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The Art of Storytelling in Bedouin Society: A 21st-Century Ethnographic Collection of Poems from the United Arab Emirates

Résumé

Les individus représentent les véhicules culturels par lesquels le patrimoine intangible est transmis, aussi cette étude examinera le rôle que la culture orale bédouine émirienne joue à cet égard. Sa tradition dynamique exprime des émotions et enseigne la conduite éthique pendant les occasions sociales, étant à la fois source de divertissement communal et pivot de la hiérarchie sociale. Par les diverses représentations du patrimoine, les Bédouins pratiquent leur propre version de culture intangible, qui souligne les normes folkloriques et façonne des comportements qui s'appliquent à la famille, la tribu et le pays. Les thèmes comme la nature, le mal du pays et le patriotisme sont examinés en plus de la danse traditionnelle, comme des formes de parrainage de la culture. La mémoire folklorique est ainsi validée et l'arabe vernaculaire illustre une version dynamique mais quelquefois obsolète de l'arabe mondial. Ainsi la nature fragile de ces ressources dans un environnement en voie de développement rapide est soulignée avec, aussi, la politique de conservation. Les contributions, volontaires, sont le résultat de vingt années de participation sociale dans la communauté.

Abstract

Individuals represent the cultural vehicles through which intangible heritage is transmitted and so this study will examine the role that Emirati oral Bedouin culture plays in this regard. Its vibrant tradition expresses emotions and teaches ethical conduct during social occasions, both a source of communal entertainment and at the same time, a lynchpin of the social hierarchy. Through diverse heritage performances, the Bedouins practise their own version of intangible culture, underscoring folk norms and informing behaviours that enforce family, tribe and country. Themes such as nature, homesickness and patriotism are examined in addition to traditional dance, as forms of patronage culture. Thus folk memory is validated and the Arabic vernacular illustrates a dynamic yet sometimes obsolete version of World Arabic. Thus the fragile nature of these resources in a rapidly developing environment is highlighted and so, too, the politics of preservation. The contributions were voluntary and the result of twenty years of social capital in the community.

Storytelling is as old as language itself. Used as a form of social cohesion, a record of tribal victories, a means of education, and a form of entertainment, oral storytelling has a significant place in Bedouin society. Some of these narratives have been recorded, but many have not and the compilation of an oral Emirati corpus was initially to find how cultural narratives were realized. The research revealed a poetical form to be more dominant rather than prose, though often the two were interconnected, with the narrative (*salfah*) introducing in an accompanying poem (Ingham 1993).

The prevalent oral poetical genre in the UAE is known as *al Nabati*, a type of debate poetry, originating in Sumerian culture 4,000 years ago,

according to Holes, a noted expert in the field (Ahmed 2014). Many of the poems feature animals, some of which are given speaking roles. However, Sheikh Makhtoum, believes it may be related to a specific dialect of Nabat, near Medina, in Saudi Arabia, or a reference to the etymology of the words employed in the poetry (personal communication 2012). Whatever the origins may be, it is a widespread genre among Arabic speakers. Bedouins tribes used a number of different micro-dialects, which are inaccessible to outsiders, so their scrambled poetical discourse, confuse all but insiders. Rather like cockney rhyming slang, the use of localized lexical variants goes a long way to explain the importance

of how poetry as verbal banter is used between competing groups (Hurreiz 2002).

In fact, as standardized Arabic is not spoken at home, there is considerable interest in collecting and defining the distinct differences in dialects across the globe. Both the uses of animal voices and the specialist dialect doubly conceal the content of the verses, making them strategically significant for the tribe and difficult for the researcher to fathom.

The oral compositions featured in this article have been negotiated through social intertribal networking and although many stories and poems have been recorded by the UAE government already, such as those featured at the Maritime Museum of Sharjah, and the collection by Holes and Abu Atheera, there has not been any extensive effort made to highlight comparisons to world Englishes (2011). The idea of a personalized collection is not new and private archiving has augmented many national initiatives, available in electronic format or transcription. However, Sowan is working along similar comparative lines in Saudi Arabia, following on from his seminal publication of 1985, *Nabati Poetry: The Oral Poetry of Arabia*. Consequently, this study comes at an important moment in the expansion of translation studies of World Arabics. For example Wilmsen (2006), citing Qafisheh (1974), has highlighted how studying an Arabic dialect prior to approaching standardized Arabic is a more intuitive way of non-specialists approaching translation of the language. Consequently, this has led for more local support for non-specialists translators in intercultural bridging activities.

Versions of the Anazi dialects dominating the Gulf region, according to Versteegh, have developed into numerous tribal sub-categories, with the overarching supra-dialect spread over a wide geographical area of northeastern Arabia (Versteegh 2001). Therefore, while tribal micro-dialects have mushroomed in the past, they have also later become homogenized following the creation of key administrative centres. More specifically, there are three main linguistic subdivisions within the Emirates. The first is in the south around Abu Dhabi, al Ain, western region and the islands, where the oral corpus originates. The second is in the more educated north around Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, and Ras al Khaimah and

the third is al Fujairah on the east coast (al Fardan and al Kaabi 2015).

In the early 1970s the modern UAE was created and intangible heritage in the form of the antiquated lexis used in much Bedouin oral poetry has since become endangered through the condensed form of regional Arabic that has taken root. This has in part resulted from migratory diffusion and language contacts. Anxious to appear innovative yet respectful of its own heritage traditions, the country has had to address the extent to which dialects have disintegrated commensurate with linguistic and political integration. However, while such intangible heritage may now potentially be under threat from the hypokinetic world that has seen the UAE become the leading technological giant in the Arab world, this is not a sustainable or complete analysis. Abu Dhabi emirate was slower to modernize than the northern half of the country, so the generational lexical discrepancy is more noticeable in this region. Hence contributions from the key actors retained their distinctive character for longer, despite the rapid changes around them, but these have been adopted in tandem with a parallel respect for the past.

Overall, Bedouin influence on language allows for more creative borrowing from contact languages, code switching, and less rigid word order in general, with some vocabulary choices that can be traced back to classical *al fussha* (classical Arabic) (Versteegh 2001). This continuity facilitates the dominant indigenous literature of the Emirates, which is occasional poetry in a modern context, though other Classical themes such as love, nature, country, or the importance of God, still are common. Emirati Bedouins recite poetry on important occasions such as births, birthdays, camel races, or National Day celebrations, but frequently spontaneously or as a focus of a grievance of some kind.

The examples in this article are investigated thematically, with additional background on how and why the poems are created and delivered, to better understand the social role of storytelling; co-translations are also provided. Among the local forms of oral poetry in the Emirates are: the *balah*, a celebratory poem with an echo response to the narrator at the end of each line, which is also common in Yemen; the *zamil*, a two-line form of disparagement; the *ghazal* or

love poem; and the *madih*, a poem in praise of an individual or tribe (Reynolds 2007: 31). Friends donated some of their family poems and the compositions and transmissions featured are by Shamsa al Falahi and Hazzaa al Hamimi. They were recorded informally on a mobile telephone and later transcribed by Noura al Muhairi and co-translated in 2012 by Noura and Hazzaa respectively.

As face-to-face relations are extremely important in the Bedouin community, Bedu are still functionally illiterate in both English and Arabic, it is their knowledge of the world and their need to subsist in a harsh physical environment that governs their existence. Hence survival in the desert and maintaining transhumance herds despite climatic extremes is a first order priority and thus dominates the poetry. Life and death cannot be taken for granted; consequently, deference is also given to age in this culture—the oldest, most vulnerable members of society are often seen as the best custodians of communal observance, the sum of their life experience regarded as a fount of social learning. The early blues recordings in America were easier to compile than were these poems, in part because many of musicians performed in public, often with financial incentives. However, Emirati participants include elderly Arab women in their homes, wearing a face covering and speaking an obsolete form of vernacular Arabic and their poems are often transmitted from another generation. Other forums include a televised program, however, which many younger men choose as a medium for performance.

This article, then, tries to highlight archaic vocabulary marginalized through lack of use, and showcases fragile oral resources. However, the diversity of heritage in the Emirates also includes many mesmeric dances and songs, exotic cuisine, dramatic wadis, and breathtaking vistas. Figure 1 is evocative of other forms of intangible heritage in the country and the impact of place and geographical features on memory and cultural practices should not be understated. As Classical poetry often is tied to memories of people in old encampments, such themes are continued to this day, using the *al Nabati* formula.

Fig. 1
Desert rose. Courtesy of
the author.

Methodology of Corpus Collation in Bedouin Intangible Heritage

My approach to collecting examples of Emirati Bedouin intangible heritage was broadly guided by the UNESCO stance on ethical procedure. Mounir Boucheraki, Assistant Director General for Culture, UNESCO, speaking at ICOMOS, advised adopting a cautious approach, sensitive both to the politics of preservation and the pragmatics of field investigation:

Intangible heritage ... consists of *processes and practices* and accordingly requires a different safeguarding approach and methodology to the tangible heritage. It is fragile by its very nature and therefore much more vulnerable than other forms of heritage because it hinges on actors and social and environmental conditions that are not subject to rapid change. (Boucheraki 2003: 3)

As a result, this study, originally a private collection to investigate my host linguistic environment, encourages the sustainable investigation of local oral poetry. Based on a need to support a potentially endangered oral culture, which is itself broadcasting to a wider global audience through the televising of poetry competitions, it has now attracted participants from abroad. While traditional forms of Emirati poets are showcased on televised competitions such *Milion's Poet Channel*, to highlight Emirati vernacular heritage more, Dr. al Humairi, Director of the Intangible Heritage Department at Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage has stated:

While the efforts by the countries represented here to preserve their intangible heritage are to be commended, it is not enough to simply have such programmes



within each country. It is our responsibility whether as governmental or private entities to preserve our heritage ... to raise international awareness and interest in these facets of our cultures. (Farah 2011)

Therefore, it is up to all residents to help promote ambient culture and in so doing there is the hope to address a number of preconceptions of the sometimes greatly misrepresented Gulf Arab culture, which many influences have shaped, including Indian, African, and Persian.

Within the Emirates, the differences between village and city dwellers and Bedu are as many as the various local climates, and while the country has been subject to rapid change through globalization and acculturation, local “processes and practices” deserve some form of safeguarding in this age of global transformation. UNESCO is looking closely at helping to preserve Emirati poetry and dances along with Emirati initiatives and contribution from scholars and long-term residents (Boucheraki 2003: 3). To this end, promoting poems from the local community could help to slow linguistic entropy, the decline in standards of usage of local dialects in the UAE, a goal that Emiratis would like to achieve by placing more emphasis on Arabic in education. A landmark conference held in Dubai in May 2013 has resulted in a renewed determination to place the mother tongue centre stage once more and address the eclipsing of the mother tongue in education. As one objective of the collection was highlighting regional vocabulary to illustrate the diversity of local oral composition, contributions from a twenty-year-old male volunteer from Abu Dhabi, and an eighty-year-old grandmother from Al Ain are included. The age range of around sixty years demonstrates both generational spanning of the oral tradition and extant shifts in dialects between tribes and regions.

More specifically, the methodology chosen largely followed Fetterman’s ethnographical guidelines, which begins by weaving together data volunteered from participant observation in the field into a final coherent holistic finished product (Fetterman 2010 [1989]). Recorded in Abu Dhabi and Al Ain, the corpus was later authenticated after transcription and co-translation by participant family members and by Arabic speaking colleagues, namely, Dr.

Tanya Alghar, Dr. Sael Shadid, Dr. Abdul-Karim Arakat and Dine Lancen. They used an initial forward translation method from Arabic to English and later both forward and backward techniques to recheck the English version, translating once more into Arabic. During this process, however, the validators observed that the language was often outmoded, an older form of Arabic and consequently difficult to translate, and so the exercise was both challenging yet all the more necessary. Therefore, an additional level of authentication was sought from Emirati specialists, such as Hanan al Fardan, of the Dubai Educational Council and Al Ramsa Institute, Dubai, Nada Salem, a local poet, formerly of the Prime Minister’s Office, Dubai. Dr. Sultan al Amimi of the Poet’s Academy and Dr. Fatima al Shamsi of the Sorbonne, Abu Dhabi validated individual poems. Further editing then followed.

While objections to the literary merits of Bedouin compositions based upon the non-standardized language choices in relation to classical Arabic (*fussha*) are familiar in the Arab-speaking world, such negative attitudes has as much to do with market positioning, accessibility to readerships, and the political will to accept regional minority dialects, as it has with content or literary merits. Therefore, a greater Bedouin inclusion in world Englishes or world Arabics allows greater representation of a distinctive social and cultural grouping that is ready to define itself globally with confidence. The major demographic changes, such as the internal and external migration of workers into the main cities of Dubai and Abu Dhabi, that have contributed to huge changes in register operant in the region have been the focus of ethnographers. Both local and global audiences are focused on traditional linguistic practices. The language attrition associated with social expansion and linguistic shift in Arabic, and diglossia (the use of two different dialects of the same language), has been contextualized historically by Versteegh (2001). Language loss is a natural occurrence, but when accelerated it has a more dramatic and condensed impact and the difficulty experienced by Emiratis in understanding all the vocabulary used in their grandparents’ poetry indicates the true extent of the recent wave of language attrition. Therefore, assistance in deciphering such archaic lexis has

come from scholars of classical Arabic as well as from the community.

Using the UNESCO categorization rubric, which graduates from stage one or “safe” to stage seven or “extinct,” Emirati dialects might at first sight be seen to around stage two or “stable yet threatened” (Moseley 2012: 4). This usually means that in practice there are many people in the society familiar with vocabulary choices and that therefore: “The language is spoken in most contexts by all generations with unbroken transmission, although multilingualism in the native language and one or more dominant languages has taken over in certain contexts”(4). However, this is perhaps an over-simplification of the issue. Most tribes had a dialect that had unique features and the subsequent mixing of the tribes has led to an amalgam, with abbreviated vocabulary to make communication easier. Consequently, language loss of the dialects has been greater than first anticipated and it is perhaps more accurate to use the term “severely endangered” due to dialect homogenization—this is evident in the transmission of oral poetry. The ways that Bedouin cultural experience is articulated can be revitalized but the understanding of the specific words to “categorize that experience” is slipping away (Nettle and Romaine 2000: 11). This is because the Bedouin variant has eroded, with the result that “the language is spoken only by grandparents and older generations; the parental generation may still understand it but will not pass it on to their children” (Moseley 2012: 4).

As a result of such language loss, translation, a necessary element of global communication which enhances all forms of cross-cultural interaction, became more difficult. However, the translation process has been perceived in many different ways and has been variously defined. As an amateur or non-specialist, the purpose of reaching a non-specialist audience, was guided by Robinson (1997). As a translator of poetry, and supporter of a field-dependent approach, a collaborative co-translation materialized, with the composer, transmitter, transcriber, and co-translators and validators working as a team. According to Robinson’s model, translation basically involves three main actions: an original creative “abduction” process, a term he borrows from Peirce, followed by an “inductive” process that allows for editing and finely tuned correction

based on reflection and experience of linguistic structure, and a final “deduction” process, which results in a more creative and less literal finished product. Consequently, three versions of the poem were produced, each one more refined than the last. Therefore, Robinson advocates using a mixture of pragmatic linguistic skill and applied scientific methodology (Robinson 1997: 86). This was in practice what occurred in the research as some form of intuitive idea of the intended meaning was arrived at, followed by a revision stage and a final stage to arrive at a finished product.

Unlike the seminal Emirati *al Nabati* collection of Holes and Abu Athera, which emulated the playful ballad style of the poetry, initially there was no real attempt to recreate the double rhyme, with the exception of the “War Poem” ca. 1842. The “stuffing” required to get an English couplet, and imitate the original scansion was avoided, even though the idea of a liberal translation which maintains “the spirit and ‘tone of voice’ of the original poems by making imaginative use of the resources of the English language” was applied (Holes and Abu Athera 2011: 32). Attention was also placed on what Sawayan describes as a thematic balance between the “familiar and the unique” in the language, as in his translation of Saudi *al Nabati* (Sawayan 1985: 95). No two translators will ever produce the same end result and Palva maintains that accentual structure is more important in *al Nabati*, while Maling maintains that accentual stress overlays the metre, with some syllables free and others fixed in length (1963). However, the English accentual pattern was not doggerel or cast as strict metrical patterns produced by the local dialect; syllabic distribution were not employed in this selection (Palva 1993). To show a variety of approaches, though, later poems are co-translated differently, in deference to the late Abu Athera.

For instance, in the translation of the pastoral poem of Shamsa al Falahi some American cultural terms were employed to reflect the makeup of the modern UAE. Phrases such as “coffee to go” were selected instead of a reference to the traditional *della* or portable coffee pot that is a symbol of Bedouin hospitality, which occurs in the Arabic. Additionally, since young Emiratis produce a lot of rap tunes and identify heavily with African American culture, a second major influence was Newmark, “designed to satisfy both the author of

the text and the reader of the translation in equal measure” (1984: 61). In addition, the merger of language choices into a “simultaneous” version of Arabic, which combines the dialects with modern standard Arabic, one contemporary description of what has been occurring in modern Arabic, is also mirrored (Khalifa 2013).

In other words the mixture of registers, formats, and code-switches that comprise the spoken form is becoming more accepted in the public arena, since literate and non-literate influences are conflated in the present and also in the past. Indeed Sawayan’s research suggests such a hybrid use of language existed with a vigorous and “constant interplay between the literary and vernacular traditions” in respect to poetry (1985:169). Thus a similar fusion style was suggested in the translation.

Finally, to assist access to oral Bedouin poetry, texts more familiar to non-specialists and Western readers are juxtaposed. While popular Farsi literature such as *A Thousand and One Nights* has impacted Western literature immensely through translation, Bedouin poetry has a great potential to be linked to global literature in the future through such co-translations.

Oral Narrative and Intangible Heritage

Yates’s 1966 influential study on memory has reinforced the cultural importance of rhythm as a mimetic technique for a number of classical civilizations. How visual, spatial, and auditory cues created mnemonics to anchor information are also explored. This vital aid to rhetorical delivery was examined through Greek, Roman, and Medieval examples, among others, and Fig. 2 provides an associative architectural representation of the uses of buildings which Yates’s study documents, as an *aide-memoire*. She outlined how the sequence of structural features in buildings, including entrance portals and other features could trigger memory to help speech makers and other public performers. Memorization techniques can also be seen in *fussha* (classical Arabic performances), where the *rawi* (reciter of poetry) memorized the lengthy works of the *sha’ir* (poet) to perform at social events, in pre-Islamic times with heavy patterns of stress used as an assist.¹ As it is likely that both literate and illiterate techniques were employed with *al Nabati*

oral tradition, it conforms to many other oral traditions. Such role divisions appear similar to Lord’s categorization of Homeric poetry; the *aidos* (bard) who was capable of instantaneous composition and the *rhapsoidos* (performer) and as part of the Arabian peninsula was colonized by Alexander the Great, at least as far south as Bahrain, there are parallels in performance delivery according to scholars such as Guillén (1993) and Sawayan (2013). As the region has been traversed by a wide range of influences in each direction, researchers are still questioning the overall analysis resulting from a number of archaeological finds, including Greek coins at Mileiha, as to the extent of Hellenization in the region (Potts 2012: 3). Indeed the local currency is the *dirham*, Persian for coin, derived from the Greek *drachmae*.²

However, commenting on aspects of Hellenization in respect to the intangible heritage of Saudi Arabian Nabati (vernacular Arabic) poetry, Sawayan believes application of Parry-Lord formulaic theory on the one hand conflates composition in performance with composition ahead of the performance itself, while, on the other hand, it does not recognize the extent to



Fig. 2
Window into the past.
Courtesy of the author.

which both transmitting and performing are complementary exercises. He further maintains familiarity and popular taste are more likely to have produced formulaic choices such as adding a blessing for the health of a ruler as a coda, rather than these additions acting as delay tactics or to increase the length of a poem (Sowayan 1985). Nevertheless, certain endings were known to have been included according to Holes and Abu Athera, specifically commenting on Emirati poetry (2011). The genre is still under intensive investigation in the Emirates and is provoking a huge range of critical responses. Inevitably though, transmission and composition are potentially evolutionary functions of the poet and performer. Training to memorize and perform poetry acted as a kind of apprenticeship to becoming a poet and it is likely that this did occur in some cases (Sowayan 1985).

Furthermore, the social engagement of the performer with the crowd results in forms of collective response to the “display of communicative competence,” so central to the art form, eliciting either an approving reception or a negative reaction from the audience. The live event affords the opportunity for a communal “enhanced experience” which in turn results in an increased ability to teach moral life lessons through entertainment in a spectacular social setting, according to Bauman (1977: 11). Therefore, the performance element is essential to capture this medium, transcribe it accurately and validate the English without losing the immediacy of impact. Vaivade has also stressed the importance of live performance:

Intangible cultural heritage is a set of cultural expressions that have no living existence without a person, a group or a community actively practicing, creating and reproducing it, through performances of traditional music, oral expressions of knowledge, know-how of craftsmanship, storytelling, etc. (2009: 31-32).

To illustrate this practice of live performance of poetry, the Emirati contributions were performed at home or in a familiar setting with myself as an extended tribal guest or *dakhil* (protected person) (Nicholson 1993). A non-family member in a Bedouin group is given the same security as other members of the household, but special guests are not necessary to warrant oral poetry performance. The poem below is possibly

a fragment from a longer poem, a form of *fakhr* (tribal panegyric), estimated to have been written in 1842 at a time of inter-tribal conflict. It was recorded in Abu Dhabi and transcribed and co-translated by an Emirati student, Hazzaa in early 2012. The English version which Hazzaa helped me complete was approved by him, and was later checked by Noura al Muhairi and Ali al Afeefi, Emirati artists. Noura also transcribed the Arabic. In 2017 he discovered there to be a printed version, attributed to Salem al Anaib by Mohammed Ali Ba Mazaab (2007). Bahisami, the leader of the al Hamimi clan, replaces Hamimi but it is of interest that the memorized version of the poem was passed down almost exactly as the published version, an Arabic account of the Bal Eid tribal exploits. The *salfah* indicates that the buyers like him and scales are mentioned. After much deliberation, the final line was altered to produce a couplet as in the original.

Hazzaa Anwar Nasser Ba Saloom al Hamimi was twenty-two years old at the time of the recording and hails from Baniyas, a large settlement on the outskirts of Abu Dhabi. His name follows the patrimony of his tribe, Anwar being his father's name and Nasser his grandfather's and so on. The al Hamimis were originally from Yemen, and are Bedouin, so his dialect is distinctly Bedu and while he recognized the dialect of Shamsa's poetry in Bedouin, he could not identify all the words. He then recited a war poem by his great-great-grandfather about the 1842 Arabian conflict, and a poem of his own composition, both of which were from memory. Although Hazzaa knew very little English at the time of the recording, he has since improved after travelling to England, when he later reviewed the co-translation. This experience has allowed him to refine some of the original vocabulary choices. As his father is a captain in the police, with two wives, and his grandfather worked in the Presidential Court, this indicates the strong social connections from an earlier period (personal communication 2012).

اربع مئة شفت حبود المهتكب . على اطرافها سبعة من الخيالة
ذلي سبور القوم يا الهميمي من حب صافي يرغب الكيالة

Untitled War Poem ca. 1842
I have gazed upon four hundred of the
enemy might,
On each flank seven of cavalry,
Hamimi shall not wait to be enslaved,
His worth far more than jewelry.

(Trans. Elizabeth Rainey, Ali Al Afeefi and
Hazzaa and al Hamimi).

The poem describes the large numbers of the enemy and the steadfastness of the home defence despite overwhelming odds. Later, Hazzaa recounts the position of the enemy, his ancestor acting as an *ikhbariyyun* (intelligence agent) for his tribe, and also pledges allegiance to the homeland and the need to defend it. Thus, the land they value so much and the characteristics of the Bedouin who inhabit that land—their allegiance, valour and strength—are celebrated. There were many vassal tribes in the Arabian Peninsula at this time and it is unclear exactly whom the Hamimi were defending themselves against. Hazzaa believes that it was a rival tribe and that the conflict lasted around forty years, from ca. 1820 to 1860. The move to Baniyas occurred after the discovery of oil as previously the tribe had been based at the Al Ain oasis. Unification caused a mass exodus to the new urban capital, but there are also ties to Yemen in the area.

Hazzaa's rhyme scheme employs an ABCB pattern, using a dominant *aah* sound, a pattern that was maintained in translation. In this way he is able to make a dramatic impact in only a few lines and also makes it easier to memorize. Western readers familiar with European literature in translation may like to compare the stoicism displayed in Hazzaa's account with the tenacity displayed by the wolf in Vigny's poem *La Mort du Loup* (1843):

Gémir, pleurer, prier est également lache.
Fais énergiquement ta longue et lourde
tache
Dans la voie où le sort a voulu t'appeler.

Puis, après, comme moi, souffre et meurs
sans parler.

Complaints, tears and prayers are all
equally spineless,
You must actively toil the long and hard
test,
In the way seeming best to your conscience,
Then, like me, suffer the passing in silence.
(Trans. Elizabeth Rainey 2012)

Such qualities of bravery and *élan* are valued as part of ethical exemplary behaviour in battle. While in Hazzaa's poem the eye-witness prepares to fight to secure the beloved homeland, Vigny describes the very moment of the gallant wolf's death. The wolf passes on in silence, after a long battle that does not spare any quarter, displaying tenacity to the end of its life. The two accounts are juxtaposed to anthropomorphically highlight the universal appeal of bravery as an attribute.

During a visit to her home in Al Ain, another contributor, Shamsa al Falahi, recorded a poem attributed to her dead brother Mohammed. Shamsa is over eighty years old and a widow. Her father was a *mutawa* or religious teacher, fluent in *fussha* Arabic, the language of the *Qur'an*. She was married at thirteen to Khalifa al Muhairi and had four daughters; one died aged eleven. Two are unmarried and live with her. She also had one son, Saleh. Although she has travelled frequently to Europe for medical reasons, she does not speak any English. One of her daughters is a retired teacher and the other still teaches. She keeps goats on her land and is famous as a local poet but unpublished. She acted as an informal adviser to the late Sheikh Zayed al Nahyan on local matters and is from a comparatively high socioeconomic group. Al Ain dialect is used and since she is illiterate, all her compositions were memorized. Her granddaughter assisted in the interview and much of the material was recorded in Al Ain in 2011 by the author.

In her *salfah* (preamble) to contextualizing the *ganas* (hunting poem), Shamsa imitated the barking of her brother's hunting dog, Raed. He had been lent to another hunter who misused and beat him and, consequently, the dog ran away from his abuser and back to Abu Dhabi, covering a distance of around 170 km. Raed,

meaning thunder, is hence aptly named as he travelled quickly. However, the poem features Hissa, a prize hunting *saluki* (Persian greyhound), never mentioned by name. She is referred to endearingly as “Little Cotton Ball,” because of her luscious, white, fluffy coat. Today bred in Syria and the UAE, there exist ancient drawings of salukis both in the Pharaohs’ tombs and Persian rock art.

Mohammed’s immortalization of Hissa is transmitted by Shamsa in a dialogue, extolling the virtues of the huntsman and the hunt. Shamsa’s own poem is as the shepherdess-composer of pastoral, though al Nabati is more specifically a debate form. Mohammed provides the narrator voice of the first and last lines, and the dog narrates the rest of the poem. She testifies to her steadfast devotion to her master, and to his nobility or *assail* (pure Arab blood line), reflected in his genteel demeanour and discourse. Her owner then returns the compliment and praises her, describing her pedigree in the dedication at the end of the dialogue. Both owner and companion are therefore worthy of respect for their appearance, language, and conduct, as befits a noble or Bedouin. Shamsa’s granddaughter Noura was also present during the transmission and the transcription is hers.

انجان هزري فيج ماخاب قطنون يا جالب المسره
قنيصي في روجي اسليه وصوته جداي ما يفره
جان الخزر اللي يركز ذنيه دون الحضييه بان غره
تيس الجبل لازم اضويه وذوجه من الموت حره
رفجه عليه اداريه مارقص على العود مره
كاس الخمر مدار في ايديه ولا جد وطى في اللي يضره
عينج مثل الحراب ومن الاصايل فيج فره

She will never let me down, my sweet white ball of cotton.

My marksman, my soul’s own delight, alert to my call.

Spotted from the camp on the horizon with the fresh mark,

Bringing the quivering game from the far mountain before it is dusk.

I will protect you, you who have never danced to the oud,³

Or even once held a cup of wine, or followed a crooked path.

Eagle-eyed, pure-bred, of the best pedigree.

(Trans. Elizabeth Rainey and Noura al Muhairi 2011)

The use of metaphor in Bedu narrative often relates to the surrounding landscape. The origin of the term Bedouin, which distinguishing them from other groups like sedentary farmers was probably *badia*, used to describe poor grazing land.⁴ The shifting weather patterns that have defined the migratory lifestyle of the Bedu and their imagination require Bedouins to master such a difficult desert environment. The animals and the myriad plants that spring up during the brief periods of rainfall inspire composition on the long journeys to locate fresh pasture.

The creation of new metaphors and the application of innovative language enhance expression and this is very true of the Bedouins. They combine both standard and non-standard *malhun* (ungrammatical or non-classical) Arabic in vernacular poetry with idiosyncratic vocabulary (Holes and Abu Athera 2011). As Bedouins relate their own distinctive turn of phrase to their independent mindset and distance from central government, it is linked with political and economic self-determination. Colloquial language and other non-standardized morpho-syntactical forms are tolerated in their poetry while not present in higher order registers and genres (Holes and Abu Athera 2009).

One favourite use of colour is the “blood of the gazelle” to describing dark reds, as meat was so central to tribal survival offering guests an abundance of hospitality in areas of comparative food scarcity is seen as an act of generosity and is therefore ennobling. Slaughtering a deer would therefore be a significant gesture of hospitality for visitors. Additionally, there are non-topographical references such as “white heart,” which stands in contrast to black, associated with malice, and therefore indicates someone who is without guile although this is a universally understood convention. Colour

figures significantly in the landscape, as blooms standing out dramatically against the dunes after rain. *Gattuni*, a diminutive of the fluffy white cotton plant was the pet name for Hissa, the prized hunting dog, in Mohammed's poem, for example. The link between the landscape, colour and common metaphors in Bedouin storytelling is key in the production of many forms of their intangible heritage because of the ubiquitous taupe of the desert sands (Fig. 3).

The onomatopoeic *ra* sound of the end rhyme imitates the sound of Raed's barking in Shamsa's introduction and Mohammed later uses a *na'isa* (internal rhyme) for Hissa's voice from the second to the penultimate line ending in *hee*, which is indicative of an older form of poetry known as a *maomumah* (double mono-rhyme) (Holes and Abu Athera 2011: 7). This means there are two distinct schemes each with a single ending sound pattern in the poem. By incorporating the second rhyme, Mohammed renders the dog's voice as more refined, perhaps out of respect or affection.

Besides striking figures of speech and rhyme, structure is also of particular importance. This is because the key distinction between *kalum manzum* (organized linguistic structures) and *kalum manthu* (generic prose) is a very important one. The former description has been likened by Badawi to the organization of pearls into a necklace: according to Badawi, a poet is "a jeweler whose medium was words" (1975: 5). It is the careful structuring of compositional narrative that results in a marketable end product, rather like the pearls themselves, attracting community endorsement, and providing a profit for poets. This attendant respect for language and its effects in these vast silent tracts of land is immense and poets are still well respected and rewarded for their work. In pre-Islamic times the poetry competition at Ukaz, near Mecca (McDowell 1992), was fiercely contested and the sparring between the tribes for patronage continues to the present time as seen in contemporary televised shows with a top prize of five million *dirhams* to be won (\$1,361,470).

Forms of intangible heritage such as folklore and oral poetry influence us before we are able to read and write, providing social anchorage, cultural identity, and sense of belonging to a community. This transmission, often in the form



of tradition or learned behaviour, is particularly strong in Islam but is also evident in other religions. What the teller intends, in general terms, is to entertain, as well as convey a message from the voice of experience which is both "ludic and commemorative" (McDowell 1992). Hence both the ritual of ceremony and playful performance is integral in the process. As Schram notes of Jewish storytelling, a fresh perspective is generated in the communal perspective when re-witnessed by new eyes (1984).

The stories and poetry of the Emirates are enthusiastically transmitted and received, and yet the practical dimension of these stories and songs is also never far from the surface. Emirati performance art is in general dynamic and highly

Fig. 3
Ergoub. Courtesy of the author.

dramatic. For instance, camel drivers used the “*Rakdh al Rikab*” song to keep up morale as they tracked stray beasts in the Empty Quarter. When water was discovered in Abu Dhabi island in 1761 it became a centre of government and more permanent settlement rather than a transit grazing area traversed by coastal tribes and others from the Western region (Agius 2005). These levels of engagement are part of the communal practices that keep material goods and immaterial cultural practices interconnected. A derivative of the “Al Tareq” or quest song of travellers, in contrast to the internal or literal religious *hajj*, the workmen use such songs to mark time, such as hoisting the sail of the *dhow*s with the “Al Khateefa.” Dubai Municipality has catalogued a number of these songs to explain aspects of Emirati culture to the outsider (Dubai Municipality 1996). Figure 3 illustrates the local topography which inspired such songs, poems, and narratives. Wells were named after the men who dug them and used as signposts, identifiable in part because of the slow pace of travel, where every bush and individual shape of *ergoub* (high sand dunes) was a memorized land mark. Another type of song is the “Al Malid,” which is a sacred song used to accompany the celebrant on religious pilgrimages and other important rites of passage, such as circumcision or the birth of a child (Dubai Municipality 1996). These kinds of social celebrations draw in the new members of the tribe and consolidate their identity. While early cycles of poems have been archived and passed into written literature in Arabia, within parts of the Emirates this process has been slow to occur for cultural reasons. This

Fig. 4
Cloudscape. Courtesy of
the author.



would indicate that the Bedouins have remained more traditional and closer to their roots in the south of the country, since they have retained traditional oral practices more extensively. In addition, more spontaneous forms of performance occur, while public competitions are common, friends surrounding talented transmitters are often gifted with personalized and unexpected impromptu performances.

The composition below is a current example of oral Bedouin intangible heritage and though composed in 2006 had never been written down until transcribed by Shamsa’s granddaughter Noura. It was originally recited in response to her daughter’s concerns that her elderly mother would become distressed going to feed her goats in the heat of the day. When her daughter suggested that it might be a better idea to sell the herd, this family dialogue resulted in a poem, recited from memory by Shamsa on request in 2011 and was not arranged for an artificial occasion or influenced by an additional audience in any way.

Shamsa does not have titles for her poems because they are informal, relate to a specific situation, and are a part of well-meaning familial banter. The Arabic recording and transcription has been released with kind permission. Throughout the recitation Shamsa played with the prayer beads in her hand and also gave the explanation of the circumstances that led her to compose the poem. The intimacy of religious faith and humanity is seen in many Muslims’ use of prayer beads to relax them and to bring emotional and spiritual consolation. This is an engrained automatic and reflexive practice and it seemed to comfort her as she recited her considered response to the request in the form of a poem. She lay down after lunch and prayer in her room and then invited me to come and listen to her poem. Afterward, her granddaughter Noura and I worked on the translation and then she approved the finished work later, after a backwards translation was read and explained to her.

If I sell them, I will never see their worth,
Countless times fed kin from kids,
Favoured by Zayed, I keep my counsel and
owe no man,

Am brave, not given to sloth.
 The road to the pasture is silky smooth,
 I cruise to the field in my dark, velvet ride,
 Coffee to go, car full of grain and hay,
 A skilled driver knows how to keep me
 chill,
 Happy in the trees' shadow, amid full bird
 song
 Would hear thunder's ring and full
 lightning sparkle,
 Watering country, town and Bedouin.
 (Trans. Elizabeth Rainey and Noura Al
 Muhairi).
 (Shamsa personal communication 2011).

This Emirati *decastich* (ten-lined poem of an unspecified metre) celebrates the rural idyllic pastoral lifestyle. Shamsa evokes the ties to the earth that the Bedu enjoy along with their independent spirit, and combines it with a traditional invocation for rain. Such prayers are offered up during spells of prolonged drought and Shamsa's journey invokes these clouds. The pleasure of her simple daily routine is given a more modern feel with a description of her car and driver and she attributes these benefits to Sheikh Zayed. Therefore, praise for the ruler, along with her spirited independence is linked in a sound rebuff. She also reminds her of traditional Bedouin hospitality and of the gifts of the natural world that she can still enjoy. This also shows the distinction between the Bedu, who are careful to maintain their social differentials from urbanized tribes. Figure 4 depicts some of the surprising cloud bursts alluded to in Shamsa's composition.

The bucolic dialogue reflects Shamsa's attitudes toward her surroundings and family as the description moves from the particular to the general in the *rihlah* (journey). Replacing a swaying camel with a cushioned land cruiser, she concludes in a positive vein which Sowan states is classical. A conclusion suggesting *mitayil* (moral behaviour) underscores the importance of continuity (1985). Thus the debate is both a means to an end and an end in itself. Unlike Saudi Arabia, there is more active participation in the Emirates, although traditionally in the home rather than in public. Such simple country delights, listening to the ringing call of birdsong

اللي بعثهم ماياين اثمان في السوق عند اللي يبيعون
 وياما ذبحنا تيوس سمان حرق الضيوف يوم يلهون
 ومن فضل زايد عالي الشان لابيع السر ولا انا مديون
 وعندي شجاعة انا هب كسلان ولانا من اللي يتبع الهون
 ويازين مرواحي امسيان وسط الكروزن عامج اللون
 امحضر الدلة وسامان وسبوس ومن الجت مشحون
 والدريول شاطر وفنان واللي من تحرك سيره ابثون
 ومستانس في ظل عيدان في عزبته ومن الحمام يردد لحن
 وليت الرعد يبات دنان والبرق اللي فيه المزون
 ويسقي على الدولة والاطمان والبدو اللي في البر اسكون

and willing a desire for rain, express the spirit of the 21st-century Emirati pastoralist.

The poem is in the first person, a direct and informal communication combining good political husbandry linked to good care of her herd and her personal *mirwahi* (journey) to feed them is a colloquial choice. Yet as her family used to migrate from Dubai, Al Ain, and Abu Dhabi depending on the season, the word choice may be on one level pan-Emirati, yet paradigmatically nowadays very regional. The life-style choice is equated with a tradition that she insists on maintaining, providing food for her herd and her guests.

Figure 5 shows an abundant collection of dates that grow locally, served to household visitors with local *gawa* (coffee) as refreshment



Fig. 5
 Palm and dates. Courtesy
 of the author.

while reciting the *diwan* (collection of poems). Other cultures such as those of Iraq, Iran, and Turkey associate narratives around coffee houses rather than drinking coffee (Kreyenbroek and Marzolph 2010).

Structurally, the poem employs a double monorhyme, each line having an *aan* sound, and the end rhyme, using rich assonance with *oun*. She also incorporates *saman*, (an Urdu word for goods), reflecting the daily language of her driver together with a modern term, land cruiser. In delivery her voice rose in intonation with the line “Am brave,” underscoring her resolute Bedouin character, quiet and composed throughout. More specifically, speaking of Shamsa’s role, according to Noyes, her performances are used to reinforce her “authority and autonomy within her family.” Later she states, “Exemplarity is performance” (Noyes 2016: 76).

In a contrastive form of pathetic fallacy, the juxtaposition with Virgil in the extract below, is significant. It is the scene where Meliboeus laments how one of his flock has miscarried and he is blighted and Shamsa, the Bedouin, describes an abundance of benefits. In the Classical example, the “dire Portents” and punitive sentence of exile is absent and instead there is complete harmony with nature. What do such comparisons show us? Shamsa’s version of the *wasf* (pastoral) emphasizes the importance of the farmer in maintaining Emirati cultural and socio-economic infrastructure. While not a Doric voice in the sense of a regional Greek dialect reflected in voices such as Sophron or Theocritus, but in the broader sense of idyllic, her Al Ain home is presented as a complete refuge for the tribe.

Far diff’rent is my Fate: my feeble Goats

With pains I drive from their forsaken
Cotes.

Fig. 6
Desert bird. Courtesy of
the author.



And this you see I scarcely drag along,
Who yearning on the Rocks has left her
Young;

(The Hope and Promise of my failing
Fold:)

My loss by dire Portents the Gods foretold:
(Virgil, *The Eclogues* I:17-22. Trans.
Dryden).

الطير يلعي على الكنيسة ويردد لحون

ساعدونى يا اهل الخير ودونى صوب الامارات

لشيخ زايد ابغى اسير راعي الحمية والمروات

It was through forms of entertainment such as narrative that directives were passed from Persian overlords under the Achaemenid Empire and the allegiance displayed by Shamsa in ascribing her domestic good fortune to the rule of Zayed, also is supportive of political order (Nicholson 1993). Al Nabati supports the local rule but equally her own position and also the intimation of the promise of rain is also a blessing which contrasts with the “failing Fold” and dire landscape of Virgil’s *Eclogue*.

The short third contribution from Shamsa is the three-lined verse below, composed in 1993 during a trip to Switzerland. A special family favourite, it had not been written down until requested in 2011 and is an evocation of the homeland. It expresses a poetic form of the *hijaz* mode (longing for the desert). Sheikh Zayed is also known to have written a number of such verses, expressing a desire for the familiar red sands of Al Ain, while away in other Emirates. Her grandson asked her to explain what the bird was saying and she replied

The bird’s keening song rings out from
the church,

“Help me, good people, to be Emirates
bound,

I want to be under Sheikh Zayed’s Bounty
and Hand.”

(Trans. Elizabeth Rainey and Noura al
Muhairi.)

Shamsa uses the metaphor of the bird as an indirect reference to her own desire to go home and again relates it to the good governance of the ruler.

Variant Two

When asked to perform from the poem in 2013, Shamsa could not remember her composition, and so, with lots of family encouragement she came up with this slightly different version with an additional line. Vaz da Silva has observed that memory loss is a major cause of accidental variants, making composition an “evolutionary” process (2013). This variant seems to suggest his finding accurate. (Shamsa personal communication 2013.)

The bird’s keening song rings out from the church in a loud lament,

Saying to “The Father of the Generous,”
Take me to my Emirates home,

I want to be under Sheikh Zayed’s Bounty
and Hand.

God grant our Patron, Zayed, a long life.”

(Trans. Elizabeth Rainey and Noura al Muhairi).

الطير يلعي على الكنيسة يلعي يطرب ويصيح بصوات
ويقول في ابو اهل الخير ودوني دار الامارات
ل شيخ زايد ابغي اسير راعي الحمية والمروات
ياالله اتخلي زايد استيين ويعلة ذخر طول الوقت

The plaintive call of the bird perched for flight is a signal of the need to depart. Thus, the poem is a life-enhancing evocation of Bedouin lifestyle, and amid the high-speed technological highway such personalized poetic cameos have a culturally strategic importance. Focusing on the journey that has brought the UAE to its present position, Shamsa’s voice does not go unremarked in the cross-cultural Emirati canopy of 21st-century development.

Shamsa makes her request obliquely, using poetry instead of a direct statement to express her feelings and emotions, seen both as more polite and culturally appropriate. The signal for the

journey is persuasive, using political identity and oral tradition strategically to win the argument. The choice of image is instinctive, replacing an Emirati mosque with the local church, linking the idea of religion and patriotism together with nostalgia. The bird’s simple emotive call is representative of modern transhumance and the need for a home-based pasture. Working with her prayer beads, she kinesthetically associates the Islamic tradition that produced her with her poem through the reassuring movement of her hands (Turner 1982). As she inspired the others around her to travel and feel a similar yearning for home by her poetic message, this was an effective performance. The warbling of the bird is territorial and heartfelt, beautifully composed and evocative of her nesting instincts in the heart of the regional red sands. Her appreciative audience left for home shortly afterward as a result of the tailored performance and thus she has inspired the others around her to initiate another journey. The bird’s discourse contains a rich rhetorical appeal to prepare for a new encampment, his perch on the roof a religious location for such a sung imperative for the family to travel. The vast distance waiting to be crossed was thus presaged through his ringing voice.

The quatrain uses a *muhmala* (mono-rhyme) scheme ending with an *aat* sound, a more complete unit than the first version (Holes and Abu Atheera 2011). She incorporates an extended blessing for the health of the ruler, a standard appeal often grafted on as a mark of respect.

Conclusion

Bedouin vernacular al Nabati is alive but without further exposure to appreciative enthusiasts, it is facing a steady decline in the use of aspects of older dialects (Versteegh 2001; Fidlow 2008). This is despite the popularity of televised programs and media exposure, having increased the prestige, wealth, and power of the practitioners (Crystal 2000). This together with a resurgence of sensitive co-translation and a creative positioning with familiar, regional, texts will help keep older dialects of Arabic alive and in the public domain.

Indeed, the difficulty in negotiating the final translation from the original Arabic was because few of the key actors were able to explain the same lexical choices. Further study

and enhanced collections will help stabilize the dialects by highlighting obsolete vocabulary, providing extended global recognition. The love of extemporized performance is very central to this outcome yet it is an ability that has been taken for granted as part of the intangible heritage of the UAE. Modernization, together with the switching to English as the language of education, has meant that this remarkable intangible heritage has to some extent atrophied, but is still very active in the more traditional areas. It is also a highly prized ability and celebrated on many social occasions where the vernacular is a mark of regional identity.

While globalization has led to much being taken from what is considered the best from the world marketplace in the Emirates, it has also allowed for some benchmarking in cultural practices. Persian popular oral narratives are also a relatively neglected area of study according to Kreyenbroek and Marzolph (2010). Helping to preserve oral composition and storytelling in the Middle East enhances interest in the Bedouin dialect, global folklore, and cultural links at a time when plans for a series of museums for Abu Dhabi are underway. Alongside a Guggenheim and Louvre, the Zayed National Museum, is to house a range of traditional exhibits celebrating national identity. Further, the Dubai World's Fair (2020 Expo) will augment the Emirates' ability to display intangible heritage in tandem with other more familiar forms.

Additionally, the idea that a kind of *dinomia* (cultural depletion), similar to the linguistic concept of "subtractive bilingualism" might permeate the Emirates, has long been the subject of debate, but this is in fact not the case (Lambert 1977). The society is cosmopolitan and urbane, yet still very protective of its heritage and language base. Understanding of the dialects is decreasing as those with the ability to authenticate translations of vernacular poems disagree amongst themselves. While deference to other cultures has been in part the result of accommodating a large cosmopolitan ex-patriot community and a bilingual educational system, cultural memory has remained strong. In order to make intercultural exchange fully sustainable, traditional oral practices ought to be encouraged internationally, without rendering the genre inauthentic. While there is no reason to be unduly pessimistic

about the future of Emirati oral narrative, there are many archaic morpho-syntactical examples of unfamiliar obsolete vocabulary present in the work of key actors who participated in the collection. While to an extent it can be argued that language loss takes place in any society, the impact of English together with the unification of isolated communities and generational levelling has significantly fractured use of older vocabulary.

Consequently, while aspects of *dinomia* (cultural depletion) can be revitalized through extended participation, this might be further enhanced by studying colloquial poetry in both Arabic and English as well as in relation to other regional literatures. The United Arab Emirates has a great deal to offer the global community and this has not been damaged irretrievably by the imposition of English, but rather has revitalized a two-way trade that has been ongoing for centuries. Even a relatively untutored ear can hear the resonance of the poetry of the region and the mother tongue is still used in conversation, song, and folk memory.

This study hopes to continue to augment interest in Emirati composition and to see it become globally accepted into internationally recognized publications. The immediacy of impact of Bedouin poetry and the exceptional output renders it more readily accessible through sensitive translation to the non-Arab. Comparative literature may have a role to play since the UAE is strategically positioned at a crossroads for revitalizing local Arabic co-translation. Accidental collectors could also suggest some further avenues of interest using parallel texts of English and Arabic poetry and potentially revitalize interest by relating world folk heritage to the culture of the Emirates. Identifying regional variants of Emirati Arabic in tandem with marginal uses of vocabulary in English could also be one such constructive approach, as an assist to staunching the community's lexical disconnection from its own linguistic inheritance. Finally, celebrating both contemporary and archaic language usage is a dynamic, performative and communal exercise, uniting some marginalized members of a Bedouin host culture with resident and global enthusiasts, through the transmission and mediation of intimate poetry collections. Let us hope this symbiosis continues apace.

Notes

1. Tueteu recounts it was generally accepted that 622 is the date of the exit of the Prophet Mohammed from Mecca for Medina (1985: 22).
2. Broadly speaking, the beginning of the third century BC seems a generic date for significant Hellenistic contact in the Emirates. Hellyer (1998: 83); Kay (1986: 98). Strictly however, the Hellenistic period would be ca. 330-125

BC or so but in the Gulf Hellenistic also often encompasses the Parthian period, so ca. 300 BC-200 AD is not uncommonly used, so long as it's pre-Sasanian (Potts, Personal Communication February 15 2014).

3. Ancient stringed Middle Eastern musical instrument, the fore-runner to the lute and guitar.
4. Verdteegh, however, believes the term to refer the 'lost tribes' (*al bai'da*), perhaps even meaning non-believers (2001: 37).

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