Abstract
This paper deals with the poetic debate engaged in by professional Palestinian poet-singers, primarily at traditional Palestinian weddings in the Galilee region. Details are given regarding the extemporizing-singing of several poetic genres (*catâba, *hida, *m annâ, *qarrâdi, and *qaṣîdîh), the sociocultural background of the groom's wedding eve, and the broader context in which the poetic debates are conducted. Transliterated Arabic texts and their English translations are included to illustrate the poetic duels between the poet-singers, the refrains of the folk dancers, the interaction between the two, and the issues on which the poets debate. The major poetic and musical characteristics of each genre are presented, followed by an explanation of the techniques of improvisation employed during debate in the respective genres. The paper notes the limited time available to the poet-singers to produce their meaningful, artistic poetry; briefly discusses their training; and indicates the expertise of these artists, capable of improvising and singing their creative poetry while debating serious intellectual issues. The paper stresses the originality of the practice of poetic debate and its artistic, educational, and cultural values.

Key words: improvised poetry — poetic debate — line dance — folk poet — singer — *catâba — *hida — *m annâ — *qarrâdi — *qaṣîdîh
N\textsc{Introduction}

T\textsc{he} improvised-sung poetry of the Palestinians is an established living tradition of oral poetry extemporized in spoken Palestinian Arabic and sung by professional Palestinian poet-singers, generally for rural audiences and occasionally for city people. It is mainly performed at traditional weddings (\textit{acr\=\text{\`a}s}, sing. \textit{\text{\`ear}s}), circumcision and baptism parties, private celebrations, and other joyous occasions (\textsc{Sbait} 1982, 1-59). Known in Arabic as \textit{aš-šīr al-murtajal} (improvised poetry), \textit{aš-šīr aš-ša\=\text{\`a}bi} (folk poetry), \textit{az-zajal} (colloquial strophic poetry), or \textit{aš-šīr al-\text{\`a}mmi} (vernacular poetry), this improvised-sung poetry does not adhere to the established grammatical rules of the Standard Literary Arabic used in literary poetry. The Palestinian poet-singer is called by his audience \textit{ša\=\text{\`e}r Ša\=\text{\`a}bi} (folk poet), \textit{qawwāl} (improviser), \textit{zajjāl} (improviser of \textit{zajal}), or \textit{ḥādī} or \textit{ḥadda} (lit. "cameleer singer," colloquially a poet who sings \textit{ḥida}, the most popular genre of Palestinian improvised-sung poetry). The most common of these names are \textit{ša\=\text{\`e}r Ša\=\text{\`a}bi} and \textit{ḥadda}.

The professional poet-singers are invited by hosts to sing in teams of two. The poet-singers choose their own partners, but if another professional poet-singer happens to be present at the occasion as a guest, the team members usually show their courtesy towards their colleague by inviting him to sing with them for a while, after which they carry on their duty as hired professionals. Most of the Palestinian poet-singers I have interviewed prefer to sing with their permanent partner—a gentlemen’s agreement exists between the two, and they are accustomed to one another (\textsc{Sbait} 1982, 376-93). There are altogether seven established teams. Members of six teams live and perform in the Palestinian villages and towns of the Galilee region. The seventh team comprises one member from the Muthallath region and one from the West Bank. This last team is active in both regions. A poet-singer generally performs mainly in his own village or in neighboring communities, but normally accepts invitations to other parts of the
country if he is paid well for the job.

Performances of improvised-sung poetry may last from several minutes to a few hours, depending on the occasion. As the poet-singers improvise-sing they switch genres and subjects rapidly. On the eve of a wedding, for example, a poet-singer team performs for an average of four hours without a break. The audience interacts with the poet-singers by repeating refrains (either established or new), clapping rhythmically, and dancing various folk dances suitable for the occasion.

The Palestinian poet-singers' poetry involves seven major genres: atāba, farēwi, hida, mr'anna, mhōrabih, qarrādi, and qasīdih. These genres differ totally from one another in melody and poetic form (Sbait 1982, 60-349). The respective melodies, though based on established tunes transmitted orally from one generation of poet-singers to the next, are nevertheless embellished by the individual poet-singers. The poetic forms are also more or less fixed, but, since there is no fixed text that the poet-singers must follow, each new performance is largely unique. This is due to the use of new rhyme schemes, meters, images, subjects, refrains, and poetic devices such as paronomasia, antithesis, metaphor, and metonymy. Also adding variety are the poet-singer's gestures, the audience's interaction, and the folk dances which the audience enjoys tremendously.

My research is based on a collection of approximately sixteen thousand verses of improvised-sung poetry recorded live in the field (Sbait 1975–92); prior to the performance the poetry had been neither written down, composed, nor preserved in books, manuscripts, or tapes. The focus of this paper is on the unique practice of poetic debate (mhāwarah), a form of debate carried out in a spirit of friendly rivalry and commonly employed by the Palestinian poet-singers, particularly at weddings. I examine only those improvised-sung genres that involve poetic debate; all other forms are disregarded, such as farēwi and mhōrabih (genres used during marching and processions). The article discusses such issues as the sociocultural context of this poetic tradition, the techniques of poetic debate followed by the Palestinian poet-singers, the genres in which the debates are conducted, and the current issues discussed in the debates, with examples provided from translated samples of poetic texts.

Poetic Debate at the Wedding-Eve Celebration for the Groom

Weddings are among the most celebrated social events in Palestinian culture (Sbait 1982, 1–59). During the traditional wedding celebration, which may last twenty-four hours, the bride and groom are given
separate, simultaneous parties in the evening and again during the day. The poet-singers are generally invited by the groom's parents (the hosts) to entertain at their son's parties, while professional popular musicians and a singer usually entertain at the bride's parties. Thus it is primarily at the groom's wedding parties that the poetic debates take place.

The first to arrive at the groom's evening wedding celebration (sahrit il-aris or it-ti‘lilik) are his relatives and immediate friends, followed by guests from outside the village. They assemble in the guest room of the host's house, sipping coffee and chatting. A short time before the formal party begins, the invited team of poet-singers improvises poems in honor of the groom, his parents, and the guests. The young men and women, led by a folk musician playing a double-reeded instrument, perform dabkih (Palestinian folk circle dance) and sing outside the house in order to warm up for the formal evening celebration. As the dancing progresses the crowd continues to grow, and the poet-singers are ready to begin their main performance.

The best man, who plays the role of master of ceremonies, invites the poet-singers, the folk-dance leader, the dancers, and the guests to move to another location in the village, usually the school yard or some other open space large enough to accommodate a big crowd. As soon as most of the guests have moved, the poet-singers are ready to begin. The folk dancers line up and, clapping rhythmically and chanting the phrase "widahaw" (spread out), form a saff sahji (a line of about fifty to two hundred dancers at traditional Palestinian weddings). Two or more sahji organizers (hāsi) dance in front of the line to help the dancers get organized and follow an orderly clapping rhythm. An audience of several hundred local residents and other guests sits on chairs, with the groom and best man in the front row facing the folk dancers. The two poet-singers and the line organizers stand in the space left between the audience and the dancers.

The poet-singers then begin their performance. Each holds a microphone in one hand, puts the other hand on his ear, and sings "ôf" (a sigh of relief) on a high note several times. The sigh echoes throughout the area and is followed by a responsorial "ôf" from the dancers and the audience. As soon as the crowd settles down, the singing and dancing that will lead to the poetic debate begin. During the groom's evening celebrations the poet-singers improvise-sing the poetry genres suitable for an outdoor performance. The sahji dancers interact by singing relevant refrains and performing suitable folk dances (for details see SBAIT 1982, 1–58).

After the sahji dance is over most local people return to their
homes. Guests from outside the village who are not planning to attend the next day's wedding may offer their congratulations to the groom and then leave. Those guests who will be attending the wedding either go to the groom's house or accept invitations to sleep at the homes of friends from the host's village. The young friends of the groom and his family and relatives walk back to the host's house at about midnight, usually led by the poet-singers.

Although the poet-singers conduct their poetic debate in the *hida* genre as the *sahjih* is being held outdoors, they also perform indoor debates employing other improvised-sung genres. As the wedding guests sit down to drink and eat, the poet-singers entertain them with suitable sung-poetry. The audience participates by singing refrains introduced by the poet-singers, and in some cases the performances are accompanied by professional musicians. However, when the serious poetic debate begins the audience listens carefully to the poet-singers' arguments, repeats the refrains after them, and enjoys the performance.

In most Palestinian communities, the closest friends of the groom stay with him for an after-midnight "bachelors' party"* (sahrit il-az-zabiyyih); it is also customary among the Christian Palestinians of the Galilee region to hold an extended post-midnight party for relatives, friends, and guests. At this party the guests are invited to sit, dine, and drink while the poet-singers entertain them with indoor *cataba* and other genres of improvised-sung poetry suitable for the occasion. The audience participates by singing refrains and performing other folk songs and dances. The poet-singers use this opportunity to conduct poetic debates. The frolic continues until the poet-singers become tired and many of the guests are tipsy. It is then time for most people, especially the groom, to retire and rest for the next day's celebration. With this the first major part of the wedding festivities comes to an end.

Preparations for the "groom's shaving party in public"* (hlāqit il-żarīs, zyānit il-żarīs, or zaffit il-żarīs; iz-zaffih for short) start early on the morning of the wedding day. Soon after the barber's arrival, a crowd of relatives and guests gathers in the home of the groom's father to participate in the festivities. The *zaffih* is long, and so is the singing repertoire. A drummer and a double-reed musician begin warming up. The folk music and dancing generally commence with a Palestinian circle dance, after which the poet-singers take the place of the folk musicians and improvise-sing in genres suitable for this indoor celebration. Here again they might employ a light spontaneous poetic debate.
Other social occasions on which the poet-singers conduct poetic debates while singing indoors are public festivals and private parties of all kinds. The following sections include illustrations of such debates.

**The Poetic Features of the *Ataba* Genre**

The *ataba* is a popular genre of improvised-sung Palestinian poetry, usually comprising four basic lines and sung by one poet-singer at a time. A core feature of this genre is use of the *jinās* (homonym): the last word of every line in an *ataba* except those in the final verse must be a *jinās*. The most common *ataba* rhyme scheme is AAAB. The final rhyme of the last verse of an *ataba* must be either *āḥ* or *nā*. An *ataba* that ends with the *āḥ* rhyme and is sung outdoors is not followed by an audience refrain, while one ending with the rhyme *nā* and sung indoors normally is. Both types, when sung indoors, are occasionally followed by popular established refrains introduced by the poet-singers and repeated by the audience. Usually each line of *ataba* has a minimum of eight syllables and a maximum of fifteen. The basic topics addressed in this genre are praise, description of the occasion, love themes, and social and political issues. *Ataba* improvisations are sung in a free rhythm, following the Arabic musical mode (*maqām*) of *bayyāti* (for other types of *ataba* see Sbaţ 1982, 59–146).

**Debate in *Ataba***

Poetic debate in the *ataba* genre is usually casual and spontaneous, and thus does not follow any set of technical rules. Each poet-singer improvises a single quatrain of *ataba* expressing an opinion about an issue, to which the other poet-singer responds with another *ataba* that either affirms the opinion of his teammate, opposes it, or introduces a totally new concept for discussion. My collection of *ataba* sung outdoors during saff *sahjih* includes several examples of long, friendly, serious poetic debates in which the poet-singers discuss a given subject or two contrasting subjects. The examples I have include:

1) A poetic debate entitled “The Green Eyes,” between the poet-singers Muḥammad al-Raināwi and the late Tawfeeq al-Raināwi (Sbaţ 1982, 112–14, Cas. 38). This debate includes forty *ataba naṣl* (speedy or snatched *ataba*) quatrains. In this debate both poet-singers discussed one given subject: green eyes, known for their particular attractiveness to young Arab men. Both poet-singers defended their love for and attraction to green eyes. In this way the poetic debate dealt with one specific topic: *gazal*, the admiration of the beauty of a
beloved. *Gazal* is pure as opposed to passionate love.

2) A poetic debate called “The Poet and His Apprentice,” with the poet-singer ʿAwni Sbait as the master poet and ʿAfeef Nāṣir as the apprentice (SBAIT 1982, 112, Cas. 23). This debate comprises eight ʿatāba improvisations sung outdoors during a *ṣaff saḥīḥ*. Both poets discussed a single issue, the relationship between the master poet and his apprentice, with the master poet acknowledging his student’s poetic talent and achievement and the apprentice praising his teacher as the finest poet in modern times.

3) A poetic debate entitled “The Homeland,” between the late poet-singer Yaʿqūb al-Kinānī and the poet-singer Jihād Sbait. This debate includes ten ʿatāba quatrains. The following is a brief portion:

i. Yaʿqūb addresses his quatrains to a friend (symbolizing all fellow Palestinians):

*O*, my friend, honor your homeland and its trees,
Liberate her and keep me close to her.
I will open a battlefront for her sake,
I will close a million doors over the light surrounding her.

ii. Jihād responds, addressing his quatrains to his son (symbolizing all Palestinian children):

*O*, my son, honor your homeland and her people.
Leave us from the unworthy concerns of the world and how to solve them.
I kiss the soil and the mud of the homeland,
I am ready to die for this homeland and to embrace her soil.

(SBAIT 1975–92, Cas. 29)

The above debate focused on a unified political subject. Each poet praised the homeland, explained its importance, and declared his love
and willingness to sacrifice for her. Each urged the audience, young and old alike, to sacrifice for their homeland.

In the above debate the poet-singers did their best to keep the discussion within the given subject in order to maintain the unity of the topic in each poem. Still, in most debates one can find traces of unrelated or minor additional topics, due perhaps to the fact that the oral poets lack the time to edit their improvised-sung poetry as they perform impromptu in front of their audience. One can also notice that while the poetic debates in ‘atāba are not very confrontational, they include contrasting ideas. Although the debate in ‘atāba is entertaining to the Palestinian audience, it does not constitute a serious climax to the eve of the wedding.

**The Poetic Features of the Hida Genre**

The hida genre—the most popular type of improvised-sung Palestinian folk poetry—is based on couplets (muzdawijāt), quatrains (mrabbarāt), eight-line stanzas (mṭammanāt), or stanzas of more than eight lines (fawq al-mṭammanāt). The rhyme schemes of couplets are AB, AB, CB, DB, etc.; quatrains are AAAB, CCCB, etc.; and stanzas of eight lines or more are ABABABAC. All hida types include established responsorial and rhythmic refrains repeated by the audience after every single hida. The lines have either seven or eight syllables. **Hida** genre poetry, including hida debate, is performed at weddings during the groom’s evening celebration, particularly at the time of the saff sahjīh. The subject material of the hida is unlimited: praise; politics; love; description of the occasion; and social, educational, and intellectual issues. **Hida** couplets employ a slow tempo, quatrains use a faster tempo, eight-line stanzas have a still faster tempo, and the sub-genre known as Bedouin folk dance (is-sahjīj il-baddāwiyyyih) has the fastest tempo. Thus a basic musical feature of the genre is the capacity of the poet-singers to accelerate the tempo from one type to another. All types of hida are sung in the Arabic musical mode of bayyātī (for details see Sbait 1982, 147–225).

**Debate in Hida**

Poetic debate in the hida genre is the most elaborate and complex type, and forms the climax of the groom’s evening party. The poet-singers warm up with other types of hida, and when the sahjīh dancers and the audience are totally attentive they switch to the serious and exciting debate. Unlike debate in the ‘atāba genre, hida debate is generally preceded by the following technical steps:
1) One of the two poet-singers suggests during his improvisation that they start a friendly poetic debate on either a single subject or two contrasting subjects; he may even suggest the topic of debate, such as “the pen versus the sword” (mental versus physical power).

2) As a matter of courtesy, each poet-singer gives his partner the right to choose first. This shows the audience that the poet-singers have not agreed upon a subject beforehand. Most poet-singers are honest and genuine in their debates, and can improvise poetry on any issue spontaneously. Professional Palestinian poet-singers spend years in their quest to master the art of improvisation (SBAIT 1989); they must learn all genres and subgenres equally before they are recognized as professionals. Even if a team agrees on a group of topics for debate, one member can never read the mind of the other nor guess what rhymes he will use. Because of the necessity for rapid response in poetic debate only those who are in total command of the art would attempt it. My collection provides solid evidence that all professional Palestinian poet-singers have achieved such mastery.

3) After one of the two poet-singers makes his choice, the actual poetic debate starts immediately.

4) Each poet-singer presents his arguments and the debate continues for as long as half an hour or more, depending upon the importance of the subject and the ability of the poet-singers to carry on the argument with sufficient novelty to avoid boring the audience.

In most cases this kind of debate employs ḥida of quatrains only, and could conclude with an ʿatāba improvisation. However, I have recorded one performance in which the two poet-singers started with quatrains and concluded with an eight-line ḥida, and did not follow with a relevant ʿatāba improvisation as is customary. At the end of a ḥida debate the poet-singers usually follow the following technical steps:

1) When the arguments are finished and the audience is informally divided between the positions of the two poet-singers, one of the performers improvises an ʿatāba in which he suggests that peace between both parties is the best of all judgments.

2) Traditionally speaking, if a third poet-singer is present at the time of the debate, he is usually asked to decide which of the
two debating poet-singers has won. This third poet-singer is known as the arbitrator or judge (hakam). Normally he does not take sides, but improvises a few quatrains of catâba declaring that both poets are knowledgeable and right. Still, some of the more candid members of the audience may continue to argue about who won the debate, even after the wedding is over.

3) When the poetic debate is heated, the dancers of the sahjih stop clapping and singing the refrain and simply enjoy the exchange, but usually resume their active participation towards the debate’s end.

4) It is noticeable in my cassettes that in most debates the poet-singers slow the rhythm of their improvisations, perhaps in order to give themselves an opportunity to form their arguments and allow the audience to better understand and enjoy the subject of the debate.

The above is the most common framework of hida debate, and is generally followed by all Palestinian poet-singers.

The following is a brief portion of a hida debate performed at an outdoor wedding celebration as a sahjih was being held. It consists of an exchange on the single issue of understanding between religions, performed by the poet-singers Muḥammad al-Asadi and Qāsim al-Asadi.

i. Muḥammad says:

ha-li-knisih il bi-tlämi
lamma bi-tnddi cal-jämi
ayy wi-l-xilwih minha lämni
nur il-uxuwwih yä-huddår

Folk dancers’ refrain:
al ya ḥalāli ya māli

The church which is illuminated with light
When it calls the mosque, And the Druzes’ religious assembly place,
The light of brotherhood is shining from it, O audience.

ii. Qāsim responds:

il-masši bi-šahāhätuh
wi-l-yahūdi bi-tūrātuh
w-il-muslim bi-āyātuh

The Christian and his Holy Scripture,
The Jew and his Bible, The Moslem and his Quranic verses,
The following is another brief quotation from a twenty-two qua-train hidā debate on the contrasting issues of peace and war, between the poet-singers Shaheen Sbait and cAwni Sbait:

i. Shaheen opens the debate:
bi-s-silim ni-tgannayna If we sing about peace
li-l-mabādi ḥabbayna And if we love its principles,
bi-n‘ādi l-yyuqtul fīna
We will be the enemies of him who kills us.

ma nimši marrah b-īḍlāl
However, we never yield to humiliation.

Folk dancers’ refrain:
al ya ḥalāli ya māli
Oh, how delighted I am!

ii.  cAwni responds:
bi-ydallu cālī li-jbīn
The forehead will remain high
il ḥabb is-silīm ya Sāhin
If one loves peace, O Shaheen.
inšallah bi-ṣūdū l-gāybin
We hope that the [Palestinian] refugees will return,
ta n‘ammir cālāli il-cāl
So that we will establish great edifice.

Folk dancers’ refrain:
al ya ḥalāli ya māli
Oh, how delighted I am!

iii.  Shaheen:
is-saxs il-biršid it-tifāq
The person who preaches peace,
lā māt luḥ bīdī li-wrāq
I will sign agreements with him.
tājir bi-rjāl il-axlāq
Take pride only with the men of morals,
ib-mabda w-māc mabda w-kamāl
The men of principles and perfection.

Folk dancers’ refrain:
al ya ḥalāli ya māli
Oh, how delighted I am!

(Sbait 1975–92, Cas. 13)

Other quatrain-style ḥida debates in my collection:

2)  cAwni Sbait and cAfeef Naṣir: “Light and Darkness” (Sbait 1975–92, Cas. 28).
3)  Yūṣīf Maṣārwiḥ and cAbdallah Mūsā: “The Acceptance or the Refusal of a Gift” (Sbait 1975–92, Cas. 35).
4)  Yūṣīf Maṣārwiḥ and cAbdallah Mūsā: “The Types of Men” (Sbait 1975–92, Cas. 34).

There is a subgenre of ḥida based on eight-line stanzas which is also utilized in poetic debate. Usually the poet-singers switch rapidly from quatrain-style ḥida to eight-line ḥida as they perform, following
the same technical rules of poetic debate for both. My collection includes two poetic debates with eight-line *hida*:

1) ʿAWNI SBAIT and ʿAFEEF NAṢIR: “Freedom and Imprisonment” (SBAIT 1975–92, Cas. 24).

2) YΑQUB AL-KINĀNĪ and JIHĀD SBAIT: “The Old Poet and the Young One” (SBAIT 1982, 195–98, Cas. 29).

Palestinian poet-singers employ additional techniques of verbal duel in the *hida* genre that tend to emphasize verbal contrast, poetic form, rhythmic rendition, and musical recitation rather than subject matter. One such device involves sharing the improvisation and singing of the same *hida* quatrain: the first poet-singer improvise-sings the first two lines, upon which the second poet-singer immediately completes the quatrain while adhering to the same rhyme scheme and, apparently, the same theme as the first. They also share eight-line *hida* stanzas in the same way. Most of the poets practice this sharing process without any hesitation. Obviously the poet-singer who has to complete the quatrain, responding spontaneously to all changes introduced by the first poet-singer, is in a much more difficult position.

The following eight-line stanza by the late YUSIF MAJĀDLIH and YUSIF MAṢĀRWIH represents one version of the shared *hida*, distinguished by such features as the rhythmic stress the poets place on Arabic syllables with a doubling sign, the “unconventional” division of the poetic form, and the rapid tempo. Each poet improvise-sings two lines at a time instead of four lines, as is customary in the shared eight-line stanzas:

Majādlih:

\[
\text{ay ha-n-nāhi ʾš-šamāliyyih}
\]

\[
\text{aw badd āsmāʾ minkum il-kaff}
\]

Māsārwih:

\[
\text{wi-b-hayy il-xityāriyyih}
\]

\[
\text{wi-li ʾqāʾid marʾ is-saff}
\]

Majādlih:

\[
\text{baddi rjāl ilhā hayyih}
\]

\[
\text{il-wāḥad minkum yinṭah alf}
\]

And this left side [in reference to the folk dancers],

I want to hear a clap from you.

I greet the old men,

Those who are sitting and the *ṣaff sāḥjih* dancers.

I want men of supremacy,

Each one of you can gore but one thousand men.
Mašārwiḥ:

_al wi-dyūfi ṭa eīnayyi_  
.ibm-hādā l-balad wa-l-xillān_  

Welcome to my guests,  
And to the friends in this village.  

Folk dancers’ refrain:  

_al ya ḥalāli ya mālī_  

Oh, how delighted I am!  
(Sbait 1982, 177–80, Cas. 33)

The purpose of this technique is probably to emphasize the expertise and wit of the professional poet-singers, who like to impress and excite their audience with innovative improvisation and singing. The reaction to such a verbal duel is very favorable—the audience is usually quite impressed by the speed and the accuracy of the extemporization, and by the precise coordination of the folk dancers’ rhythmic hand-clapping.

Although the verbal duel quoted above does not amount to a serious poetic debate, my collection includes several other examples that meet the criteria of single-topic debate (Sbait 1982, 167–68).

**The Poetic Features of the *Mčanna* Genre**

The *mčanna* genre is an elegant type of improvised-sung poetry that is based on verses of four, six, eight, or more lines. Quatrains in the *mčanna* genre utilize an AAAB rhyme scheme, while longer stanzas follow an AAAAAAAB scheme. The last line of *mčanna* improvisations is the refrain, which is sung twice by the audience. *Mčanna* verses include a minimum of ten syllables and a maximum of fifteen syllables each. The genre is used at weddings and private parties as an indoor table song; poetic debates in *mčanna* take place in such a setting. *Mčanna* poems are mostly expressions of love, praise, the poet-singer’s subjective feelings, and other life concerns. The Palestinian poet-singers sing *mčanna* in a slow, free rhythm following the Arabic mode of *bayyāṭi*; the refrains are rhythmic and follow the same mode. Musical instruments may also accompany the poet-singers as they sing this genre, particularly when the audience sings the refrains (for details see Sbait 1982, 266–92).

**Debate in *Mčanna***

My collection includes one major debate in the *mčanna* genre consisting of ten units, in which the poet-singers Ḥanna Sbait and Jihād Sbait discuss the talent of the poet. The poem’s title, “The Mare of Our Poetry,” utilizes an expression that symbolizes the talent of the poet. The poem was improvised indoors, at a private party, while the poets
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and guests dined at a table.

i. Hanna opens with a quatrain of mcanna

*muhrit shir'ina ba'idha bi-aw-wal umir*
*bilmarrakih ba'mur ana alaiha amir*
*win'tabbacah wimcallamih 'atbara'ta*
*casirjiha bitfqi bitlaqi 'umur*

The mare of our poetry is still in the beginning of her age,
I order her strongly in the battlefield,
She is tamed and taught according to our character,
When she walks up, she finds a life over her saddle.

Audience’s refrain:
*casirjiha bitfqi bitlaqi 'umur*

When she walks up, she finds a life over her saddle. [Repeated twice]

ii. Jihad responds with an eight-line mcanna:

*muhrah mtabbcah in kazzait-ha wislit la-Bcalbaki*
*bathbit haddih haqiqah ma huwwi hakih*
*Ana ma brid akun malik aw 'indi mamlakih*
*ma brid akun 'abid la-la-hakim mushtaki*
*ghair 'a-darb il-amanih ma marrah basluki*
*b-sahit il-marrakih mithil asad 'asnunuh b-yusruki*
*law jahu shair il-qutrain 'aqbali ana*

A tame mare, if I become tough with her, can go all the way to Balbak [a city in Lebanon].
I can prove that this is true, it is not just talk.
I don’t want to be a king who has a kingdom,
I don’t want to be a slave who complains to the ruler,
I don’t follow but the path of fidelity,
I am like a lion who grinds his teeth in the battlefield.
If people bring “the poet of the two regions” [the Lebanese poet Khali Mutran] to debate me,
I will weave the strings of his poetry over my wings.

Aslaki shir'uh 'a-jinahi b-hay-yiki

Audience refrain:
*Aslaki shir'uh 'a-jinahi b-hayyiki*

I will weave the strings of his poetry over my wings. [Repeated twice]
iii. Hanna:

*Muhrit shē′rīna baʿridha brizz w-muna
wsirjiha l-mash-hūr kullithu hana
wimṭabbāʾah wim-ṣallamih rāk-fūfina
blamḥit baṣar biṭṭir fi kull iddina

Audience refrain:
blamḥit baṣar biṭṭir fi kull iddina

The mare of our poetry is still in her glory and hope,
Her famous saddle is salutary.
She is tamed and taught in our hands,
With the wink of an eye she surrounds the world.
With the wink of an eye she surrounds the world. [Repeated twice]

(Normilly, each unit of a *mcanna* poem is concerned with one theme, like the *catāba*. The *mcanna* is predominantly personal, an expression of the individual feelings and passion of the poet.

Other poetic debates in the *mcanna* genre in my collection:

1) Hanna Sbait, Jihād Sbait, and Muḥammad al-Asadi: “The Duty of the Poet-Singer towards His Host” (SBAIT 1975–92, Cas. 7).
3) Jihād Sbait and Hanna Sbait: “A Debate with the Beloved” (SBAIT 1975–92, Cas. 11).

**The Poetic Features of the Qarrādi Genre**

The *qarrādi* is the most popular indoor genre of improvised-sung poetry. The *qarrādi* involves the improvisation of couplets, quatrains, or eight-line stanzas, and is sung either solo or in alternation. *Qarrādi* couplets generally follow a rhyme scheme of AB/CB/DB, etc.; quatrains mostly rhyme AAAB or ABAB/CCCB, etc.; eight-line stanzas usually rhyme ABABABAC, etc. All *qarrādi* improvisations are followed by refrains, produced by the poets and repeated by the audience. The *qarrādi* refrains stem from the introductory couplets of each new improvisation. *Qarrādi* lines are short, entailing seven and seven, seven and eight, or seven and four syllables in every pair of lines. Poems in this genre are sung at weddings and private parties indoors; they are mainly rhythmical and are accompanied by folk dance, hand clapping, and musical instruments (both folk and modern, but particularly Arabic
drums and tambourines). The tempo differs from one improvisation to another. Several melodies are sung in fast duple meter, and follow the Arabic mode of siga. Qarrāḍi improvisations treat many subjects, including love, praise, description of the occasion, and nationalistic issues (for additional details see Sbait 1982, 293–325; 1989, 213–35).

DEBATE IN QARRĀḌI

Although the qarrāḍi genre is performed quite rapidly and although the poems are mostly descriptions of the occasion or expressions of the poet-singer’s feelings towards the occasion, some qarrāḍi improvisations are well-thought-out social and political commentaries. My collection includes several indoor poetic debates in the qarrāḍi genre that took place either at private parties or during wedding-related festivities as the poet-singers and their audience were dining and drinking. The following example, entitled “Lost between the Dark and the Fair Girls” and improvised-sung by Jihād Sbait and Ḥanna Sbait, is a good example of poetic debate in this genre.

i. Opening quatrain by Jihād:

talfant-illik yā-samra
can-numrah ṯnain

bain il-baida wi-s-samra
dā‘ū r-raqmain

Refrain by the audience:

bain il-baida wi-s-samra dā‘ū
r-raqmain

I phoned you dark girl, however, I dialed the other number [the wrong girl].

But I got the two numbers of the fair and the dark girls mixed up.

ii. Ḥanna responds with a quatrain of qarrāḍi:

bain il-baida wi-s-samra
tšit ‘il-qamra
m-ahla layālī l-x-amra
bain il-ahlain

Refrain by the audience:

bain il-baida wi-s-samra dā‘ū
r-raqmain

Between the fair and the dark girls the moon shines, How marvelous are the nights in which we drink wine amongst our relatives.

But I got the two numbers of the fair and the dark girls mixed up.

iii. Qarrāḍi of eight lines by Jihād:

w-xāyif min bā‘d il-malqa
yabdu il-hijrān

I am afraid that after the reunion, another separation of the beloved will occur,
w-aq'ud qāsi bi-l-furqah
laḏa n-nīrān
muhjit qalbī miḥtirqah
frāq il-xillān

lākin marrah bi-s-sirqah
bawfi la-d-dāin

Refrain by the audience:
bain il-bāīḍa wi-s-samra ḍārū
r-raqmān

iv. Jihād improvise-sings another qarrādi of eight lines, continuing the same debate:
tārik ahli wi-rbūrī
w-sukkān il-ḥāyy
w-nār il-furqah bi-dārī
cumī tikwī kāyy
zāyid buhāyī w-nūḥī
cā sitt il-ḥāyy

mīn iydāwi la jruḥī
ma bain w-bain

Refrain by the audience:
bain il-bāīḍa wi-s-samra ḍārū
r-raqmān

But I got the two numbers of the fair and the dark girls mixed up.

v. Jihād switches to a dialogue between himself and his beloved:
la tḏunni abu fāḏī
gālat b-ansāḥ
jāriḥ qalbī w-fwādī
mdallī l-islāk
l-aḥriq lik ha-l-barādī
il xabbū š-ṣubbāk
ḥaraqu-li fwādī
w-xabbū l-ḥilwīn

Refrain by the audience:
bain il-bāīḍa wi-s-samra ḍārū
r-raqmān

But I got the two numbers of the fair and the dark girls mixed up.

She said, “Father of Fāḏī [nickname of the poet], don’t think I will forget you,”
“You wound my heart, you stretched wires for me.”
I said, “I will burn the curtains which are hiding your window,”
“Because they burned my heart and hid my beautiful beloved.”

(Sbaīt 1982, 306–11; Cas. 11)
Each pair of lines in the above poem comprises unequal lines of seven and four syllables, with the poet-singers relying on enjambment to maintain fluency of meaning. Hanna participated in the debate until Jihad switched to the dialogue with his beloved, whereupon Hanna let Jihad develop the theme on his own.

It is worth mentioning that open love is an unconventional subject in Palestinian improvised-sung poetry; most love themes are symbolic and indirect. However, in both cases the gazal or love expression is decent and elegant. This topic is popular among the youth, and is therefore performed mostly by socially liberal poet-singers.

The following is a qarrādi poetic debate that took place at a private party. It deals with one specific nationalistic subject, the beauty of the homeland and the importance of its trees. Entitled “The Olive Tree in the Land of My Country,” it is sung alternately by Jihad Sbait and Hanna Sbait. In all nine quatrains of the poem the two poets describe the importance of the olive tree as a national symbol.

i. Jihad opens with a quatrain of qarrādi:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{bi yganni abu fadi} & \quad \text{Father of Fadi [nickname of Jihad] is singing,} \\
\text{rūkh w-qalbu b-yihdiha} & \quad \text{He is ready to give his soul and heart to her [his country].} \\
\text{iz-zaytūnīh b-arḍ blādi} & \quad \text{The olive tree in the land of my country,} \\
\text{ilgaym ib-yit'amšaq fiha} & \quad \text{The clouds are hung over it.}
\end{align*}
\]

Refrain by the audience:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{iz-zaytūnīh b-arḍ blādi ilgaym} & \quad \text{The olive tree in the land of my country, the clouds are hung over it.}
\end{align*}
\]

ii. Hanna develops the same theme:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{iz-zaytūnīh b-arḍ blādi} & \quad \text{The olive tree in the land of my country,} \\
\text{markūzih malha cādīh} & \quad \text{Is firmly rooted in the land.} \\
\text{bīdi sanadāth snādīh} & \quad \text{I supported it strongly with my own hand,} \\
\text{ḥatta ā-ṭamar yāwshiha} & \quad \text{And I am proud of it.}
\end{align*}
\]

Refrain by the audience:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{iz-zaytūnīh b-arḍ blādi ilgaym} & \quad \text{The olive tree in the land of my country, the clouds are hung over it.}
\end{align*}
\]
An olive tree in the land of my country
Is a cure for my heart.
My grandfather planted it,
And I am proud of it.

The olive tree in the land of my country, the clouds are hung over it.

You [Jihad] have a sense of honor in your poetry,
You sound happy with your poems.
The light shines from the [oil of] the olive tree,
So we have to be proud of it.

The olive tree in the land of my country, the clouds are hung over it.

It is worth mentioning at this point that the qarrādī resembles the ḥida in that it is based on couplets, quatrains, and eight-line stanzas; it also employs identical rhyme schemes. Although it is safe to say that both genres influence each other, they are otherwise different in many ways, particularly in their musical melodies, refrains, occasion of use, and even subject matter.

THE POETIC FEATURES OF THE QASIDIH GENRE

The qasīdīh genre of improvised-sung poetry (see Sbait 1986, 75–108) is also known colloquially as the zajaliyyīh (pl. zajaliyyāt). The word zajaliyyīh derives from zajal, a general term commonly applied to all improvised-sung poems that follow in the steps of the Classical Arabic qaṣīda, employing two hemistichs of equal length, a strict classical meter, and a monorhyme at the end of all couplets (Sells 1987; see also “Kasida” in the ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF ISLAM, 4: 713–14). Other qaṣāyīd (pl. of qaṣīdīh) follow the form of the Andalusian muwashshah (postclassical stanzaic Arabic poem), which has sections (stanzas) that end with
a concluding line and a final stanza that includes a *kharjah* (a closing verse with an important message). Refrains are not common in this genre. The *qasidih* verses have from eight to thirteen syllables each. Monorhyming poems have rhyme schemes of AB/CB/DB, etc., while five-line stanzas may rhyme ABACB/ABADB, etc. Two common topics are politics and the rebuke of (or dialogue with) the beloved. The *qasāyid* in my collection are sung in free rhythm and with a slow tempo, and follow the Arabic mode of *ṣiga* (SBAIT 1982, 326-57; 1986, 75-108).

**DEBATE IN QASİDİH**

It is unlikely that poet-singers would use the *qasidih* genre as a vehicle for one-on-one poetic debate since the *qasidih* is usually an individualistic performance, a subjective and personal expression of the artist. However, it is customary during the *qasidih* for the poet-singer to introduce a serious issue in which he criticizes or chastises another party, such as an authority, a ruler, the beloved, an aggressor, or the time, thus creating an indirect "debate."

My collection includes several *qasāyid* that involve such indirect debates. The following quotation, from a thirteen-quatrain *qasidih* improvised-sung by Muḥammad al-Raināwi at the annual conference commemorating "The Day of the Land," provides a brief illustration of this feature:

Quatrain 1.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{garibih mrah} \, \text{id-dunya garibih} & \\
\text{minha mufrihah w-minha karibih} & \\
\text{w-fi min bait fiyyuh l-farah dayir} & \\
\text{w-janbuu bait fi nakbih w-musibih} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

How strange are the phases of the world, how strange!

Some people are happy and some are sad.

There is a house in which happiness reigns,

And next to it a house with calamity and misfortune.

Quatrain 2.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ibn zayyad init bi-l-wata} & \\
\text{r} & \\
\text{wa-ana r} & \\
\text{bi ha-n-nakbih w-musibih} & \\
\text{ṣūf ṣ-sar} & \\
\text{ib ṣ-damm fāyir} & \\
\text{w-min dammuh bada yidfar} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

Son of Zayyad, you are a poet in the homeland,

And I am feeling this calamity and misfortune.

See the people, see the blood boiling,

And from their blood they start
In the above example, the poet-singer acts as an indirect spokesman for the audience, attempting to debate the policies of the local authorities and their treatment of the native Palestinians. Such debate is implied in the internal dialogue presented in the qaṣādīh.

My collection includes five additional qaṣāyīd which dwell on an indirect debate:

1) Tawfeeq al-Raināwi on the same occasion as above (SBAIT 1975–92, Cas. 13; 1986, 87).
2) ‘Awni Sbait on the same occasion as above (SBAIT 1975–92, Cas. 13).
3) Hanna Sbait, “One Thousand Times Welcome to Those Who Were Absent” (SBAIT 1975–92, Cas. 8).
4) Jihād Sbait, “For Such a Meeting I Have Been Waiting” (SBAIT 1975–92, Cas. 1, 1986, 83).
5) Yusif Maṣārwi, “The Tortured Abu Ḥṣayn Recites a qaṣīdīh” (SBAIT 1975–92, Cas. 3).

The Use of Time in Improvisation

Many have wondered how the poet-singers find the time to think out their lines as they spontaneously produce their poetry. This is a difficult question, the answer to which lies in the training of the poet-singer, in his experience, and in an understanding of the average time utilized by the poet-singers for their speedy compositions and renditions. My investigation indicates that the improvised-sung genres employed by the Palestinian poet-singers are of three major categories with regard to time and tempo: 1) genres improvised in a free rhythm with a slow tempo, including the normal type of ʿatāba (but excluding the speedy type, the ʿatāba naṣīl), the meʾanna, and the qaṣīdīh (as well as the mḥorabih, which is not a debate genre); 2) genres improvised with a faster tempo, including the ʿatāba naṣīl, the ḥida (except for the Bedouin style ḥida), and the qarrāḍī (and also the farʿāwi, which is not a debate genre); 3) genres with the fastest tempo, including the Bedouin style ḥida, the shared ḥida improvisations, and several qarrāḍī types (also some farʿāwi types). But whichever genre the poet-singer employs, from the slowest to the fastest, the time available to him to produce perfect rhyme schemes and well-thought-out ideas and at the same time maintain a precise tempo, rhythm, and meter (or exact syllable count) is certainly extremely limited.
On the average, a couplet of a moderate tempo takes ten to fifteen seconds to produce; a quatrain requires fifteen to twenty seconds; and a stanza of eight lines needs twenty to thirty seconds. When refrains are used by the audience, the poet-singer gains an additional five to ten seconds between the improvised units. This is how much time a poet-singer possesses to conceive, compose, and deliver his lines. In debate sessions where speedy genres are employed the time decreases even further, and the poet-singer must be a very quick thinker—he must practically read the mind of the first poet, accurately anticipate what he will say, quickly sense the rhyme arrangement and other relevant poetic features, and respond without hesitation. And he must do this over and over again for an extended period of time while switching from one genre and type to another. Yet all the professional Palestinian poet-singers who participated in my research produced their poetry quite successfully within the established time frames. How were they able to do this?

This ability is fostered through the training process undergone by the Palestinian poet-singers and the practical experience they gain over time. My investigation and personal interviews with fifteen poet-singers indicate that the period of self-training (tadrib) and apprenticeship (mumārasah) lasts from a minimum of two years to a maximum of ten years. It is unlikely, however, that any poet-singer could become a recognized professional at such an early age or with so little experience. Thus he may practice for a longer period with a seasoned or professional poet-singer “master,” acquiring the practical experience and knowledge that will enable him to stand in front of a large audience for hours producing poetry of all genres, and above all to debate with his partner about highly intellectual subjects. Once the poet-singer knows how to isolate himself from the audience and concentrate fully on his improvisation, he can improvise in any genre at any speed while following all the established poetic rules of that genre without difficulty. The more he practices and the more he is tested by another professional master, the easier his job becomes. In fact, performances of any length and debates on any subject become a matter of routine; at that point the question of speed and time are resolved for the new professional poet-singer (for further details see Sbait 1989, 230–32).

**Conclusion**

Debate (mhwārah) in improvised-sung poetry is a deeply rooted and commonly practiced tradition among the Palestinian poet-singers. It is well composed and rendered in accordance with established and complex techniques. It is an event that is much liked and anticipated by
the Palestinian audience. The educational value of the issues discussed in poetic debates is as important as their artistic value for the poet-singers and their audiences alike. The debates demonstrate the tremendous poetic talent of the poet-singers and their intellectual ability to engage in friendly debate on a vast number of issues and to present solid arguments in support of their position. The performance, forming the climax of a wedding eve or a private party, is enjoyed in all its aspects by both ordinary listeners and the intellectually inclined. Poet-singers are interested in it because it raises their performance to a higher standard and because it enables them to reach out to their audience and deliver any sociocultural, ethical, political, or educational message they wish. The performance is spiritually uplifting, and the interaction between the poet-singers and the folk dancers is very entertaining even to those members of the audience who are not directly involved.

The debate is, of course, only one aspect of the performance presented by the Palestinian poet-singers at a wedding or other joyous social occasion. Thus the description above does not cover all the major components of a Palestinian wedding sung-poetry performance, nor does it include the many other poetic forms and subjects utilized on such an occasion. I hope, however, that it has enabled the reader to appreciate the tradition of poetic debate in the improvised-sung poetry of the Palestinian poet-singers, and to recognize the originality of this oral tradition as well as its true poetic, musical, intellectual, and aesthetic merits. The poetic debate is an integral part of a greater tradition of oral poetry that forms a major contribution to Palestinian culture and its poetic-musical tradition.

NOTES

* This paper is dedicated to the memory of my father, the late Palestinian poet-singer Hanna Shlban Sbait, who passed away on 10 March 1992. Hanna Sbait improvised-sang poetry professionally for over fifty years at numerous weddings and various joyous events in Haifa and the Galilee. His dedication to this poetic-musical tradition and his love for his people and their sociocultural heritage was tremendous. He left behind a serious collection of improvised-sung poetry, part of a vast aesthetic tradition that will, I hope, continue to flourish.

1. The traditional "bachelors' party" of the Palestinians is limited to men. It is not exactly the same as the traditional Western bachelors' party, but it shares the basic concept.

2. This essay had to overlook many poetic, musical, and cultural details. For example, due to the author's literal translation such poetic features of the Arabic original as rhyme, meter, internal rhythm, idiomatic usage, metaphor, and words with cultural depth could not be expressed in the English versions. Also, the enormous num-
ber of songs employed in poetic debates meant that all quoted verses had to be excerpted from their larger poetic context, and thus may seem abrupt at times. Still, all the major representative aspects of the poetic debate are faithfully presented.

3. The olive is a common tree in the Galilee region known for its beauty and long life and as a symbol of peace. It is a source of livelihood for many Palestinian farmers. Christian Palestinians consider it to be holy, and are accustomed to bringing olive branches to be blessed at the church on Palm Sunday. Later they store these for use instead of incense to drive away the evil eye or to help cure the sick. According to Jihād and Ḥanna, the olive tree symbolizes the relationship between the Palestinian peasant, his land, and history. It is a source of pride for the poets as well as for the people.

4. “The Day of the Land” (Ya'um al-ʿArḍ) is a nationalistic occasion celebrated on 30 March of every year since 1976, when all Palestinian workers and employees went on strike for one complete day to express their resistance to a decision made by the Israeli authorities to requisition more Arab lands. It continues to be celebrated by Palestinian Arabs in various parts of the country as a protest against the Israeli authorities’ ongoing confiscation of their property.

5. The reference is to Tawfīq Zayyād, the famous Palestinian literary poet and the mayor of Nazareth.

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