What I have so far described is the laborious process of understanding a poem, an understanding that every participant in this oral tradition can more or less take for granted but which the ethnographer obviously cannot. I have maintained that this process is distinct from, though clearly related to, what I call the poem's *interpretation.* Whereas understanding may come automatically to the native speaker, interpretation may be problematical even for him.

In tribal society interpretation is sometimes, though rarely, a public act; it is more usual for each listener to form his own opinion silently on what the text means. I was obviously left in a quandary as to how to interpret poems when the interpretation was not openly worked out or discussed in a public forum (as it is, for example, in Western classrooms or literary journals). What I did was to interpret the poems in the same way that I would interpret, say, a Shakespeare sonnet—a process that is not yet, and probably can never be, "rule-governed" or subject to a methodology. I then presented the interpretation to one or more of my best informants and asked them if they agreed with it. Rarely did this question start a heated debate; more often the informant demurred. The trouble here is that tribesmen do not make their interpretation explicit. Instead they *react* to a poem's meaning (by laughing, composing another poem in response, keeping silent, and so forth), and that reaction betokens an interpretation the listener must *infer.*

It is important to remember that my interpretations were accepted by some people and rejected by others, the determining factor often being the listener's self-avowed political leanings. The interpretation of the poem (as in the case of most poems) is thus *politicized,* a condition that is of course characteristic of our tradition as well (W. Mitchell 1982; Rabinowitz 1987).

The major problem of translation is rendering the poeticality of these poems when this quality rests fundamentally on Arabic linguistic structure, vastly different from that of English. First, the metrical pattern depends on an alternation of syllabic weights between a light (Cv) syllable and a heavy one. (Other possible syllabic structures are elucidated in Appendix B.) By contrast, the predominant metrical pattern in English poetry has historically depended on syllabic stress rather than syllabic weight. Moreover, we might culturally apprehend a precise regularity in the metrical pattern as dull and monotonous,

whereas in the Yemeni tradition it is positively valued. Even if one translates the Yemeni meter into a stress pattern, one is left with a difficult aesthetic choice: should one adopt strict classical meters, such as iambic pentameter, and thereby mirror the spirit of the original Arabic; or should one be more casual about the pattern by leaving, say, four heavy stresses irregularly distributed in the line and thereby gratify modern sensibilities?

Second, these constraining technical problems are only the tip of the iceberg. Much of the poeticality rests on allusion, elliptical reference to cultural beliefs and actual historical circumstances that require extensive commentary for the nontribal and non-Muslim reader. But such explanations of course mar the aesthetic impact of allusion as elliptical reference.

Finally, I have been speaking about the poem as though it were commensurate with the verbal text, much in the way we understand the notion of a poem in the West. But most tribal verse genres include compositions created in a dancelike performance which comprise an aesthetic-semiotic ensemble along with words and music. It is an aesthetic experience we have largely lost (except in opera).

The intractableness of this poetry to translation was beyond my talent to overcome in such a way as to present a satisfying aesthetic piece that remained wholly intelligible. In the end I opted for literalness, which would permit the Arabist to check the accuracy of the translation against the original text. I then supplemented the translation with however many notes were necessary to make both the content and the poeticality of the verse comprehensible. I do not pretend to have made a literary translation, only a literal one.

I prefer that this book be perceived as an ethnography, even though I am fully aware of how problematical that term has become in anthropology. Insofar as various theorists in "reflexive anthropology" understand the ethnographic enterprise to be vexed, this work is no less so, and for some of the same reasons (Marcus and Fischer 1986; Clifford 1988; Geertz 1988). But in fact I find the term *ethnography* far less problematical than *poetics,* which is in vogue these days among anthropologists who seem to have taken it over unreflexively. To suggest that one is doing an ethnography of poetry is to challenge one of the most serious shortcomings of Western poetics, namely, its failure to ground the theory of the poem and the literary institution in a the-

ory of sociopolitical reality, no matter how it is represented ethnographically. Therefore, what I wish to emphasize is not the fact that poetics may illuminate our representations of ethnographic phenomena (Clifford 1988; Geertz 1988) but rather the reverse. I want to anthropologize poetics.

A full-fledged ethnography of poetry does not, to my knowledge, exist—certainly not for the Middle East and probably not for other geographic areas. Only Musil's pioneering *Manners and Customs of the Rwala Bedouins* (1928) comes close to being one. There have been, to be sure, several outstanding books written on the relationship of a particular poetic genre or of the poetic function in nonpoetic genres to various aspects of cultural life. I need only single out here Meeker's (1979) brilliant reworking of Musil's data on the Bedouin *qaṣīdah* and his arguments concerning the dilemmas of tribal politics in nineteenth-century Arabia; or Abu-Lughod's (1984, 1985, 1986) fascinating and evocative account of how Egyptian Bedouin women express their sentiments of longing and desire in *ghannawa* verse. Obviously, I owe a debt to these anthropologists as well as to other students of Arabic colloquial poetry, and I shall refer to them repeatedly in this work. But I think it is fair to assert that neither of the two works mentioned, nor any other, has made its focus the entire system of poetic discourse per se and analyzed the way in which that system reticulates with the social practices and cultural beliefs of a particular group of people. My aim, in other words, has not been to use the poetry to explore some aspect of sociocultural reality that is fundamentally of concern to myself, to anthropological research, or to linguistics. Rather, I came to Yemen to understand what tribesmen meant by poetry and analyze what they produced as poetry—in brief, to explore the aesthetic system of their verse—and at the same time anchor this production in their language and society. Not only do we have ethnographies on Tiv and Kaluli song (Keil 1979; Feld 1982), dance and the plastic arts (Thompson 1974), Australian sand paintings (Munn 1973), as well as Indonesian proletarian drama (Peacock 1968) and puppet theater (Keeler 1987)—to mention only some of the excellent work on art done by anthropologists—there has also been considerable attention paid of late to verbal art (Gossen 1974; Hymes 1981; E. Basso 1981; Tedlock 1983). I see this book as an extension of these traditions of research.

The fact, however, that no ethnography of poetry exists has made the task of writing this book more problematic than ethnographies ordinarily are. I have felt as though I were inventing a genre, if that is not too grandiose a description of the task at hand; but perhaps all anthropologists feel that way, or should. Here I was able to draw on the burgeoning ethnography of communication (Hymes 1974; K. Basso 1979; Heath 1983; Sherzer 1983; Bauman 1978; Beeman 1986; and others) for guidance and inspiration.

In brief, I came to study poetry in North Yemen because it seemed as though the culture was fascinated by it. To impart this fascination to the Western reader, I suppose it would have sufficed to represent the rich and complex use of verse in a variety of different social and political contexts and let the ethnography speak for itself. But my quarrel is not really with Western cultural assumptions of verse so much as it is with the literary critics and poets who harbor them and unreflexively construct theories of poetry based on them.

In an effort to challenge these views on a theoretical level, I have tried to develop a model of poetry as cultural practice in the conclusion. Whereas we do have plenty of examples of sociological analyses of the novel and other kinds of prose works such as drama, almost nothing exists in this line of research on poetry. Why? One reason may have to do with the historical development of poetry in America and Europe. It has a smaller readership than prose, its reception smacking almost of an elite preoccupation, and we tend to value "private" and "confessional" over "public" and "political" verse. Our poetry, as a consequence, seems much harder to ground in social and political reality. Another difficulty in developing a notion of poetry as practice is that poetic form is probably more deeply enmeshed in the structures of language than any other art form; but to appreciate this fact, an orthodox or more doctrinaire Marxist line would be of little avail, since Marxist theory has largely ignored the study of language (for reasons that need not be spelled out here).

Why, then, proceed in this direction? More obviously than in the West, poetry in tribal Yemen is both the creation of art and the production of social and political reality in the same act of composition. To compose a poem is to construct oneself as a peacemaker, as a warrior, as a Muslim. It seems to me that this fact is a critical insight into

art as a *constitutive* social practice. It is one reason why I have chosen the term *practice* to describe Yemeni tribal poetry.

The other reason has to do with the sense of practice as *techne,* or the craft of fashioning verse. Poems in Yemeni society, or any other society for that matter, are not idly or haphazardly put together. The Yemeni poet must master a complicated set of interlocking practices, including rhyme, meter, alliteration, metaphor, formulas, speech acts, strophes, poetic exchanges, chants, and a host of performance routines. The sheer technical virtuosity required of a master poet in this tradition is staggering. This practice, which seems alien to most of us, is everyday cultural reality for Yemeni tribesmen. If this book awakens the reader to another kind of world, one very different from his or her own, a world in which poetry is centralized, not marginalized, in the arena of social and political conflict, and if that reader can learn, as I did, to be in awe of the craft needed to make that spectacle possible, then I will count it a success.

To reiterate, the basic point of the book is that the two kinds of practices—artistic and social—are indissociable. To fashion a poem is to engage in social practice. Each of the genre chapters in Part 2 elaborates this same basic point in different ways. In the two chapters devoted to the *bālah* I argue that this genre is to be understood largely in terms of the production of tribal ideology (*gabyilah*) or what it means to be a tribesman. But to grasp this point, we have to understand how the practice of composing a poem is simultaneously a practice that signifies "tribalness." We shall see how this problem relates to contemporary interest in the social construction of self, particularly in the Middle East. The paired chapters on the *zāmil* begin a shift in the analysis of techne from performance to the perfection or finalization of the text-utterance, a shift not completed until the third genre. I argue that the practice of composing the *zāmil* produces a certain ideology meant to be persuasive in the arena of political conflict. To understand the significance of this art of persuasion, we must reexamine some assumptions about the nature of power in tribal society as it has been described in the literature on the Middle East. The final two chapters on the *qaṣīdah* show how the practice of composing poetry has shifted onto the shoulders of the individual master poet, who is problematically self-conscious about the historical poetic tradition and changing social conditions. This person also gives voice to a political ideology relevant to the creation of the modern nation-state. The

tribe becomes involved in state politics through the spread of its poetry on tapes sold throughout the market system. Of course, the state also tries to control this means of poetic communication to disseminate its own ideology among the tribes. In short, I will look at a problem rarely considered in the literature on the state: the way in which discourse, ideology, communicative practices, and state formation are interdependent. To us, this problem may seem all the more remarkable because that discourse is poetry; but to Yemenis, there is nothing remarkable about it. By the end of this book I hope the reader will understand why.

Yemeni tribal poetry is not atypical of verse found in other societies studied by folklorists and anthropological linguists. It is not "high" literature as recognized by the educated elite in Western countries or Arab society. For example, it is almost always spoken or chanted, not written; and it is cast in an idiom and linguistic register, generally known as colloquial, toward which the educated Arab elite has an ambivalent attitude, denigrating it for its supposed ungrammaticality while at the same time admiring it for its spontaneity and wit. To explore these unwritten forms of aesthetic expression, I have borrowed heavily from the tradition of folkloric research (Parry 1930, 1932; Lord 1960; Dundes 1980; Bauman 1978; Ben-Amos 1972). In particular, I am concerned with the need to study oral formulaic composition of verse in performance as well as the need to analyze folkloric works in light of their linguistic, aesthetic, and anthropological dimensions. Besides extending and enriching these descriptive goals in the genre chapters, I hope also to make a more theoretical point. The kind of data usually gathered by folklorists could be more usefully employed by sociological aestheticians who focus almost exclusively on written and "high" literary texts.

Finally, a few remarks on what this book is not about. I have little new to add about women's lives (Myntti 1978; Dorsky 1986) or women's poetry in North Yemen. Throughout my three years there I elicited information on both topics, but I was only allowed to speak to men in the tribal villages, and they usually stiff-armed the questions about women. My glimpse into this hidden world made me believe that women's verse paralleled to some extent the male genres, particularly the *bālah* and the *qaṣīdah,* and that among the eastern Bedouin the women competed with men for recognition of their artistic talents in

public performances. I never heard a tribal woman deliver a poem, however, nor a man recite a composition by a female poet. The evidence was anecdotal, at best, and more often was simply not there for observation or recording by a male ethnographer. But I suspect that a female ethnographer would be amply rewarded for her time and patience.

I hope Arabists will find the data in this book interesting; but mine is a synchronic ethnographic analysis, not an attempt to reconstruct a pan-Arabic language, ostensibly frozen in Yemeni tribal poetry, or to relate the ethnographic findings to a historical reconstruction of a pre-Islamic poetry. I leave these tasks to Arabists better qualified than myself.