

# Beyond Folklore

## The *Sirat Bani Hilal* in Modern Egypt

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The *Sirat Bani Hilal* is an Arab folk epic that has been told throughout the Middle East and North Africa for centuries. Based on the actual migration of the eponymous Hilal tribe from the Arabian peninsula to Tunis between the tenth and twelfth centuries, the epic narrative has been transmitted by oral poets since the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Reynolds 1-2, 9; Slyomovics 1). In Egypt, the lineage of oral poets has continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and performances may still be heard. However, studies of the epic in Egypt, such as those completed by Dwight Reynolds, Bridget Connelly, and Susan Slyomovics in the 1980's, tell a story of decline. Professional epic poets and their performances have foundered over the past century in the face of television, radio, pop music, and an increasingly urbanized and uninterested younger generation (Reynolds 87-88, 100-103; Connelly 66; *Safeguarding* 1). At the same time, the epic has not remained static, and new forms of performance and transmission have emerged in response to rapid social and technological change (Reynolds 12, 96; Connelly 48). While previous studies have focused primarily on traditional oral poets, performances, and contexts, for sixteen months (August 2008 to December 2009) I investigated the adaptation and the evolution of the epic.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I begin with a description of traditional professional epic poets and their performances. I move on to explore the ways in which oral poets have modified their performances, attracted new audiences, and exploited new media and performance venues, focusing on two primary strains of innovation. I then look beyond professional poets to the proliferation of the *Sirat Bani Hilal* in modern media and art forms, viewing these new versions of the epic as dynamic continuations of the tradition that are helping to keep the epic current and socially relevant.

The *Sirat Bani Hilal* is a sprawling narrative. While the Hilal tribe's migration from the Arabian Peninsula to Tunis comprises the central plot, the epic encompasses the stories of several generations of Hilali heroes. Starting before the birth of the major heroes and continuing past their deaths, it includes extensive adventures unrelated to the migration. Some versions can fill a hundred hours of oral performance (Reynolds 7). Three broad sections help to organize the action. The first section describes the history of the tribe and the birth and early lives of the heroes who will drive the bulk of the epic, including Diab, Jazia, and, of particular importance, Abu Zeid. Abu Zeid is miraculously born black although both of his parents are Arab. The subsequent exile of Abu Zeid and his mother Khadra al-Khalifa, who is assumed to have committed adultery, creates a central plot tension. Abu Zeid is eventually recognized by his father and becomes a hero of the Hilal tribe (Reynolds 15; Slyomovics 49-52; Lyons 120-121). The fact that Abu Zeid is black plays a recurring role in the epic, especially when the hero is mistaken for, or pretends to be, a slave, a servant, or an itinerant poet (Reynolds 13-14).

The subsequent two sections of the epic recount first the travels of Abu Zeid and his three nephews to Tunis and then the migration of the Hilal tribe and their eventually victorious battle for Tunis. In some regions, a fourth section is included. It tells the story of the self-destruction of the tribe as its heroes are killed in internecine fighting stemming from conflicts precipitated in the battle for Tunis (Reynolds 15-16; Slyomovics 49, 52-54; Lyons 121-150). Each section is composed of numerous episodes detailing specific adventures, battles, weddings, etc. Because

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the *Sirat Bani Hilal* is rooted in an oral tradition, the number, content, and details of episodes vary widely. However, all versions are united by the overarching plot structure and the set of main characters (Reynolds 16-20; Connelly 69). For example, while there is variation in the details of exactly why the Hilal tribe migrates west, or as to whether Zanati, the King of Tunis, is a Muslim, Arab, Berber, or Jew, all versions share the same core heroes and the same inevitable migration and victory in Tunis (Reynolds 15; Slyomovics 47-48, 52-53, 61; Lyons 136).

In Egypt, the *Sirat Bani Hilal* is transmitted most famously by professional oral poets. These poets have traditionally come from families of poets which have distinct identities separate from other Egyptians. Often considered outsiders even within villages they have called home for generations, poet families throughout Egypt have historically been equated with gypsies and vagrants. With their low social status, poets were largely confined to marginal lands and less respected work, and intermarriage between poet and non-poet families was rare. Additionally, the performance of the epic by those from non-poet families was considered shameful, though informal recitations without music were tolerated. Paradoxically, many of the same communities that granted little respect to the poets held the epic itself in high esteem, some considering it to be the true history of the Arabs, thus creating a fascinating tension as the social outcast transmits a respected story (Reynolds 48-65, 90; Slyomovics 6-7, 11-19, 76).

A traditional oral performance of the *Sirat Bani Hilal*, as observed by two centuries of travelers, writers, and academics, consisted most basically of a professional oral poet narrating one or more episodes from the epic in a mix of prose, poetry, and sung poetry. He would largely perform solo and accompany himself with a drum or *rababa*, a one- or two-stringed viol (Connelly 5-6, 80; Reynolds 4, 11; Slyomovics 1-3). The professional poet did not recite a memorized version of any episode, but rather composed the story and poetry anew in the midst of each performance. The poet relied on his deep familiarity with the story and recurring poetic structures, patterns, and descriptions to construct his performance. The poetry was generally structured with a single end rhyme that would be repeated for entire stanzas, and talented poets used extensive punning to create layered meanings. With these improvised performances, each retelling differed, even when the same episode was recounted by the same poet (Reynolds 12, 150; Slyomovics 71-73; Connelly 69-75). Thus the variations of the epic found between regions were compounded by further variation between individual poets in the same region and performances by the same poet.

The skill of the poet, the context of the performance, and interaction with audiences influenced variations. On a very basic level, each traditional performance context influenced the episode chosen. Venues included weddings, circumcisions, harvests, and saints' festivals, as well as in cafés and in private homes for evening gatherings of patrons and guests called *sahras*. Wedding performance called for light wedding stories, and for a *sahra*, a poet might choose a patron's favorite episode (Reynolds 105, 111). During a performance skilled poets continued to tailor the narrative to the audience. For example, he could draw out explicit descriptions of women for a group of younger men, or make the same scene family friendly for a mixed crowd (Reynolds 127-128, 137-138, 193-197).

However, the audience was more than simply a passive presence. Particularly in traditional *sahras*, the audience were active participants in the performance and would explicitly interact with the poet and epic. Having grown up with the *Sirat Bani Hilal*, they were well versed in the story of the epic and the traditional poetic mode of storytelling which included a mix of classical Arabic, dialect, and archaic and obscure words and phrases. Drawing on this familiarity, audiences actively commented on the action, criticized perceived errors, and praised particularly impressive poetry and punning. The poet in turn commented on the audience within his poetry through his manipulation of the epic characters and their story lines, possibly praising

or criticizing a patron or commenting on local issues and regional politics, things he could not have done outside of performance given his low social status (Slyomovics 75-76; Reynolds 178-184, 200). For example, he might single out a drowsing audience member by introducing a sleeping epic character who is awakened by a loud noise that the poet imitates, thus waking both the character and the audience member, to the delight of the larger audience (Reynolds 192). Further interaction occurred during the tea and cigarette breaks inserted into performances, which often lasted for hours. Personal and local stories were swapped along with talk about important current issues, all of which could inform the subsequent epic narrative (Reynolds 186-189).

Over the last century, such performances that combine traditional poets with traditional contexts and audiences have nearly disappeared. Radio and television have replaced poets in cafés, and amplified music and bands have become the fashion at weddings and other celebrations. Young Egyptians have come to seek entertainment more and more in film, television, and Arab Pop, becoming less interested in, and less familiar with, the epic and oral performances (Reynolds 106; Connelly 66). With smaller, aging audiences and fewer contexts in which to perform, making a living as a poet has become more difficult. The lack of work, combined with the historic stigma attached to the poet profession, has resulted in few children of poets learning the skills of their fathers, but rather finding more respected and lucrative work (Reynolds 87-88; Slyomovics 7).

However, this decline is only part of the story of oral poetic performance in modern Egypt. Some poets have taken advantage of new media and adapted to new audience tastes, playing in ensembles rather than solo, incorporating new instruments, and using melodies from modern songs (Reynolds 12-13). In the 1960's and 70's, while many traditional poets were struggling, the poet Sayyid Hawwas was becoming popular throughout the Nile Delta region. Hawwas was not a traditional poet. He did not come from a poet family, and he introduced an array of novelties into his performances. He replaced the traditional *rababa* with the modern western style violin and included multiple musicians in his group on stage, along with amplifiers. He eschewed the traditional turban associated with rural and lower class poets and instead wore the fez and robe associated with religious singers. Also, in order to make his performances more accessible to uninitiated audiences, he replaced the traditional poetic style in which a single rhyme was used throughout a passage. Instead, he used simpler, shorter verses and the varied rhyme scheme of popular Egyptian folk songs. Hawwas' innovations, along with his non-poet birth, also helped to disassociate him from the social stigma that surrounded other poets. With his increasing popularity, he was able to demand up to fifty times the payment of other poets, and he became a commercial success by taking advantage of the burgeoning cassette business, thereby reaching larger, more scattered audiences. Given this success, it is unsurprising that many poets of the Delta region attempted to imitate Hawwas' formula (Reynolds 96-98). The poets who succeeded formed a new strain of oral performance that continues today.

During the same time period a second strain of performance innovation occurred, exemplified by the southern Egyptian poet Jabir Abu Hussein, a master of the epic tradition. Unlike Hawwas, Jabir maintained much of the aesthetic of traditional performance, performing solo and with a *rababa* for much of his career (Connelly 82-83). He departed from tradition in his collaboration with Abd al-Rahman al-Abnoudi, a famous modern verse poet and champion of the *Sirat Bani Hilal*. For example, in the cassettes recorded by the pair, al-Abnoudi plays an intermediary role, explaining the story of each section before Jabir performs it. He thereby makes the performance accessible to audiences that are not intimately acquainted with the plots or specialized poetic language and techniques of the tradition. Jabir also performed for al-Abnoudi's radio show, on which al-Abnoudi presented poets from throughout Egypt. Thus, in

1978 an observer could find men packed into Cairo street cafés in order to listen to an epic performance, reminiscent of scenes from the previous century. However, rather than watching a live poet with his *rababa*, patrons listened to the radio, the device that had supplanted epic poets in cafés in the first place (Connelly 48-49).

Both strains of innovation were in evidence during my time in Cairo. Between the fall of 2008 and winter of 2009, I attended multiple performances of three poets, al-Sayyid al-Duwi, Iz al-Din Nasr al-Din, and Ahmad Sayyid Hawwas (not the same Hawwas mentioned previously, who passed away in the late 1970's). Following the model of Jabr Abu Hussein's cassettes, knowledgeable intermediaries were used. Al-Abnoudi took this role in the performances of Sayyid al-Duwi, in much the way he did with Jabir. Seated prominently next to al-Duwi and his troupe, al-Abnoudi introduced episodes and explained obscure poetic language. Ministry of Culture officials and academics played the introductory role in the performances of Sayyid Hawwas and Iz al-Din Nasr al-Din. In the case of Ahmad Sayyid Hawwas, the poet followed in the footsteps of our first Hawwas and performed the epic with simplified, more accessible poetry. None of the three poets performed solo but were accompanied by three or more musicians, primarily *rababa* players, except for the violin players employed by Hawwas. Both al-Duwi and Hawwas used amplifiers in their performances, which, combined with large, mixed audiences, created the ambiance of a concert.

Just as significant as the innovations employed in the performances, the venues and contexts also represent a break from tradition and reveal a profound evolution of the epic's social position. Far from traditional cafés or weddings, Sayyid al-Duwi performed in Beit al-Suheimy, a beautiful mansion embedded in the old Hussein district behind the famous Khan al-Khalili market. This venue hosts traditional music performances as well as more modern groups. Ahmad Sayyid Hawwas performed on the grounds of the Citadel, the Mamluk fortress and tourist destination that towers over Cairo. Finally, Iz al-Din Nasr al-Din performed in a classroom at Cairo University. The performances at Beit al-Suheimy and the Citadel were sponsored by the Ministry of Culture as traditional entertainment for Ramadan. The Cairo University performance came at the tail end of a conference on oral traditions in which the *Sirat Bani Hilal* was prominent. Corresponding to the novel venues and patrons, the audiences of the performances were distinct from traditional ones. From informal surveys and conversations, I found that audiences included urbanized and educated Egyptians and foreigners who did not grow up participating in epic performances. Many audience members knew the story of the Hilal tribe, but were not intimately acquainted with the poetic language and techniques.

These venues, sponsors, and audiences are distinctive to modern performances. For much of its history, the epic was largely disregarded by Arab cultural and political elites because it was viewed as a lowly, peasant tradition. The *Sirat Bani Hilal's* oral heritage, illiterate bearers, and mixture of classic and colloquial Arabic was considered beneath the notice of those immersed in the strict rules and grammar of classical Arabic poetry and other approved forms (Connelly 10-17; Reynolds 7-8). This situation has changed drastically, if gradually, through the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the epic has increasingly drawn national, regional, and international researchers and acclaim, complete with conferences like the one I attended and growing archives of papers and recordings (Connelly 22-23). In addition to the official sponsorships mentioned, UNESCO designated the epic a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2003, and I spoke with a number of Egyptian professors and Ph.D. students currently working with the epic (*Safeguarding* 1).

Thus the story of professional poetic performance over the last century is one of competing trends. On the one hand, the traditional audiences of epic performances, the rural villagers and common city dwellers, have to a large extent turned away, increasingly considering

the tradition to be backwards and “hickish” (Reynolds 106). On the other hand, those who have historically held those same views, the cultural elite, have increasingly come to consider the epic to be a sophisticated subject of study and an important part of Egyptian, and world, heritage. Despite the patronage of foreign and domestic researchers, traditional performances, which rely on traditional contexts, audiences, and social interactions, cannot be supported if the first trend continues, and there seems little reason to expect it to stop. However, based on the performances I attended, it is clear that some poets have adapted to these rapid societal changes and exploited the opportunities of the second trend. Through new media and new models of performance they have found ways to take advantage of smaller, more scattered audiences and new audiences less familiar with the epic. These elite poets now perform in select venues, and even tour abroad, such as Iz al-Din, who traveled to Algeria to perform in the summer of 2009 (Abouel-lail 122).

How do these modern performances compare with traditional ones? On a basic level, modern performances continue to support professional poets with the ability to tell the story of the *Sirat Bani Hilal* in sung poetry composed in performance. As for the other changes in performance style, such as multiple musicians and amplification, these need not be viewed as a departure from tradition, but rather a continuation of it. As a living, oral tradition, variety is a distinctive part of the tradition. The use of novel melodies, instruments, and modes of performance are part of the Egyptian epic (Reynolds 12). For example, the one-stringed *rababa* that was used exclusively in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was replaced by the two-stringed version by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Connelly 81). Even when (the elder) Sayyid Hawwas first began performing in his innovative manner, his audiences did not consider it to be a break from the epic tradition, as he drew from existing parts of folk culture and continued to follow the same characters and story lines (Reynolds 98).

The most significant differences between traditional and modern performances, I believe, are the number of poets they support and the changing relationship between the poet and the audience. In his *Manners and Customs of the Egyptians*, published in 1893, Edward Lane mentions fifty poets of the *Sirat Bani Hilal* playing in the cafés of Cairo. In the countryside, hundreds more professional poets made their living traveling relatively small circuits (Reynolds 11). A survey of Egyptian poets completed in 2006, after UNESCO's designation of the epic as intangible world heritage, listed only a few dozen poets in all of Egypt, remarking that the number of master poets is decreasing rapidly (*Safeguarding* 1). Of those poets, I found only the three poets previously mentioned performing in Cairo during my 16 months there. Venues are limited, audiences consume many other forms of entertainment, and interest is concentrated during Ramadan. Such an environment provides room for a relatively small number of elite touring poets who can obtain higher payment from fewer performances. Similarly, the exploitation of new media, such as the 2010 Ramadan television series featuring Sayyid al-Duwi and al-Abnoudi, like the cassette industry of previous decades, benefits only a few, widely popular poets.

As to the changing relationship between poets and audiences, the trend is towards less interaction. In traditional performances, particularly *sahras*, audiences were familiar enough with the tradition to both praise and criticize a performance. The role of critic did not stop with innovations in performances. In the late 1970's listeners wrote letters complaining about digression from the “authentic” epic in response to poets broadcast on al-Abnoudi's radio show (Connelly 62, 66). However, with fewer young Egyptians growing up listening to the epic, the pool of critics is shrinking. Also, when the poet lived in the community, or had a long term relationship with a particular patron or audience, the additional familiarity provided fodder for further interaction and creativity. The punned insults and commentary on local affairs and social

issues relied on this familiarity and the casual discussion between poets and audiences in cigarette and tea breaks.

In the performances I attended, there was no audible critiquing. The epic was completely in the hands of the poet. It seemed to me that the audience was receiving the epic as heritage rather than actively participating in a shared tradition. And with such a mixed, nameless audience, there was little room for casual interaction, stunting the poet's ability to manipulate the themes and episodes of the epic to be pertinent to a particular, vocal audience. A partial exception occurred in Sayyid al-Duwi's performances, including his television performances, in which al-Abnoudi seemed to take the role of both intermediary and critical audience, explaining words and mentioning when al-Duwi missed a detail. However, the power over authenticity still resided with the men on stage. A journalist attending a 2002 performance of the pair described the effect as “peering at a commodified, insulated version of [the epic] – in the present case with the aid of specialist commentary – through the often stained class of a modern museum display” (Rakha).

Because modern performances support so few poets, and because there is less interaction between poets and audiences, a couple of concerns arise about the future of the epic. First, will the number of poets continue to decrease? And, second, will the epic continue to be a dynamic tradition, relevant to the lives of Egyptians? As to the first question, the answer is likely yes for the time being. However, given the continuing demand for the sorts of modern performances described, there may be a place for a limited number of successful poets in the coming decades. While fewer poets means that there are higher stakes in even a single break in the chain of transmission, there are still sons following their fathers. Both Sayyid al-Duwi's son and Iz al-Din's son are candidates for continuing the oral epic tradition well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Iz al-Din's son in particular has trained in his father's footsteps and has led performances after Iz al-Din's tragic death in a car accident in 2009 (Shuman 115; Mohammadi).

As to the second question, will the epic continue to be dynamic and relevant, I believe the answer is yes, though much of the dynamism may reside outside of professional poetic performances. With fewer poets performing, the vision and variety of the epic is correspondingly much narrower. In addition, with these remaining poets performing for mixed, changing audiences unfamiliar with the epic, the concern is raised that poets may select the most exciting episodes while others fade away (*Safeguarding* 1). Thus, I look for the variety and reinvention needed for a living tradition in the other forms the epic has taken. While the professional poets have overshadowed other forms of the *Sirat Bani Hilal* in Egypt, the epic has a long history of other manifestations. In addition to manuscripts and yellow books (named for their cheap, yellowing paper), informal storytelling and recitation have shared space with professional poets (Reynolds 104). With the proliferation of new media and art forms of the last century, forms of the epic have proliferated in turn. Besides cassettes and radio, versions of the epic can be found on television, on new audio formats such as mp3s, and on Internet sites like Youtube. It has a Facebook fan page and is mentioned in online discussion forums and blogs. It is the material of novels, poetry, plays, television programs, and songs. Unfolding from the oral tradition, these versions do not conform to a single narrative, but rather many versions and visions of the *Sirat Bani Hilal* coexist in Egypt today. I argue that these new forms augment poetic performances and provide evidence for the continued dynamism of the *Sirat Bani Hilal* in Egypt, that is, its continued reinvention to both appeal to and be relevant to modern audiences.

Most closely connected to the oral tradition are yellow books, which are structured like transcribed oral performances and have circulated in the book markets of Cairo for the past century. Updated versions of yellow books contain the same mix of prose and poetry of their predecessors but have sleeker paper and covers aimed at new audiences. One example from a

street-side stand had a cover with a comic book-like cartoon dominated by a cloaked, superhero-like figure on a horse with a large, jagged and curved sword in his hand. The modern poet Abd al-Rahman al-Abnoudi has also published a three volume version of the epic structured as a transcribed performance. As he did at Sayyid al-Duwi's performances, al-Abnoudi includes explanatory notes on history and obscure poetic language, mediating once more between the traditional poetic style and new audiences. Even Egyptian music superstar Mohammad Munir has added his star power and youth appeal to the epic, performing parts of al-Abnoudi's version of the epic ("Mohammad Munir"; "The Opera House"). None of these versions are radical in their reinvention of the epic, but they are aimed at modern audiences and add to the epic's visibility and prevalence.

Other artists have taken the *Sirat Bani Hilal* and strayed further from the structure of a traditional oral performance, taking full advantage of the possibilities of new art forms. The author Samir Abd al-Baqi, for example, has written a novella for youth based on the epic and published in 2005. Unlike yellow books or al-Abnoudi's version of the epic, al-Baqi writes his work as modern fiction rather than following the oral poetic format. Written entirely in modern Arabic prose and dialogue without any poetry, the book escapes the obscurities that al-Abnoudi footnotes. Al-Baqi has also composed a dramatic recorded version of the epic containing a mix of narration, actors in dialogue, and song. As with his book, he departs from the professional poetic style to create an entirely new version of the epic, taking advantage of new media and storytelling techniques familiar and accessible to modern audiences. Similarly, the televised series "Al-Sirah Al-Hilaliyya" has dramatized the epic for mass Egyptian audiences. While my Egyptian friends who were well-versed in the epic disregarded the series as inaccurate, many young people I asked in Cairo were aware of the epic primarily through this TV series, which first aired during Ramadan in 1996. Written by playwright Yusri al-Guindy, the drama includes a cast of household names and comedic relief, and it represents an entirely new way to present the epic.

Yusry al-Guindy has also written a number of plays centered on Egyptian folklore, including the *Sirat Bani Hilal*. In fact, the epic has a long history in Egyptian theater. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mahmoud Bayram al-Tunsi wrote an operetta based on the famous love story of Yunis and Aziza from the epic (Salaiha). Playwrights Mohammad Abd al-Ala al-Salamouni and Abd al-Ghani Dawoud have also employed the characters and stories of the epic (Dawoud). An independent theater group in Cairo called al-Warsha has been involved with two separate attempts to dramatize the *Sirat Bani Hilal*, "Spinning Lives" and "Al-Warsha Nights". While firmly part of modern Egyptian theater, the plays connect back to the oral tradition through aspects of traditional oral epic performance (Hammond 272). In addition to adding to the dynamism of the tradition with their variety, these adaptations help to keep the epic a vehicle of social and political commentary, a role historically served by the professional oral tradition and the informal talk of epic enthusiasts. Both Guindy's and Dawoud's plays have political agendas, and the play "Abu Zeid in Our Country," written by al-Salamouni, sets the Hilali hero Abu Zeid in a troubled modern Egyptian village, bringing the epic directly into contact with current social issues (Dawoud; Salaiha). In addition to the new versions of the epic created in writing these plays, each new production is an opportunity for further variation and reinterpretation.

More recently, the epic has also been used by the band Ana Masri, or "I am Egyptian," which I saw perform multiple times while in Cairo. This ecumenically minded, youthful group performs songs taken from Coptic, Muslim, and regional Egyptian traditions, including the *Sirat Bani Hilal*, with an emphasis on Egyptian unity (Mustafa). In the realm of politics, the epic has most recently been connected to the Arab Spring and the January 25<sup>th</sup> revolution that succeeded in toppling the Mubarak regime in February, 2011. For instance, the phrase "ka'inak ya Abu

Zeid ma ghazeet” (“As if you, Abu Zeid, had not attacked”), which derives from events in the epic and refers to wasted effort when achievements are lost, has been used in political articles and essays concerned with events of the Arab Spring (Fareed; Amr; Abu al-Ghar). Also, a puppet theater group from the south of Egypt has produced a play called “Sirat Masr 'Ala al-Rababa” (“The Sira of Egypt on the Rababa”). The production turns the events of the revolution into a new epic, complete with an epic poet and his *rababa* (Khadeer). More generally, Doctor Khalid Abouel-lail, a professor of folklore at Cairo University, has appeared on the Egyptian television program “Culture Studio” to speak about the connection between folk heroes, particularly Abu Zeid, and the revolution (“The Folk Hero”).

These new forms and uses of the epic, along with modern oral performances, are in many ways distinct from the traditional epic, and they can be interpreted as a departure from tradition. However, I believe that the modern life of the epic is more accurately viewed as a continuation of a tradition that evolves to meet the needs of its audiences. The particular, fascinating performances which stemmed from the interaction between an outcast oral poet, a respected history, and a knowledgeable audience are certainly disappearing. But if one considers the essence of the tradition to be its variety and dynamism through time and geography, a fluidity stemming from its oral origins and giving it the flexibility to appeal to centuries of audiences, then the epic survives. In this view, as long as the narrative of the *Sirat Bani Hilal* continues to be told and reinvented in ways that speak to new audiences, then the tradition survives. Regardless of whether the modern epic is considered a continuation or a departure from the traditional performances described, it deserves further research. In particular, examination of the modern epic's role in social and political commentary in Egypt and the changing attitudes of different groups towards the various forms of the epic could, I believe, shed light on a complex and changing society.

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## Additional Resources

### Ramadan Television Series:

"مسلسل السيرة الهلالية الحلقة الاولى ج 1 [Al-Sira Al-Hilaliyya Series, First Episode, Part 1]." 13 June 2011. 10 Sept. 2011 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vS-4RTdP5oM>>.

### Sayyid al-Duwi and Abd al-Rahman al-Abnoudi's Television Series:

"السيرة الهلالية" EgyptNewsCenter. 21 Aug. 2010. 10 Sept. 2011 <<http://www.youtube.com/user/newscentereg#p/c/8CB65FCF8CF9F81C/3/oP5VNzwN3LI>>.

### Facebook:

"السيرة الهلالية" [Al-Sira Al-Hilaliyya]. Facebook Group. N.d. 22 Oct. 2011 <<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=133930025910&v=wall>>.