

“O Bride Light of My Eyes”: Bridal Songs of Arab Women in the Galilee

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Introduction

Oral poetry is rapidly becoming a new field of interest for many scholars. Of particular interest are the problems of the whole tradition of oral transmission and the influence of oral tradition on written tradition. Though oral poetry was an acceptable form of literature in the past, it has been only recently recognized by scholars as a source for study of tradition in literature. Recognition came when the assumption that oral literature was produced largely by non-literate people was proven incorrect when applied to certain regions.

Among the Nabati in Arabia, for example, there are both literate and non-literate poets of oral tradition (Sowayan 1985). The same is true of the poets in Ladino, and among the women of the Yemenite communities of Israel (Armistead and Silverman 1982). The world today is a place where non-literate and literate peoples co-exist, and there are some indications that this co-existence inevitably leads to interaction between oral and written poetry. At the same time, the world is changing rapidly. Developing countries are increasingly becoming industrialized, and thus oral tradition is disappearing. Oral poetry is becoming scarce as a result of these changes, and traditional poets, who were once essential to the promulgation of oral literature, are depicted as primitive. Hence, folk literature, folk songs, and oral poetry are considered to be part of a lower stratum of society by many literary critics. However, if one delves into the history of Arabic poetry it becomes clear that it is not a product of inferior circles.¹ In early times the composition of oral poetry was a normative practice in most spheres of Arab culture and not necessarily linked to the aristocracy. Nor was poetry exclusively the domain of small circles who kept to themselves, but rather was regarded as a common form of expression by most of society. It is

¹ See, e.g., the special issue of *Oral Tradition* on “Arabic Oral Traditions” (4, i-ii, [1989]).

likely that the majority of individuals knew innumerable verses of poetry by heart.

The scholar who pursues the study of oral tradition first must ask the meaning of the term *oral*. Albert Lord suggests that oral poetry is a people's medium: "poetry composed in oral performance by people who can not read or write... as literacy spreads throughout the world at a now rapid pace, oral poetry is destined in time to disappear" (1965:591). Indeed, it is difficult to define the medium of oral poetry; however, it is generally accepted that the term designates poetry composed on location during actual performances. Some scholars give oral poetry an even broader definition by extending its meaning into the medium of epic narrative form.

This definition may be further developed by including the aspect of oral transmission. The mode of transmission is related to the mode of performance, one example of which has been described by Parry and Lord in their analysis of South Slavic epics. Although the possibility exists that the act of composition or the process will take place before the performance itself, in some traditions the singer may also choose to improvise or modify most of the prepared text prior to the actual performance. While oral transmission may be defined as the process of transmitting a song by word of mouth, it does not necessarily require that the exact text performed on location at one point will be performed in an identical manner in another place at another time. Indeed, this mutability is one of the artistic imperatives of oral poetry. Tradition allows for many versions of the same motif, while at the same time enriching the genre of oral poetry and helping to make it a universal medium. An example of two different versions of the same motif is found in a poem from Yemenite women in Israel and another from Arab women of the Galilee:

I do not want an old man
 Even if he shaves his beard
 And he cuts his mustache....
 I wish to have a young one
 To squeeze all the bones in me. (Caspi 1985:49)

I wish not an old man, I wish not
 His beard like a horse's tail
 I wish a young one
 His teeth like a file. (Caspi 1985:155)

Oral poetry is made more complex by virtue of the fact that the definition of the medium itself is unclear. We have suggested certain

characteristics: it is performed on location; it is passed on from one generation to the next via oral transmission; and improvisation is peculiar to its form. Yet we still have not fully defined what oral poetry is. It was in an effort to further understand the discipline and importance of the study of orality that we undertook field research in the Galilee. By collecting proverbs and bridal songs reflecting social phenomena of traditional and modern Arab culture, we could examine and discuss in detail the unique characteristics of oral literature, with specific focus on the ability of Arab women as singers to weave traditional with modern customs. This weaving allowed us to delve into the communicative qualities and contexts of oral literature exemplified in various festive events surrounding traditional, classic, and modern customs. In addition, it provided us with new and valuable insights about the nature of orality per se.

Aspects of Bridal Songs

From the day of marriage, a woman in Arab Galilee is in some ways considered the property of her husband; however, we must correct a misperception concerning this dimension of Arab society.² Generally speaking, Western society perceives Arab women as being bought by their husbands, an act that signals his ownership and control of her. This perception is highly superficial and is a result of certain studies conducted outside the field of women in Arab society. In addition, much of the information is misleading because it reflects nothing other than the viewpoint of the man in Arab society. Arab society is patriarchal and emphasizes the importance of the man in the family or tribe, but the common Western perception is a simplistic vulgarization of the true Arab family structure.

An Arab proverb states, “‘Al ’ibn mawlid, wal-job mardūd wal-’akh mafqūd” (“The son is born, the husband comes again, but the brother has no substitute”). This proverb adverts to the remaining traditional social structure of Arab society, emphasizing the dependence of the female upon her father during childhood, when she is under his protection. If the father dies, she is put under the protection of her first-born brother. In the case of his death, she is placed under the protection of another brother; and if she has no brothers, she is placed under the protection of her father’s brother

² The following section of this essay is revised from Caspi and Blessing 1991:16-37.

(*'Ammaha*). They are responsible for the woman, her honor, and her welfare; negotiations relating to her marriage can take place only with the man who is responsible for her. When the woman is married, her father (or the surrogate father) is no longer responsible and she is placed under the care of her husband. Should her husband die, she is then cared for by her sons. If she does not have any sons, or if they are still young, she returns to the protection of her father. (The same is also true if she divorces her husband.) Because of this rigid structure, most scholars tend to believe the woman passes from the protection of one man to another without any legal rights or recourse to legal action. Again, this is the perception of scholars who are familiar theoretically with what is depicted in the proverbs like the one above, but who have not lived within the Arab community or conducted field research in Arab society.

Proverbs like “*'al marah bala ḥaya kat'am bala milḥ*” (“a disgraced woman is like cooked food without salt”) or “*'al 'azāyah lil-marah min al-jannah*” (“the rod to the wife is from paradise”) circulate widely in the male society. These proverbs project men’s hidden fear of the power of women. From this perspective we propose that while men possess physical strength and consequently are responsible for family matters such as honor (particularly the honor of women), the spiritual and familial power of women is significant and becomes mystified under the physical strength of men. For example, the woman is in charge of everything that pertains to the household. She is glorified and praised for her talent in caring for and educating her children.

The following proverbs relate how a man is not required to ask his wife’s permission or consult with her in any regard: “*'an-niswan 'alahun nuṣ 'aql*” (“a woman has only half intelligence”) and “*'ily bism'a min'al-marah biḥuṭ qad thalātha*” (“he who listens to a woman’s advice pays three times more”). Once again the subliminal implication of these proverbs is the existence of a male society afraid of women, and because of this fear unable to relate to them in a positive and appreciative manner. Such proverbs, viewed by scholars from a theoretical standpoint and judged according to the values of the twentieth century, would fail to make manifest the underlying and paradoxical relationship between male physical strength/hidden fear and female spiritual strength/oppressive condition.

With relation to the tradition of bridal songs, it is important to note the manner in which men and women address one another in public and within the context of the family. The woman is required by societal values to respect her husband; thus, in public she calls him *ya-sidi* (“o, master”) or

ya-shaikh (“o, sheik”) or *ya-’ibn ‘ammi* (“o, my beloved cousin”).³ Sometimes she calls him by the name of her first-born son, *abu ‘Amar* (“the father of ‘Amar”). In public, the husband calls his wife *ya-marah* (“o, woman”) or *ya-masturta* (“the condemned one”) or *ya bint ‘an-nas* (“o, daughter of people”). Sometimes he even calls her *walid* (“unnamed woman”). When he refers to his wife outside of her presence, he adds to the expression the words *ba‘id minak*, meaning literally “far from you” and implying an apology on the part of the man for mentioning her name in conversation. At home the man may call her *’ukhti* (“my sister”), *bint ḥalal* (“a proper or distinguished woman”), *bint ‘ami* (“my beloved or my cousin on my father’s side”), or *ya shikka* (“a lady”). Sometimes he refers to her as the mother of his first-born, *’um ‘Amar* (“the mother of ‘Amar”). However, he does not call her the mother of ‘Amar in her presence; instead, he calls her *jarat baiti* (“the lady of the house”) or *’um ‘awladi* (“the mother of my children”). Such expressions denote the relationships between husband and wife and are used exclusively by them within the family, household, and public contexts.

Other proverbs affirming the importance of the role of the woman in keeping the family together include:

’Al joz wa’anah zawyah wal ‘ielah wa’anah ghaniyah,
’Al jiran wa’anah saḥiyah.

[With the husband I am strong, with the family I am rich, and with the neighbors I am generous.]

’An jai yashhad lil ‘arusa, ghair ’umha
wakhālatha wa’asharah min haratha.

[Look who came to testify in favor of the bride: her mother, her aunt (from her mother’s side), and ten more members of her family.]

This last proverb alludes to the unreliability of testimony. It also suggests that one who associates with dubious people may become like those people. Furthermore, the proverb demonstrates the deep regard Arab society holds for familial relationships. In fact, because family relationships are regarded with such respect, not everyone who testifies in favor of the bride is considered a worthy source. To determine the validity of testimony, evaluation and judgment must proceed with great care. Priority in the

³ This last expression refers to the custom of marrying one’s cousin from the father’s side.

marriage process is always given to the family of the father. To insure an ideal arrangement, a cousin, either the daughter of the uncle from the father's side of the family (*bint 'ammo*) or the son of the uncle from the father's side (*'ibn 'amah*) is always considered first. The following Arab proverb supports this type of marriage arrangement and regards it as a blessing: “’ibn al ‘amm biqimaha min ’al faras” (“the cousin takes her off, even from the back of a horse”). This expression lays stress upon the fact that the cousin may take the woman off the back of the horse she is riding on the way to her groom's house. The idea is that the cousin has an inherent right to marry the woman if he so chooses, and he may do so in light of his own self-interest, disregarding any intentions of others. Another proverb strengthens this notion: “’awal hubāl ’ili ya’atī bint ‘ammo lr-rijal” (“only a fool among fools allows a stranger to marry his cousin”).

Marriage between relations represents a solution to the dilemma of class dynamics. In this way, the character and standing of the family members are clear to all. However, some of the complications relating to the marriage of women to other family members are expressed in many popular sayings that identify family troubles. For instance, the phrase “al banat jalabat” states simply that “daughters are problems.” Most often, the complications involve land inheritance. According to Islamic law, a woman receives half of the man's property with the exception of estates, which are not usually permitted to transfer from one family to another and so are redeemed with money. Another way to prevent an unlawful transfer is to arrange marriage between relatives, so that all the properties and possessions remain in the extended family. Overall, marriage between relations is restricted by certain rules: for example, a man is not permitted to marry his father's mother, mother's mother, sister, father's sister, mother's sister, niece of either his brother or sister, a woman that has nursed from his mother's milk, or the daughter of his wife while the latter is still living.

In an effort to prevent future difficulties within a family and because certain families may wish to extend and reinforce the friendship between themselves, some families declare the engagement of their daughter at birth or during her childhood. One well-known proverb observes, “maqṭu’ surrītaha ‘ala ’ismo” (“the child's umbilical cord was cut from the mother in the name of the declared husband”). In some cases, the event of the cutting is blessed by reading certain verses from the Quran. These customs endure for reasons pertaining to inheritance and/or economics. Occasionally a family does not wish the marriage of their daughter to another family member. The rationale for this stance is that the family does

not want to give up a substantial dowry, especially if their daughter is beautiful and healthy. Another technique for preventing an unwanted marriage is for a male member in the groom's family to demand a large sum of money that the bride's family cannot afford. Consequently, a marriage between a young woman and an old man is likely to occur because he can afford the sum requested; often such marriage arrangements are contrary to the will of the woman. Some balladic poems, distinguished by their happy endings, have been composed about these cases. Here are a few examples from this tradition:

Bidish 'al shaib bidish
 Lahyato danbat qdish
 Bidi 'al shabb
 'Isnāno zai al mibrad.

[I do not wish an old man, I do not wish
 His beard, like a horse's tail
 I wish a young one
 His teeth like a file.]

Bidish 'al shaib wlaw 'aṭ'amni 'asal
 Bidi 'al shabb law 'aṭ'amni bazal.

[I wish not the old man, even though he feed me honey
 I wish a young one, even though he feed me onion.]

The dowry was and continues to be a significant problem in Arab society. It is generally viewed as a form of appreciation and a way to honor the family of the bride-to-be, but in most instances the dowry is considered a burden. This is especially true in rural society because money and presents must be offered not only to the bride, the bride's family, and various relatives, but also to the honorable people and the matchmaker who successfully arranged the marriage. If the young woman is from another village, the custom is that presents should be given to the young men of her home village as a token of gratitude for allowing her to leave and marry someone else. All of these expenses are in addition to those of the customary feast and the wedding celebration, and prevent many young men from marrying. In Egypt our informants told us that such expenses cause migration of many young men to the cities, where the traditional customs no longer play such an important role. Another consequence of the exorbitant costs associated with weddings is seen in the proclivity toward incestuous relationships.

In some cases a man may be interested in marriage—“ḥaṭ ‘an waḥidah” (“he laid his eyes on her”)—but the woman’s family is not interested in him and they do not grant him this right. To effectively prevent him from marrying her, they triple the sum of the dowry. A popular saying images this situation: “ḥal bidosh y‘ati binto biyaghli mhārha” (“he who does not want to give his daughter in marriage increases her dowry”).

Ironically, among women there are sayings that express their desire to leave the father’s house. Many proverbs uttered by women disclose their preference for the household of their present or future husband as opposed to that of the father. Most likely, this attitude stems from the greater social and personal power a woman possesses in the household of her husband. Her power may not be apparent in public, but at home she undoubtedly sets the tone. Her authority relates not only to her status as mother, educator, and central mediator, but also as a member of the work force. In addition, she achieves recognition through the laws that entitle her to half of her husband’s estate in the case of death.

Another celebrated women’s proverb depicting her preference is “nar jozi wala jannat ‘abuya.” The implication and meaning of this saying is that the fire of her husband is better than the paradise of her father. Generally, however, the power of Arab women is not mentioned, and scholars have mistakenly thought of women in Arab society as degraded and devoid of any political and economic influence. Nevertheless, we suggest that proverbs and sayings divulge the true underlying nature of male-female relationships in Arab society. Many of the proverbs reflect social phenomena that are an integral part of Arab life, such as the saying “khud ‘al‘azīlah walaw ‘ala l’ḥazīrah” (“take the noble one even if she is on the mat of hay”). This phrase implies that it is ethically preferable to marry a woman of noble character, regardless of whether she comes from a rich family or a poor one. Although the above-mentioned proverb is a common one, there in fact tends to be a wide gap between its intended impact and reality.

The situations described above show that it is not rare for a father to request a large dowry, thereby preventing the marriage of his daughter. One outcome of this action was the development of exchangeable marriages, that is, a practice by which any unmarried female (daughter, sister, or cousin) may be exchanged for the daughter, sister, or cousin of another family. Such marriages do not require a dowry but rather a *siaq*, which is understood to include anything relating to clothing, jewelry, gifts, and the wedding feast, these items and expenses being most often the

responsibility of the groom. In this kind of marriage everything proceeds on an equal basis, and guidelines are provided concerning which items and expenses are exchangeable. For example, a female virgin, and/or a healthy woman, and/or a beautiful woman may be exchanged for a woman with the same characteristics. If such an exchange is not possible, then the two families will discuss the differences between the women, agree upon a sum of money as compensation, and subsequently one family pays the other to complete the exchange. If the marriage subsequently becomes difficult, a woman may choose to run away to the home of her father. She is then referred to as *hardānah*, which literally means a runaway. The husband then proceeds to take back the woman for whom his wife was exchanged. The saying that expresses this situation is “Fish ḥada ’ali yikhbizlahu” (“there is nobody to bake bread for him”). The only way to bring back the *hardānah* is by taking the exchanged woman away from her home.

Once a woman reaches the age appropriate to marriage, and if she is free from marital obligations, her name is circulated among the members of the community. In early times the names of the eligible women would be mentioned beside the local well, then considered a common meeting place. Sometimes her name is circulated prior to her readiness as seen in the proverb: “Dawer libintak kabl ma t’dawer la’ibnak” (“look for your daughter before you look for your son”). If a woman is sought by a man from the same village, and if she is known to be eligible for marriage, the man’s family may ask some honorable members of the community to conduct the appropriate negotiations. If she is from a distant village, the family begins by gathering information about her. As previously noted, special attention is paid to lineage in Arab society, as is evident in the proverb, “In kan ’abuha thum wa’umaha baḥal minen ar-riḥa ’il maliḥa?” (“if her father is a clove of garlic and her mother an onion, how can she be of a pleasant fragrance?”).

It is then the responsibility of the honorable community members to go to the village of the eligible woman and ask her parents for her hand in marriage. In the past this ceremony was conducted in a particular fashion in accordance with certain customs. More recently, we found the ceremony to have undergone significant changes. Most of the traditional rituals are no longer maintained, and those that are preserved are maintained in the interest of the family that desires the match. The proper response to the honorable members of the community is “she is still young and has time before she needs to be considered for marriage.” This answer is an element of the negotiating process and is understood as a sign of respect to the woman and her family. In fact, those who approach the family requesting

the woman's hand in marriage do so not once but a few times, with the negotiations continuing until an agreement is reached concerning the dowry, jewelry, and expenses for the wedding feast. The bride-to-be has no say concerning these matters and no right to interfere in the negotiation process; in the past she was not even aware of the man chosen to be her husband. In urban society today the prospective couple tend to know each other well, and even in rural areas they are familiar with each other from the village or school.

In one village where we conducted our fieldwork we heard a description of the negotiating process related to us by elderly informants who remember the tradition well. They observed that young people today meet each other at social events like weddings, visitations, and school. Years ago they met at the local well, but modern plumbing eliminated the need for wells and the tradition lost its relevance. Initiation of the marriage process as a parental responsibility, however, is still the rule today. Some villages now allow limited visitations by a man to the family of an eligible woman, on the condition that such meetings are held in the presence of her relatives. When the parents of a young man decide to request the hand of an eligible woman in marriage they must speak with her parents. Usually the following manner of addressing the woman's parents is employed:

The man's parents: "We respectfully ask for the hand of your daughter to marry my son [his name], and hope that they will have good luck to live together."

The woman's father responds:

"Give me time to get some advice and think."

The woman's father does not give the final word immediately; if he did, it would be considered a sign of disrespect to his daughter and the entire family. The next step is the father's advising his wife and daughter of the marriage proposal. He then discusses it with his brothers. If he and his brothers agree to the proposal, then upon the return of the prospective groom's parents, approximately a week later, he says to them: "You have luck with her. It was decreed that we will be relatives." At the same meeting they agree upon a day to announce the engagement. On this day the man's parents and some guests come to the house of the woman and ask the woman's father to declare his agreement to the marriage before those assembled. Next, the groom chooses his best man and the bride selects her maid/matron of honor. Both the best man and the maid/matron of honor

hold jars in their hands while the *imam* (religious leader of the community) reads some verses from the Quran. In this way *'al 'aqid*, the betrothal, is confirmed and the engagement is made formal. Interestingly, the only element necessary to complete their marriage is a prayer recited at the wedding ceremony. After the engagement ceremony is finished, sweets are distributed and the party leaves for the groom's father's house. Some families employ another ceremony called *fathah*, "connection" or "binding," a technique used for the benefit of the bride and groom to get to know one another better. It is a special ceremony and common to the Druse community.

The amount of the dowry depends largely on the bride's parents. As previously noted, the dowry generally continues to be an issue of great importance in Arab society. This is not the case, however, in the Druse community, where the social and religious norm is that the father has no right to request the dowry himself. Traditionally and currently, the families agree jointly upon the details, including the sum of money to be given to the bride-to-be; she then uses this sum to purchase items she will need in the future. In addition, the families agree upon a sum that will be paid to her in case of divorce. In some cases, the family may request *zdaq raqbatha*, literally a "fee for the bride's neck." An agreement is reached whereby approximately one third of the woman's *mhar* or dowry goes to the father, brother, or other family members who serve as her guardians. In recent years the Druse and Christian custom of giving the entire dowry to the bride has significantly influenced the Muslim tradition. As a result, the custom of the father receiving a third of the dowry is no longer the norm. Once again, all negotiations are conducted by the parents of the bride and groom with the guests as witnesses.

In Druse society there is a difference between *'al 'aqid* and the *fathah*: the former is a promise of marriage, while the latter is read aloud, signaling "these two young people are bound temporarily (until their marriage) in order that they may get to know each other better and decide whether or not to marry." Once they decide to marry, the groom's parents call upon several honorable members of the community, along with their own relatives, to accompany them to the house of the bride, where the *'al 'aqid* is confirmed. Afterwards the entire group follows the bride to the groom's house. This ceremony does not include the wedding feast, which is held after the couple's home is ready and fully furnished. The period of betrothal usually lasts anywhere from six months to two years. In rural Arab society the marriage ceremony or *'aqid al-khitbah* is performed by the *imam*, the *sheikh* of the village, or the *qadi* (religious teacher) of a

nearby town. Some communities conduct *al-khitbah* on the same day as *'al-'aqid*. Others choose to perform the ceremony, *'al-'urs*, in a quiet setting in the presence of only a few guests. The reasoning behind this latter type of ceremony is avoidance of the evil eye (a symbol of bad luck).

The following is a description of a wedding ceremony:

The father, the brother, the uncles, the religious leader, and the guests who serve as witnesses approach the bride's room and ask her: "Do you wish to marry this man?" They expect her to answer, "Yes." (In some remote places where this ceremony is performed, they pinch the bride until she answers, "Yes.")

The second question asked the bride is: "Whom do you appoint to arrange the betrothal?" She answers, "You, my father" (or brother, or uncle). This part of the ceremony is repeated three times.

Next, they turn to the person who was appointed by the bride and ask him:

"Do you agree to marry this bride and groom?" He responds, "Yes," and this part of the ceremony is also repeated three times.

At this point they turn to the groom's family and ask the father:

"Do you wish your son to marry this woman?" He responds, "Yes, I do." This is repeated three times.

Now they turn to the witnesses and ask:

"Have you heard these words? Can you act as witnesses to what you have heard?" The witnesses respond, "Yes" three times.

Then the religious leader confirms these vows in writing by requesting the signatures of the bride, the groom, and the witnesses upon the marriage document, after which he reads certain verses from the Quran.

In some areas it is customary for the groom's father to present the bride's father with the *hudum* (clothing and other gifts). From this time forth, the bride is considered the groom's wife and he is permitted to take her to his home. This bond can be broken only by the husband in the presence of a religious leader/teacher or as a result of the death of one of the partners. After the marriage ceremony, if the man must travel far from the village the woman must stay in her father's home until he returns. If he does not return, she must remain at the father's house until witnesses can

confirm that her husband has died.

Before the wedding feast is held, families spend time gathering enough money to buy gifts, clothing, and jewelry for the bride's family, the honorable guests, and the negotiators. Careful attention is paid to the preparation of linens, blankets, featherbeds, rugs, and jewelry, which most often includes necklaces, bracelets, rings, and earrings. In some areas it is customary for the groom to bring the bride *hirğah* or *mandıl*, a veil or kerchief made from blue or colorful silk. It is used to cover the woman's head and extends down her back to the waist. To demonstrate his love for the bride, the groom ties the fringes of her veil, symbolizing their bond. The bride shows her love for him by embroidering a purse made of silk or velvet, which he uses to store his *kufiya* or head dress. Likewise, she ties the fringes of his head dress as a sign of their bond.

Traditionally, the bride's wedding dress is very colorful; in contrast, it is not unusual to see the modern bride in white. This is another sign of the changes occurring in contemporary Arab society. Characteristic of the Persian Gulf area is the bride clothed in green with embroidery from the neck of the dress to the waistline, and from the sleeves to the thighs. In some villages it is customary to wait for the groom while he goes to a large city to buy presents for the bride and her relatives. Upon his return they stand in front of him with a *zarifah*, a beautiful doll, dressed in women's clothing—a custom performed to confuse *shiṭan* or *iblis*, Satan, and to prevent him from harming the bride or groom's family. Here is the song the wedding party sings on this day:

'Arisana ya nas
min qal 'anu 'aşmar
'Aṭra min jibnah
Wa 'aḥla min sukkar.

[Our groom, o men
Who said he is black?
Fresher (he is) than cheese
Sweeter than sugar.]

'Arisana ya nas
min qal 'anu shan
'Aḥla min sukkar
wa 'aḥla min qutein.

[Our groom, o men
Who said he is ugly?
Sweeter (he is) than sugar

Sweeter (he is) than dry figs.]

When all preparations are complete and all arrangements concerning the dowry, gifts, house, clothing, and furniture are in order, the wedding feast is held, generally at the end of the summer season. In accordance with the lunar calendar, it is held at the time of the crescent moon; as the moon increases within its cycle it symbolizes the increase of good fortune, abundance, and plentifulness of the newly married couple. The wedding itself is also an opportunity for relatives from many places to come together and meet one another. Indeed, weddings are very important family events, and in spite of the tremendous expense involved it is considered an honor to attend one. The night before the ceremony, known as *lail al ḥinna*, it is customary for the family of the bride to stand beside the entrance to the house and welcome the guests. Women arrive wearing their finest clothing and adorned in their most expensive jewelry and carrying money in their hands in the form of bills or gold and silver coins. They spread the money over the bride's clothing and put coins in the henna dough to bless each other and be blessed by the wedding ceremony. On this day the bride is seated in what is called *al-higleh*, a room enclosed by curtains made from velvet or silk and adorned with gold. Usually the women arrive at the bride's house following the evening prayers. They are greeted with sweets, and the hosts spray the female guests with perfume—a sign that they are welcome. Spraying perfume is an old practice that still exists in Arab communities in Saudi Arabia, the Persian Gulf, Morocco, and other regions where the sense of this tradition still prevails in the midst of modernization. The common theme for songs on this evening is love:

ya nur, ya nur, ya nur 'inaya
raḥat ya nur tistaki 'alaya

[O light, light, light of my eyes
She went, o light, to complain about me]

Another song:

She took off my white (garment) and wore hers
Went to the *qadi* to complain about me
She took off my yellow (garment) and wore hers
Went up, the beautiful one, to adorn herself
She took off my blue (garment) and wore hers
And almost drowned in the sea of Tiberias.

A song peculiar to certain places (Caspi and Blessing 1991:29):

Do not go up the stairs, o henna box
 Do not believe the bachelors, they are from us
 Do not go up the stairs and ask about me
 The fire of love, uncle, is from paradise
 Do not go up the stairs, o coffee tray
 Do not believe the bachelor, he is lusty.

In some places it is customary to hire a special band to sing and orchestrate the evening. The character and reputation of the band depends upon the status of the family. If the family is respected and wealthy, the band tends to be well-known, reflecting the prestige of the family; if they are not wealthy, the women of the village conduct the evening. In some Arab villages the guests spread henna on the bride's hands and feet: in the Persian Gulf, Saudi Arabia, northern Yemen, and a few other areas, it is customary to paint delicate and beautiful designs on the back of the bride's hands and feet. Besides the placing of the coins in the henna dough, it is sometimes customary to adorn the henna with green leaves of *alias*, a fragrant plant found in the Persian Gulf. In the groom's house the same ceremony is performed; however, the henna is placed on his hands and feet only symbolically to represent his participation in the happiness of his bride. Today such customs have all but disappeared as a result of the influence of modernity, or they have been altered in some way as reported to us by an elderly person from the village of Ġasr al Zarqa near Zihkron Ya'akov in Israel, where some brides still dip their hands in the henna dough but cover them with plastic to keep from getting "dirty."

If the bride comes from far away, then she and her assembly leave the village the morning after the *lail al ħinna*. In the past it was natural for them to leave in the morning because they traveled by camel or donkey; today they leave by car. Before they depart it is customary to break an egg on the head of the animal or the top of the car, an act symbolic of sending away the *iblis* (Satan). In some places they slaughter chickens for the same purpose. After breaking the egg they walk through the streets of the village singing. If they come to a house of one who is in mourning, they stop singing temporarily as a sign of respect. Long ago, when they reached the village of the groom, it was customary for the bridal procession to request gifts for an uncle or another respected individual whose name did not appear on the "appropriate" list. Such requests were considered a sign of the procession's respectful disposition as well as an indication that the bride was not from a household of common people. At this moment the bride's

father would say:

'innana ma 'a'aṭanakish linas ḥa-yalla
'innana 'a'aṭinaki linas masium 'alaihūm

[We have not given you just to people (common folk or people of low social stratum). We have given you to honest and important people.]

The bride would respond:

ya ba wasa' bab betak liziarat wa-lilḥardāneh

[O father, open the gate of your home to visitors and to the runaway.]

The implication of the bride's response is that should she run away from her husband, her father will accept her into his household and protect her. The father would answer:

beti wasi' ubabu wasi'

[My house is open and its gates are wide.]

In some places the bride's uncle (the father's brother) approaches her and says, "Ride without fear as long as I wear my *kufiyah* and I have a long sword." After this dialogue some women offer advice concerning what to do and how to behave in a new place. Mostly, they emphasize that the bride should be obedient and respectful toward her mother-in-law.

The morning after the *lail al ḥinna*, the groom's parents go to the mosque and write down the marriage agreement known as *mulkah*, recorded in the presence of the *imam* and the bride's family. From this day forth, the woman is considered the man's lawfully wedded wife. This day is called *dukhlah*, meaning the entrance; the bride is entering another realm in her life. The first night of married life is called *lail al-dukhlah*, denoting the first night she enters her husband's house. In some villages, like Uman, it is customary to lead the bride from her father's house to the house of the groom while she carries the Quran on top of her head. When she enters the house, her feet are washed with perfume to symbolize steadiness in married life. One of the guests, usually the *sheikh* of the village, then reads verses from *Surat al-Nur (The Light)* in the Quran (Sura no. 24). If the bride comes from the same village as the groom, she is placed on the back of a horse driven by the groom; however, if she is a widow or divorcee, this ritual is not allowed. Due to the influence of modern technology, a car

substitutes today for a horse, and the bride rides on top of the car, which is adorned, and is driven around the village. In the past it was customary for the groom to step on her foot when she entered his house after the ride. This was done to demonstrate his authority in the household. Then many people would pour water or perfume on the bride's foot as a symbol of abundance and blessing. During the first days of married life both husband and wife remain at home. (It should be noted that in the village this period corresponds to the time between reaping the grain and plowing the earth for a new season.) While the husband takes a break from his work and enjoys his vacation, the wife begins her work at home. One week after being married she returns to her father's home for a visit. This custom seems to have been developed to give her time to adjust to life in her new house and to the family of the groom.

Motifs in the Bridal Song

The songs that are sung before the bride employ different motifs. Most of these songs point to the separation of the bride from her parents' home, family, and friends. Some contain only a single line and some are composed of a few lines. Characteristic of most songs is their shortness and expression of sadness and joy; separation causes sorrow, while anticipation of a new home, family, and praise brings joy. In Arab society, marriage is considered a serious event and an obligation everyone must fulfill; bachelorhood is condemned and viewed as shameful. A man must marry; consequently, the women receive a great deal of attention from men. Special attention in the form of passionate love is not expressed in public, however, such affairs remaining confined to the privacy of the home.

Motifs depicting the nature of love in society are common to Arabic poetry. For example, during the henna ceremony (where the bride and groom are anointed with henna), several songs are recited that describe the joy of the bride and the honor of greeting the wedding guests. At the same time these songs include the theme of sorrow over her separation from the family. This duality is exemplified in the following song:

O mother, o mother, gather the pillows and
leave the house
I have not said farewell to my sisters

Other songs serve as a warning to look out for those who might be jealous and wish to cause a separation of the newly married couple:

He lowered his eyes and stretched his arm
 They will anoint him with henna
 His loins (waist) are narrow and with a kerchief
 they wrap him
 O my beautiful one, he who separates us will be blind

In other songs concerning the night of the henna, the motif of leaving the house is prominent:

Do not go out of my house, the wind from the west
 Do not go out, o my beloved, you hurt my heart
 Do not go out, o spoiled one, o spoiled one
 Do not go out of my house, the wind from the east
 Only death and separation hurt one's heart

Another song says:

Tears will not help you
 And if there is a nail in your father's house
 Take it and bring it with you

While the groom takes part in his own henna ceremony, his name is mentioned in the house of the bride. The following song describes him as one who bends down to pluck flowers:

Tonight they anoint the groom, o peace and halo
 Open the garden's rose, o groom, at night

Or:

Tonight they anoint the groom, o Na'im
 Open the garden's rose, o groom, pick it up

The bride is described in the above songs as a flower about to be plucked (deflowered) by the groom. An informant from the village of al-Yamin in the district of Jenin in the West Bank described the special beauty of the bride as follows:

Arise and ride, arise the one with the kerchief
 Your hair is long, cover the street of Jenin

Arise and ride, o bride, the car⁴ is waiting here

This song is sung the day the wedding procession leads the bride to the groom's house. The motif of the car is seen in another song reflecting the modern influences on Arab society:

Your father is the *sheikh* of the village
I do not think he will be obstinate
Arise and ride, o bride, the car is waiting

Your father is the town's *sheikh*, he is not stubborn
Arise and ride, o bride, o white one⁵
And your hair is long, cover the street

The dualism mirroring the sorrow of separation and the joy in the virtues associated with the woman's role as wife and mother is seen in this song:

With peace, o sweet one, the road on the right
We did not say farewell to you and return months ago
We did not branch off from you in Beirut, o beautiful
The beloved and beautiful one, worth of two thousand⁶
We did not branch off from you in Haifa

The assembly waits for the bride at the entrance to the house, and upon her arrival the singers greet her as follows:⁷

Arise with us, o bride, they are waiting for you
The candles and the crowd waiting by the gate
Arise with us, o bride

⁴ The car functions as an image of modernity, an example of the singer's improvisation.

⁵ Refers to her beauty.

⁶ Refers to the dowry.

⁷ Recorded in an Arab Christian village.

in the life of your uncle⁸
 Your groom, the moon,⁹ is waiting for you
 by the church

The above song seems to be sung to hasten the process of separation of the woman from her family. The groom's family usually emphasizes their concern about the length of time the entire process takes, and the family of the bride then responds with a song:

Peace with you, she who leaves us
 O dear and beloved one
 Tell us what you wish to have
 And she will not live far from us
 God will please you with blessings
 And He will arrange life for us

Songs like this one are still sung in villages of the Galilee and some larger towns, and through such songs the people have managed to preserve the spirit of antiquity. Indeed, one of the unique characteristics of oral poetry is its ability to retain the vitality of the past while adapting to modern ideals. Folk traditions passed from one generation to the next are apparent in the motifs of this very visual song:

The lions in the forest call upon (Maḥmud)¹⁰
 He does not resist and continues to ride
 He rides the horses of glorious Abu Dhill

The song above compares the groom to the legendary character, Abu Dhill, with the implication that the rider (groom) is a courageous warrior and an extremely valiant horseman.

On the day of the wedding, the mother of the bride is an especially happy woman. From this day forward the daughter's every action is a reflection of the mother's success as nurturer, educator, and preparer of the daughter as wife and mother. The importance of the mother is reflected in the motif of the "queen" in the following song:

⁸ The father's brother.

⁹ An image of beauty.

¹⁰ Refers to his bravery and courage.

O the bride's mother, o the queen
 The pearl in the net
 Let us bless our bride

Next the groom's family turns to the bride's mother and the bride herself prepares to leave the house of her father. Prior to her exit both the groom's family and the guests bless the bride's family for the honor they have received in the bride's house:

Thank you and God will increase your health
 We wish not to have any relatives but you

Another important motif that recurs throughout bridal songs is the one expressing the relationship between the mother and daughter, which in Arabic poetry knows no geographic boundaries. For example, the Arab poet Ibn al-Khafilib writes:

O mother, so am I made miserable
 Yet my lover lives in my vicinity

Interestingly, similar descriptions of this type of relationship are found in the oral poetry of many cultures. Consider this passage—

O my mother, I wish I could be
 A chip in your pile of wood
 When the woodcutters come back from the forest
 Ask them: "Where is my daughter?"

—or:

O mother who bore me
 Your heart knows me no more!
 Is it because of the distance
 Or the sons that you since bore?

In another poem the mother is represented by the speaking voice:

Said the mother of the daughters,
 "O, I wish I would die,
 I raised the daughters—
 They were plucked from my garden."

From the examination of proverbs, and in particular of traditional,

classical, and modern motifs in the bridal songs, our thesis concerning the duality and true underlying nature of male-female relationships in Arab society becomes visible. Many of the proverbs reflect social phenomena in Arab society. On the surface women appear to be passive objects with a total lack of identity; underneath that superficial appearance, however, women are honored and appreciated by men, and praised by family relations. They control their lives in light of tradition. As for the bridal songs, in weaving together joy and sorrow they constitute an inseparable part of both wedding customs and associated festive events. And alongside the traditional practices there is a new and dynamic reality in Arab society as expressed in the motifs of modernity. The recently inaugurated custom of hiring a band to entertain the guests at the wedding celebration, as opposed to the tradition of the active wedding party, is among one of the many changes seen in rural society today. We may question whether these developments will eventually lead to the disappearance of the traditional Arab wedding. Are such developments a foreshadowing of the changes in the tradition of oral poetry? One young informant named Rudaina 'Uthman Abu Yunis summed up the situation in the following words: "In our village of Sakhnin, in which two communities live, one Christian and one Muslim, we still try to preserve the early traditions. There are still women who learn to sing the folk songs by heart, and they pass these songs on to those who are interested. I do not know how long this will last, but as long as the tradition exists, let us keep it."

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Saad Abdullah Sowayan. *Nabati Poetry*. Berkeley:
University of California Press.**Appendix: Bridal Songs**

1.
 Spread the henna O mother spread it
 Light the candle and dance with me
 Spread the henna over me O mother with perfumed leaves
 My beloved will go tomorrow and won't come back
 I seek that one who is the only son of his mother
 And who has no sister
 To put me on his bed
 And all night long he plays with me
 I want one Jew to play for me the *ud*¹¹
 One who will put his arms on my arms
 And all night long he'll play with me
 Spread the henna with *na'na*¹²
 My beloved one goes and has not come back
 And still has not come back yet

2.
 Your brightness O bride is beyond compare
 And your groom O bride there is no one like him
 At night he comes and goes alone¹³
 What else could you want O cherished one?
 I wish for you long life and health
 I will be your hiding place all my life

3.
 Let the cherished bride step softly
 She is the beloved and favored of her uncles

Let the bride walk in honor
 She is precious to her brothers

¹¹ A stringed musical instrument.

¹² Mint leaves.

¹³ Implies bravery in watching over her each night.

Let her walk on the magic carpet of the sky
She is the virtuous daughter of her esteemed father

Let the bride be carried on the sea
She is the most dear to her mother

Let her walk upon the ground
How dear the bride to her family

Set the adorned carpet beneath her feet
She is the honored one so dear

4.
Light of my eyes
Your groom is worthy and you are beautiful

She wore the maxi dress then took it off
And stepped into the decorated taxi
She set aside the dress, olive green
Then put it on once more
And came into my house, this elegant one

She took off the dress, deep blue
Then put it on again
And almost drowned in Tiberias Sea

The white dress lay at her feet
She drew its splendor about her again
And went to the judge to complain about me

5.
We have brought the taxi, arise O fragrant one
I am afraid for you even from the perfume and the fragrance

We have brought the taxi, come out O beautiful one
I tremble at your beauty, from jealous eyes

We have brought the taxi, arise O cherished one
I am afraid you'll get wet in the morning dew

6.
Tell the groom's mother to spread the tapestry

They told a bride¹⁴

The bride is passing by¹⁵
Tell his mother to prepare the room

The gracious bride is passing by
Perfume the chairs with fragrance and henna
The bride is coming to us

7.
Dance O beautiful one¹⁶ O daughter of the honorable one
Dance *taghlayah*¹⁷

Arise and go on to your bed
Arise and get out of your bed

The dove sings for you O bride
The dove sings for you O bride

Come on and keep walking
And my eyes will follow you

Your groom hired someone to build a shower for you
And put a faucet in every room

Arise so we may see your height
O the one with the watch and the glasses

Your groom hired a wagon with a horse
O beautiful

8.
O light O light of my eyes

¹⁴ The text suggests singing the particular name of the bride who is to marry.

¹⁵ The singer mentions the name of the groom.

¹⁶ The text twice suggests *allah*, which we translate “O beautiful,” since in this context it is not the name of God but an exclamation relating to her beauty.

¹⁷ A dance in which the women hold small candles and dance around the bride while she dances with two long candles held in her hands.

Your groom is worthy and you are beautiful
She took off the white dress and put it on
And went to the judge to complain about me
She put on the blue dress and took it off
She almost drowned in the lake of Tiberia
She put on the green dress and took it off
She walked by my house, that pretty one

9.

O mother O mother Gather my pillows
I went out of the house and did not say goodbye to my sisters
O mother O mother Gather my handkerchiefs
I went out of the house and did not say goodbye to my friends
O mother O mother Gather my pillows
I went out of the house and did not say goodbye to my loved ones