A Study of Ṣaʿālīk (brigand-poets) in Pre-Islamic Arabia: Heroes in Inverted World

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This thesis is divided into two parts and consists of four chapters. The subject of this research and the contents will be reviewed in brief as follows:

Reciting poems was regarded very highly in Arab society in Pre-Islamic period. Men in the upper and ruling classes played significant parts in materializing and advocating their own social sense of value and ideology through their poetry. In contrast, Ṣaʿālīk, who were living ruffian lives as bandits or brigands, were also renowned as poets.

Ṣaʿālīk poetry is essential part of Pre-Islamic poetical heritage which, together with Qurʾān, forms the basis of Arab-Islamic literary culture. Also it is significant subject of Arabic picaresque literature. Yūsuf Khulayf, Egyptian pioneer in this field, published the first valuable research in 1959. However, no other researches followed his works were remarkably developed except some investigations by Stetkevych, American specialist.

This paper represents a comparative study between Ṣaʿālīk poets and the mainstream at the time, namely, poets of tribe, because the better comprehension of this unorthodox literature by
Sa'alik as bandits needs clarifying relation with the orthodox poetry. This way of investigation will be the key to develop Sa'alik literature studies.

The first part includes two chapters, and discusses the poets. The first chapter outlines the social position and the public roles of poets in the Pre-Islamic period. Firstly, with regard to their position in the society well known as patrilineal tribalism, they were the center of politics, military affairs, diplomacies, and rites. They recited poems embodying and advocating their tribal social systems and their cultural values. Consequently, the public roles of these poets were regarded politically and culturally significant. They eulogized their genealogies and the achievements of their predecessors, and satirized their enemies through poems.

The second chapter presents the position that Sa'alik poets had been put compared with the orthodox tribal poets. The only clue to define their position in this period is analyzing Akhbār (anecdotes) about them. These Akhbār, however, are characterized by their fictional and allegorical properties. Therefore, this thesis considers them not genuine biographies, but narratives, which were formed during interpenetration with the poetic texts while interweaving the facts with the fictions into them. And we emphasize the importance of their social, psychological and symbolic characteristics.

Our new analysis on these Akhbār show that the images of Sa'alik poets reflected in them could be divided into three types according to their attitudes toward tribal societies; "Anti-tribe", "Trans-border", and "Pseudo-tribe".

The followings are each of their characters and representative poets. Al-Shanfarā is the typical "Anti-tribe" poet. Poets in this type felt animosity toward the tribe that they belong to, and repeated attacks and plunders. Al-Sulayk ibn al-Sulaka and Ta'abbaṣa Sharran are categorized into the second type, "Trans-border" poets. They always come and go beyond the border of their tribal societies in order to satisfy their desires. At the same time, they sometimes deviate from
the sphere of human society, even stepping across the border of nature. 'Urwa ibn al-Ward is the only example of the "Pseudo-tribe" poet in this period. He criticized the actual situation in their tribe, and tried to make improvements by establishing a provisional community. "Anti-tribe" and "Pseudo-tribe" poets disturbed, and moreover, terrified the tribal social structure. Unlike them, "Trans-border" poets sneer it from away. Even though these Ṣa‘ālik poets are varied as above, all of them are characterized as strangers / outlaws deviated form their tribal society. Also, Akhbār describes that Ṣa‘ālik are untied to their social system, blessed with superhuman potentials, free to follow their private desires in common. Therefore, this thesis regards them as the eccentrics who tend to deviate from their social systems, not as the weak or the socially oppressed just defined by Yūsuf Khulayf. We name their characteristic found as above "De-tribal disposition".

The second part deals with poetry itself. The third chapter surveys the structure of Qaṣīda that is the classic form of poetry formulated by the orthodox poets. Pre-Islamic Qaṣīda has highly appreciated and well investigated in the traditional Arab-Islamic poetics. However, most of the investigations have been biased by the trend of the times. Moreover, religious authoritarianism obstructed decomposing and reinterpreting those distorted view of Qaṣīda. Around 1970s, new theories against them appeared. These unrestricted studies for the possible reinterpretation should be favorably received.

This thesis evaluates the significant suggestion by Stetkevych, Arabic Literature Specialist, that "paradigm of the rite of passage" helps to explore the semantics of Qaṣīda. Our aim here is to interpret the fundamental structure of Qaṣīda with applying this paradigm to a famous poem recited by 'Alqama. Qaṣīda consists of dozens of (sometimes more than a hundred) lines with identical metre and rhyme. In its full traditional form, it comprises three thematic units: Nasīb, the amatory prelude; Raḥil, the description of poet's journey to desert; Fakhr, the poet's boast of himself and his tribe; or Madīḥ, the panegyric; or Hijā', the lampoon. These thematic units
function as “three ritual phases” in the rites of passage; separation → margin → aggregation, which is Cultural Anthropological methodology shown by Van Genepp. The result of the survey based on this Stetkevych’s suggestion presents a persuasive theory that Qaṣīda as whole expresses the social ideology and cultural values in the tribal societies, such as personal maturity and thriving, social reproduction and prosperity, and so on.

The last chapter discussed the structure, significance and function of the Ṣa‘ālik poetry. The important point is that Ṣa‘ālik poets and mythological “tricksters” have similar characters; deviant, extremist, strategist, disordered, ambiguous, attributive, brutal, egoistic and so on. Surveying those common characters helped to elucidate the realms of Ṣa‘ālik poetry as follows.

The sense of value in the traditional Qaṣīda is totally reversed, disproved, and profaned in the realm of Ṣa‘ālik poetry. At the same time, these blasphemous acts by Ṣa‘ālik paradoxically give the members of the society opportunities to reaffirm their sense of value. This disposition can be called ambivalent, and is exactly common to both “tricksters” and Ṣa‘ālik.

Furthermore, there is another significant side to it. Ṣa‘ālik poets express directly and positively the respect for the existing social values in spite of their own contradictory position as ruffians. Even though, or rather, for the reason that they are strangers / outlaws, they could suggest some universal values and virtue while criticizing their social structure and its disappointing reality. It is the very paradox pointed by Turner that people like the weak or outlaws rather have “power” to restore the appropriate “equilibrium” and “universal-human values”.

In the Ṣa‘ālik poets’ works, they are the very persons who embody the social values, and they are the “heroes”. This realm that deviants as Ṣa‘ālik play the heroic parts is none other than the inverted structure.

This thesis concludes that the realm of Ṣa‘ālik poetry is ambivalent which a couple of
contrary sides coexist; the side of disproving the existing social values, and the side of reaffirming them.