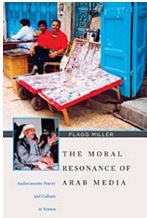


Circulating Oral Poetry in “Reel” Time

Sean O’Neill



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Poetry has deep roots in the Islamic tradition. Like many religions, if not most, the central text — the Koran — is itself composed as series of poems, meted out as a series of parables, commentaries on the situations and scenes of everyday life; and even the word *Koran* itself literally means “to recite” in Arabic, in the sense of delivering oral poetry before an audience. This recent book by Flagg Miller illustrates just how much that is still true today, nearly 1400 years after the founding of the religion. This much should be familiar to those who have been following the deep history world literature, including traditions like Homeric epic, the Jewish Torah, or *Beowulf*, among many other examples, such as Celtic Bards or West African Griot musicians, not to mention the Christian Bible. All of these traditions represent examples of poetry in the flesh, delivered fresh, before a live audience, with strong moral and political overtones — which can include satire and comedy at the expense of the elite. It should come as no surprise, then, that poetry continues to play a major role in everyday life within Muslim societies, which this book explores in relation to the circulation of contemporary poetry in modern-day Yemen, composed on an “authentic” tribal model, in cosmopolitan settings.

Those familiar with the literature on contemporary Arabic poetry will recognize that Steven Caton explored similar themes in *Peaks of Yemen I Summon* (1990), with its focus on poetics, aesthetics, and rhetoric, all rooted in Aristotle’s philosophy, which is still very much alive in the throughout the Arabic-speaking world. Here Miller follows in Caton’s footsteps, exploring similar themes in relation to the circulation of original poetry by means of modern media, specifically audiocassettes. Furthermore, Miller’s book specifically focuses on distinctive genre called *bid’ wajiwab*, which loosely translates as “initiation and response,” a kind of poetry that opens a dialog and demands an immediate reply, while delivered in a characteristically dignified and respectful fashion. There are parallels, of course, to the “call and response” pattern of, say, African American gospel and blues poetry, or with the general dialogic process of language itself, as Mikhail Bakhtin laid out in his life-long intellectual program (cf. Bakhtin 1981). Yet, in this case, the reply comes days or weeks later, when returned to the sender with a matching cassette poem, heard widely on the local scene.

As Miller shows throughout this book, this sort of living poetic tradition continues to enter into the political fray in modern-day Yemen, shaking — and shaping — the foundations of society, with a guiding ethical vision. Miller’s observations are based on his fieldwork in the Yāfi’ region of Yemen — a mountainous territory near the southern coast, where the author lived for several years, starting in 1995. As Miller illustrates, with detailed ethnographic sketches that are sometimes carried on into the notes at the end of the chapters, these messages are now carried into the airwaves in the form of audiocassettes. Each chapter, in this way, provides a close up shot, a detailed portrait of how these poems circulate, with an impact on the local communities. Chapter 1, for instance, focuses on the circulation of folk poetry as a genre, with emphasis on just three cassettes that played a role in resolving local ethnic dispute between 1995 and 1997, when the author was there, on the ground, so to speak to witness the debates that unfolded as local audiences reacted to the tapes. Chapter 2, on the other hand, provides a historical backdrop, making sense of the seemingly paradoxical rise of “metropolitan tribalism,” while Chapter 3 examines changes in responses to modern technology, paving the way for the emergence of the audiocassette today. Chapter 4, in contrast, focuses on strategies of poetic composition during the time when the author was present to the process. Finally, Chapters 5 and 6 focus on tropes of character, personality, and history, as they appear in these narratives, especially as they give rise to morally compelling recordings, resonating with a modern audience. In this sense, the book as a whole is an elaborate study in the ethnography of speaking, revealing, chapter-by-chapter, how language in fact shapes human thought, perception and action in everyday settings. Undoubtedly, this process has now passed into cyberspace with the ubiquitous cell phone, but this book was based on fieldwork carried out before the era of the iPhone.

In this way, Miller’s book offers more than a glimpse into one of the world’s major poetic traditions, providing a detailed ethnography of the ongoing political dialogues that unfold in the Arabic world, often on fast-paced schedule of mere hours or days, particularly in modern-day Yemen, where the author carried out his fieldwork for several years, starting in 1995 — even if similar processes are at work throughout the Islamic world. That sense of moral resonance, as Miller puts it, is part of the guiding spirit of the poetic tradition, which is thoroughly dialogical, as he points out, once one looks past the individual poem, to the larger tradition in which these works are embedded.

For those who crave poetry in the flesh, with examples of entire poems delivered before a live audience, including the spontaneous reactions of those present, this book may slightly miss the mark. Few poems are given in their entirety, nor does the reader feel the embrace of the poetic encounter, unfolding before their eyes and

ears. Yet this is not for lack of ethnographic detail, which the book gives in great abundance, even going well into the extensive notes that finish each of the chapters. And the reader can also turn to the extensive corpus of poems given in the appendixes.

This monumental work clearly belongs within the broad tradition of the “thick description” as defined by the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973 : 3-20). As such, it is a major contribution to the study of the place of poetry in the contemporary world, with its fine-grained analysis of the political commentaries that circulate by in modern-day Yemen by electronic means, resonating with the deepest “tribal” values of the region, even in urban and cosmopolitan settings. More to the point, the author, Flagg Miller, illustrates that this poetry has what he calls a “moral resonance,” providing a venue for social critique in the name of justice, righting perceived wrongs, as swiftly as a poem can be disseminated, by means of cassettes, which quickly circulated, in a matter of weeks, to audiences in the tens of thousands during the time of his fieldwork in Yemen, over several years, mostly between 1995 and 1997. Yet, even beyond the Middle East, this work also has a much wider “resonance” with the allied fields of anthropology, linguistics, communications, cross-cultural poetics, and religious studies, in a time when aural discourses circulate with electronic media, such as audiocassettes or even the internet. Finally, followers of comparative literature will observe a subtle corrective to Mikhail Bakhtin’s notorious prejudice against poetry as a supposedly “monologic” literary genre, canonically featuring only one voice, from a single perspective. As Miller illustrates throughout this work, modern-day Arab poets incite lively political dialogue in the form of verse and song, creating one of the world’s most engaged — and thoroughly *dialogical* — art-forms, with the ability to respond to current events in “real” time — or in “reel” time, when it comes to cassettes, to invoke an evocative pun in English!

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AUTEUR

Sean O'Neill

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Courriel : seanoneill@ou.edu