

The muwashshah as enacted in poetry and in dance in the Yemenite tradition

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I. Preface

The Jews of Yemen once preserved a well-defined system of poetry that not only comprised the very poetry itself, but also entailed its vocal and instrumental arrangement, as well as the dance performance.¹ This system, though not always in its entirety, encompassed every aspect of life among Yemenite Jewry: whether in the realm of religion which included the liturgical readings in the synagogue and during the Sabbath-day and holiday meals within private homes, or in the social realm which included events related to man's life-cycle – birth, marriage and death, as well as to other events such as the dedication of one's house (*hanūkkath ha-bayit*) or any social gathering that was not related to the above events. All of this in accordance with the rules of etiquette laid-out in a male-oriented society, which in principle women had no part in. In any case, the feminine gender had its own structured poetry system, which also incorporated an impromptu vocal and instrumental performance, as well as dance performance. This all-female social setting incorporated in its system of poetry those matters touching upon society alone, that is to say, events related to human-being life-cycle.²

The texts used in the all-male social gathering, which were compiled in Hebrew or in Judeo-Arabic, and occasionally even in Aramaic, were penned in writing and included in the compilations of song anthologies (sing. *dīwān*), and in the prayer-rite books (pl. *tkālil*; sing. *tiklāl*), or in other liturgical compositions. This can certainly be traced back to the fact that rudiments of reading and writing were the legacy of all Yemenite Jewish men, having acquired such skills during their schooling as children. In contrast, those poems chanted by women were to be found only in the Arabic tongue, and had never been put down in writing, since Yemenite Jewish women were banned from attending school, and did not acquire the rudiments of reading and writing. Another important difference between the separate male and female social settings and their arrangements of poetry was that the poetry cited by men generally expressed the national aspirations of the Jewish people and was detached in terms of its content from the poetry associated with the Muslim environment, while the folk poetry orally transmitted by women expressed the sentiments of their own gender and was, in principle, close to the poetry of Muslim women. In what follows, we shall deal only with the poetry cited by men, and in their social setting alone – excluding the religious sphere, and especially what concerns girdle poems (the *muwashshah*).

II. Poetic Genres Used in Men's Poetry

Among Yemenite Jews, men's poetry intended for recital at social events was not contained in the Prayer Books (*tkālil*), but rather in the *dīwān*. In terms of its formal structure, there are three primary genres: the *nashīd*, the *shirah*, and the *hallel*.³ The

¹ On Yemenite Jewish music, see Bahat 1982; 1983; Shiloah 2002. On Yemenite Jewish dance, see Bahat-Ratzon 1999; Adra 2011; on women's poetry and dance during wedding ceremonies of the Jews of Habban, see Shai 2001. On the integration of literature with music, see Shai & Amir 2004.

² On the poetry of women in Yemen – both Jewish women and Muslim women, see Gamlieli, N. 1975; Gamlieli, B. 2018; Maloom 2011.

³ See Tobi 1978.

nashīd, an Arabic word having the usual connotation of “ode,” in the Yemenite Jewish poetic arrangement is directed at a poem written in the form of a classical Arabic *qaṣīdah*, meaning, a poem written in Arabic meter, whose stanzas are divided-up between an opening phrase (*ṣadr*) and closing phrase (*‘ajz*) with the same rhyme all over the poem. In terms of length, the poem varies between a Hebrew *maqṭū‘ah* and an Arabic *qaṣīdah*, typically no longer than fifteen strophes. The word *shīrah* is a Hebrew designation for two forms known from Arabic poetry, namely, the *muwashshah* and the Andalusian *zajal* – that is to say, a poem where each of its strophes concludes with only one line that rhymes with the concluding lines of the other strophes. The *hallel* (praise, thanksgiving) is also a Hebrew designation, directed at a short poem, one that is usually without meter, and whose lines embody a uniform rhyme, and its last line comprised of a biblical verse.

In terms of its function, men's poetry has five genres: the *nashīd*, the *shīrah*, the *hallel*, the *ḥīdwiyyeh* (or: *ḥiddūyah*), and the *qaṣīd* (or *qiṣṣa*):

1. *Nashīd*, serves as an opening poem for the range of poems that are sung at a social gathering, whether on account of a Sabbath or holiday meal, or on account of one of the events related to a person's life cycle. In terms of its content, the *nashīd* is clearly religious, usually an appeal to God.
2. *Shīrah*, the principal genre that is sung during different joyous occasions, Sabbath and holiday meals, or gatherings related to a person's life cycle, especially weddings. The *shīrah* is a long poem that incorporates different subjects, and having a fixed structure with an opening in praise of God, and a closing that heaps praise on those assembled in the group during that joyous occasion. In practice, several poems (*shīrot*) are sung at this time one after the other.
3. *Hallel*, sung usually at the conclusion of the joyous occasion, and being a praise unto God, or else praise to the person for whom the joyous occasion was made.
4. *Ḥīdwiyyeh* (or: *ḥiddūyah*), an Arabic term the origin of which is uncertain, although several different explanations have been given for its meaning. By this genre is intended a poem written in the form of a *zajal* and sung in honor of the groom and bride during wedding ceremonies, or else at the *zaffah*, being the bride's procession to the house of the bridegroom during the wedding ceremony, or while escorting the groom from the synagogue on the Sabbath days before and after the wedding.⁴
5. *Qaṣīd*, its meaning in this context is a poetic tale or story of some event, whether historical or private, often in an amusing satirical tone. Its form is usually the Andalusian *zajal*.⁵

III. Manner of Performance of the *Nashīd*, *Shīrah*, and *Hallel* in Social Gatherings

The social-gathering always takes place around set tables, on which a variety of dainties have been laid up, with beverages (never actually solid foodstuffs), and, as noted, opens with a *nashīd*. The first to perform this is the most distinguished of the guests at the social-gathering, usually the rabbi, even if he were not a man with a pleasant voice, neither an expert in terms of musical performance, seeing that the

⁴ On the *zaffah* and the poetic verse used in Muslim weddings in Yemen, see Maloom 2011.

⁵ On the *qaṣīd* poems of the Jews of Yemen, see Ratzaby 1986; Tobi 2008; Tobi (in print); on the role of music in the *qaṣīd*, see Sharvit 1986.

music of the *nashīd* is relatively simple, similar to the music of liturgical poems (*piyyutim*) recited in the synagogues, expressing longing and emotion. After he commences with the *nashīd*, the performance passes unto a more experienced man in the congregation, known for his musical talents and who is called by the Hebrew word, *meshorer* (singer of poetry), a word adopted in the Arabic parlance spoken by the Jews of Yemen. The sense here is not to one who composes poems, as is the word's meaning in Modern Hebrew, but rather he that conducts the singing, that is, the singer himself, just as the meaning of the word in the Hebrew Bible (*Ezra* and *Nehemiah*, and the *Book of Chronicles*). The *meshorer* sings the first hemistich of the stanza, while another person, or the entire congregation, answers after him in concert. The experienced *meshorer* improvises the performance by changing the melody, but maintains the leisurely pace of the music. In the course of the performance, the *meshorerim* (“singers”) can be changed, and, occasionally, even by those who are not skilled performers, seeing that many are proficient in the melodies of the *nashīd* songs. The performance at the end of the poem returns to the one who commenced it. During the performance of the *nashīd* (or the *shīrah*), absolute silence prevails, insofar that these poems are considered sacred poems. Only at the conclusion of the *nashīd* (or *shīrah*) is it permissible for those lounging to partake of the dainties and beverages, and to bless aloud each man his neighbor, the proprietor of the house, or the man for whom the joyous occasion was made, by making use of standard texts of traditional blessings.

After having performed the *nashīd* as the opening song, the strophic poem known as the *shīrah* then takes its turn. During Sabbath-day and holiday gatherings, the *shīrah* is likewise performed in the aforesaid order, while ensuring that the melodies are sung in an easy-going and leisurely fashion. If the atmosphere is agreeable, several *shīrot* are performed one after the other. After each *shīrah* is cited one or more *hallel*s, which include words of praise to God, as well as blessings to the proprietor of the house, or to the person for whom the festivities were made. At the conclusion of the festivity, the proprietor of the house chants the *hallel*, by which he blesses those that had lounged there. As far as musical intonations are concerned, as well as performance, the *hallel* is the simplest of all genres. One man of the party opens with the starting words of the *hallel*, while the entire party eagerly joins in with him, in an audible voice and with a monotonous staccato melody, and by audibly drawing out the end of the textual and musical frames.⁶

IV. The Musical and Dance Performance of the Shīrah at Wedding Ceremonies

This genre carries with it a different character in different joyous occasions, especially in what concerns weddings (as opposed to those poems chanted during Sabbath and holiday meals), where the *shīrah* constitutes the main and essential part of the singing performance. It should be pointed out that, in contrast to the Sabbath and holiday meals that are held in the presence of family members alone, and occasionally also in the presence of a few guests, wedding celebrations are conducted before a large audience which requires a much higher level of singing skill and all the things associated with it. The opening is similar to that of poems being sung during Sabbath and holiday meals, but forthwith they transition, as previously mentioned, going into the essential part of the *shīrah*, conducted by an experienced precentor and accompanied by the beating of a copper tray (Arabic: *ṣaḥn*), and dancing performed by well-mannered dancers. There is a huge difference between the melodies of songs that are sung during Sabbath and holiday meals and those of the *shīrah* genre sung at

⁶ On the *hallel* genre in Yemenite Jewish poetry, see Ya‘aqov & Sharvit 1984; Bahat 1986.

wedding celebrations. The melodies that are sung during Sabbath and holiday meals are very similar to the prayers and to the liturgical poems (*piyyutim*) spoken in the synagogues and belong to the ancient musical heritage of the Jewish people. According to some scholars, who found therein similarities with the liturgical music of Orthodox Christian churches in the Land of Israel, their origin is said to be from the music played in the Second Temple.⁷ In contrast, the *shīrah* melodies at wedding celebrations and their accompanying dance are, undoubtedly, borrowed from the local Muslim surroundings.

In Yemenite Jewish tradition, the melodic strains of the *shīrah* which are sung at wedding ceremonies are ascribed unto the arch-poet of Yemenite Jewry, Shalom Shabazi (1619–1680+). This tradition, however, seems to merely reflect the fact that he was the poet that implanted within Jewish verse a style of poetry influenced by the Muslim *Humaynī* school of poetry in Yemen, although he was not the first Jewish poet to write in that style. Presumably, not only did he borrow from the *Humaynī* genre of poetry those specifications relating to the folk register of Arabic language, lending to the permissive approach regarding the poem's meter, as well as for its bold and frequent use of imageries of the love for a woman being a depiction of God's love for Israel – but also borrowed the melodies in which songs had been sung by Muslims.⁸ It is to be noted, based on several testimonies, that Jews sang Arabian songs of *erotica* (*ash'ār*) used by Muslims, which drew severe criticism from the religious leadership of the Jewish community.⁹ Thus it may be understood, at least from the words of an anonymous Jew from Yemen who forwarded them in the *dīwān* that he edited, although he seems to have taken matters too far when he attributed this phenomenon to most of the Jews of Yemen:¹⁰

Most [of the Jews in Yemen] walk in the customs of the Gentiles and listen to vile language and to the words of lechery during the others' holidays, and they rejoice and sing and dance with the Gentiles and with the women, until they trespass the laws of good society.

Similarly, Rabbi Yehuda Şa' dī wrote concerning the years 1725–1726 that the Jews in Şan'ā' had it as a practice to sing Arabian poems of *erotica* (*ash'ār*) that were widely accepted among Muslim society.¹¹ Moreover, Rabbi Yiḥyeh Qoraḥ, one of the most distinguished Jewish scholars in Şan'ā' in the 19th century (1840–1881), has already addressed the subject of Muslim poetry's impact on Jewish poetry in Yemen, and has testified about himself that he used to visit singing parties of the Muslims in his city in order to thoroughly acquaint himself with the poetic requirement of the singing and its performance during festive occasions. It would seem therefore that, like the phenomenon that is well-known also among other Jewish communities,¹² Shabazī compiled poems – and presumably also other Jewish poets – with religious and national Jewish themes based on these melodies, or at least the poems were sung by others based on borrowed melodies taken from the Muslim society. In my possession is a video-clip from the 1980s showing a young Muslim man from Yemen performing an

⁷ The first to raise this proposition was Abraham Zevi Idelsohn, who researched the music tradition of Yemenite Jewry during his frequent encounters with Yemenite Jewish immigrants in Jerusalem during the first quarter of the 20th century; see Shiloah 1992, p. 31.

⁸ On the impact of the *Humaynī* style of poetry on Shabazī's poetry, as well as on Yemeni poetry in general, see Tobi 2006; 2006a; Wagner 2009, pp.156–172.

⁹ Qāfih 1957, pp. 204, 237, 240.

¹⁰ Tobi 2020, p. 112.

¹¹ Ratzaby 1968, pp. 21–22.

¹² Ratzaby 1966; Adder'ī 1929, the author's preface; Amzalag 1987; Nizri 2004; 2008.

Arabic song in a melodic tune and one full of longing, reminiscent of the poem *Qiryah yafefiyyah*, belonging to Rabbi Zechariah al-Zāhirī who lived in the 16th century, a moving poem of yearning for Jerusalem.

The structural layout of the *shīrah* performed at wedding celebrations is the double *muwashshah*, a structure that is characteristic of Muslim and Jewish poetry of Yemen, alike. The sense here is that the *qufl*, or *simt* (the lines which conclude the strophe), is made-up of two parts: (a) three or four short lines, embodying a single rhyme which changes from one strophe to another; (b) two lines whose rhyme is identical in all the strophes. In Yemenite Jewish tradition, these short lines are called *tawshīh*. The *shīrah* poems sung on these occasions were usually written with a combination of Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic; on rare occasions they were written strictly in the Hebrew language, or else strictly in Judeo-Arabic.

The performance of the *shīrah* at wedding celebrations by the professional *meshorer* (precentor) opens with a melodious tune; the *ghuṣn* lines (the first lines that open the rhyme) in the first strophe being by nature slow and full of yearning. When the precentor reaches the third line of the *ghuṣn*, the tempo becomes more charged. At this point another person joins the performance, not necessarily an experienced precentor, who sings the second part of each line, or repeats the short *tawshīh* lines. The melody changes with the commencement of each strophe, whereas in the second strophe a pair of dancers join in the performance. The tempo of the dance varies according to the tempo of the melody, which becomes more intense with the *tawshīh* lines. The precentor, who usually remembers the text of the long *shīrah* by heart, forewarns the dancers before the *tawshīh* that he is about to speed-up the pace from the moment they hear the word *tawshīh*. The passion of those performing the *shīrah* – the precentors and the dancers – becomes more fervent before the amazed onlookers.

In performing music and dance there was a big difference between the Jewish community in Ṣan‘ā’ and the communities in the outlying districts and villages. In Ṣan‘ā’, the performance was much more moderate, because of the religious leadership’s reservations about certain features of the *shīrah* that had been taken explicitly from the Muslim surroundings. Therefore, it was entirely prohibited, for example, to sing those types of songs on Sabbath days where dancing was ordinarily associated with those songs, because dancing is prohibited on the Sabbath day according to Jewish tradition. Dancing was especially developed among those Jewish communities who resided in the midst of a tribal Muslim-society, where the dancing itself was performed with great passion and was often accompanied by the brandishing of curved daggers (*jambiah*). In this manner, the Jews of Wādi al-Sirr, of al-Shaghdirah, and of Baraṭ became known in their dance, who would even continue therein, on occasion, until the wee hours of the morning. The dance associated with the *shīrah* is based on the well-known “Yemeni step”. However, in many notable communities outside of Ṣan‘ā’, the *da’sah* dance is also prevalent, in which two parties danced opposite each other, the one progressing while the other retreating, intermittently.

As noted, the performance of the *shīrah* is accompanied by drumming on a copper tray, but in the last generation of Jewish existence in Yemen, the common practice outside of Ṣan‘ā’ was to do so on an empty tin can (*tanakeh*), once used to contain kerosene and whose upper lid had been removed. In Ṣan‘ā’, this was done only after the rabbis had retired from the party. The source of the abstention from making use of musical instruments is attributed to the strictures imposed by the Sages of Israel on the

Jewish society as a whole after the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans. Thus, Maimonides wrote in his Code of Jewish Law (*Hil. Ta'aniyyot* 5:14):

When the Temple Sanctuary was destroyed, they decreed that no one is to play on musical instruments. And as for all kinds of minstrel-playing, or any of the sound-producing apparatus of song, it is forbidden to rejoice in them and it is forbidden to hear them because of the destruction.

Similarly, Rabbi Yiḥyeh Qoraḥ wrote concerning the Jews of Ṣan'ā', in his introduction to the Commentary on the poems of Yosef Ben-Israel and the poems of Shalom Shabazī:¹³

Most of their poems are cited entirely by mouth, and they have not known the lute because of the enactment of the ancients [who made it a law] that they not sing with a musical instrument at all, in order to fulfill [the verse], “How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land” (Psalm 137:4), “...until he establishes, and until he makes Jerusalem a praise in the earth” (Isaiah 62:7).

This, however, seems to have also stemmed from the prohibition imposed by the Zaydi scholars on the use of musical instruments.¹⁴ The Jewish sages of Ṣan'ā' had also prohibited singing the *qaṣīd* poetry written in the form of a *zajal*, because they considered them as pure secular songs. Nevertheless, this ban was not typically accepted in communities outside of Ṣan'ā', where these songs were sung accompanied by dance.

Let us conclude by saying that the Jews of Yemen brought with them to the Land of Israel the tradition of performing the *muwashshah* genre of poetry, along with all that is associated with this genre musically and in terms of dance; and at various social gatherings, especially in the *henna* ceremony and at weddings, it is still possible to see throngs of people – both men and women – dancing enthusiastically in large banquet halls to the pleasant song of a singer of Yemenite origin, and to the sound of loud electronic music.¹⁵

13. *Hafeṣ Hayyim* 1966, p. 10

14. *Yemen Guide* 2012, pp. 58–59.

15. Edelman 1999.

Notes:

1. On Yemenite Jewish music, see Bahat 1982; 1983; Shiloah 2002. On Yemenite Jewish dance, see Bahat-Ratzon 1999; Adra 2011; on women's poetry and dance during wedding ceremonies of the Jews of Habban, see Shai 2001. On the integration of literature with music, see Shai & 'Amir 2004.
2. On the poetry of women in Yemen – both Jewish women and Muslim women, see Gamlieli, N. 1975; Gamlieli, B. 2018; Maloom 2011.
3. See Tobi 1978.
4. On the *zaffah* and the poetic verse used in Muslim weddings in Yemen, see Maloom 2011.
5. On the *qaṣīd* poems of the Jews of Yemen, see Ratzaby 1986; Tobi 2008; Tobi (in print); on the role of music in the *qaṣīd*, see Sharvit 1986.
6. On the *hallel* genre in Yemenite Jewish poetry, see Ya'aqov & Sharvit 1984; Bahat 1986.
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8. On the impact of the *Humaynī* style of poetry on Shabazī's poetry, as well as on Yemeni poetry in general, see Tobi 2006; 2006a; Wagner 2009, pp.156–172.
9. Qāfih 1957, pp. 204, 237, 240.
10. Tobi 2020, p. 112.
11. Ratzaby 1968, pp. 21–22.
12. Ratzaby 1966; Adder'ī 1929, the author's preface; Amzalag 1987; Nizri 2004; 2008.
13. *Hafes Hayyim* 1966, p. 10
14. *Yemen Guide* 2012, pp. 58–59.
15. Edelman 1999.

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