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Female Discourse in South Arabia Folk Poetry: A Linguistic Study of an Indigenous Mehri Poem

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Abstract – The present paper deals with the oral tradition of Al-Mahra, a Yemen governorate located in the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula, where tribes known as *Mehris* have been living for centuries. Taking an ancient Mehri narrative (poetry) as a literary artifact, the present paper analyses the specific linguistic devices and production techniques which preside over its composition. Focusing on that specific oral poetry narrated by a woman, the study explores in particular the linguistic choices made by the female narrative agent as well as the discursive strategies she develops in this folk poem orally collected from Mehri informants in Qishn, a district of Al-Mahra. This piece of oral poetry, which relates a true story based on tribal feuds that took place in that region about a century ago, clearly reflects prominent aspects of the cultural, traditional, historical and linguistic heritage of South Arabia.

Key-words: culture – discourse – female – folk – linguistic – narrative – oral – poetry – tradition – tribe.

Résumé – Le présent article s'intéresse à la tradition orale d'Al-Mahra, une province du Yémen située au sud de la péninsule arabique, où vivent des tribus connues sous l'appellation *Mehris*. Partant de l'objet littéraire qu'est un ancien poème narratif Mehri raconté par une femme, l'article analyse les spécificités linguistiques et les techniques de production qui président à sa composition. Sous ce rapport, l'étude met l'accent en particulier sur les choix linguistiques opérés par l'instance narratrice ainsi que les stratégies discursives que cette dernière développe dans ce poème populaire recueilli oralement auprès d'informateurs à Qishn, un district d'Al-Mahra. Relatant une histoire réelle basée sur des querelles tribales ancestrales qui se sont déroulées dans cette région il y a environ un siècle, le poème dégage clairement d'importants aspects du patrimoine culturel, traditionnel, historique et linguistique de l'Arabie du sud.

Mots-clés : culture – discours – femme – linguistique – narration – orale – poésie – populaire – tradition – tribu.

a) Introduction

Spoken by tribes living in isolated regions of Eastern Yemen and Western Oman, Mehri, also known as Mahri, is one of the Modern South Arabian languages (Simeone-Senelle 1997, 2010; Cross Jr 2010; Rubin 2010; Watson 2012; and Almakrami 2015). Until the advent of Islam, which widely spread the Arabic language and considerably put a curb on its importance and development, Mehri was spoken in the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula (Al-Qumairi 2015).

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Today, Mehri is not only a spoken language, but also an important medium of cultural transmission in terms of values, traditions and oral literature.

Fieldwork research has been conducted on Mehri oral poetry these past years in Yemen by some researchers who visited the area recording, transcribing and translating all the data collected. From a philological and linguistic perspective (Liebhaber 2007, 2010), the Modern South Arabian languages in general, and the Mehri language in particular, are relatively well-documented and given sound descriptive study by such linguists as Thomas (1937), Lonnet (1985), Johnstone (1987) and Simeone-Senelle (1997, 2010), to name but a few.

On the other hand, previous studies on the poetic traditions of Al-Mahra – a governorate of Yemen located in the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula – have been far less systematic (Liebhaber 2010). Although samples of Mehri poetry were collected by the Viennese Expedition from 1898 to 1902, they were just regarded as linguistic samples. Little attention was given to the social, historical, cultural and political meanings of these samples of Mehri poetry (Liebhaber 2010). Liebhaber (2007) argued that those Mehri texts have been rather dealt with as unrelated narratives, poetry and songs than as a coherent system of expression. Likewise, no anthropological or sociolinguistic studies whatsoever have been so far carried out to study the role of the Mehri language in shaping local, regional, national and even supra-national identities.

The purpose of the present paper is to study a very famous Mehri oral poem narrated for a century by indigenous people in Qishn, a district of the Al-Mahra Governorate, Yemen. The paper seeks to analyze the poem both in a linguistic and literary perspective, making the most of the available information sources to decode its meaning. Codes and meanings embedded in the poem are approached through a linguistic and literary analysis. Meaning sometimes resides in the linguistic patterning of a text. Thus, the study aims at exploring the specific lexical patterns used in the composition of the Mehri poem. On the other hand, it highlights the way these patterns relate to the social, cultural and ideological backgrounds, which are all central to the analysis of how the potentials of language have been used to encode meaning in the poem taken as a linguistic and literary object. In Brumfit and Carter's view (1986), the literary text is seen as a self-contained language artifact, and as an object in itself. The critical point is that the centrality of language in a literary text makes the study of the patterns of language use quite fundamental and important for a global apprehension of meaning.

This paper adopts the Prague Linguistic Criticism approach as theoretical framework in the study it conducts. Akinbode (2013), who adopted the same



approach in his study, states that the Prague Linguistic Criticism circle views literature as a special class of language that is different from ordinary language. According to this approach, the primary function of ordinary language is to communicate a message, or information, by referring to the actual world. It contrastively views literary language as self-focused: its function is not to primarily make extrinsic references, but to draw attention on its own formal features – that is, the interrelationships among the linguistic signs themselves (Akinbode, 2013). The study of the indigenous Mehri poem attempted in the present paper is grounded in this theoretical framework because literary analysis or criticism can be approached through the prism of linguistics, a science that also explores other types of discourse than ordinary discourse. The laws of linguistics mainly produce the distinctive features of literariness.

The first part of the paper specifies the methodology and sheds light on the historical, geographical, social, linguistic and literary background of the poem. The second part, which analyzes the poem *per se*, studies the way discursive strategies are used and linguistic choices made to develop a strategic discourse for the community, the tribe. The notion of “strategic discourse” refers here to a committed discourse that revolves around the notion of defense, conflict and retaliation.

b) Methodology and Survey of the Background to the Poem

From the historical perspective, Qishn, which is located in the east of Yemen (see map at the end of the paper), picked up its significance from being the capital of the Afrari Sultanate of Qishn and Soqotra (Liebhaber 2007). In any case, the Sultan himself kept his home in Soqotra and ruled Al-Mahra from his permanent residence in the island. Inner clashes between the Sultanate of Qishn and Soqotra and the Kathiri Sultanate of Hadramawt on the one hand, and wars against the Portuguese on the other hand, were major impediments to the improvement of Qishn, and they were eventually overshadowed by Al-Shihr and Al-Mukalla (Liebhaber, 2007). In Qishn, there are still vestiges of a wealthy and crucial past as it was only in 2005 that the area was connected to any other settlement or city by a paved road. It is characterised by columns of conventional, low-slung homes extending along the coastal plain. According to Liebhaber (2007), this was to its awesome advantage; Qishn has remained an extraordinary enclave with the biggest portion of the population speaking Mehri better than Arabic (See figure on page 92).

Liebhaber (2007, p.vi) states that



Since “belonging” in Arabia is generally expressed through poetry or other related forms of oral culture, we would expect Mehri poetry to be an untapped mine of rich historical, political and social information. From the perspective of ethnography and the related field of ethno-poetics, Al-Mahra remains a blank stretch between Hadramawt and Oman.

Mehri culture is mainly based on oral tradition (Simeone-Senelle, 2010). For instance, Mehri ethnotexts such as tales, folk songs, folk epics, proverbs, riddles and so on are orally handed down from generations to generations. All these types of texts, known as “orature” - oral literature - contribute to the richness of Mehri culture.

Whether it is written or oral, the primary function of a text is to convey a message, which is expected to be explicit, that is to say, clear and intelligible enough not to require any effort of decoding. On the other hand, it can be implicit, fully engaging the reader in the construction of meaning from nuances of language and encoding, through the process of analysis, interpretation, deciphering, and so.

Mehri literature, in its written form, is quasi inexistent. The poem under study was orally collected from old Mehri informants in Qishn during fieldwork trips to the area. As this city enjoyed great political significance in the past, some of the old generations of “Qishnites” still recall considerable amount of political and tribal poetry. As a matter of fact, numerous composers and repositories of traditional political and social poems, often forgotten in other areas, still exist in Qishn. This is also one of the reasons why the native inhabitants of Qishn are commonly regarded across Al-Mahra as being particularly eloquent. The poem under scrutiny was collected from them and transcribed using the symbols of the IPA (International Phonetics Association). Later, it was translated first into Arabic, then into English, with the assistance of the same Mehri informants since some of them also mastered the Arabic Language.

Tribal organizations shape the Mehri society. In the past, it was not uncommon to see tribal tensions, fuelled by political, customary and social matters, beefing up and resulting in conflicts now and then. Courage, honour and pride are non-negotiable values which may lead to crime, revenge and wars among Mehri tribes. The poem clearly reflects such issues. In order to be better immersed in the Mehri social and cultural environment, and figure out the background to the poem’s production and narrative, fruitful discussions were held with Mehri informants from Qishn, to whom this paper is much indebted. These “Qishnites” informants were composed of elderly as well as young people, which stroke the balance in terms of objectivity and age group perceptions. Discussions with both young and old residents of Qishn helped, to some extent, to distinguish between the use of recent Mehri words and that of archaic ones on the one hand; and meaning



mutations such as in the interrelated processes of “desemantization” and “relexicalization” on the other hand. The old informants helped to obtain the original meaning and structure of some archaic expressions in the poem. Moreover, some texts related to the Mehri language as well as to the history of the Al-Mahra district were used for the purpose of the study.

Narrated by indigenous speakers in Qishn for decades, this famous indigenous Mehri poem is more than one hundred years old. It relates a story about tribal feuds based on true events. The story took place around the year 1910 in Qishn, more precisely in a valley where Mehri tribes live, not far from the sea.

The setting is very significant as it straddles two places: the sea and part of the inland of the South Arabian Peninsula. In other words, the setting is between two cultures: a nautical culture on one side, with its related activity, fishing; and an agricultural and pastoral culture on the other side, with farming and cattle breeding (sheep, goats and camels) as activities. The folk poem under study reflects both cultures as it unequivocally refers to the sea and to camels. However, the nautical factor appears to be amplified in the text. It is in this context that the tribal feuds took place¹. The poem provides a survey of Mehri oral culture with reference to traditional time. It also displays important aspects of the cultural and social background of South Arabia, all of which participate in the referential or cultural code in the narrative in general, and provide the reader or listener of the poem with knowledge of the Mehri society in particular.

It is not common to hear female voices in poetry around the world. This fact is all the more true given that, not later than a century ago, female poets or women speaking in poems were almost inexistent in Western literature, let alone in South Arabian civilization, in which the conditions of women are narrowly framed by Islam. Yet, despite the patriarchal society in which she lives, the Mehri woman, who is the custodian of the traditions and values, can be very influent within the intimate circle of family and home. She can also have her say about issues concerning her tribe.

Composed of 24 lines, the poem describes “the grieves and sorrows” of a woman named Fatemah – the speaker in the poem – who laments the death of her uncle, Seelem; and who still suffers the pain of the latter’s murder in the silent presence of passive onlookers. In this respect, the poem sounds like an elegy. On the other hand, Fatemah attempts to entice the pride of the men of her own tribe into revenging her dear uncle. In other words, the poem is also a call for revenge. Tribalism and rivalry are the main causes of the escalation of the tensions that ultimately led to inter-tribal violence in the region. Accompanied by Barrak, a



member of the Kalshat tribe that had settled down in that area, Seelem had tried to pass through the coast to the zone of the Al Jedhi tribe; but the two were prevented from crossing the area because Uncle Seelem, by carrying a gun, had broken the time-honoured customs. In fact, his intention was to kill the chief of the Al Jedhi tribe. The Al Jedhi tribesmen, in turn, had been waiting for the opportunity to take revenge, and their rival was not Seelem, but Barrak instead.

As soon as they reached the coast, Seelem began to fire at some of the Al Jedhi tribesmen, who chased them in retaliation. Seelem tried to escape from that intricate situation by alternately running away and stopping to shoot at them. He had even succeeded in killing some of them. However, he was caught and killed the very moment his rifle ran out of bullets. As for Barrak, he managed to escape and get to Heswain to inform Seelem's family about what had happened. Some people witnessed the murder; however, they tried neither to come to the victim's rescue nor to prevent the crime. The poem is composed on a dialogic mode. It opens on a dialogue between the speaker, Fatemah, and her father, Naseeb.

c) Lexical Choices and Discursive Strategies: The Mehri Woman as a Committed Figure

1- **fætmeħ! dəkɔ:h tbeiki min ʃəfəʃ tntehi:lel?**

Oh, Fatemah! Why are you crying and gasping from your chest?

2- **ʔeɪnəʃ təʒɔ:d təʊləs ɣeɪləʃ həs'ebi:h bə qæln**

Your eye took its full share from what happened to your uncle that morning in Qishn

3- **dihɔ:rəs bə ddiħæs' ən nefs wə zmi:s ʔəʊt' əs.**

When they were guarding at the port to the extent of being tired like a camel gasping for breath.

4- **li:lət də qri:f iʃɔ:rəf wə ɣeddəʊmət dɪkdəʊdəm wə dɪ ɣəʊzi ləmħəʊrəs**

Since the night of the big fish-net sweeping while workers were working hard, they had refused to take guard.

5- **ħeɪbɪ! dəkɔ:h tɔ:mər ʃædlɪ fɪrt' əʊt' helles bædgerɪlɪ dɪmħəʊməs ?**

Oh father! Why are you saying this as if a coffee were grilled and its time elapsed?

6- **ʃəqs' əʊr mbɔ:nɪdi:dəħ fɪlk ʔi:tæfu:s ʒəħəʊməs**



He got short of his cousins as a sea vessel front going deep into the sea and higher up

7- **mdi:t ʃju:t kælbi swu:b mɪntɪlu:tɜn**

Sea wind blows out the wounds of my heart

8- **mdi:t æ:ru:t bʃəʊfi be:ɪ mɪn hulu:tɜn**

Sea wind dwells in my chest; I am already one of the crazy women.

9- **hʌmb:ru: ʃhæqæbk si:ləm æs fɪʒʒeɪləm ləh qælu:tɜn!**

Oh people! I am so gloomy about Seelem when young men crowded on him and did to him what they wanted!

10- **hes' wi:ləm təh bfəʊtəb wə hæbu: mɪftɪ.ʃju:tɜn**

They made him stand in the tide-out beach while the people were watchers.

11- **læ dmu:hi wəl mdəʊ.ɹək wəlɪhʒəʊ.ɹəm mt' ɹbu:tɜn**

None of those present tried to save him and keep him under protection.

12- **elɪhʒəʊ.ɹəm təh ʒəhəʊ.ʒəh hæleɪbu:b mlɪfju:tɜn!**

If powerful men had attended!

13- **s:reɪw wə æli wə si:ləm wə hmi:d wə ʒælu:tɜn**

Men like Sreew, Ali, Seelem, Hameed, and with him Alooten

14- **ʃi:həm sɜlli:b k'ɔ:t' ʒ wə ʒɜnɔɪb ʒɜlfu:tɜn**

They have cutting weapons and sharp daggers.

15- **ʒɜksɪ:təh təh mɜfæs' ʒh wə mɜnti:hi:k' lu:tɜn**

Surely powerful and strong young men would have found him

16- **ʒæ:ɹəmtæxəf bæɪrwu:di ʒɜllɜheim mɔɪɪ.ʃju:tɜn**

Surely he would have gone by afternoon and met strong young men at the valley.

17- **dæ:ɪ bɜ:ɪ məʊsem bəɪɪbəʊləb bɔ:ɹæf ʒæɪ.ʃju:tɜn**

The house of the son of Maosem is like high rooms on mountains,



18- **dæ.ɪ bɜ.ɪ məʊsem bɜ.ɪ ɪ:ɪəb bɜ.ɪ bəʊʒək k' dlu:tɜn**

The house of the son of Maosem knew ropes of agreement were cut off.

19- **tɜɪ.ɪæn zju:d weɪkɜ.ɪ dɪbeɪl mɪn ʒɜd.ɪu:tɜn**

After a while the tide is so full overflowing from walls

20- **wə mɜ.ɪku:b wə bæɪbeɪt' ɜ.ɪ bɜk' fu:wɜl tɜ.ɪtku:tɜn**

And riders at Batigater in subsequent caravans

21- **tu:ʒɜ.ɪ hɜs' mu:h ʒmɜ:ɪɜh həsɪlɪ:l dəbi:ɪu:tɜn**

Like a trader who lost his capital.

22- **sæfæ wə hmɜ:h ju:kɜb bɜn sɜk' əf wə ʒɜd.ɪu:tɜn**

Strong wind with water enters between roofs and walls.

23- **bɜ.ɪɪk ʃwi:ʃ wɜʒɜh s' əʊ.ɪəh kəɪ.ɪu:tɜn**

Barrak disgraced his face before all people,

24- **ɣeɪɪ dəhɜnʃu:ʃ bənɜddɜh t' æt' mɪn ' mɜk' əddɜmu:tɜn!**

My uncle got his match fall dead, the tribal chief!

The poem opens on a father who talks to his daughter Fatemah, inquiring about the reasons for her hot tears. The apostrophe – “Oh, Fatemah!” – used by the father informs, right at the beginning of the poem, about the solemnity of the moment, the gravity of which is confirmed by the emotional state in which the daughter is. Fatemah has been crying to the point of gasping for breath. Curiosity is aroused as early as the first line of the poem and is fuelled by the second line, which vaguely mentions the reason for the daughter’s tears. Indeed, the reader knows very little about the event narrated. The person concerned – Fatemah’s uncle – and the time and space circumstances – “that morning” and “Qishn” – are clearly set. However, the nature of the event is not yet disclosed: “what happened to your uncle that morning in Qishn”.

Line 3 gives further details about the circumstances of the event. It took place at a moment when a group of tribesmen – “they” – were busy guarding the fort with much dedication and commitment, as expressed by the simile “tired like a camel gasping for breath”. The reason for the guards’ zeal is given in line 4: they had not fulfilled their duty for a long time. A close analysis of the father’s idiolect



shows that he expresses himself by means of figurative language and imagery. He refers to the torrent of tears shed by his daughter as the share of her eyes in what had happened to her uncle: "Your eye took its full share" (line 2). He compares the guards' fatigue with "a camel gasping for breath" (line 3). Time is given by referring to key events memorable to everyone in the tribe: "Since the night of the big fish-net sweeping". In general, as they live according to ancestral traditions, indigenous tribes, autochthone communities and oral cultures resort to natural phenomena, social events and the likes as a means of time expression. Mehri tribes are part of them. What seems to be an idiolect specific to the father seems to be, in fact, a sociolect – similarities in the language use of a community. Indeed, the daughter herself uses, in turn, imagery and figurative language in her replies. Addressing her father through an apostrophe – "Oh father!" –, she disapproves of the way the latter minimizes what had happened to her uncle, which should not be taken as an insignificant event: "as if a coffee were grilled and its time elapsed". It is through a simile and other expressive forms that Fatemah, again, refers to the way her uncle did not and could not get assistance from his cousins. The image of a sea vessel front going deep into the sea and emerging again high up in the air is captured to render the violent situation in which her uncle was, as he was in danger. Both father and daughter perform speech acts that display features of the oral civilization to which they belong.

Just as line 6 does, line 7 refers to the sea, which is a symbolic and significant setting in the poem. The reference to the sea in these two lines foreshadows its diegetic function in the narrative that ensues. The sea is reminiscent of her uncle's murder, because he was killed on the sea shore. The sea and its wind are a depository of oral memory. By standing in a similar place breathing similar breeze, the speaker remembers the tragic event and her wounds become fresh again. In other words, sea wind inflames the raw wounds of her heart: "Sea wind blows out the wounds of my heart" (line 7). The heart, and by extension the chest, is the seat of emotions and feelings.

The crime scene is contained within the heart of the speaker. The killing of her uncle has caused her heart to bleed. The passage "the wounds of my heart" is a hyperbole – an overstatement – amplifying the scope of her pain. The lexeme "wounds" conveys a metaphor showing the ravage of her uncle's death within her, and expressing how much horrible and unbearable the pain is to her. The following line further insists on the speaker's grief, as she accounts for her deep sadness – "gloomy" – to the death of her uncle. The metaphoric use of the verb "dwelled" (line 8) expresses the impossibility to dissociate the sea wind from her



chest, where it is deeply lodged and “comfortably” accommodated. In other words, there is no way one can alleviate Fatemah’s pain after the tragedy experienced.

The tragic event creates within the speaker a homology between “landscape” and “psychoscape”. Indeed, the immensity of the sea implicitly echoes the immensity of the void left within her by her uncle’s death. She keeps lamenting to the extent of feeling like an insane woman, just like other women of the tribe. By associating her condition or state with that of other women, the speaker draws attention on the lot of other fellow female members of the tribe who, most probably, have suffered the same existential fate: losing a dear one due to tribal tensions or rivalry.

The importance of the sea and its wind is expressed through the use of the anaphora “sea wind” (lines 7 and 8), a repetition that is also used here as an expression of complaint, mourning and lament. There is adequacy between form and content in the speaker’s discourse. Indeed, complaints and lamentations often bear repetitive passages. Anaphora, which is the repetition of a word or a group of words at the beginning of successive lines, is used in this poem to structurally render the repetitive complaints or laments: “Sea wind” (lines 7-8), “Surely” (lines 15-16) and “The house of the son of Maosem” (lines 17-18). Line 8 further legitimates the use of anaphora, notably with the reference to the mental state of the speaker, whose unbearable pain almost makes her an insane woman. Repetition is sometimes at the core of insane discourse.

The suspense raised in the previous lines is further prolonged in the ninth line. Indeed, in the ninth line Fatemah refers again to the cause of such “*spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings*”, to borrow Wordsworth’s famous definition of poetry in the Preface to the Second Edition (1800) of *Lyrical Ballads*². However, she talks about it in a way that recalls the rhetorical trope known as preterition. In other words, she talks about what had happened – “young men crowded on him and did to him” – without really talking about what had happened – “what they wanted” (line 9). In so doing, she further delays the disclosure of the nature of the event, that is, the narration of the unspeakable crime. All along the poem, Fatemah keeps creating suspense and arousing curiosity in her narrative through the use of *proairesis* – “action of choosing” –, which refers to the way “*a code of actions is constructed for the reader*” (Cuddon, 2013, p.132). Together with the hermeneutic code, the proairetic code participates in the narratologic artifice in which the poem under study is woven. The poem is composed on a deferral mode as it is only in



the very last line (line 24) that the speaker consents to utter the word “dead” openly, which is a supreme moment of revelation³.

Through the use of an apostrophe constructed with an interjection – “Oh people!” – the speaker, who keeps on lamenting, draws the attention of her tribe on her miserable condition. The reason for her pain and grief is now hinted at, and it is associated with a name mentioned for the first time in the poem, Seelem – the speaker’s uncle. Fatemah resorts to an apostrophe, a rhetoric figure generally used in speech or address, as a discursive strategy in her narrative.

Line 10 focuses on the crime scene, the beach, the sea, which was announced as early as in line 4 (“fish-net”) and line 6 (“sea”). The circumstances of the crime, which are likened to a drama, or spectacle, are narrated. The tide was out at the moment of the murder, which made the beach a stage large enough for a tragic performance. The description of the sea state implies the clearance of the place where everybody could see without any hindrance. On the other hand, “the people” were just looking on, as if they were the audience of a play. No one dared to step forward to intervene, rescue or side with Seelem who was left at the mercy of “young men” who “crowded on him” (line 9). Fatemah deplores non-assistance to person in danger on the onlookers’ part. The indefinite pronoun “no one” placed at the beginning of the line takes the value of an impressive style and reinforces the idea of non-assistance: “No one of those present tried to save him and keep him under protection” (line 11). As they simply watched and let things go the way they did, those people who were present symbolically participated in the murder.

Fatemah resorts to an innuendo as speech act to regret and even put the blame on the weakness of the onlookers, who are far from being so powerful as Sreew, Ali, Hameed and Alooten, probably close and strong relatives of hers, just like Seelem the victim. All these models of bravery and courage are always armed with “cutting weapons and sharp daggers” (line 14) and are therefore ready to face the enemy at any time.

Imagination now takes over from reality as Fatemah reverses the course of the events in her mind and begins to think hypothetically and even to ratiocinate. She firmly believes that if Seelem had been along with those men of his own tribe, he would not have undergone violence and crime that fateful day.

The anaphoric use of the adverb “Surely” (lines 15-16) further grounds her thoughts in certainty. She fabricates her own reality. Uncle Seelem, to her imagination, would have gone to the valley by that afternoon and would have taken revenge, and his enemies would have found him very brave.



The anacoluthon in line 17 introduces a break in the narrative sequence and in the speaker's stream of thoughts, which shifts from imagination back to reality, from the tribe of Seelem to that of the son of Maosem. Anacoluthon is a rhetorical device consisting in an unexpected grammatical or semantic discontinuity in the expression of thought. Germane to oral poetry, it reflects the inner, self-reflective discourse of the speaker. It is used, for instance, to reflect stream of consciousness or to draw attention in a context of written or oral literature respectively⁴.

The narrative focuses now on the house of the son of Maosem ("dæi bɜi mæusem"), the anaphoric use of which is intentional. While recalling and echoing the complaints and laments by which the poem opens, anaphora enables to insist on the house of the son of Maosem, to describe it, to give a picture of its safe and secure state, its fortress-like architecture: a highly protected and resistant house. The simile "is like high rooms on mountains" ("bæibæuɔɔb bɜiræf ʔæljɜ:tɜn") hints at its unreachable position and unassailable solidity, which sounds like a warning to potential assaulters. The simile built with the pleonasm "high" and "mountains" further emphasizes the unreachability of the house, and informs about the high social status of its owner.

The house is a symbol of the power of the owner, the son of Maosem, a member of the Al Jedhi tribe. In fact, "the house of the son of Maosem" is a synecdoche referring to the Al Jedhi tribe. Fatemah's discourse becomes ambivalent as she calls for revenge against the enemy tribe whose power, strength and unreachability she yet praises between the lines. Ironically, the house of the son of Maosem cannot stand up to the revengeful determination of the speaker's own tribesmen. For having "cut off the ropes of agreement" (line 12) between the two tribes, they should expect revenge.

Recurrent tidal wave imageries are used to represent the speaker's tribesmen invading the house of Ibn Maosem, and the Al Jedhi tribe. Indeed, Fatemah compares the invaders with a tide that invades the strong walls of the house of the son of Maosem: "After a while the tide is so full overflowing from walls" (line 19). The same metaphor is extended in the poem, and is repeated in line 22 where invasion now takes the form of a raging sea: "sæfæ wæ hmɔ:h ju:kɜb bɜn sɜk' æf wæ ʔɜdɜ:tɜn" ("Strong wind with water enters between roofs and walls"). The metaphor reveals the power and strength of the speaker's brave tribesmen, who are at the valley of Batigater, riding horses, forming caravans on end, and in procession towards the enemy tribe (line 20).



The simile “Like a trader who lost his capital” (line 21) denotes the value of what is lost and connotes the determination to reconquer it. The enjambment of this line is a poetic device to single out the mental state in which the tribesmen are. The invaders shall revenge Seelem! It can be noticed that Fatemah uses symbolism precisely in the same line. As a matter of fact, the capital stands for a symbol of her uncle, Seelem, who holds a high position in the AlSulimi tribe. The capital is culturally, socially and ethnologically significant as, in the Mehri culture, and more generally still in Southern Arabia, trade is an ancestral traditional occupation.

Because he did not defend Seelem who yet lost his life by coming to his rescue, Barrak disgraced himself in front of all the tribe. Before he lost his life, Seelem succeeded in shooting dead his counterpart, his “match” in the enemy tribe (line 24). Fatemah’s deliberate choice to refer to the name of her uncle’s enemy by calling him through his title “the tribal chief” and not his patronymic and filial identity (probably “the son of Maosem”) is very telling.

The escalation of tension noticed as early as in the opening of the narrative goes down until its closure. The speaker’s excruciating pain at the beginning of the narrative is gradually alleviated, at the end, through the act of bravery her uncle performed before his murder. He was killed indeed, but at least he succeeded in killing his match, the chief of the enemy tribe.

In her narrative, the speaker uses end rhyme from line 7 to the end. Also known as tail rhyme, end rhyme is achieved when the last syllables or words in two or more lines rhyme with each other. In the poem under study, the end rhyme /u:t3n/ is repeated in the above-indicated lines. Such a rhyme scheme creates musicality in the poem, which makes it easily memorable or sung as were most of the ancient Mehri poems. The suffix /u:t3n/ is a pronoun which indicates feminine second person plural; and it is mostly used to address women. Fatemah seems to talk to the women of her tribe, but in reality she is talking to the men. As a matter of fact, she purposefully uses a kind of deviation by applying the feminine pronoun in a masculine context. This is in line with the tribal traditions of Al Mahra, where women can resort to discursive strategies in social interactions for specific purposes. In using the feminine suffix /u:t3n/, Fatemah, who is a woman, purposefully tries to prickle the pride of the men by talking to them as if they were women. She implicitly compares the men of her tribe to women since they did not defend her uncle. She seeks to inflame their sense of “belonging” so that they revenge her uncle. In other words, Fatemah develops discursive strategies for a strategic discourse: to rekindle among her men the feudal flame of tribal pride and honour.



d) Conclusion

Collected from Mehri informants in Qishn, the poem, which is based on a true story, retraces the historical and sociological characteristics of Mehri tribes in Qishn, a district of the Al-Mahra Governorate, Yemen.

The poem is a narrative genre as the speaker tells the story of her uncle's murder. Although it contains some elements of elegy as the speaker laments the death of her uncle in a very lyrical way, it retains nonetheless the most predominant features of oral poetry.

The speaker, Fatemah, narrates the murder of her uncle by an enemy tribe. Objecting to her father's attempt to console her, she tries to goad her own tribesmen into revenge. She bestows glamorous characteristics on the enemy tribe to arouse the indignation of hers. The poem is a factual historical account. As related by natives, about 40 years after the composition of the poem, Fatemah's tribesmen will take revenge on the enemy tribe.

The tribal feud in question narrated in the poem raises an epic interest. Indeed, subscribing the poem in an epic perspective, it is legitimate to ask whether the murder of Fatemah's uncle - Seleem - is not a response to a previous event. If so, what is the cause of that previous event? Further research could be conducted to shed light on this issue.

The lyric tone of the first lines diffuses throughout the poem and is in harmony with the powerful tone of the narration, even though the gloomy tone on which the speaker's discourse opens stops midway to take a committed, vindictive and conflicting impulse. This gradation in the narrative is backed up by a set of rhetorical figures, techniques and strategies. *Proairesis* is at the core of the narrative of the events. The narrative of the actions are delayed to create suspense, to better snatch the reader's or listener's attention.

The speaker's complaint against her people is repeatedly hinted at throughout the poem. Her discourse over the poem appears to be a continuous invitation for action, for revenge. Her purpose is to provoke the men of her tribe to revenge her uncle Seelem. In other words, she resorts to discursive strategies to address a committed discourse to her tribesmen.

This study has a philological albeit an ethnolinguistic importance as it contributes to giving insight into pragmatics and linguistic specificities in Mehri texts. It also provides a survey of Mehri oral culture, with reference to traditional time as a limiting factor on a study of this nature since the Modern South Arabian (MSA) languages, the indigenous languages of the Al-Mahra region included, are generally believed to be in decline.



Notes

1 - Whether they are ethnic or tribal, such feuds are not uncommon in fishing, agricultural and pastoral civilisations; they can break out for various reasons: a piece of land, cattle lifting, rivalry, issues regarding honour and so on. In West Africa for instance, more precisely still in the Senegambian region, feuds opposing farmers and cattle breeders living in the same area happen quite often. These feuds are generally due to the intrusion of the cattle into the farms.

2 - See William Wordsworth (1800). "Preface to Lyrical Ballads", Second Edition, p. 13, <http://faculty.csbsju.edu/dbeach/beautytruth/Wordsworth-PrefaceLB.pdf>, 12-07-1018.

3 - This technique is very common in oral poetry. It is found in some African oral cultures as well as in the English and Scottish popular ballads]

4 - The Anglo-Irish poet William Butler Yeats refers to it in his poem "Sailing to Byzantium", an Oriental poem: "[...] The young....

In one another's arms, birds in the trees

- Those dying generations - at their song,

The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,

Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long [...]" (lines 1-5)

William Butler Yeats. 1996. "Sailing to Byzantium". *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*. Richard J. Finneran (ed.). New York: Scribner Paper Poetry, p. 193.

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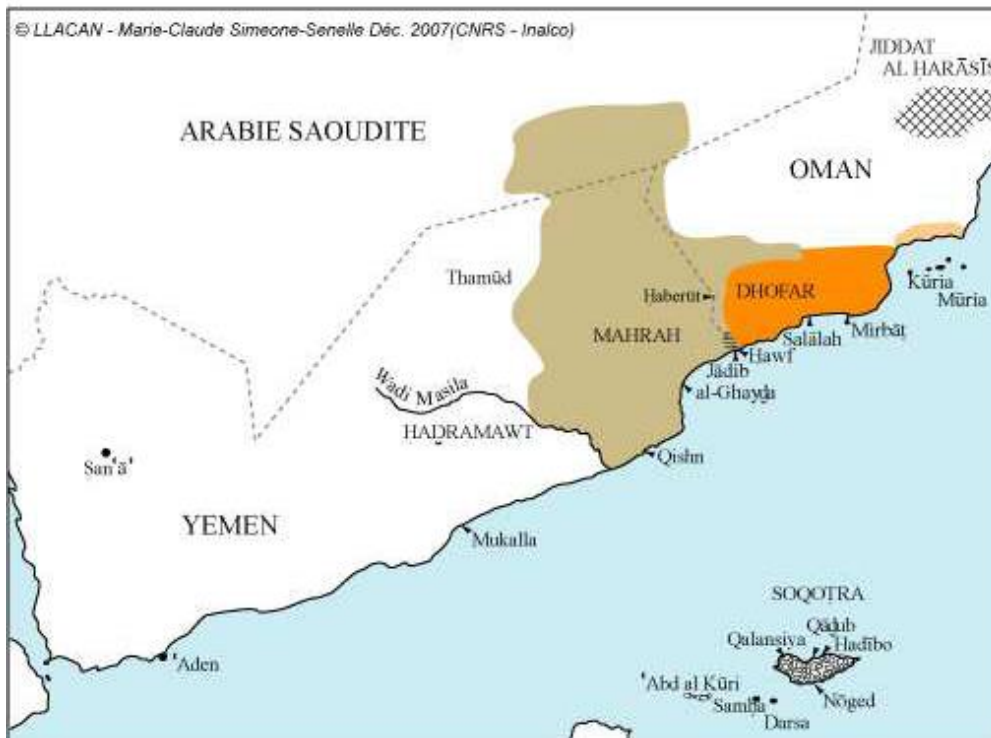
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Taken from Simeone-Senelle (2010)