

# The Arabization of North Africa

Interview with Dwight Reynolds

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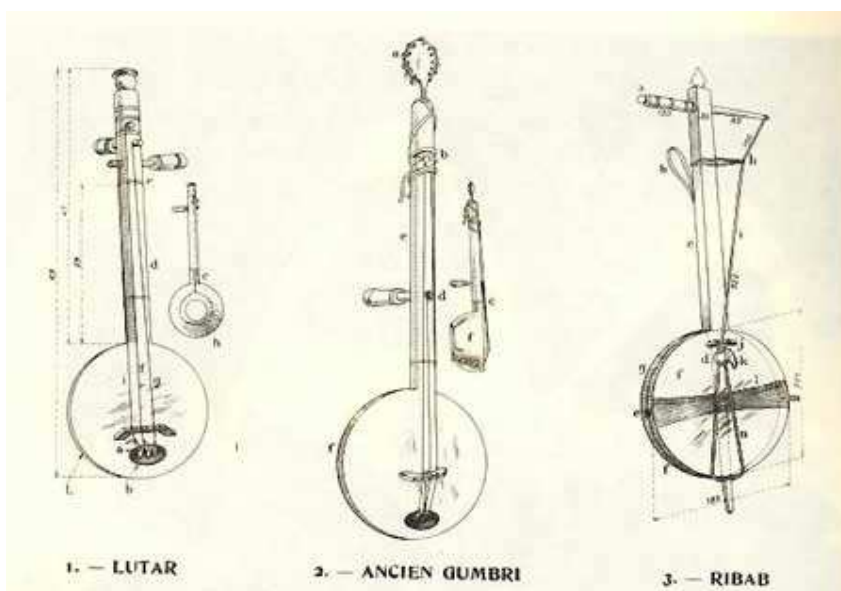
<http://www.afropop.org/multi/interview/ID/92/Dwight+Reynolds+on+the+Arabization+of+North+Africa> )

**B.E:** Coming back to Dwight Reynolds and the Arab conquest, we're leading up to the epic of the Bani Hilal. But first, historically, speaking, who were the Bani Hilal? How do they fit into the early history of Islam and the Arabization of north Africa?

**D.R:** The Bani Hilal were an enormous tribe or confederation of subtribes from the Arabian Peninsula. Their original homeland was the region of Najd, which is near where Medina and Mecca lie today. They did not participate in the original Islamic conquests. Many Bedouin tribes participated in the conquests of the seventh century and moved northwards into Syria, into Iraq, into Iran, into Egypt and North Africa. Somehow, the Bani Hilal seemed to have played no role in the 7th and 8th century conquests. They remained in their homeland where they stayed until the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Medieval historical writings in Arabic actually do not give us a very clear idea why the Bani Hilal Bedouin tribe seems to have picked up and left its tribal homeland, moved across the Sinai, then into Egypt and eventually into North Africa. In oral tradition, in the epic poem of the Bani Hilal, however, we are told that this huge migration was motivated by a great drought, a seven-year drought. For this reason, the Bani Hilal had to leave their homeland and seek pasturelands for their animals, which led them to move westward, first into Egypt, and later across North Africa.

In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, we know that the Bani Hilal cross over the Sinai Peninsula and invade Egypt, which at that time is ruled by the Fatimid dynasty. They apparently come very close to bringing the Fatimid dynasty to its knees and literally conquering Egypt, which is astonishing if you consider that Egypt has so long been a centralized power, a rich culture going back thousands of years to the ancient Egyptians. The idea that some 50,000 Bedouin fighters and all of their families, who perhaps numbered as many as 200,000 people, all told, could have almost defeated a central state such as Egypt is really quite amazing. We get several different stories as to what happened. One idea is that the Fatimid dynasty managed to repulse the invading Bani Hilal, and send some or

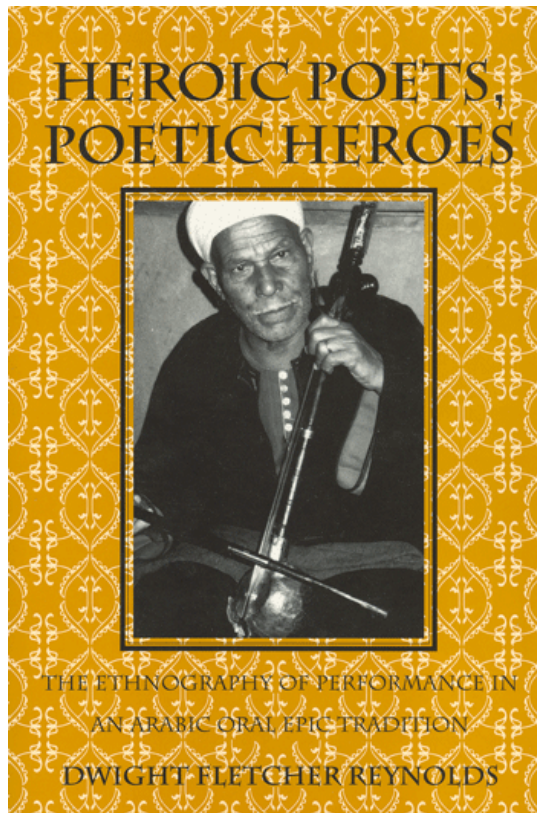
possibly all of them into the southern part of Egypt, the region that is called the Saed, down toward the Sudanese border. And there are still people to this day in southern Egypt and northern Sudan who claim to be the descendents of the Bani Hilal, which is historically quite possible.



We also have this wonderfully poetic story that the Fatimid caliph, who at that time also controlled North Africa, managed to get rid of the Bani Hilal through an interesting trick or ploy. At that point, his governor in what is now Tunisia supposedly revolts against the leader in Cairo, and shifts his

allegiance from Cairo to Baghdad. So the Fatimid caliph in Cairo offers to pay a gold coin for every able-bodied fighting men of the Bani Hilal who is willing to cross the Nile and go and invade North Africa. The degree to which this is true is hard to determine. It is hard to believe that in fact a caliph would simply have offered a pot of gold to the Bani Hilal and they would have said, "Fine, we will go off and conquer North Africa." But there may well be some kernel of truth to the story.

In any case, in the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, going into the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the Bani Hilal do begin to leave Egypt. They invade Libya and began to attack the major cities in Tunisia. So by the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century—somewhere around 1050 or 1051—we have the Bani Hilal arriving in what is now Tunisia and capturing the cities of Gabes and Quairouan and forcing the rulers of that region to withdraw from those regions, and move further westward, withdrawing in front of the Bani Hilal advance.



**B.E:** Who exactly are the Bani Hilal fighting? Is that the new Arab elite? And what about the Fatimids?

**D.R:** At this point in North Africa, the Arab elites and the influence of Islam has been around for well over three centuries, and there has been an enormous amount of intermarriage. There are already, probably, Berbers who are essentially entirely Arabized, who may no longer speak Berber, but rather Arabic as their maternal tongue. Virtually everyone has converted to Islam at this point, so the Berbers are now Muslims, and the population of these urban centers and the coastal plains is very much a mixture of Berbers and Arabs. Islamic culture has united the population, which in the coastal regions has almost totally converted to Islam. There are certainly people who are very proud of their Arab lineage and descendants. The fact that they keep track of those and write those in historical records demonstrates not only that there is still that identity with Arab roots from three centuries earlier, but also that those pure lineages are beginning to disappear and becoming rarer and rarer.

**B.E:** So as the Bani Hilal are moving across, are they penetrating more deeply into the hinterlands? And if so, is that because of their sense of mission, or were they simply building on the wave of earlier conquests?

**D.R:** It is difficult for us to get an accurate picture of the Bani Hilal during and after the conquest, during the century that they ruled over large parts of North Africa. Almost all of the texts that we have were written after the Bani Hilal had been destroyed, and were written by historians who were very much anti- Bani Hilal, and who are in some sense sympathetic to and more pro Berber, and anti-Arab, and particularly anti the nomadic, Bedouin Arabs that the Bani Hilal represent to these historians. What appears to have been the case is that they Bani Hilal never truly sedenterized. They were Bedouin in the Arabian Peninsula. They were a very potent military force, so they were able to travel where they wished, and in many cases conquer even much larger, sedentary military forces. But they did not end up occupying and living entirely in the cities. As nomads with large flocks of animals, they spread themselves out much further into the hinterlands than had the earlier conquests.

Many scholars, even modern scholars, have written about the Bani Hilal in extremely negative terms.

One modern scholar, for instance, writes, "Warfare was their normal way of life," as if the Bani Hilal did nothing more than pillage and maraud. On the other hand, modern scholars attribute the arrival of the Bani Hilal and their spread out into the hinterlands as having been the moment that really brought about the Arabization of many of the Berber peoples. It is not entirely clear what went on in this process, but the Bani Hilal presence as the controlling social group seems to have pushed Arabic language and culture much, much further into the mountains and down south away from the Mediterranean coast than it had ever been before.



**B.E:** Sticking with the historical version, how did the Bani Hilal meet their end?

**D.R:** From historical records, we know that the Bani Hilal begin their push into North Africa around the year 1050, 1051. By 1052, they capture the Tunisian city of Gabes. In 1057 they capture Qairouan. And they basically rule over parts of what are today Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria, even some parts of Morocco, for almost exactly a century. And then, it Berber dynasty from Morocco, the Almohads as they are called in English, begin moving westward. And they engage the Bani Hilal in two particularly large battles, the second of which is fought in 1161, and an astonishing thing happens.



The Almohads wreak such a devastating defeat upon the Bani Hilal that this huge confederation of Bedouin tribes and subtribes is essentially wiped off the face of the earth. After 1161, we no longer hear of the Bani Hilal as a social unit, as a people. We hear of people whose lineage comes from the Bani Hilal, but the tribe or the confederation seems simply to have disappeared from history.

**B.E:** That's so interesting. Now, the Almohads are Muslims, even fanatical Muslims. So they have been very thoroughly converted in the aftereffects of the earlier wave of Arab invasion. So this fight is not about religion. It's about power and territory, right?

**D.R:** Yes. Everybody involved is Sunni Muslim.

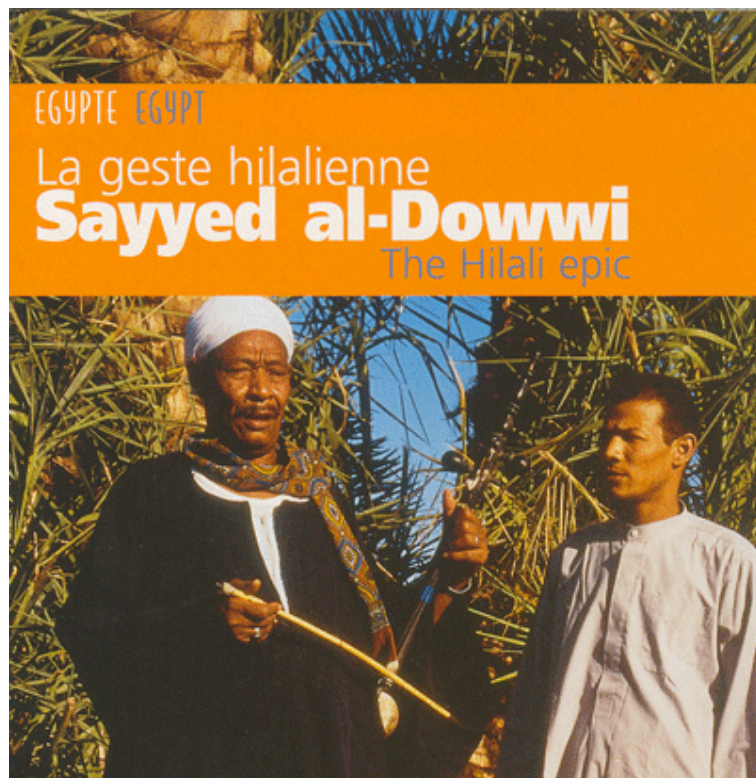
**B.E:** But how does that square with the idea that Arab influence did not spread to the hinterlands earlier?

**D.R:** Well, the religion did to a great extent. We are talking about Arabization. We need to make a distinction between the arrival of Islam at the hands of the Arabs, and subsequent conversion to Islam, and the actual Arabization of the native peoples of North Africa, of the Berbers. Conversion to Islam was fairly rapidly accomplished in most of the coastal zones, and certainly pushed back into the

hinterlands rather completely in the first centuries after the original Arab conquest. The arrival of the Bani Hilal, however, seems to have brought with it a secondary wave of Arab isolation, and that is pushing the Arabic language into places it had not been before.

B.E: Okay. Which do you think of these two—religion or language—would be the more powerful force in terms of affecting music?

D.R: In that early period of time, rather than talking about the arrival of the Bani Hilal as affecting Berber music, as Arabizing the Berber culture, I think we have to imagine that to a great degree, Arab music—that is, songs sung with Arabic lyrics—and Berber music, were fairly separate and distinct, but in the mixture of these two cultures, eventually, there emerge genres and types of music that bear the imprint of both of the mother cultures.



B.E: Let's turn to the epic itself. First, describe it as a literary/musical tradition.

D.R: One of the most remarkable elements of Arab folklore, or the oral traditions of the Arab world, it is the epic of the Bani Hilal. This is an epic poem that tells us the story of the conquest of North Africa by the Bani Hilal Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula. We can talk about the epic on one hand, but the story of the conquest of North Africa by the Bani Hilal is actually told in many different ways in Arab folklore. There are proverbs that derive from stories about the Bani Hilal. There are folk tales. There are rhymes. There are folk songs. So this huge story, this narrative of this Bedouin tribe that comes out of the Arabian Peninsula, conquers North Africa, and is then defeated and

disappears after about one century of rule, has percolated into many different forms. But the one form that really seems to capture the imagination, both in the Arab world, and for outsiders, is the most artistically complex form, and that is the epic poem of the Bani Hilal, or Sirat Bani Hilal, as it's known in Arabic.

This is a single poem. It consists of many, many different episodes that tell the story of the Bani Hilal tribe, from their history in the Arabian Peninsula, how they conquered North Africa, and their eventual destruction. It is an epic that is fascinatingly complex on the psychological level. Some epics tell the story simply of a central hero, and the central hero is virtually perfect. If you look at the Song of Roland, for example, Roland is a great knight, a hero. He fights. He dies. But Roland himself has almost no personality, no psychology other than being a hero. Similarly, we could look at Beowulf and say that Beowulf is in no way a complex personality. The Bani Hilal, however, is peopled by a constellation of very complex characters.

Perhaps the four or five most central characters—and there are many characters in this epic—each represent almost a human stereotype. One, for example is Diyab. Diyab is an extremely powerful

warrior. He is the person who leads the charges of battle, and who wins the battle in the end. But at the same time, he is almost fatally flawed because he's so thin-skinned, especially about points of honor. All you have to do to get him upset is to insult him in any way. And when he is slighted or he feels that he is not being treated with the proper amount of respect, he will stomp off the battlefield and refuse to fight. In the tale of the Bani Hilal, the Bani Hilal tribe know that they have to put up with Diyab's weaknesses because it has been foretold from the beginning of the story that only that the hand of Diyab will the ruler of Tunis be killed, and only when Diyab kills that ruler will the tribe find a safe homeland. So from the beginning, Diyab, however flawed he is, has to be put up with.

A second major character is Abu Zayd, and in some regions of the Arab world, he is considered the primary character, the single most important hero. He too is a very complex personality in that he is extremely intelligent, and he has a gift for words. He is often portrayed himself as being an epic poet who could sing poetry for night after night and entertain rulers in courts around the world, but precisely because he is so gifted with words and so intelligent, his personality always borders on the cunning. There is something slightly dishonest about Abu Zayd, and both poets and audience members frequently end up in heated discussions about whether what Abu Zayd did in this story or that story, this part of the epic or that part of the epic, was in fact honorable. Or was it dishonorable because he lied or played a trick? In fact, in Arabic, his nickname is Abu Hiyal, that is "the father of ruses, the father of trickery."

The third most important character in the Bani Hilal tribe is Hasan, a man of politics and diplomacy. He is actually the leader of the whole tribal confederation, and it is his job to a great extent, to try to bring the different clans and tribes together, and to hold them together by smoothing out the differences and difficulties between them. But at the same time, he is constantly portrayed as someone whose great diplomatic efforts rarely leads to the intended result. That is, his diplomatic efforts almost never bring about lasting peace. Sooner or later, there is a war, and his importance is overshadowed by that of Abu Zayd and Diyab, who are gifted leaders in war. Hasan himself is not a very strong fighter in battle. He is a man of words, not a man of the sword.



The other fascinating character in the epic of the Bani Hilal is a woman. Her name is al-Jazya, and she is quite simply the most beautiful, the wisest woman in all the world. She is so wise is that the Bani Hilal give her one quarter of the say in any tribal council. She is also so beautiful that any man not directly related to her by blood falls in love with her almost instantly upon seeing her. So she ends up being a mediating force between the three different images of manhood that we have seen, Diyab, who is the man of power, war and brawn, Abu Zayd, who is a man of cunning and of words and of intelligence, and Hasan,

who is the man of politics and diplomacy. Al-Jazya ends up being the final recourse for her tribe having, if you will, exhausted their male resources. Al-Jazya comes to play in many episodes as the female force that saves the tribe or allows them to achieve safe passage to another region, or gets them out of a battle, oftentimes by her interaction by the leaders on the opposite side.

The one last main character that we need to discuss in order to understand the larger structure of the epic, is the ruler of Tunis, and his name in the epic is al-Zanati Khalifa. And his name Zanati comes from the name of the large Berber tribe, the Zanata. In North Africa up to today, there is still very much a struggle or an intermixture of Arab and Berber identity. And so this epic is very clearly understood as representing a struggle between Arab-ness and Berber-ness, between the Berber indigenous peoples in the region, and the invading Bani Hilal Arabs. In Egypt, on the other hand, there is virtually no sense of who the Berbers are, other than that they live in North Africa. Berberness

is not an issue of day-to-day concern. There, people sing the epic, and they listen to the epic, but they don't see it in those same Berber-Arab terms. If anything, they actually see it almost more in a dichotomy between the Arabs and Africa. And that has to do with the character Abu Zayd, whom we spoke of just a moment ago.



Abu Zayd is one of several different major figures in early our culture who are black. One of the major poets of the pre-Islam period, truly one of the great, great poets, Antara ibn Shaddad, is black because his mother is African, and so he is the son of an African mother and an Arab father. There is an epic about his life as well, and the epic tells precisely of his struggle to gain acceptance with an Arab culture being biracial, being black by virtue of his mother's African-ness. A number of the most famous poets from the pre Islamic period were black. Together, they were known as the ravens of the Arab world. Most of them were black because they were born of African mothers and Arab fathers. Abu Zayd was black, but not because he had an African parent. He is a child born of parents who for years have not been able to bear a child. His father, Rizq, married eight different women, one after the other, and yet none of them were able to bear him a son. They bore him 11 daughters, but as the epic says, "He did not have a son to carry forth his name." So of course, Rizq wants a son, and he is eventually given a signal that if he marries Khadra Sharifa, the daughter of the Sharifa of Mecca, she will bear him a son. So he does this. But then, they are married for seven years, and she does not bear a child, and of

course, he is at this point desperate. He doesn't know what to do and he gets angry. He loses his temper. In fact, he slaps his wife in the face in a dramatic moment in the poem. He orders her out of the tent and she leaves tearfully.

She goes out with another woman and a servant, out into the desert, and they come to a pool of water. Both of these two women have wanted to have a child and have not been able to. There are some birds drinking at the water. And first there comes a large, white bird, a beautiful bird. It flies down out of the sky and lands, and all of the other birds gather round him. And the first woman looks at that white bird, and looks up to God, and says, "Oh God, please grant me a son. And may he be as beautiful as this white bird, and may the Arabs gather around him as a leader the way these birds have gathered around this large, white bird." And then, Abu Zayd's mother is looking at the white bird and the other birds around him, and suddenly a large, ugly, black bird comes soaring out of the sky. It is strong and fearsome and it scares all the other birds away, and then drinks its fill of the water. Then Abu Zayd's mother looks up at the sky, and she says, "Oh God, please give me a son, and may he be as fierce and as powerful as this black bird, even if he be just as black."

And of course, both of their prayers are heard, and come true. The first woman gives birth to Hasan, the diplomatic, political figure among the Bani Hilal Arabs, and his name, Hasan, means “handsome,” and he is indeed born as handsome as the white bird, so much that he glows with good looks. And then, when Abu Zayd is born, much to the surprise of the Arabs watching on, the child turns out to be black. Now, of course, the mother Khadra Sharifa understands that he is born black because of her prayer, authored when she saw the large black bird at the pool of water. But the Bedouin begin to spread rumors and they begin to talk. They begin to accuse Hadra of having committed adultery with some black slave, and eventually the rumors grow so strong that her husband grows furious and forces her out of the tribe with his son, out into the desert. So as they go into the desert, the fate of Khadra and her newborn child seemed to be very much in peril.



Of course, it takes hours to recount the tale, but eventually what happens is that God sends down an assistant, God sends help to her in the desert and she is guided to another tribe where she raises her son in a tribe that is other than his own. It's a long, complicated story. But at the end of many adventures, and three or four hours of singing, what happens is that Abu Zayd, this black warrior who is now grown up, meets his father on the field of battle. They don't know who each other are. And they fight day after day after day, and neither is able to best the other because God intervenes each time one of them shoots a spirit or throws an arrow, and avoids having the son kill the father or the father kill the son. In the end, they recognize each other. The father accepts his son, and Abu Zayd and his mother are welcomed back into the Bani Hilal tribe, where very quickly, Abu Zayd becomes the most important warrior of the tribe.

The story of the epic is incredibly complex. It takes a master poet, say, 100, 120, or 140 hours to sing it in its entirety, but it is basically divided into three different segments. The first section recounts the birth of each of the different heroes, and then a series of adventures in which the young heroes go out traveling in the world. Oftentimes they end up capturing a bride, if you will, marrying a woman from some other part and then bringing her back as his bride to the tribe in their homeland in the Arabian Peninsula. The second part begins with a horrible drought that is beginning to take a great toll on the tribe. Their animals don't have pasturage, and it is decided that the tribe will have to find another homeland. And so a reconnaissance party is put together of Abu Zayd, the black warrior, and his three nephews. And they go travel the world. In the epic, they go to China. They go to Cyprus. They go to Jerusalem. They go to Damascus. And eventually, they go to Tunisia, and Tunisia, they decide, shall be the future homeland of the tribe. And it is always refer to as Tunis al-Khadra', Tunis the verdant, or the green. Abu Zayd then returns to the tribe, and the third, the longest and most complex segment of the epic is the tribe's westward journey, the *taghribat* Bani Hilal, as they go from country to country and fight their way to Tunisia, finally captured Tunisia and live there.

**B.E: So the tribe was wiped out, but the epic survived.**

**D.R:** In the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, we know from the writings of various ethnographers and travelers and various historical records written in Arabic that the epic of the Bani Hilal was well-known and performed in virtually every country of the Arab world from Morocco across to a rock and down in to Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula. One of the reasons that we think that this particular epic, this particular set of tales, became so widely known was precisely that the tribe of the Bani Hilal, as we said earlier, were destroyed in their battle with the Almohad dynasty coming from the West in Morocco.

One of the reasons we think that this particular set of stories became so widespread is precisely because the Bani Hilal were destroyed in their battle against the Almohads of Morocco. Normally, the poets of any particular genre only sing the exploits of heroes of that tribe.



You don't sing the exploits of heroes from other tribes. But because the Bani Hilal disappeared so suddenly, and were wiped out—and at the same time, there must have been survivors who fled in different directions across the Sahara—we think that these stories then spread to different peoples, and because the tribe who owned them, or the tribe whose stories these were, was not there to claim them, they began to be told by people regardless of tribal affiliation, regardless of what society they lived in. They simply became a part of the larger folklore of the Arab world. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries we know, for example, that these songs, these tales, were told and sung

in Cairo and Beirut and Damascus, Baghdad, and other places in North Africa. But over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with various different forms of modernization, the arrival of radios and television, the disruption of traditional life in villages in small towns, this body of tales, this epic, began to disappear in many different regions.

Right now, and certainly in the latter 20<sup>th</sup> century, the most important region for the performance of the epic of the Bani Hilal—that is, sung, musical version of the Bani Hilal epic—has been Egypt. Even in Egypt, however, there are several different styles of performing this. The classic performance in some ways of the epic of the Bani Hilal has always been to the instrument of the *rebab*. The rebab is a spike fiddle, as we call it in English, a very simple instrument. It has a wooden spike or panic. It has a sound box. In Egypt, the rebab has a coconut shell sound box, and it literally has a spike in that you used to stick it in the ground and hold it in place, because you perform on its sitting cross-legged it on the ground, or on a platform. The Egyptian version of the rebab has two strings. It is a very simple instrument, but very effective, particularly in creating the musical background for something that is rather straightforward, such as telling detail of the epic to a simple melodic background.

**B.E: This has to be among the world's first bowed string instruments, right?**

**D.R:** The ancient cultures of the Middle East, and the Mediterranean of course, had instruments of many different types. They had plucked lyres and harps and flutes of several different types. They had panpipes. They had drums. But one thing they did not have was a bowed string instrument. Bowed string instruments play such a large role in western music that it seems almost astonishing to us that the idea of the bowed string instruments seems not to have existed in human civilization until say the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century. We know that the instrument emerges out of Central Asia, possibly around the area that is now Uzbekistan, and that it spreads rather rapidly eastward into China, and also south and west into the new Islamic empire. The Arab version, or Islamic version, is called the *rebab*, but there are related instruments that are found all the way from China to Indonesia, to India, and in various parts of Africa. The sound of the bowed string instrument was extremely impressive because it could maintain notes similar to the way a human voice does, unlike the plucked string instruments. So as the technology, as an idea, the bowed instrument spread quite rapidly throughout the Middle East, and with the Arabs, it was introduced into the Iberian peninsula, what is now Spain, and from there into Europe, where of course it gave birth to all the bowed string instruments we know today such as the violin, the viola, the cello, and the double bass.

**B.E: What about the poets themselves? You had considerable experience with these people, didn't you?**

**D.R:** In the 1980s, I made a number of trips to a village in northern Egypt called al-Bakatush. I eventually lived there for a year studying exactly this epic of the Bani Hilal. I was most interested in studying the social life of the epic—who sang it, who listened to it, what it meant to the people who listened to it at weddings and saints' festivals and other types of celebrations. Al-Bakatush at that time was one of the largest communities of epic singers in all of Egypt, probably the largest. There were 14 households of hereditary epic singers, by which I mean that every male in each of these households became an epic singer, whether he was good at it or not. Those who were good became stars, and those who were not as good at this art became second fiddle players. In other words, they accompanied the better singers and got a smaller cut of the pay that they receive for these performances.

One of the very interesting aspects of the social life of the epic was that the singers themselves identified very closely with the figures in the epic. The epic is enormous. It takes over a hundred hours to do the full version, and these men spend oftentimes upwards of 10 years of their life learning, memorizing, learning how to perform this epic from between the ages of about 15 and 18. They identify closely with the heroes of the epic. They often name their children for figures in the epic. There is this vast body of knowledge that in some sense gives them their identity. It certainly gives them their livelihood. It is the one and only occupation that they have, although women folk in their family often have secondary occupations, perhaps selling things in marketplaces, which brings an additional amount of income into the household.

The poets that I worked with in al-Bakatush are actually a very distinctive social group. Perhaps the best term to use for them in English is Gypsies. They have a specific social term for themselves, the *wilad halab*, and they are definitely seen by the standard Egyptian peasants, the *fellahin*, as being a group that is distinct and separate from the Egyptian peasantry. Much of my stay in the village was marked by observations about how these two social groups interacted, and the tensions that occurred



between them, and a soon began to realize that the actual performance of the epic in some sense was a constant mediation between the two identities of these different groups. The much smaller group of these Gypsy, epic singers, who identify so strongly with the epic itself and the heroes of the epic, and then the Egyptian farmers who pay to listen to this epic, who are the patrons of the art form, and who also identify with the epic, but in a much different way, much less personal way. They see it more as a great history of the Arabs rather than something that has to do with their individual identity.

One of the fascinating epics about the art form of epics singing is that these singers do not memorize it word for word the texts of the epic. Instead, they memorize a very, very complex story in all its details, with all of the names of characters and events, etc. And they learn a technique for singing epic verse, with its meter and its rhyme and its music, but with a great ability to improvise. In fact, the performances of master poets are marked by the fact that they can improvise and interact with audience members given various social circumstances. One simple example of this is a trick that the poet uses if an audience member has fallen asleep. He sees that there

someone asleep, say in the back row. And as he is singing the epic, he causes one of the characters in the epic to fall asleep. Perhaps it is Abu Zayd. Abu Zayd is traveling through the desert. He gets tired. The sun is beating down, then suddenly there is this tree and this wonderful shade under the tree, so of course he rides up to the tree, ties his horse, lies down in the shade underneath the tree, and he slowly falls asleep, and he's in a deep, deep sleep. Then the poet sings about another character coming up, and the character shouts at Abu Zayd. And he does this in the performance. He gives a huge shout, "*Wake up!*" and all of the audience members can tell what is happening, and they look around and see the person who is asleep at the side or the back of the audience, and they're all smiling, waiting for what they know and expect to have happen and that is when the poet shouts, that person who is asleep in the audience wakes up suddenly. Everybody laughs, and they go back to the story.

**B.E:** At the end of your book, you write that you were witnessing the "end of an era." What should we make of the decline of this tradition?

**D.R:** The tradition of singing the epic of the Bani Hilal is certainly disappearing rapidly in Egypt, and as we noted, it has already disappeared from most other regions of the Arab world. That seems to be motivated primarily just by the impact of modern life. Boys used to spend 10 years or more learning this epic from their fathers, grandfathers, uncles. They would accompany the elder males to various

performance is. They would listen to the performances. They would be given essentially lessons. Family members would quiz them on names of characters and the events of the epic. And they would eventually begin picking up the rebab, learning the melodies, making their first attempts at telling stories, all with certainty that that was the life that lay ahead of them. These were hereditary occupations. They were to become poets. They did not have earned many other choices, and so they weren't going to school. They were instead learning the epic.

With the advent of modern, government, public schooling, of course, many poets would rather see their children go to school and try to make their way into a better profession, one that pays more for example, or one that is more stable and steady than singing epic poetry. There is simply a basic choice. A child cannot both go to school and spend years of his life memorizing the epic. And, and almost all cases now, the children of even the greatest epic singers are going to school with the idea that with the schooling, they will have a better life, a more stable life, a steady income, and a more widely respected occupation.

**B.E: Does the decline of the epic tradition bring with it and accompanying decline in awareness of the events the epic describes? Is there a kind of cultural forgetting that accompanies this decline, I forgetting of actual history?**

**D.R:** On the one hand, the disappearance of the epic certainly means that the Bani Hilal conquest of North Africa, and the characters Abu Zayd, and Diyab, and Hasan and al-Jazya, are receding from if you will the daily culture, the lived culture of the most Egyptians and Arabs. On the other hand, it is true that these stories are working their way into other more popular, more modern forms of entertainment. There have been television programs that tried to draw on the story of the Bani Hilal epic. There are theater pieces sometimes. But certainly nothing that has the richness and the detail of the epic itself. The epic for centuries has been a primary form of entertainment at weddings and festivals and celebrations, and its role in those types of gatherings has almost entirely disappeared. If one goes to Egypt and one wants to hear Sirat Bani Hilal, perhaps one's only chance to hear it is in a government-sponsored folklore show, or perhaps a theater adaptation of some small part of the story. So in general, the conquest of North Africa, the personalities of the great heroes, are fading away. They are being preserved in different forms, but I would have to say less rich and less detailed forms in these modern genres.