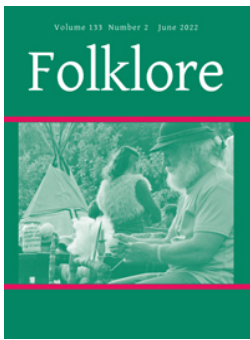


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The Iraqi Folkloric Tradition of *Mājīnā*: The ‘Trick-or-Treat’ of Mesopotamia

Meis Al-Kaisi

Abstract

The term ‘trick-or-treat’ conjures up the image of Halloween’s festive celebrations. However, similar traditions are also witnessed and practised in some Middle Eastern cultures. The Gulf region in general and Iraq more specifically have a long history of folkloric practices that involve children wandering the streets and asking for treats during the months of Shaban and Ramadan of the lunar calendar. In Iraq it is called *mājīnā* and in the United Arab Emirates *ḥagg el-lēla*, plus a variety of other names across the Arabian Gulf. This article examines the Iraqi *mājīnā* tradition. Scholarly sources on *mājīnā* are scarce; hence, this article is based mainly on information gathered from Iraqi informants and online magazine articles. The objective is to discuss, record, and preserve the Iraqi *mājīnā*, which has been thus far largely neglected.

Introduction

Pinning down the exact origin of a cultural behaviour or a folkloric tradition can often prove to be an extremely challenging task, if not an almost impossible one, especially when dealing with a rich history and a cumulative heritage dating back thousands of years. The Iraqi folkloric tradition of *mājīnā* is a noteworthy aspect of Iraqi culture which deserves attention, yet has not been properly recorded in scholarly literature thus far. It is a custom similar in many respects to Halloween’s trick-or-treat and other Western and Middle Eastern mumming traditions. The Iraqi *mājīnā* is practised on the fifteenth day of the month of Ramadan in the lunar Islamic (also known as the Hijri) calendar after the breaking of the fast by children who take to the streets chanting, knocking on doors, and asking for treats in the form of sweets, nuts, or money. Note that a lunar year is roughly 354 days so that unlike in a solar year, the months do not fall in particular seasons.¹ This article aims to fill a gap in scholarship by treating this particular element of Iraqi folklore. It investigates the Iraqi trick-or-treat-like custom by attempting to (1) present the first substantial scholarly record of the *mājīnā* and (2) pinpoint its purpose and

demographics. The article addresses several possibilities for the origin of the term and its connotations. It also serves to record the lyrics of the typical mājīnā chant or song of which there are several variants, as shown in [Appendix A](#).

Rationale and Research Methodology

In reality, little effort has been made to record the evolution of some particulars of Iraq's folklore, or at least to study their origin and purpose. There are a few published works on Iraqi folkloric heritage available in Arabic and only a handful in English (Al-'Alwajī 1966; Buckley 2007; Campbell 2005; Ḥammūdī 1986; Al-Lami 2017; Masliyah 2000; Qaddūrī 1989; Qadduri 2008; Rājī 1986; Reynolds 2007; E. A. Stevens 1931).² Some aspects of folklore are thus poorly addressed, if at all. Mājīnā is one of those practices that has received little, if any, attention in scholarly literature.³

For many Iraqis of the modern age, especially the generations born in diaspora, some of these folkloric details are mere tales and songs narrated and sung by their parents and grandparents. They speak of joyful and innocent times echoed in the memories of those older generations. Many customs and traditions have not been experienced first-hand, but only heard of in stories from the 'ancient' past. As such, it is an Iraq that lives in the memories of an earlier generation. Sadly, some such customs come to mind only when a person is exposed to similar, thus familiar, practices. The Iraqi tradition of mājīnā came to my attention through a conversation about Halloween and the similarity of its customs to what is practised in Iraq during the month of Ramadan. Being of Iraqi heritage, although born and raised elsewhere, I was intrigued to hear about Iraqi children trick-or-treating in Iraq. After all, my only knowledge of Iraq comes from the memories recalled by my parents about their childhood and youth. So I embarked upon a search for more details, which often proved to be scarce and difficult to find.

In an ideal world, I would have travelled to Iraq during the month of Ramadan to explore this custom. I would have visited Baghdad and also the rural areas to observe children as they practise mājīnā. I would have interviewed Iraqi children to gather my data and to experience mājīnā through their realm, in the manner pioneered by Iona and Peter Opie. Although the Opies' notion of an entirely separate 'realm of young people' might have been somewhat overstated (Opie and Opie 2001, vi), I would nevertheless have focused on children as my source of information. Unfortunately, I was not able to do any of that. Iraq's unstable political reality and its unsafe environment, in addition to the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic, were major obstacles which I could not overcome. Consequently, I had to resort to other methods.

A variety of different types of data was gathered during the research process and this article draws primarily upon the information collected from Iraqi informants of varying age groups and diverse social, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. The first and main contributor is my mother, Sadia Al-Jebouri, who was the first to introduce me to the existence of a mumming practice in Iraq. Following my mother's description, I consulted with a number of Iraqi intellectuals in diaspora to gather further information. Unfortunately, I did not manage to interview Iraqi folklorists or

heritage scholars, due to a lack of means of communication with scholars in Iraq. My hunt for information was met with obstacles as I found it almost impossible to get in contact with Iraqis in Iraq. I was, however, lucky enough to speak to a few Iraqi professionals in diaspora who knew something about the *mājīnā* from their own early lives in Iraq or, like myself, from reports from their parents. I also surveyed a number of Iraqis living in Iraq and in diaspora by administering to them a structured questionnaire which was made available online through SurveyMonkey and shared on various Iraqi social media platforms in addition to being shared via email with my direct contacts and through them, in turn, with their contacts. The results are discussed later in the 'Data and Analysis' section. In addition to the interviews and the survey, a few written sources were consulted. However, Arabic scholarly sources that speak of Iraqi heritage rarely mention the *mājīnā*. The Iraqi Folk Heritage Journal (*Majallat al-turāth al-sha'bi*) includes no articles on the *mājīnā*. In fact, I contacted the Chief Editor of the journal enquiring about this practice but met with no success. Our conversation did not last longer than a few minutes during which the Editor offered to help me find journal articles on the subject through a search in the archives. Nevertheless, I never managed to get hold of the Editor again despite numerous attempts to contact him. An Iraqi writer and journalist, Rudha Al-Dhahir, based between Iraq and the UK, and who happens to be my maternal uncle, said:

It is with great sadness that this country, that is Iraq, does not respect anything called 'archives'. In fact, Iraq does not have proper archives to refer to or to access. It proves difficult to communicate with Iraqis through emails, telephone calls or social media. You must come to Iraq and visit the National Library and seek access to its archives. Even then, matters are too complicated and you are often met with countless obstacles before you actually get to the Library or its archives. In reality, you need to know people who would help you out but that proves impossible in today's COVID-19 circumstances. In summary, this is a 'nation without memory'. People have a mistaken perception believing or even thinking that they could get this sort of information from Iraqis living in Iraq today. (Rudha Al-Dhahir, Facebook Messenger audio conversation, 2 September 2020)

To this, an Iraqi living in the United Arab Emirates responded telling me that, indeed, while 'this is true of Iraqis in Iraq, the Iraqis in the diaspora have nothing but their memories to hold on to' (Abu Bakr Al-Ani, via WhatsApp, 2 September 2020). Nonetheless, I found difficulty in gathering adequate information from the Iraqi informants in the diaspora. I contacted every Iraqi I know and asked them in turn to put me in touch with their contacts. This was the simple part. Thus, the challenge in gathering information from Iraqis in diaspora was not a matter of difficulty in securing an interview or an unwillingness to communicate, but more of a lack of information and weak memories about past practices. People simply could not remember what they used to practise as children in Iraq. Certain elements of their Iraqi heritage and identity are, sadly, lost. Indeed, what Al-Dhahir explained about Iraqis in Iraq today proved also to be true, to a certain degree, of Iraqis in diaspora.⁴

Consequently, I had to resort to online newspapers, magazines, and social media which I found to be more informative than scholarly works quantitatively, although qualitatively they are questionable. The amount and quality of research put into

producing such reports is certainly doubtful. Nevertheless, when scholarly material is unavailable the journalistic data prove to be useful.

In addition to the mājīnā, this article briefly examines similar customs in neighbouring countries, like *ḥaqq el-lēla* in the United Arab Emirates. This was undertaken purely for the purpose of comparison. Also, there are obvious similarities between Middle Eastern and certain Western mumming practices. One may wonder, do they all stem from one source, or are they organic products of their own cultures? The likeness may be just coincidental, and mājīnā may just be a natural product of its own environment, far from being influenced by foreign practices. However, it is not the purpose of the present study to investigate whether Western mumming practices, like Halloween, have influenced the mājīnā. A future study might usefully examine that question, but the main purpose of this article is to describe, and thereby preserve a record of, the Iraqi custom. It also shows that similar customs exist in other Middle Eastern countries.

Solicitation Rituals

Many nations have customs that see children walk in procession while offering some kind of a performance in exchange for a treat, be it sweets, other food, or money. Western scholarship has used a variety of terms to define and name such practices: mumming, guising, wassailing, Thomasing, souling, and more. Jack Santino, for instance, uses the term ‘mumming’, saying that it is used in reference to a practice that ‘involves progression, or procession, from home to home ... A performance of some sort is usually involved, in return for which a reward of food, drink, money, or some other token is given’ (Santino 2009b, 16). This certainly defines the Iraqi practice of mājīnā. Nonetheless, Santino confirms that ‘local traditions are just as often referred to by alternative names, such as “guising” in Scotland’ (Santino 2009b, 16). Yet guising is a practice that involves disguising oneself in fancy dress or by wearing a mask. It includes what children (and adults) do at Halloween. The practice of disguise, however, is absent in mājīnā and the term would, thus, be inappropriate to use.

In his *Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain*, Ronald Hutton discusses ‘wassailing’, ‘Thomasing’, and other similar solicitation practices. Concerning Thomasing, Hutton says that it is a regional begging activity that ‘occurred on St Thomas’s Day’ and ‘provided an opportunity for the poorer members of the community to appeal to the better nature of the wealthier ... by asking for money or provisions for Christmas feast of their own’ (Hutton 2001, 58). Nevertheless, Thomasing was more often associated with adult women, although occasionally also with children. ‘Wassailing’, on the other hand, is a practice that involves the wassail bowl, or cup. The term ‘wassail’ derives from Old Norse *ves heill*, ‘your health’, and thus signifies a toast. It came to be associated with female wassail-bearers who would march from house to house at Christmastide singing carols and asking for a reward of some kind (Hutton 2001, 62). Indeed, the latter two are similar to the mājīnā in the sense that they involve (1) a performance, (2) a reward (or a treat), and (3) a religious occasion. Nonetheless, Thomasing and wassailing are adult

practices as opposed to the *mājīnā* which is delimited to children. Note that ‘wassailing’ is a term that is rarely used today and as a practice has been absorbed into ‘carolling’, which follows more or less similar principles of going door to door at Christmas singing to collect money for charity. ‘Thomasing’, on the other hand, is specific to one region (Hutton 2001, 58).

As for ‘souling’, Steve Roud writes that the custom was to make special soul-cakes (hence the name ‘souling’) and give those away to the poor in exchange for a prayer for the souls of homeowners’ dead relatives. With the passing of time, this practice was taken up by children who would go from house to house asking for treats on All Soul’s Day (2 November). The soul-cakes which children were expecting were not necessarily the special cakes made originally for the occasion but could be ‘biscuits, nuts, apples and the like—all of which they call “soul-cakes”’ (Roud 2008, 450). Although this might appear too far-fetched when compared to *mājīnā*, on second thought it is not so different. Iraqi children step out on the evening of *mājīnā* and go from house to house asking for treats in the form of stuffed cookies, fried pretzels, nuts, raisins, roasted chickpeas, or, even better, money. Nonetheless, bearing in mind the actual name ‘souling’, in reference to ‘soul-cakes’, and the origin and purpose of this practice—that is, a promise to pray for the souls of the dead—it would be inappropriate to use ‘souling’ as a term to explain *mājīnā*.

Having considered a variety of terms, the most relevant when describing the practice of *mājīnā* is probably ‘mumming’, although this could also imply masks for some.

Middle Eastern Mumming Traditions

Middle Eastern Muslim cultures witness a variety of mumming traditions practised during the two consecutive months of Shaban and Ramadan of the Islamic calendar. Both 15 Shaban and 15 Ramadan see the children in the Arabian Gulf and in Iraq, respectively, wandering the neighbourhoods celebrating, singing, and asking for treats. This custom is called *ḥagg el-lēla* in the United Arab Emirates, *gargā’ūn* or *garnag’ūh* in Bahrain, *al-garīg’ān* or *garīgshūn* or *al-nāṣifa* in Saudi Arabia, *garīg’ān* in Kuwait, *garnag’ūh* in Qatar, *al-garnagshūh* or *al-tulba* or *ṭāb* in Oman, and *mājīnā* in Iraq. Egypt, too, has a similar tradition observed throughout the month of Ramadan, as noted in one study on Egyptian folklore (Salīm 2000, 143). This article evaluates only the Iraqi *mājīnā* tradition and provides a glimpse into the Emirati *ḥagg el-lēla* by way of comparison.

There are a host of different theories addressing all sorts of possibilities for why, how, and when the mumming custom started in the Middle East. Some have explained it as an evolution from begging. In the classical literature, references are made to practices by beggars in the middle of each month where they would roam the streets and knock on doors and ask for food.⁵ They would speak the phrase *ajr jū’ān* (feed the hungry), which seems to have been altered throughout the years and came to be pronounced as *jarji’ān* then *karki’ān* and later *gargi’ān*. It is a theory definitely worth considering. However, in Iraq, this folkloric tradition is called *mājīnā*.⁶ Where did this name come from? Why does it happen on the fifteenth night

of Ramadan specifically, and not during any other month or during Shaban as it happens in other Arabian Gulf countries? Some claim that it is a practice adopted from the Shia, or rather that the Shia have connected this practice to a historical event that they annually celebrate, namely the birth of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Al-Hasan on 15 Ramadan. There is, however, no evidence that such a practice was performed by any of the Companions of the Prophet, or ever witnessed at the time of the Prophet, or at the time of Al-Hasan's birth. Note, though, that 'the Shia are the earliest example of a sectarian community in Islam', and 'their first spark was seen as early as 632'; the Shia were only fully established as a distinct group from the main body of believers after 680, which is almost fifty years after the Prophet's death (Al-Kaisi 2019, 124).

I propose that the establishment of such a practice in mid Ramadan was most probably to stimulate the children and encourage them to continue fasting for another fifteen days. They are rewarded halfway through with a night of treats, culminating fifteen days later in the festival of breaking the fast, Eid Al-Fiṭr. This appears to be the most convincing rationale. In order to provide context, it is helpful to look briefly at the significance of the two months during which these practices are witnessed.

The Socio-Religious Significance of Shaban and Ramadan

In the Muslim calendar, the two consecutive months of Shaban and Ramadan have special merit. In fact, there are numerous reasons why Shaban holds so much importance. The Prophet Muhammad used to fast for the whole of Shaban or most of it (Al-Bukhārī 2002, no. 1969).⁷ He is reported to have said that Shaban is a month of forgiveness and a month during which man's deeds are presented to God.⁸ The Prophet is also said to have specifically mentioned the status of the fifteenth night of Shaban, saying, 'Indeed Allah, Mighty and Sublime is He, descends to the lowest Heavens during the night of the middle of Sha'ban, to grant forgiveness to more than the number of hairs on the sheep of (Banu) Kalb'.⁹ While the authenticity of this hadith is doubtful, as it is considered 'weak/inauthentic' (*ḍa'īf*), the association of holiness seems to have remained in the popular memory of many Muslim societies. The official authenticity of reports about the Prophet is of less concern to folklorists than are the ramifications of what is popularly considered sacred or holy for social practices.

Hence, some Islamic religious scholars have preferred to dedicate this night to observing the night vigil (prayers) in hope for God's mercy and forgiveness, while others have disagreed on the validity of the aforementioned hadith and in turn dismissed this practice. Regardless of what the religious scholars say and whether adults in general choose to perform supererogatory prayers or not on the fifteenth night of Shaban, children of the Arabian Gulf seem to have established a different practice of their own—they have taken to mummery on the fifteenth night of Shaban. As an example, the Emirati ḥagg el-lēla is discussed later in a separate section.

As for the month of Ramadan, besides its obvious religious status as a month of fasting, righteousness, and piety, there seems to be a sociocultural aspect to it as

well. Those less concerned with the religious part experience Ramadan slightly differently. For them, it has become a festive month during which houses are decorated with lanterns, families and friends gather for social events—be it home visits or outings—and children rejoice. They all fast, then feast, celebrate, reconcile, play games, and stay up until dawn every night for the entire month.

One of the most popular Ramadan practices in Iraq, for instance, is a game called *mhēbis* (a little ring). It is played privately in households or publicly by men on the streets or in big halls in the form of official or unofficial tournaments between various neighbourhoods. Large trays of baklava or *zlābiyya* (deep-fried pretzels soaked in sugar syrup) are the prize for which the losing team will bear the cost.¹⁰ The game involves a ring hidden in a player's fist to be found by the opposing team. Specific phrases are used and even songs and anthems are sung. The children, on the other hand, would be playing a variety of games suitable for their age since *mhēbis* requires a level of attention to detail and patience rarely found in children (Qadduri 2008, 142–43). On the fifteenth night of Ramadan, the mumming takes place. They call it *mājīnā*.

Mājīnā: The Iraqi Trick-or-Treat-Like Tradition

Not so long ago, my mother Sadia Al-Jebouri, a retired embryologist in her late seventies, said to me ‘this Halloween we see in the West is not that different to what we used to do in Iraq as children’ (January 2018). She recalled a memory from the past, narrating how she would arrange with her girlfriends to meet on 15 Ramadan after *iftar* (breaking of the fast) and start their march on the streets of Babylon, knocking on the neighbours' doors, and chanting *mājīnā o mājīnā*. She said: ‘we would stand at the door of a house and shout *mājīnā yā mājīnā ḥilli 'l-chīs w-nṭīnā*’ (*mājīnā o mājīnā* untie the pouch and give us [something]) and wait with excitement for a treat of sweets or, even better, money’. The treats were normally the traditional Iraqi Ramadan sweets called *zlābiyya* (mentioned earlier), *klecha* (buns stuffed with nuts or dates), baklava, sugared almonds, roasted chickpeas, or raisins. When the children were kept waiting, they would shout ‘*tinṭūna lo nintikum? bet Makkah nwaddikum*’ (will you [plural] give us [something] or shall we give [something] to you? To the House of Mecca [i.e. the Kaaba] we shall take you) and wait again with excitement for their treat. If the children were still kept waiting for too long without a treat they would then shout ‘*yā ahl 'l-suṭūḥ tinṭūnā lo nrūḥ*’ (O you, the owners of the house [lit. rooftops], will you give us [something] or should we leave?). The expression *ahl 'l-suṭūḥ* (the owners/people of the rooftops) is used because Iraqis commonly spend their evenings on the rooftops of their houses. This was, and continues to be, a common practice. The children would call out to those on the rooftops once and twice. If the second call worked, then the children would salute the house owner and his eldest or youngest son, by name if these were known, or just say ‘*bi-jāh Allah w-Sma'in āmīn Allah yikhallī rā'i 'l-bet āmīn ...*’ (For the sake of Allah and Ismail [Isma'in], amen, may Allah protect the guardian of this house, amen ...). Nevertheless, if the second cry for a treat is in vain, most children would leave

quietly. The determined ones, however, might persist and ask again and again. In such cases, the people of the house could feel harassed and the episode would end with the children getting a splash of water from the rooftop to wave them off. They would then run and shame the owner for being ungenerous. They would cry out loud ‘chabbaw ‘alena al-māy yā bet el-fugur’ (the stingy house splashed us with water). Such was the night observed annually with children marching from house to house singing, chanting, and collecting their treats.

No mention is made of massive preparations for this event in Iraq. The approach is humble. There is no specific dress code, nor are special favours distributed, but children would go out in their usual everyday clothing and knock on doors and ask for treats. The Emirati ḥagg el-lela, however, has evolved into a highly sophisticated practice as shall be shown in the following.

Ismail, the Son of Abraham

One cannot help but wonder why the prophet Abraham’s (in Arabic: Ibrahim) son Ismail (who is also considered a messenger and a prophet in the Quran) is saluted in the mājīnā. Could it be because his name in Iraqi pronunciation rhymes with *amīn* (amen)? Or because he is regarded (by both Jews and Arabs) as the progenitor of the Arabs? Or because of the story of how Abraham and Ismail rebuilt the Kaaba (in Mecca), which is of paramount importance for all Muslims? Perhaps it is the literal meaning of Ismail’s name which translates ‘God hears/heard by God’?

One must appreciate the fact that the masses of people generally, and children specifically, in such contexts, would rarely know the connotation of a specific word or name. These names from the ancient past function like pegs on which local or collective legends are hung. People must have been introduced at some point to an idea which these words evoke or to a principle that they represent. Yet with the passing of time, all of the reasons fade and become too blurry to remember. People may receive and in turn transmit legends without necessarily fully understanding all the elements involved. In an interview with an Iraqi intellectual, I asked about a possible reason for the inclusion of Ismail in the mājīnā chant. He replied, ‘I don’t really know’, smiling, ‘probably because it rhymes with *amīn*’ (Sattar Izwaini, pers. comm., November 2019). This is evidence that even highly educated people give little, if any, thought to mājīnā, which further suggests that such historical or legendary details are indeed likely to be irrelevant to the general population.

To the folklorist, however, such detail is naturally relevant and significant. Therefore, let us consider some of the questions raised earlier. First, the literal meaning of Ismail’s name. According to tradition, the name ‘Ismail’ refers to the yearning of Abraham and his wife Sarah to have a child. Abraham later had his first son with his second wife Hagar and he named him Ismail. In that sense, this Abrahamic tradition fits well in this scenario where children yearn for some treats and wish to be ‘heard by God’. Once their call is answered, the children (probably unwittingly) evoke an element from the past for what it denotes in terms of answers to prayers, wishes, and desires, and, in turn, they honour and salute it. In this case,

Ismail is no more than a metaphor that is used to commemorate the past in the present. There is a legacy of previous generations present in this piece of folklore.

Another reason for including Ismail could be the story about the construction and guardianship of the Kaaba. According to tradition, God ordered Abraham and his son Ismail to raise the foundation of the Kaaba. Abraham, in turn, entrusted the guardianship of the Kaaba to Ismail, who became the first to serve as the Kaaba's caretaker. There is also the story of how—after the birth of Abraham's second son Isaac from his first wife Sarah—Hagar and Ismail were banished to the desert. Tradition has it that they settled in Mecca, near the Well of Zamzam. This, in fact, marks the beginning of the sanctification of Mecca as a holy place in Islam. Hagar and Ismail are thus remembered in Islam at the time of pilgrimage (*ḥajj*). As part of the annual pilgrimage rituals, Muslims are required to run between the hills of al-Ṣafa and al-Marwah seven times in commemoration of the distressed Hagar who was searching for water for her thirsty son Ismail. She ran back and forth between these two hills seven times until she discovered a spring which came to be known as the Well of Zamzam. This spring and its water hold a holy status in Islam. Moreover, Islamic tradition also says that God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son Ismail, either as a test or as part of a vow of which both Abraham and Ismail approve. Nonetheless, as Abraham attempts to slay his son, God prevents the death of Ismail and tells Abraham that he has fulfilled the command. Consequently, at every Eid al-Aḍḥā (the feast of sacrifice) Muslims slaughter an animal to commemorate Abraham's sacrifice.

There are two points to note in the *mājīnā* chant, both of which direct one's attention towards Mecca and the Kaaba and could be the justification for naming Ismail in the chant. The first is in the part where the children shout 'tinṭūna lo nintikum? bet Makkah nwaddikum' (will you give us [something] or shall we give [something] to you? To the House of Mecca [i.e. the Kaaba] we shall take you). This call for a treat could be interpreted as one that comes with a reward to the one who gives out the treat. The reward, in this case, is a visit to Mecca and the Kaaba. This evokes the traditional story of Abraham who asked God for a son and was given one (Ismail), who in turn ends up in Mecca, participates in the construction of the Kaaba, and serves as a prominent model of obedience and sacrifice. The second point is in the part that comes in the 'thank you' note at the end of the chant when the children thank the household for being generous with treats. The children say 'bi-jāh Allah w-Sma'in āmīn Allah yikhallī rā'i 'l-bet āmīn ...' (For the sake of Allah and Ismail, amen, may Allah protect the guardian of this house, amen ...). Here is another, yet indirect, reference to the Kaaba which is known as *the* House and whose first guardian was Ismail and who, in turn, was protected by God. Here, again, one notes a legacy evoked and preserved in a simple chant that is transmitted by children from one generation to another.

The Lyrics

In his 'The Folk Songs of Iraqi Children', Sadok Masliyah writes that *mājīnā* is a popular children's holiday throughout Iraq (Masliyah 2000, 187).¹¹ He includes the

most thorough written transcript of the chant/song that I could find, although no further information beyond the lyrics is given. Masliyah presents two different versions with no explanation of the variations, and neither does he comment on the sources used.¹²

YouTube has several versions of the song. What seems to be the oldest version is by a female singer named Sallama, a Lebanese performer active in Baghdad from 1949 well into the 1960s.¹³ It is noted in the sources that Sallama became famous for singing the mājīnā song, which is part of Iraqi folklore. Hence, it is evident that the oral tradition predates the 1950s song which was composed by the Iraqi Ala Kāmil (1922–73).¹⁴ Sallama's song is probably based on the most popular version chanted by the children on the streets of Baghdad. Its lyrics are the closest to the street chants, as opposed to Masliyah's versions.¹⁵ It is also possible that Sallama gained her fame through the song for no other fact than that mājīnā was already a well-established practice and a well-known chant to Iraqis at the time.

There are several more recent versions of the mājīnā song where the wording has changed and many political or sectarian tendencies are evident therein.¹⁶ Some of the street chants exhibit sectarian tendencies, with names like Ali or Al-Hasan included in the chant, in line with the Shia belief that the practice itself originates with the birth of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Al-Hasan on 15th Ramadan. This is discussed further later. It is noteworthy that in the past few decades—with the rise of sectarianism in Iraq—certain names, like Ali, Al-Hussain, or Al-Hassan, have come to be closely associated with Shia Muslims.

Data and Analysis

This section examines the possible meanings and origin of the term and the practice. Yet some questions about mājīnā remain unanswered and beyond the scope of this study. Among these are the following: when does mājīnā appear as a practice and what are the factors that brought it about? Can one establish a practical link to Halloween or other solicitation rituals? There are obvious similarities between these folkloric customs, and that is perhaps part and parcel of an organic evolution of people's folk practices. However, is an actual influence or transmission of knowledge traceable? A deeper investigation is certainly required to establish more solid conclusions in this regard—a subject for another article.

In the absence of scholarly material about mājīnā, a number of Iraqis were interviewed. In addition to those already mentioned, three more Iraqi males were interviewed; one Muslim Arab in his eighties (Informant A1), one Muslim Arab in his fifties (Mustafa Adnan), and one Muslim Arab in his twenties (Informant A2). All three are originally from Baghdad but currently living in diaspora. All three confirmed that they know the mājīnā, and know the lyrics to the chant, yet none of them had practised it. All three further remarked that it was less common in areas inhabited by middle-class or upper middle-class families and more common in the densely populated areas of the lower social classes. Mustafa Adnan explained that many families were in less favour of having their children practising the mājīnā 'as it

involved knocking on people's doors and asking for treats which was perceived as similar to begging' (WhatsApp voice message, 26 August 2020). A2 speculated that, from a religiously conservative perspective, the *mājīnā* was perhaps frowned upon (WhatsApp message, 2 September 2020). A1 said 'none of the families we knew practised the *mājīnā* but I have seen kids practising it, so I presume that it was not something our family did' (email message, 25 August 2020). On this matter, Sattar Izwaini (whom we met earlier) remarked, 'I don't believe it is class related. Indeed, it would be more obvious in the common areas as these are more vibrant. Those of the upper middle class would rarely let their children out on the streets and the *mājīnā* would in turn find no popularity' (WhatsApp voice message, 13 September 2020). Izwaini's remarks are somewhat self-contradictory, as his explanations suggest that social class could indeed be a determining factor.

Three Iraqi females were interviewed: one Muslim Kurd in her sixties (Ronak Husni), one Christian Assyrian in her forties (Rena Francis), and one Mandaean¹⁷ in her forties (Rana Farhan). The first is from Irbil, the second from Ankawa (a village approximately thirty miles from Irbil), and the third from Baghdad. All three are currently living in the diaspora and left Iraq when they were in their teens or twenties. All three remarked that none of them had practised the *mājīnā*. When asked about the *mājīnā*, Husni and Farhan confirmed that they had only seen it on national television, but never on the streets of their neighbourhoods (Ronak Husni, private conversation with the author, September 2018; Rena Farhan, Messenger communication, 10 September 2019). Although Farhan lived in Baghdad and in an area mostly populated by Arab Muslims, she had not witnessed the *mājīnā* on the streets of her neighbourhood. According to her, it was an upper middle-class area. This tends to confirm the social class argument discussed earlier. Francis, however, said that she had never even heard of *mājīnā* (Messenger communication, 1 September 2020). As I enquired into further details, Francis questioned both of her parents who also affirmed that they had never heard of *mājīnā*. It is noteworthy that Ankawa is a Christian-only village where Aramaic is the medium of communication and Arabic is a second language taught at school. This is evidence that *mājīnā* is a practice particular to Muslim speakers of Arabic. In reality, since *mājīnā* is performed during Ramadan it might seem unlikely that non-Muslims would practise it as well. In conservative environments (and Iraq is certainly one of these), people tend to be less keen to adopt practices related to religious occasions other than their own. Nonetheless, when children have a choice they would most probably not discriminate when treats are at stake. Moreover, since *mājīnā*'s lyrics are in Arabic it would only appeal to those who speak Arabic and who live in areas where Arabic is the medium of communication.

In search of further information, I conducted an online survey and managed to obtain some useful responses. A nine-question questionnaire was structured to collect historical as well as demographic information (see [Appendix B](#)). The results are as follows:

- The author received twenty-nine responses out of which twelve proved to be useful for the purpose of this study. Others responded, but with 'I don't know' to every question.

- Five respondents out of the twelve are Arab Muslim males, four are Arab Muslim females, and there is one each of the following: a Kurdish Muslim male, a Muslim male of Arab and Kurdish parentage, and an Arab female with no religious affiliation.
- All twelve respondents are familiar with the mājīnā.
- All twelve had either practised the mājīnā themselves or confirm that their parents or grandparents had practised it.
- Eight out of the twelve suggest that the mājīnā originally denoted *lawlāk māji'nā* (we would not have come had it not been for you) in the belief that it is a phrase rendered by the Companions of the Prophet upon visiting the house of Ali b. Abi Talib (d. 661), to congratulate him on the birth of his son Al-Hasan who was born on 15 Ramadan 626. This was mentioned briefly earlier and is, in fact, one of theories claimed by Haydar al-Ka'bi in a 2013 online article discussed in the following 'Journalistic Data' section.
- One out of the twelve suggests that the term mājīnā refers to some wealthy woman. This is most likely the 'Rijina' theory, which is also addressed in the 'Journalistic Data' section.
- Three out of the twelve did not know what the term mājīnā means. This is evidence that the general population are not necessarily interested in knowing the etymological details of certain practices.¹⁸
- Seven out of the twelve say that the name 'Ismail' was included in their chant. All seven confirm that they do not know the reason for his inclusion. This also supports the argument that people typically inherit a practice without questioning or seeking explanations for any names that might be mentioned.
- One of the twelve includes the name 'Ali' in her version of the chant, noting down the lyrics, 'mājīne ya mājīne ḥillī-l-chīs wentīne lkhāṭer 'Alī mashshīne' (mājīne o mājīne untie the pouch and give us [something], for the sake of Ali let us go [*sic*]). Here is an evident sectarian association. The author believes that the 'let us go' suggests to the addressee that they must give something in order for the children to leave or else they will stay and ask time and time again.
- Six out of the twelve (aged between forty and seventy-five) confirm that both their parents and grandparents practised the mājīnā. This indicates that the mājīnā is not a modern establishment from the 1940s or 1950s but one that is at least one hundred years old.

Although the online survey did not attract the numbers hoped for, the few who responded provided details that—when combined with the information gathered through direct interviews—support the argument discussed earlier. Basically, the when, where, and how a practice starts are all irrelevant questions to most people. The general public, and even the highly educated among them, rarely know or question folklore unless they have a special interest in it. People inherit folkloric practices and the legendary stories that accompany them, and most of the time they never ask for the historical details. There must be an origin lying somewhere in the past. Perhaps a further study addressing similar cultures and their potential influences on Iraqi folklore would provide a clearer answer.

Journalistic Data

In a 2009 online article in *Dunya al-Waṭan*, Salām al-Shammā' compared the Iraqi mājinā to similar traditions in the Arabian Gulf region, which all follow, more or less, the same principle. al-Shammā' admits, however, that he did not manage to find out the meaning of the word mājinā or its origin.¹⁹

In a 2012 online article produced by Shakwmakw Press, the mājinā is described as one of the most famous Iraqi folk songs.²⁰ The anonymous author of the article relates the Iraqi folk custom to one in Egypt called *waḥawī yā waḥawī*. It must be noted, however, that some sources suggest that the Egyptian *waḥawī yā waḥawī* originates in an ancient Pharaonic tradition rather different to the mājinā, although today it is practised in Ramadan, specifically to welcome the beginning of the month. It is also worthy of note that there is no 'trick-or-treating' involved in the Egyptian *waḥawī yā waḥawī*. Having said that, in a monograph on Egyptian heritage, Luṭfī Salīm mentions a practice that is indeed similar to the mājinā to the degree that even the song sung has similar wording. It is, according to him, practised in Egypt throughout Ramadan (Salīm 2000, 143).

The 2012 Shakwmakw Press article gives a number of theories explaining the possible origin of mājinā. One claims that mājinā possibly means *naḥnu ji'nā* (we came). Sattar Izwaini, a linguist and Professor of Arabic and Translation Studies at the American University of Sharjah, explains that in this case 'it can be an abbreviation of a whole interrogative sentence: *jīna law mā jīnā?* (have we come or not?/haven't we come?/we have come, haven't we?)'. 'But this seems to be a Mosul dialect', he continues, 'as a Baghdadi would say: *'ijena law mu' ijena?*' (email message to the author, 25 September 2019). Izwaini further explains that the vocative *yā* in the phrase *mājinā yā mājinā* 'may be an indication that it is a call for someone/some people' (email message to the author, 24 January 2020).

This same 2012 article gives a second theory explaining that mājinā was originally the name of a wealthy Baghdadi lady named Rijina, an Iraqi Jew, who gave much to charity in Baghdad. She was the sister of the singer Salima Murad Pasha (d. 1974), who was the wife of the Iraqi singer Nazim al-Ghazali (d. 1963). Yet what is the likelihood of her being linked to a custom performed during Ramadan, a month that is holy and blessed in Islam? Would Muslim children seek treats from a Jewish woman in the month of Ramadan? It is certainly possible since children are less likely to discriminate. Also, the article claims that Ramadan in Iraq had a national connotation in addition to its religious nature. How true this statement is needs further investigation. Nevertheless, what it *suggests* is that being a Jew or a Muslim made no difference to the attitude of the Iraqis of the past. However, the link to Rijina is doubtful and can be dismissed for the following reasons: (1) I have already established that the practice is at a least a century old, based on the information gathered through the questionnaire, and (2) mājinā lyrics—as noted in [Appendix A](#)—say, 'tintūna lo nintikum bet Makkah nwaddikum' (will you give us [something] or shall we give you [something]? To the House of Mecca we shall take you). Why would Rijina, being Jewish, wish to go to Mecca? This link to Rijina is thus nonsensical.

Rijina is part of Iraq's modern history, while the custom of mājīnā appears to be demonstrably older than her lifetime.

Another theory is given in a 2013 online article published by Al-Taakhi Press entitled 'al-mājīnā.. fulklūr sha'bī 'irāqī lā tamḥūh al-sinīn' (Al-mājīnā.. Traditional Iraqi folklore that years cannot erase). The author, Haydar Al-Ka'bi, writes that mājīnā originally denotes 'lawlāk mā ji'nā' (we would not have come had it not been for you). Al-Ka'bi claims that this was a phrase spoken by the Companions of the Prophet upon visiting the house of the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, Ali b. Abi Talib, to congratulate him on the birth of his son Al-Hasan who was born on 15 Ramadan.²¹ It is worthy of note that eight of the respondents to my questionnaire also gave this explanation, which they most probably got from either this article or a similar one. The veracity of this information cannot be established. A hint of Shiism is undoubtedly there. After all, the majority of the Iraqi Muslim population is of the Shia sect of Islam and such a romanticized story would certainly find popularity. This version of mājīnā says: 'mājīnā yā mājīnā ḥilli 'l-chīs wa-nṭīnā tiṭṭūnā law ninṭikum bayt makka nwaddikum²² rab 'l-'ālī yikhallikum tiṭṭūnā kul mājīnā yā mājīnā law mā-'l-Ḥasan mājīnā' (mājīnā o mājīnā open the bag and give us, will you give us or shall we give you, to Mecca we will send you, may God Almighty save you, give us every time we come mājīnā o mājīnā, had it not been for al-Hasan we would not have come).²³ Al-Jebouri (my mother) confirms that Al-Hasan's name was never included in the mājīnā in her community in Babylon, despite the fact that it is heavily populated by Shia Muslims. Izwaini, who is a generation younger than Al-Jebouri equally asserts that such claims were never heard of in Baghdad during his childhood. 'They are nothing but modern sectarian fabrications', he summarized (pers. comm., October 2018).

To investigate this claim further, I consulted primary sources reporting on the birth of Al-Hasan and any other biographical information about him. Those that exhibit sectarian tendencies were avoided and the focus was only on the ones that are generally accepted as authoritative by mainstream Muslim scholarship. It came as no surprise that no trace was found of the aforementioned link between mājīnā or any similar practice and the birth of Al-Hasan. There is nothing in those sources that describes the Companions as having said something similar to what Al-Ka'bi claims in the aforementioned article (Al-Albānī 1992, 128; Al-Bukhārī 1994, 1, parts 1–2: 163, hadith 1491; 1994, 2, parts 3–4: 225, hadith 2704 and 261, hadith 3752; Al-Dimashqī 1995, 13: 238, 245, 248, 253–54 and 259; Ibn Hanbal 1999–2001, 2: 159, hadith 769; Al-Iṣfahānī 2007, 2: 43–48; Al-Qurtubī 1992, 1: 358, 384–85 and 387–88). This theory can thus be dismissed.

Social Media Data

I also investigated several Iraqi groups on social media to see whether the mājīnā is mentioned. The information found is no different to what is given in newspaper articles except for two additional theories about the origin of the name. One of the theories says that mājīnā is derived from Urdu and means reconciliation between

neighbours.²⁴ Another source claims that *mājīnā* is derived from *bājī* which is a foreign word (most likely Persian) commonly used by Iraqis when addressing their eldest sister or simply an older lady, as a mark of respect. The young would say *bājīnā*, which later came to be pronounced as *mājīnā*.²⁵ It was not possible to come to any conclusions in this regard due to lack of any further evidence.

Ḥagg El-lēla: The Emirati Equivalent

In the United Arab Emirates, the mumming or trick-or-treating-like practice occurs a month earlier than the *mājīnā* in Iraq; that is, 15 Shaban. Nevertheless, the idea is practically the same. One must appreciate the fact that the United Arab Emirates is striving to record and archive its heritage properly. Therefore, by exploring the Emirati *ḥagg el-lēla* one might hope to understand the origin of such practices. However, like the *mājīnā*, *ḥagg el-lēla* has thus far not been explored by scholars. There are annual articles published by local newspapers mentioning no more than simple facts about the practice, the dress code, and the preparations involved.²⁶ There is surely a need for a more academic approach. It is worth noting that the same phrase that is used in Iraq on 15 Ramadan is also spoken by children in the United Arab Emirates on 15 Shaban. That is, “*aṭūna Allāh yeṭṭikum bet Makka yiwaddikum*’ (give us [something] may Allah give you [something], to Mecca He will send you)’.

Similarly to the *mājīnā*, there is a lack of verifiable information regarding the origins of *ḥagg el-lēla*. This, in turn, opens the gate for speculation. Hana al-Hammadi writes in her 2013 *Al-Ittiḥād* article on *ḥagg el-lēla* that a heritage scholar named Sultan b. Ghāfān mentions several possible reasons for this celebration.²⁷ One is that 15 Shaban is a blessed day on which the direction of prayer for Muslims shifted from Jerusalem to Mecca. However, it is apparent that this is an attempt to explain the situation without substantial evidence. It seems that Ghāfān failed to use reliable sources. As for Hammadi, she does not appear to have investigated her source thoroughly. The authentic hadith report regarding the shift says that it happened in mid Rajab of the lunar calendar in year 2 of the Hijri Calendar/January 624 CE (Safārīnī 2009, 2: 565). Another of Ghāfān’s theories is that the month of Shaban is the best of all months as it falls between the two celebrated months of Rajab and Ramadan. This, of course, is not an academic theory, and substantial evidence is lacking. Indeed, the Prophet is said to have observed Shaban mostly fasting, as has been mentioned earlier, but there is no record stating that Shaban is the best of all months. There is no doubt that the most holy of all Islamic months is the month of Ramadan. Ghāfān’s third theory is in line with what has been mentioned previously about the night of 15 Shaban being a night of ‘records’ during which deeds, both good and ill, are noted. None of Ghāfān’s three theories provides a clear link to *ḥagg el-lēla*. The origin for *ḥagg el-lēla* as such remains obscure.

In the United Arab Emirates, *ḥagg el-lēla* has received much attention in recent times and a lot of hustle and bustle is now surrounding it. Preparations are made for special clothes to be worn by the boys and the girls alike for the occasion. These are nothing like Halloween costumes; rather, traditional outfits with colourful

embroidery specifically dedicated to this occasion are worn. The children also carry specially designed sacks made of fabric to collect their treats in. The households would, for their part, stock up on a variety of treats to give away as the children pass by and knock on the doors right after the afternoon prayer until sunset. This tradition developed even further into a more sophisticated festival-like event for which people would prepare weeks in advance with pre-ordered favours. Decorated bags, sacks, or boxes will be filled with treats, both sweet and savoury, and some would, interestingly, even include toothbrushes. These are then distributed as favours to the children on the streets or to those who knock on one's door. There are even Instagram accounts that advertise goods ahead of the night for people to order. The designs and varieties given are enormous and very tempting to the eye. There is certainly a taste of the old and the new in the modern Emirati ḥagg el-lēla event.

Conclusion

The subject of this article is what a folklorist would, most probably, label as 'childlore' rather than 'adult' folklore. Childlore includes all sorts of customs and traditions particular to children, and it is seasonal children's customs that have been the topic of concern here: namely, the annual mumming, or trick-or-treat-like tradition of the children of Iraq. There are obvious similarities, as has been noted, in the folkloric practices shared by children in different regions. Iraq is not unique in that sense with this element of its childlore. The mumming custom is practised in the Gulf region as a whole with variation in names and dates, although it is more famous in its Western, and fairly modern, borrowed garment of Halloween.

Having said that, the trick-or-treating of Halloween and other Western solicitation practices are better understood as they have been thoroughly studied and recorded by Western scholarship. The Iraqi 'equivalent', the mājīnā, is less documented and its origin and evolution cannot be properly traced. However, I believe it would make no difference to the lore of the people if they had a better understanding of the roots of their folk practices. There is no apparent interest and desire, at least in the case of Iraq's mājīnā, to understand the history of such practices. This, perhaps, is the nature of folklore.

Mājīnā has not been studied by folklorists, as far as can be determined—not even sporadically. Most articles on mājīnā seem to be newspaper articles or magazine blogs or a few lines in a book on Iraqi heritage. These can be useful, but they fail to provide relevant ethnographic data. Perhaps in local academic journals on Iraqi heritage one could find more scholarly and informative material, yet these sources have proved to be impossible to obtain in diaspora. Amongst its thousands of articles, the leading monthly journal on Iraqi heritage, *al-Turāth al-Sha'bī*, has not said anything about the mājīnā.

In the case of modern Iraq generally, and for the Iraqis in diaspora specifically, this piece of Iraqi childlore is no more than an idea echoed in the memories of the older people of yesterday's Iraq. The new Iraq appears too busy and concerned with mere human survival to focus on the survival of its heritage, let alone a children's seasonal custom. Elements of Iraqi identity seem to be changing and boundary markers of Iraqi heritage are sadly evaporating in the turbulence of today's Iraq.

The present study delivers what may be the first scholarly record of the *mājīnā*. Although *mājīnā*'s origin remains unclear, this article presents worthwhile findings. It includes the song lyrics in several variants, and discusses the various possible meanings of the term *mājīnā* and the verbal variations with some possible explanations. This study also presents an overview of the meagre existing literature and theories therein. It also suggests that *mājīnā*'s occurrence in mid Ramadan is for the purpose of rewarding the children for completing fifteen days of fasting and in turn encouraging them to continue for another equal number of days until the festival of breaking the fast, Eid Al-Fiṭr. Hence, *mājīnā* serves to stimulate and encourage the children to endure the month-long fasting. Moreover, this study suggests that *mājīnā* is distinctly Arab and Muslim, and notes some diachronic shifts in the popularity of the custom. This may be, and most probably is, a result of what is considered in recent times to be an unsafe environment for children on the streets of a politically turbulent Iraq.

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Appendices
Appendix A

The lyrics in the third column entitled ‘Sallama’ are from a YouTube Video, accessed 17 August 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_yXzACBOZo.

	Masliyah (1)	Masliyah (2)	Sallama	Children’s Street Chant	Analysis
1	Transliteration of the Arabic script and translation into English by Masliyah <i>mājīna mājīna mājīna mājīna</i>	Transliteration of the Arabic script and translation into English by Masliyah <i>mājīna mājīna mājīna mājīna</i>	Transliteration of the Arabic script and translation into English by the author of the current article <i>mājīna yā mājīnā mājīna o mājīnā</i>	Based on the common version gathered from a number of Iraqi informants <i>mājīna yā mājīnā mājīna o mājīnā</i>	
2	Transliteration of the Arabic script and translation into English by Masliyah <i>hīllu-ḡ-ḡis wurūṭūna untie (pl.) the pouch and give us</i>	Transliteration of the Arabic script and translation into English by Masliyah <i>hīllu-ḡ-ḡis wurūṭūna untie (pl.) the pouch and give us</i> <i>Beyond this line the rest of the song is completely different to Masliyah (1) Sallama’s version and the street chant.</i>	Transliteration of the Arabic script and translation into English by the author of the current article <i>hīlli-l-ḡhis wenṭīna untie (sing.fem.) the pouch and give us</i>	Based on the common version gathered from a number of Iraqi informants <i>hīlli-l-ḡhis wenṭīna untie (sing.fem.) the pouch and give us</i>	Masliyah’s two versions use the plural form while Sallama’s and the street chants address a woman. The feminine form rhymes well with the following words: <i>mājīnā</i> ... <i>hīlli-l-ḡhis wenṭīna</i> as opposed to the plural form in Masliyah’s versions
3	Transliteration of the Arabic script and translation into English by Masliyah <i>tīntūna lo nīntīkum give (pl.) us or we’ll give you</i>	Transliteration of the Arabic script and translation into English by Masliyah <i>bāb ash-shaykh wul-rī’yan bāb ash-Shaykh and the shepherds</i>	Transliteration of the Arabic script and translation into English by the author of the current article <i>hīlli-l-ḡhis li-l-tālib untie (sing.fem.) the pouch for the seeker</i>	Based on the common version gathered from a number of Iraqi informants <i>tīntūna lo nīntīkum will you (pl.) give us or shall we give you (pl.)?</i>	Masliyah (1) lines 3–4 correspond to the street chant lines 3–4 but do not appear until much later in Sallama’s version. See lines 9–10
4	Transliteration of the Arabic script and translation into English by Masliyah <i>bayt Maḡḡah nwaḡḡīkum to the House of Mecca we’ll take you</i>	Transliteration of the Arabic script and translation into English by Masliyah <i>zaynah zaynah are beautiful, beautiful</i>	Transliteration of the Arabic script and translation into English by the author of the current article <i>wunṭi li-li bih rāḡhib and give to the one who desires it</i>	Based on the common version gathered from a number of Iraqi informants <i>bet Maḡḡah nwaḡḡīkum to the House of Mecca (i.e. the Kaaba) we shall take you</i>	
5	Transliteration of the Arabic script and translation into English by Masliyah <i>tīntūna kulma jīna give us whenever we come</i>	Transliteration of the Arabic script and translation into English by Masliyah <i>digg il-ḡajar brījīaynā bang the stones with our legs</i>	Transliteration of the Arabic script and translation into English by the author of the current article <i>jenālich tara nṭālib we’ve come to you (sing.fem.) asking</i>	Based on the common version gathered from a number of Iraqi informants <i>yā-h-li-l-suṭūh O people of the rooftops</i>	Masliyah (1) line 5 is Sallama’s line 12
6	Transliteration of the Arabic script and translation into English by Masliyah <i>yā aḡḡil il-suṭūh o people of the rooftops</i>	Transliteration of the Arabic script and translation into English by Masliyah <i>brījīaynāh with our legs</i>	Transliteration of the Arabic script and translation into English by the author of the current article <i>we-lich be-tālib ‘ena (sic.) and may you help those who seek</i>	Based on the common version gathered from a number of Iraqi informants <i>tīntūna lo nrūḡh will you (pl.) give us or shall we leave?</i>	Masliyah (1) lines 6–7 are lines 5–6 in the street chant and lines 7–8 in Sallama’s version
7	Transliteration of the Arabic script and translation into English by Masliyah <i>tīntūna lo nrūḡh give us otherwise we’ll go</i>	Transliteration of the Arabic script and translation into English by Masliyah <i>Waḡḡid ṭubag laylu one platter of pearls</i>	Transliteration of the Arabic script and translation into English by the author of the current article <i>yā-h-li-l-suṭūh o people of the rooftops</i>	Based on the common version gathered from a number of Iraqi informants	Here Sallama’s version is using the plural in addressing the people on the roof. In the song this part is sung by the chorus. It is a group of people addressing another group (the people on the roof). Here is a clear shift from particularity to generality

(Continued)

8	<i>tintūna lo [l]nfh il-jfāh</i> give us, or otherwise we'll spread the stink Note: this is a threat of mischievous, the 'trick', should no treat be offered	<i>wahid tubag mirjān</i> one platter of corals	<i>tintūna lo nrāh</i> will you (pl.) give us or shall we leave?		
9		<i>tubag mirjān</i> one platter of corals	<i>tintūna lo nintūkam</i> will you (pl.) give us or shall we give you (pl.)?		
10		<i>yidwi 'alās-sultan</i> shines on the sultan	<i>bet Makkah mwaddūkam</i> to the House of Mecca (i.e. the Kaaba) shall we take you		
11		<i>yidwi 'alās-sultan</i> shines on the sultan	<i>rabbī-l-āli yikhallikam</i> may the Lord keep you [safe] (pl.)		
12		<i>sarbas 'alā sarbas</i> a wheel with buckets of water on top of a wheel with buckets of water	<i>tintūna kulma jina</i> will you (pl.) give us each time we come		
13			<i>la-thāwel etsed el-bāb (sic.)</i> do not try (sing. masc.) to shut the door		Another noticeable shift. The addressee is a male. Yet it is not clear why
14			<i>te'ruf finā ehna shāb (sic.)</i> you know (sing. masc.) that we are friends		
15			<i>khallīna ilak ahbāb</i> let us be your (sing. masc.) loved ones		
16			<i>we-š-šuhba tara zena and</i> friendship is a good thing		
17			<i>sahrānīn mashghūlīn</i> we are staying up till late being occupied		
18			<i>Jam 'l-mājīnā dayrīn (sic.)</i> roaming around and collecting the majina		
19			<i>khallīna tara mkayfīn</i> let us be (pl.) we are full of joy		
20			<i>Bi-l-mājīnā mītwasīn</i> With majina having fun		

Appendix B

Majina ya majina: Iraqi Folklore Explored

This survey contains nine questions and aims to gather information from Iraqi informants about an Iraqi folkloric tradition named *majina*. It will take no more than five minutes to complete the questionnaire. This is for the purpose of academic research. Please complete it with complete honesty.

يتضمن هذا الاستبيان 9 أسئلة تهدف إلى جمع المعلومات من العراقيين حول العادة التراثية العراقية المسماة ماجينا يستغرق هذا الاستبيان حوالي 5 دقائق فقط وستستخدم المعلومات لأغراض بحثية وستنشر في دراسة أكاديمية
يرجى تعبئة الاستبيان بصراحة تامة
وشكراً لتعاونكم

Yataḍaman hādhā al-istibyān 9 as'ila tahduf ilā jam' al-ma'lūmāt min al-'Irāqiyyin ḥawl al-'āda al-turāthiyya al-'Irāqiyya al-musamma mājīnā
Yastaghriq hādhā al-istibyān ḥawālī 5 daqā'iq faqat wa-satustaghdam al-ma'lūmāt li-aghrād baḥthiyya wa-satunshar fī dirāsa ākādimiyya
Yurjā ta'bi'at al-istibyān bi-ṣsarāḥa tāma
Wa-shukran li-ta'āwunakum

1	Gender, age, years spent in Iraq (from-to), where in Iraq, ethnicity, religious background. الجنس (امرأة / رجل) , العمر , مكان الميلاد / السكن , سنوات الإقامة في العراق (من - إلى) , الهوية (عربي / كردي / كلداني / آشوري / تركماني / أخرى) , الديانة <i>Al-jins (imra'a/raju), al-'umur, makān al-milād/al-sakan, sanawāt al-iqāma fī al-'Irāq (min-ilā), al-hawiyya ('Arabi/Kurdi/Kildāni/Ashūri/Turkmāni/ukhrā), al-diyāna</i>
2	What is majina, and what does the actual word majina mean? ما هي الماجينا وما معنى كلمة ماجينا ؟ <i>Mā hiya al-mājīnā wa-mā ma'nā kalimat mājīnā?</i>
3	Where has this practice come from and when did it start to be practised in Iraq? ما هو أصل وعمر الماجينا ؟ <i>Mā huwa aṣl wa-'umur al-mājīnā?</i>
4	Why does it occur in Ramdan generally and in mid Ramadan specifically? لماذا تمارس الماجينا في رمضان عامة وبالتحديد في النصف من رمضان ؟ <i>Limādhā tumāras al-mājīnā fī Ramaḍān 'āmatan wa-bi-l-taḥdīd fī al-niṣf min Ramaḍān?</i>
5	Have you practised it yourself? Did your parents practise it? Did your grandparents practise it? هل سبق لك ولوالديك أو أجدادك ممارسة الماجينا ؟ <i>Hal sabaqa laka wa-li-wālidayka aw ajdāduka mumārasat al-mājīnā?</i>

(Continued)

6	Is it being practised in Iraq today? هل لا تزال الماجينا تمارس في العراق اليوم ؟ <i>Hal lā tazāl al-mājīnā tumāras fī al-‘Irāq al-yawm?</i>
7	What does the majina song say (please write the lyrics as you remember them in full)? ما هي كلمات انشودة ماجينا اذكرها كما تتذكرها <i>Mā hiya kalimāt unshūdat mājīnā idhkurahā kamā tatadhakarahā</i>
8	If the names ‘Hassan’ or ‘Ismail’ or any other are mentioned in your version of the song, do you know who they are and why are their names rendered? هل تتضمن نسختك من الأنشودة أي ذكر لاسم إسماعيل او الحسن او كليهما؟ من المقصود برأيك ؟ <i>Hal tataḍaman nuskhātuka min al-unshūda ay dhikr li-ism Ismā‘il aw al-Ḥasan aw kilayhumā? Man al-maqṣūd bi-ra‘ika?</i>
9	Any other comments أي ملاحظات اخرى ؟ <i>Ay mulāḥzāt ukhrā?</i>

Notes

¹ There are twelve months in the Islamic calendar, with Ramadan being the ninth and one of the four sacred months during which fighting is forbidden. Ramadan is the month of fasting. The Islamic calendar months are: Muharram, Safar, Rabī’ al-awwal, Rabī’ al-thānī, Jumāda al-ūla, Jumāda al-ākhirā, Rajab, Shaban, Ramadan, Shawwal, Dhū al-qa‘da, Dhū al-ḥijja. The four sacred months are Muharram, Rajab, Ramadan, and Dhū al-ḥijja.

² See also Haider Al-Ka‘bi, ‘Al-Mājīna.. fulklūr sha‘bī ‘irāqī lā tamḥūh al-sinīn’ (Mājīna: Iraqi popular folklore that years cannot erase), *Al-Taakhi Press*, 4 August 2013, <http://www.altaakhipress.com/printart.php?art=33709>; Salām al-Shammā, ‘Tusammūnah (qarqā‘ūn) wa-nusammīh (mājīna)’ (You call it qarqā‘ūn and we call it mājīna), *Dunyā al-Watan Voice*, 10 September 2009, <https://pulpit.alwatanvoice.com/content/print/173894.html>; ‘Mājīna yā mājīna ughniya Baghdādiyya Ramaḍāniyya’ (Mājīna o mājīna, a Baghdadi Ramadan song), *Shakwmakw Press*, 2012, <http://www.shakwmakw.com/vb/showthread.php?t=394174> (website no longer available). There is also a monthly journal on Iraqi heritage issued by the Heritage Institute at the Iraqi Ministry of Information since 1969 entitled *al-Turāth al-Sha‘bī* (Folklore). Amongst its thousands of articles, there are no records of mājīnā.

³ To complete this article, I initially relied on my mother and her memories of Iraq. I also gathered information through interviews with a number of Iraqi informants.

⁴ Reaching out to strangers through social media networks proved to be unsuccessful. I received no replies to my messages despite numerous attempts to contact people.

⁵ Khalid Al-Mashiḳīḥ, ‘Al-Qarqī‘ān fī laylat al-khāms ashār min Ramaḍān’ (Qarqī‘ān on the fifteenth night of Ramadan), *Multaqā ahl al-ḥadīth*, 21 August 2010, <http://www.ahlalhdeth.com/vb/showthread.php?t=220466>.

⁶ In Basra it is called *giri‘ān*, similarly to other Arabian Gulf countries. See Masliyah (2000, 187).

⁷ Sunnah.com. *Sunan al-Nasā‘ī* (Nasā‘ī’s collection of hadith), nos. 2175–81 and 2350–56, <https://sunnah.com/nasai/22>; Sunnah.com. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (Muslim’s collection of hadith), nos 1156e and 1156f, <https://sunnah.com/muslim/13>.

⁸ Sunnah.com. *Sunan al-Nasā‘ī*, no. 2357.

- ⁹ Sunnah.com. *Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī* (Tirmidhī's collection of hadith), no. 739, <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi/8>.
- ¹⁰ From a religious perspective, this is considered *haram* (prohibited). Strange as it may seem that *mhēbis* is practised in Ramadan, but culture and tradition are not necessarily always in line with what is permissible and/or prohibited according to Islamic law. Societies in general do not pay much attention to the appropriateness of certain practices, religiously speaking, as opposed to whether it is culturally acceptable. Ahmed Allaithy, Professor of Arabic and Translation Studies at the American University of Sharjah, explained in a conversation with the author (June 2020): 'for such a practice not to be *haram*, a third party is to offer the prize and no monetary subscription should be taken from the contesting parties'. Similar practices, although not necessarily during Ramadan, are witnessed in Turkey where teams compete and the prize is a tray of *baklava* paid for by the losing team.
- ¹¹ This is the only English-language article found that mentions *mājīnā*.
- ¹² For the lyrics, see Appendix A.
- ¹³ For the song, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_yXzACBOZo. For information on Sallama, see <https://www.facebook.com/Alwtr7/posts/2737554326343775> and <https://www.sama3y.net/forum/showthread.php?t=103362>.
- ¹⁴ For information about Ali Kāmil, see Falah Al-Khayyat, *Al-Mulaḥḥin 'Ali Kāmil awwal ra'īs li-qism al-mūsīqā fī al-tilfīziyūn* (The composer Ali Kamil, the first head of the department of music for television), *Attaakhi Press*, 13 July 2015, <http://www.altaakhipress.com/viewart.php?art=56949>.
- ¹⁵ See Appendix A for the lyrics.
- ¹⁶ These lyrics have been excluded from this study as the main focus is on what I call the 'original'; that is, the one chanted by children on the streets during the month of Ramadan.
- ¹⁷ The Mandaean community is an ethno-religious community mostly found in Iraq and some in Iran as well. Mandaeanism is also known as Sabianism.
- ¹⁸ The presenter in a Facebook video clip confirms my observation that when people are asked about the *mājīnā* and its origin 'all of them respond saying, "we don't know, we were born to see it practiced."' See https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=search&v=268450510870726&external_log_id=b67017fb-f1b2-4258-b7a9-ee02d5ac94c2&q=ماجينا20%باجي
- ¹⁹ Al-Shammā, 'Tusammūnah (qarqā'ūn) wa-nusammih (mājīnā)' (see note 2).
- ²⁰ 'Mājīnā yā mājīnā ughniya Baghdādiyya Ramaḍāniyya' (Mājīnā o mājīnā a Baghdadi Ramadan song), *Shakwmakw Press*, 2012, <http://www.shakwmakw.com/vb/showthread.php?t=394174>. Accessed 1 November 2018, but webpage no longer available.
- ²¹ Al-Ka'bi, 'Al-Mājīnā.. fulklūr sha'bī 'irāqī lā tamḥūh al-sinīn' (see note 2).
- ²² In another version: 'inṭūnā Allāh yinṭikum' (give us, may Allah give you).
- ²³ The Egyptian version starts with 'lawmā Muḥammad mājīnā' (had it not been for [the Prophet] Muhammad we would not have come). See Salīm (2000, 143).
- ²⁴ See <https://www.facebook.com/600515929961509/photos/a.600522213294214/1589340747745684>. There are other similar posts.
- ²⁵ See <https://www.facebook.com/AbrrarAlani/videos/186369852024397>.
- ²⁶ Some of the available articles on *ḥagg el-lēla* include: Ali Al-'Amūdī, 'Ḥaq al-layla'. *Al-Ittiḥād*, 10 May 2017, <https://www.alittihad.ae/writerarticle/27636/2017/>; Ibrahim Mubārak, 'Ḥaq al-layla'. *Al-Ittiḥād*, 1 May 2018, <https://www.alittihad.ae/writerarticle/33302/2018/>; Hana Al-Ḥammādī, 'Ḥaq al-layla munāsaba turāthiyya bi-nakha Imārātiyya tubhij al-kibār wa-'l-ṣighār' (Ḥaq al-layla: a folkloric occasion with an Emirati flavour that cheers up the elderly and the young). *Al-Ittiḥād*, 23 June 2013, <https://www.alittihad.ae/article/60296/2013/-حق-الليلة-مناسبة-تراثية-بنكهة-إماراتية-تهج-ال كبار-والصغار-吳>; Hana Al-Ḥammādī, 'Ḥaq al-layla 'aṭūna Allāh ya'ṭikum, bayt Makka yiwaddikum' (Ḥaq al-layla give us

or shall we give you, to the house in Mecca He shall take you). *Al-Ittiḥād*, 29 April 2018, <https://www.alittihad.ae/article/32680/2018/حق-الليلة-عطونا-الله-بعظيمكم-بيت-مكة-يوديكم>; Mirvat 'Abd al-Ḥamīd and Sa'īd al-Washāhī, 'Ḥaq al-layla bahjat al-aṭfāl bi-'l-mukassarāt wa-'l-shūkūlāta' (Ḥaq al-layla, children's joy with nuts and chocolate). *Al-Bayan*, 30 May 2015, <https://www.albayan.ae/across-the-uae/news-and-reports/2015-05-30-1.2385145>; Samira 'Ubayd, 'Ḥaq al-layla'. *Dubai Post*, 29 April 2018, <https://www.dubaipost.ae/ar/stories/2018-04-29-1.4600>; 'Bi-'l-fidyū 'ḥaq al-layla' turāth Imārātī tatanāqalahu al-ajyāl' (Ḥaq al-layla: a video on Emirati folklore that is passed on by generations). *Al-Emarat Al-Youm*, 10 May 2017, <https://www.emaratalyoum.com/editor-choice/2017-05-10-1.994186>.

²⁷ Hana Al-Ḥammādī, 'Ḥaq al-layla munāsaba turāthiyya bi-nakha Imārātiyya tubhij al-kibār wa-'l-ṣiḡhār' (see note 26).

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