

## English translation of al-ḥājj ‘Umar elegiac poem: Labbo

In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful

God bless and save Muḥammad, our leader, and his family and disciples

1. How come Hind has deserted us without discord,  
And tidings of her are proclaimed abroad loud and wide.
2. She has passed away and has become like those that were bygone.  
And she has abandoned the habitual places all in ruins.
3. Reports of her migration has become widely diffused;  
And she has left all her friends disconsolate.
4. They have become like herds of tribal sheep,  
Whose ears have caught ominous, fateful roar of lions close.
5. Her loved ones have spent a Nābighan<sup>1</sup> night,  
In anxious grief, like Ya‘qūb,<sup>2</sup> when he missed the lamb.
6. And all her beloved are dumbfounded and confused.  
Tears cannot be resisted as they flowed.
7. Other voices were being raised in loud lament.  
Losing the beloved is heaven burden to endure.
8. The heart rattled off, when they said, Hind was gone.  
And the wind blasted off, dispersing sorrow and dread.
9. Then all you can discern are mourners as they weep;  
And wailers whose tearful eyes mimed the rainy-clouds.
10. The crowd of women was massive, innumerable.  
And they all kept saying, we are bereaved of force.
11. O Hind, O Hind, what day will you return to us?  
A voice seemed to respond: “There is no return, desist!”
12. Without a doubt, without at all a doubt, we have become apart.  
Woe unto us, from separation that banish men away.
13. At that moment they said: “No happiness is left for us  
In this world; it is truly unfathomable!
14. So deep a grief they showed as if inebriated,  
You will think all these friends are insane.
15. Thus has Hind departed vacating her abodes,  
After so much lively coquetry that dazzled mountains.

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to the Arab poet al-Nābighah, whose *dīwān* includes a poem composed to console the king of Ghassan who lost prisoners in a battlefield loss; these introductory verses have become proverbial in Arabic poetry for suffering a wakeful night of sorrows, run as follows:

*Commit me to tormenting anxieties O Umaymah*

*And a night I must endure with tardy stars.*

*It lingered for so long until I thought it will never end,*

*And the custodian of the stars was not going to arrive.*

<sup>2</sup> Reference to the Qur'anic story about Jacob as his children, who had thrown Joseph (the lamb) into a well, came to inform him that he was devoured by a wolf. See Qur'an: 12: 16 – 18.

16. She was full of beauty, coquettish and shrew,  
Furious against all lovers without reason.
17. Many a powerful man approached her in desire,  
But obtained nothing save resentment when he came.
18. Ill-tempered indeed she was, and would chose no one at all,  
And men that approached, she quickly turned away.
19. But were she to behold al-ḥājj Labbo,  
In his garment of youthfulness, most elegant when he swaggers,
20. With long neck, beautiful tooth-gap and winning smile,  
In his soft spoken gait, generous, exalted among notables,
21. She would instantly seduce him without timidity.  
And she would suddenly blubber, sending chattels to woo;
22. And saying: this marriage is unparalleled before.  
I am his true ordained consort without encumbrances at all.
23. Offer him the dowry without any delay.  
For in truth, this is the spouse that is preferred.
24. When I marry him, I have obtained my life desire.  
Suffice him as husband besides anyone else.
25. I will live in refreshment and satiation at his home.  
And I will not be in lack of robes or kohl.
26. I shall obey him: how slaves obey their lord.  
And I shall never defy him, whether his words or deeds.
27. For he is the pure progeny of erudite lord, benevolent,  
That is guardian of secrets among people, without boast or conceit.
28. No, not at all, nor that! He died so young, as  
Our Lord, Merciful, Exalted and Mighty one, has so decreed.
29. His nickname was Labbo, and his age was *labbu*<sup>3</sup>; how astonishing,  
Man, that both nickname and age should concur!
30. As if he was the full moon whose effulgent night is complete,  
And its radiance continuously warming people even after it sunk.
31. The dark gloominess of that night descended and then diffused.  
Grief and sorrows then grew in density; imagine the sight!
32. The masses scattered about as soon as it was announced,  
“The young man is dead. God’s appointed time has come.”
33. On hearing that, you can observe, lamenting women all around,  
And lamenting men, pouring their tears freely like rain.
34. Some collapsed in shock, like drunken men, unknowing  
What to say, in mourning that young man.
35. If you could have seen when he was wrapped in shrouds,

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<sup>3</sup> The letters *l. b* add up to 32 by Arabic letter computation: *l* = 30; *b* = 2.

- After incense was burnt, and then when he was cleansed and bathed,
36. Or you have seen his bier as he was borne aloft,  
To his eternal home below, amidst a funeral that choked the roads.
37. Such throng in front bewailing, as they go;  
Behind him large masses mourning like mothers bereaved.
38. Upon their returning home, they looked like intoxicated;  
And their eyes were so soppy they could fill jars.
39. There is need for self-restraint, as everything is confounded;  
And this abode is not abode for noble men.
40. I expressed gratitude to his friends, for all that they have done  
During these fateful times, whether women they were or men.
41. All praises be to God. He obtained all worldly bliss.  
He died with reverence, and did not live in vain.
42. He achieved four great exploits in row:  
Knowledge, pilgrimage, preeminence and good repute.
43. People of knowledge had acknowledged him and raised  
Him in esteem, may the Almighty accord them blessings.
44. But the vicious and the rabble considered him  
Only as stone wielded to pelt at partridges.
45. The hyacinth cannot be compared to animal fodder:  
As grass, straw, clover and herbage.
46. Neither do gold, banknotes and pearls be compared to  
Bitter leguminous plants for animals or any other kinds of pasture.
47. Or draw similitude between beetle and rose: whereas  
Roses destroy its life, it lives in blissful filthiness. Such is the simile.
48. Such are people also: those who follow scholars  
As well as righteous men judge them by their works.
49. Some of them are evil men who only follow after  
In order to get some grass to eat or do some vicious acts.
50. He suffered from *fukā*<sup>4</sup> for quite a while;  
But we did not know of that until it fissured and worsened.
51. It began ravaging his lungs, his heart and his bowels,  
Then went to the liver, the pharynx and finally the kidneys.
52. After that we tried every cure,  
But nothing proved effective, because the time ordained has come.
53. And when he was dead, the multitude were grief-stricken,  
Because since he began to walk he was never stingy.
54. Rather, his entire largesse was given without desiring any return.

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<sup>4</sup> Hausa word referring to upper respiratory illnesses such as bronchitis, phthisis or asthma, but the description suggests that the illness was pneumonia.

- That was how he was known by all, except the overbearing or hateful.
55. Thus lamented the poor, and beggars all at once;  
And the musicians broke into loud wails from agony.
56. Truly the people from Gōbir<sup>5</sup> were all aggrieved alike;  
Especially their elder Abdu. His body has grown so lean!
57. His spouse Hawwā'u – the sensible one - cried so bitterly,  
That is Thāghūr, until she was bathed in tears.
58. Likewise Ṣafūrā – his other wife – cried uncontrollably.  
She broke down into wailing, tears flowing ceaselessly.
59. Kumātu Ḥafṣatu was wailing loudly, her voice rising so high,  
And her loud laments without doubt sounded like drums.
60. All his beloved ones were grief-stricken, especially  
Ḥāfīzu Manzō. He clearly expressed his grief.
61. In effect his love was pure and absolute without any defect,  
In the course of his life as well after his death. There is no misfortune in it.
62. When he died, there came from everywhere,  
Oral and written Messages of condolence from notables.
63. Some of them were accompanied with money, money for prayers;  
As is customary for people of those localities, not to be stingy.
64. From the forests of Asante and the [desert] land of the Tuareg [people],  
From lands of government or Gambal, take it from me and say,
65. From the rivers of Mesahohe and together all around it,  
From Kano in Hausa land and the states of Hadeija together,
66. From Katsina in the land of Zakizaki<sup>6</sup> and the land of Kebbi;  
And from the lands of Gobir and the lands of Zabarma, they sent condolences;
67. Until we have counted about eighty in our state of confusion.  
Then after that twenty, and then another six, or ...
68. And that is what reached us, not counting those to come.  
And only God knows how many will come consecutively.
69. Thus when all was done, no worry disturbed me.  
The worries were allayed by righteous men, with great efforts and great feat.
70. Be merciful to your servant O He who has no partner,  
And forgive him his sins, done intentionally or ignorantly.
71. O Lord, pour showers upon his tomb,  
From your goodwill, as numerous as the grains of sand.
72. And pour forth abundant showers of mercy upon him,  
The little of which would encompass both low and highlands.

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<sup>5</sup> *Banū ghabrā'* or "children of the earth" in Arabic, but it is very likely that 'Umar was referring to the Hausa state of Gobir, where the poet's grandmother was born.

<sup>6</sup> Zaria also known as Zazzau.

73. Let there sprout over him lilies and narcissuses,  
Violets and jasmine abundantly and beautiful.
74. And within his tomb diffuse the aroma of musk and ambergris,  
Qust<sup>7</sup> and ghāliyah and nidd whose fragrance is ambrosial.
75. Be merciful to him, O He whose is Most Merciful, O Lord Everlasting,  
For the sake of the companions who braved death fearlessly.
76. And place him in the Garden of Eden without any reckoning.  
And place him in Heaven<sup>8</sup>, O Lord of Peace.
77. And save us from the vicissitudes of life O Eternal Lord;  
For in our time there are many things that bewilder the mind.
78. And during this time, man becomes highly puzzled,  
And he is prevented from sleep or to live a comfortable life or eat.
79. And anyone who does not fear the outcome of his life and so transgresses,  
And lives heedless of God, he has indeed trespassed all bounds.
80. Effectively, freethinkers have obtained their heart desires.  
And they live luxurious lives and are considered outstanding.
81. There is no doubt, no doubt at all, that the times are decadent.  
People of piety today are trust aside and have fallen low.
82. I fear that if we live longer,  
We shall soon see the rat leading the cat submissively.
83. Or we see the lion running away from the vilest of cats.  
And the billy-goat will lose strength and fail to throw down a jackal.
84. Even the fowls will not care about the voice sound of the eagle.  
When it sees it rather, it will say bring, and it will be answered with a no.
85. Or we behold a hero, during every battle,  
Submitting to the most coward knights. Take that a simile!
86. Likewise today, Muslims have all  
Become so lowly that they seem like mere squatters.
87. O Lord, we seek strong protection from you,  
From these calamities. O He who is Almighty
88. Protect us from the evil of those by whom we are weakened.  
In like manner that you protected prophets and messengers;
89. By the grace of Ṭāhā, Yāsīn and Baqrā,  
As well as ‘Āl-‘Imrān, Al-‘An‘ām, and al-‘A‘lā<sup>9</sup>,
90. And by the favor of our master, together with other prophets,  
The family, the companions and the saints.
91. Its verses are *ḏb*,<sup>10</sup> expressed when vocalized.

<sup>7</sup> *Qust*, *ghāliyah* and *nidd* are said to be various kinds of aromatic plants.

<sup>8</sup> Literally *dār al-salām* in Arabic, meaning “peaceful abode” or Heaven.

<sup>9</sup> References to the Qur'an chapters 20, 36, 2, 3, 6 and 87, respectively.

<sup>10</sup> The letters *ḏ* . *b* add up to 92 by Arabic letter computation: ḏ=90; b=2.

Praise be to God, with praises by which hopes are attained.  
92. And then blessings be upon he who brought us guidance,  
Till crescents rise, incomplete or complete.