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, 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 Ḍ. Sbait 1982:1-59). This improvised-sung poetry is known in Arabic by the name of ash-shīr al-murtajal (improvised poetry; cf. Bonnebaker 1978) or ash-shīr ash-sharbī (folk poetry) or az-zajal (colloquial Arabic poetry in strophic form) or al-shīr al-ẓāmmī (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”), shācir sharbī (folk poet), qawwāl (improviser or reciter), or zajjāl (improviser), the most common of these names being ḥaddā or shācir.

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

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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: ʿAtābā, Ḥīdā, Farāwī, Mḥorabīh, Mʿannā, Qarrādī, and Qaṣīdīh. These genres are entirely different from one another in their poetic forms, diverse rhyme schemes, and musical melodies (ĐT. Sbait 1982:60-349).

The following paper focuses on two of the most popular genres of the improvised-sung poetry of the Palestinian poet-singers: Ḥīdā 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 Ḥīdā 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 Ḥīdā 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. Ḥīdā

A. The Characteristic Features of Ḥīdā

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

2 The Ḥīdā is known as ḥudāʾ 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] ḥadawan and ḥidāʾan; ḥudāʾan 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 ḥudāʾ in literary Arabic is known as ḥādī (pl. ḥudāt) and ḥaddāʾ is an exaggerated form of the noun ḥād. But a poet-singer is known as ḥādī, or ḥadāʾ (pl. Ḥādāy) in the colloquial Arabic of the Palestinians.


muzdawij (couplets), mrabba’ (quatrains), and mthamman, (stanzas of eight lines), followed always by a refrain. Additionally, each type of ḥidā entails several other subgenres. The above-mentioned types of ḥidā 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 ḥidā the poet-singers start the improvisation with ḥidā muzdawij, then switch to mrabba’ and mthamman in sequential order.

Ḥidā is strictly an outdoor genre, sung basically at 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 ḥidā refrain yā ḥalālt yā mālt,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.

All ḥidā 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’ refreains, create a sharp contrast between the poet-singers and the dancers, a combination which creates dynamism in all ḥidā

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4 Most of the common refrains are sung spontaneously by the saff 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 ḥāṣht (the saff saḥjih organizer).
performances. *Hidā* normally is sung in an alternated fashion, but it can be improvised solo as well.

The rhyme scheme of the regular *hīdā muzdawīj* is AB, AB, CB, DB; the *mrabba*c entails an AAAB, CCCB rhyme scheme; and the *nṭamman* employs an ABABABAC pattern. Each line of *hīdā* 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 *hīdā* poems are highly rhythmic and follow the *maqām* of *bayyātt*. The regular *hīdā muzdawīj* is sung with a slow tempo *bayyātt*; the *mrabba*c with a fast-tempo *bayyātt dūğāḥ*; the *nṭamman* with a faster tempo *bayyātt nawā*. The subgenre of *hīdā muzdawīj* known as *is-saḥij il-baddāwiyyih* (the Bedouins’ folk dance) is sung with the fastest tempo following the *maqām* of *bayyātt ḥusaynī*. The tempo gradually accelerates from one type to another. The poet-singers start the improvisation with the slowest type, the regular *hīdā muzdawīj*, and finish with the fastest, the *baddāwiyyih*. The refrain *yā ḥaḷāltī yā māltī* is sung in a free rhythm after all types, except for *is-saḥij 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 *bayyātt*. Because the Palestinian *hīdā* is such a common form, the Palestinian poet-singer is called *ḥāḏī* (one who improvises-sings *hīdā*) by his countrymen, even though he sings all other genres of colloquial poetry as well.

**B. The Poetic Forms of the *Hidā***

1. **Hidā Muzdawīj,** i.e., *hīdā* of two lines.

The form of regular *hīdā muzdawīj* consists of a pair of improvised lines by one poet-singer followed by the dance of *saḥij*, rhythmical clapping and the dancers’ refrain *yā ḥaḷāltī yā māltī* sung once by the audience in a slow tempo. Then a second poet-singer improvises two pairs of *muzdawījat*, and the improvisation continues in the alternating fashion stated above. The following *hīdā* by ʿAbdallāh Mūsā and Abū Lail6 illustrates this feature:

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i. ʿAbdallāh: Al bismi bāḍī lḥadādaī Fīmādī ṣalḥay- il-ḥālī
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5 Some Palestinian poet-singers call this type of *hīdā mafraḍ* (i.e., divided by singing pairs of lines of *hīdā*, one at a time).

6 Yūsūf Maṣarwih, born in Kufr Qār, the Muthallath, in 1936. He became a professional poet-singer in 1955.
The Ṣaff: Aw’yāḥalālīyāmālī

ii. ʿAbdallāh: Wmin ba’di hādhā waddhī šallūʿarā‘i r-risālih
The Ṣaff: Aw’yāḥalālīyāmālī

iii. Abū Lail: Ilbadriʿaddinyā bazagh wannajmiḥawluh bilālī
The Ṣaff: Aw’yāḥalālīyāmālī

iv. Abū Lail: Nādīʿalā kull il-ʿArab illailīh nādī larjālī
The Ṣaff: Aw’yāḥalālīyāmālī

(Ref. ʿA. Mūsā and Y. Abū Lail, Cas. 34, A-191-307)

i. ʿAbdallāh: In the name (of Allāh), I start the ḥaddāt; I rely on the Supreme Being.
Dancers: O how fortunate I am!

ii. ʿAdballāh: 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!

ʿA. 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.

l.a. Is-sahjih Il-Baddāwiyyih

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

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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 mrabbaʿ, or mthamman, and that is followed by the sahjih 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 mrabbaʿ 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-sahjih il-baddawiyyih*. It is distinguished by its rapid rhythm, the fastest of all types of *hidā*. Its refrain, *ya ḥalālt yā mālt*, or its variations, are sung twice by the *sahjih* dancers with the fastest tempo of all types of *hidā* and is repeated after each *muzdawij* in order to match the rhythm and length of the improvised *muzdawijāt*. The following example by *ʿAwnī Sbait* and *ʿAfīf Nāṣir* illustrates this subgenre:

i. *ʿAwnī*: ʿAssahjih il-baddawiyyih  
   *Dancers*: ʿalainā

ii. *ʿAwnī*: Ṭjalī ṭuddū ʿalainā  
   The Ṣaff: *Aw yā ḥalālt yā mālt issabiʾ šād il-ghazālih*

iii. *ʿAfīf*: Bihalfarḥah farḥānīn  
   The Ṣaff: *Aw yā ḥalālt yā mālt issabiʾ šād il-ghazālih*

iv. *ʿAfīf*: Wāsh-shamāl wālyamīn  
   The Ṣaff: *Aw yā ḥalālt yā mālt issabiʾ šād il-ghazālih*

(Ref. *ʿAwnī Sbait* and *ʿAfīf Nāṣir*, Cas. 28, B-381-435).

i. *ʿAwnī*: Let us join the bedouin folk dance;  
   My men, (the dancers) answer us.

ii. *ʿAwnī*: My men, answer us;  
   My men, answer us.

   Dancers: O how fortunate I am;  
   The lion has captured the female gazelle.

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

*9 ʿAwnī Sbait*, born in Iqrith, the Galilee, in 1930. He became a professional poet-singer in 1950. *ʿAwnī* is the only Palestinian poet-singer who has published a collection of colloquial poems (see *ʿA.Sbait 1976*).

*10 ʿAfīf Naṣīr*, born in Kufr Smaiʿ, the Galilee, in 1941. He became a professional poet-singer around 1970.

*11* The audience here sings a different refrain, *ya ḥalālt yā mālt issabiʾ šād il-ghazālih* ("Oh how fortunate I am! The lion [groom] has captured the female gazelle [bride]").
We are happy in this wedding,
The wedding of the best relatives.

O how... etc.

To the left and right sides, I greet
the men of perfection.

O how... etc.

‘Awnī rhymed the two lines of muzdawij “i” AB, and muzdawij “ii” BB.
‘Affī 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 Mrabbār, i.e., Ḥidā of four lines.

The Ḥidā mrabbār 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 mrabbār is followed
by the sahjih, the rhythmical clapping, and the refrain, al yā ḥalāt yā mālt, which
is sung by the dancers only once after each mrabbār. The poet-singers improvise
several types of Ḥidā mrabbār which share most of the common poetic features of
the basic mrabbār but differ slightly in one aspect or another.

The following is a brief excerpt from a long debate in Ḥidā mrabbār between
‘Awnī Sbait and ‘Affī 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 mhāwarah (lit. Ḥiwr, i.e., debate).

Mrabbār 1

‘Affī:
i. ‘Aaqwalak bulabbāk

ii. Wiljāwib ʾamaʾānāk

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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-Mutanabbi and Ibn Khālawayh. The debate is known in classical Arabic by the name munāzarah;
the plural is munāzārāt (see al-Fākhrī n.d.:602). The debate with mrabbār is the climax of
the evening for the groom’s part and is the most elaborate type of Ḥidā. See the complete description
Mrabbā' II

ʿAwnī:
i. Yallī bissijin ʿamārn
ii. Nādī tatiʿ-mai sajjān
iii. ʿAsīnak ʿaṭṭī burḥān
iv. Ykūn awdāḥ barāḥīn
The Ṣaff: Yā ḫalāfī... etc.

Mrabbā' III

ʿAftīf:
i. Khallī l-qawl ibistifḥām
ii. Wkhūdh w-aṭṭī bilkalām
iii. Lawlā ssijin mā bitnām [E.]
iv. ʿYānak min is-sarrāqīn.
The Ṣaff: Yā ḫalāfī... etc.

Mrabbā' IV

ʿAwnī:
i. Sijnak aswād kazzālām
ii. Kulluh ʿahzān w-ālām
iii. Lawlā l-ḫurriyyīh il-ānām [E.]
iv. Mā shāfāṭ ḥāyāt illīn
The Ṣaff: Yā ḫalāfī... etc.

(Ref. ʿAwnī Sbait and ʿAftīf Nāṣīr, Cas. 24, A-64-298.)

Mrabbā' I

ʿAftīf:
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.

Mrabbā' II

ʿAwnī:
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‘ III

‘Affif:
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‘ IV

‘Awnî:
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‘ I by ‘Affif rhymes AAAB, Mrabba‘ II by ‘Awnî CCCB, Mrabba‘ III DDDB, and Mrabba‘ 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‘. Each mthamman is followed by the sahjiḥ, the rhythmical clapping and the refrain yā ḥalālt yā mālīt, 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 Ḥannâ Sbait13 illustrates the regular type of Ḥidā mthamman:

Of
i. Binghanī bhal-ḥafî shshîr
ii. hattā Ṵqaddim wajibnā
iii. Badl il-jum‘ah nhannî shahr
iv. Ta-ni‘jib jämâ‘ inā
v. Nfayyid yânābî ishshîr
vi. Idhâ ḥafîlî ti‘jibnā
vii. Bḥibb ishshîr wfawq ilmuhr
viii. Bkhayyîl wibnîl fursân
The Ṣaff: Yâ ḥalâlt yā mǎlīt

(Ref. Ḥannâ Sbait, Cas. 7, B-303-367)

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13 Ḥannâ Sbait was born in Iqrîth, the Galilee, in 1921. He became a professional poet-singer in 1940.
We sing poetry in this wedding
In order to do our duty (i.e., in respect for the host)
Instead of one week, we are ready to sing for one month
In order to delight our folks
We overflow the springs of poetry
If we like the celebration
I like poetry, and on horseback
I gallop and call the knights.

Dancers: O how fortunate I am!

Hanānī 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, mrabbar 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. Qarrādt

14 The term qarrādt is possibly derived from the root stem ṭrd, which is found in most Semitic languages. The Arabic verb ṭraqada means to lie down or to dance (Khalil 1974:16-17). The verbs ṭrakad and ṭkad in Aramaic, ṭrakada in Akkadian, and ṭraqaṣa 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 ṭrd, the term qarrādt was used instead of ṭraqadī 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’uf 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 *Qarrāḍī*

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

The regular *qarrāḍī muzdawij* uses an AB, CB, DB, etc., rhyme scheme; the *qarrāḍī mrabbā’āt* usually rhymes ABAB, CCCB, etc., and the *qarrāḍī mthamman* follows an ABAB, in its *maṭla’*, then a CDCDCDCD scheme. The *qarrāḍī* 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 *qarrāḍī* improvisations do not deal with a single subject, yet some poems in my collection do deal with only one topic.

The majority of *qarrāḍī* improvisations are rhythmical and suitable for popular folk dances. Therefore, they are usually accompanied by a *durbakkih* (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. *Qarrāḍī* 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 *qarrāḍī* songs except one, have a fast tempo and are sung in duple meter following the musical *maqām* of *sīgāh*.

\(^{15}\) It is worth noting that the *qarrāḍī muzdawij* resembles the *hidā muzdawij* in its being based on couplets and in having a similar rhyme scheme. The *qarrāḍī mrabbā’āt* is also similar to the *hidā mrabbā’āt* in number of lines and rhyme scheme; and the *qarrāḍī mthamman* has the same number of lines as the *hidā 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 *qarrāḍī* and *hidā* 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 *qarrāḍī* is usually improvised-sung and accompanied mainly by folk music instrument, while the *hidā* 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 Ōf followed by a *maṭla* of two short lines of seven and four syllables, or two long lines of seven syllables each. Each *maṭla* is sung by the audience as a refrain. If the *maṭla* is unfamiliar to the audience, the poet sings it along with them. Thereafter, the poet-singer improvises *muzdawijāt* or *mrabba‘āt* which are followed by the audience’s refrains. In the following quotation Shāhīn Sbait\(^{16}\) and ‘Affīf Nāṣir relied on the improvisation of *muzdawijāt*, each of which expresses a separate notion. The refrain is repeated only once by the audience.

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\begin{array}{ll}
i. & \text{Shāhīn:} \quad \text{‘Arfāṣainā hal-asmar} \\
ii. & \text{Audience:} \quad \text{‘Arfāṣainā hal-asmar} \\
 & Yābū Zaid il-Hilāf \quad \text{Yābū Zaid il-Hilāf} \\
iii. & \text{Shāhīn:} \quad \text{Zādat minnuh mḥabbitnā} \\
iv. & \text{Audience:} \quad \text{W-fīrḥīt kull il-‘āḥāf} \\
 & ‘Arfāṣainā... etc. \\
v. & ‘Affīf: \quad \text{Hādhi l-farḥah farḥītānā} \\
vi. & \text{Audience:} \quad \text{Faraḥ laghlā l-‘āḥāf} \\
 & ‘Arfāṣainā... etc. \\
\end{array}
\]

(Ref. Shāhīn Sbait and ‘Affīf Nāṣir, Cas. 12, A-270)

*Maṭla* by Shāhīn:

\[
\begin{array}{l}
i. & \text{Our groom is this “brown”\(^{17}\) person} \\
ii. & \text{You are brave like the warrior Abū Zayd al-Hilāf (see Lane 1973:391).} \\
\end{array}
\]

Refrain by the audience:

As in i. above

\(^{16}\) Shāhīn Sbait, born in Iqrīth 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. ʿAftīf: This wedding is our wedding
vi. The wedding of the dearest of relatives.

Audience: Our groom... etc.

The foregoing qarrāḍī muzdawīj is sung with a fast duple meter. The maqām is stgāḥ adhering to rast towards its end. Shāhīn rhymed his muzdawījāt ABCB, and ʿAftīf continued the same scheme and rhymed his muzdawījāt CB, etc. The B rhyme is maintained throughout the entire improvisation.

2. Qarrāḍī Mrabbaʾ

Poems of this category are based on mrabbaʿāt. Even the maṭlaʾ itself is a mrabbaʾ. 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 mrabbaʾ 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-Rināwī illustrate this type:

maṭlaʾ mrabbaʾ:

i. Bism il-waṭan binghamīnī
ii. W-nilqī l-majhūd
iii. Wiblādī mithl il-jannīh
iv. Malyānīh w-rūd

Audience, refrain:

Wiblādī mithl il-jannīh
Malyānīh w-rūd
Wiblādī mithl il-jannīh
Malyānīh w-rūd

Maṭlaʾ 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

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18 Muḥammad al-Rināwī, born at al-Rainīh 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 mrabbaʿ is sung in a slow duple meter following the maqām of stāḥ, and it is accompanied by handclapping but not music or dances. The first mrabbaʿ rhymes ABAB and the second (not quoted here) CCCB.

3. Qarrādī Mthamman

This type of qarrādī is based on the improvisation of a maṭlaʿ of qarrādī mrabbaʿ 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 Sbait19 and Ḥannā Sbait represents this type:

Jihād opens with a maṭlaʿ:

mrabbaʿ:

i. Talfantillik yā samrā [E.]
ii. ‘Annumrah th-nain
iii. Bain il-baiḍah wissamrā [E.]
iv. Dāū r-raqmāin

Refrain by the audience:
Bain il-baiḍah wissamrā
Dāū r-raqmāin
Bain il-baiḍah wissamrā
Dāū r-raqmāin

Ḥannā responds with a qarrādī mrabbaʿ:

i. Bain il-baiḍah wissamrā [E.]
ii. T-shīʿ il-qamrā
iii. Maḥāl layālt l-khamrah [E.]
iv. Bain al-ahlāin

Refrain by the audience:
Bain... etc.
Dāū... etc.
Bain... etc.

19 Jihād Sbait, born in Iqrith in 1939, became a professional poet-singer in 1965.
Jihād resumes with a qarrāḍī mhamman:

i. W-khayif min ba'd il-malqā [E.]
ii. Yubdū l-hijrān
iii. Waq'ud qāšt bīfurqah [E.]
iv. Lādā n-nārān
v. Muhjīt qalbī mihtirqah [E.]
vi. Frāq il-khillān
vii. Lākin marrah bissirqah [E.]
viii. Bawfī laddāin

Refrain by the audience:
Bain... etc.
Dā'ū... etc.
Bain... etc.
Dā'ū... etc.

(Ref. Jihād Sbait and Ḥannā Sbait, 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.

Qarrāḍī mrabbā' 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.

Qarrāḍī mhamman 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 Hannā go on alternating qarrātī mthamman concerning the same subject. The poem is rhythmic, but it is sung in a medium tempo, employing the maqām of sigāh. The majlaʿ of Jihād rhymes ABAB, the mṛrabāʿ of Hannā AAAB and the mthamman of Jihād CDCDCDCB.

C. The Subjects of Qarrātī

The immense number of 1400 lines of qarrātī in my collection makes it difficult to classify them in terms of their subject matter. The topical unity in many qarrātī improvisations diminishes due to the fact that each improvisation combines several subjects. Still, some qarrātī improvisations treat a single explicit theme. The most common topics of the qarrātī 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 Qarrātī

The qarrātī poems in my collection are sung only while sitting indoors. They are improvised at weddings, especially during zaffat il-warīs (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 khutbih (engagement party), at private and family parties, at a mahrajān (festival), at a private high school party, and at a nadwat
zajal\textsuperscript{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.

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 hidā poems are sung outdoors, normally the poet-singer stands at the end of the ṣaff sahjih so that he can see his colleague, the sahjih 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.

\textsuperscript{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 saḥjih 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 (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 samāʿ (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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