

## English translation of al-ḥājj ‘Umar b. Abī Bakr praise poem: Malam Ṣalaw 1

In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful.

O God, bless Muḥammad and may your peace be upon him.

1. Salma has departed from the abodes.<sup>1</sup>  
We could not find it a visiting place.
2. And we inquired, they said she has gone forth  
With those who have gone away.
3. We tracked the trails of Salma  
And found nothing but wilderness;
4. And grazing wild beasts:  
Ostriches and a herd of cows.<sup>2</sup>
5. We stood in mournful silence,  
And wandered off at loss.
6. Turning our gaze all around  
We found nothing but bustards,
7. And flying birds,  
And eagles and vultures.
8. Then we fasted our eyes;  
And that inflamed our longing sore.
9. I said: enough of that my dear friend.<sup>3</sup>  
Your longing cannot be a shame.
10. He said to me, indeed, my friend,  
My longing is for maidens.
11. Then I said, leave this and that.  
Be wise and patient.
12. Turn your thoughts on one who  
Among the people became commander.
13. That is Ḥussain al-Kashnāwī,<sup>4</sup>  
Son of Yākūb, the famous one.
14. His nickname is Ṣalaw.  
The nickname of chosen ones.
15. Its meaning is prayer.<sup>5</sup>  
That he performed day and night.
16. Bravo Ṣalaw, bravo Ṣalaw  
Bravo our Ṣalaw, the luminary!
17. He became leader of people,  
It has been decreed long ago.

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<sup>1</sup> Following the motif of the classical *qasīda*, the poet begins with a reference to an imaginary beloved, an opening that becomes the inspiration for the praises that follow

<sup>2</sup> These fictional references to animals constitute part of the classical motif in the prelude

<sup>3</sup> This reorienting of the discourse, called *takhalluṣ* in Arabic, is another feature of the classical *qasīda* and leads the reader to turn their thoughts on Malam Ṣalaw, the “commander” (verse 12)

<sup>4</sup> الكشناوي, a reference to Malam Ṣalaw’s connection to Katsina, a town in northern Nigeria, through his father, who emigrated from Katsina to Yendi in the nineteenth century

<sup>5</sup> ‘Umar transcribes Ṣalaw to correspond with the root of *Ṣ.l.w.* from which the *ṣalāh* or “prayer” is derived.

18. Hearken, O people, to my verse.  
There is a message therein.
19. A star has set<sup>6</sup> a star has risen,  
That is enough to call for joy.
20. A sun has set in our world,  
A radiant sun has risen high.
21. A gloomy sadness befell us,  
Then joy betook us, and it dissolved.
22. We have missed a great man;<sup>7</sup>  
Şalaw the radiant took his place.
23. Şalaw has been generous,  
Before becoming commander.
24. He feeds the poor a lot,  
As well as orphans, captives too.
25. It is his wont since long ago.  
He serves scholars constantly.
26. Whenever he sees a learned man,  
He becomes his servant and slave.
27. He has been with me for many years,  
Like an attendant, for long a time.
28. He gives me gifts time and time  
And many other things;
29. And clothes of all hues,  
As well as written books,
30. And garments and wrappers,  
And jubbahs and veils,
31. And rams and chicken,  
And meat and trappings.
32. He used to meet my needs,  
From his hands, though exacting.
33. His deeds are wonderful in deed,  
May God reward him well!
34. O traveler, hardworking man<sup>8</sup>  
May you live happy and in joy.
35. May you receive fortune among humankind,  
And may you become reverent among people.
36. You became a progeny of kings,  
May God augment your delight.
37. Be generous as your father was.  
Be gentle and patient.
38. Be attendant to scholars.  
Be faithful and thankful.

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<sup>6</sup> Reference to the poet's son, who died shortly before the composition of the poem

<sup>7</sup> Same reference as previous note

<sup>8</sup> *میتکائی*, probably a neologism combining the Hausa words *mai* and *tik'iniya*, which translate as one characterized by hard work

39. May God Almighty have mercy,  
Upon ‘Uthmān,<sup>9</sup> and forgive him.
40. Forgive him, O God,  
His private and open faults.
41. ‘Uthmān has died, but  
He is a man remembered still.
42. O Omnipotent, O Mighty Lord,  
Be a helper to Ṣalaw.
43. Affirm him in his rule.  
And make him reverential.
44. May God crush down any enemy,  
Who will conspire evil against him;
45. Force him into submission,  
Drag him along and lock him in chains.
46. Vanquish and chase him away.  
Reprehensible he is and besieged!
47. May God destroy the wretched,  
The idiot, the deluded,
48. The malicious, the liar,  
Compound, O Lord, his ruin.
49. That is as the reprobate Satan,  
Who sets alight sparks to flame.
50. May God reward him the mundane;<sup>10</sup>  
And he will never come to good.
51. Let him be and turn him away,  
He will be ruined and his lot in pain.
52. Ṣalaw has two qualities,  
Both are good, take it from me:
53. These are modesty and generosity,  
Suffice them as source of pride.
54. Besides them he has ten others,  
None of which is bad at all.
55. He has such reverence,  
And who beholds him is filled with awe.
56. Then calmness among people,  
When he speaks, it is not idle.
57. And he has a handsome face,  
A face like the moon.
58. The garments that he wears  
Are woven by Egyptians.
59. With forbearance and knowledge,  
He is well known through East and West;
60. And compassion for scholars;  
That he holds in high esteem.

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<sup>9</sup> Perhaps a reference to Malam Ṣalaw’s father

<sup>10</sup> The poet suggests that only a disbeliever would invest his life efforts to acquire the mundane

61. Such is indeed from the God of the throne.  
In addition, he is solicitous,<sup>11</sup>
62. And dutiful towards his parents.  
O brother, the ten is complete.
63. He obtained fame among humankind,  
In the way of God and with Christians<sup>12</sup> too.
64. People gather at his place  
Before even he became commander.
65. From the time of his childhood,  
He was never undistinguished.
66. He was famous and well known.  
And his fame spread widely.
67. When I asked, “Where is the master?”<sup>13</sup>  
I was told he has become vizier.<sup>14</sup>
68. You, O master, you understand.  
Be vizier and protector.<sup>15</sup>
69. Do not be like other viziers,  
Who came before, they were like slaves.
70. The viziers in Kumase  
Are corrupt and perfidious.
71. They are stupid and full of vice.  
They dupe and deceive horribly.
72. How many were the viziers in Kumase  
Who today have become like dust?
73. I have not seen any vizier among them  
Who was honest, they were but immoral.
74. O master be a good vizier.  
Be sincere and tolerant.
75. Be truthful and trustworthy.  
Do not be a burden and perfidious.
76. Be like Harūn unto Mūsā.<sup>16</sup>  
Be one who lives delightfully.
77. Do not follow the footstep  
Of lying viziers, imposters and evil ones.
78. Where is Mūsā,<sup>17</sup> the grandson of Mūsā?  
I did not hear a word of him.
79. Where is Salmān, his brother?<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> غيور , but probably محير

<sup>12</sup> Allusion to the British who recognized Malam Ṣalaw as head of the Hausa community in Kumase.

<sup>13</sup> Malam Ṣalaw.

<sup>14</sup> English transliteration of the Arabic title, *wazīr*, a high-ranking political position in the classical Muslim tradition.

<sup>15</sup> محير , but probably مجير

<sup>16</sup> The Prophets Aaron and Moses

<sup>17</sup> Perhaps Malam Ṣalaw’s uncle Mūsā, mentioned in another poem in this collection, praise poem: Malam Ṣalaw 2, verses 132-33

<sup>18</sup> Perhaps literally a brother of Malam Ṣalaw

- Where has he been, where did he go?
80. The two Adams,<sup>19</sup> where have they been?  
They said they were friends.
81. One of them hails from Lanfar.<sup>20</sup>  
He was a student for years.
82. One of them was a descendant of Fāfū,<sup>21</sup>  
A helpful trader to traders.
83. Where is Sāni,<sup>22</sup> the son of Hafsa?  
He was a good helper.
84. May God have mercy on his father,  
So that he is forgiven.
85. And may God send the sky,  
On his tomb, to shower abundantly.
86. We pray to God for Ṣalaw,  
Every time, several times.
87. May God suppress all enemies,  
And tyrants and traitors.
88. May God ruin all detestable persons,  
And envious ones, totally.
89. They turned out lies,  
They concocted ingeniously.
90. Whoever will be plotting,  
Will end up in utter ruin.
91. I have heard no news of your brother,  
Khidr,<sup>23</sup> where has he gone?
92. Is he in the East or in the North?  
Or in the South or in the West?
93. Or is he in Wenchi?<sup>24</sup> Or Asante?  
Or among the Moshi?<sup>25</sup> Or in travelling?
94. May he acquires many cows,  
And sheep and donkeys too.
95. We praise God, the Almighty,  
To facilitate things constantly.
96. And blessings be upon the one  
Who set his way up towards the throne.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Perhaps relatives of Malam Ṣalaw

<sup>20</sup> Unknown town, probably in northern Ghana

<sup>21</sup> Uncertain reference; pronunciation of “f” in some Hausa dialects is close to “p,” so it could be *papo*

<sup>22</sup> Literally *thāni* in Arabic, which means “second,” it is the nickname of a second-born Muḥammad in a family. Muḥammad is a favored male name and often is given to all males born in a Hausa family. In such a case they become known by their birth rank: *awwal* (first), *thāni* (second), *thālith* (third), etc. The specific reference is unknown.

<sup>23</sup> Malam Ṣalaw’s brother

<sup>24</sup> Town in northern Ghana

<sup>25</sup> Or Mossi, an ethnic group in northern Ghana and Burkina Faso

<sup>26</sup> Reference to the Prophet Muḥammad’s night journey

It has been completed and Allah be praised. It has become widely known. The number of verses of the poem, as the number of letters in Şalaw by the *jummal* calculation system, that are ninety-six, since *sād*<sup>27</sup> is equivalent to sixty, *lām* thirty, and *wāw* six= 96.

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<sup>27</sup> The “s” in Şalaw is ص (*sād*) and not س (*sīn*), the latter being the equivalent to the English “s”