

# Messages, Texts, and Rhetorical Detachment in Contemporary Mahri Poetry

## *Mensajes, textos y distanciamiento retórico en la poesía mahri contemporánea*

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**Abstract:** Despite its geographical and linguistic proximity to the Arabic language, the Mahri (or Mehri) language (ISO 639-3: gdq) of Eastern Yemen and Western Oman has remained a non-written language into the present era. While older generations of Mahri speakers never considered the prospect of a written idiom for their language, recent years have witnessed efforts to compose and circulate texts in the Mahri language. These circumstances have yielded a poetic praxis that traverses the domains of orality and literacy; they also enable us to identify lexical and syntactic characteristics that betoken where in the shifting terrain of oral and literary composition a poetic work occurs. I will examine the appearance of one such lexical and structural motif – the dispatched messenger – in a recently composed collection of Mahri language poetry, *The Dīwān of Ḥājj Dākōn* (2011). Embarking from the notion of textual autonomy developed by Chafe, Olson, and Tannen, I argue that the sudden appearance of the messenger motif in Ḥājj Dākōn's poetic collection is a by-product of his adoption of a written practice. In this way, we can establish that a stance of rhetorical detachment is a hallmark feature of an emergent written practice, even at its earliest stages.

**Keywords:** Arabian Peninsula. Mahri. Orality. Literacy. Transitional Texts. Oral Poetry.

**Resumen:** La lengua mahri o mehri (ISO 639-3: gdq) de Yemen oriental y Omán occidental ha permanecido hasta el presente sin escritura, a pesar de su proximidad geográfica y lingüística con el árabe. Mientras que las generaciones anteriores de hablantes mahri nunca consideraron la posibilidad de escribir su idioma, en los últimos años se han hecho esfuerzos por componer y difundir textos en mahri. Estas circunstancias han generado una práctica poética que atraviesa los dominios de la oralidad y la escritura, y también nos permiten identificar características léxicas y sintácticas que indican qué punto del labil terreno de la composición oral y literaria corresponde a determinada obra poética. Examinaré la aparición de uno de estos motivos léxicos y estructurales –el envío de un mensajero– en una colección reciente de poesía en lengua mahri, *The Dīwān of Ḥājj Dākōn* (2011). Partiendo de la noción de autonomía textual desarrollada por Chafe, Olson y Tannen, sostengo que la repentina aparición del tópico del mensajero en el poemario de Ḥājj Dākōn es un resultado secundario de la adopción de prácticas de escritura. De este modo, podemos establecer que una posición de distanciamiento retórico es un rasgo distintivo de una práctica de escritura emergente, incluso en sus fases más tempranas.

**Palabras clave:** Península arábiga. Mahri. Oralidad. Escritura. Textos transicionales. Poesía oral.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2011, a collaboration between myself and the Mahri-language poet, Ḥājj Dākōn, was published under the title: *The Dīwān of Ḥājj Dākōn*. This collection of eighteen poems was significant for being the first literary publication in the Mahri language (ISO 639-3: gdq), an indigenous language spoken by approximately 200 000 individuals in al-Mahra in eastern Yemen and Dhofar in western Oman.<sup>1</sup> In addition to contemporary efforts to match the Mahri language to a modified version of the Arabic script,<sup>2</sup> *The Dīwān of Ḥājj Dākōn* was meant to circulate literary poetic texts within the community of Mahri speakers with the goal, as expressed by Ḥājj Dākōn, of demonstrating that the Mahri language is capable of modern poetic expression and ought to be considered on equal footing with the Arabic language.<sup>3</sup> This represented a departure from common practice in al-Mahra where Arabic had been exclusively used for writing, leaving the Mahri language to occupy the spoken domain, which it shares with Arabic.

Being a witness to Ḥājj Dākōn's process of poetic composition and the work of writing his poems down, I was granted the opportunity of recording the birth of a literary practice in real time. Although Ḥājj is deeply familiar with Arabic poetry – both spoken and written – and with oral Mahri poetry, Ḥājj had no precedents to guide his hand while writing down his Mahri poetry.<sup>4</sup> As a re-

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1. For information on the Mahri/Mehri language, readers are directed to the Endangered Languages Archive at the SOAS University of London: <https://elar.soas.ac.uk/Collection/MPI976775> (accessed 4/4/2020) and the author's digital exhibit: *When Melodies Gather* (2020) (<http://whenmelodiesgather.supdigital.org/wmg/index>. Accessed 4/4/2020), published by Stanford University Press in 2018.
  2. For recent efforts to adapt the Arabic script to the Modern South Arabian language family, see here: <https://ahc.leeds.ac.uk/modern-south-arabian-languages/doc/resources-2> (accessed 4/4/20). Ḥājj Dākōn developed his own method of writing the Mahri language using the Arabic script, with the addition of a few diacritics to represent the consonants and vowels that are found in Mahri but not in Arabic. Given the small number of orthographical additions to the Arabic script needed to adequately capture the Mahri language, Mahri speakers were able to read Ḥājj Dākōn's written Mahri poems without much effort at all.
  3. Personal communication with author, 2003.
  4. Thanks to the formulaic or even cliché nature of lyric, sentimental colloquial poetry in Arabic and its rigorously formal structure, writing poetry in the Mahri language that was imitative of Arabic models was less of a challenge for Ḥājj Dākōn than writing expository, non-narrative prose in Mahri. As for the latter, Ḥājj encountered immense difficulty when I suggested he provide written analysis in Mahri of his poetry, and he gave up doing so. This fact led to me realize that literacy in poetry and non-narrative prose literacy might be two separate functions and that the prose literacy presents a greater technical challenge than poetry literacy. The fact that many of the earliest texts ever written down in any language are rhymed and metered poetry ('hymns') is meaningful in this light.

sult, *The Dīwān of Ḥājj Dākōn* is incontrovertibly a transitional text: the first written literature of a formerly unlettered language. Starting from this premise, we can stand the typical calculus of scholarship on transitional texts on its head: rather than starting with a written text and asking what marks it as transitional, we can start with the transitional text and ask what marks it as a written. In doing so, we can verify the elements of literariness that take root in an oral tradition when it transitions to a written one, and given the fact that this process unfolded before me, it is even possible to suggest the time frame in which such changes occur.

A caveat is needed here before proceeding to the analysis of Ḥājj Dākōn's poems. The persistence and problematic of a binary approach within the field of orality and literacy is an unavoidable characteristic of such ventures. On one hand, a conceptual contrast between orature and literature is grounded in reality: an alphabetized index is useless in a non-lettered society just as an oral performance loses its potency when denied a living voice (Karpf). At the same time, the field has sustained criticism for applying a reductive and biased logic, especially when applied to the domain of cognition. While Ong is rightfully regarded as a pioneer in the field, his delineation of a contrast between an oral and a literate consciousness can be read in a manner that equates literacy with progressive modernity linked to the global north whereas orality may be read as a primitive remnant associated with the global south. This criticism – not just of Ong's *Orality and Literacy* but of a number of foundational works in the field of orality and literacy studies – is articulated by Emevwo Biakolo, who draws together a number of critical concerns into a comprehensive critique. While literary scholarship receives a lighter judgment in Biakolo's reckoning, Biakolo's concern of a reductive logic *vis-à-vis* orature and literature opens the door to some critical points regarding transitional texts. In summarizing one problematic in the field of orality and literacy studies, Biakolo writes:

If there is an essential oral consciousness, then it should be matched by an equally essential literate one. In this sense, Havelock, Ong, Goody, and Olson are at least consistent. The problem arises when there is a transformational situation, where an ostensibly fixed oral consciousness acquires the technology of writing. Does it not acquire a fixed literate consciousness with it as well? If it does, surely this can only mean that either the oral consciousness was not fixed in the first place, or the subject acquires in itself two fixedly contradictory consciousnesses. (59)

## ANALYSIS

Biakolo's concern brings me to the gist of my argument, insofar as I assume the inherent reality of an oral and literary binary. However, I restrict this binary logic to the manner in which poetic acts – whether they are performances, utterances, or texts – depict themselves through lexical and metaphorical framing devices: do they describe something that only exists in fleeting face-to-face communication, or do they describe themselves as potentially captured, i.e., textual, information? The binary lies in the rhetorical devices used, not in the poet's cognitive mode or even whether the poet's local culture is oral or literate. In addressing Biakolo's critique, I would confirm that there is a 'fixed literate consciousness' that emerges with the advent of writing; however, we should limit ourselves to talking about the poetic practice, not the human consciousness, that produces individual lines of poetry. When I speak of poems as having developed motifs of textual representation, I do not mean to implicate people or cultures in the oral-literacy binary view. As related by Marcel Kurpershoek, the Arabic language *nabaṭī* poet al-Dindān is non-lettered, but the Arabic culture that he draws from is saturated in writing and thus his poems are imbued with literate imagery. Ḥājj Dākōn is literate in Arabic and composes written Arabic poetry, but prior to the early 2000s, he had simply not done so in the Mahri language. Indeed, most Mahri speakers today would aver that a written literary tradition in the Mahri language would be superfluous when the Arabic literary tradition – which most Mahra are eminently familiar with – offers such a bounty of resources.

While rejecting the cognitive implications of the orality and literacy binary, I find the distinction drawn by David Olson between utterances and texts, which he develops in contrasting oral and literary modes of communication, to be fruitful when applied to the analysis of orature. According to Olson, an utterance – understood as oral communication – requires direct contact between a speaker and his or her audience to convey the complete intended meaning of a communicative act; meanwhile, written texts '[permit] the preservation of meaning across space and time and the recovery of meaning by the more or less uninitiated' (Olson 270). This distinction is given further weight by Wallace Chafe who develops a contrast between spoken 'involvement' and written 'detachment' (45) and Deborah Tannen, who understands the binary in terms 'interpersonal involvement' in oral communication versus written 'message content' in written communication

(8).<sup>5</sup> More recently, Karin Barber asserts a similar quality for written texts: ‘Texts are constructed to be detachable from the flow of conversation, so that they can be repeated, quoted and commented upon – they are forms of language, that is, which, whether written or oral, are accorded a kind of independent and privileged existence’ (Barber 3). In short, orality assumes direct communication between individuals – an utterance – whereas literacy allows for mediated speech between absent agents – a text.

I would add a complicating feature to this contrast: whether the poetic act is oral or written is of secondary importance compared to whether the poetic act imagines itself as oral or written. Does an oral poem represent itself as a text and thereby engaged in ‘the preservation of [its] meaning across space and time’ (Olson 270)? In this case, we may assume that such utterances are produced by literate or literacy-aware speakers who are familiar with the functionalities of writing. Conversely, it is hard to imagine an individual who has never encountered their language in written form conceiving of their utterances as texts: captured and coherent blocks of information ordered through individual words that are themselves composed of individual letters, all subject to the rules of spacing, punctuation, and the other formal trappings of analytical prose. Although written in response to the shortcomings of the written transcription of oral narratives, Raphael Samuel’s point still rings true in this regard:

The spoken word can very easily be mutilated when it is taken down in writing and transferred to the printed page... The imposition of grammatical forms, when it is attempted, creates its own rhythms and cadences, and they have little in common with those of the human tongue. People do not usually speak in paragraphs, and what they have to say does not usually follow an ordered sequence of comma, semi-colon, and full stop. (19)

The premise that the poem’s self-depiction trumps the poet’s actual state of oral or literate awareness is borne out through the examination of vernacular poetry from the Arabian Peninsula: Arabic *nabaṭī* poetry. In an earlier article, I demonstrated that the introductory formulas of *nabaṭī* poetry frame the poems as texts, despite being circulated as oral poems (Liebhaber 2015). This is the case

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5. I have adapted this summary of Olson’s, Chafe’s, and Tannen’s positions from an earlier article (Liebhaber 2015, 5).

even when the poets themselves are not capable of writing Arabic. It merely suffices that the author be aware of the potential of his or her language to be written down – an easy enough assumption to make even for remote corners of the Arab world where the Qurʾān is witnessed as a written text (not to mention street signage, advertisements, license plates, and other quotidian examples of the written, Arabic word). As a result, even non-literate *nabaṭī* poets (such as al-Dindān) rely on the common framing device of the poem-as-message through the ‘O Rider!’ (*yā rāḳīb*) formula. According to this formula, the poetic subject calls upon a camel riding messenger to deliver a verbatim recitation (or even written text) of the poem to an intended recipient:<sup>6</sup>

1. O camel-rider with ten mounts chosen for their speed // Priceless racers, never displayed at a market for sale [...]
9. Travelling straight ahead, by noon at aṣ-Ṣummān. // You will arrive at the first tents of the ʿIlwa tribe.
10. Expect to be drowned with offers of hospitality; // Tell them: ‘You will be guests at Ibn Ziriḅān’s home’.
11. Give them my greetings, reading from ink on paper, // To the clan of Dhuwi Nāṣir and especially to Fayḥān! (Kurpershoek §28)

In discussing the prevalence of this motif in the *nabaṭī* tradition, Kurpershoek says the following:

[This] organization of speech framed as messages in the form of verse, each one fitting into the other like Chinese boxes, is part of the Nabaṭī tradition. Here the words spoken by the poet to the messenger underline from the outset the oral nature of the verses and the device that the verses have been spoken extempore by the poet while addressing a messenger on his camel ready to speed off in order to deliver his precious load of poetry stored in his memory... As the poem is a whole, with a beginning and an end, it aspires to be both a set of instructions to the messenger including the message itself; and a message including the instructions for delivery. (§51)

Even though this formula relies on a romanticized appeal to traditional, oral modes of communication – as averred by Kurpershoek in the citation above –

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6. This poem was composed by Ibn Subayyil and although the poem was circulated in an oral fashion, Ibn Subayyil was certainly familiar with written Arabic.

this poem represents itself as an autonomous ‘package’ of information that, despite whatever distance it travels in space and time, remains immutable. Thanks to the conditions of ‘preservation of meaning’ (Olson), ‘detachment’ (Chafe) and ‘message content’ (Tannen), this poem and others like it may be classed as texts and owe their conceptualization as such to the prevalence of the written representation of Arabic in the Arab world.

Different circumstances attend to the Mahri language. Despite being articulated in a different language, the Mahri poetic tradition is cognate to the Arabic *nabaʿī* poetic tradition in terms of its genres, topic, motifs, and formulas. This should come as no surprise since Arabic-monolinguals and Mahri-speakers have a long history of coexistence on the Arabian Peninsula; indeed, the only thing that truly distinguishes them is the fact that Mahri speakers have access to a second language (Mahri) in contrast with their Arabic monolingual neighbors. In virtually all other domains of daily life, Arabic monolinguals and Mahri speakers may claim a common identity. Indeed, Mahri speakers may identify as Arabic speakers and have historically used the Arabic language for written purposes; I rarely heard the Mahri and Arabic languages described in conflictual terms by native speakers. Given their historical familiarity with written Arabic, the Mahra have not perceived a need to write in their maternal language. In the absence of Mahri dictionaries, schooling in the Mahri language, Mahri language print media, etc., it is unlikely that Mahri speakers link their utterances to a mental image of written words strung together in sentences and paragraphs.

Not coincidentally, none of the Mahri poems that I recorded as oral performances are framed as texts through the ‘O Rider’ motif; indeed, only a single poem amongst the more than forty oral poems that I recorded uses a motif that detaches the poem from the rolling present of its composition and performance.<sup>7</sup> I do not believe that the oral Mahri poems I recorded were conceived of as texts by their composers and transmitters. The multiple ways in which phonemes, words, word clusters, and lines could be heard and interpreted suggested to me that their audiences did not parse them as visual information. A traditional Mahri poem is strictly aural and is rarely preserved

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7. In the poem where this motif occurs, ‘A Message from Sing̃er’, the message and the poem are not identical as they generally are in the *nabaʿī* tradition. Instead, the message in this poem is just a brief ‘sign off’ (see Liebhaber 2018, <http://whenmelodiesgather.supdigital.org/wmg/a-message-from-sinr> [accessed 4/4/2020]).

beyond the moment of performance, thus enabling a multiplicity of impressions regarding its content and yielding occasional stretches of meaning-adjacent language that defied unambiguous analysis. This especially tended to be the case the closer my consultants and I zeroed in on a particularly troublesome phrase: an initial, seemingly obvious impression and interpretation would fall apart upon repeat listening as it became more and more difficult to establish where the word boundaries were and what precise phonemes were being articulated. The oral nature of these Mahri poems is confirmed by the uncertainty of transcribing them and the near impossibility of providing a word-by-word analysis.<sup>8</sup> In short, conventional Mahri poems assume ‘direct contact between a speaker and his or her audience to convey the complete intended meaning of a communicative act’ (Olson 270), and are therefore aligned with an oral praxis.

The fact that traditional Mahri poems were conceived as existing in a rolling, immediate present – as opposed to the autonomous and preserved content of a *nabaṭi* poem – is confirmed through one of the common formulas found in Mahri poetry: *we-ṣrōma we-krēm* or *ōdī we-krēm krēm*, or a variant thereof. This formula is generally used at transitional points in public-facing poems: either as an opening invocation or when the poet pivots from a narrative to directly addressing the audience. The longer expression of the formula is notoriously difficult to translate; it is only used in poetic contexts and appears to have a pious connotation. However, the Mahri word *ṣrōma* is unambiguous: it means ‘now’ and links the poetic recitation to the present moment at which the poem is heard.<sup>9</sup> What follows are three examples culled from oral poems I have recorded (Liebhaber 2018):

- a) Now I’ll compose a *habbōt* // atop a well-crafted melody // if the rhymes fit together  
*ṣrōma mehbābīb // ṭār elēben mātlīm // ān ewakb ertākūb*<sup>10</sup>
- b) And now // when the melodies gather // a reservoir that can’t be emptied by scooping<sup>11</sup>

8. The problematics of transcribing oral utterances is central the field of orality studies; this topic is given detailed treatment in Karpf.

9. A similar use of spontaneity markers – translated as ‘(and) here’ and ‘(and) now’ – in Jebli oral poetry from Morocco is highlighted in Gintsburg 2017; 2020.

10. Liebhaber 2018: <http://whenmelodiesgather.supdigital.org/wmg/atop-the-peak-of-arbt> (accessed 4/4/2020).

11. Liebhaber 2018: <http://whenmelodiesgather.supdigital.org/wmg/the-battle-of-kbbt> (accessed 4/4/2020).



*we-ṣrōma we-krēm // bēs alēhen ertabūb // w-meḥṣāt l-ġārāffūt*<sup>12</sup>

- c) And now, O Generous One, // I have a refuge from fear // in the Black Mountain [of Karmeym Ḥawrōt]

*we-ṣrōma we-krēm // šī mġawwī men eḥawf // b-kermeym ḥawrōt*<sup>13</sup>

By grounding themselves in the immediate present of the recitation, the three poems depict themselves as unmediated utterances, whether or not this is in fact the case.

The self-depiction of Mahri poems as unmediated utterances has, until recent years, been unchallenged. However, the Mahri poet Ḥājj Dākōn recently embarked on a course that departs from the conventional poetic practice of al-Mahra by committing a series of lyric poems to writing (Liebhaber, *The Dṛwān*).<sup>14</sup> Ḥājj Dākōn conceived of these poems as written texts and expected them to be circulated as such. In a few instances, I was granted the opportunity of watching how the process of composition unfolded. In 2003, while I was doing field work in al-Ghaydha in the Governorate of al-Mahra, Ḥājj would swing by my house and he and I would spend the afternoon in my living room chatting about poetry and life in al-Mahra more generally. Over the course of a few days, Ḥājj would bring pen and paper to our meetings and, while humming lines of poetry to himself, would sketch out some of the poems that would be included in his *Dṛwān*. Other poems were composed at night in his own home and brought to me as texts the following day. Ḥājj had no precedent to guide him and if there were other indigenously crafted literary texts in the Mahri language, Ḥājj was unaware of them. While in many cases the composition of these poems occurred overnight, their departure from the conventional poetics of al-Mahra was immediately apparent. For one, the ‘*ṣrōma*’ performance key is completely absent from Ḥājj’s poetic works; it does not occur in a single one of the eighteen poems he wrote for his *Dṛwān*. Whether Ḥājj was consciously aware of this fact or not, the immediate and unmediated framework predicated by the word ‘now’ (*ṣrōma*) was no longer appropriate to his newly textualized poems.

12. Liebhaber 2018: <http://whenmelodiesgather.supdigital.org/wmg/the-battle-of-kbbt> (accessed 4/4/2020).

13. Liebhaber 2018: <http://whenmelodiesgather.supdigital.org/wmg/gunfight-in-nisawn> (accessed 4/4/2020).

14. It is worth pointing out that Ḥājj Dākōn’s experimental use of writing Mahri does not extend to prose texts. Different circumstances obtain for the closely related Soqotri language which has witnessed the recent development of written prose texts using a similarly modified version of the Arabic script (Kogan).

Secondly, the messenger motif – common to the Arabic *nabaṭī* tradition yet absent from the traditional Mahri poetic practice – came into immediate use as a framing device:

I want to write a line // and hire a messenger,  
 [To go] with those who travel // and have an entry visa.  
 I'll pay him for his expenses // and the cost of shipping  
 And even more from me // since whatever he takes is acceptable.  
 I've been in turmoil // day after day,  
 I haven't known // sleep or a moment of peace  
 Since my feelings are with her // wherever she has settled.  
 Even if my heart quiets down // and forgets for a moment,  
 My eyes burn with insomnia // and tears pour down.

*ḥōm lekṭeb ḥaṭ // we-l-ʔōnī rsūl*  
*kelyēd yeḡḥīm // w-šihem dḥūl*  
*w-bob dḥōn heb // meṣrūfeh w-nawl*  
*w-zōyed hnī // hel ḡaybeṭ kbūl*  
*ʔār bob meśṣāḡeyb // l-ādēd de-ḥlūl*  
*w-aḡarbes lā // šnēt we-dḥūl*  
*w-hessī ʔār bīs // men hēl teḥlūl*  
*ʔān ḡalb w-hēd // w-sāten ḡfūl*  
*ʔayenten ḡḥēd // we-dmā bmlūl<sup>15</sup>*

Seemingly from the first moment that Ḥājj Dākōn envisaged his poems as written works, they adopted the conceptual trappings of literary texts with their contingent detachment, autonomy, and preservation of message content. Not only is the poem imagined as a message, it is also a written message: the poet wishes ‘to write a line’. The fact that Ḥājj Dākōn – or any Mahri speaker in the early 2000s – would not have written a love note in the Mahri language makes this overnight shift to a pose of rhetorical literacy all the more striking. This brings me to my final point: what we think of as an unfolding transition from orality to literacy may in certain circumstances take place in the virtual blink of an eye.<sup>16</sup>

15. Liebhaber, 2018: <http://whenmelodiesgather.supdigital.org/wmg/i-want-to-write-a-line> (accessed 4/4/2020).

16. The accelerating velocity of oral and written transitions in the modern era is underscored by Gintsburg (2020), who notes that while transitions from orality to literacy may have stretched out over decades or even centuries in the pre-modern era, the same transitions are now taking place at unprecedented speed.

## CONCLUSION

The intention of this article is to foreground a conceptual distinction between poetry conceived in a strictly non-lettered environment and poetry that is informed by a written practice, even if the poems themselves are not necessarily circulated as a written text. The idea here is to implicate writing as a conceptual possibility – not necessarily the poet’s facility with writing – in the emergence of a self-referential poetics and contingent notion of textual autonomy. That is, it is possible to distinguish between poems that bear the hallmarks of a written text without necessarily being written texts, and poems that are perfectly free from the influence of writing and literacy. In the case of Mahri-language poetry from Yemen, poems are quickly re-imagined as self-standing, autonomous texts when poets discover the possibilities inherent in writing their language. This can be demonstrated through the rhetorical devices that frame poems either as messages or as utterances, and these rhetorical devices in turn offer a potent tool to evaluate the degree to which ‘literariness’ has impinged on orature; as a literary historian, I understand that this tool may have particular utility with respect to determining the provenance of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry.

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