

4. ORAL NARRATIVE AS AN ETHNOGRAPHIC SOURCE

Having examined the story of *Hiḍlūl aš-Šwēhri* as a series of historical events, 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, is realistic and direct. The bulk of its message, drawn mainly 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 nomad's worldview and an ethnographic reflection of the socio-cultural realities of Bedouin 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 compelled 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. Aside from all this, 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 (19). 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.

This situation has given rise to a state whereby the facts of desert life are simplified. Nomads are presented either as robbers and murderers, a picture unworthy of our consideration, or as free-roaming bands who lead a noble and heroic existence. No doubt, the nomad enjoys a great measure of freedom, but his life is not totally egalitarian. Desert life fosters equality, nevertheless chiefs and herdsmen, brave men and cowards, open-handed givers and misers etc. do exist. In the absence of central authority and the formal agencies of law and order, a society like that of the nomads lives by the codified principles of virtue, honor and chivalry. But these are not different from concepts such as freedom, equality, justice and human rights, which are, at best, hard to apply and, at worst, mere rhetorical slogans manipulated for political ends. Life is too complicated for any society to maintain a total virtue and pure altruism. The instincts of self-interest and survival play a great role in directing the conduct of human life everywhere.

It is important to stress these points in order to rid our minds of the traditional and simplistic image we may have of nomadic life. Once free of these assumptions, we can achieve a certain measure of objectivity in looking at the social actions and political events of the desert. It is with such a frame of mind that we should examine the episodes in the story of *Hiḍlūl aš-Šwēhri*. They are actual situations that constitute part of an ongoing and dynamic socio-political process. The characters of the story are men engaged in human competition over the limited resources and means of survival available to them. Their actions are directed by the dynamics of Bedouin society and the intricacies of tribal politics. We would be greatly mistaken to reduce their struggle to one between heroes and villains.

From the outset of the narrative, two institutions are introduced, *dxālih* and *xāwih*. The word *dxālih*, whereby an oppressed man

seeks the protection of a powerful defender, is derived from *daxal*, "to enter," because a fugitive usually enters the sanctuary of the tent of a prominent person to seek his protection; hence, the saying *daxal ad-dixīl w-silim* "the fugitive has entered (the tent) and was assured of safety" (20). In the case of *xāwih*, a weak tribe seeks the protection of a stronger tribe through the payment of a regular fee in the form of camels, sheep, butter, etc.; i.e. a weak party buys the brotherly obligation of a strong benefactor, or, the strong may impose his hegemony over the weak by extracting *xāwih* from him by force. Related to *xāwih* is *xuwwih*, a friendly pact contracted between equals as an expression of good will or as an exchange for a big favor <345, 349,562-564>. The two institutions of *dxālih* and *xāwih* depend on the two concepts of *wajh* "countenance, honor" (21) and *ida* which is the return of stolen property according to the terms of *xāwih*.

At the beginning of the narrative we are told that Mḥammad al-Hirbīd attaches himself to a group of raiders from ʿAbdih and brings one camel back as booty. Ibn Gdūr, the chief of as-Swēd, is obliged by *xāwih* to take the camel from al-Hirbīd and return it to its rightful owners, aš-Šarārāt. Al-Hirbīd, in turn, seeks the protection (*dxālih*) of Hidlūl aš-Šwēhri. The incident develops into a test of wills and a show of strength between aš-Šwēhri and ibn Gdūr. The conduct of aš-Šwēhri shows his great resourcefulness and ability to maneuver skillfully. From the outset, he conducts himself as one eager to maintain tribal accord and to resolve the issue peacefully. First, he tries to absolve himself from the *dxālih* obligation by offering his own camels to al-Hirbīd in place of the looted camel. The latter refuses the offer. To avoid confrontation with ibn Gdūr, aš-Šwēhri starts by showing all the courtesy and respect due to a tribal chief. Then, aš-Šwēhri proceeds to employ all the peaceful means available to him to convince ibn Gdūr to let al-Hirbīd keep the looted camel. He entreats him, appeals to his sense of honor, and even offers him his favorite thoroughbred riding camel, Rīmih. But ibn Gdūr will not budge. To overcome this impasse, aš-Šwēhri confronts ibn Gdūr with the argument that

the *xāwih* does not apply in this case. It is this ambiguous situation that gives rise to alternate interpretations and the varying applications of desert codes, thus leading to tension and conflict. Having exhausted all the possibilities of resolving the difference with ibn Gdūr peacefully, aš-Šwēhri did not immediately turn to direct personal confrontation. Instead, he drew a well-calculated plan which showed his ingenuity in manipulating the mechanics of desert politics. The plan won him sympathy and respect and proved his leadership qualities. He managed to put ibn Gdūr into a very critical position in which he was humbled and deserted by his own subjects. Ibn Gdūr was forced to seek outside help from the chiefs ibn Ṭnayyān and ibn Rmāl who rebuffed him because, knowing that the balance of public sentiment was tipped in favor of aš-Šwēhri, they did not want to champion a lost cause. The refusal of ibn Rmāl and ibn Ṭnayyān to respond to the appeals of ibn Gdūr and give him assistance shows how political calculations influence the interpretation and application of desert codes.

What happened between ibn Gdūr and aš-Šwēhri is in sharp contrast to what happened between ibn Nōbān, who granted *manf* to aš-Šwēhri, and ʿGāb al-ʿWāji, who took aš-Šwēhri from ibn Nōbān with impunity because he was a powerful chief whose star was ascending. But, aš-Šwēhri, for a much less serious breach, was able to challenge the chiefly authority of ibn Gdūr because, in addition to the undoubted capabilities of the former, the influence of the latter was obviously on the wane at the time.

The overthrow of ibn Gdūr shows how easily a Bedouin chief can lose his position once his leadership qualities are proven inadequate. The harsh existence of the desert put a high premium on moral and physical courage. Individual capacities were, and are, constantly put to severe tests. Nomadic culture values individual prowess, and nomadic society provides the chance for a man to prove his worth. Through his daring raids against the tribes of ʿAnazah and aš-Šarārāt, aš-Šwēhri made a name for himself in the desert. Likewise, Mfīz ibn Habdān was instantly transformed from anonymity to fame by felling ʿGāb.

Through careful characterization of the *dramatis personae* in the

narrative, men such as aš-Šwēhri, °Gāb al-°Wāji, Silīm al-Lhāwi and Riĵa al-Būhi, we learn something about the characteristics of desert heroes. For example, we are told that Hidlūl aš-Šwēhri was a valiant man who walked on the brink of danger and threw caution to the wind, a born leader and a self-made man. He came from a humble background, but through luck, self-reliance and a daring spirit he was able to gain the admiration and respect of his tribal peers. He dared to challenge the authority of Fāliḥ ibn Gdūr, the chief of as-Swēd, and was able to sway public opinion to his side.

Brave warriors wear badges of distinction in the battlefield. Riĵa al-Būhi, who drank the cup of aš-Šwēhri, wore an ornament on his shoulder. Others wore vests or turbans of certain colors. In addition to badges and distinctive costumes, there are other practices which are meant to enhance heroic conduct among nomads. The Bedouin attach symbolic associations to coffee similar to the associations attached by the ancient Arabs to wine. Coffee is forbidden to children, women and churls. The coffee cup is handed only to worthy men of valiance, gallantry and hospitality. When the coffee is passed around and the cup reaches a base man or one who is in disgrace, the cup is poured on the ground instead of being handed to him, he is *madfūgin finjāluḥ* <469>. To drink the cup of someone is to challenge him to a duel, to pledge to kill him <151-156> (22).

Each hero has a title or war cry. The heroic title *nxawih* is uttered by a person in a situation where he needs to show his honor and manly courage, as in the battlefield. One addresses another man by his *nxawih* to petition his assistance and invoke his valor. A man usually chooses the name of his sister as his *nxawih* because it is the duty of the brother to defend the honor of his sister. When a man is attacked by a superior enemy, it is not considered shameful to flee and abandon all his possessions, but should the honor of his womenfolk be threatened in any way, he must stay put and fight to the last breath. The *nxawih* symbolizes the critical stage of no surrender and no further concession. The *nxawih* of Hidlūl aš-Šwēhri is *ixu Samra*, °Gāb is *ixu Nimših* and

Hāyis is *ixu Siṣda*. The two terms *naxa* and *intaxa* "to shout one's war cry," seem to be etymologically related to the formula *ana xu flānih* uttered by the champion pronouncing the name of his sister *ixt* as a gesture of his readiness to give up his life in defense of his name, the honor of his house and that of his sister. The *nxawih* is a title accorded only to brave and worthy men (cf. *ḥān ana xu Samra* <35>). This could be related somehow to the belief that a man's character will reflect on his sister's. Therefore, a suitor would ask first about the brother of the lady whose hand he is seeking. Connected with this is the belief that a man's character is determined by his avuncular line (see footnote 56, part II). It is important for a man to prove his worth so that respectable men will ask for his sister's hand. After all, men do not marry only for love but also for alliance.

The *nxawih* of a man might also be a reference to something very dear which he would defend tenaciously – such as his horse or camel herd. Or, it could be a reference to an exceptionally noble stand or heroic action. Hidlūl aš-Šwēhri, for instance, is called *ibu-Ġlūl* (from *gill*, distress) because he afflicts his enemies with great loss, thus causing them grief and distress. There is also an overlap and interchange between individual *nxawih* and tribal *ṣizwih*. When Hāyis al-Ḡcēṭ wanted to urge Mfīz ibn Habdān to kill ḠGāb al-ḠWāji, he did not know his personal *nxawih*, so he called him *Sinṣūsi*, the *ṣizwih* of ḠAbdih. When Mfīz charged at ḠGāb, he shouted his tribal *ṣizwih*: *Ana bin Ḍēgam* (I am the son of Ḍēgam), (or we may assume that the *rāwi* does not know the personal *nxawih* of Mfīz so he depicts him shouting his tribal *ṣizwih*).

By careful reading of the story of Hidlūl aš-Šwēhri, we can learn a great deal more about many institutions which used to regulate the social and political life of the bedouins. Intertribal conflict, for instance, is regulated by various institutions that serve as a deterrent against excessive bloodshed. Among such institutions is *al-manṣ*, the surrender of mount and weapon by the pursued to the pursuer on the condition that his life be spared (23). Or, when a man is fed, his life becomes inviolable. Since ibn Nōbān and Ḍbēb al-ḠWāji broke these laws, they became the objects of defamation and satire by the Šammar poets to this day.

The institution of *manʕ* is a rather complex affair which serves to grant safety to captives in warfare. He who grants *manʕ* must call out his own name because the pursued person would want to make sure before surrendering that the man whose hands he is putting his life in is worthy and capable of carrying out the obligation of *manʕ*; not simply take the mount and weapon of the *minīʕ* and do nothing to protect him <310,481>. The *manʕ* does not apply in case of real enmity. The opposite of *manʕ* is the rhyming word *gaʕʕ*, meaning "cutting of throats".

There are other examples which show that the main objective of tribal warfare is looting, not bloodshed. In the Kihlih raid, for instance, Ḥsēn ad-Dnēb did not shoot Silīm al-Lḥāwi. Instead, he shot his horse to hinder him from pursuing the Šammari raiders to save his camels. Ḥsēn told Silīm that he could have shot him dead, but wanted to spare his life and leave him to look after the Šarārāt women. By examining carefully the Kihlih raid and the other battles described in the narrative text below we can learn a great deal about the ethics and strategies of warfare among the Bedouin.

The principle of kinship is the pivot around which the socio-political life of the desert Arabians revolves. In any narrative it is essential to know the exact genealogical relationship of the various characters to each other in order to understand the forces which motivate their actions and shape their attitudes towards one another. A good narrator understands this very well. He makes it a point to locate every character in his proper position on the genealogical chart <207,212,531>. He may even specify his own relationship to the various characters in the story. The story of Hidlūl aš-Šwēhri begins with a reference to his genealogy, that he is from al-Griši branch of as-Swēd. We are told later that his lieutenant, Ḥsēn ad-Dnēb, is from al-Faḍli branch. Because al-Harābdih are his maternal uncles, Hidlūl takes the side of Mḥammad al-Hirbīd in his dispute with ibn Gdūr, the chief of as-Swēd. When Ḡāb draws his sword to kill Hidlūl the latter invokes the name of Hāyis al-GḠeṭ because both belong to the ZōbaḠ moiety of the Šammari confederacy.

Mobility is one of the most distinctive characteristics of nomadic existence, the nomadic trait *par excellence*. A nomad has to know his way around the desert as he moves alone or with his kin from one grazing area to the next or from one watering hole to another. Furthermore, successful raiding depends on precise knowledge of desert routes, exact locations of water holes and rain ponds, different landmarks and the distance between them and knowledge of the stars and other natural phenomena. It is also necessary to know the geo-physical formation of various regions in the desert in order to draw up a sound plan for attack and retreat. It is for these, and many other reasons, that geographical knowledge, in the most general sense, comes next to genealogical knowledge in importance for the Bedouin.

We have already seen how the narrator of a *sālfih* makes it a point to characterize the principal *dramatis personae* of a narrative and pinpoint their genealogical positions. In the same way, we notice that the narrator makes sure to give detailed information on places mentioned in the narrative, to locate their positions in relation to other more well-known places <41,49, 254,260>. In the story of Hidlūl aš-Šwēhri we are even told how certain places got their names <56,291,406,463,472>.

The daily activities of nomadic life center on camels and raiding. The intensity with which the Bedouin view these two concerns is reflected in the rich vocabulary and similes associated with them. There are different breeds and different kinds of camels. Those used for raiding and riding are fleet and graceful thoroughbreds. They are usually kept barren so they will remain strong <284,614, 626>. Pack camels, mostly males, are big and strong. Fat camels are used for meat. There are also camels reserved for milk. White camels are most beloved and most valuable to the nomads (24).

The Bedouin is constantly occupied with the grazing and watering of his camels and protecting them from raiders. Brave and fully armed youth called *janab* ride their mares and go with the herds to guard them in distant pastures <411,419>.

As to the right time for watering the camels the pasturing ground and the season of the year are the deciding factors. When grazing on the salt *hamz*

plants exclusively they can hold out no longer than four or five days without water. If their food consists of dry plants, *ḥenn*, like some dry grasses called *ḥemri* or the perennials known as *naṣi* and *soboṭ*, they can endure from six to fifteen days. In the time of *rabī^c* when they eat nothing but fresh, juicy grasses, they will not touch water for even as long as thirty days. In the hot season, *al-kəz*, when the bedouins encamp in the settled territories, the herds are driven to the watering places every day.

A thirsty she-camel murmurs pitiably, *taḥenn*, refuses to graze, her eyes overflow with tears, *tedāma^c* *cayūnaḥa*, every little while she makes an attempt to urinate, and her loins sink in more and more. On seeing the camel herds in this condition the traveler inquires of the herdsmen: "How long have the camels thirsted? *zma^o* *al-bel wušu?*", the answer being: "They have thirsted four, five, seven eight, and even fifteen days; *rib^c* *ḥems semḥi temān laḥadd ḥamsta^caš.*" (25)

Camels while watering are prime targets for raiders. At a watering place, the camel herds are already rounded up and have had enough water to sustain them during a forced march across desert wastes. However, while watering, the camels are near the camp and there would be many men around to defend them. Another good time to attack is when camels are led to pasture or when they are led back to camp. One advantage of attacking herds in the pasture is that, though the camels are dispersed, they are usually attended by only few herdsmen and some *janab*.

Raiding strategies and tactics differ depending on various factors such as time of year, the number of raiders, and the purpose of the raid. The raids of Hiḍlūl and Hāyis, as related in our narrative, illustrate such strategies and tactics. According to laws of desert warfare, a tribe never engages in hostilities against another tribe before making a formal declaration of war <627>. A full-fledged raid is carried out by a sizable group and takes some time to prepare. Each horseman must seek a cameleer to carry water and provision for himself and his horse. The raiders may cover hundreds of miles and it may be months before they are back with the booty.

When two fighting groups meet on the battlefield, each group arranges its cavalry with one horseman called *middib* in charge

giving orders when to attack <628>. This is done in order to make a collective shock assault on the enemy. A bold horseman, however, may try to slip away and attack first in order to make a spectacular exhibition of his courage, and also to beat his fellows to the booty from the other side.

In a close encounter, fighters take off their garments so that when they engage in hand to hand combat they can easily slip off from the grip of their combatants <183>. Among the well-known strategies in Bedouin warfare is driving the camels in front of the men as a cover to shield them from enemy bullets <183>.

Upon returning victorious from a raid, raiders celebrate their victory by slaughtering one of the plundered camels to feast on it and to use its blood to dye the necks and sides of the other camels. When they get home they parade their booty in front of their people and sing victory songs <271-272>. People at the camp would then run after them and ask them to share their booty with them. If the raiders had brought plenty of camels or horses they would give some to their relatives, each according to his rank. Such a gift is called *hadiyyih*.

When one tribe wants to occupy the pastures of another, their chief leads the whole tribe (*yiṣūl*) <627> (26) with all the children, women and possession to engage the other tribe in a major battle (*manāx*) and take possession of its territory. The opposing tribes pitch war tents (*byūt al-ḥarb*). To strike the war tent of the other side means the ultimate rout <601> (27).

In the summer, tribes gather round their tribal wells with all their possessions and great camel herds. These great herds become irresistible targets for attack, but the large number of tents in a summer encampment make such an attack risky. Only a daring leader, followed by a sizable group of warriors, would take such a risk. Hidlūl aš-Šwēhri was that kind of leader <68>.

During the rainy season, the tribes disperse and move in search of good pastures. The desert becomes checkered with single tents and small camps. This is the time for foot thieves (*ḥanšal*) to prowl the desert searching for camels to steal. These are poor men who do not possess the horse and the camel mount necessary

for raiding. Such camel thieves can cover the short distances separating small winter camps on foot. They do not need to carry water or provisions because there are plenty of rain pools and the desert is covered with edible plants in winter. Hidlūl aš-Šwēhri started his career as a foot thief but through his skill and daring rose to become a raid leader <8-9>.

We may conclude by reiterating some of the points which were made earlier. The ethnographic facts which we have been discussing in the preceeding pages may, or may not, have happened in connection with the characters and incidents in exactly the same way mentioned in the narrative. Whether they did, or did not, happen in these particular situations 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.