ORALLY TRANSMITTED POETRY IN PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIA AND OTHER PRE-LITERATE SOCIETIES

One of the difficulties in dealing with the pre-Islamic poetry of Arabia is the fact that there is a wide gap between the time of composition of this poetry and the time at which it was finally committed to writing. Thus, for example, the poetry connected with the war of Basūs is stated to have been composed at the end of the 5th century A.D., and to be among the oldest Arabic poetry extant, while the work of recording Jāhiliyya poetry did not really get under way until the middle of the 8th century A.D.—something like 250 years in this instance. The problems caused by this prolonged interval between composition and recording have been discussed often enough, and it is not proposed to go into them here. It must however be emphasised that these eighth-century collectors and anthologists lived in a society and culture which was utterly different from that of the desert Arabs who produced this poetry, and that their mentality was as far removed from that of the pagan Arabs as is our own. Inevitably their assumptions about the nature and purpose of poetry were those of their own time, and they could hardly avoid imposing their own standards and preconceptions upon the poetry of the past. In particular, their classicising tendencies, by which they tended to regard this poetry as a fixed and unchangeable standard of excellency, prevented them from seeing it for what it was, a rather haphazard selection of the folk-literature of a certain society, caught and preserved at the moment of transition to a completely different way of life which rendered it obsolete.

The anthologists of the 8th century had no knowledge of the life and literature of other so-called primitive societies with which they might have compared that of the Jāhiliyya period, and they cannot be blamed for any distortions caused by treating it in the same way as they would the literature of a settled and literate society. In the same way, it was natural for earlier generations of European Orientalists to follow in the footsteps of the Arab authorities, as it is only quite recently that any systematic study has been made of the oral literature of the less developed societies which exist at our own time, or have existed until recently. Furthermore, this research has largely been in
the hands of anthropologists rather than students of literature, and it is only now that studies of this literature as literature are beginning to appear. It is only in the light of such studies that the true position of pre-Islamic poetry can be evaluated, and it is the intention of this paper to make a brief comparison of this poetry with that of certain other societies at a similar stage of development. It hardly needs to be said that, given the present state of our knowledge of the subject of oral literature, this can only be a very general survey, much of which will need to be corrected or amplified in the light of subsequent and more detailed research.

When we begin to study the literature of pre-literate societies, one of the first things that strikes us is how much of it is functional; in other words it is not produced for entertainment or amusement, but rather serves a definite social purpose, and is in many cases itself an essential part of the social system, to the extent that the society could scarcely function without it. This seems obvious enough in the case of such things as ritual or magical incantations or work-songs (genres of which we have no record for pre-Islamic Arabia), but in fact this functional nature is to be found throughout the whole range of the literature of such a society, so that a poem becomes a tool as essential as a spear or a diggingstick, and the ability to compose it a skill as essential as the ability to handle a bow or ride a camel.

When we consider the poetry of pre-Islamic Arabia, this observation seems to be as valid here as it is for the poetry of, for example, Rwanda or the Zulus. In order to illustrate this statement, we may examine the main types of recorded Ḥābiliyya poetry and compare them with what we find elsewhere.

Classical Arabic authors customarily divide this poetry into only two categories, i.e. ḍaṣīda and qitā. While there is indeed a basic difference between ḍaṣīda poetry and non-ḍaṣīda poetry which will be considered later, this distinction is unhelpful in that, through a typically Islamic preoccupation with form rather than content, it lumps together all the very different kinds of non-ḍaṣīda poetry under the name of qitā and, further, by the use of this particular name, implies that the qitā is derived from the ḍaṣīda when it seems far more probable that the reverse is the case. Further implicit in this particular choice of terminology is the assumption that the ḍaṣīda represents the norm while the qitā is somehow of secondary importance.

This certainly seems to be the case by the beginning of the ‘Abbāsid