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The Rise of the Individual Style in Andalusian Arabic Poetry: the Case of Ibn Khafâja (1056-1138)

Arie Schippers

Abstract

To define an Arabic poet and his style as individualistic is highly problematic. From the beginning Arabic poetry was extremely conventional. Most themes in early Bedouin poetry were well established and primarily focused on love and the desert. While the desert motifs remained in later Arabian poetry, new urban themes such as drinking scenes and the poet's longing for the young female or male servant who poured the wine came into vogue. The paper looks at Ibn Khafâja's poetry, its poetic form and how the poet's individualistic use of stock motifs gives his oeuvre a unique character.

Keywords

humanisation and personification of Nature, Arabian Peninsula, Homo- and hetero-eroticism, Old Age description, Nightly travel motif, aimlessness of life in poetry

The first poets in Arabic literature were Bedouins of the Arabian Desert in the sixth century CE or earlier. The oral Bedouin poetry already displayed lots of conventions in love and desert description. In the ages that follow Arabic poetry became more urbanized and rhetoricised. The old desert motifs remained, but also new urban motifs such as the wine drinking scene and the Poet's longing for the young female or male servants who poured the wine came into vogue.

To define an Arabic poet and his style as individualistic is highly problematical since Arabic poetry is extremely conventional. In pre-Islamic poetry most themes were well established. As far as ideology is concerned, the corpus of pre-Islamic poetry is sometimes characterized as an anti-Koran.¹ Classical Arabic poetry continued the pre-Islamic situation and the coming of Islam did not change its character substantially. Notwithstanding the coming to power of the Islamic reigns, there still remained not only Christian and Jewish Arabic poets, next to poets of Muslim origin, but also freethinkers, who did not care about religion at all, or ridiculed the established religions. But being a libertine poet, manifesting oneself in poetry as a wine drinker and pederast, and at the same time boasting about love affairs with 'twenty' women, should not be a priori a criterion for individuality. Many

¹ Cf. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*, p. xi

poets such as Abū Nuwās (756-813), Bashshār ibn Burd (714-784), and in later times even Ibn Sahl al-Isrā'īlī from Seville (1212-1260), were known for their deriding and lampooning attitudes towards Islam and Islamic duties such as the *ṣalāh* and the fasting of the Ramadan, although they were formally Muslims. Abū Nuwās ridiculed the month of Ramadan in the following manner in a witty translation by Geert Jan van Gelder:²

O you month, O how long will you last?
We're disgusted, we're fed up with you.
If a month could be properly
killed, we would surely kill you.
Whenever the praises are sung
of Shawwāl, it is you we will blame.
O, if only you'd gone!
But that's too much to hope for.

The blind poet from Syria al-Ma'arri (993-1058), who knew by heart the whole tradition of Arabic prose and poetry, is not only author of the *Epistle of Forgiveness*, an ultra tomb narrative, where the protagonist meets in the Afterlife classical Arabic poets to criticize or praise their poetry or to ask questions about it. He is also an imitator of the Koran in his *Book of Paragraphs and Periods*, with rhymed prose full of allusions to knowable facts from early Arabic culture, history and literature. This poet was a vegetarian and professed that he did not commit the crime of his father to engender a son; he was also a sceptic about religions and their holy places and asked with a sneer if it was democratic that one stone got more reverence than another? Famous is his statement:

They all err - Moslems, Christians, Jews, and Magians;
Two make Humanity's universal sect:
One man intelligent without religion
And one religious without intellect.⁴

Now we will concentrate less on the more ostentatious anti-religious manifestations of poets and therefore seek the individualism in the Andalusian poet Ibn Khafāja, being from rich origin, who apparently never underwent the constraints of a strictly religious education, but whose mentality was already Epicurean in his early years and in old age complained about the difficulties of his lost youth. In a recent article the Arabic poetess and critic Salma Jayyusi gives an appreciation of Ibn

² Abū Nuwās, *Diwān*, II, p. 100; V, p. 220; cf. Wagner, *Abū Nuwās*, p. 119. Gelder, 'Against Ramadan'; see also Schippers, 'On-islamitische uitingen in de klassieke Arabische literatuur'; several mediaeval anthologies have short chapters on the subject.

³ See the article 'Ma'arri' by Smoor, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, pp. 927-935.

⁴ Translation by Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Poetry*, p. 167 (poem no. 239). Magians are the so-called *Majūz*, 'Mazdeans' or 'Zoroastrians'. This poem has been translated three times into Dutch among which the translation by the poet J. H. Leopold (1865-1925) is the most conspicuous, placed together with two other translated poems by al-Ma'arri in the anthology by Komrij, *De Nederlandse*, pp. 376-377.

Khafāja's revolutionary changes in diction and style of poetry and comments:

If these changes in al-Andalus would have continued, a real Andalusian style would have perhaps arisen. The poet chooses his vocabulary sometimes from a long forgotten repertoire, or chooses rare plurals, or turns words into a new shape, which suddenly strikes the reader, whereas he sometimes makes new words and uses them with a consciously chosen meaning, which is not used in the normal manner. A remarkable characteristic of his poetry is his continuing capacity of transferring words to other and several semantic fields. Thus he frequently uses war terminology to describe other themes, or words of the human body to describe nature and sometimes he arranges words in an audacious manner or puts sense parts in a different word order uncommon in the normal word order of the traditional Arabic poetry.⁵

Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm Ibn Khafāja (1056-1138) was born in Alcira (Jazīrat ash-Shuqr) near the river the Júcar, between Játiva and Valencia. In the last mentioned city he died. He lived in the period of the petty kings of Muslim Spain (1030-1091) and afterwards during the reign of the Almoravid King Yūsuf ibn Tashufin and his family. Ibn Khafāja used the motifs of ancient Arabic poetry with a special rhetorical stance, he is well known because of his humanisation and personification of the Andalusian nature. His garden descriptions are optimistic, always with many metaphors and antitheses. But he describes his frivolous trysts with young girls and lads using names of specific Bedouin locations in the Arabian Peninsula. Among the motifs of his later poetry are his complaints about old age and remembrance of youth. His motifs about endless nightly travel, from desert to desert, are recurrent elements and point to a pessimistic and existential feeling about the aimlessness of life.

His repetitive strategy is deliberately chosen in order to sell the stock of the motifs of his poetry to officials and friends and was meant to attract the readers and listeners by the recurrence of specific elements recognizable as typically Ibn-Khafājian. Just as connoisseurs of figurative art like to follow the development of their favourite painter, Ibn Khafāja's customers and addressees were interested in his individual use of stock motifs and other special poetic elements throughout his oeuvre. This means that one should not judge his poetry in isolation from the background of his entire oeuvre to determine his individual characteristics.

In the beginning the Arabic poets had as their natural patrons the heads and chiefs of their tribes or subtribes in the desert and their poems were used to defend and to propagate the honour of their tribe. In the more urban setting of the Arab and Islamic kingdoms and caliphates poets praised their political

⁵ Jayyusi, 'Nature poetry'; Al-Nowaihi, *The Poetry of Ibn Khafāja*; Schippers and Mattock, 'Love and War'.

leaders, kings, wazirs, generals and caliphs. But Ibn Khafāja was an independent landlord, who considered governors and caliphs as his friends and dedicated to them many laudatory poems. In the beginning of the twelfth century he went to Morocco during the troubles which arose around Valencia. He praised the Almoravids and sometimes asked a lightening of the taxes on his estate and land. So his poetry had a political function: the praise of certain dynasties, governors and other officials.⁶

Our poet would not have been appreciated by an Italian poet like Petrarch who was called by Ernest Renan "the first modern man". Petrarch did not like Arabs and their frivolous and obscene poetry which was more associated with body than soul. But Petrarch sometimes recognized the same frivolity in his own poetry whose trademark was Laura and whose form was the newly developed sonnet.⁷ Already in pre-Islamic times we will find the same motifs later employed by Ibn Khafāja, and which could have been known by Petrarch because of Averroës (Ibn Rushd)'s comment on Aristotle's *Poetics*, which contained a number of Arabic verses translated by Hermannus Alemannus into Latin, for example the following passages:

- a) I ascended to be with her as water bubbles go up, thinking that her husband slept in, and she tried me to push away whispering saying: 'Do you want to die, don't you see that the watchers did not go to sleep yet?' Then I said: 'I suffer from a fire that I would like to extinguish.'
- b) As if I never climbed on the back of a horse, as if I never embraced a girl with jewels, as if I never drunk from a wine sack of pure wine, as if I never incited for the second time the horse to a course after having retreated with him several times.⁸

These two quotations from pre-Islamic Arabic poetry contain motifs utilized by Imru'ul-Qays namely the motif of boasting love; and the elegiac motif of the time of youth that has passed.

Both themes are practised in the same manner by Ibn Khafāja.⁹ It is clear that both Imru'ul-Qays the pre-Islamic poet (d. 550) and the Almoravid poet Ibn Khafāja (d. 1138) were from this 'sublunar'¹⁰ world. There is no spiritual interpretation possible. There is no feeling of sin and will of purification as in Petrarch's *Canzoniere*. There is no transcendence of the soul and avoidance of materiality of the body with these Arabic poets. They lived in the material world and had no sense for spirituality and the divine.

Love poetry occurs for the first time in the love introduction of the solemn Arabic ode the so-called *qaṣīda*. Here love is a nostalgic remembrance of the love affair of

⁶ Cf. Schippers, 'Prosopography'.

⁷ Mancini, 'Petrarca'.

⁸ A) "*Estuavi ad utendum ea more fluctuantis aque, dum maritum senseram obdormisse; at illa, cum susurrio recalcitrans me, inquit "velles interisse, non advertens vigiles nondum decubuisse"; cui ego: "vexor incendio quod vellem extinsisse".*" B) "*Ac si non ascendissem unquam causa solacii equum aut non tenuissem puellam ornata monilibus mecum; et ac si numquam dolium plenum vini meracissimi salutassem, et equos post multos recursus iterum ad cursum non incitassem*" Imru'ul-Qays [Ibn Hujr al-Kindi], *Diwān*, pp. 31 ff. (no. 2); Imru'ul-Qays [Ibn Hujr al-Kindi], *Diwān*, in Ahlwardt, *The Divans*, pp. 152-153 (number 52); both fragments from the same poem.

⁹ Cf. Ibn Khafāja, Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm, *Diwān*, poem no. 1, line 13 ff. and see poem no. 178 [vide infra].

¹⁰ The notion 'sublunar' entered by Arabic philosophy (al-Farābī; Ibn Rushd/ Averroës) into European Christian philosophy and theology, but the notion was not necessarily supported by our poet Ibn Khafāja. Our poet however was of earthly rather than divine inspiration.

the poet with a Bedouin girl whose nomadic tribe went away. The pre-Islamic and later on the Classical Arab 'poetic I' weeps upon the remnants of the encampment and asks to where the tribe of the beloved girl has gone: but they do not answer. This kind of nostalgic poetry in the erotic introduction of the *qaṣīda* which refers to the past was called *nasīb*. The objects of love are women from the past. A later form of love poetry, not an introduction but an independent poem about love with boys and girls in the present time is called *ghazal*, a genre which often takes place in a drinking scene: here the objects of desire are the younger servants who are pouring the wine. The 'poetic I' communicates with them in the present time.

Ibn Khafāja mixes both elements of love lyrics with each other. Nostalgic *nasīb*-like feelings refer to Bedouin place names of the Arabian Peninsula and stand for the rendezvous of his youthful loves. Moreover, there are his *ghazal* like compositions in which short meetings are described with little girls as well as young boys. Homo-eroticism in medieval Arabic and Hebrew poetry has raised several polemics in modern time because practising love for boys is considered contemptible in religious surroundings, especially today.¹¹

The nature descriptive element is also present in many of his poems, both descriptions of flower gardens and nocturnal elements of clouds and lightning, which can be part of nightly travel description. With regard to his garden poems the poet has portrayed himself as follows:

The fact that in the poetry of this man frequently occur flowers, trees, flowing water, and chant of birds, has to do with his inborn predilection and natural gift to describe these elements because the Andalusian peninsula was his home and living environment. There one finds an abundance of fluent water, singing birds, extended valleys and fertile lands. Belonging to what he says about Andalusian nature is a poem in which he describes a place where the sky comes down, and which is moistened by the dew, white of blossoms and alternatively colouring silver and inflaming. He exhorts in this to drinking wine and take rest and describes a cooing bird there and, and a tree whose blossom fall down one after another drop and whirl down.¹²

It is well known that the most remarkable characteristic of Ibn Khafāja's nature poetry is his use of personifications. In poem two hundred and twenty-nine¹³ we find a tree personified as a woman who is represented as drunk, shaking back and forth in the wind, as if drenched by the wine. However, it was not wine, but rain pouring down from the clouds, whereas the birds

¹¹ Schippers, 'Die Knabenpoesie in der arabisch- und hebräisch-andalusischen Literatur'.

¹² Introduction to one of his poems.

¹³ The numbers of the poems refer to Ibn Khafāja, Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm, *Diwān*.

in the trees act as singers: by the use of these metaphors, a wine scene has been created.

- May the day be sprinkled, where I took rest at the foot of a large tree, a leafy giantess of a tree! Wind joked and played with her.
- She was in a drunken behaviour, when the dove sang for her, bending of joy, the cloud poured her and she drank.
- At that tree we amused ourselves, a flag of youth was hoisted, a chariot of joy was spanned.
- The little river bent itself there as a galaxy, in which a star of wine rose.

But gradually his love for nature became overshadowed by his growing old. Poem one hundred and one concerns a rose 'outside the season'. It looks like one of his garden poems but in reality it announces his old age:

- What sweet reception prepared me the wondrous innocent! O could the day have been dissolved in the dark!
- She appeared me to pleasure my old age as if she had done it to delight my youth!
- And I received her wholeheartedly with full enthusiasm: my regards, to say the truth, spoke clearly
- I was drunk, showing my admiration for her, and she forgave me my old age, and covered Destiny with reproaches.
- She was the fragrance of a gentle autumn, noble and far, her present is a greeting.

The poem cannot be understood when read as referring to a real rose, because one wants to see a brilliant rose in its full glory at daytime and not at night. Probably the first four lines refer to a young little girl who smiles (sweet reception) and has no experience (an innocent wonder). Then the poet manifests his wish that the night must come instead of the day because the night is more favourable for an amorous meeting. The dark of the night is possibly referring also to the black hairs of youth: would the poet still be young! Then women would still have interest for him!

In the second line the woman arouses the poet's desire and, in spite of his age, he covets her. He is still as passionate as if he were young.

Line five, with its mention of fragrance and gentle autumn, suggests that she brought the scent of spring to him in his declining years and consoled him with greetings. But line four leads us in another direction, the woman does not reproach him for his desire because he is an old man, his age is not his fault but the fault of Destiny. Because the young little

girl is the personification of a rose, the poem can be read on two levels: there is not only the love of the poet for women, but also his love for nature, both of which he still feels although he is no longer living in the right season; he feels his old age and complains about it.¹⁴

Ibn Khafāja's oeuvre is optimist in its beginning phase: the nature and garden poems with nature metaphors express a positive attitude of life. Al-Andalus (Muslim Spain) is a Paradise. After having lived in Paradise usually you do not enter in Hell (poem three hundred and one).

People of al-Andalus, what a good fortune for you to have waters, shadows, rivers, and trees.

The Garden of Eternal Happiness can only be on your territory: if I had to choose, it is this territory which I would choose,

Do not be afraid that you shall enter Hell Fire after that, because you cannot enter Hell after having visited Paradise!

But gradually the poet will be stooped under old age, he loses more and more friends to death, and life will remain a disconsolate wandering from desert to desert.

A positive note, however, are the love adventures which the poet has with young boys and little girls where the age difference is sometimes large (more than fifty years) as in poem forty:

- I am sleepless thinking of a distant meeting place, which I cannot reach. Amorously I inhale gusts of the wind coming from that distant horizon.
- I said to a flashing lightning which cleaved the night: bring greetings to that place whose remnants are effaced.
- Bring to the occupants of the house the message that I love them. I nourish for them an embracing love which unites me with them, in spite of the distance.
- Bring also greetings to little 'Afra, and ask her whether the small star that she was, I shall ever look at it as a full moon?
- Shall her branch bend herself ever in youthful splendour over my encampment, shall I ever embrace her neck in embracement?
- Who gives me this young gazelle as a prey? I shall eat her by biting her and drink her by kissing her.
- Since my youth one and fifty years have expired: they passed away as if I appeared in a dream.
- Would the bird of my lucky stars fulfil my wishes, and I take possession of her, proud of my prey!

¹⁴ al-Nowaihi, *The Poetry*, pp. 45-46.

- Would that I were still fourteen years old, so that I need not to call her daughter and she did not call me uncle!

Poem two hundred seventy-eight shows a similar love affair of the poet with a young boy.¹⁵

In the second part of his life pessimistic poems with existentialist contemplations dominate in his nocturnal descriptions¹⁶ and is also central to the famous mountain poem. The poet describes his nocturnal travel from desert to desert in poem one hundred sixty-four:

- Hardly I rose in the first regions of the east and had I gone up with the sun, when I found myself in the last regions of the western evening country.
- I travelled alone and became a playing tool of the deserts, and I stood eye in eye with the face of death which covered itself in veils of dense darkness
- I had no companion but a firm sword; no house had I, but the saddles of camels.
- I tore the clothes of the night: a grey formation appeared frowning, shining of teeth.
- I saw a bit of grey dawn, looking from a twinkling star which enflamed.

After this passage the poet comes to a mute mountain which nevertheless seems to teach him its life experience, a kind of Mont Ventoux, but with even more real life experience.¹⁷ The theme of nightly travel, his poems about old age and his elegies on his friends form together his pessimistic oeuvre.

White hair makes the beautiful ladies go away and old age, in the end, announces death. The poet describes how suddenly the forerunners of old age arrived (poem one hundred seventy-eight):

- Suddenly appeared the smile of grey hair because of which I did not recognize the face of a young girl, because of all her scowling,
- I loathed a spotted raven which caused separation and which was black in the time of youth.
- So a long sigh followed another one because of advanced age, because of which I wept blood over the loss of youth.
- The mirror of my glance and my ear became rusty so that I do not perceive the things with those two senses as in former times.
- Is there any trustworthy friend in Time which conserves a friendship, when even two friends, as these two senses are, betray me?

¹⁵ Cf. Schippers and Mattock, 'Love and War', pp. 50-68.

¹⁶ Schippers, 'The Theme of Old Age', pp. 94-104.

¹⁷ Cf. al-Nowaihi, *The Poetry* and many others made ample analysis of the poem.

- It is as if never the laughing mouth of a morning aroused my desire at al-Liwa, and never sipped the deep red of the lips from under the darkness [of the girl's hair].
- And as if I never visited at night a beautiful lady quivering like a branch and trailing behind her a speckled snake namely the abundance of her tresses.
- And as if I never travelled away from her when I observed that the morning had become grey after having arrived riding on a black horse at night out of longing for her.
- And as if the wind never competed with me in pulling the abundance of a lock of hair, in which I clothed myself as sealed with the sign of youth.

Also remarkable in this poem is the repeated phrase in which the poet considers his bygone youth "as if he had never experienced it". This "as if never" is typical of the elegy and often used in relation to the deceased: "It is as if I never met him". Here again al-Liwā is mentioned as a place of juvenile love which, according to Ibn Khafāja's remark in prose, he had a certain predilection for Hījāzī place names in his poetry.

The nightly travel description belongs to a well-known set of themes in Arabic poetry. Although Ibn Khafāja is not the only poet to practise it, his poetic form and the repetition of his lexicon and clusters of themes give his oeuvre nevertheless a special character. The description of a desert travel shares common elements with the nostalgic *nasīb* such as lightning and the mention of places names of the Arabian Peninsula.

We find recurrent images like crossing deserts and wading through darkness, or turning eyes looking at the sky, all belonging to the poet's stock of motifs and images. His existential elaboration of the nightly travel motif shows the inner life of the poet's individual, in which the Divine or God plays no role whatsoever.

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