



**BEDOUIN FOLK SONG AS CULTURAL ARCHIVE:  
GENDER, MEMORY, AND ORAL TRADITION IN THE GALILEE**

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**Abstract**

Folk song represents one of the most enduring forms of oral cultural expression in Bedouin society. Transmitted across generations through collective memory rather than written documentation, these songs function not only as aesthetic expressions but also as social archives preserving communal values, historical experience, and patterns of everyday life. This article examines the social and cultural roles of Bedouin folk songs in the Galilee, with particular attention to women's song traditions and their contribution to sustaining communal identity and transmitting cultural knowledge. Drawing on folkloristic theory, oral tradition studies, and ethnographic documentation, the study analyzes a corpus of songs associated with life-cycle rituals, agricultural labor, seasonal practices, and communal celebrations. The analysis shows that folk songs operate simultaneously as emotional expression, social regulation, and cultural pedagogy. Through simple language, repetitive structures, and collective performance, these songs encode moral norms, gender expectations, and shared historical memory. Women's performances in weddings, childbirth rituals, and everyday labor emerge as central sites of cultural transmission in largely oral societies. The study further demonstrates how Bedouin folk songs adapt to changing social realities while preserving older symbolic patterns, thereby maintaining continuity between past and present. By approaching Bedouin folk song as a form of cultural knowledge rather than merely artistic expression, the article highlights the role of oral musical traditions in shaping communal identity and sustaining social cohesion.

**Keywords:** Bedouin folklore, oral tradition, folk song, Galilee, cultural memory, women's songs, Arab folklore, collective identity, ethno-poetics, Middle Eastern oral culture.

**Introduction: Folk Heritage and Its Cultural Value**

The cultural renewal of societies does not occur through the complete abandonment of the past, but rather through careful exploration of inherited traditions—selecting their most valuable elements, developing them, and building upon them.<sup>1</sup> Among Bedouin communities, folk heritage preserves collective experience, expressing joy, hardship, hopes, and sorrows through proverbs, songs, poetry, and narratives. Folk song, in particular, occupies a central place in Bedouin popular culture, accompanying major social rituals. In recent decades, scholars have turned to these traditions to better understand Bedouin values and social life.<sup>2</sup>

For long periods, rural and Bedouin societies were largely non-literate, making oral transmission essential for preserving knowledge. Rhythm aided memory through the patterned

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<sup>1</sup>. Nabil'Alqam, "A Study of Heritage and Palestinian Folk Heritage," *Heritage and Society Journal* 1, no. 1 (1974): 119.

<sup>2</sup>. Clive Holes and Said Salman Abu Athera, "Poetry and Politics in Contemporary Bedouin Society," *ISBs* (2009): 97–98.

phrasing of proverbs and the rhyme of folk songs. Beyond aesthetic form, Bedouin poetry and song serve social functions, providing culturally accepted ways to express emotions and shared experiences in communal settings.<sup>3</sup>

Cultural symbols rooted in folk traditions often shape and sustain collective identity more effectively than official symbols because they arise organically from communal experience. Circulating in everyday life, they transmit values, traditions, and historical memory across generations, strengthening shared sentiment and reinforcing social cohesion within the community.<sup>4</sup>

Popular heritage, in both its material and intangible forms, serves as a key medium for expressing communal identity. This identity appears in cultural practices such as traditional clothing, cuisine, architecture, music, dance, and folk medicine, as well as in verbal traditions including myths, tales, songs, riddles, proverbs, and everyday expressions of the community.<sup>5</sup>

These elements of folk heritage reflect the accumulated cultural and human experience of generations and reveal the intellectual and civilizational development of a society. Folk literature, in particular, offers one of the most authentic forms of communal expression, articulating collective aspirations and emotions, and thus provides valuable insight into the worldview and social psychology of a community.<sup>6</sup>

Human beings are the central agents in the formation of heritage. Through their interaction with social, natural, and economic environments, they create and transmit cultural traditions. By preserving these practices through memory and performance, individuals act both as carriers and guardians of heritage, sustaining the collective identity of their communities.<sup>7</sup>

The popular character of folk heritage is marked by two key features: diffusion and continuity. It circulates across all social groups and is shared collectively within the community, unlike official culture often limited to elites. At the same time, it endures across generations, reappearing in each era with renewed vitality and emotional resonance.<sup>8</sup>

This popular character makes heritage a collective creation produced spontaneously by the community. Folk heritage reflects the feelings and social consciousness of the people and arises from their lived experiences. Unlike official culture, often shaped by cultural elites through deliberate planning, folk heritage develops organically within everyday communal life.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>.Ibid., 417.

<sup>4</sup>.Iḥsān al-Dīk, *Folk Heritage: A Reading of Its Early Origins* (Nablus: Dār al-Shāmil, 2023), 13; see also Sharīf Kana'na, *He Who Forgets His Past Is Lost* (Acre: Al-Aswār Foundation, 2000), 66.

<sup>5</sup>.Aḥmad Rushdī Šāliḥ, *Folk Literature* (Cairo: Egyptian Renaissance Library, 2013), 52.

<sup>6</sup>.Iḥsān al-Dīk, *Palestinian Folk Heritage: A Reading of Its Early Origins*, 14; see also Yaḥyā Jabr and 'AbīrḤamad, *Studies and Research in Palestinian Folk Literature* (Qalqilya: National House for Translation and Printing, 2006), introduction.

<sup>7</sup>.Aḥmad Mursī, *Studies in Folk Heritage* (Baghdad: House of General Cultural Affairs, 1986), 12; Sārī al-Dīk, *What the Narrators Tell of People's Sorrows and the Joys of Celebrations and Festivals* (Bāqa al-Gharbiyya: Al-Qasimi Academy of the Arabic Language, 2014), 13.

<sup>8</sup>.Mahmoud Dhihni, *Folk Literature: Its Concept and Content* (Cairo: Dar al-Ittihad al-'Arabi li-l-Tiba'a, 1972), 27.

<sup>9</sup>.Sharif Kana'na, "The Role of Folk Heritage in Strengthening Identity," *Heritage and Society* 6, no. 22 (1993): 10.

Popular literature reflects the collective emotional consciousness of society and is transmitted primarily through oral tradition across generations. In this process, communal participation often outweighs individual authorship. As a result, folk literature represents the expressive culture of ordinary people, preserved through memory, performance, and shared tradition, whether its creators are known or anonymous.<sup>10</sup>

Because folk heritage extends across both space and time and encompasses diverse aspects of life, it necessarily exhibits flexibility and multiplicity of forms. Its meaning is not limited to systems of beliefs and popular conceptions—though these often dominate—but also extends to the sphere of everyday practices, customs, and patterns of behavior. These practices form an integral part of the cultural system through which communities organize their social experience.<sup>11</sup>

In folk literature, language itself is not regarded as an end but as a means of expression used to achieve communicative purposes. This understanding corresponds with the classical definition proposed by Ibn Jinni, who described language as “sounds through which people express their purposes.” In this sense, folk expression privileges communication and meaning rather than linguistic refinement for its own sake.<sup>12</sup>

Folk literature includes many forms such as folktales, myths, legends, proverbs, sayings, riddles, and heroic narratives, as well as folk songs, including those traditionally performed by women. Among these forms, the folk song is especially responsive in recording social events, emotions, and collective experiences. Characterized by simplicity, spontaneity, and adaptability, folk songs function as living records of community life. Women’s songs reflect social realities and help shape cultural values and aspirations.<sup>13</sup>

Although the cultural significance of Bedouin oral traditions has been widely recognized, scholarship has often focused on poetic form or political themes, leaving the everyday social role of folk songs less explored. In many Bedouin communities, songs function as living practices embedded in labor, ritual, and communal interaction, sustained through oral performance rather than written preservation. Attention to women’s songs—performed in weddings, childbirth, and agricultural work—reveals their importance in transmitting cultural values and communal memory. This study therefore examines Bedouin folk songs in the Galilee as cultural archives that preserve social experience while adapting to changing realities, with particular emphasis on women’s role in sustaining and renewing these traditions.<sup>14</sup>

The article situates Bedouin folk song within the broader framework of oral tradition and folk literature, then examines the main contexts in which these songs are performed—life-cycle rituals, seasonal labor, and communal gatherings. Through selected examples, it shows

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<sup>10</sup>.Ahmad RushdiSalih, *Folk Literature* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahda al-Misriyya, 2013), 16.

<sup>11</sup>.Rif’at Salam, *In Search of Arab Heritage: A Critical Methodological Perspective* (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 1989), 196.

<sup>12</sup>.ahya Jabr, “The Pre-Islamic Qasida Reproduced in Folk Poetry,” *Center for Gulf States Folklore*, no. 43 (1966): 37.

<sup>13</sup>.Khalifa Mahmoud Jadallah, *Folk Literature in Palestine: Women’s Songs as a Model* (Nablus: An-Najah National University, 2010), 10; see also Idris Jaradat, “Identity and Belonging in the Folk Song,” *Journal of Human Sciences*, Ali Kafi University Center, Tindouf, vol. 7 (2023).

<sup>14</sup>.Ihsan al-Dik, *Folk Heritage: A Reading in Its Early Foundations* (Nablus: Dar al-Shamil, 2023), 13–14.

how folk songs function as emotional expression, social guidance, and cultural transmission, shaping collective memory and reinforcing social belonging.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Concept of the Folk Song**

From a linguistic perspective, a song refers to words that are sung or poetic lines that are chanted, often accompanied by music. In *Lisān al-‘Arab*, singing is defined as raising and prolonging the voice; thus, among Arabs any voice that is elevated and extended may be considered singing.<sup>16</sup>

From a terminological perspective, the folk song has attracted considerable attention in both Western and Arab folklore studies because of its deep presence in collective consciousness and emotional life. It is generally defined as a lyrical form created spontaneously within the community and transmitted orally across generations. Through its simple structure and accessible language, the folk song records the experiences, beliefs, and emotions of ordinary people. As Idris Jaradat observes, folk songs function as cultural media through which identity and belonging are expressed and reinforced within society.<sup>17</sup>

Ahmad Mursi similarly defines the folk song as a recurring song preserved in the collective memory of a community and transmitted orally across generations. Its continuity derives from the shared emotional consciousness of the people who perform and preserve it.<sup>18</sup> Folk song is among the most widespread forms of folk literature, combining word and melody and performed collectively during moments of joy, sorrow, celebration, and hardship. In traditional societies, song becomes a rhythmic expression of life itself, accompanying individuals from birth to death and providing a distinct social and expressive function beyond ordinary speech.<sup>19</sup>

### **Folk Song as Cultural Expression: Concept, Origins, and Social Function**

Folk songs possess a distinctive cultural structure that helps reinforce social values and shared norms within the communities that produce and transmit them. In this sense, the folk song plays an important role in shaping collective character and cultural identity. The inherited repertoire of songs accompanies many stages of human life—from birth and early childhood to major life events and even moments of mourning. From the earliest signs of pregnancy, families express hope and anticipation through songs that celebrate the coming child and honor the mother who carries new life. Other songs accompany childbirth and welcome the newborn into the social world. Through such practices, song becomes a medium through which communities gradually transmit values, emotions, and cultural expectations. Characterized by simplicity, sincerity, and spontaneity, the folk song reflects the aesthetic sensibility and lived experience of the community that sustains it.<sup>20</sup>

Folk songs appear in nearly all human societies. They often express social realities more directly than formal poetic traditions because they emerge from everyday life and communal experience. Closely tied to specific occasions and practices, they reflect customs, traditions,

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<sup>15</sup>.Dihni, 1972, 27.

<sup>16</sup>. Jaradat, 2023: 65.

<sup>17</sup>.Yusra Arnita, *Folk Arts in Palestine* (Beirut: Research Center, 1986), 32.

<sup>18</sup>.Ahmad Mursi, *The Folk Song: An Introduction to Its Study* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma‘arif, 2000), 23.

<sup>19</sup>.Nabila Ibrahim, *Forms of Expression in Folk Literature* (Cairo: Dar NahdatMisr, 2nd ed., 1974), 223.

<sup>20</sup>.Nadi Sari al-Dik, *What Storytellers Say of People’s Concerns and the Joys of Celebrations and Festivals*, 9–11.

and social norms in a language familiar to the community. One of their most visible features is the use of local dialects, which vary between rural, Bedouin, and urban settings. Thus, when a Bedouin woman sings while working in the fields or during communal celebrations, she naturally uses the vocabulary and expressions of her local environment, distinguishing her speech from that of neighboring villages or urban communities.<sup>21</sup>

Bedouin folk songs represent a significant branch of folk literary expression, reflecting the emotions, values, and collective consciousness of Bedouin society. Rooted in lived experience, they embody rituals, customs, and social practices while offering a vivid portrayal of everyday life. These songs extend beyond wedding celebrations to accompany many aspects of communal existence, giving voice to shared emotions such as joy and sorrow, hardship and hope, and expressing the resilience and aspirations of the community.<sup>22</sup>

Bedouin poets often compose their verses using expressions rooted in the community's cultural memory. These include familiar formulas, traditional motifs, and well-known figures, some dating back to the pre-Islamic period. As a result, Bedouin poetry blends individual creativity with inherited tradition, drawing from a cultural reservoir shaped by nomadic life, adventure, and social values, while its language and imagery reflect the ideals and patterns of Bedouin popular culture.<sup>23</sup>

It is difficult, however, to determine the earliest origins of the folk song. One field study observes that although folk songs are widely circulated and repeatedly performed in many places, their beginnings remain largely unknown and their earliest roots difficult to trace.<sup>24</sup> What can be stated with greater certainty, however, is that folk heritage—including folk songs—extends far back in history. A study on folk dance, for instance, suggests that folk songs reach as far back as the dawn of ancient civilizations.<sup>25</sup>

Folk songs have evolved alongside human society, accompanying the transformation of communities from nomadic Bedouin life to more settled forms of existence. Because they have been transmitted orally for centuries, their precise origins remain uncertain. It is often difficult to determine whether the narratives associated with particular songs reflect historical events or later explanations created to accompany them. Some scholars nevertheless trace links between folk songs and early forms of Arabic poetic expression.

The roots of folk song may extend to early Arabic literary culture. Hussein Nasar, for instance, links the poetic form of *rajaz* to early popular verse distinct from classical poetry. Folk songs are typically anonymous and composed in vernacular language. Initially improvised by individuals, they spread through repetition, gradually changing as communities modified them until both text and melody became collective cultural property.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>. Hilmi Badir, *The Influence of Folk Literature on Modern Literature* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1986), 44–45.

<sup>22</sup>. Ayid Mahmoud Abu Farda, *The Folk Song in the Palestinian Wedding* (Amman: Dar Hammurabi Publishing, 2008), 3.

<sup>23</sup>. Yitzhak Bailey, "Social Values in Bedouin Poetry," *Studies on Bedouin Society*, vol. 3 (1972): 43–46.

<sup>24</sup>. *Heritage Song Collections*, prepared by the Public Library, Baqa al-Gharbiyya: Public Library, 2014, introduction.

<sup>25</sup>. Ola Ibrahim and Nadia al-Damardash, *A Study of Folk Dance: An Introduction to Folklore Studies* (Cairo: Ain for Human and Social Studies, 2007), 25.

<sup>26</sup>. *Ibid.*

It is also difficult to determine precisely when the term “folk song” itself first emerged. Nevertheless, it can be stated with confidence that folk songs are produced spontaneously by the community and represent a collective rather than individual creation. They belong to the realm of oral circulation, arising among the people and preserved by them. In this sense, the folk song may be described as a popular artistic expression that commemorates events and transforms them into enduring cultural memory.<sup>27</sup>

Ahmad Mursi defines the folk song as a repeated song preserved in the collective memory of a community and transmitted orally across generations, deriving its existence from the shared emotional consciousness of the people.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, the folklorist Alexander Haggerty Krab describes the folk song as a lyrical composition set to melody whose origins are unknown, which once circulated widely among illiterate communities and continues to remain alive in popular usage.<sup>29</sup>

Regardless of their precise historical origins, folk songs represent an authentic expression of the emotional life of the people, reflecting communal hopes, joys, and sorrows. They may be viewed as a parallel tradition to Arabic poetry, shaped by different environments and social conditions. Although classical poetry received greater scholarly attention, folk songs remain deeply rooted in collective consciousness and offer a vivid representation of social life and cultural reality.<sup>30</sup>

### **Types of Folk Song**

Folk songs may be classified in several ways. In addition to being categorized according to their themes and purposes, they may also be classified according to their structural form, their general emotional tone (such as sorrow or joy), their musical patterns, and the gender of the performer. Certain songs are traditionally performed only by women, others exclusively by men, while some forms are shared by both genders.<sup>31</sup>

Women have historically performed folk songs in a wide range of social contexts extending from early childhood to lamentations at death. They sang for their children, fathers, brothers, husbands, and daughters during weddings and joyful occasions, and they also sang songs of sorrow when mourning the loss of loved ones. Within folk literature, women are no less creative than men; accordingly, female singers acquired distinctive titles reflecting their role in oral performance. The term *al-badda* ‘a derives from the Arabic root meaning “to create” or “to innovate,” referring to the woman who improvises verses, while *al-qawwāla* denotes the lead performer skilled in recitation and poetic expression. In mourning songs, the female performer is often referred to as *al-raddāḥa*, the woman who leads lamentation chants.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>.Ahmad Mursi, *The Folk Song: An Introduction to Its Study*, Cultural Books Series 138 (Cairo: Egyptian General Book Organization, 1979), 25.

<sup>28</sup>.Mahmoud al-Hafni, *Three Weddings that Led the Treasury to Bankruptcy* (Cairo: Dar al-Katib for Printing and Publishing, 1986), 44.

<sup>29</sup>.Mursi, 1979, 23.

<sup>30</sup>.Alexander Haggerty Krab, *Folklore Studies*, trans. Rushdi Salih (Cairo: Dar al-Kitab al-‘Arabi, 1967), 253; al-‘Attari, 2008, 14; Ali Afkayda, “Imagery in the Palestinian Folk Song,” *Heritage Journal*, Inash al-Usra Society, al-Bireh, vol. 3, no. 1 (1978): 51.

<sup>31</sup>.Jiryis Khoury, *Palestinian Folklore and Folk Song: A Study in History, Terminology, Art, and Distinctive Phenomena* (Haifa: Arabic Language Academy, 2013), 103.

<sup>32</sup>.Linguistically, *badda* ‘a is an intensive form derived from the verb *bada* ‘a, meaning “to create” or “to originate something without prior example,” while *bādi* ‘a is the active participle from the same root. In the context of folk

Folk songs offer a vivid and realistic portrayal of human life in its many situations, especially in the relationship between people and their natural environment. Human beings naturally seek to establish a balanced relationship with their surroundings and with the broader natural world. Consequently, folk songs often transform everyday environmental elements into aesthetic images. In Bedouin and rural communities, this aesthetic sensitivity strengthens communication within society, since individuals reinterpret familiar landscapes as symbols of beauty and cultural meaning.<sup>33</sup>

Folk songs often reflect the natural environment, celebrating places such as springs, mountains, valleys, and fields, as well as plants like olive trees, herbs, and wheat. They also convey social values central to communal life, including hospitality, generosity, courage, and honor. Women's folk songs commonly follow simple rhythmic patterns suitable for dancing and clapping. In other contexts, especially during domestic work, songs may be sung without strict rhythm, serving to ease fatigue and relieve boredom during daily tasks.<sup>34</sup>

Women's folk songs are commonly divided according to performance style into two major types: *mardūda* and *mahāhāh*. The *mardūda* is a women's song composed of simple, rhythmic folk verses accompanied by a melody that may vary slightly from region to region. The song is called *mardūda* ("the repeated song") because its melody is repeated throughout the performance regardless of the number of verses. Rhythm is often maintained by percussion instruments such as the *darbuka* (goblet drum) or by hand clapping from accompanying women. The song also contains a recurring central idea or motif that connects the different verses, making it easy to memorize and transmit across generations.<sup>35</sup>

An example from a traditional wedding procession song illustrates this structure:<sup>36</sup>

*We plant nothing but cardamom bright —  
Our groom rides proudly through the night.*

*We plant nothing but fragrant bloom —  
Our groom awaits within the room.*

*We plant nothing but cinnamon fair —  
Our groom appears in wedding flair.*

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song, *badda'a* or *bādi'a* refers to the woman who first composes or performs a song that other women have not previously heard. See 'Abd al-'Aziz Abu Hudba, "The Role of the *Badda'a* in the Development of the Palestinian Song," *Heritage and Society* 2, no. 2 (1976): 30.

<sup>33</sup>.Al-Dik, *What Storytellers Say*, 18.

<sup>34</sup>.Jadallah, 2010, 7–8.

<sup>35</sup>.The term *tarwīda* derives from the verb *rawwada*, meaning "to repeat a melody again and again." Many people use the word *tarāwīd* to refer specifically to women's songs performed for the bride, with *tarwīda* as the singular form. Nabil 'Alqam defines it as a women's song performed solo, either in the house or outdoors, often to express sorrow or complaint. By implication, *tarāwīd* are usually sad and emotionally charged songs whose primary purpose is to bid farewell to the bride and move both her and the women around her to tears, sometimes even to wailing, especially if the bride is leaving for a distant place. If one examines women's songs and melodies in Palestine, one finds a common characteristic: the melody is repeatedly returned to and reiterated despite changes in the words or subject matter within the same song. In other words, the song begins and ends with the same recurring musical phrase, which is why it came to be called *tarwīda*. See Khalifa2010, 9.

<sup>36</sup>.Na'ilaLabbas, *Women's Folkloric Songs for Engagement and Marriage Occasions* (Jerusalem: The Modern Arabic Press, 2007), 13.

*We plant nothing but thyme so sweet —  
Our groom walks proud through every street.*

The performance of women's singing typically occurs in two distinct ways. In the first, women sing collectively through a call-and-response pattern between the lead singer and the rest of the group. The lead performer, the *qawwāla*, sings the initial verse, and the other women repeat it. Sometimes another woman joins the lead singer to strengthen the voice and project it across the gathering. The two performers coordinate the selection of verses, which are then echoed by the group. In some regions the lead singer is called *al-badda* 'a, highlighting her ability to improvise verses and adapt them creatively to the circumstances of the occasion.<sup>37</sup>

Folk songs in Bedouin and rural Palestinian traditions appear in diverse forms tied to specific social contexts and life-cycle events. Embedded in everyday life, they accompany birth, childhood, seasonal celebrations, marriage rituals, and communal labor. In women's traditions especially, songs are often classified by performance context, including children's songs, ritual songs linked to events such as circumcision and marriage, seasonal songs, and wedding ceremony songs. Each type reflects particular social situations and conveys distinct cultural and emotional meanings.

#### **Songs of Childhood and Lullabies**

Songs associated with childhood represent one of the earliest encounters between the individual and the surrounding cultural environment. Usually performed by mothers or older women, these songs soothe the child, express maternal affection, and symbolically welcome the newborn into the community. Children's songs may include lullabies sung by adults, songs performed by children themselves, and songs by adults centered on childhood themes, introducing cultural values and emotional expression at an early stage of life.<sup>38</sup>

For example, when a son is born, the mother may sing:

*Necklace of my heart,  
How long I waited for you,*

*A gift from God —  
May loved ones rejoice with you.*

She may also express her wish for his long life:

*The moon rose bright  
From the eastern sky,  
My Muhammad, beloved of his mother —  
May he never die.*

*The moon rose shining  
In gentle light,  
My Muhammad, beloved of his mother —*

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<sup>37</sup>.Jadallah, 2010, 8.

<sup>38</sup>.Nadi Sari al-Dik, *What the Storytellers Say of People's Concerns and the Joys of Celebrations and Festivals*, 85.

*M may he live long and bright.*<sup>39</sup>

Before sleep, mothers also sing lullabies meant to calm and comfort the child:

*Sleep now, sleep now,  
I'll bring you a dove somehow.*

*Little dove, do not fear,  
I'll make my child smile and sleep here.*

### **Ritual Songs of Circumcision**

Another category of songs accompanies the circumcision ritual (*tahūr*), which is traditionally celebrated as an important stage in a boy's life. Preparations for this ritual often involve festive gatherings, and women perform songs to encourage the child and create an atmosphere of celebration rather than anxiety. When the circumciser arrives, women sing:

*Adorn him well, O beautifier,  
Pass him to his mother,*

*Precious tears fall gently from his face.  
Adorn him well, O beautifier,*

*Pass him to his uncle,  
Precious tears fall softly to his anklet.*

They may also sing:  
*Circumciser of the boys,  
We beg you in God's name*

*Work with care and tender hands  
And spare them needless pain.*

*Do not hurt the little ones  
As you perform your part,*

*Or we will blame you loudly  
for the tears you make them start.*

These songs demonstrate how ritual performance transforms a potentially frightening experience into a communal celebration.<sup>40</sup>

### **Seasonal and Festival Songs**

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<sup>39</sup>.Na'ila Labbas, *My Grandmother, My Grandmother: Motherhood and Childhood in Palestinian Folklore* (Jerusalem: The Modern Arabic Press, 2002), 25.

<sup>40</sup>.Al-Dik, *What the Storytellers Say*, 77.

Children and adults also perform songs associated with specific seasons and religious celebrations. These songs mark communal time and reinforce shared cultural rhythms throughout the year. For example, when the fasting month of Ramadan ends and the Eid celebration begins, children may sing joyful verses such as:

*Tomorrow is Eid — we celebrate,  
We'll slaughter Sa'id's cow at the gate.*

*But Sa'id owns no cow at all,  
Then we'll slaughter his daughter tall!*<sup>41</sup>

These playful songs express excitement and anticipation surrounding communal festivities.

### **Wedding Songs**

The popular wedding is regarded as a moment of great joy that young men await with intense anticipation. It marks the transition into a new stage of life—one that brings responsibility and maturity. A young man aspires to marriage, while his family begins the process of searching for a suitable bride who will be appropriate both for him and for the family as a whole. Within this context, women traditionally perform songs and chants throughout all stages of the wedding ceremonies, beginning with the delegation that formally requests the bride's hand (the *jahah*), continuing through the engagement, and extending to later stages such as the bridal procession and the wedding night itself.<sup>42</sup>

Before the engagement stage, once a young man has chosen a prospective bride—often after consulting his family, or sometimes following their suggestion—the next step is to determine whether her family would accept the proposal. The girl's reputation and qualities are often already known, encouraging the groom's family to pursue the match, especially if the family enjoys good standing or prior kinship ties.

To discreetly determine the bride's family's intentions, a woman is usually sent to inquire informally and return with a clear answer. This role is most often performed by the young man's mother, sister, or grandmother, though in some cases another trusted woman may undertake it. She is known as the *naqqada*, whose task is essentially to “test the waters” and gauge the willingness of the bride's family to proceed with the marriage proposal.

Once these private consultations have ended and the bride's family signals approval, the process moves to the public stage. A formal delegation known as the *jahah*—representing the groom's family—visits the bride's home to officially request her hand in marriage. The groom's father organizes the delegation and prepares the customary arrangements required for the visit according to local traditions.

At the bride's house, her father gathers relatives and neighbors to receive the delegation. A central ritual during this meeting is the serving of Arabic coffee. A cup is placed before the head of the delegation, who sets it down without drinking and formally expresses the request for the bride's hand. The bride's father then indicates acceptance with courteous words, inviting

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<sup>41</sup>.Ibid., 77.

<sup>42</sup>.Ayd Mahmud Abu Farda, *The Folk Song in the Palestinian Wedding* (Amman: Hammurabi Publishing House, 2008), 5.

the guests to drink their coffee. Discussion of the dowry follows according to Islamic custom. After agreement is reached, Surat al-Fatiha is recited, the engagement is confirmed, and women celebrate the occasion with ululations.

### **Engagement Songs**

After private consultations confirming the suitability of the bride and the willingness of her family, the process moves to the public stage. A formal delegation known as the *jahah*, representing the groom's family, visits the bride's home to request her hand in marriage. The groom's father organizes the delegation and prepares the customary arrangements for the visit according to local traditions.

At the bride's house, her father gathers relatives and neighbors to receive the delegation. A key ritual during the meeting involves serving Arabic coffee. A cup is placed before the head of the delegation, who sets it down without drinking and formally states their request for the bride's hand. The bride's father signals acceptance with courteous words, inviting them to drink the coffee. The discussion then turns to the dowry in accordance with Islamic custom. After agreement is reached, Surat al-Fatiha is recited, the engagement is confirmed, and arrangements are made for the marriage contract (*katb al-kitab*), while women celebrate with joyful ululations.

On the day of the engagement, relatives and friends gather at the groom's house, and the women begin to sing celebratory songs:

*Evening has come —  
May God bless you all,*

*You seek a wedding —  
May joy be your call.*

Another verse may follow:

*People of joy,  
May your joy remain,*

*The sound of ululation  
Woke me again.*

And

*O people of the wedding day,  
May your joy forever stay.*

*The sound of ululations bright  
Awoke me gently from the night*

*O people of the wedding cheer,  
May your happiness appear.*

*The ringing cries of women's song  
Pulled me from my bed ere long.*

At the end of the engagement celebration, the women compliment the bride's father, singing:

*Blessings on the bride's dear sire,  
May God grant him heart's desire.*

*We asked him for his daughter fair,  
He gave a gazelle beyond compare.*

### **Clothing and Preparation Songs**

As the wedding approaches, garments are prepared for the bride, groom, and their relatives. Women sing songs celebrating the coming ceremony and the groom's future.

*On your wedding day,  
O groom so dear,  
What joy and feasts  
Will gather here.*

These songs reflect the excitement surrounding the preparation for marriage.

### **Henna Night Songs**

The henna ceremony, held on the evening before the wedding, is another central ritual accompanied by women's singing. While preparing the henna mixture, women chant celebratory verses such as:

*Rise, O bride,  
Adorn your hand,*

*The lights shine bright  
Across the land.*

These songs praise the bride's beauty and mark the transition into married life.

### **Bridal Farewell Songs (*Tarāwīd*)**

After the henna ceremony, women perform farewell songs known as *tarāwīd*. These songs often express sadness and emotional attachment, particularly when the bride leaves her family home.

*A gentle gazelle  
So young and fair,*

*How could her family  
Send her there?<sup>43</sup>*

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<sup>43</sup>.Jadallah, 2010, 9.

Such songs emphasize the emotional dimension of marriage and the bonds between family members.

### **Wedding Procession Songs**

On the day of the wedding itself, the groom is ceremonially prepared and escorted in a festive procession. Women sing while encouraging the men to prepare the horse for the groom:

*Prepare the mare and bind her rein,  
So the groom may ride again.*

These songs accompany the final celebratory stage of the wedding ritual.

### **Work Songs**

Work has long been regarded as a valued and even sacred activity in many societies, particularly in religious contexts. The Qur'an itself encourages productive labor: "And say, 'Work, for God will see your work, and so will His Messenger'" (Qur'an 9:105). As people engage in labor, they often seek ways to relieve fatigue and lighten the burden of long hours of work. Singing therefore emerged as one of the earliest expressive and recreational practices accompanying human activity throughout life.<sup>44</sup> Among Arabs, singing has long accompanied work. Workers often used song and poetry for entertainment, emotional release, and relief from the hardships of daily labor. Singing helped reduce physical fatigue, renew energy, and strengthen morale. Many forms of labor were associated with song, including digging wells, construction, and caravan songs known as *huda'*, used by camel drivers to regulate the rhythm of travel.<sup>45</sup>

Some scholars have suggested that early Arabic poetry itself may have originated in forms closely related to song, particularly during the pre-Islamic period. According to this view, early poetic expression first emerged in the form of songs performed during specific occasions such as rituals and communal labor.<sup>46</sup>

The earliest songs in human societies were closely connected to practical activities. Work songs, performed individually or collectively, helped regulate the rhythm of physical labor, coordinating movement and reducing fatigue during long hours of work. Such rhythmic patterns appear in songs associated with harvesting, fruit gathering, fishing, and other manual tasks.<sup>47</sup> The main function of work songs is to encourage workers and sustain their energy through collective performance. These songs appear in many contexts, including agricultural work such as plowing, harvesting, threshing, and olive picking, as well as construction, fishing, shepherding, and various domestic tasks. The following sections present examples of these work songs:<sup>48</sup>

### **Harvest Songs**

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<sup>44</sup>.Nadi Sari al-Dik, *What the Narrators Say: People's Concerns and the Joys of Celebrations and Festivals* (Baq al-Gharbiyya: Al-Qasimi Academy for the Arabic Language, 2014), 141.

<sup>45</sup>.Husayn Nassar, *Arab Folk Poetry* (Beirut: Iqra' Publications, 1980), 115.

<sup>46</sup>.Muhammad Mandur, *Literature and Its Arts* (Cairo: NahdatMisr Publishing House, 1974), 156.

<sup>47</sup>.Al-Dik, 2014, 141.

<sup>48</sup>.Gustav Dalman, *The Diwan of Palestinian Poetry*, trans. Nimr Sarhan (Beirut: Palestine Liberation Organization, Department of Information and Culture, 1980), vol. 2, 46.

Bedouin communities became familiar with agriculture after periods of settlement, cultivating crops such as wheat and barley—both essential staples used for bread, cracked wheat (*jareesh*), bulgur, and other basic foods. Over time, agriculture acquired an importance comparable to sheep herding within Bedouin economic life. Farmers would mark their fields and plow them using a wooden plow pulled by a donkey or horse, turning the soil after seeds had been scattered during the autumn season, usually before the first rainfall. The seeds would remain in the soil throughout the winter until the arrival of summer.<sup>49</sup>

The harvest season, which begins toward the end of April, was traditionally considered a season of abundance and blessing. It is the period during which crops are gathered and stored, and it typically lasts between two and three months. When the fields were extensive, landowners often hired additional harvesters to assist with the work.<sup>50</sup>

During harvest, the entire family took part in the work. Men and women harvested crops together, cutting grain with sickles or gathering it by hand. The cut stalks were left in piles that were later collected into larger stacks called *hilla*. In the next stage, known as *rajad*, the stacks were loaded onto a wooden frame called a *qadim* and carried by pack animals to the *baydar*, the communal threshing floor.<sup>51</sup>

The harvest season required great endurance because it took place during the intense heat of midsummer. To maintain their energy and coordinate their work, men and women often sang together while harvesting. Sometimes the harvester even addressed his sharpened sickle in song. These chants created a shared rhythm that eased fatigue and turned hard labor into a collective social activity.<sup>52</sup> Here are some samples:

*My sickle, bright—who polished thee?  
The smith himself prepared the steel.*

*He honed its edge within his trade,  
May that small case in honor stay.*

The harvester emphasizes that his sickle is of fine quality, marked with decorative notches on its handle. He notes with pride that it was brought from Gaza, a place once known for producing sieves and various agricultural tools. He sings:

*My sickle, marked with shining lines,  
From Gaza's markets it is mine.*

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<sup>49</sup>.See *Intangible Cultural Heritage: Harvesting and the Harvest Season*, Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, <https://ich.gov.jo/node/58930>; see also Nadia al-Batma, "June: The Month of 'Iqlash'," *Afaq al-Bi'a wa al-Tanmiyya* (Environmental and Development Horizons), electronic magazine, no. 4 (2008), <https://www.maan-ctr.org/magazine/Archive/Issue4/torath/torath1.htm>

<sup>50</sup>.Interview with Ghazala Mahmoud al-'Ali (Umm Kamil), al-Sha'baniyyin clan, al-Sawa'id tribe, age 72, village of Kammana, 25 August 2020, 13:30.

<sup>51</sup>.Saleh Ziyadneh, *Singing and Music among the Bedouin* (Hebron: Rabitat al-Khalil Press, 2011), 55–56.

<sup>52</sup>.The sickle and *qalush* are traditional harvesting tools; *taghmir* refers to gathering harvested grain into piles; the *qadim* is a wooden carrying frame attached to a pack animal for transporting the crop.

*My sickle, rough with ringing sound,  
It sweeps the wheat across the ground.*<sup>53</sup>

Days when dew falls upon the fields are considered especially favorable for work. Harvesters try to take advantage of these moments, when the moisture softens the crop and makes cutting easier. As they work, they repeat songs celebrating the blessing of the dew:

*dew, O mother of the grain,  
You give us strength to work again.*

*Without the dew upon the land,  
My harvest could not fill my hand.*

They also sing verses to encourage themselves to continue working without fatigue. With great enthusiasm they challenge one another through song, saying:

*Go home, you bankrupt, leave the field,  
A pot of food the hearth will yield.  
You'll find it filled with cracked wheat stew—  
God spare us from a life like you.*

Through these songs the harvesters sustain their energy and transform the labor of harvesting into a shared communal activity marked by rhythm, competition, and humor.

Harvesters often begin singing and responding to one another when fatigue and boredom set in. Through this exchange they entertain themselves and momentarily forget the strain of labor. A playful rivalry usually develops between the **shaquq** (the worker who opens the row for the harvesters) and the **jahush** (the one working from the opposite side). The shaquq begins the challenge with the following verse:

*Jahush, lift your tail up high,  
That braided girl is not for you.*

*That braided girl belongs to me—  
I'll take her whether you agree.*

The jahush answers him with another teasing verse:

*Shaquq, lift your tail up high,  
That braided girl is not for you.*

*That braided girl belongs to me—  
I'll take her and outdo you too.*

Among the flirtatious verses sung during the harvest season are the following lines:

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<sup>53</sup>. Ziyadneh, 2011, 56.

God is great, O harvest maids,  
Mothers of the patterned braids.

God is great, O harvest bright,  
Mothers of the beaded nets of light.

The words of these songs are generally marked by modesty, since the admiration expressed concerns the outward appearance of the woman rather than her physical charms. The song praises the *bukal*, the decorative pins or ornaments that gather and adorn a woman's hair. The term *shabak* in the song most likely refers to a head covering, as suggested by the reference to the beads that decorate it. These flirtatious verses may be interpreted in two ways. The first possibility is that the harvesters sing them simply for their own amusement and entertainment. The second possibility is that they sing them so that the women working in the fields may hear them. If the latter interpretation is correct, the emotional effect of these verses likely increases the workers' energy and enthusiasm, since the emotional interaction with the song transforms physical exhaustion into a heightened emotional vitality that momentarily dispels fatigue.<sup>54</sup>

### **Olive Harvest Songs**

In local rural society, the olive tree occupies a position of special importance.<sup>55</sup> People have long taken great care in planting and cultivating olive groves, since the olive tree is considered among the most blessed of trees. Olive oil is used in food preparation, in various traditional remedies, and in several domestic crafts. Olive wood itself serves as fuel for cooking fires. In literature—especially poetry—the olive tree often functions as a symbolic icon. Among many farmers, land planted with olive trees is considered more valuable than land cultivated with other crops. Olive oil is rarely absent from the table, and popular proverbs frequently highlight its importance, such as: “Oil is the pillar of the house,” “He whose mother is at home eats bread and oil,” and “My bread and oil sustain my home.” These sayings reflect the central role olive oil plays in everyday life.<sup>56</sup>

The olive tree often appears in songs together with other symbols of nature, as in the following verse:

*bird that circles through the sky,  
Lean down toward the valley nigh.*

*Bring me grapes from vineyard vine,  
With thyme and figs both dark and fine—*

*And olive oil with olives too,  
A traveler's meal both fresh and true.*

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<sup>54</sup>.Intangible Cultural Heritage: Harvesting and the Harvest Season, Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. <https://ich.gov.jo/node/58930>

<sup>55</sup>.Omar Atiq, “Folk Songs in Agricultural Seasons,” *Journal of Folk Culture*, specialized quarterly journal, no. 46. <https://folkculturebh.org/ar/index.php?issue=46&page=article&id=877>.

<sup>56</sup>.See also Nadia Mustafa, “The Olive Tree in Palestinian Memory and Sentiment,” *Afaq al-Bi'awa al-Tanmiyya* (Environmental and Development Horizons), electronic journal, no. 89 (2016). <http://www.maan-ctr.org>.

During the olive harvest season the entire family participates—men, women, and children alike. Everyone goes to the fields and sings to the olive trees while working:

*olives of the winding lane,  
Your early fruit brings golden gain.*

*O olive tree, turn lemon bright,  
Turn feast and bread in oven's light*

*olives of the valley wide,  
Your fresh young fruit is wealth and pride.*

*Your harvest fills the threshing floor,  
Your yield enriches rich and poor.*

They also sing the well-known song:

*'Ala dal'ouna, 'ala dal'ouna,  
Olives of my land, the finest grown*

*Olives of my land, green almonds too,  
With sage and thyme in morning dew.*

### **Rain-invocation songs (*Istisqa*)**

Rain-invocation songs (*Istisqa*) form an important part of seasonal folk traditions in many rural communities. Since ancient times, life in these regions has depended almost entirely on rainfall. When rain falls abundantly, springs fill, rivers overflow, the soil becomes fertile, and fields flourish with crops. If rain fails and drought spreads, however, anxiety spreads among the people. Crops wither, pastures dry up, and livestock suffer. Because agriculture and herding depend on rainfall, the absence of rain threatens the entire community with hardship and even hunger.

In such circumstances, people traditionally turn to prayer and supplication, seeking divine mercy. With the coming of Islam, the Prophet established the prayer for rain (*salat al-istisqa*) as a communal act of worship in times of drought. Alongside this formal practice, popular customs developed in which women and children played a central role in invoking rain through songs and ritual processions. Women would gather in an open space in the village, accompanied by children, and together they would raise their voices in supplication, expressing their distress at the lack of rain and its effects on crops and livestock.<sup>57</sup>

According to oral accounts, women sometimes went out in the evening accompanied by children. One woman might carry a *jarusha*, a small hand-mill used for grinding grain, while holding in her other hand a handful of dry grains such as wheat, lentils, chickpeas, barley, or other pulses. As she walked, she ground the grain rhythmically, symbolically expressing the

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<sup>57</sup>.Abd al-Fattah RawwasQal'aji, "Rain Invocation through Chant and Song: 'Give Drink to the Thirsty, O Lord,'" *Al-Ma'rifa Magazine*, Syrian Ministry of Culture, no. 610 (2014): 95–97.

scarcity of food caused by drought. Another woman might carry a rooster, occasionally tapping it so that it crowed loudly. The act was performed with a touch of humor, as if the rooster were being urged to call for rain. Meanwhile the children carried small tin cans and struck them with stones as they moved from house to house, chanting their rain-calling songs.<sup>58</sup>

Among the verses they chanted were the following rhymed lines:

*Mother of Rain, send rain today,  
Give us bread and oil, we pray.*

*Mother of Rain, let showers fall,  
And guard Abu Masis, shepherd of all.*

*Mother of Rain, clouds now release,  
Protect old Billi, grant him peace.*

*Our shepherd Hasan, bald and lean,  
Never satisfied, forever keen.*

Another song repeated during the procession called for rain in simple rhythmic invocations:

*Lord, send showers from the sky,  
Two long months have passed us by*

*Lord, a drop, a drop we plead,  
So the thirsty cat may drink her need.*

*Lord, a gentle rain we pray,  
So the little foal may drink today.*

Appealing to children and animals was a common feature of these rain-invocation rituals. Both were seen as innocent creatures untouched by sin, and therefore their voices were believed to carry special power in supplication. The songs thus combined humor, innocence, and communal prayer, reflecting both the hardship caused by drought and the deep hope for divine mercy.<sup>59</sup>

### **Pilgrimage Farewell Songs (*Tahneen*)**

In the past, these customs held great emotional significance. The rituals were often accompanied by deeply sorrowful songs, reflecting the hardship faced by pilgrims during their long journeys and the genuine fear that they might not return. Although modern transportation has greatly eased travel and made the pilgrimage far safer, the songs of *tahneen* (farewell lamentation) still retain the essential tone of departure and longing.

*Tahneen* refers to a form of folk singing characterized by melancholy and devotion.<sup>60</sup> The songs usually begin with praise of the Prophet Muhammad and expressions of longing for

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<sup>58</sup>.AmalRadwan, *Heritage in Seasonal Songs* (Ramallah: Dar al-Wasat for Media and Publishing, 2018), 24–28.

<sup>59</sup>.Abd al-Fattah RawwasQal'aji, "Rain Invocation through Chant and Song," 95–97.

<sup>60</sup>.MirvatSadiq, "Palestinian Women Singing *Tahneen* in Farewell to Pilgrims," *Al-Jazeera Culture*, 2016.

the sacred lands of the Hijaz and the Ka'ba. Gradually, the verses move toward farewell and blessing. Women gather at the home of the woman preparing for pilgrimage, who sits in the center of the gathering while the other women surround her and begin the ritual singing. The songs often include advice and well-wishes for the traveler, such as reminders to prepare provisions for the journey. One line commonly sung advises:<sup>61</sup>

*Bake her bread with thyme today,  
So the pilgrim will not lose her way.*

The songs then turn toward praising the Prophet and those associated with him. One of the recurring verses is:

*We praise Muhammad, first and best,  
We praise Muhammad, ever blessed.  
Al-Qasim, Ahmad, Hasan, Husayn—  
We praise Muhammad once again.  
We praise Khadija, noble and bright,  
We praise Khadija, source of light.  
And Mecca shining, pure and fair—  
Mecca the blessed beyond compare.*

After the praise, the singers express the pilgrims' longing for Medina and Mecca, and the songs gradually shift into farewell verses, such as:

*Take me with you on your way,  
Take me with you, do not delay.*

*Without your company I cannot stay,  
Separation steals my breath away.*

The singers then move into praising the woman performing the pilgrimage and entrust her with greetings to the Prophet:

*Sing for me till God allows,  
Sing for me beneath His vows.*

*Your visit, Prophet, gift divine,  
A grace from God, a sacred sign*

*You endured and now you gain,  
O pilgrim, you endured the pain.*

*Around the Ka'ba you have trod,  
Blessed traveler, guest of God.*

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<sup>61</sup>.Ibid.

*Take her with you, pilgrims true,  
Take her with your faithful crew.*

*We carry gifts through love sincere,  
For the Prophet we hold dear.*

These farewell songs reveal the emotional depth attached to the pilgrimage journey in traditional society. Beyond religious devotion, they reflect communal solidarity, shared longing for the sacred places of Islam, and the collective emotional participation of the community in the pilgrim's journey. Through rhythm, repetition, and poetic imagery, *tahneen* songs transform departure into a moment of collective spiritual expression.

### **The Mahaha**

The *mahaha* is a distinctive form of women's vernacular poetic performance. It is also known by related names such as *zalghouta*, *zalghata*, or *zaghrata*—terms associated with the celebratory trilling sound produced by women during joyful occasions.<sup>62</sup> The name *mahaha* itself appears to derive from the elongated exclamation “*hī*”, pronounced with an extended vowel, which traditionally introduces the performance. At the end of each verse, women produce the well-known ululating cry—“*lululululu... yīsh*”—which functions both as rhythmic punctuation and communal response.<sup>63</sup>

Mahaha is extremely widespread in Palestinian folk practice. Although it is strongly associated with wedding celebrations, it is not limited to them; it accompanies many festive events and communal gatherings. Structurally, a mahaha typically consists of two lines of vernacular verse divided into four hemistiches that express a single thematic idea. The lines normally share a unified rhyme scheme, though in some performances the rhyme alternates between paired lines, or the first and final hemistiches may share the same rhyme.

The performance itself is usually initiated by a single woman—often a relative, neighbor, or elder in the gathering—who chants the opening phrase. The other women respond either by repeating lines of the verse or by producing ululations. The chant commonly begins with introductory sounds such as “*heihei*,” “*heiwi*,” “*hei a*,” “*wi*,” “*aw ya*,” “*ah wiya*,” “*aw yiha*,” or “*ahyiha*.” These variations depend on regional dialects but share the same expressive function and likely derive from the same phonetic roots combining the exclamatory particles “*hi*” and “*ya*.” The chant concludes with the celebratory ululation traditionally rendered as “*lululuwūlī*.”

A typical example of a mahaha verse praises the honor and dignity of a bride or a respected woman within the community. The lines are composed in colloquial Arabic and rely on strong rhythm and rhyme to facilitate collective participation. A translated and rhymed version may be rendered as follows:

Aw yiha—she is noble, born of noble line,  
Aw yiha—none can question her honor or design.

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<sup>62</sup>. Khoury, 2013, 106.

<sup>63</sup>. Na'ila Labbas, *Women's Folk Songs for Engagement and Wedding Ceremonies* (Jerusalem: Modern Arab Press, 2007), 14–15.

Aw yiha—never shamed in youth before the crowd,  
Aw yiha—no tongue has mocked her, none spoke aloud.

Aw yiha—choose well, avoid the daughters of decline,  
Aw yiha—take only the maiden whose beauty shines.

Aw yiha—the sun her mother, the moon her brother bright,  
Aw yiha—the crescent her cousin, glowing in the night.

Through such performances the mahaha serves not only as entertainment but also as a social statement. The verses publicly affirm values such as honor, lineage, modesty, and communal pride. The improvisational nature of the form allows performers to adapt the lines to particular individuals or circumstances, thereby transforming the event into a dynamic communal expression of approval, blessing, and celebration.

### **Functions and Characteristics of Folk Song**

The women's folk song performs multiple functions within traditional society. It fulfills social, psychological, emotional, and cultural roles, while also reinforcing and transmitting customs, values, and communal traditions.<sup>64</sup> At times, the folk song reflects prevailing social norms and conventions; at other times, it expresses deeper emotional needs and motivations.<sup>65</sup> Through singing, individuals articulate their inherently social nature and their desire to belong within a collective community. While individuals may strongly identify with particular groups, folk songs reveal an important difference in how men and women express social belonging.

In women's songs, male figures often appear as central pillars of social identity. The man is portrayed as father, brother, son, husband, leader, tribal chief, warrior, and protector of the community. Women's songs frequently celebrate these roles with pride and admiration.<sup>66</sup> Expressions such as "*We allied ourselves with honorable men,*" "*Your brothers are five—may God preserve them,*" "*O tall and noble one, child of kings,*" "*Father of the bride, bearer of burdens,*" and "*A brother like you cannot be replaced by even the greatest of sheikhs*" illustrate how women's songs praise masculine virtues such as courage, generosity, and honor.

By contrast, in men's songs the representation of women is usually more limited. Although the woman is a life partner, she often appears primarily as a subject of romantic admiration. Men's songs tend to emphasize beauty and emotional attraction rather than broader social roles. One example illustrates this tendency:

*Gazelle so graceful, gentle in your sway,  
For your words I would not turn away.*

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<sup>64</sup>.Fadwa Yunis, *Women's Folk Songs and the Songs of Sit Badriyya* (Nazareth: Ministry of Science, Culture and Sports, 2001), 15.

<sup>65</sup>.Sabah al-Sayyid 'Azazi, *Glimpses from the Heritage of the Palestinian City and Village* (Amman: Dar al-Jalil, 1989), 28–29.

<sup>66</sup>.Labbas, 2007, 21–24.

*By God I'd sell the camel from my care,  
Just to win the beloved fair.*

Another example of romantic praise describes the beauty of the bride:

*They said: a young gazelle—what harm in that?  
A chest of golden jewels, imagine that.*

*Take the young bride, be patient as you wait,  
Let jealous tongues speak envy as their fate.*

Folk song also strengthens a person's sense of belonging to the community by transmitting cultural, historical, and civilizational patterns from one generation to another. Because it spreads quickly and easily, the folk song functions almost like a social messenger: it informs, guides, teaches, and sometimes even leads. Through song, communities articulate values, preserve collective memory, and reinforce cultural identity.

The theme of attachment to homeland appears frequently in folk songs as well. One simple verse expresses the depth of emotional connection between the individual and the land:

*I climb the mountain high above the valley wide,  
And greet the breeze that blows from my homeland's side.*

Human life is inevitably shaped by hardship and struggle, and such circumstances influence both individuals and the communities around them. The person who labors under difficult conditions often finds in song a sincere medium through which to express feelings and emotions. Folk song therefore becomes a form of emotional relief and a channel for expressing otherwise suppressed desires. In many cases it functions as one of the artistic forms closest to the human spirit.

In this sense, folk song offers a spontaneous outlet for psychological needs that social conventions may otherwise restrain. For example, expressions of romantic love are often constrained in direct speech, yet they appear naturally within song. This function can be seen clearly in the well-known *Dal 'una* song tradition:

*Bring me ink and bring the pen—  
Let me write upon my hand again.*

*The secret of love is now revealed—  
See what fate within my palm concealed.*

Women's songs in wedding celebrations also emphasize moral virtues and social ideals according to traditional Arab cultural values. These songs often praise noble lineage, generosity, and honorable conduct. A bride, for instance, may be praised by referencing the generosity of her father:

*Whose daughter is she, O people near?  
The daughter of Azzam, a noble seer.*

*The man who pours coffee cup by cup,  
In measured bowls his kindness fills up.*

Religious belief and moral conviction also appear prominently in folk literature. Religious upbringing and spiritual traditions shape human behavior and inevitably influence folk expression. As a result, faith, prayer, and references to prophets frequently appear in folk songs, stories, and proverbs. Belief in divine protection, fear of envy, and appeals for blessing are common motifs. Expressions such as “*Step aside, envious eye,*” “*Stay back, jealous one,*” or invocations such as “*Blessings upon Muhammad*” reflect the deep presence of religious sentiment within everyday cultural expression.

In many verses, belief in God is explicitly expressed:<sup>67</sup>

*I believed in God—*

*Heh heh heh—*

*I believed in God.*

*Your beauty’s light, a sign from God.*

*I believed in God.*

Through such verses, folk songs communicate religious conviction while simultaneously expressing emotional devotion. They become not only cultural expressions but also vehicles for transmitting belief, moral guidance, and communal values.

Beyond social and emotional roles, folk songs also serve aesthetic and practical functions. As Na’ila Labbas notes, folk expression often reflects a community’s sense of beauty and its relationship with the surrounding environment. Every culture develops its own standards of beauty and expresses them through artistic forms. In traditional Arab aesthetics, for instance, admired features include large dark eyes, flowing hair, and graceful posture. These ideals often appear in songs describing adornment, such as the use of henna, kohl, jewelry, and decorative clothing.<sup>68</sup>

Finally, the utilitarian character of folk literature distinguishes it from many forms of elite literary production. As Jiryès Khoury observes, folk expression performs practical functions in everyday life. It accompanies the sick in illness, the poor in hardship, and the joyful in celebration. For the ordinary person, folk song becomes a refuge—an expressive space where emotions, hopes, and social values can find voice within the rhythm and language of the community.<sup>69</sup>

### **Inheritance (Transmission)**

By inheritance, we mean the oral transmission of songs from one generation to another, as well as their circulation among individuals within the same generation. This process gives folk songs both historical and cultural value, since they function as witnesses to the transformations experienced by a people over time. Each generation adds to the tradition

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<sup>67</sup>.Yunis, 2001, 16–18.

<sup>68</sup>.Labbas, 2007, 31.

<sup>69</sup>.Khoury, 2013, 36.

elements that correspond to new social realities and life circumstances. In this way, folk songs remain connected to the earliest cultural features of the community while simultaneously adapting to new contexts.<sup>70</sup>

### **Popularity (Collective Ownership)**

One of the most fundamental characteristics of folk literature is its popular nature. Folk song belongs to the community rather than to an individual author. The audience of folk literature encompasses all segments of society, unlike official or elite literature, which is usually produced and consumed by a limited cultural group. Because it emerges from the heart of the community, folk song reflects the collective psychology, values, and beliefs of the people in a language that can be understood by both the educated and the illiterate.<sup>71</sup>

### **Anonymity of Authorship**

Like many other forms of folk literature, the folk song is typically anonymous. In most cases the identity of the original creator is unknown. Unlike modern literary production, which is governed by intellectual property and authorship rights, folk songs emerge collectively through communal creativity. Many scholars therefore consider the anonymity of folk songs to be evidence of their spontaneous creation by a group rather than by a single individual. Over time the community itself refines the text, modifying or expanding it as it circulates among performers and audiences. Through this process the original composition gradually transforms until it becomes part of the shared cultural heritage and an expression of collective identity.<sup>72</sup>

### **Variation and Transformation**

Because folk songs are transmitted orally, they are naturally subject to variation. Words, phrases, and even entire verses may be added, omitted, or modified during performance. As a result, it is rare to find a single stable version of a folk song that has remained unchanged across generations. Oral transmission therefore plays a crucial role in shaping evolving lyrical forms. Some researchers have compared the folk song to a living organism that grows and develops according to changing social conditions and may even disappear if it loses the cultural environment that sustains it.<sup>73</sup>

### **Purpose and Social Influence**

Palestinian folk songs are rich with social values, customs, and collective attitudes. At times they express moral teachings and religious principles, while at other times they reflect social expectations and everyday behavior. Through these songs communities transmit cultural norms, reinforce shared identities, and communicate collective experiences. In many respects the folk song functions as a cultural messenger—serving simultaneously as journalist, teacher, guide, and community voice.<sup>74</sup>

### **Lyric Expression and Collective Emotion**

Folk song is fundamentally lyrical in nature. Through it the performer expresses personal feelings and perceptions about both private and public matters. Although the expression may appear individual, the emotional content often reflects collective sentiments

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<sup>70</sup>.Khoury, 2013, 39.

<sup>71</sup>.Ibid., 35.

<sup>72</sup>.Jaradat, 2023, 65; see also Khoury, 2013, 37.

<sup>73</sup>.Jaradat, 2023, 65.

<sup>74</sup>.Azazi, 1989, 50.

shared by the community. This blending of individual voice with communal emotion allows folk songs to resonate widely among listeners and ensures their long-term circulation. Because of this strong emotional connection, these songs become embedded in collective memory and continue to be transmitted across generations.<sup>75</sup>

### **Exaggeration and Repetition**

Many folk songs contain exaggerated imagery that goes beyond ordinary reality. Hyperbolic expressions are used to heighten emotional impact and reinforce the poetic character of the song. Repetition also plays an important structural role. Often a particular line or phrase is repeated after each stanza, creating a rhythmic pattern that helps performers remember the lyrics and allows audiences to participate in the performance. For example:

*Tall one, tall like the poplar tree,  
No Bedouin girls were raised like thee.*

*Even if you stood in the highest sky,  
You'd still outshine what meets the eye.*<sup>76</sup>

### **Simplicity of Language**

Folk song avoids linguistic complexity and artificial stylistic ornamentation. Its language is direct, emotionally charged, and easily understood. The popular composer does not rely on elaborate rhetorical techniques to ensure the spread of a song. On the contrary, the simpler and more expressive the words, the more easily the song enters popular memory. This simplicity allows the song to circulate quickly within the community, becoming closely connected to its hopes, values, and everyday experiences. Folk songs therefore reflect the life of the people in both joyful and sorrowful moments and remain one of the most authentic expressions of communal culture.<sup>77</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Bedouin folk song in the Galilee emerges from this study as a vital cultural archive through which communal memory, social values, and collective identity are preserved and renewed. Beyond its poetic and musical qualities, folk song encodes everyday life—birth, labor, marriage, pilgrimage, drought, longing, and devotion—functioning in oral societies much like written records elsewhere: remembering, instructing, and interpreting social experience.

A key finding of this study is the central role of women's song traditions. Women's performances accompany major social transitions such as childbirth, lullabies, circumcision, engagement, henna rituals, weddings, and mourning. Through repetition, improvisation, and collective performance, these songs transmit social expectations concerning honor, kinship, faith, endurance, and belonging. They preserve cultural knowledge while offering emotional spaces where hardship, longing, and restrained desire may be expressed.

Bedouin folk songs operate simultaneously on several levels: aesthetic, functional, emotional, and pedagogical. Work songs regulate labor and relieve fatigue; wedding songs

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<sup>75</sup>.Jaradat, 2023, 72.

<sup>76</sup>.Azazi, 1989, 50

<sup>77</sup>.Jaradat, 2023, 65; Azazi, 1989, 49.

ritualize social transitions; rain-invocation songs transform anxiety into collective prayer; and harvest songs sustain communal energy through rhythm and humor. Their oral transmission, simplicity, repetition, and adaptability explain their durability across generations.

Ultimately, Bedouin folk song represents a form of cultural knowledge through which communities remember their past, interpret their present, and sustain their identity through shared voice and performance.

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