

English translation of al-ḥājj ‘Umar historical poem: Muslim revival

In the name of God, the beneficent, the Merciful
God bless and have salvation upon Muḥammad, his kin and his disciples.

1. O my friends¹ be amazed,
For I have seen wonders with my eyes.
2. The most amazing thing occurred,
In the year *t.y. and q.r.sh.b.a*²
3. I was pondering³ upon passing time⁴
And all that it holds as surprises.⁵
4. But then that year alas, at Kete,⁶
Falsehood appeared flagrantly.
5. Harken to my words,
Ponder upon them, then pen them down.
6. While I was residing in Kete,
Busily writing my books of learning,⁷
7. Then we heard of an arriviste,
Travelling⁸ the land from place to place.
8. What is more⁹ he seemed to be
Enjoining religious discipline among people.
9. Conveying a message¹⁰ as he went
To guide fathers and sons.
10. Exhorting people to perform *ṣalāh*,¹¹
And fasting as obliged.
11. Smashing idols¹² as he went,
Becoming famous East and West.
12. They said he ate no food,
Nor tasted any drink.

¹ يا خليلي , an opening address to friends named Khalīl, is a classical Arabic poetic introductory formula.

² The poet adopts the convention of indicating the date alphabetically: *ط ي ق = 9, 10, 100, ر = 200, ش = 1000, ب = 2, ا = 1, or 1322*. The Islamic calendar is lunar with years counted AH or after the hijra of the Prophet Muḥammad. 1322 AH corresponds to the year between March 18, 1904 to March 7, 1905 CE.

³ رأيت , adverb derived from رأى , to ponder.

⁴ الدهر , literally the time but here it connotes eternal duration.

⁵ كل ما كان أغربا , literally all that was strange.

⁶ كتي , the ajami word referring to Kete, the Muslim quarter in the town of Kete-Krachi.

⁷ علم , knowledge.

⁸ قصد , literally to aim.

⁹ بل , literally “nay.”

¹⁰ In the sense of missionary activity, that is the sense in which *risālah* derives from rasūl, a messenger.

¹¹ Muslim ritual prayer

¹² الصنم و الوثن , two different words for idols.

13. He feigned serenity¹³ among people,
For them to say he was well-behaved.
14. And then he covered his head,
With hooded cloak;¹⁴
15. Claiming not to accept
Anything from gratuity.
16. Likewise any gift of charity
He had no desire for it.
17. Pretending all the time,
He had journeyed to Yathrib.¹⁵
18. Not for viewing the Maqām,¹⁶
Nor the waterspout¹⁷ was he away.
19. That was Mūsā¹⁸ playing his tricks,
Scaring people with threats.
20. But that was all a ruse,
To ascribe to himself outstanding traits.¹⁹
21. Most people believed in him,
And held him in high respect.²⁰
22. They strongly believed in what he said,
And welcomed him with open arms.
23. Perhaps²¹ because of ignorance,
Or mostly from servility;
24. Or simply from blind devotion;
Or idiocy ingrained in them.
25. It is neither this nor that I say!
But in malice they are compeered.
26. At first he was alone.
Then they augmented in falsity.
27. Mūsā is but a fiend!
That is how best to describe him.
28. Anyone sane and sound
Can distinguish truth from naught.²²

¹³ الصمت , silence or quietness.

¹⁴ البرانيس أهديا , North African hooded cloaks sometimes worn in West Africa as a sign of Islamic devotion.

¹⁵ Yathrib is the original name of Madina (Medina) in Arabia. This reference and the text that follows indicates that Mūsā was claiming to perform the miraculous feat of appearing in several places at once.

¹⁶ A site near the Ka'aba in Makka (Mecca) where Abraham reportedly left his footprints.

¹⁷ A reference to Zamzam, the venerated well at the mosque in Makka.

¹⁸ Nowhere in this poem or the documentary record is Mūsā identified by more than his first name.

¹⁹ منقب , (singular) spiritual feats attributed to Muslims mystics.

²⁰ حلوا له حيا , an idiomatic expression and literally means to loosen the cloth held around the folded legs in a sitting position: unfolding the folded cloth means to stand up and welcome a guest.

²¹ لعل , the shorter form of لعل

29. And we²³ are people who can differentiate
Between earthen jar and chicory.
30. Likewise we can differentiate
Between young locust and locusts²⁴
31. We can also discern when allusion comes
To mean lord or usury.
32. O people, how can in trade
Licit transactions equate to usury?
33. Musa used to hide
His eating of dates and dry fruits.
34. He hoards wealth secretly,
In boxes that he hides.
35. His deputies are three,
All of them were close to him.
36. Then in Salaga²⁵ they contrived,
To introduce new sects.
37. One of them
Went to Nanumba²⁶ land.
38. Ḥusayn was the name of this,
He was nothing but a cranky ogre.²⁷
39. In Wulensi,²⁸ there he destroyed,
Every idol they adored.
40. The unbelievers then convened,
And gave him a thrashing treat,
41. With clubs and iron rods
Until he fell flat on the ground.
42. Abu Bakr was one of them.
He went towards Kintampo.²⁹
43. Thereon he continued to Nkoranza,³⁰
Where he settled like a plant.³¹

²² The rhetorical effects intended by the poet in the six lines that follow are lost in the translation into English. The aim is to demonstrate that the poet is an expert rhetorician who can distinguish truth from falsehood.

²³ Meaning learned people like himself.

²⁴ *Al-dabā* is a small locust before it flies; the plural is *dabā*. It can also be read as *al-dubbīy* meaning someone.

²⁵ *صَلَع*, or Salaga, a major commercial center that was destroyed by civil discord in 1892 and never reemerged as a major town in the early twentieth century. The poet was one of many former residents of Salaga who fled and settled elsewhere.

²⁶ *نَانُومْبَا*, or Nanumba, an ethnic group in northern Ghana.

²⁷ *وَالْمُقَرَّبُ الْعَضْبَانُ؛ وَأَنْشَدَ: إِذَا رَأَيْتُ قَرَطِبًا، وَالْقَرَطِبَةُ: الْعَدُوُّ، لَيْسَ بِالشَّدِيدِ؛ هَذِهِ عَنِ ابْنِ الأَعْرَابِيِّ.* From *Lisāna-l- 'Arab* (<http://www.baheth.info/all.jsp?term=قرطب>).
(*قرطب* = *قرطب*). وقيل: *قَرَطِبٌ* هَرَبٌ. أَبُو عمرو: *وَقَرَطِبٌ* الرَّجُلُ إِذَا عَدَا عَدُوًّا شَدِيدًا.

²⁸ *وَلَنْش*, or Wulensi, a town in the region historically inhabited by Nanumba peoples.

²⁹ *كَنْتَمْبُو*, or Kintampo, a major market town in the early twentieth century.

³⁰ *كِرَنْسَا*, or Nkoranza, another market town near Kintampo.

44. When he reached their gathering place
They were shouting and singing.
45. He chanced upon the crowd
Beating tambourines and gourds.
46. The leader³² himself was present,
To grace the fun and festivity.
47. He shouted out to them: " O people be silent,
I am not here for fun.
48. I have come to preach to you.
So stop reveling and the dancing!"
49. They took his words as though
He was a crawling child
50. Nay, they belittled him
And turned him into billy goat or jackass
51. One of them came to us.
He was nicknamed Hassan was.
52. Our dunces accosted him
Delightfully and welcoming.
53. Saying to him, "Without a doubt
Honored be, and be our guest!"
54. Claiming him to be
Follower of the best sect.
55. Nay we saw him but a firefly,
Or a wanton male ram.
56. Our town folks deluded him,
Their ignorance is chronic.
57. And he soon had them under his rule
Flogging fathers and sons.
58. Soothsayers are those who flog
Those bōri-possessed³³and old witches.³⁴
59. The he dared summon the chiefs
Of Krachi which was not wise at all!
60. That day there were people running out of fear
As if they had seen the plague
61. Dhan Buhu was then district chief.³⁵

³¹ Qushlub or Qishlib is some sort of plant.

³² Literally "sultan" in Arabic, it refers to a political leader.

³³ بوري, a Hausa word referring to bori the indigenous religious beliefs and practices about spirit possession and illness among non-Muslim Hausa people.

³⁴ Literally *shahrab* or "very old lady."

- He came with soldiers³⁶ heavily armed.
62. Soon, the shortest of them
Sneaked out to the market, rabbit like.
63. They quickly pounced on him,
And bound him without fight.
64. At night they sent
For him the absent one.
65. There, in the compound of the imam,
(A man decent and true)
66. They had bound him in cuffs;³⁷
Shameful it was but well deserved.
67. They cannot be blamed for this,
Since he lived usuriously.
68. The cause of that is the delusion
Of idle men and fools.
69. Then the two were quickly chained
And tormented throughout the night.
70. They were made laughingstock³⁸
Like those who committed rape.
71. No honor was seen in them
Nor were they in harmony.
72. They thus remained in chains,
For close to sixty nights.
73. Finally they said to Adam³⁹:
"We've all repented of our guilt."
74. Only then were they unchained.
And quickly they scampered from there.
75. Musa was the greatest among them.
He set off for Yeji⁴⁰ as his goal
76. Spreading his authority
Like a novice to power.
77. Thence to Atebubu⁴¹
He went to deceive them.

³⁵ Dhambuḥ probably a descriptive word for the district chief. The word *bārik* is Hausa and refers to the English word for barracks, but also is used metonymically for a military officer

³⁶ السوج , Hausa word referring to soldiers.

³⁷ أنكفوج , Hausa word referring to handcuffs.

³⁸ *Maskhar* infinitive of *sakhara* in Arabic, meaning to laugh at revile, scoff.

³⁹ Probably a town leader

⁴⁰ الياج , or Yeji, a major nineteenth century Volta River trading town that was the transport link with the overland route from Kumasi to Salaga.

⁴¹ أتوبوب , or Atebubu, a major nineteenth century trading town on the road between Kumasi and Yeji.

78. He flogged people with cane
And became their tormentor.
79. He began hoarding wealth
After feigning frugality at first.
80. He soon bought a horse,
And began riding it.
81. O honorable people hearken to me,
I am not composing verse for fun.
82. Listen O wise men;
I am not concocting lies.
83. The Christians⁴² based in Kumase⁴³
Warned him to stay away.
84. Frightened of them he fled,
Crestfallen and in great distress.
85. He fooled his gullible followers⁴⁴
Saying, "I'll soon return,
86. After six days has passed."
He was only a goat.
87. Musa had fled away,
Never returning to his den.
88. Those are the signs of imposters,⁴⁵
To deceive and then abscond.
89. Anything built on lies,
Will tumble to the ground.
90. I am not envious of them,
But telling the truth is obligatory.
91. Base men accuse me of
Weaving lies.
92. Every fool maligned me,
Branding me with every vice.
93. Every false blessing,
Will turn into a curse.
94. Every fraudulent fortune,
Will turn into scorpions.
95. If its praises last longer than time
They will turn into woes.
96. But lies at first will seem,

⁴² *Naṣārā* refers generally to Christians and here it refers to the British who had occupied Kumase.

⁴³ كمانش , or Kumase, the capital of Asante in Ghana.

⁴⁴ *Qawm* here refers to partisans.

⁴⁵ *Muftari* is derived from the eighth form of the Arabic root *f.r.y* meaning to fabricate or slander

- Sweeter than white blended honey.
97. A liar in a short while,
Will amass a lot of wealth.
98. Lying at first appears,
Charming like buxom virgins.
99. Although surpassing honey in its taste,
It soon befouls and becomes rank
100. But truth at first might taste
Like colocynth but then will become milk⁴⁶.
101. Let any astute man discern
What we say – will he contradict it?⁴⁷
102. Everyone who is wise
Will choose truth for his way [of life].
103. Will the message remain
Among the Kabres⁴⁸ to be confined?
104. Were they sent to the Konkombas⁴⁹
Excluding the Hausa?⁵⁰ That is but crap!⁵¹
105. Between Basare and Tchamba⁵²
Messages are consolidated for them?
106. Have you ever heard of a messenger
Who had grown up in Zuku⁵³?
107. I do not mean to defame him;
I say the truth to be inscribed.
108. And whoever denies
My words, will come to see manifestly.
109. I have no doubt that
He has fled with the eastern winds.
110. The hypocrite⁵⁴ will not return,
Or we shall be young again⁵⁵.

⁴⁶ The word *halbaba* is obscure; the closest term that makes sense within the context is *halīb*, milk which could have been a misprint from the copyist.

⁴⁷ *habā* has a meaning to oppose *i.e. I'tarāḍa*.

⁴⁸ كبر, or Kabre, an ethnic group in northern Togo.

⁴⁹ ككنكب, or Kankomba, an ethnic group in northern Ghana and Togo.

⁵⁰ هوسا, or Hausa.

⁵¹ *Dhā habā* is Arabic for “that is dust,” a reference to the Qur’an 25:23 “وَقِيمْنَا إِلَىٰ مَا عَمِلُوا مِنْ عَمَلٍ فَجَعَلْنَاهُ هَبَاءً مَنْثُورًا”
“And We shall turn to whatever deeds they did (in this life) and We shall make such deeds as floating dust scattered about.” Usuf Ali, *The Quran Translation*, (Human Assistance & Development International (HADI, *Islamicity.com*); <http://www.islam101.com/quran/yusufAli/QURAN/25.htmverse>)

⁵² Ethnic groups in northern Ghana and Togo.

⁵³ Zuku or Zugu is a district in Benin (WA)..

⁵⁴ *Munāfiq* is the past participle of *nāfaqa*, third form of the Arabic root *n.f.q* meaning to dissemble or play the hypocrite.

⁵⁵ Which is impossible, since ‘Umar is past the forties then.

111. And thereupon I am reviled
By obstinate apostates.
112. All those who malign me,
For this, by God, have sinned.
113. All kinds of evil deeds are smeared,
And vices about were falsely spread.
114. My Lord will surely judge,
Between believers and dissenters.
115. All the creatures will be interrogated,
Both those who submit and those who dissent.
116. Then they will be rewarded for their acts,
Either in bliss or in hell.
117. There a habit in humankind,
To love falsities.
118. Disclaimer of falsehood among them,
His blame is severe.
119. And he who upholds the truth,
His denunciation is severe.
120. When fate afflicts us with grief,
Patience becomes but necessary.
121. The patient person is like
The one who hunts a sturdy ox.
122. The one who is a scholar among them,
Is like a coward man.
123. My brother ponder upon what
Has come to pass and be amazed.
124. Ahmad⁵⁶ the purest one was denounced
By every stupid fool.
125. Nay, Suyuṭī⁵⁷ was criticized
By his enviers, to be ostracized.
126. He had written books numbering
Nuqṭa Raqin,⁵⁸ for modesty.⁵⁹
127. *Majma' u al-baḥr*⁶⁰ is his work,
As well as *Itqān* and *Kawkab*.
128. Mention *Farīd* and *Niqāyah*

⁵⁶ One of the names of the Prophet Muhammad.

⁵⁷ Jalaluddin al-Suyuti (1445 – 1505) was a fifteenth century Egyptian Muslim scholar and mystic whose writings are influential among West African Muslims.

⁵⁸ N=50, q=100, t=9, r=200, q=100 total 459.

⁵⁹ Ta'adduban, for the sake of modesty contextually expresses the poet's belief that there could be more but he wants to be modest about it.

⁶⁰ The list of books that follow are among some of al-Suyuti's works.

- And also the *Nahja* appropriately.
129. The works of Suyuti cannot
All be accounted for the sake of modesty.
130. Ḥariri⁶¹ had also been envied;
And Ḥallaj⁶² was slain.
131. And Bukhāri⁶³ himself
Was chased away and plundered.
132. Thus was Shāzali⁶⁴ also
Driven out and was forced to emigrate.
133. Likewise Ibn Ḥanbali,⁶⁵
They demeaned him like a tender maid.
134. Even Ali⁶⁶ himself [was not spared],
H was the axis of the army force.
135. Those are the people who
Set up models to emulate.
136. Especially, as I am but an ignorant,
I am worth nothing, to be enraged.
137. Therefore I do not care,
For those who reproach.
138. My paragon are those who
Chose truth their course of life.
139. I swear by God I do not care at all
For words uttered in frenzy talk.
140. When the year “Sharfān⁶⁷” appears,
Then the Mahdi is well at hand
141. When truth emerges we
Will declare it for delight.
142. I am not of those who conceal
The truth, and I will not deviate.
143. This is indeed the end,
We ask God for magnanimity.
144. We praise God, our Lord,

⁶¹ Arab scholar who composed work in rhymed prose.

⁶² Mansur al-Hallaj (858 -922) was a ninth century Persian Sufi mystic who was executed in Baghdad for heresy in 922 CE.

⁶³ Muhammad al-Bukhari (810 -870) is a ninth century Persian Muslim scholar whose collection of hadith or Prophetic Tradition is considered authoritative by most Muslims.

⁶⁴ Abul Hasan as-Shādhilī (1196-1258) was the founder of the Shādhiliyya sufi order

⁶⁵ Aḥmad bin Muḥammad bin Ḥanbal Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Shaybānī (780–855 CE / 164–241 AH) is the founder one of the major Islamic sunni schools of jurisprudence.

⁶⁶ Ali ibn Abi Talib was the fourth Caliph and cousin and son-in-law to the Prophet Muhammad.

⁶⁷ Sh = 1000, r = 200, f = 80, a = 1, n = 50, totaling 1331 AH corresponding to approximately 1912.

- His is power vast, He is generous.
145. Save us O God,
From the evils of belligerent men.
146. Lord forgive me my faults,
For I am indeed a sinful man.
147. And our shuyūkh⁶⁸ as well,
And mothers and fathers too.
148. Save us the evil of envious men:
Strangers and kindred⁶⁹ ones.
149. Bless O Lord and save,
The Prophet who lies in Qubba,⁷⁰
150. The owner of the trough, and intercessor
For those who have sinned.
151. Save also his kindred
As long as rains cascade;
152. Then his wives as well,
Whenever “b” is written in books..

⁶⁸ Plural of Shaikh meaning elder or senior scholar.

⁶⁹ *‘aprab*, near ones.

⁷⁰ The tomb of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina.