

The Acting, Vulvar, and Anthropological Manifestations of El Madah's Character in El Halaka's Theatre

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Abstract:

This study, entitled "The Acting, Vulvar, and Anthropological Manifestations of El Madah's Character in El Halaka's Theatre," examines the multifaceted aesthetic dimensions that elicit enjoyment in the portrayal of El Madah's character within El Halaka's theatre. Initiating with an exploration of the concept of enjoyment and its intricate association with the art of performance and its profound anthropological underpinnings, this paper investigates the acting and anthropological aspects of El Madah, also known as the qawal or storyteller. His pivotal role in fostering entertainment in popular theatre and within the madahin circles of Arab folk culture is scrutinized in detail.

Keywords: El Madah, Enjoyment, Character, Performance, Acting, El Halaka.

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1. Introduction:

Theatre has perennially served as a conduit for popular entertainment and pleasure across various civilizations, with its universal appeal remaining unchallenged. As epochs have unfolded, theatre has transcended its classical origins, spawning epic and experimental forms among others, to mirror the evolutionary trajectories of societies and nations.

Within this global panorama, it became essential for Arabic theatre to adapt and resonate with these transformations. Emerging from the Arab domain is the nascent theatre form known as El Halaka, or the theatre of El Madah and the storyteller. This character, a cultural archetype, is imbued with an array of physical aptitudes and performance prowess that competes with the finely honed talents of contemporary artists from elite training institutions. This capability is attributed to their seminal role in cultivating and amplifying the enjoyment and pleasure of Arab populations through historical epochs. To initiate this discourse, it is imperative to furnish a historical survey of the principal forms of popular entertainment across diverse cultures, noting that the notion of enjoyment is not uniform but shaped by each nation's unique traditions. As Grotowski astutely observed, "Theatres do not resemble each other in their entertainments but rather in their principles"¹.

Each religious ritual or communal festivity strives to vividly enact the underlying mythology, thereby rendering the sacred accessible and comprehensible through dramatization in social life. This revival and portrayal of traditional gestures not only transform them into celebratory acts but also into avenues of entertainment, as exemplified by numerous ancient religious ceremonies and traditional festive practices ubiquitous across human societies².

2. Popular Entertainment and the Art of Performance:

Prior to elucidating the concept of enjoyment, it is crucial to clarify the distinction between two terms frequently conflated by scholars, "the art of performance" and "enjoyment", to ascertain which encapsulates a broader spectrum. The term "performance" embodies a diversity of meanings so expansive that it challenges comprehensive definition across all its semantic and practical contexts. Hence, in our discourse, "enjoyment" is employed synonymously, rather than as a replacement for "the art of performance," highlighting that "performance" denotes a unique form of artistic achievement.

In instances where a theatrical performance is executed solely by the performers for an observing, passive audience, enjoyment for us transcends mere performance and even the theatrical domain, as it encompasses rituals, celebrations, and sporting events.

Over time, the Arabic word for enjoyment has evolved to parallel the term "spectacle" in other languages, signifying both the phenomenon and the observer. It further embodies the notion of exerting influence, either in alleviating sorrow or in engaging with what entertains³.

1.2. Definition of Enjoyment:

Richard Schechner articulates enjoyment as "a behavior crafted repeatedly" (4), while Clifford Geertz conceptualizes it as "a story people tell about themselves to themselves"⁴. These interpretations suggest that enjoyment functions akin to a compact social drama, representing pivotal and significant cultural moments.⁵ As such, enjoyment emerges as an expressive genre through which individuals communicate, resonating with an audience that shares a collective memory with the creators of the said enjoyment.

2.2. Anthropological Roots of Popular Enjoyment:

The Greek term for "theater," *Theatron*, translates as a place for enjoyment or observation. Theaters, among the earliest entertainment forms known to humanity, provide a venue where actors perform live to either entertain or impart moral teachings in an artistic and aesthetically appealing manner, devoid of dryness or arrogance, whether staged in an enclosed or an open arena conducive to theatrical displays.

Ancient enjoyment was thus inherently linked to the influence of myths on humans and the archaic practices of gestural dance rituals in ceremonial celebrations, especially those associated with fertility and hunting rituals, as well as other festivities aimed at controlling, communicating with natural phenomena, and interpreting and justifying the mysterious and unknown⁶.

In ancient Greece, theater was profoundly connected to official religious observances, deeply interwoven with various religious emotions, and was an integral part of the official religious festivities dedicated to "Dionysus," the god of fertility and wine. During these celebrations, the ancient Greeks would congregate to honor the grape harvest festival, parading through urban and rural areas while indulging in frolic, dancing, improvising songs, and vocalizing praises to Dionysus as the deity of wine⁷.

According to Aristotle in his seminal work "Poetics," theatrical styles in ancient Greece encompassed the tragic, distinct from the comedic and the satirical plays, known as Satyro. Satyro plays, characterized by their humor and satire, utilized sexual innuendos, crude language, and suggestive gestures, with characters donning masks that depicted beings with human faces, horse tails, and goat legs and skins. Unlike comedic or farcical plays that provide social critique, the satirical play (farce) focuses on humor, delivering laughter purely for the sake of amusement⁸.

This exploration into the realm of popular enjoyment within Greek culture prompts the inquiry: Is the concept of popular enjoyment unique to the Greeks, or is it a universal human experience?

Indeed, popular enjoyment is a widespread human phenomenon, observed across numerous cultures. This reinforces the earlier assertion that enjoyment transcends mere performance and theatre, encompassing broader activities such as rituals, celebrations, and sporting events. Thus, theatrical arts manifest as a global phenomenon, where it is customary for humans to engage in dance at significant life events such as births, coming-of-age ceremonies, weddings, and during rituals praying for rain or success in hunting⁹.

The assertion that theatre is exclusive to European civilization is challenged by the presence of various theatrical forms globally, such as Japanese Kabuki. Examining ancient Egyptian theatre or African theatrical traditions reveals their intrinsic linkage with religious rituals and ceremonies¹⁰. Similarly, in the Arab world, theatrical elements are traceable back to the pre-Islamic era and early Islamic periods. The Arabs were familiar with storytellers and narrators who performed in a monodramatic style¹¹. Arab heritage from this era also includes "numerous arts, among them the theatrical art known to Arabs through literary rituals coinciding with the Hajj season, where people recited their poems and stories containing dramatic elements, at times resembling theatrical dialogues, yet lacking only a designated stage and actors"¹². These instances indicate a quasi-theatrical nature among the Arabs, suggesting that they were on the cusp of developing complete theatrical forms, only missing a recognized stage.

Moreover, during the Ottoman period (1518-1830 AD), the Algerian populace was acquainted with other theatrical forms, which were performed in markets, public squares, cafes, and private tents. Actors and storytellers would take center stage in these informal settings, captivating audiences with exaggerated tales of adventure, horror, and triumph. Following these performances, financial contributions were typically solicited.

The historical tracing of enjoyment positions it as an expressive genre through which people communicate, presented before an audience that often shares a collective memory with the creators. Given that enjoyment leads to a distinct impact on its audience, transforming it into a text poses significant challenges for researchers¹³.

The fleeting nature of enjoyment, vanishing immediately after its conclusion, confined to a specific time and space, renders its recreation in the same form impossible. Furthermore, the space occupied by popular enjoyment is marked by both symbolic and semantic proximity; it does not sever but rather enhances the connection between performers and spectators.

Contrary to merely receiving enjoyment passively, most popular forms of enjoyment actively engage their audience in its creation, thus transforming spectators into participants and co-creators of the experience.

3. El Halaka as a Popular Form of Enjoyment:

El Halaka represents an emblematic form of expression integral to the cultural development of Arab societies. This ancient mode of popular enjoyment incorporates diverse theatrical components such as singing, dancing, storytelling, and a variety of sound effects. It has become deeply ingrained in the consciousness of audiences in the Maghreb, primarily due to its dynamic and interactive nature.

The Halaiqi, or performer, enhances this experience by creatively segmenting popular narratives into distinct stages and eras, using a blend of words and movements. This approach allows him to immerse both himself and his audience in a vibrant world where the fantastical seamlessly intertwines with the real. The circular setup of El Halaka and its narrative-driven performances, which feature expressive body movements and music, ensure that the boundaries between performer and spectator remain fluid and engaging.

El Halaka's origins and evolution are closely tied to religious celebrations and ceremonial rituals within Arab-Islamic civilization, extending to various collective cultural activities such as celebrations, evening gatherings, and festivals. This ancient art form, characterized by its simplicity, aims to profoundly impact the human soul, eliciting pleasure and emotion that resonate deeply within the psyche, akin to a magical experience.

It serves not only as a form of entertainment but also as a social ritual, reflecting the spirit of the community and embodying the essence of tribal societies. From this perspective, El Halaka is seen as both a manifestation of oral civilizational heritage and a rudimentary precursor to theater. It is a communal gathering of human bodies where the narrator, standing at the center, weaves together narration and characterization, seriousness and jest, reality and magic.

Scholars and researchers widely recognize and define El Halaka as a communal gathering arranged in a circular form, where one or more individuals, skilled in intertwining singing with storytelling and humor, captivate the audience¹⁴. This practice is distinguished by its use of gestures and acrobatic maneuvers, with the narrator or El Madah occasionally assuming comedic roles that enhance the entertainment value.

The content of El Halaka includes a rich repertoire of astonishing tales and legends that captivate passersby, predominantly characterized by improvisation in performance and dialogue. This spontaneity often results in the actors delivering their lines in a non-linear fashion, weaving together elements of laughter, tragedy, music, dance, and other performance arts¹⁵.

The form and structure of El Halaka inherently adapt based on the subject matter; the circle may contract when narrating intimate popular epics or the biographies of the Prophet Muhammad and other prophets and messengers, creating a closer, more reflective atmosphere. Conversely, it can expand into a vast arena, encompassing a wide range of movements, bodily expressions, and acrobatic games tailored to the spectacle being presented.

El Halaka typically occupies public squares and weekly popular markets, making it accessible to people from all social strata and cultural levels. Abdelkader Alloula eloquently describes this setting: "It is a weekly occasion where groups and crowds of people gather to meet their needs.

In these markets, circles are drawn in which the stories of heroes and their epic deeds are recounted, resonating profoundly and holding significant relevance for the audience. It is a universe built on popular memory and the imagination of creativity, where speech, action, and movement coalesce, fueled by enjoyment and pleasure where truth blends with imagination, and seriousness with jest"¹⁶.

This description highlights El Halaka as a vibrant cultural nexus where individuals reconnect with their historical and traditional roots, embodying a cultural phenomenon deeply ingrained in Arab folk heritage. Abdelkader Alloula utilized El Halaka in his theatrical experiments aimed at forging an authentic Algerian theatrical art. He drew inspiration from the aesthetics of this traditional circular form and tackled everyday life scenarios through this artistic medium, which primarily engages auditory rather than visual senses due to the oral nature of folk culture.

Furthermore, the space of El Halaka acts as an open educational and entertainment institution, welcoming all societal layers. It is not merely a homogeneous art form but rather a style that embraces various art types, unified by elements of structural agreement yet differentiated by contextual and methodological variations.

Given its oral origins, passed down through generations, the exact dating of El Halaka remains elusive, with scant written records. Despite this, it continues to thrive to this day, demonstrating its enduring relevance and ability to maintain its presence amidst the evolving dynamics of Arab societies. This enduring success underscores El Halaka's capacity to retain its audience and integrate into diverse social contexts. Thus, El Halaka has evolved into a voice of the people, primarily focusing on educating and imparting moral lessons through its pervasive presence in marketplaces.

Amidst its evolution, El Halaka has transformed into a pre-theatrical expression with a distinct religious and ceremonial character, finding its niche in traditionally conservative societies. Initially emerging from worship practices, it has developed into a popular entertainment form, rich with its own artistic and aesthetic underpinnings. This evolution is characterized by spontaneity and direct emotional engagement, which facilitates dynamic communication and active participation among the audience.

Influencing individuals across diverse educational and cultural backgrounds, El Halaka has its roots and continued development deeply embedded within the framework of religious rituals and devotional ceremonies, thereby adopting a pronounced religious and ethical dimension. This aspect is reflected in its circular geometric configuration, centered by a narrator, storyteller, preacher, or Imam who recounts historical tales of prophets, stories of companions and saints, and recites praises and poems to enrich the performance.

Consequently, El Halaka has proliferated among religious groups, aiming to convey its religious, educational, and ethical messages. These groups endeavor to reform and enlighten society by establishing educational circles of remembrance and delivering sermon-based lessons in mosques, squares, and public markets.

El Halaka stands as one of the oldest performance arts in the Maghreb, representing a form of theater in its primitive stage—pre-theater—that emerges as a comprehensive form of entertainment, encompassing acting, dancing, and singing, where the audience engages through various expressions emanated by "El Madah," "El Halaiki," or "El Kawal" ¹⁷.

The space of El Halaka encompasses an oral text that is perpetually rewritten through the erasure and expressive transition from folk tales and narrative expressions to ritualistic dance, theatrical pantomime, and improvisation.

El Halaka ingeniously integrates these various genres and entertaining practices within a singular entertainment text. The significance of El Halaka's entertainment value lies in the profound level of audience participation, a concept underscored by Fischer-Lichte in his theory of "the autopoietic feedback loop."

According to Fischer-Lichte, the aesthetic experience of a performance does not solely depend on the artistic presentation by actors on stage but also significantly on the audience's reactions opposite the actors. This interaction underscores El Halaka as an exemplary model for the exchange of impact

between the creator of the entertainment -the Kawal- and its audience, transcending other theatrical elements like accessories or lighting (18).

4. The Character of El Madah (The Qawal, Storyteller, or Narrator) as the Center of Entertainment:

The Arab world has long cherished this form of entertainment, commonly known as "Hakawati" in the Eastern Arab countries, or "Qawal" and "Madah" in the Maghreb. This character frequents public markets, where he narrates folk tales imbued with wisdom and moral lessons in a straightforward, engaging style that captivates listeners with his gestures and hints in a vernacular poetic language.

His stories often gravitate towards narratives of heroism and religious feats, interwoven with a mix of mythology and folk folklore, and the theatrical space for El Madah is referred to as "El Halaka".

Since the expansion of the Islamic Caliphate and its conquests across East Asia, North Africa, and Southern Europe, the tradition of Hakawatis or storytellers has significantly proliferated, enhancing their methods of imitation and storytelling, which included voicing humans and animals alike.

"Numerous jesters thrived, mastering humorous techniques intermixed with imitations of dialects from those descending upon Baghdad, including Bedouins, Khorasanis, Zanjis, Persians, Indians, and Romans. They even mimicked the blind and sometimes even donkeys. Among the most renowned was Ibn Al-Ghazali, who entertained on the streets. Upon hearing of him, Caliph Al-Mu'tadid summoned Ibn Al-Ghazali, who regaled him with humorous tales until he coaxed the Caliph out of his stoic demeanor, inducing laughter" ¹⁸.

The enduring style of storytelling and the impact of these narratives on the audience lay the groundwork for modern Arab theater. Abdel Rahman Kaki, drawing inspiration from Algerian folk heritage, intricately wove these elements into his play "Al-Kurab wal-Saliheen." He utilized the vernacular language and performance style of El Madah, employing characters who spoke in a poignant "Melhoun" language that resonated deeply with the audience, enchanting them and provoking reflection on its meanings and implications. ¹⁹

This specific use of language positioned the spoken word within a unique temporal space, transmitted orally in a poetic, rhymed format, often in the form of lengthy, epic-styled Melhoun poems. This technique is vividly illustrated in El Madah's narration of the stories of saints presented to the audience, captured in the poetic language that vividly brings the dramatic event to life:

El Madah: "A day among days, and my Lord's days are many,

In the Garden of Ridwan and my Lord's garden is vast,

Three of the righteous met before a bitter trial,

The three from among those adept at managing fates, their tale a known narrative,

He who recalls them in threes, a directorship he does not miss,

And he who visits them in threes, rides nothing but jealousy..." ²⁰

Kaki's revival of El Madah's language and the contextual use of El Halaka creatively transformed the space into a venue for performance and a depiction of reality. He maintained a dynamic interaction between actors and spectators by solidifying the theatrical function of El Madah as a catalyst for dynamic engagement between the stage and the audience²¹. His approach enabled effective communication with the audience, basing his plays on the spectacle and the act of mass influence. The narrators performed live in front of crowds in popular markets, transforming the theatrical space and décor from these settings and shifting the spectators' role from passive viewing to active participation in the popular circle.

Playwrights today, amidst the age of technology, cinema, and television, are reminded of their lineage to the ancient storytellers and hakawatis. They are encouraged to preserve, with the aid of modern technological means, their ancestral role as narrators and cultural custodians. "Playwrights must deeply and insistently realize that they are heirs to the ancient storytellers and hakawatis, and in the age of technology, cinema, and television, they must preserve, aided by technological means, their ancient role"²².

5. The Performative Entertainment Dimension of El Madah's Character:

The folk character of El Madah has its origins in the circles of remembrance, preaching, and celebratory gatherings, where the remembrance of Allah, His glorification, and that of the Prophet—peace be upon him—are practiced. This theatrical form was initially present in Algeria, where El Madah engaged his audience in markets and public squares, embodying various characters through his narratives²³.

El Madah in Algeria has played a crucial role in preserving the nation's oral heritage by passing it down through generations. Positioned strategically along the circle's perimeter, El Madah is often supported by his assistants or students, who are typically young learners adept at playing traditional musical instruments and performing auxiliary tasks essential for the proceedings.

These youths help maintain the order within the circle, collect donations from the audience, and manage the performance tools. In some instances, multiple narrators might share the circle, performing without assistants; here, the Madahs alternate roles—singing, narrating, playing instruments, and energizing the audience. When multiple Madahs converge at the same market, often leading to a reduced audience for each, they may collaborate to enhance the performance's appeal²⁴.

5.1. Circular Performance:

El Madah initiates the circle with the Basmala and the recitation of Al-Fatiha, followed by a sequence of prayers, inviting the audience to join him in raising their hands and echoing the prayers ending with "Amen." This ritualistic opening serves to prepare the attendees mentally and spiritually for the stories to follow. He then sets the stage for a Ghazwa, a narrative form based on epic events from ancient Islamic history²⁵.

The narration of the Ghazwa is divided into poetic segments accompanied by the playing of the "Rebab." In some parts, other traditional instruments like the Qasaba or Bendir are also utilized. El Madah punctuates these segments by poetically summarizing the events, pausing occasionally to collect contributions from the audience.

When assisted by colleagues, these moments of collection are strategically timed to coincide with the peaks of dramatic tension within the story, enhancing the overall engagement. The act of collecting donations is often intertwined with animated interactions, involving prayers and jesting, particularly with regular attendees who have formed a personal bond with El Madah²⁶.

El Madah frequently initiates dialogue with one of the attendees to inject humor and joy into the atmosphere of the performance, and sometimes to dispel disruptors and those who hinder the progress of the performance with their mocking comments.

During the performance of the Ghazwa, and in some of its scenes, El Madah may use a secondary story that does not directly fall within the Ghazwa's narrative but aids in understanding or affirming the situation through its moral extracted. These stories typically do not belong to the genre of epic narratives but rather to other narrative forms such as animal stories, anecdotes, or social folktales. He also employs proverbs and popular sayings for the same purpose, and occasionally includes poems of a moral nature.

At the end of the Ghazwa, El Madah announces the end of the circle; he sends blessings upon the Prophet and his companions and raises his hands in prayer, prompting the audience to do the same. He utters memorized phrases calling for the protection of Muslims, their well-being, and the fulfillment of their needs, ending with everyone saying "Amen, O Lord of the Worlds." He then promises his audience a forthcoming performance, possibly naming the Ghazwa he will perform next.²⁷

5.2. Theatrical Performance:

El Madah skillfully initiates dialogues with attendees during performances, often incorporating humor and joy to enrich the atmosphere. This interaction also serves to manage disruptors or those whose mocking comments might impede the progress of the performance. While narrating the Ghazwa, El Madah may intersperse secondary stories that, while not directly related to the main narrative, support the understanding or emphasize the moral lessons of the scenario.

These auxiliary tales often derive from genres such as animal fables, social folktales, or personal anecdotes, each selected for its thematic relevance and moral instruction. He also weaves in proverbs, popular sayings, and occasionally moral poems to further underscore the lessons conveyed.

At the conclusion of the Ghazwa, El Madah formally closes the circle by sending blessings upon the Prophet and his companions, coupled with a communal prayer session where he invites the audience to raise their hands and join him in prayer for the protection and well-being of Muslims, concluding with a collective "Amen, O Lord of the Worlds." He then teases the next performance, often revealing the theme or specific Ghazwa to be presented.²⁸

In the circled space, El Madah's performance heavily relies on his resonant voice and the nuanced modulation of spoken words to convey meaning and context. His physical expressions are predominantly confined to the use of his upper body, especially his arms and facial expressions. These are complemented by musical interludes, either performed by El Madah himself or cued to a companion, which serve to underline the narrative's emotional stakes or enhance the audience's imaginative engagement with the story.²⁹

El Madahs differ significantly in their narrative repertoires and physical capabilities, which include facial expressiveness and mastery of performance techniques. Their individual flair for innovation is often showcased during moments of commentary or explanation where they weave words borrowed from ancestral poets into their narrative, enhancing the engagement and enticement of the audience.

El Madah's effectiveness largely hinges on his ability to fully engage and immerse the audience in the narrative world he creates. This involves a mastery over various performance elements, facial expressions, vocal modulation, and bodily movements, allowing him to vividly portray characters and scenes. El Madahs vary in their capacity to depict the external world and embody it through diverse narrative representations, which clarify the story's features using everyday life elements, environmental scenes, and social dynamics.

Moreover, distinctions among El Madahs also emerge in their approaches to performance, with some exhibiting a strong inclination towards innovation and creativity. This adaptability allows them to meet contemporary realities and audience expectations effectively. In contrast, others may exhibit a tendency towards conservation, prioritizing the preservation and continuation of traditional methods and stories inherited from their predecessors.

6. Conclusion:

The term "Madah" encompasses a variety of names across Arab cultures, Kawal, Jawwal, Halaiki, Hakawati, Raawi, each signifying the venerable profession of folk storytelling. This art form is deeply rooted in the traditions of praising and narrating the life of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, his companions, and revered saints.

The origins of the craft of El Madah trace back to the formative period of the Muhammadan message, when poets played pivotal roles in defending the Prophet and extolling his deeds. Over time, this evolved into a structured practice where storytellers utilized mosques not only as spaces for religious narrative but also for interpreting the Quran and for delivering sermons and guidance.

These cultural practices, endowed with religious legitimacy, continued to flourish under the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates, and extended throughout various regions of the Islamic world. The settings for these performances varied from mosques to public squares and even the courts of caliphs and princes, reflecting the integral role these narratives played in the social and spiritual life of the community.

In contemporary times, this character and its associated practices have been revitalized in what is now referred to as "Halaka Theatre" or "Theatre of the Madahin." This modern adaptation remains a vibrant testament to the enduring appeal and significance of the Madah in connecting audiences with their cultural and religious heritage, thereby continuing a long-standing tradition of storytelling that bridges past and present.³⁰

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