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# CAMELS AND COFFEE THEIR ROLES IN NABATI POETRY AS AIDS TO COMPOSITION AND MEANS OF TRANSMISSION

by  
Saad A Sawayan

It is the domestication of the camel that made bedouin life and nomadic existence in the Arabian desert both necessary and possible. The bedouin is well aware of this fact and expresses his appreciation of the camels and their importance in his life by calling them the gift of the Lord *ʿatāya allah*. He derives immense pleasure from talking about his camels. They are an inexhaustible source of bedouin lore, and conversation always leads back to them. A good part of the imagery, metaphor, motifs, and the whole aesthetic and linguistic repertoire of the Arabian oral literature relate to the camel.

The fascination of desert poets with the camel and their utilization of it as a poetic subject goes back to the earliest specimen of Arabian poetry. This poetic interest stems from the fact that this animal, aside from the general bedouin interest in camels, is the most efficient means of spreading poems. How a poetic message is to be transmitted from its composer to its recipient is usually spelled out in the poem itself, and integrated into it as a part of its overall thematic structure. It is in this part of the poem that the camel appears as a mean of transmission delivering messages, news, and events articulated in verses that are sung by camel riders and relayed by mounted travellers. The camel theme occupies the most prominent section of the *qaṣīdah*, that of the journey *ar-riḥlah*, the extended introductory section describing the camel. This prelude is the most important part when it comes to the aesthetic and artistic components of the Arabian ode and it constitutes the backbone of the poem and the most nostalgic part of it. In this prelude, the poet exhibits his artistic skills and encyclopedic knowledge by giving detailed descriptions and expert portrayal of a fine camel mount. A riding camel *dilūl, miṭiyyih* must be a thoroughbred of noble ancestry, not a common pack animal. She is graceful and alert with sharp glowing eyes, small pointed ears, graceful arched neck, long limbs, muscular shoulders, wide chest, erect hump, and broad, bulging ribs. She can travel tirelessly over long stretches of waterless desert, and she can graze on the run so that the rider does not lose valuable time.

This tradition has continued in Nabati poetry with a great deal of elaboration. It remained alive throughout the ages and continued with all its details till the car came to replace the camel and diminish its cultural role and curb its function as a mean of transportation. For desert poets living in an oral culture, the camel is not only a beautiful animal and an object of admiration. More than that, it is an aid to poetic composition and a means of dispersal of poetry. The poet mounts his camel to dispel his worries *humūm* and to soothe his soul when it is agitated by the compositional urge. The classical poet Tarafah says:  
*wa-ʿinni laʿumdi l-hamma ʿinda ḥiḍārihill bi-ʿawjāʾa mirqālin tarūhu wa-taḡtadi.*

When overridden by worries, I find relief on the back of my mount, gaunt from much going and coming.

While the Bedouin poet Rida ibn Taarif from the Shammar tribe says:

1/ *la dāg bālī gilt dannū dilūlīll ḥiṭṭū ʿalēhā kūrahā w-al-garāmish.*

2/ *ḥiṭṭū ʿalēhā kūrahā w-irxšū lill nabī nmaḍdi wagtinā b-al-miṭārish.*

1/ When distressed, I call out: bring forth my mount, put on her saddle and my riding gear.

2/ Put on her saddle and I shall take leave; I must seek relief on desert roads.

Till recently, Nabati poets continued to handle the camel theme in the prelude to their poems as their *jāhili* predecessors did, and they even have a term for this part of the poem which they call *irkāb* despatching of a mounted deputy. Frequently, a Nabati poem begins with a prelude of several lines enumerating the qualities of a fine riding camel which is preferably a barren female, because females are more docile and enduring than males, especially in winter, the rutting season. Also, a barren camel is stronger and more manageable than a pregnant or suckling camel because the strong attachment of the mother to her calf makes it quite difficult to separate the two.

The treatment of the camel theme differs from poet to poet. Some take the matter literally and give a factual catalogue, a realistic manual, so to speak, of a good riding camel. The more accomplished poets, however, are well aware of the fact that this is not a real life situation so much as an artistic device. For them, it is a poetic realm sometimes reflecting and sometimes deflecting the real world. Some poets give only lip service to the subject dismissing it in few lines in the beginning of the poem. Others expand on it and go into the minutest details enumerating the exceptional qualities of the camel, specifying her age and pedigree, describing the riding gear, the tassels of the saddle bag, the color of the halter, and even the driving stick of the rider. The poet, then, goes on to expound on the daring and alertness of the rider, the various bedouin camps and water stations he passes on the way, the stars that guide him, the topographical features marking desert roads, the beasts and terrors of the wilderness, not to mention human enemies, as well as hospitable hosts.

Through poetic artistry and versification, the camel has turned into a mythical being; she runs so fast

her feet hardly touch the ground. The strikes of her hoofs crush stones and shatter them in every direction like flying arrows. To urge his mythical mount to a higher speed, the poet sends after her starving carnivores or ties to her a wild cat to gnaw on her side with its sharp teeth and claws. Her speed is compared to an ostrich or a gazelle frightened by hunters, or to a thirsty grouse flying towards water. The quickness of her darting is likened to the swooping of an eagle or to a bucket laden with water which, having reached the top of the well, its pulling rope snapped and it plummeted into the bottom. Artistry reaches its peak when the marks of the saddle girths lining the sides of the mount are compared to the marks of drawing ropes on the rocky sides of a water well. The poet relishes in comparing the movement of the swishing tail of his mount to the unbraided plaits of a beautiful maiden dancing on her wedding night.

The poetic camel is left to graze on wild desert pastures, protected by daring lads who thwart with their lances any attack from jealous enemies eager to graze their own herds on such lush pastures. The camel stores fat and energy in her hump which grows visibly bigger and higher. She is never ridden or loaded but left to graze freely until the poet decides that an urgent matter has come up to saddle her and go on a long journey. Having spent such a long time in the pastures of the wilderness, and having not been ridden all this time, she has become so wild and so untamed the rider could hardly manage to set the saddle on her back and ride her. Her hump has grown so big the saddle would hardly fit on her. She shies away from her own shadow and is startled by her saddle trappings. The mount is so vigorous and strong the rider has to hold tight on the rein lest her nervous jerks break it and the saddle. The camel starts the journey fat and strong, but by the end of the journey she is emaciated to mere skin and bones. The hump is completely gone and the back is sore and blistered, showing deep marks of the saddle and girths.

Going on a long journey in the open desert is a perilous and extremely difficult undertaking which may prove fatal to both camel and rider unless they both use their instincts and excellent senses and cooperate to avoid danger. The camel perceives danger quickly and alerts the rider by her movements, but she never growls, for a growling camel can easily attract enemies. An experienced rider never ill-treats his mount, but always looks after her needs. If the camel dies from exhaustion, the rider may perish with her. Through the difficulties of a long and hard journey, a mutual and intimate bond develops between the camel and the rider who empathizes with his mount and comes to appreciate the camel qualities of endurance and fortitude. Frequently, the poet engages the camel in a dialogue in which each of them gives consolation and encouragement to the other. The silent painful groaning of the camel under him symbolizes for the poet his own suffering and heartaches *humūm*. The sorrow the journeying poet feels over the separation from his loved ones and fellow tribesmen is echoed by the tender sighs of the camel yearning after her young and after her companions in the herd. The camels exhibit such strong attachment, not only to their kind but also to humans, who share with them the vocabularies relating to tender feelings and emotions, such as attachment *ryām*, affection *wilf*, and yearning *hanīn*. When the camel sees her young, milk starts dripping from her udders or, as the bedouin say, *t<sup>c</sup>atif*, a word sharing the same root as *c<sup>c</sup>af* meaning kindness and charity to the weak and needy.

It is not unusual for a poet to address his poem to, or compose it in honor of a person who may be separated from him by the vast tracts of desert wastes. The urgency of the matter recorded in the poem and the dangers on the road call for the proper mount with the necessary qualifications of strength and speed. Here, the camel turn into a tool, an instrument that abolishes distances and relays poems from tribal chief to tribal chief, from poet to poet, or from a lover to his love. The following is a poem addressed by Si doun al- Waaji, Chief of al-Ja aafrih section of the Anazah tribe, to his son Gaab, who was then camping in the Syrian desert, imploring him for help against an adversary:

1/ *yā-rākibin min ʿindinā fōg miḥdābll mā mūn gaṭṭāʿ al-fayāfī ila anwēt.*

2/ *ʿind al-fidīlih ʿidd yōmēn b-iḥsābll awwal ḡrāhum ḡōl yā-dēf ḥiyyit.*

3/ *ḥirrin ṣiḡir w-taww mā shagg lih nābll ʿigb al-ḡrā waddiʿ rjālin lihum ṣit.*

4/ *w-ilyā rikībtih darrbih xall al-ajnābll w-inḥar l-najm al-jadiy kān ant maddēt.*

5/ *islam w-sallim li ʿala ʿgāb wi-ḥjābll sallim ʿalā madnūn ʿēni ila anwēt.*

6/ *b-al-ḥāl xiṣṣ ʿgāb fakkāk al-anshābll yinjik kān innik ʿan al-ḥagg ʿidit.*

7/ *gil lih tarā shāmīx shimax ʿigib mā shābll ya-ʿgāb w-allah ḡallalōni w-ḡallēt.*

8/ *ya-ʿgāb ḥaddōni ʿalā ḡēr mā ṭābll ḡālaw tawddar min wara al-mā w-taʿaddēt.*

9/ *min ʿigib mā ni sitrihum ʿind al-ajnābll w-ilyā balathum ḡālitin mā titaggēt.*

1/ Farewell, rider on a speedy, well-bred camel fit to travel desolate wastes.

2/ In a scant two days you reach liberal hosts who receive guests with warm welcome.

3/ Noble and young, her molars are not out yet, after you are refreshed, take leave of the gallant hosts.

- 4/ Ride your mount and follow the tracks in a strange country; travel north, keeping the Pole Star before your eyes.
- 5/ Go in safety and carry my verses to 'Gaab and Hjaab; give my greetings to my dear sons.
- 6/ Give a special salutation to 'Gaab, the valiant lad, protector of the weak and the oppressed.
- 7/ Tell him that Shaamix has become a brazen man in his old age; by God, O 'Gaab, he oppresses me so.
- 8/ O 'Gaab, bitter is the taste of defeat; now I am forced to stay away from the tribal wells.
- 9/ While before I was the champion of the tribal cause, the hero on the battlefield.

Poetic correspondence between desert chiefs used to be the primary means of delivering a threat, declaring war, or proposing peace. Such poems were transmitted in a formal manner. A deputation of well-mounted, gallant riders, whose mounts were of the same breed and exotic color, was dispatched with the poetic message. The following are few lines from a threat poem addressed by one chief to another:

1/ *yā-rākīb allī mā lahajha al-jinīnāll mā hī wahadhā tāmnt lah ṭimāna.*

2/ *fijj an-nḥūr mḥajjalāt al-yidēnāll min sās ʿērātin ʿrābin smāna.*

3/ *yalfin l-misliṭ tart al-ḡānmīnāllgil irḥalū ʿan jawwikum ṣār māna.*

4/ *nabī ndallih miḡirʿāt al-ḥanīnāll aḡwād min riʿy al-maxāfiḥ smāna.*

5/ *nifikkihin min lābitin miʿtidīnāll min dūnihin ʿūd al-ʿrēnī ʿaṣāna.*

6/ *mā hin b-warṭ jdūdīnā l-migdimīnāll kasbin b-al-ēdī min ḥalāyib ʿdāna.*

- 1/ Hail, you rider on a barren mount whose breasts were never suckled by a calf; one of eight identical camels, she is not alone.
- 2/ Their chests are wide, their legs are spotted with white, thoroughbreds of Omani origin.
- 3/ You will alight by the camp of Mislit, the scion of noble ancestors; tell him to quit his land, we wish to take possession of their wells.
- 4/ We wish to graze our camel herds there, sweet to the ear is their growling; we fatten them on coveted pastures.
- 5/ We protect them against enemy tribes, we herd them bearing our long lances.
- 6/ We did not inherit them from our ancestors; they are the milch camels of our adversaries, which we took by force.

At other times, a poet addressed his composition not to a particular individual but to a whole group. An example of this is the poem entitled al-xaluj, which Muhammad al-'Ouni composed to exhort the people of al-Qasiem to revolt against Ibn Rashid. al-'Ouni says:

1/ *yā-tārishin min fōg sarrāgt al-wiṭall hamīmin ilā sārāt daʿarha dlālaha.*

2/ *ḥāyil ṭimān snīn mā miss xalfahall w-lā birrkat l-ash-shēl jimlat ḥyālaha.*

3/ *ilā bidā lī lāzimin gilt shiddahall w-iḍbiṭ ʿan al-fazzāt magḡab ḥbālaha.*

4/ *lā ūʿtini b-al-xirj mā ḡi b-ḥazzitihll shil ḡirbitin w-ijʿal zahābik ʿdālaha.*

5/ *lā shilt xiḡ lī b-ar-risan gadir sāʿihll abliḡk fi diḡḡ al-misāyil jlālaha.*

6/ *awṣik yā-mirsāl b-as-sēr w-as-srāll w-aḡḡirk nōm al-lēl ʿēnik yanālaha.*

7/ *lā sirtahā ʿashrin w-xamsin mḡarribll mirwāḡik al-mēdān minhā manālaha.*

8/ *lā jīt sūḡ al-ʿaṣir yāʿik ḡilmihll taxattāʿ b-zēnāt al-brīsam nʿālaha.*

9/ *yigūlūn lik yā-ṣāḡ ʿatnā ʿlūmikll bildān najdin ʿigbinā wish jarā laha.*

10/ *gil kill bildān al-ḡiṣim w-ḡērahāll ʿan az-zūm zāmaw dūn jālah rjālaha.*

11/ *ḡḡā dārikum min ʿigbikum tandb aṭ-ṭarāll tabkī ʿala al-mādīn wā-ʿizzitā laha.*

- 1/ Hail! Rider on a fine mount which steals distances with her swift pace; a spirited wild beast, she is startled by her own shadow.
- 2/ An eight-year-old barren camel, never suckled by a calf, nor couched to carry loads.
- 3/ Now that an urgent matter has come up, saddle her, but hold tight to the rein lest she jerk away.
- 4/ Pay no mind to the saddlebag, there is no time for fancy trappings; just carry a waterskin and balance it with your provisions.
- 5/ After you load, hold the rein and halt and listen to me, let me impart to you an urgent message with all the details.
- 6/ Harken, messenger! You must travel day and night, and must not let your eyes slumber.
- 7/ After traveling for ten and five days due west, you will reach al-Meydaan. Then, let your mount loose to graze.
- 8/ When you come to the afternoon market, you will meet sturdy lads whose leather sandals tread on their flowing silken robes.
- 9/ They will ask you, O good man, let us have your tidings, the land of Najd, what happened to it after we left?

10/ Tell them that the men of al-Qasim and other regions rose up to liberate their homelands from tyranny.

11/ Except for your homeland which you fled, leaving her crying for revenge. She pines for past generations (who were more gallant than you); how I feel sorry for her.

If the poet cannot deliver the poem himself, he may send it with a traveling party or a courier whom he entrusts to deliver the poem verbatim to the person for whom it is intended. In such a case, the courier must be an eloquent orator and a gifted reciter so that he can drive home the poem's message and influence public opinion. He moves from hearth to hearth and from one assembly to another in order to spread the poem swiftly and extensively. This deputy is chosen with great care; he is described by the poet as an intelligent, alert, bold, and articulate man who traverses desert wastes on a noble camel mount. The deputy never closes his eyes, he might forget the poem if he fell asleep, and he continually urges on his mount by singing the verses of the poem, going over them again and again lest he forget any of them. After describing the deputy, his mount, and the desert road, the poet turns to the main topic of his composition by addressing the deputy thus: "And when you alight by so-and-so (i.e., the recipient of the poem), tell him that . . ." In the remaining verses, the poet spells out the poetic message and praises or vilifies the intended recipient, depending on the occasion and the circumstances. These are the introductory verses from a poem by Nimr ibn Adwaan:

1/ *yā-rākībin min ʿindina fōg niḍḍīll māmun gaṣṣām al-ʿaṣa yōm nāḍī.*

2/ *ḥirrin kitūm w-la b-ḥissih yijiddīll w-ila misha yashḍī girīn al-ʿyāḍī.*

3/ *fōgih ḡlāmin lā haraj lik yfiḍḍīll bihlūliyīn ma hu xaṭāt al-ʿkādī.*

4/ *yiddī kalāmin min ḍimīrī yifiḍḍīll min nimr ibin ʿadwān li-jdē ʿfāḍī.*

5/ *ya-jdē ʿ wa rajwa ʿashīrī tmiḍḍīll rajwa al-yihūdī l-al-bkār al-gyāḍī.*

1/ Farewell rider on spirited mount; stout camel, she dashed off and nearly broke the saddle.

2/ A noble beast; she does not growl, nor does she grumble loudly; she moves fast, catering like spirited gazelles.

3/ Mounted by a youth eloquent when he speaks, merry spirited, not of the slothful kind.

4/ He recites verses I composed with care; addressed by me, Nimr ibn Adwaan, to Jdey .

5/ O Jdey , My friend, I mark time hoping for my love; a false hope; like the hope of Jews for the return of their camels.

(The legend has it that the Arabs stole the camels from their original owners, the Jews who are still waiting and hoping in vain to get them back). When the deputy arrives at the place of the person for whom the poem is intended, he is given water, coffee, and food to allay his thirst and hunger. After this routine hospitality, his fatigue dispelled, the deputy is besieged with questions by the hosts and the assembled guests who are always curious to hear fresh news. At this point, after an appropriate introduction, the deputy begins to recite the poem to the attentive assembly, exactly as he learned it from the poet. The deputy will remain with the host for several days and will have many occasions to repeat the poem in the presence of the host and his guests. As an example of this, here is the introductory section of a poem by the Anazi poet Ghaanim al-Lmei :

1/ *yā-rākīb allī min rākīb ash-sharārātll lōla ar-risan b-ar-rās ma yingīwī lah.*

2/ *banāt ḥirrin min gidīmin ʿatīḡātll wi-mʿarribātin ma ḥawōhin hamīlah.*

3/ *ḍrāb ad-ḍrāb mḥaffīḍātīn b-shamlātll killish ʿala al-yad ma ḍrābah jihīlah.*

4/ *akwāʿaha ʿan nōsh zōrah biʿidātll ḡiwīlt an-nisnūs ḥimrin jilīlah.*

5/ *taḡfil mn ūhāt al-ʿaṣa ba-al-ūhātātll xaṭrin ʿala rakkābaha min shilīlah.*

6/ *talfi ʿala bēt an-nida w-al-mruwwātll bētīn gidīm w-min biʿidin ʿnī lah.*

7/ *tagliḡ ʿala firsh ash-shyūx an-niḍīfātll talga ʿalēhin miḡīḡmīn ad-dibīlah.*

8/ *yijik ḡāyim b-al-yidēn as-sirīʿātll bi-mbahharin yiḡḍi xawa ar-rās hēlah.*

9/ *w-la ja al-ʿasha yigūl ya-xlēf gim hātll ṣiniyyitīn yanxōn nāsīn tishīlah.*

10/ *ma tinnīḡil lōla ḡlāḡah giwiyyātll min girrah al-xifān wi-smān ḡilāh.*

11/ *ʿigb al-ʿasha yarham ʿala ad-ḍēf nishḍātll maʿlūmn inn ism al-mʿazzib yisīlah.*

12/ *hill al-garāyid l-al-lmēʿi ḡarībātll ma ḡālihin diḡshīn yxabbiḡ b-ḡilāh.*

13/ *ṭarāyifīn w-illa al-ḡiṣāyid kiṭīrātll w-aṣ-ṣiḡḡ ma yijziʿ fihīmin ḡkī lah.*

1/ Riders on camels of the Sharaaraat breed, guided by halters tied to their heads.

2/ Descendants of a noble stud, high-born of ancient ancestry, carefully bred, not of the common sort.

3/ Noblest of the noble, their genitals are covered, their owners lead them only to studs of unadulterated ancestry.

4/ The upper parts of their foreleg do not rub against their breasts, with long spines, red of color and big

of size.

- 5/ They flinch at the shake of the driving stick, Their riders were nearly thrown down by their fast gait.
- 6/ You alight by the tent of a chief famous for his generosity and valor, of ancient nobility whose leadership is well established.
- 7/ You sit with the chiefs on clean rugs, you find brave men sitting there.
- 8/ Quickly he stands up to hand you a spicy cup with fragrance that clears your dizziness.
- 9/ When time comes for supper, he calls out for Khleif, the servant, to bring forth a tray so big they ask for helpers to drag it.
- 10/ They grasp it by its strong handles to carry it, filled with meat of fat lambs and sheep.
- 11/ After supper comes the time to question the guest, it is certain that the host will inquire.
- 12/ Then recite to him exquisite verses composed by al-Lmei , Not by a jabbering numskull.
- 13/ Poems are plenty but my verses are novel, I speak the truth which should offend no one.

As this example shows, when the poet or his deputy arrives at the tent of the intended recipient of the poem, who is usually the tribal chief or some principal member of the tribe, etiquette of hospitality dictates that before he is engaged in any serious discussion, he is first welcomed by the gathered assembly and given nourishment which starts with coffee and ends with a sumptuous banquet. Coffee is not only a part of this ritual hospitality, but its most important and ceremonious part as shown by examples presented here. Like the camel, the subject of coffee figures prominently in Nabati poetry. Many a poet begins his composition with a few lines describing the details of serving and making of coffee. Just as they did with the camel, Nabati poets have managed to integrate the coffee subject in the introduction of the poem and tie it with the process of poetic composition and transmission.

When the poet feels the spark of inspiration stirring inside him, he rides his camel and roams the desert, or else fixes himself a cup of coffee to clear his head and help him compose. Coffee making is as elaborate and absorbing as composition. Coffee making and poetic composition are both patterned activities, each is in some way a mimesis of the other. While the poet makes his coffee he also makes his poem, deciding its rhyme, meter, and opening line, which is called *mishadd*, from the verb *shadd* to saddle a camel mount , because the other verses of the poem ride upon the first line; that is, they depend on it, in rhyme and meter. By the time coffee is ready, the poem is well on its way. As he sips his coffee, the poet reviews his poem, revises its verses, and adds some finishing touches. This is the opening section of a poem by ibn J eithin:

- 1/ 'a<sup>c</sup>af al-kara ma <sup>c</sup>axid mn al-l<sup>c</sup>l s<sup>c</sup>ihll ila dakk fi galbi kit<sup>c</sup>ir al-haw<sup>c</sup>jis.
  - 2/ adni <sup>c</sup>ala kefi dl<sup>c</sup>lin ni<sup>c</sup>difihll w-barr<sup>c</sup>iyitin ya<sup>c</sup>rab laha kill h<sup>c</sup>amis.
  - 3/ adirah <sup>c</sup>ala kefi <sup>c</sup>an an-nayy w-al-haragll w-adiggah <sup>c</sup>ala h<sup>c</sup>uni b-z<sup>c</sup>en al-mah<sup>c</sup>aris.
  - 4/ 'adiggah w-azillan <sup>c</sup>igib fo<sup>c</sup>hahll b-ri<sup>c</sup>hin fi<sup>c</sup>dihin tayybin l-al-man<sup>c</sup>afis.
  - 5/ 'azillah <sup>c</sup>ala xamsat w<sup>c</sup>ufin taw<sup>c</sup>al kil wa<sup>c</sup>hidin ri<sup>c</sup>h la-al<sup>c</sup>axar yj<sup>c</sup>anis.
  - 6/ tara al-arbi<sup>c</sup>ih minha hawa kill sh<sup>c</sup>aribll ha<sup>c</sup>dak <sup>c</sup>an mi<sup>c</sup>li yizil at-ta<sup>c</sup>amis.
  - 7/ sha<sup>c</sup>ha ha<sup>c</sup>jisiyy w-walaf al-g<sup>c</sup>il ba<sup>c</sup>ilil w-jif<sup>c</sup>ni jifa no<sup>c</sup>mi wa-la hu<sup>c</sup>b na<sup>c</sup>is.
  - 8/ 'a<sup>c</sup>addil mn al-g<sup>c</sup>ifan ma kan ma<sup>c</sup>yilll <sup>c</sup>ala ge<sup>c</sup>bit al-wa<sup>c</sup>shi xabi<sup>c</sup>t ad-dis<sup>c</sup>ayis.
  - 9/ 'adir iftikari wen malfa hadiyyitill ila sirt min ba<sup>c</sup>d al-mish<sup>c</sup>ah<sup>c</sup>i mra<sup>c</sup>wis.
  - 10/ dawwart ma<sup>c</sup>ugin <sup>c</sup>ala kill ha<sup>c</sup>lihll sib<sup>c</sup>urin simutin fi h<sup>c</sup>dur al-mij<sup>c</sup>alis.
  - 11/ wa-la shift yag<sup>c</sup>di ha<sup>c</sup>jt al-amir ge<sup>c</sup>rihll yamshi laha ben ad-daha w-al-xar<sup>c</sup>amis.
  - 12/ talabt allah al-xirih <sup>c</sup>ala al-amir <sup>c</sup>azimll w-dann<sup>c</sup>et mird<sup>c</sup>atin <sup>c</sup>ala ad-daww <sup>c</sup>anis.
  - 13/ sla<sup>c</sup>bin gaw<sup>c</sup>ayimha mn as-s<sup>c</sup>er w-as-srall laha b-al-mah<sup>c</sup>amih w-al-mit<sup>c</sup>ayih tim<sup>c</sup>aris.
  - 14/ xa<sup>c</sup>rin tkassir kuraha min sta<sup>c</sup>rahall ila lan habl al-mixtimih lah tid<sup>c</sup>aris.
  - 15/ yg<sup>c</sup>al ummaha far<sup>c</sup>ih w-ibuha jd<sup>c</sup>e<sup>c</sup>ill wi-hi jaryaha yasbig ty<sup>c</sup>ur al-mal<sup>c</sup>ahis.
  - 16/ ansif <sup>c</sup>alaha mizhabin li w-girbihll wa-<sup>c</sup>axid <sup>c</sup>asay w-foga<sup>c</sup>ha al-<sup>c</sup>abd jal<sup>c</sup>is.
  - 17/ w-al-<sup>c</sup>asir fed xla<sup>c</sup>faha aw yisarahall wi-hi kinna<sup>c</sup>ha ad-danig bih al-<sup>c</sup>ud tar<sup>c</sup>is.
  - 18/ addi salamin salm az-z<sup>c</sup>eg sa<sup>c</sup>fill mn ash-shahd mamzu<sup>c</sup>jin libib al-mal<sup>c</sup>amis.
  - 19/ ila mintisa gili w-mashka mhimmitill daray la habbat <sup>c</sup>alayy an-nis<sup>c</sup>anis.
  - 20/ mhammad haya al-mimhil ila sayyaf al-hayal aw hal ba<sup>c</sup>dr al-<sup>c</sup>ishb b-al-ard ya<sup>c</sup>bis.
- 1/ When my heart is beset by anxieties, slumber escapes my eyes and I do not sleep one bit.
  - 2/ I get up and bring forth my dear shiny pot and coffee beans which I enjoy roasting
  - 3/ Carefully to my taste, neither raw nor burned, then I pound them in a beautiful mortar.
  - 4/ After pounding, I let them boil in the pot, its spreading aroma smells so nice.
  - 5/ I mix with it five kinds of spices, the smell of each is as good as the other.
  - 6/ Any one would wish for four cups of this delicious brew which sets my mood right.



- 7/ Now my mind is put at ease and I start composing, I am awake and my eyes wide open.
- 8/ I set my verses to rhyme and meter, alone by myself with no envious grudge to spy on my inner thoughts.
- 9/ I pondered to whom should I present my panegyric verses, I am not the one who would praise just anyone.
- 10/ I looked for a trusted friend to accompany me on my journey, a reliable man who is not a babbler in assemblies.
- 11/ The most suited to fulfill my wish, always ready to go, whether at midday or midnight.
- 12/ I asked guidance from the Lord and decided to depart, I brought my barren stout mount.
- 13/ Her feet are solid from much going and coming, used to traveling on desert roads.
- 14/ So vigorous she nearly broke the saddle, when I let go of the halter she darts away in full force.
- 15/ A noble mount descending from Farhah, her mother, and Jdey i, her father.
- 16/ I put on her my provisions and water skin, I pick up my stick and ride with my slave.
- 17/ She travels so fast by late afternoon she puts the settlement of Feid behind her or to the left of her, she sails like a boat with a raised canvas.
- 18/ I give my greetings, sincere and devoid of deceit, sweet as honey and tender as silk.
- 19/ To a man worthy of my verses and responsive to my complaints, my shield when the wind of misfortune blows in my direction.
- 20/ Muhammad, the verdant pasture in drought years, when grass withers and the land is barren.

Coffee assemblies around the hearth in the tent of a gallant nomad or in the coffee-chamber of a noble citizen, where men gather to sip coffee and exchange news served as podiums where poets, reciters, and eloquent men recited poetry. Behind the hearth sits the host, who is continually busy with the fire and the preparation of coffee. The guests sit on the floor forming two lines facing each other. Important guests sit closest to the hearth, the more important, the closer. Uninvited guests and men of lower rank sit at the end, by the door, near the outside, where guests remove and leave their sandals. (To indicate the low status of a man, one says, "So-and-so sits near the sandals.") Such guests rarely participate in the conversation, and they are the last to be served coffee. The conversation is concentrated around the fire-hearth.

After a few rounds of coffee, and after all the important men have been introduced to one another and have chatted for a while, there is a sudden lull in the conversation, followed by a moment of silence. Then, the host or one of the senior guests near the hearth asks a question such as: "By the way, which of you, honored men of this assembly, knows the poem composed by so-and-so on such-and-such occasion?" This prompts one of the guests to recite the poem and the occasion which led to its composition. This recitation may be followed by a discussion of the historical accuracy and artistic merit of the poem. If another poet has composed a response to the first poem, then that response may also be recited by whoever knows it. From there, the discussion may drift to which tribe has the best poets, or who is the poet most esteemed by the people and whose verses are the most appealing. Such questions can split the assembly into different factions which engage in a lively discussion interspersed with choice poetic examples.

Coffee serving constitutes the most important and ceremonious element of desert hospitality and the entertainment of and socializing with guests. When a host first perceives guests coming, he rushes to meet and welcome them. As soon as their mounts are couched, he rakes the hearth and strikes a blazing fire to make coffee. Soon, the host begins to roast the coffee beans. Then, he grabs his mortar and starts pounding of the roasted beans with measured strokes, with an occasional rap on the rim of the mortar to give variety to the beat. Lightening of fire and pounding of mortar are the two most prominent icons of hospitality in the desert. They guide night travellers to the tents of hospitable hosts. The rhythmic pounding of the brass mortar is soothing music to the ears of the weary travelers who, having been travelling on the backs of their camel mounts in cold winter nights wearing very scanty clothes, gather round the fire to warm their frozen limbs. After crossing the empty and dreary wastes the guests are delighted by the sight of the fire lighting up the darkness of the wilderness, and by the cheerful pounding of the mortar, and the smell of the smoke of the burning tamarisk wood, and the roasting coffee beans and the crushed cardamom and the boiling coffee pots. All these delightful sensations give pleasure and relaxation to the weary desert travellers whose tongues are loosened by such refreshment and they begin to spin eloquent rhapsodies of tales and verses.

The host performs every step in this ritual coffee preparation ceremoniously and with the utmost dignity. With welcoming gestures and pleasantries, he tries to put his guests at ease and let them feel that

they have done him the honor with their presence. He tries to fix for them a truly refreshing cup for them which, besides its good taste, looks, in the words of poets, like henna on the fair hands of a beautiful bride, a cup that will banish fatigue and clear the head. They call coffee *kēf* "that substance that sets the mood right"; and they call it *mwannsih* because it brings *uns* which means camaraderie and joy and it helps remove barriers between the host and guests. Notice how the coffee theme is weaved into the following verses by Hneif ibn S eidaan:

1/ *yā-hēh yā-hal hāyfāt al-mitānīll al-kill tajfil min dlāl al-ma<sup>c</sup>ālīg.*

2/ *ʿsiyy ahalhin layyn al-xēzarānīll himr al-ʿyūn mlāḥḍāt al-misāwīg.*

3/ *asbag mn ash-shēhān w-al-hēgītanīll wi-mḍallag al-ʿarḥf ma<sup>c</sup> fakkt ar-rīg.*

4/ *ḥarāyryn w-illa banāt al-ʿmānīll rakkābihin law yaḍirb al-xōf ma ʿīg.*

5/ *riddu kalām ḥnēf y-ahl at-tīmānīll al-gōl gōl ḥnēf ma fih tabriḡ.*

6/ *in kān fikum y-ad-dalāyil ḡḥānīll allī yihigg ash-shōf yabda ash-shawāhīg.*

7/ *tilfūn badwin ṭarshihum ḡetarānīll fī darb wasmiyyih w-ḡiblat shibārīg.*

8/ *w-bētīn lya shiyyid kibīr al-mibānīll yshādi kīma allī nāyfaḥ min ṣa<sup>c</sup>āfiḡ.*

9/ *w-nārīn tshādi l-al-fanar b-al-biyānīll w-ʿind al-ʿsha tasma<sup>c</sup> l-nijrah taxāfiḡ.*

10/ *nijrin l-hashshāl al-xala mirḥabānīll ala laḡāḥ yshallḡ al-galb tashliḡ.*

11/ *ḥabb al-yīman w-al-hēl w-ʿaz-zāfarānīll bi-dlāl biḍīn miṭīl wasf al-ḡarānīg.*

1/ Hail riders on lanky mounts, spirited camels, startled by the movement of their gear.

2/ Their riders drive them with pliant rattan sticks, their reddish eyes constantly gaze in fear at the sticks of their drivers.

3/ They travel faster than falcons and sand grouses, or eagles flying in the early morning.

4/ Noble mounts of Omani breed, their speed enable their riders to cross desolate waists fearlessly.

5/ Memorize the verses of Hneif, you riders on eight camels, verses composed by Hneif with no blemish.

6/ Oh, experienced travellers, choose the alert amongst you with sharp eyes, let him climb a high post to look out for the camp.

7/ Where you will alight by bedouin who own herds of white camels; camped on the road to Wasmiyyih, west of Shibaarig.

8/ Go to the erected tent of the chief, huge in size, as large as the high dunes of Sa aaf<sup>g</sup>.

9/ The blazing fire lights up the darkness. You hear the loud pounding of mortar at sunset.

10/ A mortar that welcomes night travellers in the desert, its hard pounding makes your heart aches.

11/ Mocha beans, cardamom, and saffron are mixed in clean pots, white as cranes.

Throughout the ages desert poets kept on chiselling delicately with their artistic tools on the two themes of coffee and camel till eventually they were extricated from the mother poem and were blown up into full fledged poems in their own right. There are poets who achieved fame through their camel poems. Others achieved fame through their coffee poems. But, although camels are more crucial to nomadic life, coffee turned out to be more fertile as a poetic subject, even though it was introduced rather late into the desert scene.

Bedouin poets differ in their treatment of the coffee theme from the *ḥadar* poets who treated coffee merely as a poetic subject giving elaborate details of the process of its making and serving. The *ḥadari* poet usually ends up drinking his coffee alone while composing his poem. Town poets did not infuse their coffee poems with human and chivalrous qualities, as was the case with bedouin poets who found in coffee a rich theme which they employed skillfully to stress tribal values and nomadic codes. Bedouin poets, knights, and tribal chiefs found in the ritual act of preparing and serving of coffee a poetic theme that has been no less important in the make-up of the Arabian poem than the camel, or, for that matter, the moving tribe and the deserted encampment.

From his carefully prepared coffee pot, the bedouin poet offers the first cup of honor to the worthy man of deed who deserves it; he who single-handedly covers the retreat of his comrades, he who drives pursuers away from those comrades whose mares are slow, he who assists fallen comrades, and, above all, to the generous man who has around his tent mounds of ashes and coffee dregs resembling the dirt heap of a recently dug water well and whose tent flaps are always dripping with grease because of the many guests who wipe their hands on them after partaking of their host's sumptuous meals. Coffee is served in bedouin tents to men of courage and men of hospitality. They do not offer the cup to scoundrels and cowards who do not accompany men on raids, nor to the greedy and base men who nurture their herds of sheep to sell in the market instead of slaughtering them to feed hungry guests and weary travellers.

The symbolic and ritual significance of Arabic coffee is manifested by the way it is prepared and

served, compared, for example, to Turkish or American coffee. While bedouin women do all the cooking chores and preparation of food for guests, coffee making is the prerogative of men only. It used to be forbidden for women to come near coffee utensils or make coffee, let alone drink it. Since it was first introduced into the Arabian desert, coffee has become a symbol of chivalry and manly qualities. It has offered a perfect substitute for the wine theme and the associated concept of *futuwwah* noble manliness in *jāhili* poetry. The description of coffee preparation and the values associated with its serving reminds us of the opening lines of the *mu'allaqah* by Amr ibn Kalthoum.

Serving of coffee is no less ceremonious than the making of it. Indeed, the serving of coffee is a ritual act fraught with symbolic significance. When coffee is served, the hero is always presented with the first cup. But as the cup passes on the right from one man to the next, it bypasses idle men, who are not given coffee until the more respected men have drunk the first round. It is a grave insult to call a man *ya m'aggab al-finjāl*, "thou who art bypassed when the cup goes round". Before a major battle, the tribal chief pours a cup of coffee saying this is the cup of so and so who will drink it? and he names the most feared warrior in the enemy camp. Whoever drinks the cup commits himself to meeting that enemy warrior in a duel and try to kill him.