

Salma Khadra Jayyusi
Pre-Islamic Culture,
Language and Literature

Workshop at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin,
July 24-27, 1995*

On the invitation of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, this workshop was convened at the end of the academic year so that the fruits of the research I did during the previous months, as well as of the many consultations I conducted throughout the year mainly with German colleagues, and especially of the workshop I organised at the Kolleg on July 7 would be fully utilised.

The July 7 Workshop included Professors Renate Jacobi, Angelika Neuwirth, Baber Johansen, and Drs. Susanna Enderwitz and Ziyad Mouna. Professor Preissler was, at the last minute, unable to join us from Leipzig because of some sudden business which had to do with the Orientalist Conference he was preparing. However, while I genuinely missed his contribution, our meeting was, nevertheless, very successful. I had formulated my ideas of what the whole study was meant to accomplish, but through these consultations and discussions, the table I had tentatively prepared and cautiously contracted, was, as I had hoped, enlarged at the July 7 meeting, and the names of would-be contributors, mainly Europeans (with some American scholars as well), were suggested.

We were going to build on this and finalise the whole picture in the later meeting of July 24-27.

The July 24 workshop included Dr. Shukri Ayyad who travelled from Egypt for the purpose, and Dr. Abd al-Fattah Kilito who travelled from Morocco. Dr. Ziyad Mouna also attended this second meeting. I had chosen Dr. Ayyad because of his sharp critical acumen and his broad knowledge of classical Arabic poetry and prose, including pre-Islamic literary forms. He is also well versed in classical Greek. And I chose Dr. Kilito because of his great affinity with the most modern trends of literary critical thinking, his knowledge of all ages of Arabic literature and his capacity to deal with most subjects creatively and with remarkable dexterity. Dr. Mouna is very knowledgeable in the non-poetic aspects of

* The seminar was sponsored by the Otto und Martha Fischbeck-Stiftung.

the period and has contributed intelligently to the two meetings. Names of would-be contributors, mainly from the Arab world, were suggested.

We went over the whole table again, with minute care, and I am enclosing a copy of the final version.

The study I had planned concentrates on the history, culture, language and literature of pre-Islamic Arabia. Such a study will take into account the social and political history of Arabia during the first six centuries since the beginning of the first millennium, its relations with the empires of Persia and Byzantine, its involvement in the global trade which took place between the Far East, the Mediterranean and beyond, its military and nomadic nature, the relationship among the various tribes, and the urban centers which existed before Islam: the kingdoms of Yemen in the south, and Hira, Ghassan and Petra in the north. The study will also give consideration to the various aspects of an early Arabic culture only sporadically known today even to the Arabs themselves, will look into the possible cultural relations between the Arabs and their neighbours, and will study the cultural traits of the pre-Islamic Arabs, their customs and life-style, their concepts, ideals and values, particularly because many of these cultural phenomena have persisted throughout the Islamic periods. The religions of Arabia will be studied, as well as the rich mythology which was suppressed or forgotten after Islam. The early monotheists will also be described. Much of this study may be able to show that the Arabs on the whole were perhaps already predisposed towards embracing Islam and monotheism.

The study will also examine the history of the Arabic language, its origins and its possible contacts with other surrounding languages, Semitic and otherwise, always remembering that the language of the *Quran*, the fountainhead of Islamic teachings and intransigent adherence to text, is pre-Islamic. The most artistically profound part of the *Quran*, the Meccan chapters, had been delivered to the Arabs before 622, i.e. before the Prophet's flight to Medina.

The study of pre-Islamic poetry will try to deal with the origins of this poetry which reached its maturity, its first golden age before Islam. The well-built *qasida* or ode demonstrates several phenomena which should be of great interest to students of art in any language. Its maturity in the sixth century, just before Islam, points to a long history of development. Written mainly by nomads in the desert, it represents a creative phenomenon that deserves to be not only fully explored for its own sake by the modern tools of the critic and literary historian, but also fully disseminated and explicated to critics and literary historians of other cultures. It will show how artistic genius can burgeon and undergo a sophisticated development even in harsh and primitive circumstances, how

poets deal with their surroundings, no matter how awkward and seemingly uninspiring, how they will exploit every aspect of a very limited repertoire of objects and poeticise their relationship with them: thus the desert fauna and flora find a firm place in this poetry, and many of them, especially the fauna, are fully symbolised.

The study will also show the full scope of artistic modes and their presence in this poetry, their strong relationship with the creative impulse and its historical moment, and their spontaneous recurrence in one language after the other. It will also prove their limited nature when we consider that most poetic modes are to be found, in various degrees of sophistication and simplicity, in all poetries.

Problems of orality and transmission, as well as the question whether this poetry is formulaic or not, will also be addressed.

All aspects of the *qasida* will be analysed and its thematic space described. The rhythmic and metrical structure will be discussed in full. *Non-qasida* forms will also be studied.

Apart from poetry, the book will also deal with other literary contributions in pre-Islamic Arabia, such as prose genres: proverbs, oratory and sermons. A chapter on pre-Islamic music and singing is also planned.

Dr. James Montgomery, who lectures at Leeds University, will co-edit with me. E. J. Brill will publish the book.

Culture, Literature and Language in Pre-Islamic Arabia

Program of the Workshop

I. Cultural and Historical Background

1. Arabia and Around

- i. Historical Background
- ii. Languages (Syriac and Aramaic, Persian, Byzantine, Coptic)
- iii. Literatures
- iv. Cultures around Arabia

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2. State and Tribe in Pre-Islamic Times
 - i. **The Yemen**
 - ii. Kingdoms of Ghassan, Hira and Petra
 - iii. The Arabian Peninsula
 - a. Urban Towns
 - b. Tribes and Tribal Relations

 3. Social and Cultural History of Arabia in Pre-Islamic Times
 - i. Customs and Life-styles
 - ii. Concepts, Ideals and Values
 - iii. The Marketplace and its Significance
 - iv. Trade Routes

 4. The Metaphysical Sphere
 - i. Mythology
 - ii. Religious Beliefs
 - iii. Monotheism (Al-Hunafa)
- II. The Arabic Language
1. Language or Languages?
 2. The Riches and Maturity of the Arabic Language before Islam
 3. The Linguistic Basis of the *Quran*
- III. Poetry, the Greatest Art of the Arabs
- A. Introduction: Poetry and the Poet
 - B. Developments
 1. Behind the Surveying Corpus: the Pre-Islamic History of the *Quasida*.
 2. Possible non-Arab Influences
 3. The *non-Quasida* Forms in Pre-Islamic Times: the *qit'a*, the *rajaz*
 - C. The Mature *Oasida*, Form and Content
 1. Language, Style and Imagery
 2. Modes, Tone and Attitude
 3. Form and Rhythmic Structure
 4. Themes
 - i. Love Poetry (*ghazal*, *naseeb*) and the Image of Woman
 - ii. Wisdom (including concepts, values and *Weltanschauung*)
 - iii. Description and the Beginning of a Major Genre

- iv. The Panegyric
- v. Elegy
- vi. Satire
- vii. Battle Poetry, Revenge Songs
- viii. Wine
- ix. Fauna and Flora

D. Orality

- 1. The Problems of Oral Transmission
- 2. The Orality of the Pre-Islamic *Qasida*. Are there formulae in this poetry?

E. Major Poets

- 1. Tribal Poets
 - i. Abeed
 - ii. Bishr b. Abi Khazin
 - iii. Tarafa
 - iv. `Amr b. Kulthum
 - v. Al-Harith b. Hilliza
 - vi. `Antara
 - vii. Zuhair
 - viii. Labeed
 - ix. Al-A'sha
- 2. Court and City Poets
 - i. Al-Nabigha
 - ii. Hassan b. Thabit
 - iii. Adiy b. Zayd
- 3. A Vagrant Prince
 - Umru'u al-Qais
- 4. Outlaw Poets
 - Al-Shanfara, `Urwa, Ta'abbata Sharra
- 5. Women Poets

IV. Pre-Islamic Music

V. Pre-Islamic Prose

Proverbs, Wise Sayings, Sermons and Oratory.