

Palestinian Improvised-Sung Poetry: The Genres of *Ḥidā* and *Qarrādī* – Performance and Transmission

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Introduction

The improvised-sung poetry of the Palestinians is a living tradition of oral poetry,¹ extemporized impromptu in the colloquial Arabic of the Palestinians. It is sung by professional native Palestinian poets for their countrymen primarily at weddings, baptisms, private parties, public festivals, and other joyous social occasions (see D. Sbait 1982:1-59). This improvised-sung poetry is known in Arabic by the name of *ash-shiʿr al-murtajal* (improvised poetry; cf. Bonnebaker 1978) or *ash-shiʿr ash-shaʿbī* (folk poetry) or *az-zajal* (colloquial Arabic poetry in strophic form) or *al-shiʿr al-ʿāmmī* (poetry in colloquial language), because it does not follow the grammatical rules of the written standard Arabic used by the poets of literary poetry.

The Palestinian poet-singer who composes this poetry is known by his countrymen as *ḥādī* or *ḥaddā* (lit. “camel-eer”), *shāʿir shaʿbī* (folk poet), *qawwāl* (improviser or reciter), or *zajjāl* (improviser), the most common of these names being *ḥaddā* or *shāʿir*.

My research is based on a collection of improvised-sung poetry

¹ The issue of “orality” in the classical Arabic poetry has been explored before and resulted in two major works: Monroe 1972 and Zwettler 1978. Both works grew out of a substantial body of scholarship initiated by the research of Milman Parry and Albert Lord into the features of oral composition in Homeric poetry; Parry and Lord analyzed the peculiar features of Homeric verse and compared the results to the analysis of a living tradition of oral composition in southern Yugoslavia (Lord 1960). However, while Parry and Lord’s work was strengthened by their ability to relate the ancient tradition to a similar and observable living tradition, much of the work on classical Arabic poetry has been marred by an inability to develop evidence for hypotheses about its “orality” from directly observable sources. The living tradition of improvised-sung colloquial poetry of the Palestinian poet-singers provides a unique and crucial vehicle by which scholars could compare and analyze the relation between this living oral tradition and the ancient Arabic poetry. This relation promises to be an even stronger case than that of the Slavic folk singers.

recorded live in the field, neither written or precomposed nor preserved in books, manuscripts, or tapes. It includes approximately 15,000 lines of this extemporaneous poetry, which fall under seven different genres: *‘Atābā*, *Ḥidā*, *Far‘āwī*, *Mḥorabih*, *M‘annā*, *Qarrādī*, and *Qaṣīdih*. These genres are entirely different from one another in their poetic forms, diverse rhyme schemes, and musical melodies (D. Sbeit 1982:60-349).

The following paper focuses on two of the most popular genres of the improvised-sung poetry of the Palestinian poet-singers: *ḥidā* and *qarrādī*, these two being the most representative genres of this oral tradition. This study presents a concise literary definition entailing the basic characteristic poetic features of both genres, as well as a brief theoretical musical description. It also presents an analysis of the poetic structure of the basic forms of the *ḥidā* and *qarrādī* with an emphasis on the use of the rhyme schemes, an overwhelmingly dominant poetic feature in this oral poetry. Yet due to the richness and complexity of this poetry, the analysis will exclude the many related subgenres. The analysis will be supported by illustrative quotations of improvised-sung poetry. The paper also deals with the subjects of the poems, as well as the social context in which the poems are improvised-sung. In addition the essay also describes the method in which the *ḥidā* and *qarrādī* are performed, and finally it includes a thorough presentation of the practical training of the Palestinian poet-singers and the manner in which their oral poetry is handed down from one generation of poet-singers to another.

I. *Ḥidā*²

A. The Characteristic Features of *Ḥidā*³

Ḥidā is the most popular genre of improvised-sung poetry of the Palestinian poet-singers. They employ three major types of *ḥidā*:

² The *ḥidā* is known as *ḥudā'* and *ḥadw* in dictionaries of literary Arabic, also known as *ḥidā* by omitting the *hamzah*, and as *ḥadādī* in the colloquial Arabic of the Palestinians. The literary form verb *ḥadā* is [Form I] *ḥadwan* and *ḥidā'an*; *ḥudā'an* implies the meaning of singing the *ḥudā*, while *ḥadā al-ibl* means to urge the camels to move while singing to them. The singer of *ḥudā'* in literary Arabic is known as *ḥādī* (pl. *ḥudāt*) and *ḥaddā'* is an exaggerated form of the noun *ḥādī*. But a poet-singer is known as *ḥādī*, or *ḥaddā* (pl. *Ḥaddāy*) in the colloquial Arabic of the Palestinians.

See Frayḥa 1973:32; Dalman 1967:137; Even-Shoshan 1974, II:719; Krupnik and Silbermann 1927, I:279; al-Ma'lūf 1966:95; Naṣṣār 1962:42-47; Smith 1967:127; and H. Wehr 1976:163.

³ For additional definitions of the Palestinian *ḥidā* see: 'Alqam 1977:60; al-Barghotī 1963; al-Barghotī 1979:63-84; al-Bāsh 1971:63-72; Dalman 1901: Introduction and 137-39; Jargy 1970; Saarisalo 1932; Shiloah 1975; Sirḥān 1979:276-85; and Sirḥān 1977, I:63-84.

muzdawij (couplets), *mrabba*^c (quatrains), and *mthamman*, (stanzas of eight lines), followed always by a refrain. Additionally, each type of *hidā* entails several other subgenres. The above-mentioned types of *hidā* are based on the principle of doubling the number of lines from one type to another; from 2 to 4 to 8. During a given performance of *hidā* the poet-singers start the improvisation with *hidā muzdawij*, then switch to *mrabba*^c and *mthamman* in sequential order.

Hidā is strictly an outdoor genre, sung basically at the party on the evening before the groom's wedding and accompanied by the folk dance known by the Palestinian Arabs as *saḥjih* (men's folk dance). In the *saḥjih* the *saḥḥījih* (folk dancers) shake their bodies slightly, clap rhythmically, and sing the common *hidā* refrain *yā ḥalālī yā māli*,⁴ which can best be translated as ("O how fortunate I am!" or "I am delighted with my money or wealth") and other variations of the same phrase. The audience may join in singing the above refrain.



Saḥjih in the Palestinian village of °Aylābūn, summer 1985
(photo courtesy of Bahjāt Ṣlayyih.)

All *hidā* songs are rhythmical and responsorial. Moreover, the dancers' refrains conform to the rhythm of the poet-singers' preceding improvisations. The rapid melody and the stress which the poet-singers place on the last rhyming syllables, along with the matching response of the folk dancers' refrains, create a sharp contrast between the poet-singers and the dancers, a combination which creates dynamism in all *hidā*

⁴ Most of the common refrains are sung spontaneously by the *ṣaff saḥjih* dancers due to the fact that they are familiar to them, or they are introduced by the poet-singers and transmitted verbally to the *saḥjih* dancers by the *ḥāshī* (the *ṣaff saḥjih* organizer).

performances. *Ḥidā* normally is sung in an alternated fashion, but it can be improvised solo as well.

The rhyme scheme of the regular *ḥidā muzdawij* is AB, AB, CB, DB; the *mrabba*^c entails an AAAB, CCCB rhyme scheme; and the *mthamman* employs an ABABABAC pattern. Each line of *ḥidā* utilizes seven or eight syllables. In some samples the poet-singers lengthen certain lines from seven to eight syllables by using vocal syllables such as *aw*, *al*, or *ay* in order to make up for a missing syllable.

All *ḥidā* poems are highly rhythmic and follow the *maqām* of *bayyātī*. The regular *ḥidā muzdawij* is sung with a slow tempo *bayyātī*; the *mrabba*^c with a fast-tempo *bayyātī dūgāh*; the *mthamman* with a faster tempo *bayyātī nawā*. The subgenre of *ḥidā muzdawij* known as *is-sahjih il-baddāwiyyih* (the Bedouins' folk dance) is sung with the fastest tempo following the *maqām* of *bayyātī ḥusaynī*. The tempo gradually accelerates from one type to another. The poet-singers start the improvisation with the slowest type, the regular *ḥidā muzdawij*, and finish with the fastest, the *baddāwiyyih*. The refrain *yā ḥalālī yā mālī* is sung in a free rhythm after all types, except for *is-sahjih il-baddāwiyyih* in which it is repeated twice instead of once and is highly rhythmic. In both cases the refrain also follows the *maqām* of *bayyātī*. Because the Palestinian *ḥidā* is such a common form, the Palestinian poet-singer is called *ḥādī* (one who improvises-sings *ḥidā*) by his countrymen, even though he sings all other genres of colloquial poetry as well.

B. The Poetic Forms of the *Ḥidā*

1. *Ḥidā Muzdawij*,⁵ i.e., *ḥidā* of two lines.

The form of regular *ḥidā muzdawij* consists of a pair of improvised lines by one poet-singer followed by the dance of *sahjih*, rhythmical clapping and the dancers' refrain *yā ḥalālī yā mālī* sung once by the audience in a slow tempo. Then a second poet-singer improvises two pairs of *muzdawijāt*, and the improvisation continues in the alternating fashion stated above. The following *ḥidā* by °Abdallāh Mūsā and Abū Lail⁶ illustrates this feature:

- i. °Abdallāh: Al bismi bādī lḥadādāī
I°timādī °al-ḥayy- il-°ālī

⁵ Some Palestinian poet-singers call this type of *ḥidā mafrūd* (i.e., divided by singing pairs of lines of *ḥidā*, one at a time).

⁶ Yūsif Maşarwih, born in Kufr Qar°, the Muthallath, in 1936. He became a professional poet-singer in 1955.

- The Şaff: Aw⁷ yā ḥalālī yā māli
- ii. °Abdallāh: Wmin ba°di hādhā walladhī
şallū °arā°i r-risālih
The Şaff: Aw yā ḥalālī yā māli
- iii. Abū Lail: Ilbadri °addinyā bazagh
wannajmi ḥawluḥ bilālī
The Şaff: Aw yā ḥalālī yā māli
- iv. Abū Lail: Nādī °alā kull il-°Arab
illailih nādī larjālī
The Şaff: Aw yā ḥalālī yā māli
- (Ref. °A. Mūsā and Y. Abū Lail, Cas. 34, A-191-307)
- i. °Abdallāh: In the name (of Allāh), I start the
ḥadādī; I rely on the Supreme Being.
Dancers: O how fortunate I am!
- ii. °Adballāh: And after this, pray on the guardian
of the Message (i.e., The Prophet Muḥammad).
Dancers: O how fortunate I am!
- iii. Abū Lail: The full moon has risen on the
world and the stars beam around it.
Dancers: O how fortunate I am!
- iv. Abū Lail: [I] call all the Arabs
tonight I call my men.
Dancers: O how fortunate I am!

°A. Mūsā's *muzdawijāt* rhyme ABCB and Ab, Lail's DBEB. The "B" rhyme is always fixed and is used with all the even lines of the entire *ḥidā* improvisation of both poet-singers.

1.a. *Is-ṣaḥjīh Il-Baddāwiyyih*

A popular variation of *ḥidā mazdawij* is the subgenre termed by the

⁷ I have noticed in listening to my cassettes that most poet-singers who improvise all types of *ḥidā* utter an *aw* or *al* sound immediately after the end of their *muzdawij*, or *mrabba°*, or *mthamman*, and that is followed by the *ṣaḥjīh* dancers who clap and repeat their refrain. It seems that the poet utters an *aw* or *al* sound in order to give a clear indication to the dancers that he has finished his *muzdawij* or *mrabba°* and that the refrain can begin. It is also noticeable that the dancers, who are aware of the end of the *muzdawij*, react spontaneously and sing the *aw* or *al* sounds together with the poet, then continue on with the refrain. It is the *aw* and *al* sounds that create a sense of order and transition within the *ḥidā*.

poet-singers as *is-saḥjih il-baddāwiyyih*.⁸ It is distinguished by its rapid rhythm, the fastest of all types of *ḥidā*. Its refrain, *yā ḥalālī yā māli*, or its variations, are sung twice by the *saḥjih* dancers with the fastest tempo of all types of *ḥidā* and is repeated after each *muzdawij* in order to match the rhythm and length of the improvised *muzdawijāt*. The following example by °Awnī Sbeit⁹ and °Afif Nāṣir¹⁰ illustrates this subgenre:

- | | | |
|------|-----------|---|
| i. | °Awnī: | °Assaḥjih il-baddāwiyyih
rjālī ruddū °alainā |
| ii. | °Awnī: | Rjālī ruddū °alainā
rjālī ruddū °alainā |
| | The Ṣaff: | Aw yā ḥalālī yā māli
issabi° ṣād il-ghazālih ¹¹ |
| iii. | °Afif: | Bihalfarḥah farḥānīn
farḥit °izz il-aqrabīn |
| | The Ṣaff: | Aw yā ḥalālī yā māli
issabi° ṣād il-ghazālih |
| iv. | °Afif: | W°ash-shamāl w°alyamīn
ḥayyī rjāl il-kamālī |
| | The Ṣaff: | Aw yā ḥalālī yā māli
issabi° ṣād il-ghazālih |

(Ref. °Awnī Sbeit and °Afif Nāṣir, Cas. 28, B-381-435).

- | | | |
|-----|----------|---|
| i. | °Awnī: | Let us join the bedouin folk dance;
My men, (the dancers) answer us. |
| ii. | °Awnī: | My men, answer us;
My men, answer us. |
| | Dancers: | O how fortunate I am;
The lion has captured the female gazelle. |

⁸ *Is-saḥjih il-baddāwiyyih* was named so possibly because it originated among the Bedouins of Palestine.

⁹ °Awnī Sbeit, born in Iqrith, the Galilee, in 1930. He became a professional poet-singer in 1950. °Awnī is the only Palestinian poet-singer who has published a collection of colloquial poems (see °A.Sbeit 1976).

¹⁰ °Afif Nāṣir, born in Kufr Smai°, the Galilee, in 1941. He became a professional poet-singer around 1970.

¹¹ The audience here sings a different refrain, *yā ḥalālī yā māli issabi° ṣād il-ghazālih* (“Oh how fortunate I am! The lion [groom] has captured the female gazelle [bride]”).

- iii. °Afif: We are happy in this wedding,
The wedding of the best relatives.
- Dancers: O how... etc.
- iv. °Afif: To the left and right sides, I greet
the men of perfection.
- Dancers: O how... etc.

°Awnī rhymed the two lines of *muzdawij* “i” AB, and *muzdawij* “ii” BB. °Afif did not follow the rhyme scheme of °Awnī, but instead rhymed *muzdawij* “iii” and “iv” CC, CE. It should be noted that the “E” rhyme matched the rhyme of the refrain. Afterwards, both poet-singers extemporized pairs of *muzdawijāt* that have a fixed “E” rhyme in their fourth line throughout the entire poem.

2. *Ḥidā Mrabba*^c, i.e., *ḥidā* of four lines.

The *ḥidā mrabba*^c is a rhythmic and rapid type. Its form entails the improvisation of four lines sung continuously by one poet, with a fast tempo in comparison to that of the regular *ḥidā muzdawij* (II.B.1). Each *mrabba*^c is followed by the *saḥjih*, the rhythmical clapping, and the refrain, *al yā ḥalālī yā māli*, which is sung by the dancers only once after each *mrabba*^c. The poet-singers improvise several types of *ḥidā mrabba*^c which share most of the common poetic features of the basic *mrabba*^c but differ slightly in one aspect or another.

The following is a brief excerpt from a long debate in *ḥidā mrabba*^c between °Awnī Sbeit and °Afif Nāṣir concerning “imprisonment and freedom.” This type is the most advanced form of *ḥidā*, in which the poet-singers debate highly intellectual subjects requiring a great deal of argumentativeness. It is known in the colloquial Arabic by the name *mḥāwarah* (lit. *Hiwār*, i.e., debate).¹²

Mrabba^c I

- °Afif:
- i. °Aaqwālak balabbīk
- ii. Wibjāwib °ama°ānīk

¹² Such a debate was famous among Arab poets of literary Arabic, e.g., at the court of Sayf al-Dawlah al-Ḥamdānī in Aleppo. Among the poets who participated in such a debate were al-Mutanabbī and Ibn Khālawayh. The debate is known in classical Arabic by the name *munāẓarah*; the plural is *munāẓarāt* (see al-Fākhūrī n.d.:602). The debate with *mrabba*^c is the climax of the evening for the groom’s part and is the most elaborate type of *ḥidā*. See the complete description of the debate’s procedure in Ḍ. Sbeit 1982:221-24.

- iii. Ḥurriyyih ānā ba[°]tīk
 iv. Wbissijin iḥnā rāḍīn
 The Ṣaff: Yā ḥalālī... etc.

Mrabba^c II

- [°]Awnī:
 i. Yallī bissijin ṭam[°]ān
 ii. Nādī tati[°]-mal sajjān
 iii. [°]Asijnak a[°]tī burhān
 iv. Ykūn awḍaḥ barāhīn
 The Ṣaff: Yā ḥalālī... etc.

Mrabba^c III

- [°]Afīf:
 i. Khallī l-qawl ibistifhām
 ii. Wkhūdh w-a[°]tī bilkalām
 iii. Lawlā ssijin mā bitnām [E.]
 iv. [°]Yūnak min is-sarrāqīn.
 The Ṣaff: Yā ḥalālī... etc.

Mrabba^c IV

- [°]Awnī:
 i. Sijnak aswad kazzālām
 ii. Kulluh aḥzān w-ālām
 iii. Lawlā l-ḥurriyyih il-ānām [E.]
 iv. Mā shāfat ḥāyāt illīn
 The Ṣaff: Yā ḥalālī.. etc.

(Ref. [°]Awnī Sbait and [°]Afīf Nāṣir, Cas. 24, A-64-298.)

Mrabba^c I

- [°]Afīf:
 i. I will obey your request
 ii. I will comply to your thoughts
 iii. I will give you “freedom”
 iv. And I am satisfied with “prison.”
 Dancers: O how... etc.

Mrabba^c II

- [°]Awnī:
 i. O he who has greed for prison
 ii. Call out loud and make a prison
 iii. Give a very clear proof
 iv. Concerning [the importance of] your prison.
 Dancers: O how fortunate I am!

Mrabba^c III

- °Afīf:
- i. Keep on questioning
 - ii. And take and give in your speech
 - iii. Without prison your eyes
 - iv. Could not sleep because of thieves.
- Dancers: O how... etc.

Mrabba^c IV

- °Awnī:
- i. Your prison is black like darkness
 - ii. It is sadness and pain
 - iii. People without freedom
 - iv. Cannot see the life of gentleness.
- Dancers: O how... etc.

Mrabba^c I by °Afīf rhymes AAAB, *Mrabba^c II* by °Awnī CCCB, *Mrabba^c III* DDDDB, and *Mrabba^c IV* EEEB. The B rhyme is strictly followed by each poet-singer throughout the improvisation in order to keep a fluent, fixed pattern, but the set of rhymes of the preceding three lines is always subject to change.

3. *Ḥidā Mthamman*, i.e., *ḥidā* of eight lines.

This form of *ḥidā* is based on the improvisation of eight lines sung continuously by one poet-singer, and has a faster tempo than that of the *mrabba^c*. Each *mthamman* is followed by the *saḥjih*, the rhythmical clapping and the refrain *yā ḥalālī yā māli*, sung only once after each *mthamman*. *Ḥidā mthamman* is usually exchanged by two poet-singers, each improvising eight lines continuously without any repetition. The following example by the poet-singer Ḥannā Sbait¹³ illustrates the regular type of *ḥidā mthamman*:

- Öf
- i. Binghannī bhal-ḥafli shshi^cr
 - ii. ḥattā nqaddim wājibnā
 - iii. Badl il-jum^cah nghannī shahr
 - iv. Ta-ni^cjib jā^cmā^c itnā
 - v. Nfayyiḍ yānābī^c ishshi^cr
 - vi. Idhā ḥaflih ti^cjibnā
 - vii. Bḥibb ishshi^cr wfawq ilmuhr
 - viii. Bkhayyil wibnādi l-fursān
- The Ṣaff: Yā ḥalālī yā māli

(Ref. Ḥannā Sbait, Cas. 7, B-303-367)

¹³ Ḥannā Sbait was born in Iqrith, the Galilee, in 1921. He became a professional poet-singer in 1940.

	Ōf
i.	We sing poetry in this wedding
ii.	In order to do our duty (i.e., in respect for the host)
iii.	Instead of one week, we are ready to sing for one month
iv.	In order to delight our folks
v.	We overflow the springs of poetry
vi.	If we like the celebration
vii.	I like poetry, and on horseback
viii.	I gallop and call the knights.
Dancers:	O how fortunate I am!

Ḥannā rhymed his *mthamman* ABABABAC. This is the common rhyme scheme of the regular *mthamman*. The C rhyme is fixed throughout the entire improvisation.

C. The Subjects of *Ḥidā*

In determining the main subjects of the *ḥidā* of all types in my collection, each *muzdawij*, *mrabba*^c or *mthamman* was classified according to its main and not according to the secondary subjects. The following are the major subjects: a) praise (the most dominant subject in all *ḥidā*) of the host, the bride and groom, their families, the guests or their villages; b) zeal and self-praise; c) description of the occasion; d) friendly debates concerning social, educational, and intellectual subjects; e) political criticism; f) humanistic themes; and g) love.

D. The Context of *Ḥidā*

The *ḥidā* in my collection was recorded, in the main, on the evenings of weddings or on occasions when the groom's *saḥjih* took place outdoors. The *saḥjih* is the main event of the groom's evening party. *Ḥidā* can also be sung on other festive social occasions, such as the celebration of the christening or circumcision of a child.

II. *Qarrādī*¹⁴

¹⁴ The term *qarrādī* is possibly derived from the root stem *rqd*, which is found in most Semitic languages. The Arabic verb *raqada* means to lie down or to dance (Khalīl 1974:16-17). The verbs *rakad* and *rkad* in Aramaic, *rakadu* in Akkadian, and *raqaṣa* in Arabic all mean to dance to a rhythmical melody or song (see Even-Shoshan 1974, VI:2565, Dalman 1967:408, al-Jurr 1973:597, and Wehr 1976:354). Perhaps due to a metathesis of the two first radicals of the root stem *rqd*, the term *qarrādī* was used instead of *raqadī* colloquially to mean a poem or song which prompts dancing, or a rhythmical and dancing poem. For further details see al-Nour 1957:91-101; al-Ra'ūf 1976:13; °Abbūd 1968:70; Jargy 1970:13, 40-41, 50, and 85; Shiloah 1975:280; Sirḥān 1977:III, 13; Sirḥān

A. The Characteristic Features of *Qarrādī*

Qarrādī is a genre based on the improvisation and singing of *muzdawijāt* (pairs of lines), *mrabba^cāt* (four lines) or *mthammanāt* (eight lines). Each *qarrādiyyih* (one improvisation of *qarrādī*) has a different *maṭla^c* (opening section) of which one or two lines are repeated once or twice by the audience as a refrain. Most of the *maṭālī^c* (pl. of *maṭla^c*) are created by the poet-singers, but it is also customary for a poet-singer to borrow a popular *maṭla^c* from another poet-singer and to improvise lines that fit with its rhyme, rhythm, and melody. *Qarrādī* can be sung solo or alternately by two or more poet-singers.

The regular *qarrādī muzdawij* uses an AB, CB, DB, etc., rhyme scheme; the *qarrādī mrabba^c* usually rhymes ABAB, CCCB, etc., and the *qarrādī mthamman* follows an ABAB, in its *maṭla^c*, then a CDCDCDCD scheme. The *qarrādī* poems utilize three different lengths: pairs of seven and seven syllables each, pairs of seven and eight syllables of varying length, and pairs of seven and four syllables in each line.¹⁵ Most *qarrādī* improvisations do not deal with a single subject, yet some poems in my collection do deal with only one topic.

The majority of *qarrādī* improvisations are rhythmical and suitable for popular folk dances. Therefore, they are usually accompanied by a *durbakkīh* (Arabic drum), *daff* (tambourine), handclaps, and the repetition of rhythmic refrains by the audience. The use of the *ūd* (lute) and violin, or other folk instruments such as the *mijwiz* (double reed) or the *shubbābih* (flute), is optional. The instruments are played by professional or amateur musicians, and only rarely by the poet-singers themselves. *Qarrādī* songs vary in rhythm and melody; some melodies are commonly used by all while others are specific to certain poet-singers. In my collection all *qarrādī* songs except one, have a fast tempo and are sung in duple meter following the musical *maqām* of *sīgāh*.

1979:106; and Wuhaybah 1952.

¹⁵ It is worth noting that the *qarrādī muzdawij* resembles the *ḥidā muzdawij* in its being based on couplets and in having a similar rhyme scheme. The *qarrādī mrabba^c* is also similar to the *ḥidā mrabba^c* in number of lines and rhyme scheme; and the *qarrādī mthamman* has the same number of lines as the *ḥidā mthamman* and employs the same rhyme scheme. However, other poetic features and especially the musical melodies of the two genres are completely different. Consequently, it is safe to say that both genres exert some poetic influence on each other. Still other *qarrādī* and *ḥidā* subgenres excluded from this paper do not share the same poetic features. Furthermore, both genres differ completely in the refrains they employ, the folk dances which accompany each of them, and, above all, in melody. It is also worth mentioning that the *qarrādī* is usually improvised-sung and accompanied mainly by folk music instrument, while the *ḥidā* is not.

B. The Poetic Forms of *Qarrādī*1. *Qarrādī Muzdawij*

Qarrādī improvisations of this category are based on the extemporization of a vocal introduction such as an *Ūf* followed by a *maṭlaʿ* of two short lines of seven and four syllables, or two long lines of seven syllables each. Each *maṭlaʿ* is sung by the audience as a refrain. If the *maṭlaʿ* is unfamiliar to the audience, the poet sings it along with them. Thereafter, the poet-singer improvises *muzdawijāt* or *mrabbaʿāt* which are followed by the audience's refrains. In the following quotation Shāhīn Sbeit¹⁶ and ʿAfīf Nāṣir relied on the improvisation of *muzdawijāt*, each of which expresses a separate notion. The refrain is repeated only once by the audience.

- | | | |
|------|----------|--|
| i. | Shāhīn: | ʿArīsainā hal-asmar |
| ii. | | Yābū Zaid il-Hilālī |
| | Audience | ʿArīsainā hal-asmar
Yābū Zaid il-Hilālī |
| iii. | Shāhīn: | Zādat minnuh mḥabbitnā |
| iv. | | W-firḥit kull il-āhālī |
| | Audience | ʿArīsainā... etc. |
| v. | ʿAfīf: | Hādhi l-farḥah farḥitnā |
| vi. | | Faraḥ laghlā l-āhālī |
| | Audience | ʿArīsainā... etc. |

(Ref. Shāhīn Sbeit and ʿAfīf Nāṣir, Cas. 12, A-270)

Maṭlaʿ by Shāhīn:

- | | |
|-----|--|
| i. | Our groom is this “brown” ¹⁷ person |
| ii. | You are brave like the warrior Abū Zayd al-Hilālī (see Lane 1973:391). |

Refrain by the audience:

As in i. above

¹⁶ Shāhīn Sbeit, born in Iqrith in 1937, became a professional poet-singer in 1957; he quit the profession in 1968.

¹⁷ A sign of beauty among Arabs.

- iii. Shāhīn: Because of him our love has increased
 iv. And all the relatives are happy.
- Audience: Our groom... etc.
- v. °Afīf: This wedding is our wedding
 vi. The wedding of the dearest of relatives.
- Audience: Our groom... etc.

The foregoing *qarrādī muzdawij* is sung with a fast duple meter. The *maqām* is *sīgāh* adhering to *rast* towards its end. Shāhīn rhymed his *muzdawijāt* ABCB, and °Afīf continued the same scheme and rhymed his *muzdawijāt* CB, etc. The B rhyme is maintained throughout the entire improvisation.

2. *Qarrādī Mrabba°*

Poems of this category are based on *mrabba°āt*. Even the *maṭla°* itself is a *mrabba°*. Its third and fourth lines are repeated only twice by the audience as a refrain. Each pair of lines consist of two unequal lines: the first line of each *mrabba°* has seven syllables and the second line has four syllables, for a total of eleven syllables altogether. The following lines which are improvised by the poet-singer Muḥammad al-Rīnāwī¹⁸ illustrate this type:

maṭla° mrabba°:

- i. Bism il-waṭan binghannī
 ii. W-nilqī l-majhūd
 iii. Wiblādī mithl il-jannah
 iv. Malyānih w-rūd

Audience, refrain:

Wiblādī mithl il-jannah
 Malyānih wrūd
 Wiblādī mithl il-jannah
 Malyānih w-rūd

Maṭla° by al-Rināwī:

- i. We sing in the name of the homeland
 ii. And we participate in the effort
 iii. And my country is like a garden
 iv. Full with roses

¹⁸ Muḥammad al-Rīnāwī, born at al-Rainih in 1918. He became a professional poet-singer in 1940.

Audience:

And my country... etc.

Full... etc.

And my country... etc.

Full... etc.

The above mentioned *qarrādī mrabba^c* is sung in a slow duple meter following the *maqām* of *sīgāh*, and it is accompanied by handclapping but not music or dances. The first *mrabba^c* rhymes ABAB and the second (not quoted here) CCCB.

3. *Qarrādī Mthamman*

This type of *qarrādī* is based on the improvisation of a *maṭla^c* of *qarrādī mrabba^c* in which the last two lines form the refrain. Afterwards, the poet-singers improvise *qarrādī mthamman*. Each pair of lines is divided into two unequal parts, the first of which has seven, and the second four syllables. The following quotation from Jihād Sbeit¹⁹ and Ḥannā Sbeit represents this type:

Jihād opens with a *maṭla^c*:

mrabba^c:

- | | |
|------|------------------------------|
| i. | Talfantillik yā samrā [E.] |
| ii. | °Annumrah th-nain |
| iii. | Bain il-baiḍah wissamrā [E.] |
| iv. | Ḍā°ū r-raqmāin |

Refrain by the audience:

Bain ilbaiḍah wissamrā
Ḍā°ū r-raqmāin
Bain ilbaiḍah wissamrā
Ḍā°ū r-raqmāin

Ḥannā responds with a *qarrādī mrabba^c*:

- | | |
|------|------------------------------|
| i. | Bain il-baiḍah wissamrā [E.] |
| ii. | T-shi° il-qamrā |
| iii. | Maḥlā layālī l-khamrah [E.] |
| iv. | Bain al-ahlain |

Refrain by the audience:

Bain... etc.
Ḍā°ū... etc.
Bain... etc.

¹⁹ Jihād Sbeit, born in Iqrith in 1939, became a professional poet-singer in 1965.

Ḍā'ū... etc.

Jihād resumes with a *qarrādī mthamman*:

- | | |
|-------|---------------------------------|
| i. | W-khāyif min ba'ḍ il-malqā [E.] |
| ii. | Yubdū l-hijrān |
| iii. | Waq'ud qāsī bilfurqah [E.] |
| iv. | Lāḍā n-nīrān |
| v. | Muhjit qalbī miḥtirqah [E.] |
| vi. | Frāq il-khillān |
| vii. | Lākin marrah bissirqah [E.] |
| viii. | Bawfi laddain |

Refrain by the audience:

Bain... etc.
Ḍā'ū... etc.
Bain... etc.
Ḍā'ū... etc.

(Ref. Jihād Sbeit and Ḥannā Sbeit, Cas. XI, B-264-352)

Maṭla' by Jihād:

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| i. - ii. | I phoned you, O brown girl, I dialed
number two (i.e., the wrong girl) |
| iii - iv. | But I got the two numbers of the
white girl and the brown girl mixed up |

Refrain by the audience:

But I got the two numbers... etc.
But I got the two numbers... etc.

Qarrādī mrabba' by Ḥannā:

- | | |
|-----------|---|
| i - ii. | Between the white girl and brown girl the moon shines |
| iii - iv. | How marvelous are the nights in which we drink
wine amongst our relatives. |

Refrain by the audience:

But I got... etc.
But I got... etc.

Qarrādī mthamman by Jihād:

- | | |
|-----------|---|
| i - ii. | I am afraid that after the reunion, another separation
of the beloved will occur |
| iii - iv. | And I sit, suffering the blaze of the fire of separation |

- v. - vi. The core of my heart is burning because of the beloved's
separation
- vii - viii. However, one time, even if it is on the sly, I will pay my debt
(to the beloved).

Refrain by the audience:

But I got... etc.
But I got... etc.

Jihād and Ḥannā go on alternating *qarrādī mthamman* concerning the same subject. The poem is rhythmic, but it is sung in a medium tempo, employing the *maqām* of *sīgāh*. The *maṭlaʿ* of Jihād rhymes ABAB, the *mrabbaʿ* of Ḥannā AAAB and the *mthamman* of Jihād CDCDCDCB.

C. The Subjects of *Qarrādī*

The immense number of 1400 lines of *qarrādī* in my collection makes it difficult to classify them in terms of their subject matter. The topical unity in many *qarrādī* improvisations diminishes due to the fact that each improvisation combines several subjects. Still, some *qarrādī* improvisations treat a single explicit theme. The most common topics of the *qarrādī* are: a) a description of the occasion, the poet-singer's feelings, the audience's enthusiasm, the parents' sentiment, the brothers' and sisters' affection, and the relatives' and guests' response; b) praise of and congratulations to the groom, his parents, relatives, and others; c) nationalistic themes, which most often include praise and description of the homeland and its charming nature; d) the welcoming of a returning emigrant or a farewell to an emigrant; e) the thoughts of the poet-singer on Christmas evening; f) a humorous debate between a professional poet-singer and an amateur; g) advice from a father to his son; and h) love themes.

D. The Context of *Qarrādī*

The *qarrādī* poems in my collection are sung only while sitting indoors. They are improvised at weddings, especially during *zaffat il-ʿarīs* (the shaving of the groom, a highly celebrated event by the Palestinians), or while eating and drinking at the time of the wedding. They were also performed at a *khuṭbih* (engagement party), at private and family parties, at a *mahrajān* (festival), at a private high school party, and at a *nadwat*

*zajal*²⁰ (a singing session at which poet-singers improvise poetry in colloquial Arabic and debate concerning social matters). *Qarrādī* can also be sung at other happy social occasions.



Groom's *Zaffah* in the Palestinian Arab village of Fassūtah, October 1980.
(photo courtesy of Bassām Sbait and Nazeeh °Āṣī)

III. The Performance of the Improvised-Sung Poetry

The poet-singers are invited to sing in teams of two or possibly three or four, primarily at weddings at which they are the main entertainers. Every performance of improvised-sung poetry may last from a few minutes to a few hours, depending on the occasion and the time allowed to the poet-singers. On a wedding eve two poet-singers or more could alternate colloquial poetry for an average of four hours straight without a break. As the poets sing they switch rapidly from one genre or subgenre to another, and from one melody to another without any hesitation, rarely missing a rhyme or getting confused.

When the *ḥidā* poems are sung outdoors, normally the poet-singer stands at the end of the *ṣaff saḥjih* so that he can see his colleague, the *saḥjih* dancers, and the other guests attending the occasion. He sings while holding a microphone in one hand as he places his other hand on his cheek

²⁰ *Madwat az-zajal* is most often a local radio program or television show in which two or more poets sing various types of *zajal* including *qarrādī* while debating about a variety of social subjects. However, it is also customary to hold such a *nadwah* in a village or city club.

and the tip of his middle finger in his ear. His poems are aired through a loudspeaker. When the poet-singer sings *qarrādī* indoors, he may perform while sitting down on his chair at the table or he may stand so that the audience can easily see him. He sings facing them with or without a microphone, depending on availability. Whether singing outdoors or indoors the poet-singer may change his physical position from time to time depending on the length of the improvisation and the way in which the folk dancers and the audiences are situated. The folk dancers are always an integral part of the performances. They repeat applicable refrains and dance accordingly. There is a mutual interaction and a responsorial contrast between the poet-singers' poetry-melodies and gestures, and the dancers' dances and singing of refrains.

Even the hundreds of audience members attending the celebration are spiritually uplifted and become involved in the performance due to the interesting issues presented by the poet-singers, especially the intellectual debates, and due to the precise coordination between the poetry, the melodies, the refrains, and the dances. Consequently the performances are vivid and therefore highly enjoyable.

IV. The Poet-Singers: Training and Transmission of Oral Poetry

My interviews with fourteen Palestinian poet-singers, conducted in the summer of 1979, indicate that their practical training is amazingly similar. Initially, each of them learns the melodies first and improvises alone at home, then later practices with an older professional poet-singer in his own village. Finally, each performs in other villages.

While the poetic forms of each genre and sub-genre of the improvised-sung poetry which they perform are more or less fixed, the poet-singers do not have a fixed written or oral text which they always repeat, so every new improvisation is different from the previous ones. This is due to the use of new rhymes or rhyme schemes, words, images, debates, and different subjects. Thus each repertoire differs, as do the gestures of the poet-singers and the audiences' refrains and folk dances which accompany the improvisations. However, my investigation suggests that certain new creations are simply a rearrangement of the words, the images, or the old ideas.

Palestinian improvised-poetry also employs established melodies stemming from the older generation of poet-singers and known to all current ones. These melodies are inherited and transmitted orally from one generation of poet-singers to another. Nobody knows when and where these melodies originated. All poet-singers without exception have told me that they learn the melodies by *samā'* (listening) to older performers at

various social occasions in and outside their villages. They first learn the melodies of all genres and practice them alone at home, testing their voices through these established melodies. After mastering the melodies they focus their attention on lyrics. Each poet-singer follows these basic melodies but adds his own musical variations and embellishments.

The poet-singer may discover his talent and love for improvised-sung poetry in a number of ways: either through reciting literary poetry in school, writing some lines of poetry alone, orally improvising a few lines, or learning some lines by famous poets. Then the poet-singer passes a psychological stage in which he tests his basic ability to improvise and his courage to do so in public. Since the melodies are already known to him, he now tries to improvise words which agree with the melody. He also concentrates on rhymes and number of syllables and tries to imitate the professional poet-singers whom he has already heard. At this point the poet-singer is already capable of applying his poetic forms to the pre-established melodies, thus creating actual improvised-sung poetry. If he decides that he has the ability to improvise some lines of each genre alone at home, he then sings in family circles where he is usually encouraged. He gradually gains some experience and courage, and his fear of the public diminishes. At a later stage he sings to friends and other people in the village, especially in the absence of other, more professional poet-singers whose presence might embarrass the amateur.

After a period of self-training lasting a few years, the novice poet-singer gains more self-assurance and experience and is now ready to challenge a professional poet-singer. At the first possible opportunity a host, a friend, or a family member introduces the novice to a seasoned professional poet-singer who will invite him to sing with him at a wedding party. If he passes this first test, and most new poet-singers do, he gradually becomes recognized as a professional who will be invited to sing for payment either in his own village or somewhere else in the region. The audience's encouragement is one of the keys to the success of a beginning poet-singer.

The time for *tadrīb* (self-training) and for the *mumārasah* (apprenticeship) with other poet-singers lasts from a minimum of two years to a maximum of ten years. Most of the poet-singers told me that they discovered their talent to improvise at an early age, sometime between ten and sixteen. However, they were unlikely to turn professional and to be recognized as such at this early age, so they practiced first for a long period, buying time and acquiring knowledge in order that they could stand and sing for a few hours with a professional poet-singer. Two poet-singers told me that they ran away from the first wedding at which they improvised during the first break because they were afraid to continue improvising with the professional. Some new performers prepared a poem

beforehand and recited it during their first appearance. All new poet-singers admit, however, that the older ones were very sympathetic and supportive. Finally, when the poet-singer knows how to isolate himself from the audience around him and concentrate fully on his improvisation, and knows how to apply the poetic forms to the existing melodies, he can improvise without any difficulty in public. The more he practices, the more his job becomes a routine. The talent, experience, and motivation of the individual poet-singer are the keys that guarantee him success.

The older poet-singers said that they do not teach the younger ones, but rather help them to practice and accompany them on various occasions. The younger poet-singers also emphasized the importance of being attached to an older professional—without which relationship it would take them much longer to be recognized as mature and independent. Most older performers are interested in keeping this tradition alive, so they welcome any new poet-singer and help him to practice and establish himself as a professional.

Some also said that they inherited the art of improvisation from a family member or a relative who was a folk poet, a folk singer, or a folk musician. The presence of a performing relative gave them direct access to the art and accelerated the process of learning to improvise and sing oral poetry. As the poet-singers themselves say, there are no books, schools, or instructors to teach this art of oral poetry; since it has never been written down, it is orally transmitted.

Conclusion

To recapitulate, the contemporary Palestinian poet-singers produce a unique oral colloquial poetry entailing very precise poetic features which follow very colorful melodies. They improvise-sing seven different complex genres, two of which are the *ḥidā* and the *qarrādī*. The *ḥidā* is a major genre employed outdoors during the *saḥjīh* which takes place during the evening party for the groom, and is based on at least four different rigid poetic forms differing in their rhyme schemes and musical melodies. The *qarrādī* is also a major popular genre employed indoors, and is accompanied by folk dances and forms part of the groom's or the bride's parties. It also employs at least four different poetic forms which have varying rhyme schemes and melodies. While the refrains of the *ḥidā* are almost fixed, the *maṭālī*^c (opening verses - refrains) of the *qarrādī* poems are not. Some poetic similarities exist between the *ḥidā* and the *qarrādī*, but their context and function, and above all their melodies, are entirely different.

The poet-singers either improvise solo or alternate their poetry.

They are engaged in entertaining the many guests attending the weddings and other social occasions. They produce a unique art form and debate about intellectual topics, thus lifting the spirit of their audience. The audience admires their extraordinary poetic and musical talents.

In order for the poet-singers to become professional and be recognized by other established poet-singers and by the public, they must go through a long period of training and practice which may take several years. They master the melodies first by *samā'* (listening); then they work hard on their lyrics, applying them to the pre-composed established melodies, and polish up the rhyming technique, which is a crucial feature of this improvised poetry. After they test themselves locally in their village by challenging a seasoned poet-singer, they gradually become recognized by older professional poets and by the people and finally achieve their ultimate goal of becoming established performers.

The older generation of poet-singers pass along this poetic tradition orally to the younger generation, who also work sincerely to pass it on to contemporary poet-singers in order to preserve this unique form of art, an important aspect of the Palestinian culture.

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