

The Bedouin Dahiyya



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A

l-dahiyya, also known as *al-dahha* or *al-samer*, is not merely a song or form of dance but encompasses both in the most beautiful traditional art form passed on by our Bedouin ancestors. *Al-dahiyya* originated from a practice performed in olden times, when a limited number of men would gather at night, surround themselves with scattered fires, and loudly clap their hands while making sounds that resemble the roaring of lions. The aim was to intimidate their enemies by deceiving them into thinking that they were a large group.

As time passed, the warlike *dahiyya* transformed into a dance accompanied by the recitation of rhymed poems that is performed at Bedouin weddings. The poetry that accompanies *al-dahiyya* is similar in purpose to classical Arabic poetry, narrating events and expressing praise, zealotry, and courtship.

Al-dahiyya is a Bedouin folk art that is indispensable at weddings and on special occasions and intimately linked to Bedouin traditional customs. At Bedouin weddings, *al-dahiyya* starts with what is called *al-sari*: the male relatives of the groom approach the tent of the bride's family while collectively and repeatedly chanting in the Bedouin dialect: "First we must mention Prophet Muhammad, with the intercession of Muhammad and the assistance of Ali." Hereby, they indicate to the owners of the tent that they are coming to ask for the family's permission to hold

al-dahiyya. The family receives them by repeating, "Welcome, welcome to you, welcome, oh ally, oh boy."

The men then line up in front of the tent of the bride's family while the fires inside the tent are extinguished, making it dark inside so that the women gathered within cannot be seen. This reflects the Bedouins' protectiveness of their women.

the *dahiyya* line, never revealing any of her charms.

Al-dahiyya continues until late at night, interspersed with many interludes during which *al-badda'* recites poems, chanting to established melodies and rhythms and praising with creativity and skill the reputation and honor, competence, and wealth of the bride's and groom's families



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Then, *al-badda'* or *al-ithnein* (a man who improvises *qaseed*, poetry) stands at one end of the *dahiyya* line, and all participants repeat after *al-badda'*, "Welcome, welcome to you, welcome, oh ally, oh boy." The men in the line recite and clap in unison and move their bodies and heads in perfect harmony with the recitations of *al-badda'*.

An elaborately dressed woman (*al-hashhi*, who could be the bride or any woman who can move well in front of men), her face veiled, emerges, carrying a ceremonial sword. She starts dancing in front of the line, her movements coordinated with and mimicking the men's movements in

and commending the young people's beauty, skills, and bravery. At times, he may narrate events that happened in the community, even bantering and poking fun at some community members. *Al-badda'* may take a short break while the men lined up in *al-dahiyya* utter loud sounds that resemble the roars of lions until another *badda'* stands up to take charge of reciting poetry. Several *badda'* can take turns or join each other in a duet, as each tribe brings along and is proud of its own.

At some point, *al-dahiyya* is interrupted by one of the men – generally the father of the bride – performing what is known as *tawseeq*

al-hashhi, in which he asks the bride to sit on the ground in front of the *dahiyya* line. Out of respect for them, everyone sits down as well. Now the skills of *al-badda'*, who speaks on behalf of the groom and who could be a member of his tribe, are challenged and must be revealed as he recites and improvises *al-qaseed* in order for the father to release the bride. All kinds of generous offers are made to entice the father to agree to the marriage, such as: "I will give you a thousand camels laden with copious

Thus, *al-dahiyya* is both a dance and a poetic art form that has been passed on through generations to document and preserve history, narrate battles, praise heroism, and tell stories of lovely, virtuous courtship. These poems are recited to a number of repeated melodies and frequently improvised. Some are based on one stanza that comprises rhymed first and second verses. Others are based on two stanzas, each with two verses. The first and second verses of the two stanzas both rhyme.

expressive *zajal* (another form of Arabic poetry). This is unlike what we know about the traditional art of *al-dahiyya* as it was performed before music was added. Today, *al-dahiyya* has become popular and is not reserved for experienced poets but rather practiced by all who are tempted to pretend that they are a *badda'*, which may lead to poor, inferior, inexpressive, and inelegant speech. Today's *al-dahiyya* is not limited to desert dwellers either, as it has moved to cities and villages and is narrated

genuine art form, whether at the level of *al-qaseed*, attire, or the congruity of the elegant and dynamic dance performance that we once knew.

In closing, I call upon Bedouins to preserve this folk tradition with all its rituals, meanings, lessons, admonitions, and aesthetics the way our ancestors left it for us. Developments do not always mean that the beautiful becomes more beautiful; they could lead to ugliness and corruption.



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quantities of coffee." *Al-dahiyya* goes on in this manner for some time.

Finally, the bride's father releases the bride when he is satisfied with the creativity and eloquence of the groom's *badda'* in describing *al-hashhi*, which means that the marriage is approved. The bride gets up and leaves, after which the groom's family rises and joins in singing, victoriously, another *dahiyya* to celebrate.

Like any art form, *al-dahiyya* has influenced and is influenced by the passage of time and the succession of generations. In our current time, *al-dahiyya* is performed frequently accompanied by loud deafening music that makes proper listening difficult. Strong spotlights distract, and the movements in the line can be haphazard rather than coordinated, not conforming to the recitation of

in non-Bedouin dialects or, worse, in imitation of the Bedouin dialect. Teenagers dance to the music without understanding or appreciating the words of *al-qaseed* that has become devoid of aesthetic context. Also, anyone who wears trousers or any attire dissimilar to the attire of desert dwellers can now stand in *al-dahiyya's* line and perform strange movements. All of this has negatively impacted this

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