

English translation of al-ḥājj ‘Umar b. Abī Bakr historical poem: colonial rule 1

In the Name of God the Beneficent the Merciful
God’s blessing be upon the one after whom there is no prophet.

1. In praise of He who rotates the wheel of Time,¹
I begin to compose this broken *rajaz*.²
2. He is the one who alternates the passing years
And determines happiness and sorrow.
3. Most pure blessings be upon the prophet of the epic battle,
Muḥammad, whose edifice is indestructible.³
4. Salutation as well upon him and his family,
His disciples, and his wives until eternity.⁴
5. O inquirer, about what I discern within my heart,
Listen to what I recount from my mind.
6. Learn that when events befall,
Their occurrence had been foreordained long ago.⁵
7. Don’t you see it descending, o my people?
Don’t you see it escalating every day?
8. It has engulfed the savanna⁶ from every side
And spread across the lands till the farthest end.
9. Starting from Fūta Tōro,⁷ no doubt of that,
It stretched to Fūta Jallon,⁸ o my night companion.
10. Then to the town of Mayo⁹ say, or Yoro;¹⁰
To Bundu,¹¹ is it possible to move on?
11. And from there, say to Timbuktu,¹²
Thus I was informed.
12. Shinguit¹³ and Tūbā¹⁴ say, they are two towns
Large and far away indeed.
13. From Marrakesh¹⁵ and Fez,¹⁶ followed by
Bandiagara¹⁷ and Douentza,¹⁸ make mention of them.

¹ من يصرف الدهور (صرف signifies among other meanings shifting from one state or condition to another; الدهور Time from the beginning of the world to its end) cf. Lane حرف دال p. 923.

² الرجز , one of sixteen meters in Arabic poetry.

³ Reference to Islam as a construction resting on five pillars.

⁴ This formal salutation is included at the beginning and end of writing in the classical Muslim tradition.

⁵ Reference to God’s power of predetermining human actions.

⁶ Literally, sūdān, abbreviated reference to bilād al-sūdān or “land of the blacks,” the term historians and geographers writing in Arabic used to refer to the savanna lands south of the Sahara Desert stretching from the Atlantic to the Red Sea.

⁷ Middle Senegal River valley polity.

⁸ Highlands Guinea polity.

⁹ Unidentified town.

¹⁰ Unidentified town.

¹¹ Literally, Fūta Bundu, upper Senegal River valley polity.

¹² Town at the northern bend of the Niger River in Mali.

¹³ Town in Mauritania.

¹⁴ Town in Senegal.

¹⁵ Town in Morocco.

¹⁶ Town in Morocco.

¹⁷ Town in the middle Niger River delta in Mali.

¹⁸ Town in the middle Niger River delta in Mali.

14. Forget not Māsina,¹⁹ it has wondrous signs
And its people were standard bearers.
15. It was afflicted by what afflicted all people,
Of the calamities, and I mean the severe ordeal.
16. Pay close heed, you will never find escape
From this world, nor a stable home.
17. Sāmaga²⁰ of Wangara²¹ was encompassed by the calamity,
Up to the shores of Asante²² and Akyim.²³
18. Indeed, this calamity has reached Gilāso,²⁴
Up to Goune,²⁵ Bigou,²⁶ Goumne²⁷ and Fīso.²⁸
19. The Gurunshi²⁹ deserts were not spared,
Neither the inhabited lands of Mosi.³⁰
20. Worse still, the Fanti³¹ lands have been fully occupied;
Their chiefs have become dishonored slaves.
21. Their rule has reached the lands of Awana,³²
Up to Agāshi,³³ Dahomey, Ikko³⁴ and Dina.³⁵
22. Have you not seen how they have occupied the lands from Mango?³⁶
And beyond Barbe,³⁷ Tāsi³⁸ and Sagu?³⁹
23. The *kuffār*⁴⁰ of Bargo⁴¹ have all been conquered.
Their leaders either took to their heels or were killed.
24. Forget not their destruction of Abeokuta;⁴²
They have subdued all who uttered word or were silent.
25. Indeed, they have occupied all of it, up to Ilorin.⁴³
O God! Illuminate our hearts with light!
26. Keep list, and mention how they conquered the land of Bono;⁴⁴

¹⁹ Region in the middle Niger River delta.

²⁰ Town in central Mali.

²¹ Mande-speaking merchants with an extensive diaspora in West Africa.

²² Akan-speaking ethnic group in southern Ghana.

²³ Akan-speaking ethnic group in southeastern Ghana.

²⁴ Probably Bobo-Dioulasso, a town in Burkina Faso.

²⁵ Either of two towns: one located in Togo and the other in Mali.

²⁶ Town in the southeastern corner of Burkina-Faso close to the Togo frontier.

²⁷ Town in the Upper East region of Ghana, close to the frontiers of Togo and Benin.

²⁸ These two towns are probably located in Burkina Faso.

²⁹ Ethnic group in northern Ghana.

³⁰ Ethnic group in Burkina Faso.

³¹ Akan-speaking ethnic group in coastal Ghana.

³² Reference to the Ewe-speaking ethnic group in eastern Ghana, Togo, and Benin.

³³ Town in Benin.

³⁴ Reference to Lagos, Nigeria.

³⁵ Reference to Cape Coast, Ghana

³⁶ Town in northern Togo.

³⁷ There are four towns known by this name: two are located in Niger (Barbe Peul, and Barbe Zarma); one in Burkina-Faso and the other in Mali. In all likelihood, the reference might be to either the town in Burkina-Faso or one of the towns in Niger.

³⁸ Town in northern Benin.

³⁹ Village in northern Ghana.

⁴⁰ Hausa word derived from the Arabic for “unbelievers.”

⁴¹ A region in northern Benin.

⁴² Town in southern Nigeria.

⁴³ City in western Nigeria.

⁴⁴ Ethnic group in Ghana.

- And their rule has approached Alufa.⁴⁵
27. Kokūku,⁴⁶ Lāfiagi,⁴⁷ forget them not;
Likewise their surrounding villages up to their farthest limits.
28. This was all according to God's will.
He does what He wishes without a doubt.
29. I have heard they have taken
Some parts of Nupe⁴⁸ from its people. Where is a savior?!
30. Did they conquer Bussa⁴⁹ and the land of Yawuri!?⁵⁰
Indeed, they have even conquered Gombe,⁵¹ without any deliberation.
31. Do not forget that they are in Dori⁵²
And Yega,⁵³ Gilājdi,⁵⁴ Say⁵⁵ as well as Zangori.⁵⁶

Resignation

32. When you ponder upon all that I have said,
Just say: "God is our lord," and add no more.
33. For this is all by his decree,
And power, and wisdom, and knowledge.
34. Seek no way out by your own power;
Resign yourself rather to your creator.
35. Think about it. Do you see it better
For us to run away, or to stay put?
36. You will find no better choice between the two;
Either of them will lead to shame.
37. I command you O people, to stop
The idle talk; either keep quiet or abstain.

Exhortation

38. O Muslims! Show submission outwardly;
Then conceal your intentions and conspire.
39. I advise you to show thankfulness when they come;
And endure with your hearts when they show you prejudice.

Warning

40. Have no doubt that the religion of God
Shall not be destroyed by them; they are like jokers.
41. The Islamic edifice shall never be destroyed;
Any apostate shall come to regret.
42. God knew what they wanted,

⁴⁵ Town in Nigeria.

⁴⁶ Town in central Niger.

⁴⁷ Probably a town in Kwara, Nigeria, although there are nine other towns with the same name in Nigeria.

⁴⁸ Town in eastern Nigeria.

⁴⁹ Town in Nigeria.

⁵⁰ Town in Kebbi state, Nigeria.

⁵¹ Town in the Gombe state, Nigeria.

⁵² Town in Niger.

⁵³ Probably a town in Nigeria.

⁵⁴ Town in Niger.

⁵⁵ Town in Niger.

⁵⁶ Town in southern Niger.

- And what they desired, and what they stood against.
43. The prophet has foretold what will overtake them;
And we shall not be compared to them however tall they be.
44. No one can be wise about what has come to pass;
The Lord has power over what has befallen (us).

Closure

45. Keep listing my words, up to Adamawa,
As well as Kafi,⁵⁷ Lāfi⁵⁸a and Nassarāwa.⁵⁹
46. Did you hear what they perpetrated around Jega?⁶⁰
Who else other than them could have burned it, were they even to rebel?
47. He who is wise will know
What I am saying, and then ponder upon it and understand.
48. We ask Almighty God for ease,
And a way out from any difficult situation.

The Dialogue

49. And an inquirer inquired about my situation.
Inwardly and outwardly, say to him, I will give hint.
50. He says to me: “Is it Salaga⁶¹ where you want to be, or here,
Or Hausa or you prefer Ikko⁶² or Māsina?⁶³”
51. Where will you like to stay O our scholar?
For wherever you choose to stay would be our home.”
52. I said to him: “Can you not see what has occurred?
All abodes have become unsettling for us.”
53. Nay, our entire world is not habitable;
It has been rocked, and what was built is destroyed.
54. And I am confused about the situation;
And I am at a loss about what to do in this world.
55. I cannot say: ‘Here I would reside,
Or over there either, I would go.’
56. But regarding going back to Salaga, as you asked,
Nay, we have cancelled its love from our heart.
57. If it is restored, it would be wonderful for her;
Or if it is filled with abundance, she sure deserves it.
58. There are sweet things in Salaga,
And her situation is bright.
59. The residents are rich and wealthy.
However, my hopes are not fixed upon her.
60. I would not choose it for abode,

⁵⁷ There are as many as six localities with this name: one in Niger and the rest in Nigeria.

⁵⁸ There are as many as thirteen localities with the name: one is located in Niger and twelve of them in Nigeria.

⁵⁹ All three towns are located in the Northern part of Nigeria.

⁶⁰ Town in Kebbi state, Nigeria.

⁶¹ Historically one of the major market towns in northern Ghana.

⁶² See note 32.

⁶³ See note 19.

- For years to come, even if it became as pleasant there as *Tūr Sīnīn*.⁶⁴
61. And I would not sojourn there for all eternity,
With the intention of staying, speaking generally.
 62. Even if it became filled with pleasant things and bliss,
It would be in Kete⁶⁵ that I would reside.
 63. Were Salaga to be adorned in silk brocade,
I would openly declare my renunciation of it.
 64. Know that I bear her no ill,
And I have no quarrel with its residents.
 65. It is just my heart that has declined
To incline towards her again, or even hear of her.
 66. To those who claim it is the object of attractions,
Or those who think it has beneficial things,
 67. Or those who clamor that it is full of meadows,
Or those who think it has blissful gardens,
 68. Their words sound true to them,
Because it is the abode most agreeable to them.
 69. And do not think that I said what I said
Out of envy, or because I was oppressed.
 70. I am not envious of people,
Were they even to find an abode like the *Rawḍ*.⁶⁶
 71. I do not hate the people of Salaga;
Neither do I love people who smash heads.
 72. Nay, it is at Kete that I would stay;
If five stayed, I shall be the sixth.
 73. And have no doubt, if I decided to depart from here,
It would be to Sokoto⁶⁷ I would go.
 74. Or if God decrees Kete to be my resting place,
Then God's mercy is my greatest wish."
 75. O Lord, forgive the Muslim *Umma*,⁶⁸
The pious, as well as the reprobate sinner.
 76. I do not blame those who are fond of it either,
Nor condemn those who find it a meadow,
 77. Because it is the abode to which they are bound
Since childhood, nay, that is their place of birth.
 78. O Muslims, do not behave irrationally
Among them, and conduct yourself not as savages.
 79. But hold fast to the noble tradition,
And incline not towards seeking delights.
 80. Fasten your grip upon the covenant of the Merciful,
From the prophet's tradition and the Qur'an.
81. Bear stoutly all calamities,
That God might purify you through them.

⁶⁴ *طور سينين* The reference occurs twice in the Qur'an: In Sūra 23 verse 20 and in Sūra 95 verse 2. In the former it occurs as: *وَشَجَرَةً تَخْرُجُ مِنْ طُورِ سَيْنَاءَ تَنْبُتُ بِالذَّهْنِ وَصَيِّغُ لَأَكْلَيْنِ* (Also a tree springing out of Mount Sinai, which produces oil, and relish for those who use it for food.) and in the latter as : *وَالنَّيْنِ وَالزَّيْتُونِ. وَطُورِ سَيْنِينَ*
(1. By the fig and the olive 2. By the mount of Sinai) [Both translation from Yusuf Ali. *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*. (<http://www.islam101.com/Qur'an/yusufAli/>).

⁶⁵ Town where the poet moved after he left Salaga. Krachi is a nearby town and frequently the reference is to Kete-Krachi.

⁶⁶ *الروضة* this refers to a place within the Prophet's mosque at Media situated between the pulpit and the prophet's room.

⁶⁷ Town in northern Nigerian, the capital of the Sokoto Caliphate in the nineteenth century.

⁶⁸ *أمة* community; here specifically the Muslim community at large.

82. God would examine your situation,
Whether you would endure it or despair.
83. O Lord, keep us steadfast upon Islam,
Through every crisis or pain.
84. Thank God, my poem is done;
Purest blessings be bestowed upon the son of Abdul Allah,⁶⁹
85. As well as his family, wives and companions;
So long as Time spins the wheel for kings.
86. Its verses are Faz⁷⁰ and a year has dawned,⁷¹
The month of Muḥarram⁷² has attained nine.
87. I have entitled it, “Arriving at the water gorge
By one who comes to it with insight.”

⁶⁹ The Prophet Muḥammad’s father.

⁷⁰ Alphabetic numbering mostly used by Muslims scholars. Here ف = 80; ز = 7 totaling 87 verses. Probably the poet has included the opening line (بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم) in his counting.

⁷¹ وعام يشرفو the verb stands alphabetically for the Hijra calendar. 6 = و، 100 = ق، 200 = ر، 1000 = ش، 10 = ي This will add up to 1316 H. The additional و is a poetic convention of expressing the final metrical accent as long. The text also has an added ا which might be a typographical mistake. If counted the date would be 1317. Thus, the date of completing the composition would be 1st Muharram, 1316/1317, which would be equivalent to the 30th of May, 1898, or the 20th of May, 1899.

⁷² The first month of the Islamic calendar.