PART TWO

TEXTUAL AND PERFORMANCE STRATEGIES IN THE SAHRA

Different performance situations in al-Bakātūsh draw different audiences. Large public performances such as weddings create mixed, complex groups which poets attempt to satisfy, and to some extent control, as best they can. Audience expectations are dictated to a great degree by the air of festivity and celebration inherent in such situations; consequently, the poet’s choice of text, his manner of performance, and the balance between segments of the epic and auxiliary genres are usually keyed toward the successful realization of these expectations. Financial arrangements with patron families are usually completed previous to such performances; however, a potentially large amount of additional income resides in pleasing specific, usually high-status, members of the audience, or in creating a lively performance atmosphere in which listeners begin to vie with each other in offering nuqūt. Poets rarely dispute audience input in such public performances unless they deem it disruptive and inappropriate; such occasions, moreover, are minimally exploited for direct social or political criticism.

The sahra, or evening gathering, offers a counterpoise to this situation in several respects: First, the audience is likely to be more homogeneous and cohesive. Although listeners may come and go during a performance, and men of different age groups may join the gathering for all or part of the evening, there is almost inevitably a core group attached in some way to the host. A sahra is essentially a “private” gathering, though in terms of village mores and hospitality, once the sahra is under way, virtually any adult male may enter as a guest. The audience is also more likely to be more focused in their desire to listen specifically to Sīrat Banī Hilāl as a primary activity, though their reasons for doing so
may differ, for different social groups in al-Bakāṭūsh approach the epic with different basic expectations.

Second, poets generally feel that in the sahra setting they are addressing the aficionados of the tradition, their own most loyal supporters. In contingent discussions during the evening, poets vigorously defend their interpretations and their performances of the sīra; listeners, particularly older men, regularly evaluate the performance and draw parallels from the sīra to everyday life. In the sahra, the epic is a contested tradition, a text open to interpretation and negotiation, and therefore, also to conflict.

Third, the sahra juxtaposes a series of genres of verbal art which differs substantially from those performed regularly in other contexts. Though all of the performance events cited in Chapter 3 feature performances from Sīrat Banī Hilāl, the epic is in each case set within a different sequence of verbal art. It thus becomes necessary to recognize that a complex of interacting genres may form a larger whole, the individual parts of which may be understood more fully in light of each other, as an interacting dynamic. For this reason in part 2 I gradually broaden my focus, step by step, so as eventually to include the entire sahra as the basic unit of analysis, rather than restricting us to the performance of Sīrat Banī Hilāl texts, or even only to those genres of verbal art culturally recognized and labeled “performances.” It is my basic contention here that, despite the possibilities for examining the various segments of the sahra in isolation as independent texts, an understanding of the sahra as social action (the “why” rather than the “how” of social participation in, and support of, these events) must lie in a broad-based analysis of the multivocal, interacting, and conflicting aspects of the event.
The Interplay of Genres

“Tell him how the people inside are suffering. Tell him how Israel’s blown up twenty thousand homes and four whole villages. Tell him how the detention camps are as full of young men as a cheap public bath’s full of cockroaches. Tell him what happened to al-Bahsh’s son and to al-Shakhshir and to al-Huwari’s daughters. But the worst thing is that all of us, every last one of us, are forced to work in their brothels just in order to live!”

Usama stood up abruptly: “Goodbye all!” he said.

Adil didn’t move. Zuhdi got up and put out his hand: “Where are you off to, my grumpy sir? Why such a rush? We haven’t finished . . . .”

“Well, why did he get so upset?”

“He just doesn’t want to hear it.”

Abu Sabir smiled wanly: “I get it. He only wants to hear nice Abu Zayd stories.”

Sahar Khalifeh, *Wild Thorns*

A sahra in al-Bakāṭush begins in a very basic sense with the arrival of the poet at the home of the sahra’s patron. The patron and some of his guests may already be present, but many people will not enter until they hear the music begin, that is, until the performance has begun. The poet may be served tea and cigarettes before he begins to sing, and the host may spend quite a bit of time in extended greetings, salutations, and conversation with the poet and his guests. After tea and cigarettes, the poet begins to unwrap and ready his rabāb, an act often drawn out for several minutes: he carefully folds and sets aside the cloth cover, adjusts the fit between the body of the rabāb and the neck, applies rosin to the bow and then directly onto the strings, and finally tunes the instrument.

At some point the poet utters the basmalah (“In the name of God, the All-Merciful, the Compassionate”), puts bow to string, and commences playing. Conversation at this point often continues unabated, the musical
introduction serving only marginally to attract the attention of the listeners. Over the next few minutes, guests who have been lingering outside awaiting the start of the performance enter, passing in turn around the entire room to greet and shake hands with all present. If the entering guest is a person of rank and status, the host and other guests (except for the most elderly) rise to greet him and wait till he is seated to resume their places.

Madiḥ (Praise to the Prophet Muḥammad)

When most of the hubbub has died down, the poet begins to sing his “Praise to the Prophet” (madiḥ or madiḥ al-nabī). If the praise song is to be short, it consists entirely of laudatory epithets and brief allusions to well-known tales; if it is to be long, it moves rapidly from a chain of epithets to a full narrative or a chain of narratives from the life and works of the Prophet and/or his companions. The madiḥ poems are usually constructed on various quatrain patterns (aaab cccb etc. being the most common), though repetitions in actual performance often obscure to some extent the four-line structure. The following examples demonstrate both narrative and nonnarrative types. All repetitions have been retained.

Text 4.1 Brief Madiḥ
Shaykh ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Tawfīq, tape 83-718 (4/28/83)

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ḥābīb il-ḥābīb illi yiṣallī ʿalā n-nabī} & \quad 1 \\
\text{nabī ʿarabī ashhar linā l-adyān} & \\
\text{law-lā n-nabī wa-lā kān ẓāmsin wa-lā qʿamar} & \quad 2 \\
\text{wa-lā kān khulūq ganna ganna wa-lā nayrān} & \\
\text{Beloved of the Beloved is he who wishes blessings upon the Prophet—} & \quad 1 \\
\text{An Arab Prophet who made known to us the religions.} & \\
\text{Were it not for the Prophet there would be no sun or moon—} & \quad 2 \\
\text{Nor would there have been created a paradise, [neither] paradise nor [hell]fires.} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

In the tale of the Prophet and the Gazelle, the Prophet offers to be held captive in place of a gazelle who has been trapped by a Jewish hunter so that she may return to her children and feed them one last
time before she is killed.\textsuperscript{1} Released from her shackles, she rushes to her young, only to find that they refuse her milk and urge her instead to return to the hunter so that the Prophet may be released (and thereafter intercede for them on the Day of Judgment). When the hunter sees that the gazelle has kept her word and returned so the Prophet might go free, he is convinced of the Prophet's calling and converts to Islam. This version is in quatrains (aaab cccb etc.), though the poet has missed several rhymes and has inserted a pseudo-refrain which recurs three times ("Said the Prophet, 'You hear these words, O Gazelle' "). The poet alludes briefly to two other narratives about the Prophet ("for whom the rose did open," line 7) and ("the camel came to Him and spoke," line 9), before actually recounting the tale of the gazelle:

\textit{Text 4.2 Narrative Madiḥ “The Prophet and the Gazelle”}\nShaykh 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Tawfīq, tape 87-035 (3/2/87)

\begin{verbatim}
anā abtdī amdaḥ fī muḥammad
an-nabī l-ʿarabī l-mumaggad
khayrā khalq allāḥ huwa aḥmad
an-nabī badr il-tamām

I begin by praising the Prophet Muḥammad,
The Arab Prophet, the Revered,  \hfill 1
The best of God's creation is Aḥmad,
The Prophet, the Perfect Full Moon.

man yizūr in-nabī yasʿud
ibn zamzam wi-l-maQām-I
man lahu al-ward-I fattaḥ
man ʿalēhi rabbuh sallam

He who visits the Prophet is made joyful, \hfill 5
Son of Zamzam\textsuperscript{2} and the Ka'ba,\textsuperscript{3}
For whom the rose did open,
And upon whom the Lord granted peace.
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{1} See G. Canova, " 'Muhammad, l'ebreo e la gazzella': Canto di un maddah egiziano" (1981).
\textsuperscript{2} Zamzam is the name of a well in Mecca, the waters of which are believed to possess great powers of healing; in certain folk traditions it is with the waters of Zamzam that the Prophet is purified during a visitation by three heavenly figures. See Annemarie Schimmel, \textit{And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety} (1985).
\textsuperscript{3} In the Arabic, \textit{maqām}, literally 'site, location, or erected building' such as the tomb of a saint; here it is used in reference to the Ka'ba.
And the camel came to Him and spoke.
So listen, my friend, and understand,
The meanings and the compositions.

The gazelle of the desert came to complain,
To the Prophet, an arbitrator, and she cried.
And she said to Him, “You are Meccan,
Be my intercessor, O Tuhāmī.”

“O Prophet, the hunter hunted me,
With shackles he did bind me,
And the tears did pour forth from me,
For the sake of my children, the orphans,
For the sake of my children, the orphans.

“It was my wish to go and take heart,
Near them and then return quickly,
To suckle them if but a mouthful,
Before my death and my annihilation.”

4. One of the common epithets of the Prophet, literally ‘from the region of the Tihāma’,
the coastal plain along the southwestern edge of the Arabian peninsula.
Qāl il-yahūdī mā-asībhāsh
Qāl il-yahūdī mā-asībhāsh
izā l-ghazāla mā-tgināsh
yibqā kalāmhā ‘alēnā maḥālā

Said the Jew, “I’ll not let her go.”
Said the Jew, “I’ll not let her go.
If the gazelle does not come back to us,
Her words to us will have been but a trick.”

Qāl in-nabi sām‘a l-q‘āl yā ghazāla
sām‘a l-kālām wiyyā l-maḥālā

Said the Prophet, “You’ve heard his talk, O Gazelle,
You’ve heard the words and the condition.”

lakin ta‘alā yā nābinā
‘ind il-yôm anā rahinhā
lammā nshūf il-ghazāla lam tijinā
yibq‘ā kalāmhā ‘alēnā maḥālā

(But come, O our Prophet!)
“For this day I am a hostage in her stead.”
“If we see that the gazelle doesn’t return to us,
Her words to us will have been but a trick!”

q‘āl in-nabi sām‘a l-q‘āl yā ghazāla
sām‘a l-kālām wiyyā l-maḥālā

Said the Prophet, “You’ve heard his talk, O Gazelle,
You’ve heard the words and the condition.”

ḥallihā min da l-Quyūdī
ḥallihā min da l-Quyūdī
sārīt il-ghazāla fī l-barr-l tanḥā
nahw awlādhā al-yatāma

He released her from the shackles,
He released her from the shackles,
The gazelle went off into the desert heading
Toward her children, the orphans.

5. The term maḥāla is used here with several different connotations: an impossible thing (mustaḥil/istihāla), a trick (ḥila), a condition or obligation (ḥāla/maḥāla).
When the gazelle did reach them,
She found that hunger was killing them,
She cried and the tears of her eyes were streams.

Qāl in-nabi sām‘a l-q‘āl yā ghazāla
sām‘a l-kalam wayyā l-maḥāla

Said the Prophet, “You’ve heard his talk, O Gazelle,
You’ve heard the words, O Gazelle, and the condition.”

lakin ta‘ālā yā nabinā
q‘āl il-awlād yā umma
kittim dārī mà bīnā
yōm il-q‘iyāma min yashfā‘ fīnā

(But come, O our Prophet!)
Said the children, “O Mother,
Keep quiet, conceal our condition,
[Else] on the Day of Resurrection who will intercede for us?”

man Qālhā ḥurum labankī
Qālhā ḥurum labankī
wa-ḥurum asḥ-shurb-I minkī
wa-rjā‘ī l-lli ḍamankī
ballaghi minnā s-salāmī

[One of them] said to her,
“Your milk has been forbidden [to us],
He said to her, “Your milk has been forbidden [to us],
And forbidden it is to suckle from you,
So return to Him who vouched for you,
And extend to Him our greetings.”

raga‘it il-ghazāla ilēh
tilaqī l-anwār ‘alēh
taq‘addamit bāsit īdēh
qa‘addamit bāsit īdēh
shāfha l-yahūdī hamm
The gazelle returned to Him,  
She found there were lights upon Him,  
She advanced and kissed His hands,  
She advanced and kissed His hands.  
The Jew saw her and grew uneasy.

šāfhā š-šayyādī.  
lamma šāfhā š-šayyādī al-yahūdī  
qāl yā muḥammad inta aʿzam  
in-nil amint-l bak yā tuḥāmī  
wi-āmin bi-n-nabī ʿalēh is-salām

The hunter saw her.  
When the Jewish hunter saw her,  
He said, "0 Muḥammad, you are mighty!  
I believe in You, O Tuḥāmī."  
And he believed in the Prophet, Upon Him be Peace.

There is nothing surprising about the religious frame invoked with both the uttering of the basmalah at the very beginning of the evening and the deployment of the madiḥ as the first genre in the performance. The basmalah is commonly repeated by many observant Muslims at the outset of any action no matter how small or quotidian (eating, getting into a car, getting up to leave, etc.). The mobilization of the religious figuration, in the form of the madiḥ, is also noteworthy in that it fore­shadows some of the religious overtones of epic performance in what might otherwise be perceived as an essentially secular heroic narrative.

In pragmatic terms, the madiḥ assists in unifying the attention of the listeners and effectively brings an end to other on-going activities through the repeated references to the Prophet Muḥammad, to which the listeners respond with one or another form of the nearly obligatory traditional blessings, "May God bless and preserve Him" (ṣallā llāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam) or "Upon Him be God’s blessings and peace" (ṣallā al-ṣalāt wa-l-salām). Such socially approbated group responses also move the audience for the first time in the evening into the participatory role of providing the expected verbal responses and other vocal forms of encouragement which are an integral part of the sahra. The attention and emotional involvement of the audience members at this point are usually still limited, betraying the auxiliary nature of the madiḥ in this setting. A similar performance of madiḥ at a saint’s festival (mūlid; SA mawlid), for example, would typically evoke a much stronger and energetic reaction; here, however, the madiḥ is a prefatory genre and not the emotional highpoint of the performance.
The madīḥ, in addition, reemphasizes the conceptual bond noted in Chapter 2 between the performing poet and the hero-poets within the epic, for the most commonly mentioned repertory of the poets within the epic is precisely praise poetry to the Prophet. However, the vision of Islam propagated in these performances of madīḥ, and further supported by narrative elements within the epic, is decidedly anti-institutional and is informed by the various beliefs and practices of folk Islam. This vision of Islam is strongly focused on the person of the Prophet as perfect model for human existence, in a world peopled by the interceding figures of Sufi dervishes and shaykhs, al-Ḥidr, al-Quṭb, and other figures. Institutionally oriented Islam is represented within the epic only by figures such as the teachers in the kuttāb (Qurʾānic school), referred to as fiqīḥs, whom Abū Zayd kills as a young boy when subjected to their cruelty, and the qāḍī 'religious judge', Badr of the Banī Ḥilāl tribe, who is distinguished by his physical cowardice in battle and his oftentimes pretentious mannerisms in speech and dress.

The transition from the madīḥ to the epic can be direct and even abrupt. When the poets of al-Bakāṭūsh perform in the sahra setting, however, they are more likely to precede the movement into the epic narrative itself with a mawwāl or even a series of mawwāls.

Mawwāl

The Egyptian folk mawwāl is the genre of poetry most often performed in conjunction with the sīra by the poets of al-Bakāṭūsh. The term is slightly confusing in that in Egypt it is used to refer at times to the poetic form of the mawwāl, at times to the singing style used in performing mawwāls, and at times in reference to the typically sad and aphoristic content of the folk mawwāl. In the realm of classical Arab music, for example, the term most often refers to a specific style of singing in which the text is fixed, but in which the singer takes great liberties in modifying the melody, rhythm, and vocal embellishments—in essence, freesong—whether or not the text in question has the poetic form of a mawwāl. This performance style is in fact used by the poets of al-Bakāṭūsh when singing mawwāls. In literary usage, however, mawwāl refers to a specific polyrhythmed form of colloquial poetry, usually in five, seven, or nine lines, though sometimes the lines are "chained" together to create long narrative poems. Even at the folk and popular

6. For further information on the role of these interceding figures see F. de Jong, "al-Kūṭb," EI², and A. J. Wensinck, "al-Ḫaḍir (al-Ḫidr)," EI².
levels there exist conflicting ideas about the identification of a mawwal; many of the texts and statements recorded from literate authors of popular chapbooks of mawwals, for example, are not applicable to the conceptualizations expressed by the epic singers or the audience members in al-Bakātūsh. 7

The most common theme of the folk mawwal, and perhaps the most ubiquitous and enduring theme in all of Egyptian folk poetry, is that of shakwa, literally ‘complaint.’ 8 Shakwa, however, is specifically a complaint that addresses the forces of the world: Time (al-zaman), the Days (al-ayyām), the Nights (al-layāli), the Era (al-awān), Fate (al-dahr), Destiny (qadar), the World (al-dunyā), and Separation (al-bēn; SA al-bayn). Shakwa is not addressed directly to the Almighty; that is rather the domain of prayers, supplications, and pleas. It would, in any case, be sacrilegious to complain to God, for all matters in the world move only by His will. For the pious, the relationship between worshiper, worldly states, and God, may be summed up in the common expression nashkur li-kull-I Ḥal ‘We give thanks for every state (or condition).’ The cause of troubles (and therewith the focus of “complaint”) is thus displaced onto Time, Fate, and Destiny, and it is these forces which are to be endured.

Text 4.4 Mawwal 1
Shaykh Biyālī Ābū Fāmī (2/11/87)—Pattern aa b aa

iṣ-ṣabr ‘uqbuh farag li-li nshawghīl bālūh

Patience—its result is release for he whose mind is occupied (with cares and troubles),

ahlān min illī yiṭafāt9 yiḥuṭ il-fikr fī bālūh

(Which is) better than he who grumbles and puts thoughts in his mind.


8. The mawwal form has become so irrevocably associated with the theme of shakwa ‘complaint’ that for many people it can refer to any type of sad song. The term has become nearly proverbial in this sense in phrases such as balāsh kull il-mawwāl dā, which, loosely translated, means, “Don’t give me a song and dance about it!” or “Don’t make a big fuss about it,” or aqalliha mawwāl yinizzih šahbūh, “The smallest mawwāl [= ditty] gives its composer pleasure.”

9. Fāfāt, also fafad ‘to sit and brood, then complain and talk about one’s troubles’, to get something off one’s chest (usually derogatory).
There is nothing better that he who is patient
and endures) the judgments of Fate and his Era;

From the good sense of the stalwart fellow he is able to balance
his loads. ¹⁰

Though the singer of a mawwāl may be moved to sing by specific
trials and tribulations, in poetic form these must be expressed in the
abstracted imagistic world of folk symbols: the camel (jamal) is a stalwart
man; the crow (ghurāb) is an omen of death and separation; the eye (al-
‘ēn; CA ‘ayn) is the soul; the doctor (tabīb) is the source of spiritual cures
or the Beloved who alone can cure the yearning lover; the camel’s
burdens (ahmāl, sing. himl) and wounds (ajrāḥ, sing. jarḥ) are human
troubles and woes; the lion (asad, also sabr) is a figure of authority;
mosquitoes (nāmūs) are petty interlopers. The foregrounded virtues in
both the real and poetic world are patience and endurance (ṣabr); the
ability to be someone who conceals (mughattā) one’s worries and troubles,
one who does not babble (halwas), grumble (fatāfat, also fadfad); who
empties his mind of whisperings (wiswās) and thought or brooding
(tafākīr); and who, above all, submits to the will of God (ḥukm allāh):

Text 4.5 Mawwāl 2
Shaykh Biyālī Abū Fahmī (2/11/87)—Pattern a bbb a

¹⁰. Literally ‘to balance loads as on a beast of burden, so as to make them easier to bear’.
¹¹. The repetitions of the first and third lines once again display alternation between
differing dialectal pronunciations: yā qalbī becomes yā qalbī in the repetition of line 1, and in
line 3 the process is reversed, qalbī becoming qalbī the second time.
¹². Double entendre formed from the verbs ḥām ‘to wander, go astray’, and hamm ‘to
worry, be anxious’.

yā qalbī fiḏḍak min il-wiswās wi-t-tafākīr [2x]¹¹
O my heart, empty yourself of whisperings and thoughts;

işbir li-ḥukm iz-zaman il-ayyām tiwarri ktīr
Be patient with the judgment of Fate, the days reveal much;

işbir yā qalbī bass-l mā tihimsh-l [2x]
Be patient, O my heart, but do not Go Astray¹²
Worry Yourself
The Interplay of Genres

allāh khalaq lak navr [2x] bih it-tāriq timshī
God gave you sight [2x] with which to walk the path

gher ḥikam il-ilāh yā ‘ubēd mā tiqdar allā tmashshī
Without the judgments [wisdom] of God, O little slave,
you couldn’t even make your way,

wi-ēh yi’mil il-‘abd law kān luh jināh wi-yiṭīr
So what would the slave do if he had wings and could fly?

The ṣakwa theme represents a poetic discourse in which one may express feelings and emotions which it would be dishonorable to express in action or in everyday speech. It is a poetry that constructs a world of un-acted-upon impulses, unspoken voices, unrealized desires. The poetic form, by social convention, allows the speaker to disavow actual responsibility for the contents expressed; the process of symbolization within the tradition allows statements to be couched in a language at once one level removed from the real world and yet completely comprehensible. This distance lies at the heart of the tradition, for the texts of these “complaints” admonish us, in fact, not to complain; these complaints are rhetorically structured so that they in fact avoid the direct expression of personal complaint. This rhetoric is part of the general tenor of Egyptian folk poetry and extends far beyond the mawwāl and even into the epic. When Ḫaḍrwa al-Sharīfa is cast out of the Bani Hilāl tribe in the episode of the Birth of Abū Zayd, for example, she sings the following:

Text 4.6 Shakwa from within the Epic
Shaykh Ṭāhā Abū Zayd, tape 87–101 (6/1/87)

anā in shakēt wallāhī rub‘ mā biyy
wi-l-baḥr il-jāri yinshiṭ māh

anā in shakēt wallāhī rub‘ mā biyy
il-ḥajar il-jalmūd yiṭīr shatat [2x]

anā in shakēt wallāhī rub‘ mā biyy
il-jabal il-‘āli yihidd I ‘ulāh

13. See Abu-Lughod, Veiled Sentiments, for an analysis of a body of women’s poetry (qhinnāwa) as a discourse which allows expression in artistic forms of thoughts and feelings that it would be wholly unacceptable to act upon in real life. Her insightful examples provoked my own thoughts about the functioning of the mawwāl, and of ṣakwa in general, in Egyptian folk poetry.
To complain, and yet not complain, is the paradoxical situation of all honorable characters within the epic—and in real life.

The mawwal is constructed most often on a five-, seven-, or nine-line pattern involving at least two different rhymes, and often three or more. It is quite distinct from the rhyme structure of epic verse:

**Epic Verse**

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- - - - - - - - 
- - - - - - - - 
- - - - - - - - 
- - - - - - - - 
- - - - - - - - 
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(etc.)

**Seven-Line Mawwāl**

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- - - A
- - - A
- - - A
- - - B
- - - B
- - - A
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In musical terms the two genres are equally distinct; the mawwāl possesses a sound and ethos quite separate from that of epic verse. Epic verse is in general mesmerizingly rhythmic, the same melody often being used for dozens of lines before a change occurs. Although the poet may throw in a large number of devices such as extending certain notes, accenting the melodic line differently, adding musical embellishments, and such, these rarely become the focus of the audience’s attention. The overall effect is one of regularity. The mawwāl, on the other hand, is a genre used to demonstrate vocal virtuosity. It has no regular rhythm
and is often sung with a great deal of melisma, heavy rubato, and in an emotionally heightened style. The mawwāl often displays an additional feature that distinguishes it from other forms of Arabic folk poetry: an extremely artful and complex technique of paronomasia and double entendre. Briefly, the final words of all the lines that share a common rhyme are pronounced almost exactly alike in performance, though they would be quite distinct in conversational speech. This leaves to the listener the activity of choosing between the various similar-sounding possibilities and the selection of those meanings foregrounded by the poet. Providing a written transcription of a mawwāl often conceals much of the artistry of the genre. In the text below, for example, the final words in lines 1, 2, 3, 4, and 7 are close puns, not only because the words themselves are similar (i.e., standard puns) but because the poet has deliberately obscured differences in pronunciation, "leveling" the differences to a single pronunciation in his performance.

Text 4.7 Mawwāl 3
Shaykh Biyālī Abū Fāhmī (2/11/87)—Pattern aaaa bb a

qāl: il-‘ajab ‘alā jamrūh wi-mīghatṭī
He said: What a wonder is the camel who is wounded but conceals it!

yīfūt ‘alā l-i‘ād miḥammīl ghulb wi-mīghatṭī
He passes by his enemies bearing misfortune and is covered by it.

yiqūl: anā fi zamānī kunt ashīl ahmāl wi-akhātī
He says: "I in my time used to bear burdens and travel on."

yā ‘ēnī khūdī lik rāfīq zēn min khīyār il-nās wi-law khādī
O my eye, take for yourself a fine companion from the best of people, if you must take one.

14. Pierre Cachia (in "The Egyptian Mawwāl") has found that although a single term in a mawwāl may suggest many different interpretations, composers of mawwāls and some of the more literate singers focus on a single specific meaning in each line. In addition, it appears that although a rhyme word may appear more than once in the same poem, traditionally it should never refer to the same meaning twice. This is quite probably true of the mawwāl as a literary genre; audiences and epic poets in al-Bakātūsh, however, do not always seize upon some of the more recherché wordplays and often interpret the poem using the same meaning for more than one line.
This example encapsulates much of the worldview and style of the mawwāl complaint. The voices are detached, nameless; we must fill in the unspecified subject of the third-person verb (“he said,”; “he says,”) that introduces the first and third lines. Even when a direct address, to the “eye” (= soul) is introduced in line 4, we remain but eavesdroppers to the internal dialogue of an unknown speaker. The ideas are expressed in depersonalized symbols, terms with no specific antecedents. The virtue extolled is that of concealing pain and worries in the presence of enemies and rivals. If possible, troubles and concerns should not be expressed to anyone; failing that, the mawwāl exhorts us to choose a companion to confide in only with great care, someone who will conceal our secrets from others. The result of a bad choice is in fact another major theme of the folk mawwāl—deception and betrayal by friends and trusted companions.

In the following example, the final word of lines 1, 2, 3, and 9 (all pronounced khaṭābī or ḥaṭābī in this performance) can be broken down into a number of possibilities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sung Pronunciation</th>
<th>Common Spoken Pronunciation(s)</th>
<th>Translation(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>khaṭābī</td>
<td>= khaṭā biyya [SA khaṭi’a]</td>
<td>he/it wronged me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>= ḥaṭā biyya</td>
<td>he/it walked with me (i.e., carried me)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>he/it walked on me (i.e., trod on me)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>= khaṭā biyya [SA khaṭā]</td>
<td>a fault in me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ḥaṭābī</td>
<td>= ḥaṭābī</td>
<td>my kindling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

15. From ghaṭṭ, yighuṭ, literally ‘to snort’, which I have tried to capture with the translation “Hurrumph.” My thanks to Pierre Cachia for this explanation.
In performance the poet can sing [kh] and [h] so that they are nearly indistinguishable, which means that in theory all of the listed translations are possible interpretations for each of the lines. In the translation that follows, when more than one possibility functions with ease in a line, they have been capitalized and retained.

Text 4.8 Mawwāl 4
Shaykh Biyālī Abū Fahmī (2/11/87)—Pattern aaa bbb a

wi-yikūn jamālī 'ind shēl il-ḥiml ḥaṭābī
And my camel at the carrying of the burden WRONGED ME CARRIED ME

mā kān ghurāb il-nayā shālīnī wa-ḥaṭābī
In spite of the Raven of Separation, [Fate] bore me and CARRIED ME ACROSS TROD ON ME

yā nār qalbī 'alēhum qidinī ḥaṭābī
O Fire of my heart, against them light MY KINDLING.

anā as'alak yā rabb [2x] yā mugrī l-laban fī l-bizz
I ask you O Lord, O you who cause milk to flow in the BREAST!

tīta'ta' il-bakr min taḥt il-ḥīmūl wi-yīfizz
You stir the young camel 'neath his loads and he SPRINGS UP!

wi-tīsālṭan il-izz
And you have authority over all PROSPERITY!

wi-layālī il-izz bitdūm lī lakin il-layālī ma'a l-ayyām ḥaṭābī
Let the nights of prosperity continue for me; But the nights, along with the days, PUSH DOWN ON ME (HUMBLE ME)
Paraphrase:

1) As a strong man, when the time comes, I should shoulder life’s burdens,
2) Yet Fate seized me, despite my intentions, and bore me away from what I had hoped my life would be.
3) O my heart, strengthen yourself against the difficulties of life [or: against your enemies],
4) I ask you, O Lord, I ask you, O Lord, You who cause milk to flow in the breast,
5) You who give the young hope despite their troubles,
6) You have the power to grant me prosperity,
7) Let me continue to prosper. Yet all the forces of the world are trying to overcome me!

The shakwa theme whether expressed in the form of a mawwāl, such as above, or in epic verse, such as in ḫaḍrā’s shakwa also above, is one that attempts to conceal what it in fact actively reveals: the subject’s discontent and lack of sabr ‘patience, endurance’. Though mawwāls are composed about many different subjects, the examples interpolated into performances of Sīrat Banī Hilāl by the poets of al-Bakāṭūsh almost all deal with shakwa; as a body they may be taken to constitute a subgenre of sorts, intimately associated with the epic. As the examples above demonstrate, at the level of basic imagery the motif of “concealment” is a common one in the genre. The technique of paranomasia within the mawwāl differs, furthermore, from other types of punning, and may be read as a formal extension of the strategy of “concealment.” Puns are at times used by the al-Bakāṭūsh poets within the body of the epic; however, in these cases they rely upon the closeness of the common pronunciation of words to indicate the pun, which furthermore may be located anywhere in the verse. In short, in this form of wordplay it is up to the listener to create the link between two or more terms based on the similarity of pronunciation (though poets often mark the pun as well with paralinguistic cues such as musical marking with sudden pause, accentuation, sudden change in volume or tempo, etc.). In the mawwāl, the normally different pronunciations of the verse-final words are deformed and suppressed: they are pronounced the same and are all located in the verse-final rhyme, and nearly every rhyme is a pun. In the mawwāl then, the listener knows that there are puns structuring the poem, knows where they are to be found, and most significantly, must wrest the “words” from within the “pronunciation.”

In the first form of punning, the listener supplies the connection between two signifieds because of the relation she or he perceives between two signifiers (similarity of pronunciation), while in the second, the
The listener must forcibly bifurcate a single signifier (based on its structural location) into two or more separate signifiers and then connect the possible signifieds.

**Standard Punning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signifier A</th>
<th>listener's perception of similarity</th>
<th>Contrast-comparison between:</th>
<th>Signified A and Signified B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signifier B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Mawwäl Punning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signifier A</th>
<th>listener splits single signifier into possibilities, then foregrounds one or more, thus:</th>
<th>Signified A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signifier A</td>
<td></td>
<td>Signified B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The basic strategy of concealment within the mawwäl thus emerges at several different levels through (1) use of a timeless and spaceless rhetoric (distanced from singer and listeners); (2) suppression of any specific identity for the “speaker” within the poem; (3) expression of ideas in nonhuman images and abstractions which are nonetheless easily understood (displacement, for example, onto animal imagery) and; (4) concealment of key words within the poem through the deformation of normal pronunciation.

At all levels then (speaker, time, images, puns, rhymes) the shakwa-mawwäl asks its listeners to comprehend what it pretends to conceal—a strategy directly rooted in the social norms which have created a genre of poetry, the “complaint,” which bears the message that the greatest fault in a human being is to complain. To sing a mawwäl is thus precisely to complain without complaining, an extended use of praeteritio, to reveal emotions in a form that pretends to conceal them, to seek release (faraj) while still laying claim to endurance/patience (ṣabr).

The location of the mawwäl at the transition point of the sahra performance between the opening praise to the Prophet Muḥammad and the epic narrative fundamentally rearranges the axis of identification of the listeners. First of all, the mawwäl itself marks an increased attention within the performance to poetic form and likewise demands from its listeners an increased level of concentration if they are to grasp the various implications of the poem, particularly the punned rhymes. Perhaps more significant, however, is the shift away from the ideal (embodied in the person of the Prophet Muḥammad) toward the level of identification with the human heroes of the epic, heroes who are as torn as we are between
suppression and expression of troubles and emotions, but in order to be human heroes they must have faults: one cannot become a prophet; one can, however, aspire to the heroic.

These two common auxiliary genres of epic performance, madīḥ and mawwāl, should in any case attract our attention by dint of their constant proximity to the epic; their significance becomes even more telling as we become aware that both genres are constantly replicated in miniature within the epic as well, at particularly crucial junctures.

Sīra

At the end of the madīḥ-mawwāl sequence, a new sequence is set into motion, one repeated by the poets of al-Bakātūsh whenever they begin to sing the epic itself, whether this be at the beginning of an evening or after an interruption, however lengthy or brief. A musical interlude is presented first, followed by a spoken passage in rhymed prose (ṣa’ī). This spoken prose section, known among the poets as kalām al-rāwī ‘the words of the reciter’, or as the qa’dā the ‘base’ or ‘foundation’, provides either introductory information regarding the scene-setting (such as introducing characters or alerting listeners to which episode or which part of an episode is about to be sung) or actual narrative material which carries the story forward. The subsequent poetry at times represents narrative material from the prose passage; at other times the story continues forward with no substantial repetition of material.\(^\text{16}\)

The critical juncture between prose and poetry is always effected in the same manner: a character within the epic must be emotionally moved to speak. Situations and emotions must reach a confluence that impels a character to stand up and sing: “and he sang, saying verses which you shall hear, and all who love the beauty of the Prophet, wish God’s blessings upon Him,” or, “he rose and gestured, saying words, and all who love the beauty of the Prophet wish God’s blessings upon Him.” Alternatively, the poet entreats the audience to harken to what a character is about to say: “and he wept: Listen to what he shall say, and all who love the beauty of the Prophet, wish God’s blessings upon Him.” The moment of transition is one of highly charged emotions, and each time a poet moves back into the epic, he must do so in the same manner, through the vehicle of a character within the epic who is moved to speak.

\(^{16}\) In some older manuscripts of Sīrat Bānī Hilāl, the poetry consistently re-presents in dialogue the plot material summarized in third-person voice in the prose sections. See Anne Blunt and Wilfred Blunt, Stealing of the Mare (1892), for an example of this style translated into English.
Once the transition has been accomplished, once the epic-verse mode has been broached, various voices may be deployed, including extensive sequences in third-person narrative voice. The actual transition, however, is effected with the introduction of first-person voice, and this first-person utterance is usually motivated by emotional conditions. Thus typical transitions occur at moments of grief, joy, fear, anxiety, or in formal, public speech-acts:

Music → Rhymed Prose → Emotional Crisis → Verse

The final line of the rhymed prose section is invariably an invocation of God’s blessings on the Prophet. As audience members whisper one of the appropriate responsory blessings upon the Prophet Muḥammad, the poet plays another brief musical interlude, tunes the rabāb if necessary, and selects his recitation melody. The very first verse is accorded a great deal of importance by the poets, for it “sets” (tabbīt; SA thabbata) the rhyme; the words are not hard to find, however, for this introit is one of the most formulaic of sequences in the epic. The poet’s first line of sung verse (kalām al-shā‘īr ‘words of the poet’) will once again be a mention of the Prophet, often couched in the poet’s own first-person voice:

A. anā ‘abd-I min ya’shaQ jamāl-I muḥammad
    tāhā l-lāzī ḥajj il-ḥajj wi-jāh
I am the servant of he who adores the beauty of Muḥammad,
    Tāḥā for whom the pilgrims pelerinated and came.

B. anā ‘abd-I min ya’shaQ jamāl-I muḥammad
    nābinā l-hudā sayyid wilād cadnān
I am the servant of he who adores the beauty of Muḥammad,
    Our Prophet of True Guidance, Lord of the Sons of ‘Adnān.

C. awwil kalāmī fī madiḥ il-muṣṭafā
    il-hāşimī mā lināsh shafī‘ siwāh
The first of my words are in praise of the Chosen One,
    The Hashimite. We have no intercessor save He.

This brief panegyrical opening is at times expanded to two or even three lines, but rarely further. The next line invariably includes one of several formulae for announcing the speaker whose words we are about to hear, usually coupled with another formula indicating his or her charged emotional state:
D. qāl il-amīr barakāt wī-l-qalbī l-ward
    wi-nār-l qalbuh fī l-fu‘ād yikawūh
Said Prince Barakāt, and his heart was in dread,
And the fire of his heart in his soul did sear him.

E. qālat khaḍra ‘indimā māl bīḥa z-zāman
    wī-hayāt-I rabbī, lā ilāh‘ siwāh
Said Khadra when Fate leaned upon her,
“By the life of my Lord [God], there is no god but He.”

F. qāl il-malik faḍl-l min mā āṣābaḥu
    dunyā daniyya ammā z-zāman jabbār
Said King Faḍl from what befell him,
“[It’s] a wretched world and Fate is a tyrant.”

After this verbalized quotation marker, and the commonly attached expression of strong emotionality, comes the shakwa sequence or a sequence of aphorisms, sung directly by the epic character or in an unattributed voice. This aphoristic preface to epic narration has a number of parallels in other epic traditions. A suggestive parallel can be found, for example, in the heroic songs of the Mande hunters which Charles Bird breaks down into three separate modes: proverb-praise mode, narrative mode, and song mode. The proverb-praise mode acts as an introduction, establishes the veracity and authenticity of the singer’s performance, and is often found at all major divisions in the story. An additional, and even closer, parallel is found in the opening passage to “The Wedding of Smailagić Meho” as sung by Abdo Međedović. The epic poet, a Muslim, first invokes God’s assistance, then sings a series of aphoristic sentiments (“Rain will fall and the year will bear its fruits, and the debtor will free himself of his debt, but never of a bad friend, nor yet at home of a bad wife. . . . Roof over your house and it will not leak. Strike your wife and she will not scold.”), then addresses his listeners, sets the scene, and finally begins the narrative itself.

Finally, at the conclusion of the shakwa passage, the epic narrative is engaged.

The Interplay of Genres

Musical Introduction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spoken</th>
<th>Sung</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rhymed prose</td>
<td>Poet’s introit/mention of the Prophet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional crisis</td>
<td>Illocutionary marker/emotional state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invocation for the Prophet</td>
<td>Shakwa (aphoristic mode)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>Epic narrative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One variation on this sequence is common among some of the poets: a mawwāl may be sung between the rhymed prose passage and the beginning of the sung epic verse. Since the mawwāls used at this point in the performance invariably deal with the shakwa theme, no shakwa passage is then heard between the announcement of the speaker and the commencement of the story itself. (The mawwāl, once again, is a poetic form based on a poly-rhymed sequence of verses in which most verses end with a particular form of paronomasia, sung in a very distinct manner; the shakwa is a theme that can be couched either in the form of epic verse or in that of a mawwāl.)

Paired below are parallel passages taken from Shaykh Ṭāhā and Shaykh Biyālī Abū Fahmī which demonstrate these two typical transitions (with and without mawwāl).

Text 4.9 Transition into Epic Verse 1
Shaykh Ṭāhā Abū Zayd, tape 87–101 (6/1/87)

Spoken:
. . . qām ‘usarat ‘alāh nafsuh min ‘adam zikrat is–subyān, fa-qā‘ad Rizq yinshid ‘alā ‘adam zikrit is–ṣābī kalām tisma‘ ilēh wi–ṣāhiq jamāl in-nabī yikattarum is–ṣalāt’ ‘alēh:

[Music]

Sung:
anā †abd-I min ya‘shaq jamāl-I muhammad, 1
Ṭāhā l-lāzī yashtāq lahu kull-I rāyīh.
isma‘ mà qāl rizq ish–ṣhājī ibn“ nāyil, 2
dam“ jarā min muqlit il–‘ēn sāyih.
āhēn min id-dunyā wi–d-dahr wi–z–zaman, 3
kull-I mà shuftuh bi–l–‘ēn rāyih.
mā mdāḥsh fī l–ayyām yawm“ yisirranī, 4
illā yiji ‘uqbuḥ nakād wi–ṣhāhāyīh.
yā bèn salihní kifā mà fa‘alta biyy,
armēt silāḥī ilēk wa–bi–l–‘uzr wādīh. 5
Spoken:

. . . His soul grew greatly troubled over the lack of an heir, so Rizq sat and sang, of the lack of a male heir, words which you shall hear, and he who loves the beauty of the Prophet wishes God's blessings upon Him:

[Music]

Sung:

I am the servant of all who adore the beauty of Muḥammad, Tāhā, for whom every pilgrim yearns.

Listen to what said Rizq the Valiant, son of Nāyil, A tear from the orb of his eye did flow.

"Ah! Ah! the World and Fate and Destiny!

And all I have seen with my eyes shall disappear.

I do not praise among the days one which pleases me, But that its successor comes along stingy and mean.

O Fate make peace with me, 'tis enough what you've done to me,

I cast my weapons at you [but] my excuse is clear.

My wealth is great, O men, but [I am] without an heir

Wealth without an heir after a lifetime disappears.”

Shaykh Tāhā, in his opening transition into the epic-verse mode, moves, as we have detailed above, at a moment of emotional duress from spoken prose to sung verse, commencing with his own statement that he is a servant to all who adore the Prophet. He then marks the following utterance as that of Rizq the Valiant, son of Nāyil, and portrays Rizq’s emotional state with the description of his tears. Shaykh Tāhā rarely interpolates a mawwal at the juncture between prose and poetry, a habit he attributes to personal taste. The shakwa theme in his rendition is placed directly in the mouth of the speaking hero. Shaykh Biyālī Abū Fahmī, in contrast, nearly always inserts a mawwal in his transitions. It is clear from his own statements that he feels he possesses a good singing voice and that audience members are pleased when he takes these opportunities to demonstrate it. The flowing, freesong style of the mawwal allows much more room for the demonstration of vocal skill than does the more rhythmically restricted epic verse:
The Interplay of Genres

[Music]

*Mawwāl* (sung):

Mawwāl 4 (text 4.8 above)

*Epic Verse* (sung):

tuhīyā l- láyālī bi-ṣ-ṣālātu ʿalā n-nabī
nabīnā il-hudā nūruh min il-Qabr läyiḥ

wi-smaʿ mā ghannā rizq ibn-I nāyil
yāllah salāma wi-mi-z-zaman il-makāfiḥ

tizawwija-I min in-niswān yā ʿēnī tamanya:
khallīf-I minhum bidashir ʿabiyya
ābadan mā nabnī min warā l-ḥarim rabāyiḥ

*Spoken:*

. . . Rizq, son of Nāyil, began to lament his state and the lack of siring boys, in these verses. I and you, we wish God’s blessings on the Prophet, Lord of Miracles:

*Mawwāl* (sung):

And my camel at the carrying of the burden wronged me,
In spite of the Raven of Separation, [Fate] bore me and carried me off;
O Fire of my heart, against them light my kindling,
I ask you O Lord, I ask you O Lord,
O you who cause milk to flow in the breast!
You stir the young camel ’neath his loads and he springs up!
And you have authority over all prosperity!
Let the nights of prosperity continue for me;
But the nights, along with the days, humble me.

*Epic Verse* (sung):

The nights are greeted with our wishes for God’s blessings on the Prophet!
Our Prophet of True Guidance, His light from the Tomb shines forth.
Now listen to what sang Rizq the Valiant, son of Nāyil,
Come now Salāma [=Rizq], time only brings struggles!
“I have married of women, O my Eye, eight:
I sired with them eleven maidens,
No profit comes from siring only daughters.”19

19. Literally, ‘we can never build profits behind females’.
Such is the association between the transition from prose to poetry and deep-felt emotions that at times the poets must supply a passionate impulse where the narrative provides only sparse emotional motivation. In Shaykh Ṭāḥah’s performance cited earlier, the second shift from the prose “words of the reciter” to the verse “words of the poet” occurs when the Bani Hilāl tribe has arrived in Mecca, after Rizq has announced his desire to marry the daughter of the sharif of Mecca. The qaḍī (religious judge) of the tribe, Fāyid, stands and faces the Meccans to declare what the Banī Hilāl are willing to give as a brideprice. This clearly constitutes a formal speech-act: The emotions described by the poet, however, seem completely overblown given the situation in the narrative; they should be read as part of the intensified framing that surrounds the transition from prose to verse, speech to song, from performance to “performance within the performance.”

Text 4.11 Transition into Epic Verse 3
Shaykh Ṭāḥah Abū Zayd, tape 87–101 (6/1/87)

Spoken:
... wi-ḥaḍar il-qaḍī, fāyid illi huwa abū bedīr. fa-qāl luḥ tikallim yā qaḍī wi-tkallim ‘an šiyāq ỉs-šabiyya (ỉs-šiyāq dā ya’nī il-mahr). šuẓf il qaḍī hayiqūl ēḥ, wi-tāshiq jamāl in-nabī yīṣallī ‘ālēḥ:

[Sung]

Sung:
anā ‘abd-I mīn ya’shaq jamāl’ muḥammad
ṭāḥah l-lāzī talīb ish-shīfā’ā wi-nālḥā
isma’av mā qāl il-qaḍī fāyid wi-mā nishiṭ
matru[fat]n wa-lā ya’lif in-nēm ḥa[lḥā

tibāṭ ʿalā niyya wi-tisbaḥ ‘alā ḥa[zir
ka-mā in kalālīb il-‘amar fī majālīḥ
wi-in mālīt il-ʾaḥmāl bi-yadī ṣidīliḥā
wi-in mālīt id-dunyā ʿalā lāḥ iṭiḍalīḥā
hānītn bi-čentn tin’is il-lēl kāmīltn

tibāṭ mastirīḥa mā ‘ālēḥā wa-lamḥā
wi-čeni wajirā tisbaḥ il-lēl kāmīltn

tibāṭ tisallīni ‘alā lī lījārā ḥā
isma’av li-qōlī āḥ yā Qirda wi-istaham
kalām aμārā āḥ mā hum ʿayyāḥā
niʿuz minnak šabiyya Munassūba
aṣīlit il-jaddēn ‘ammtn wi-khālḥā

Spoken:
... And the Qaḍī Fāyid, father of Baḍīr, came forth. So [the sharif of Mecca] said to him, “Speak, Qaḍī, and speak of the brideprice for the
maiden.” (Poet’s aside: The brideprice, that is, the dowry.) Listen to what the Qâdî will say, and he who loves the beauty of the Prophet wishes God’s blessings upon Him:

[Music]

Sung:
I am the servant of all who adore the beauty of Muḥammad, 1
Tâhâ, who asked for [the power of] intercession and obtained it.
Listen to what the Qâdî Fayid said and what he sang: 2
“[My eye] is pained and sleep frequents it not in this state.
It goes to sleep with [good] intention, but awakes filled with caution,
As if the [all the] hooks [?] of life were in its [sleep’s] domain.
If my burdens lean, with my own hand I set them straight,
But if the world leans, only God can set it straight.
Happy is the eye which sleeps the whole night through,
It passes the night in comfort, no blame is upon it.
But my eye is in pain, it keeps vigil the whole night through,
It passes the night troubling me with all that has befallen it.
Listen to my words, O Qîrdâ, and comprehend,
These are the words of princes, Ah! they are not [mere] children.
We wish from you a maiden high-born and of noble ancestry,
From both grandfathers, paternal and maternal uncles [too].”

If my conjecture that the emotional core of the epic tradition lies in the speeches of its heroes is true, then the intensified framing that accompanies the “breakthrough into performance” of these speeches seems comprehensible. 20 The obligatory shakwa seems equally comprehensible when we read it as establishing the emotional space within which characters are moved to speak or, more properly, moved to sing their words.

We can approach this sequence of minute genres in a different manner, however, if we focus upon the formal features of each. This general sequence from the real world into the world of the epic is accomplished through the step-by-step accrual of formal features, features that set epic verse (ṣīr) apart from normal “talk” (kalâm). As we move from “talk” into the epic, we encounter first music alone, and then rhymed prose (ṣâf) without music, which introduces the feature of rhyme as well as the narrative element; the mawwâl then combines instrumental music, vocal singing, and rhyme but is neither narrative nor rhythmically regular; the brief lines of madiḥ at the beginning of each “speech” set into

motion the regular rhythm of the general recitation but does not yet integrate the narrative thread; and finally as we hear the character speak and begin to tell his or her story, we have entered fully into the epic world where utterances are musical, sung, rhymed, rhythmically measured, and narrative. The following chart illustrates this progression of formal features.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Musical Intro</th>
<th>Rhymed Prose</th>
<th>Mawwål</th>
<th>Madiḥ</th>
<th>Shakwa</th>
<th>Epic-Verse Narrative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Musical</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhymed</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
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<td>Narrative</td>
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Each of these genres, or modes of presentation, thus marks a transitional set of formal features which eventually move us into the world of epic utterances, a poetically differentiated world. If, as the Formalists would have it, the poetic function emerges as the conscious marking of language with features deployed to distinguish it from other, more ordinary, language use, then this tradition displays great concern not only to mark the utterances and narratives of heroes, but also to provide carefully organized transitions from the world of “unmarked” language use to the “marked” world of epic song.

Our deductions in this case can be partially substantiated by the poets’ habit of using this same pattern to reenter the epic after all interruptions. In many instances the poet is forced to rework the material in order to deploy this traditional sequence of genres and formal features when reentering the sung, epic-verse mode. If interrupted at an inconvenient point, the poet may have to resort to a lengthy prose introduction until he arrives at a moment in the narrative with enough emotional impact to trigger the movement into song, covering ground in the story which is, in uninterrupted performances, usually performed in sung poetry.

This traditional sequencing of formal features carries additional significance beyond the general increase in complexity of the formal marking: such marking is also used to indicate allusion to a variety of speech-acts and to other local genres of verbal art exterior to the epic. Scholars of a number of cultures have remarked that some epic traditions tend to assimilate and absorb other genres of verbal art found in their proximity. I have argued elsewhere that this phenomenon is true of the Sirat Bani

21. Any given sequence includes either a mawwål or a shakwa section, but not both.
A close study of these features, the genres of verbal art alluded to within the epic itself, and the import of the various means poets utilize for marking speech-acts within the epic would help us understand the how involved in the process of signification—how various figurations are deployed and interpreted in epic performance.

One final general observation worth exploring concerns the short transitional sequences we have examined above: these sequences frame the utterances of epic heroes precisely as the sahra itself is framed. As the sahra progresses from (1) the opening mention of the Prophet to (2) praise of the Prophet to (3) a lyrical interlude on the vicissitudes of Fate and Destiny, and only then to (4) the narrative element of the sīra, so within the sīra, heroes’ speeches progress in the same way from an initial mention of the Prophet, to words in His praise, to shakwa, and finally to the narrative. This observation is further supported by noting that poets who regularly sing mawwāls in their epic performances do so both in the initial sequence of the evening and at the juncture between rhymed prose and epic verse, while poets such as Shaykh Ẓāhā, who generally prefer not to include mawwāls within the epic, also do not perform them at the beginning of the evening. Whichever sequence the poet observes, the progression is parallel.

The heroes’ words are thus marked in the same manner as the poets’ words. Both the madiḥ and the theme of shakwa (in the form of the mawwāl) which opened the greater sahra performance reappear in miniature within the sīra when heroes speak. The speech of heroes and the speech of poets are once again equated by a tradition that has clearly evolved in a social context where poets over generations have bound their profession, and with it themselves, to the fictional characters who are accorded the respect which the poets in real life are consistently denied; in this sense, the sahra performance replicates itself over and over again within the sīra.

Other Genres

The three genres we have examined—the sīra, mawwāl, and madiḥ—constitute the three most clearly recognized genres of performance within the sahra. As alluded to in Chapters 2 and 3, however, poets do not confine themselves to these three genres, although the three are performed only by poets. Though the audience may have a great deal of

22. See Reynolds, “Interplay.”
input, the genres are not primarily dialogic forms. In the sahra two other recognized genres occur repeatedly which we can examine together in that they appear to share a single function in incorporating audience members directly into the “text” of the performance. They are (1) “greetings and salutations” (tahiyāt wa-salāmāt) and (2) “bits of country stuff” or “local color” (ḥitat baladī). The first is a genre that plays a much greater role in large public performances where listeners offer small payments (nuqūt) to have themselves, friends, or family members mentioned by the poet in a sequence of traditional greetings and well-wishing. In the sahra, these greetings are usually reserved for guests as they arrive or depart from the gathering and are usually restricted to one or two verses. The second genre, the “bits of country stuff,” is a sahra genre par excellence in that the poet must possess detailed knowledge of the social life of his listeners.

The following example of hitat baladi was performed at the request of an audience member, Ustādh Bakr, who possesses a great deal of personal and family-based status. As a government employee in the provincial capital, he commands an observable degree of respect from other inhabitants of the village; in the sahra context he is a listener who receives attention from the poets through greetings and salutations as well as other references to his presence during the performance. This request for “a bit of country stuff” was made during an intermission in which cigarettes were offered around but tea was not served; the not very veiled comments that surface in this text concerning hospitality and the offering of food and drink helped successfully initiate a substantial round of tea at the next break in the performance. In this case the poet chose a basic traditional pattern that contrasts good and bad fortune; in particular he amplified and emphasized the role of the wife in the presentation of hospitality to guests (directed at the “missing” tea in this gathering). Within the treatment of this motif, he embedded several further cutting remarks aimed at the shortage of flour in the village and the evils of hoarding food.

Audience members burst out with applause and laughter at many points, but the strongest response occurred after the poet’s criticism of the supervisor of the government-subsidized food outlet (line 28), a criticism he picks up again (line 32) in more allegorical terms with references to the timing of the Nile flood (before the building of the Aswan High Dam): if the flood came too late, it did no good, for the cotton was already dead; likewise hoarded food does no one any good if it is stored and not used.

The primary qualities of this form of entertainment are (1) the pervasive comic tone, (2) the mention within the text of members of the
audience, either directly by name or obliquely through land they own or other well-known attributes, and (3) an interstitial social commentary concerning either the immediate performance situation or the general sociopolitical situation of the village at large. Clearly there is an element of excitement and tension situated in any performance of this type, for no one knows who or what will be the target of the poet's wit. To attend such performances and participate in them is a form of social roulette: the entertainment gained at the expense of others may well be at the cost of one's own public embarrassment.

There is little or no adherence to a strict verse form in this performance genre, though a single end-rhyme is used to mark each cluster of phrases. The poet even overtly mentions his use of rhyme when he turns to me to explain (line 30) why he is using the far less common word za'bibu instead of the usual word for men's apparel, galabiyya. (I did not know the word at the time, and my confusion doubtless registered in my expression.) Although one might line out this text in many ways so as to highlight differing formal features, here I address only the techniques by which the poet involves and implicates the audience members into the text. I have therefore chosen to group the phrases into “clusters” based on the occurrence of the end rhyme. Shaykh 'Abd al-Wahhab in this performance jumped rapidly from full singing voice, to speaking voice, and from shouts to whispers; he imitated the "bad wife's" voice with a deep threatening growl and mimicked the "good wife" in soft, sweet tones.

There are, however, many features that link together various portions of this text and provide a certain cohesion to some units as well as a sense of balance to the overall development, despite the rapid-fire shift from topic to topic. The most obvious pattern is the juxtaposing of positive versus negative images. These oppositions at first occupy the space of a single line (2, 5), then a pair of lines (3–4), and are then expanded to occupy much larger segments (the "good son" in 6 and 7 versus the "bad son" in 8–10; the "good wife" in 11–16 versus the "bad wife" in 17–31). As the size of the oppositions increase from line, to couplet, to larger segments, so the "lines" themselves become looser and looser clusters of phrases sung or spoken very rapidly with only occasional punctuation from the rabab rather than full musical accompaniment. The poet returns to measured, rhythmical verses only at the close of the performance.

The section most clearly developed here, concerning the "bad wife," takes up a full half of the performance; there is within it a consistent movement back and forth from the image of the "bad wife" to the poet's other concerns, as shown in figure 6.
Figure 6. Thematic movement in Ḥitat Baladī performance

Lines 17–19:
the “bad wife”

Line 21:
the “bad wife”

Line 23:
the “bad wife”

Lines 24–28:
husband of the “bad wife” tries to be hospitable but is foiled by his wife

Line 29:
the “bad wife”

Line 31:
closure of “bad wife” motif

Line 36: return to opening motif

Line 20: description of the land and crops east of the village (owned by audience members)

Lines 22–23: description of the land west of the village with reference by name to listeners

Line 23: reference to the host and the gathering

Lines 28–29: criticism of manager of government store

Line 30: spoken aside about the rhyme

Lines 32–35: reiteration of themes in traditional motifs (the Nile; all sustenance comes from God)

Text 4.12 Example of Ḥitat Baladī
Shaykh ‘Abd al-Wahhāb Ghāzi, tape 87–044 (3/15/87)²³

Sung:
He whose goal is heaven wishes God’s blessings on the Prophet;

An Arab Prophet, He has a permanent sanctuary.

And sustenance from God is sometimes [good] fortune and sometimes [bad] fortune [lit. fortunes and fortunes].

And there is he who is given, yes, generosity and nobility, and there is he who is given stinginess till he dies.

And there is he who is given ornamented gardens, and in them are mangoes, and in them are pears, and in them are grapes, and in them are dates, and in them are pomegranates,

²³. The rhyme is -ūt/-ūt. Transliterated Arabic text is found in the Appendix.
glorious fruits, O my brother;
And sustenance from Our Lord is sometimes [good]
fortune and sometimes [bad] fortune.

And there is he who is given a single acacia tree,
by God, O my eye, or a male mulberry tree.

And there is he who is given caftan and broadcloth,
and there is he who is given a rag of a garment.

And there is he who is given a son,
clever, polite, a well-bred son;
When the boy is mentioned in conversation in the gathering,
it pleases his father;
O my brother, he holds his head high [lit. his neck is long]
and he sits contented.

This is a son who takes after his maternal uncle;
The boy’s maternal uncle is a man from the noblest of houses.

And there is he who is given a son who is a
disappointment and a good-for-nothing;
Yes, O my eye, foul-mouthed [and] rude.

He brings his father problems and misdoings;
And the stores and the cafés and the fields
and the buses and the train, yes, and all the houses.

Because his father is a man of reputation and well-meaning,
they all come back to the father to collect the money and the bills;
O my brother, a son who grew up a good-for-nothing,
taking after his maternal uncle,
for his maternal uncle is a worthless man.

And there is he who is given a beautiful, comely marriage;
Very pretty, O my brother, comely, beautiful,
noble, from the noblest of houses.

And her face is fair and her cheek glistens like a jewel [i.e., a ruby].
When he has guests who are friendly with him [lit. who lean toward him],
all “requests” come to the guests while her husband remains seated (with them),
without him sensing it or knowing it;
He doesn’t have to say,
“O my daughter, bring this, pass that.”
All the “requests” come to the guests while her husband sits among the guests contented.

Pickled dishes and rice dishes.
A noble [woman], beautiful, very pretty,
from the noblest of houses,
her husband sits among the guests contented.

He calls for something: “Yes, right away”
[Whispers:] “Yes, right away, yes, right away.”
And her teeth laugh from her fair face like jewels.

Her husband, if he lives with her eighty years,
ninety years, or completes one hundred,
(and all lifespans are in the hand of God!)
he will live and die in happiness, yes, contented.

And there is he who is given a marriage, O my brother,
Our Lord does not grant it success, nor grant success
to those who bore her or sired her or recommended her
A marriage which has become today a destructive affliction;
Lazy! Stingy! Lazy! Stingy!
From the laziest of houses,
she has a neck that resembles a catfish!

God is great! God is great!
And when a guest goes near their house,
she gets up, O my brother, clutching a wooden club!

“I was coming [to visit] Uncle So-and-so.”
She says, “He’s at the doctor, O brother.
He’s dying, he’s dying, he’s dying, he’s dying”
[i.e., she lies so as not to offer hospitality].
I asked about him as I was coming along  
the Salamōniyya [irrigation canal] from the East;  
that is, over by the contractor’s from the north,  
along the path from that train station of ours.  
This is a very good year,  
and the cotton is producing twelve qinţārs this year,  
and that’s in the rented lands,  
and in the reform lands,  
and in the private lands it’s at nine and a half or ten or so,  
and the credit and the agriculture are good,  
and they filled up the government subsidy store—  
Boy, was I content!

[The wife says:] “O if only, O my father—  
Five minutes before you came the car came and took him off,  
he’s going to die, he’s going to die.”

I asked about him as I was coming from near the  
Faza‘iyya over in the West;  
Sirahna village, from the house of Abū Šuhb,  
paternal uncle of al-Ḥājj Muḥammad,  
a prince of a man, people of nobility,  
nobility and “contentedness” [= here “well-off”].

I asked about him at Alḥmad Muṣṭafā’s place,  
a good man, and at al-Ḥājj Kāmil’s, as well,  
[I asked about] my Uncle So-and-So;  
They said, “It’s a very good year.”  
The woman says, “He’s dying, he’s dying.”  
I wish he would, I wish he would:  
“He’s going to die!”  
She’s just the daughter of misers!  
The man is sitting in the guest room!  
Like this one of Alḥmad Bakhā’ti’s that we are all  
sitting in this evening for a happy gathering!  
If God wills, let it be a gathering for good purposes  
wishing God’s blessings on the Prophet Muḥammad,  
the Light of the Prophet, yes, fills the crypt!

If he [the husband] is worried about his reputation  
he runs out the back door which faces east,  
and around to meet the guests:  
“O welcome! One thousand million welcomes! O welcome!  
Please, come in, come in, please!”  
He shakes out the couch, and the cushions,
and the pillows, and arm-rests, and bolsters.
The story, praise be to God,
has become good, all over!
Lots of cushions, lots of armrests,
and beautiful houses!
Absolute satisfaction! Praise be to God!
He said, "Praise be to God!"
He's become the richest of people,
those who live contented.

So he sits and greets them,
and he sprinkles on them a few cigarettes,
a few drinks, a few sweets,
and then afterward, when he gets alone with the evil, hairy one,
that daughter of disasters says to him:
O such hostility! O such hostility!
"Whadya want?" "A bite for these guests to eat,
they've been two hours sitting here."
"I was going to go to the clinic today,
but when I saw them from the eastern door,
I went quickly [to invite them]."
He even goes along with what she said,
the words of the evil-tempered one; what does she say?
"I have a postponement for the clinic,"
(that is, he goes along with what she said,
that is, so he can live contented).

We are their children, O my brother, âh—
"I had a check-up appointment today,
but when I saw these guests,
my health got better, praise be to God, much better.
Bring us some lunch."
Two hours pass, I don't know, perhaps three . . .
Food in a rush!
She goes to bring out the food, O my brother,
and she places it in front of him, and lets loose in a very loud voice;
Oh what great news, she's brought them bitterness!
So she's even managed to ruin this, what will they eat?
They leave the food, it's become a funeral,
and he who seeks refuge in God . . .²⁴ his friends.
Because she is miserly and the daughter of misers, from the laziest of houses.

²⁴. Unclear on recording.
The guests leave, and the man, O my eye, is not feeling good, afterward he is not content.

He goes back and says to her:

"Why, O why! Why, O why!
You've ruined my reputation, and the reputation of my grandfathers!
The generous man is never treated unfairly.
The generous man is never treated unfairly.
And these people have been in the habit of coming to us since the days of our fathers and our grandfathers.
And this house has been open [to guests] from long, long ago.
She says to him: "It's none of your business!
Shut up! So you've opened the main door?
Sit down, sit down and keep quiet."
And Our Lord's munificence is great, and the guest, before he comes, his sustenance comes before him,25
And she hoards and conceals so!
All day long I've been looking for flour in the shops, I went to Abū Sulēmān's [private shop] and to Ustāz Jalāl [manager of the government store].
I found all their flour was locked up tight!

"Okay, so here's a little bread, take it!"
"Quiet! Am I a baker? Do I pat out the loaves?
And my arm is tired—I sit down and—
Get away, get away!
And a word from her,
And a word from her husband and she starts a quarrel.
She tears his za'būṭ [men's outer garment].

[Aside to me: That is, you say galabiyya from beginning to end, but za'būṭ is for the rhyme!]

She tears up his za'būṭ, she shreds his za'būṭ.
"O woman, leave me, go back to your people's house!"
"By God, I'll never leave you, I'll be here till you die!"

25. That is, God provides the wherewithal to feed guests, for all guests are first and foremost "guests of God" (īd-dīf dīf allāh).
And when the Nile would come to us in [the month of] misrā,26
When the Nile used to come to us in [the month of] misrā,
And there is no good in the Nile if it comes in tut.27

The planting, it’s life would already have passed,
after twenty-five days the water would come,
all the cotton would have died, and all of it gone.
And when the Nile would come in misrā,
there is no good in the Nile which comes in tūt.

The fatta and bread were no more expensive than zucchini.
And there is no good in provisions that are hoarded.

And he who dies, yes, whence does he pass.
And sustenance from God, yes, is sometimes [good] fortune and sometimes [bad] fortune.

And there is he who is given generosity and nobility,
and there is he who lives in stinginess till he dies.

Yes, and there is he who is given of life his fill,
and there is he who is given a year and then dies.

And sustenance from God, yes, is sometimes [good] fortune and sometimes [bad] fortune.

And the best of these words are
(I and you together, O listeners to these words)
Wish God’s blessings on the Presence of the Prophet,
an Arab Prophet, He has an enduring sanctuary.

This is a “high-context” performance.28 It is densely contextualized, an insider’s text, and a text that “alludes to” far more that it “indicates” or “states,” a text that does not create a narrative “story world.” To achieve even the most basic understanding of this performance we would be forced to discuss the following:

Implications of landownership, the fact that only a few powerful families in al-Bakāṭūsh own gardens with fruit trees, and which of these families were represented in this audience;
Stereotypes of close emotional relationships between boys and maternal

27. First month of the Coptic year.
28. See Edward Hall, Beyond Culture (1976), chap. 7, “Contexts, High and Low.”
uncles versus more severe, disciplinarian-style relationships between boys and paternal uncles;

The performing poet’s middle son, who has been a constant disappointment to him and caused a great deal of trouble in the village, and who is particularly known for his misbehavior at gatherings;

The reputation of the house where the performance was taking place, which was one distinctly lacking in hospitality;

The topography of the village, which lands are owned by members of this audience, and the relationships between those mentioned by name and those not;

Basic tensions common in village households which arise from the wife’s responsibility for domestic expenditures and the husband’s desire to display public hospitality (which can result in effective female control of certain types of male displays of honor); and

The role of government-subsidized foods, the distribution system by monthly ration booklets, and the way this system functions within the local political and social context.

A full explanation of this brief text would, in short, lead to a detailed ethnographic portrait of the community. If this be a “text,” then it is a text that imitates the relationships it portrays. There is of course a narrative thread, but it is scarcely more than a thread: the narrative proceeds in leaps and bounds, and what holds it together is not an internal narrative logic, but the external structure of the performance. The poet moves rhythmically back and forth between the “narrative structure” and his poetic forays out into the audience and their reality.

The epic poem is certainly open to contextualized interpretation (and I argue below that it in fact necessitates such interpretation); there is a level, however, at which the epic is consciously performed as a “complete” text, a separate world, one in which the tradition itself does not recognize or perpetuate interpretation according to performance context. The hitat baladi, however, displays a marked contrast in its relation to the world: it makes no pretense of “completeness,” it is woven directly out of the performance context, and its story world exists only as a mechanism by which to implicate the audience directly into the performance.

In Chapter 2, we briefly examined a series of typical “conversational genres” that are commonly deployed by epic poets in the sahra context: (1) narratives of past performances, (2) discussions of village history and genealogies, and (3) dialect stories. I have suggested that beyond their basic function as entertainment, these genres represent negotiations of social status by the poet vis-à-vis his listeners. His recitations of village history and genealogies, in much the same manner we have just observed
with the ḥitat baladī are a maneuver of inclusion. In the historical and
genealogical performances, one does move not between a story world
and the real world, but rather is firmly situated spatially in “real life.”
Such a pendular movement is, however, inherent in these performances:
rather than implicating his listeners into his text, the poet in a display
of genealogical or historical mastery, insinuates himself into the village
community and identity, a role he is in other contexts denied.

Narratives of past performances and the dialect tales do not serve
quite this same purpose of allowing the poet to impinge upon village
history and identity but serve to differentiate his métier from that of
beggary or vagrancy. And of course they also bolster the image of the
poet as a respected and accomplished performer.

The performance activities of a poet during a typical sahra might
include any or all of the following:

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<th>Formal Genres</th>
<th>Informal Genres</th>
<th>Conversation Genres</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. madiḥ</td>
<td>1. tabiyāt/salamāt</td>
<td>1. genealogies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. mawwāl</td>
<td>2. ḥitat baladī</td>
<td>2. dialect tales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. sīra</td>
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<td>3. past performance narratives</td>
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This tripartite division is empirically justifiable only from the perform­
er’s point of view: the poets recognize the “formal” genres as those one
learns through apprenticeship, they are all “arts” (funūn, sing fann). The
“informal” genres are accepted as part of the craft (il-mihna) of being a
poet but are not among the accepted funūn and are thought to be acquired
through experience (khibra) rather than training. When pressed, poets
were willing to label these “informal” genres as ḥashw ‘filling,’ though
this term was elicited in response to my questions and is probably
not otherwise an operative conceptual category. The final category of
“conversational” genres is not accepted as part of the poet’s craft at all,
and any of these “genres” might be performed by audience members as
well. Only poets can perform genres from the first two categories.

Our examination of the typical content and formal features of these
genres provides us with a working model of the interactions of “texts”
within the sahra; it remains now to expand our examination of these
genres into performances which implicate and necessitate the participa­
tion of an audience.