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Bedouin Poetic Legacy in Egypt

Taha al-Kilani al-JAWAZI

Introduction by Editor

I first met Mr. Taha Kilani, the author of this paper, on September 11, 1994 at a hotel in Minya to interview him and obtain information about an uprising in modern Egypt. At the time, he was a chemical engineer aged 35, and exclusively devoted to reevaluating the role of the Bedouin, especially the Jawazi tribe to which he belongs, in the history of modern Egypt.

At that time, I was interested in the uprising led by a leader named Omar al-Masri of the Jawazi tribe, as mentioned that of Mr. Taha. I had written a paper on the uprising of Omar (‘Umar or ‘Ummār) Masri (Miṣrī) and the opposite vicissitudes of Fellahin and Bedouins in modern Egypt, entitled “Nomads and Farmers in the Process of the Modernization of Egypt” (Orient, Vol. 26) in 1990. My meeting with Mr. Taha was arranged to check the contents of this paper and get more information from him on the subject concerned.

Just before I met Mr. Taha, he had published a book on the history of the Jawazi tribe, entitled Qabīla al-jawāzī fī mawkīb al-tārīkh (Jawazi Tribe through History) published in Minya in 1994, at his own expense, and based upon information which he himself had compiled. Mr. Taha is the fourth grandchild of the leader of the uprising, Omar Masri, and retains the so-called fundamentalist mentality in a positive sense.

His mentality is well reflected in a letter he contributed to the Journal “al-Ahrām”, dated May 28, 1996, in response to an article in the same, dated December 28, 1995, by Dr. Yunan Labib Rizq, a leading historian on modern Egypt, entitled “Egyptionalization of the Bedouin (Tamṣīr al-‘urbān)”. In this contribution, Mr. Taha criticized the bias of Dr. Yunan against the Bedouin and defended the historical role of the latter as “Egyptian”, referring to the actions of his tribal ancestors.

Since our first meeting to date, Mr. Taha has supported my research as an informant. I met him occasionally during my time in Egypt. He has continued his own research into the Bedouin and expanded its scope to cover Bedouin in Egypt in general. He also recently wrote another book, entitled al-Qabā’il al-‘arabīya fī miṣr: tārīkh, sharā‘ī, ‘ādāt (Arab Tribes in Egypt: History, Poetry and Customs), but cannot publish it due to financial issues.

Judging from its interesting contents, I decided that it is worth introducing in English. I selected Chapter 5 on Bedouin poetry, entitled “Bedouin Poetic Legacy in Egypt (al-Turāth
Introduction by Mr. Taha al-Kilani al-Jawazi for the English Edition

Arab Heritage, whether in the form of moral codes or heritage itself, is poetic in nature. This is true and represents the objective reality of the Bedouins, since their nomadic lives barely allow for anything but poetry to reign supreme. Studying the moral codes or poetic traditions allows the reader to understand the situations and conditions of the Bedouins, and how they react to their challenges. Poetry is also connected to the Bedouins in terms of their society, culture and psychology.

It is also worth noting the physical distance separating the Bedouins from cities and city dwellers, as well as the cultural differences between the two. Due to their unique circumstances, it is understandable that the Bedouins needed to have their own sets of rules, which are nearly identical to those of Islamic Laws, and by which they could solve most of their problems. In the spoken traditions of the Bedouins, the concept of ‘journeying’ is a central theme, as exemplified in their saying, "The pride of the Bedouin is an everyday journey." The Bedouins are also known for using expressions that only they could understand, e.g. during the wars between al-Jawazi tribe and Sa'id Pasha of Egypt (1848-1863), in the writings between the Awlad Ali tribe (an ally of Sa'id Pasha) and the leader of al-Jawazi tribe, Omar al-Masri. In a symbolic line such as "Yā sidra kūnī nadra bi-l-hawām irēd išēd-ik" which is a line of warning to al-Jawazi tribe, even though the two are enemies; the Awlad Ali tribe is simply saying that they want to benefit from being allies with Sa'id Pasha without participating in the fighting against their cousins of al-Jawazi (both tribes share the same father, Dhi'b al-layl (Night Wolf), and mother, Sa'da al-Zināfiya).

It is also clear that life in the desert has made the Bedouins very emotional, meaning most of their poetic traditions exploit emotionally powerful words that are as clear and infinite as the desert itself.

Taha Muhammad Hamad al-Kilani al-Masri al-Jawazi

Preface

We shall endeavor in this paper to delve into the true nature of a time honored legacy, as Bedouin poetry is still considered to be the essence of the Bedouin culture. Moreover, it is safe to assume that the Bedouin cultural heritage, such as poetry and similar genres, is like a resilient
tree which has stood up until now to the tempests of invasion. It is a genuine depository of actual facts of life. It is obvious that the nomadic lifestyle of the Bedouins does not allow for any artistic expression to prevail other than the oral one, as it lends itself to memorization due to its specific rhythmic nature. In spite of this, the Bedouin poetical legacy has hardly benefited of any scholarly interest or been the focus of any study. This is mainly due to the nature of the relationship prevailing between the urban centers and the Bedouin communities, as it has been characterized by mutual suspicion and doubt. Therefore, the exploration of the Bedouin artistic expression, be it in the form of songs or poetry, will disclose to us the consistency of a vocabulary and the vigor and splendor of meanings that are derived from values which are totally free from the flaws of social hypocrisy and affectation. The Bedouin poetical heritage can be classified into the following categories:

1 – *Al-Hidā ‘* (poetry or rhymed prose which relates to animals, namely camels)
2 – *Qawl al-ajwād* (poetry recited in honor of the generous)
3 – *Al-Shabāha* (satirical poems)
4 – *Al-Majrūda* (lengthy poems describing the various stages of an experience or a journey)
5 – *Al-Taqdir* (poetry relating to the event of sheep shearing)
6 – *Al-‘Alam* (love songs)

### 1. Poetry or Rhymed Prose which Relates to Animals, Namely Camels (al-Hidā ‘)

*Al-Hidā ‘* is the category of poetry or rhymed prose which relates to animals, namely camels. That is why it is dubbed as *al-Hidā ‘* of camels. This type of poetry is recited while camels are covering long distances across the Saharan desert. It is noteworthy that this type of poetry is rather scarce. This is probably due to the incursion of urban lifestyles, on the one hand, and decreased reliance on the use of camels as a means of transport, on the other. Another possible reason is the fact that *al-Hidā ‘* is a type of poetry which is recited by individual persons rather than by groups. As such, it has had fewer opportunities to be transmitted and memorized in comparison with the others categories of poetry, such as *al-‘Alam*. We have come across only one poem of *al-Hidā ‘* and it reads as follows:

طراقة من اسمها من اللحمي  من عزفها لحيت قدمي

Meaning: The camel runs so fast that it strikes the rocks under its feet and kicks them far away.

لرزق طويل الذيل بوعراق  يصرد صرخ الطر قطاع إطلاقة

Meaning: The camel is blue in color and it cries like a bird when it takes off.

دار لها مسارب روحة مملوكة  فرده قطع من فردها مسلولة

Meaning: The camel has become old and faded, like a migrating bird that is separated from its flock.
2. Poetry Recited in Honor of the Generous (Qawl al-ajwād)

This type of poetry is recited to pay tribute to the generous and noble horsemen and dignitaries to extol their virtues and courage, be they still alive or deceased. Qawl al-ajwād may also be recited in honor of the poets themselves. For only the generous can recognize the merits of the generous. Indeed those who cherish heroism, nobility and other lofty values will undoubtedly be staunch advocates of such virtues. Qawl al-ajwād is usually recited in the presence of dignitaries without manifestations of joy such as clapping or repeating choruses.

Examples of Qawl al-ajwād:

أول مبادئ مرحبا يا بوادي
يدم الله بخير قولو أمين

Meaning: We begin by greeting you, dwellers of the desert.

ومرحبا بالللى قاعدين قضادي
ومرحبا بالللى هكه ذى قاعدين

Meaning: The poet greets the people sitting in front of him and those sitting in the same style as him.

نمسى عليكم كلكم يا بوادي
علي الله تكونوا بس مبسوطين

Meaning: We greet you, you Bedouins, and we hope that you are enjoying your time.

بنت بدويه من أجود سعادت
خفت عقيلي قبل كان رزين

Meaning: The poet talks about a Bedouin girl who comes from a noble family, with whom he fell in love.

هلها بعيد اليوم زول مرادى
هي والغلال اليوم متجارين

Meaning: The poet says that the girl’s family is away and that she is as beautiful as a gazelle.

(by Muhammad Farah Rahim from Burj al-'Arab)

زعمه قولي يا حبيب إنظاره
غلال لولي ولا نقش مقدرته

Meaning: Oh dark-eyed girl, I still love you as much as before.

يا حبيب أهادبه
غلال لولي ولا مفتول بابه

Meaning: Is your heart still open for me, oh girl with long eyelashes?

من يوم ما تحجرتي علي هابه
العقل شارى والعيون حｉاره

Meaning: Ever since you became another man's woman, my mind has been lost and my eyes have been confused.

والعقل متفقهن كثير شخشابه
وبالي صغير ضايقات افطاره

Meaning: The poet says that since his love left him, he could not think clearly anymore.
Meaning: The poet describes his love as a gazelle and asks if she still loves him or not.

Meaning: The poet asks his love if the man who proposed to her still intends on marrying her or not.

Meaning: The poet tells his lost love that he is used to tragedies in his life.

Meaning: The poet repeats his question to his love about whether she still loves him or not.

(by Muḥammad Farah Rāḥīm from Burj al-ʿArab)

Among other examples of Qawl al-ajwād we may cite the poems by “Sharīf al-Saʿīṭī”, a number of which exalt the true values of life whilst others glorify the valor of tribal horsemen and warriors.

Shame (al-ʿAyb)

Meaning: The results of shame are bad, and if the mind is not used carefully it cannot be controlled in the future.

Meaning: Shame is a bad thing, and you must always maintain your friendships.

Meaning: Shame is a bad thing. No religion accepts it and its bad results remain for a very long time.

Meaning: A man with a sound mind always chooses the right path in life.

Meaning: Shame is a disease with no cure and any imperfections are very bad.

Meaning: It is bad to fail in fulfilling a promise and doing so would be considered bad among people.

Meaning: A friend who abandons you should not be trusted. He is like a captain of a ship in the middle of a storm.

Time (al-Zamān)

Meaning: Times have changed and people’s faith has decreased, even though wealth has increased.
Meaning: Faith has decreased in the hearts of people.

أيام استوى فيهم العبد وسديم وشروط الحياه فهالارقات احلت
Meaning: In days like these, a slave and a master are equal and there is people have no more dignity.

والخباش ما تمت عليه نقيده
Meaning: People who spread bad rumors are everywhere.

لا عاد اهناك محنن والي إعداد قريب نافر منه
Meaning: There is no more love between people, not even within families.

حتى لو تجب ما عاد سايل عنه
Meaning: When someone falls sick, his/her close relative no longer cares about him/her.

زمان تواطى وأكثر الناس عيشته امغير زغاطه
Meaning: Time has changed and many people are miserable.

والي يباعدك يخلف معال إرباطه
Meaning: People are always not showing up when they promised to meet you, and they don't respect appointments.

والفريق الذي كانت شلوق تغرب تواطى ثمنها والحتم تعلت
Meaning: Even purebred horses have become worth less than before, while donkeys are more expensive.

Ode to ‘Umar al-Mukhtār
مرحبا يا شهيد الوطن يا وافي الحسب مرسم قلوب الناس لك تذكر
Meaning: ‘Umar al-Mukhtār is a martyr and will always been in people’s hearts.

ثلاثين عام وزود وانت في تعب وسكن بجبشك في خلاء وأعار
Meaning: ‘Umar al-Mukhtār fought for over 30 years while he traveled the mountains and deserts.

برجال يفزعوا للطويل وقتنا ما ضرب حرابي وبرغوث أو صني عقار
Meaning: ‘Umar al-Mukhtār’s men are always ready to fight, and they are from the tribes of Ḥarābī, Barghūṭh and Abnā’ ‘Aqqār.

ويبعدوا الطابور وقتنا ماقرب فراسين ما يخشو لهيب النار
Meaning: ‘Umar al-Mukhtār’s men are very brave and always ready to battle whenever the enemy’s soldiers approach them.

كمين ملطم داروه ويجيوك بالسلب تنين بيتوا روما علي لهبار
Meaning: ‘Umar al-Mukhtār and his men fought many battles and had many victories, which made Rome sad over its defeated soldiers.

رسلوك كل الصلح قاومت الغضب ولقيت خبر لك موتك علي لخبار
Meaning: Rome wanted a peace agreement with ‘Umar al-Mukhtār but he refused and chose death over peace with his enemies.

واليوم راكف للفردوس في عالي الربت وسكن مع رضوان نعم الجار
Meaning: The poet says that ʿUmar al-Mukhtar went to paradise after his death.

Saying Goodbye to al-Jawāzī Tribe

Meaning: The poet has decided that it is time for him to leave, and he wishes everyone all the best.

Meaning: The poet lived with al-Jawāzī tribe for over 35 years, and any stranger to this tribe is always welcome by them.

Meaning: He lived with this tribe for a long time and he felt that they always gave him more respect over time.

Meaning: The poet says that if it weren't for the call of destiny, he wouldn't have decided to leave Egypt where water is abundant.

Meaning: Al-Jawāzī tribe is a very generous and kind tribe, and living with them is wonderful.

Meaning: The poet says that the tribe is so generous that they give all their wealth to help others in time of need and in time of war.

Meaning: On the battle day, the enemy’s casualties will be numerous.

Meaning: If a stranger would visit al-Jawāzī tribe, he would be greeted warmly with kind words and pleasant smiles.

Meaning: The poet describes his encounter with al-Jawāzī tribe as being friendly from the beginning, and that they are good horsemen, and that they are very kind. Even if the head of a household was away, his children would treat their guests kindly.

Meaning: The poet says that a guest to al-Jawāzī tribe is treated kindly. The poet also says that he will continue to praise this tribe until the day he die.

3. Satirical Poems (al-Shabāha)

Although al-Shabāha is considered to be one of the genres featured by the Bedouin poetic
legacy, it is not widespread, for it is not condoned by the majority of Bedouins who consider some of its vocabulary as abusive. Nevertheless it does exist. *Al-Shabāha* is a satirical poem whereby someone compares another person to a monkey or a dog or the like, while the other person answers back in the same vein. *Al-Shabāha* is usually practiced amongst circles of elderly people, yet in the absence of any female presence. It is also common among the Bedouin community to use “*al-Shaqāwa*” as a synonym for *al-Shabāha*.

**Examples of *al-Shabāha***:

Franq allahu wajeej kif wa-tejzah dakhayi fi qat
al-shafahu layti al-wun grusha jajji bi sabil allahi adhar

Meaning: That the person being talked about is ugly.

Franq allahu wajeej kif wajee al-shababi layti rakkub al-hijzah
ama jumali maw mishai watan al-wala ma abudu

Meaning: The camel is not fast, and so the home of those I love is very far away.

**4. Lengthy Poems Describing the Various Stages of an Experience or a Journey (*Al-Majrūda*)**

*Al-Majrūda* is considered to be one of the most verbose patterns of the Bedouin poetic legacy as it reviews the various stages of an experience or that of a journey or the like in a lengthy storey-telling style of the type of they said, we said, he said she said, etc…. Actually, the meaning of the word “*Al-Majrūda*” suggests lengthiness, as the verbal form is often used to describe a walk or a ride as never-ending. *Al-Majrūda* is very close to “*al-Shitāwa*”, except that “*al-Shitāwa*” has a quicker rhythm than *Al-Majrūda*.

**Examples of *Al-Majrūda***:

The following is a poem entitled “The journey back home” by the poet, Sharīf al-Sa’ītī

سلامي عليكم يا بعيدين الجباء سلاما أطيب من هفوة الريحان
Meaning: The poet sends his regards across to everyone, and that his greetings carry a fragrance sweeter than that of lavender.

سلامي من إعداد النجم وإعداد الحصى وإعداد ما نزل من نقط لامزان
Meaning: The poet sends greetings that outnumber the stars, rocks and raindrops.

جوازي النذاذ أفعال تطروك ابها أصحاب الشرف ما جاركم ينهان
Meaning: The poet says that al-Jawāzī tribe is a tribe that has done many great things and that they deserve respect.

مشارح حمر وبيض ما فيكم اخياء أجود في البيوت وفي اللقاء فرسان
Meaning: Al-Jawāzī tribe is famous for brave and kind to any guests they receive no matter
what race they are.

Meaning: The poet finds it very hard to part from his white-complexioned beloved; yet the dice are thrown and his fate has been decided.

Meaning: Separation from the beloved in Minya began when the train had moved on with a rumble.

Meaning: The poet describes the train as coal is fed into it, fire is ignited and the arms of its wheels start moving on.

Meaning: The train is like a flock of birds, except that it is moving on rails.

Meaning: After evening prayer, the train stopped at the station of Alexandria – the city of splendor.

Meaning: They stayed over in Alexandria, and the train moved on early in the morning before sunrise.

Meaning: Then they reached a small city which has a market; it is called al-‘Āmiriya.

Meaning: After midnight, the train stopped alongside a platform surrounded by an empty wilderness and valleys.

Meaning: Later on, a group of black soldiers came for inspection.

Meaning: The soldiers said: let small children and women get off. Then they started searching the luggage.

Meaning: Al-Sallūm Mountain is facing us and we, in front of it, are similar to small sheep.

Meaning: They almost arrived to Ṭubruq, which, in the eyes of the poet, is a safe haven.

Thus the poet goes on relating the journey back to his home place, describing the various aspects of generous treatment he had been granted during his journey in a poem which is comprised of over fifty verses.

As for “al-Shitāwa” it is similar to al-Majrūda, apart from the fact that it can be sung and that it has a quicker rhythm. Moreover, it has refrains that can be repeated in chorus after the person who recites the poem.
Example of al-Shitāwa:

مرحبين اهلا يا زينه ودى نقول علي غالينا

Meaning: The poet greets his enchanting and cherished beloved.

هاللي دار فراق معانيا ناسي واحلنا راد ناسينا

Meaning: However, he is lamenting how she let him down and no longer cared about him.

حتي ان كان يعز علينا مولى الوشم فوق جيبينا

Meaning: He can’t bear separation from the beloved who has a tattoo and mark on her forehead.

يعني ان كان الحق علينا منا للحلايما

Meaning: The poet says that if he were the cause of the split, he should be accursed by God.

في الدنيا يلبام رديه

Meaning: If this were the case he wishes that God may punish him by ruining and spoiling his future life.

Hence we may observe that it has a rhythm and melody which are quicker than those of al-Majrūda. We will cite below another example of al-Majrūda by the Egyptian poet Sayf Maḥmūd al-Misrī al-Jāzawī. It is in the form of a dialogue between a peasant and a tool named al-ʻūd, which was used, and probably is still being used, to irrigate plants.

قال صاحب العود

Meaning: The owner of al-ʻūd (a handmade instrument used for tapping water from a lower to an upper surface for irrigation purposes) says.

لا بوي لا جدى صبوا على دواسك يالي علييت علينا اليوم تو رسك

Meaning: Neither my father nor my grandfather used to handle al-ʻūd (since only the poor and lower class used to be assigned such a task). Yet nowadays al-ʻūd has an assuming air.

لا تعرفوا مهماتك لا تعرفوا دوك ولا جيداك

Meaning: The owner of al-ʻūd says: he doesn’t know much about the various components of al-ʻūd be they “the bucket”, the “ropes”, neither does he know much about its various functions.

لا تعرفوا التقالة ولا تعرفوا عراك ولا حمالة

Meaning: He doesn’t know the taqāla (a big stone used for tapping water) or the ʻarāk (the ropes) or the ḥamālik (a wooden stick).

الزمان الأول: يا عود راك توعا له شيل الصواني عندهم كانو ناسك

Meaning: The owner of al-ʻūd says: Formerly, the servants who carried the tea trays used to be the ones who handled al-ʻūd and not myself.

قال العود: ايه نسمع ببيهم من واها لنا لطوخ ارضنا كانت ليهم

Meaning: Al-ʻūd replies: Yes I know that and I knew your people who had owned stretches of lands extending from Wāhinā (a small city located in the district of Banī Mazār) to Tūkh (a
small city located in the district of Markaz al-Minya).  

Meaning: Al-‘ūd adds: My friend don’t mind the past and think of the present time; accept God’s decree and water your broad beans (fūl).

Here is another poem by the poet ‘Ummār Maḥmūd al-Jāzawī. It is about a fishing boat which was requested to be borrowed from the owner, ‘Alī Bēk al-Sharī‘ī, who refused to lend it.

The poet is addressing ‘Alī al-Sharī‘ī as follows:

اليوم يا على شمت فينا العيله لا كحيل خدنك ولا جمل هدار

Meaning: Today you have made a mistake by refusing to lend me your boat, because I am not asking you to lend me a horse or a camel.

قويروب خشب للصيد ما هو سفينة لا تضمنه في الموح وقتن صار

Meaning: I am only requesting a wooden boat that can’t resist strong waves.

احنا اصحاب العطاء والجود كارمين ضيف الله والللى جار

Meaning: The poet says: he and his folks are known for their generosity and have always been hospitable to their guests.

ياما عطيننا خيل وهي كحيله وياما كسينا من ضن الأمبار

Meaning: He adds: He and his folks used to give horses as presents and to offer clothing to the children of the poor.

وياما ركينا من سلوق سمينا قنادة اللب وقتن يصير حصار

Meaning: He says: He and his kin used to ride stallions that were fit for battle.

نحن جدنا معروف لاندمنا ويا شرب منا "سعيد": إمرارا

Meaning: He says that his grandfather (‘Ummr or ‘Umar al-Misrī) used to be well-known among the ruling class, namely by “Sa‘īd” (Khidwī – ruler of Egypt).

جدنا "عمار" ياما شاف عزوزيّنا دا سيد الغنا والشوف ياما دار

Meaning: His grandfather “‘Ummār” lived a noble, glorious and dignified life.

ملوك اوربا رتتهم في السينا حفايا عرفا هازتهم نار

Meaning: The poet recalls that even the kings of Europe fell in disgrace.

وجنة الدنيا فرنسا القديمة راحون شوارها اليوم دمار

Meaning: Moreover, the streets of France – the earthly paradise – witnessed utter destruction.

دا الدنيا غوروا والزمن علامة وخير الفنّى يصير علي ما صار

Meaning: As such the poet acknowledges that life is fickle and therefore, one has to exercise patience and show fortitude.
5. Poetry Relating to the Event of Sheep Shearing (al-Taqdīr)

This type of poetic legacy is linked to a major event, i.e., al-Jazz or al-Tajlīm, that is, sheep shearing or the process by which the woolen fleece of a sheep is clipped. The event takes place between the beginning of spring and the outset of summer. Before the shearing takes place, the sheep are washed to ensure that the wool of their fleece becomes thoroughly white and free from impurities. The Bedouin communities carry out the task of sheep shearing in groups and everyone is expected to cooperate. This is called al-Raghāṭa. However, due to the current evolution and the increase in the number of professional sheep shearers during the sheep shearing season, the event has been increasingly taking a more individualistic feature, which means that each family has to carry out the task by themselves with the help of professionals. In other words, a group activity pattern has been supplanted by an individually based pattern.

This poetic legacy is named al-Taqdīr based on the fact that the sheep shearers are called al-Qaddāra. The poetic aspect of this festival (al-Taqdīr) features a continuous and lengthy recitation of single-verse poems by one sheep shearer, while a fellow sheep shearer may take the cue from him to comment on the tenor of his text.

**Examples of al-Taqdīr (al-Tajlīm):**

التاجر عطى عربون حلاوة على صوف الجلد
Meaning: The tradesman paid the price in advance as the quality of the wool is excellent.

عاطلك الله يا ضانا غزانتك توزى في النفل
Meaning: God has endowed this flock of sheep with top quality wool which is not affected by the desert thorns.

طوفه عيونك سود يا نعهج يا عون كاسيك
Meaning: The ewe’s eye is surrounded by a dark orb which gives her invaluable beauty in the eyes of her purchaser.

رفع رواق ذيل البيت على صياح حولية العلم
Meaning: When the Bedouin’s tent (bayt al-sha’r) is open, the sheep get inside.

إن حازيك ظلام البيت على غزيك يا ضان أمني
Meaning: When the sheep are staying inside the tent, they are safe.

يريد كل يوم دهان وحلت في تنوع الجبل
Meaning: The fleece is so heavy and profuse that the sheep shearer needs to rub his hands and shears (jalam) with ointment.

نجلاء بك وانا الخبر على ربيع يا ضان في الجبل
Meaning: The poet leads his sheep out to the hillock for grazing, for he is familiar with its pathways.

الكبش قالك يا ضان: ما تقبلن غير ع العلم
Meaning: The poet compares the ram (male sheep) to a man who is bent on singing al-‘Alam.
6. Love Songs (al-‘Alam)

This type of sung poetry is considered to be one of the major genres of the poetic legacy of the Bedouins. We may even say that the texts of such poems are recited on a daily basis and are memorized by men and women alike. Al-‘Alam songs have to be sung in a loud voice intermixed with pathetic moans and sighs. According to the Bedouin tradition, such songs are not to be performed in the presence of ladies and elderly people. Actually, al-‘Alam refers to a man known for his generosity, valor and noble character. It can also refer to a highly sensible, educated and beautiful noble woman. This poetical genre has borrowed its name al-‘Alam from the following mythical story. It is reported that a long time ago, there lived a refined and smart young man known for being an accomplished horseman and a gifted poet, whose poems were eagerly learnt by heart across distant lands. His name was al-‘Alam. One day, as al-‘Alam was riding his steed, the horse stumbled. After he had dismounted to find out what happened, he discovered that the horse’s feet were caught in the hair braids of a beautiful maid. He stood contemplating the girl, bewitched by her beauty and grace. The girl walked towards a delightful palace surrounded by flowers and aromatic plants. Al-‘Alam followed her to the palace and discovered that its door was closed. He knocked at the door, but it remained closed. Then he found a piece of paper with the following message: “the door of my heart is closed …only the beloved is entitled to possess its key”.
Themes of al-'Alam

1. al-Lawm (blame)  
2. al-'Ayn (eye)  
3. al-Marhūn (captive)  
4. al-'Azīz (beloved)  
5. al-'Alam (flag: memory of a lover)  
6. al-Šāb (patience)  
7. al-Bukā (crying)  
8. al-Mūh (sorrows)  
9. al-Khāta’ (mistake)  
10. al-'Āsīb (direction)  
11. al-Ghalā (cure)  
12. al-Nār (fire)  
13. al-Jurāh (wound)  
14. al-Ąr (lovers)  
15. al-Ya’s (despair)  
16. al-Jādar (aggravation)  
17. al-'Āy (shame)  
18. al-Dam’ (tears)  
19. al-'Āsī (suffering)  
20. al-Qadr (worth)  
21. al-Ġhalā (cure)  
22. al-Ghanī (unattainable)  
23. al-'Aqīl (the mind)  
24. al-Sarīb (memory)

It is to be noted that these themes may mesh with each other, so much so that a single al-'Alam song may include more than one theme, such as al-Ya’s (despair), al-Mūh (sorrows), al-Jādar (aggravation), etc. Al-'Alam songs are characterized by terse and very condensed single verses.

Examples of al-'Alam Songs

1. **Al-Lawm (blame)**
   
   حزينه قمرها غاب
   
   العين على البكا ما تلومها

   Meaning: The eyes begin to cry when they (the eyes) remember the lover.

2. **Al-'Ayn (eye)**
   
   يسيئن ادموع العين
   
   وين يا توالى تخطروا

   Meaning: There is nothing wrong with the eye except for missing the lover.

   إمغير على العزيز مارا
   
   ما فيك مرض يا عين

   Meaning: Oh my eyes, love is something that cannot be forgotten until death.

   تموتى ولا يوم هاننك
   
   غلاهم مرض يا عين

   Meaning: Oh my eyes, love is something that cannot be forgotten until death.

   أقسمت ليلها ليلين
   
   العين وين غالها رحل

   Meaning: The eyes have not been able to rest since the lover has left.

   شدى عزايتك يا عين
   
   يفنى العمر يا بالاغلا

   Meaning: The eyes must be patient on the hardship of the loss of a lover and we are mortal in nature.

   وزاهك في غياب عزيز
   
   خطا كبير يا عين دايره

   Meaning: The eye laughing while the lover is away is a big mistake.

   دنيا إقبال العين عزيز
   
   لا تواري لا أقسم

   Meaning: The face of the lover is always visible to the eye. The lover has therefore not left, and yet (the lover) was not the destiny of those eyes.
**(3) Al-Marhūn (captive)**

العقل ما انسى المرهون حتى في صلاتي فآركة

Meaning: The captive lover (the lover who belongs to someone else) cannot be forgotten, even during prayer.

اللي غلاء مرهون دواء صبر ياطول عازته

Meaning: Whoever’s love is under the control of someone else has no cure but patience.

 عليه إيشرى ياعين عزيز كان مرهون وفضي

Meaning: A lover ought to be happy because his lover is now free.

 مرهون بلعين أنيسه ديري عزا وأصبري

Meaning: The eye must forget and be patient whenever a lover becomes someone else’s.

 ضليل إيها ما زال العين بالمرهون شاقيه

Meaning: The eye still has trouble because it troubles its memory with the lover who belongs to someone else.

مرهون تحت ناس إعزاز رزاني وناره مقابله

Meaning: A lover who belongs to someone close to you is the same as a fire that constantly stares you in the face.

**(4) Al-‘Azīz (beloved)**

إن كان ياعزى أقسمت تديرك دواء دوب خاطري

Meaning: If fortune will bring together two lovers, it will be as a medicine that is taken regularly.

يسيل بلا تغييم على عزيز يبال أرعدن

Meaning: The tears of a person in love always fall the lover.

 أمغينا لله صيار فراق عزيز ياما صادئ

Meaning: A person in love always waits for a lover who is away.

خطر عزيز آخر ليل امئى يا نام إبكي

Meaning: The lover always comes to the person in love, even in dreams, which would make him (the dreamer) cry.

ظلامك يحوذ عزيز ندعى عليك بالليل ما تيجي

Meaning: The person in love hates darkness because it hides the face of the lover.

الاضرار يا عزيز إلحف=

Meaning: Once a person in love loses his lover, he will never love again.

على فراق ناس إعزاز الأضرار بلااعم يعطرن

Meaning: A person who lost his lover’s has eyes that are always crying, just like rains that fall even when there is no cloud.

**(5) Al-‘Alam (highly sensible, educated and beautiful noble woman)**

جد دفاتر التاريخ لقي للأقادم بالفي علم

Meaning: A lover's love is a history that cannot be erased.
Meaning: A person in love loses his mind out of remembering his lover; a traveler without food.

Meaning: The memory of a lover will always remain, even when the lover is away or with someone else.

Meaning: A lover’s love cannot be forgotten because it is written on the bones of the person in love.

Meaning: A lover has three virtues: good taste, beauty and intelligence.

Meaning: A person in love is never fooled and never forgets his lover.

Meaning: A person who lost his love is always willing to return to his lover.

(6) Al-Šabr (patience)

Meaning: A person in love is always patient, just like a man sitting on a fire and not complaining.

Meaning: Patience is the paradise of good people; can an eye handle such a beautiful thing?

Meaning: The lover has no other choice but exercise patience… if his beloved is under someone else’s custody.

Meaning: A person in love must accept the will of God (fate) and must accept the loss of a lover.

(7) Al-Bukā (crying)

Meaning: Even if a person in love is patient and has a strong will, he cries every time he remembers his lover.

Meaning: A person in love who cries cannot be blamed when his lover is away.

Meaning: A person in love cries much over his lost lover, creating a flood of tears.
Meaning: The meaning of a lost lover is tears of sorrow. This is a lover’s only consolation.

Meaning: The only consolation for a person who lost his lover is crying.

Meaning: Tears and crying do not bring back a lost lover. Patience is better.

Meaning: The tears of a person who lost his lover cuts canals into stone.

(8) *Al-Mūḥ* (sorrows)

*Al-Mūḥ* refers to the sorrows of parting ways with a lover.

Meaning: He suffers from the loss of his lover, loss of hope and sadness.

Meaning: It is a gift from God when a lover returns to a person. He (the person in love) is now happy.

Meaning: The poet is haunted by the loss, longing and worries.

Meaning: The person in love takes into his hands the sand of the desert to remember his lover.

(9) *Al-Khaṭa’* (mistake)

Meaning: It is in a person’s fate to make mistakes, so that he can never leave it.

Meaning: For a person just to stand next to his lover for just a moment is now seen as something bad by other people.

(10) *Al-Šawb* (direction)

*Al-Šawb* means the location and direction of the lover. This may also refer to one’s luck in love.

Meaning: The person in love did not have much luck with his lover.

Meaning: May whoever is jealous of two lovers’ happiness have a miserable life.
Meaning: The person in love asks for God’s forgiveness to amount to the number of times he met his lover.

Meaning: A person never forgets his old lover; even if they do not love each other anymore.

(11) *Al-Ghalā* (cure)

Meaning: One always returns to his lover no matter what happens.

Meaning: Love is what cures a lover’s sorrows.

Meaning: Love makes one ill. There is no cure for it.

Meaning: The lover may be old and grey, but will never forget the love he had.

Meaning: Love has penetrated him deeply (reached his liver), and so he cannot forget his lover.

Meaning: Every life has an end, but love is unchanging.

Meaning: Life always continues and will be beautiful if a person finds love.

(12) *Al-Nār* (fire)

Fire refers to the passion of lovers.

Meaning: A lover is always burning with the fire of love. It is unbearable.

Meaning: Love is like an unbearable fire.

Meaning: The fire of love is not spring but sheer torment.

Meaning: A lover always has a special place in his heart, despite the fire of love.

Meaning: When the lover was away on a journey, he felt a painful fire burn within him.

Meaning: The liver of a person in love is crushed by the fire of love.
Meaning: The fire of love is so intense that it burned all the whales deep in the oceans.

(13) *Al-Jurh* (wound)

بلاني الله بجروح حضيت نين جريرنكى بكوا

Meaning: The scars of love have made him so miserable, that his neighbors began to worry about his health.

جرينها بع놓ات بمبل استطلم لما دواء جاء فوقين

Meaning: The pains of a lover are slanted wounds; no medicine can remain them.

على صبر لما يلائم جرحه جديد ما زال خطرى

Meaning: Waiting for a love to return is like a repeating wound.

حتى وان باعدنا بالدان يبرى الجرح ويواضع على

Meaning: The wounds left by a lover, even if he is far away, repeat

اخرى قب ل بريانات واليوم يا عزيز نفستن

Meaning: After the wounds of a lover have healed, they become wounds again.

اجروح نازلات العضد طبيب الغلا فيهن اوجل

Meaning: The wounds of a lover have reached until the bones. No doctor can cure such wounds.

قديم جرح الولاف حتى وهم غنايا ما يرى

Meaning: The old wounds left by a lover who has left have still not healed.

(14) *Al-Awlaf* (lovers)

دموعى على الولاف دارق قنابا في الحجر

Meaning: The tears of a person who lost his lover cuts canals into stone.

العين ساهر في ليلها بعد موح الولاف

Meaning: After he remembered his lover, he could not sleep all night.

النوم في أطراف الهدب يطير واق الولاف يخطروا

Meaning: The sleep of a person in love stops once he dreams of his lover.

نسيونا بلا سيات افلال خير الولاف القدام

Meaning: The former lover forgot him (the poet), but the poet has not forgotten his lover.

زهى العين بالولاف اننها علينا دايمه

Meaning: The eye of a person in love is pleased to see the lover, and always wishes happiness for the lover.

عازيز يا بحر الولاف ضنين ان كان عواماك انجى

Meaning: Love is like the raging sea of which very few people survive.

دموعى على لولاف شلال كيف ماره ف الجبل

Meaning: All the tears of a person in love are like the waterfall in the mountain.
(15) *Al-Ya’s* (despair)

*Al-Ya’s* refers to the lover’s feelings of despair and despondency caused by the departure of the lover.

Meaning: The loss of hope is like sheep that eat the green grasses of love in its very beginning.

Meaning: Despair, frustration and time all conspired against the person in love.

Meaning: A sad person in love’s only consolation is his tears over his lover.

Meaning: Despair has become a friend that never leaves one alone.

Meaning: A person in love blames his lover because despair is in charge of his life.

Meaning: After all the love he gave, the person in love is worried and sad.

(16) *Al-Jaḍr* (aggravation)

What is meant by *al-Jaḍr* is aggravation caused by the departure of the lover.

Meaning: The lover is not here and there is no news from him. This causes a panic with no limit.

Meaning: A person is constantly upset because his lover is away.

Meaning: After all the love he gave, the person in love is worried and sad.

(17) *Al-‘Ayb* (shame)

Meaning: Happiness while the lover is away is something to be ashamed of.

Meaning: It is wrong for a lover to forget that who loves him and who always thinks of him.
It is noteworthy that *al-'Alam* songs that deal with the theme of *al-'Ayb* are scarce. This is due to the fact that the Bedouins prefer to talk suggestively and allegorically, that is, not in a direct manner (they avoid calling a spade a spade).

(18) *Al-Dam*' (tears)

ان كان فيك دمع يسيل بالعين هدى دارهم
Meaning: The person in love orders his eyes to cry when seeing the home of his lover.
قوافل دموع العين على عزير ما يوم غيب
Meaning: The tears of the person in love fall like endless rain.
دموعي على الالاف اسقطن دار حضر
Meaning: So many tears were shed that the desert is now green.
اعزاز هم أحواش العين عليهم ابكي نين تنعمى
Meaning: Lovers are in each other’s eyes; if they are separated, weeping makes the eyes blind.
قوليه يا ريح القلب داب والعين انعبت
Meaning: One tells his lover through the wind that his heart is shattered and his eyes are blinded with tears.
ديما عليك تعلى العين حتى لو ساهتها
Meaning: One’s eyes are always filled with tears when a lover leaves, even if he tries to forget his lover.
العقل ما أنسهم يوم والعين في خفا دوم سايله
Meaning: The heart of a person in love never forgets a lover; his eyes are filled with tears when no one is watching.

(19) *Al-‘Anā* (suffering)

*Al-‘Anā* refers to the suffering and anguish generated by separation from the beloved. As such, all *al-'Alam* songs may be classified under the category of *al-‘Anā*, such as:

امراض جن في ليل لا طبيب لا مسؤول
Meaning: Crazy illness at all night.. no doctor nor no one asking about me.
إه من امراض غلاك التي العقل ما عاد حامله يتحمل
Meaning: Oh! I am suffering of missing you where mind doesn’t sustain.
ازعمه يا بعيد الدار نرجو رجاك ولا نأسيوا
Meaning: (I alleged) we hope your forgiveness and we don’t despair.

(20) *Al-Qadr* (worth)

*Al-Qadr* refers to the worth of a lover.

واصحاب قدر مفهومين عليهم يا عين انعمي
Meaning: A lover means so much to the person in love, that his eyes are blinded from tears.
Meaning: The worth of a person rises if he helps people he does not know.

Meaning: A person must stay with noble people. If he is worth less, he must leave.

Meaning: The loss of a lover; when a lover joins someone who is of a lower standard.

(21) *Al-Khāṭir (heart)*

Al-Khāṭir refers to the lover’s heart.

Meaning: A person tries to forget the lover who is gone.

Meaning: A love that is not whole-hearted is a love that God does not allow.

Meaning: The person in love was deeply in love for two years, and then parted with his lover.

Meaning: Love has built a strong fortress in his heart; fortress than can never be destroyed.

Meaning: The love of a lover has been decided since the beginning of time, and that it will wound the heart of the person in love.

Meaning: We must forgive he who loves when he parts ways with his lover.

Meaning: A person in love is immortal if he ever finds true love.

(22) *Al-Ghanī (unattainable)*

Al-Ghanī is the lover who now belongs to someone else.

Meaning: A person in love is sickened by love. His cure lies with his distant lover.

Meaning: The tears of the person in love fell until they flooded out the lover who left for someone else.

Meaning: Even though he promised never to return to his lover, he cannot help himself.

Meaning: The world of the person in love will be beautiful again if the lover returns to him.
Meaning: The wound left by a lover is old but has not healed, even if he found someone else.

Meaning: A person in love is better than a lover who leaves or forgets his partner.

Meaning: The person in love remembers his happy does with his lover, even if his lover is no longer with him but with someone else.

(23) *Al-‘Aql* (mind)

*Al-‘Aql* and *al-‘Ayn* (eye) in *al-‘Alam* songs refer to the mind (a person in love speaking to himself).

Meaning: If a person in love manages to get his lover, he will be happy.

Meaning: A person in love feels sick whenever he passes by his lover who deserted him.

Meaning: On remembrance of his lost love, the person in love is lost like a traveler without food.

Meaning: Even though the person in love does not think of his lover during the day, his dreams are filled with memories of his lover.

Meaning: The person in love never forgets his lover, despite their separation.

Meaning: The illness of the person in love is caused by the unreturned love of the lover.

Meaning: A person in love becomes oblivious to the world when he remembers his love.

(24) *Al-Sarīb* (memory)

*Al-Sarīb* signifies the memory of the lost love.

Meaning: The memory of a lover comes to a person in love while he is trying to sleep, and so he can never sleep easily like everyone else.
Meaning: The person in love begins to cry whenever he remembers his lost love.

Meaning: The person in love wonders if his lost love is happy or is as miserable as he is.

Meaning: The memory of the lost love is so intense, that the person in love feels lost.

Meaning: The memory of the lover is always on the mind of the person in love.

(25) Various songs

Meaning: The sandstorm has hit him 200 times before. This is said about a person who is unlucky.

Meaning: Is said about a person who has made mistakes dealing with other people.

Meaning: The lover has been gone for a while, but his love is still strong.

Meaning: The love of a person in love lasts a lifetime.

Meaning: Is said at the moment of traveling and parting with the beloved. In other words, meeting again would be by good fortune.

Meaning: Is said one someone forgets an act of kindness he gave. In other words, despite all this the person in love returns to heal his lost lover’s forgetfulness.

Meaning: Is said when someone is checked by his love.

Meaning: Is said when love turns to hate.

Meaning: When a person comes to his beloved’s home, he finds nothing but dust.

Meaning: On days of celebration, the only joy someone who lost his love can get is crying.

Meaning: Time has betrayed the person in love. No one could blame the lover who left.

Meaning: When the lover leaves, the eye of the person in love takes its leave.

Meaning: The person in love is thirsty but can find nothing to quench his thirst. And so, he waits for the clouds to come.
(26) Forbidden songs

Some of al-‘Alam songs are licentious and obscene and may be considered as immoral. It is, therefore, inappropriate to mention them here.