CHAPTER 2

Toward a Sociolinguistics of the Text

1 The Canon and the Textual Turn

The three print anthologies compiled by ʿAbd al-Laṭīf Ibn Manṣūr (1977, IM), al-Ḥājj Idrīs Ibn Jallūn (1979, IJ), and ʿAbd al-Krīm ar-Rāyis (1982, MW), today constitute the textual canon of al-Āla. That is to say, they embody the texts that experts and aficionados consider aṣīl, or authentic to be performed within the boundaries of the tradition. The first two, IM and IJ, carry a great deal of weight amongst participants in the tradition because they present themselves as studies/redactions of the tradition’s ostensible urtext, Kunnāš al-Ḥāʾık, while also including material that is now performed as mīzān ad-darj. MW supplements these two with ṣanāʿī‘ and versions of ṣanāʿī‘ collected by al-Jāmiʿī at the end of the 19th century. Apart from a very few isolated examples, all the texts performed today are found in one or more of these print anthologies. (The exceptions are occasional ṣanāʿī‘ allegedly “discovered” by contemporary performers, with melodies typically attributed to their masters—likely a cover for their own creative efforts—and nearly always traceable to one of the manuscript versions of the Kunnāš.)

The idea of canon I am working with here is something of a shorthand expression that has little to do with the rich debate that has transpired concerning canon-formation in the context of the Western literary tradition. The chief aspect of that discussion that touches upon this very limited concept of canon has to do with the relations of power inherent in the process of defining what is canonical. The common element is the significance of teaching and teaching institutions in the establishment of canonical status, as John Guillory (1993) has emphasized. But the circumstances are quite different: whereas Guillory emphasizes the Western literary canon as a product of the teaching of literature in the academy, the canonicity of al-Āla texts derives from a living, mixed-oral tradition preserved by experts who have learned the tradition at the hands of masters of an earlier generation. The authority of the former has been challenged from both outside and within an academy divided by the culture-war politics of the late 20th and early 21st centuries; the authority of the latter is not contested at all within the boundaries of the tradition. Rather the main challenge has been a growing tendency for some younger Moroccans today to view the entire Āla tradition as fundamentally irrelevant to their lives, a threat to the social foundations of the tradition itself, not merely to its contents.
But with respect to this textual canon, it is not just the written “capture” of an oral text that makes it canonical, but rather a complex series of cultural events and conditions that render the text inviolable in some sense and establish it as a reference point for future renditions of the tradition. The example of the oral traces in these texts, most notable in the various barwala songs discussed below, shows that this point has been reached by the printed versions of the Kunnāš: Although they vary considerably amongst the three canonical anthologies, the fact of the acceptance of the barwala as aşīl and its inclusion with the other song types shows that the printed tradition has the “power” to signify canonicity to texts that actually had nothing at all to do with the Kunnāš. It is the association of the printed books with the Kunnāš that does this, not merely their having been rendered in writing by a noted figure in the tradition.

These anthologies represent the culmination of a prolonged process by which the texts of the tradition were committed to writing. However, as Chapter 3 below will demonstrate, the process was not merely one of collecting material that was being performed and writing it down. On the contrary, inconsistencies in the manuscript traditions that lie behind the modern canon point to the existence of more than one body of texts that have gradually converged to produce the canon. The manuscripts that appear to be the earliest attempts at a comprehensive anthology are only poorly represented in the modern canon, and in the two intervening centuries, a number of other manuscripts appeared, which are related to the first but clearly distinct in structure and content. These textual repositories contain some of the ṣanāʾī found in the first manuscript, but also other material not found there. All these manuscripts are identified as Kunnāš al-Ḥāʾik, despite the diversity of their contents, but where this “newer” material originated cannot be determined with the available evidence. It is safe to say, however, that as with the tradition as a whole prior to the creation of the earliest anthologies, all these ṣanāʾī must have circulated for some time as oral or quasi-oral tradition—very likely among diverse communities of Āla performers and aficionados—before emerging into the manuscripts we have today. As a further complication, although two of the modern anthologies, IM and IJ, identify themselves with the Kunnāš, in fact their contents represent even the most recent of the manuscripts only incompletely.

About a century after the first Kunnāš manuscript, another textual stream appeared in manuscript form attributed to an otherwise undocumented faqīh, Muḥammad al-Jāmiʿī. The al-Jāmiʿī collection is distinct from the Kunnāš in being smaller, and in containing some new material but also different versions of ṣanāʾī found in the Kunnāš. This corpus of songs, although not nearly as famous as the Kunnāš, has nevertheless influenced the formation of the modern canon significantly and accounts for some of the differences between it and the Kunnāš manuscripts.