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Waking The City: Young Ramadan Drummers in Amman Between Tradition and Transformation

The Musaharati in the Modern Urban Context

The musaharati, or street awakener, stands as a foundational figure within the seasonal and communal rituals of the Middle Eastern Islamic tradition. Historically, this role—derived from the root *suhour*, the final meal consumed before the dawn prayer (salat al fajr) and the daily fast—functions as a nocturnal sentinel. Armed with a *tabl* (a double-headed drum) and a repertoire of rhythmic chants, the musaharati would traverse the winding alleys of the city to ensure no believer missed the vital sustenance required for the day’s spiritual discipline. In the contemporary urban landscape of Amman, the musaharati persists as a ‘non-ordinary manifestation’ of the sacred month of Ramadan.

However, this persistence occurs in an era of functional obsolescence. The ubiquity of digital alarms, smartphones, and 24-hour connectivity has rendered the physical act of "waking" the neighborhood unnecessary for the vast majority of residents. Yet, far from fading into the annals of folklore, the ritual is undergoing a diachronic reconfiguration. This research argues that the musaharati ritual is being reclaimed and transformed by a new generation of *chebab* (youth aged 18–30), predominantly from Palestinian refugee backgrounds. For these practitioners, the ritual is no longer only a solitary religious duty performed by pious elders. Instead, it has morphed into a collective socio-economic engine and could turn into a vibrant artistic practice. In the neighbourhoods of Amman, the musaharati survives because it provides a space for self-expression, serves as an informal economic lifeline for the marginalized, and acts as a social anchor for a community grappling with the homogenizing forces of globalization.

The aim of this paper is not only to explore young people’s interest in this traditional practice, but also to assess the extent to which they can make it their own within a rapidly modernizing Middle Eastern city.

Methodology : Sources and Geography

This study is grounded in a three-phased ethnography—comprising initial scouting, active Ramadan observation, and post-Ramadan analysis—conducted in Amman in 2024. To capture the multi-sensory nature of this sonic ritual, the methodology integrated several data-gathering techniques:

- **Nocturnal Field Observations:** Ten intensive field sessions were conducted between 2:30 AM and 4:00 AM. These observations focused on the ‘sonic footprint’ of the

wakers, recording the interactions between the musaharati and the urban environment, including their physical navigation of Amman's steep topography.

- Semi-Structured Interviews: Six in-depth interviews provided the qualitative core of the study. These included conversations with active musaharatis, community leaders (*mukhtar*, imam), and local researchers.
- Digital Ethnography: Recognizing the role of the social media for shaping opinion, the study analyzed over 60 responses from an Amman-based Facebook group and critical 'modernist' debates on Reddit, where residents discussed the ritual's relevance.
- Quantitative Reception Survey: A questionnaire was distributed to a diverse sample of 115 respondents to measure public sentiment, contrasting the 'pro-ritual' nostalgic majority with the 'anti-ritual' urban noise critiques.

The ritual of musaharatis is self-organised into 'sonic territories' defined by its hills (jabals) and valleys. The sound of the drum propagates differently depending on the elevation, often crossing from one slope to another. The study focused on several distinct urban typologies:

- Jabal al Hussein: A historic area housing a *mukhayem* (Palestinian refugee camp), characterized by high-density and narrow streets and vibrant ritual activity.
- Shmeisani: A modern, middle-class, religiously mixed (Muslims and Christians) residential district.
- Jabal al Lwebdeh: A historically Christian quarter where the ritual is notably absent, serving as a 'religious boundary.'
- Other quarters without direct observations, but often mentioned during interviews, ranging from the distant balconies of Abdoun and Sweifieh to the high-density popular districts of Al Yasmeen, Nuzha, and Al Hashmi.

From Local Pious Elders to the Neighbouring Chebab : A Sociological Shift

The archetypal musaharati — a local, solitary and elderly man of recognised piety — appears increasingly to be a figure of the past. This figure is now being challenged by a new sociological profile: groups of young men.

In the low-income neighbourhood of Al Hashmi, current estimates suggest upwards of fifteen practitioners where once there was only one, suggesting that while the ritual's function may be declining, the number of practitioners is actually increasing in popular quarters.

This demographic shift is inextricably linked to the "pauperization" of certain Amman sectors. The majority of the musaharatis that we have met are young men of Palestinian refugee origin. Despite holding Jordanian citizenship, these youth frequently face systemic exclusion from public sector employment. This marginalization drives them into the informal labor market, where they work as car mechanics, waste collectors, or maintenance workers by day. The musaharati role, therefore, becomes a vital seasonal extension of their labor, allowing them to claim public space and visibility that is otherwise denied to them in the formal economy.

Although all the young practitioners we encountered—or who were reported to us during this study—share broadly similar socio-economic characteristics, their motivations and the trajectories that led them to the practice may differ. Three categories can thus be outlined: (1) hereditary transmission, in which a young practitioner proudly recounts how a grandfather or uncle fulfilled this role for decades; (2) groups of young people brought together by friendship, often centered around drummers or those who own the instruments; and (3) occasional companions driven by a form of artistic sensibility. Across these categories, attitudes toward the Ramadan fast range from strongly expressed piety to a more diffuse sense of muslim identity.

A key finding of our study lies in the emergence of mobility between the place of residence and the site of the ritual. Our observations indicate that roughly half of the *musaharatis* live in the neighborhoods they traverse at night, while the others come from elsewhere—sometimes from quite distant areas. This distance, often only partially acknowledged in our discussions, constitutes a real constraint, as it entails a long journey on foot to the target neighborhood when practitioners cannot afford transportation.

This new form of mobility brings about significant transformations in the practice: the practitioner is not necessarily known within the neighborhood they “awaken,” making them more vulnerable to criticism, as no one can vouch for their character, piety, or family background. At the same time, they may lack familiarity with the neighborhood’s specificities—such as the presence of families with infants, Christians who should not be disturbed, or potential risks along the route.

Maximization of Sonic Territories

Since 2021, the Jordanian Ministry of Interior and the Mohafazat have ceased issuing official permits for *musaharatis*. In the absence of state regulation, the ‘sonic territories’ are managed through an informal system of seniority and mutual respect. Disputes are rare but handled through community intermediaries, as seen in Shmeisani, where the threat of police intervention often bows to the ‘authority of tradition.’

Amman’s daily soundscape is a dense sonic base : gas trucks playing a synthetic version of Für Elise, the insistent honking of school buses at 6:45 AM, and the overlapping calls of the muezzin and church bells. The *musaharati* occupies the only window of relative silence—the hour and a half before dawn. The young practitioners that we met in the neighbourhood of Shmeisani note that they do not need to walk every street; they stand on ridges overlooking the valleys, allowing the sound to reach the opposite hill. Thus, every house from which their call can be heard is considered part of their territory and will be visited in the days leading up to Eid to ask the residents for their support (*eidyeh*). This approach—prioritizing volume to optimize time and maximize territorial coverage—diverges significantly from the respectful ethos commonly attributed to the *musaharati* in both academic literature and popular representations.

A Forum for Freedom of Expression

Modern *musaharatis* have moved beyond the supposedly standard formulas of the past, embracing ‘artistic liberty’ to address contemporary social and political realities. The drum provides the rhythm, but the voice provides the social commentary. Thus, it is reported that a *musaharati* in Damascus took the initiative during the late civil war to parody the traditionally religious verses into a message aligned with the opposition: from “Wake up sleeper, God is eternal” to “Wake up sleeper, Bashar al-Assad will not last.”

Similarly, the young practitioners we met in Amman spoke of their freedom to adapt their message to the immediate concerns of the neighbourhood’s residents, like encouraging people to wear masks during the Covid-19 pandemic, or calling out to children by their names as they passed their homes. In 2024, amid the prolonged war in Gaza, one of the *musaharatis* we encountered introduced messages of solidarity with the martyred people of Gaza into the ritual, shifting from festive performance to solemn supplication (*dua*). He recited direct prayers—‘O God, grant victory to our people in Gaza’—often without drums out of respect for the tragedy. This adaptation draws on artistic freedom and is particularly resonant as many *musaharatis* are from Palestinian refugee families. When one look at the opposite figure of the old *musaharatis* in Jabal Hussein who keeps drumming and reciting the same few

This adaptation of the ritual—from a conventional role of awakening to one expressing collective grief and shared emotional experience—is not uniform across all young practitioners. Nevertheless, it can be argued that youth are particularly well positioned to exercise such initiative and artistic freedom, owing to their relative unstructured time and heightened engagement with media, artistic expression, and contemporary cultural forms.

Appreciation and Theoretical Links

Public reception of the *musaharati* reflects a tension between cultural heritage and urban nuisance, with most residents supporting the practice but about 20% expressing negative views. Supporters value it as an identity marker, a source of nostalgia, and a means of social cohesion and charity during Ramadan. Critics, however, point to noise disturbances, declining performance quality, and the perceived obsolescence of the practice in the age of smartphones.

Although the concept of ‘functional obsolescence’ has been primarily used (if not actually developed) in studies of architecture and urban planning; it seems relevant to us to apply it to social practices. Social norms and *habitus* can become ‘functionally obsolete’ when they no longer match technological, economic, or cultural realities. A common example is the global rise of remote and hybrid work as alternatives to daily office-based work. In the case study of the *musaharati* ritual in Amman, it appears clearly that muslim practitioners who would like to wake up for the *suhoor* meal and the *fajr* prayer do not rely on the *musaharati* to get waken up. However, some testimonies point that the hearing of the drums and the lyrics through the windows adds to the motivation to commit to the effort of waking up at night during the holy month. This support the hypothesis that the function itself of the ritual is shifting from *waking* to *encouraging to wake up*.

Thus, although it can theoretically be situated within the framework of cultural lag, the ritual of the Ramadan street awakeners also points to processes of reappropriation, especially among youth, which may ultimately amount to a reconfiguration of both the ritual and its social function.

Methodological Limits and Openings

The evasive responses and the discomfort we observed among several practitioners when the delimitation of “sound territories” was raised reveal a tension that can be understood along two dimensions.

First, there appears to be a degree of competition over territorial boundaries among musaharatis who do not work collectively, or who belong to different groups. When two practitioners cover the same area at different times, both may claim the right to collect donations (*eidyeh*) within that territory, potentially generating irritation among residents. It would be valuable to conduct a comparative study with territorial practices and regulatory mechanisms among municipal workers in Amman (the “men in green,” responsible for street cleaning and maintenance) who also collect donations from denizens.

Second, we observed significant variation in the areas covered by a single musaharati from one night to the next. This contributes to a logic of territorial maximization, characteristic of the reconfiguration we hypothesize. To move beyond the discomfort this topic generates among practitioners, and to capture spatially specific dynamics related to the city’s geography, it would be particularly useful to employ participatory geography methods—whether through mapping exercises or guided walks conducted outside the time of practice, which otherwise leaves little room for exchange between successive drum sequences. In order to move toward a theorization of the observed phenomenon, it is clear that additional quantitative and qualitative data are needed. Longer fieldwork would, on the one hand, make it possible to build relationships of trust with participants, thereby reducing the tendency to smooth over more problematic aspects of the ritual (such as competition, restrictions, disturbances, or criticism from former practitioners). On the other hand, it would also allow for a more robust statistical assessment of the contribution of newer generations of participants to the reconfiguration of the ritual.

Further investigation should also explore the rural-urban divide in Jordan to determine if the “*chebab* shift” is a purely metropolitan phenomenon. Additionally, as the state has retreated from regulation since 2021, the role of local religious authorities in either co-opting or delegitimizing these young practitioners would deepen the ethnographic study.