

English translation of for al-ḥājj ‘Umar praise poem: Malam Ṣalaw 2

In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful

God’s blessings and eternal peace be upon the Prophet Muḥammad, after whom there is no prophet, as well as upon his family, his disciples, his wives and his descendants. Introducing the poem by *nasīb* or amatory verses was an old practice by ancient Arab poets of the Jāhiliyya¹ and Islamic periods.² And in this pattern all skillful artistic poets have composed their poems up to today. Therefore this poet herein follows their footsteps and accordingly introduces the poem by amatory verses. Observe closely, it is well known.

1. Good news brought by a herald
From Hind, well versed,
2. And from Sulaymā and Da‘d,
And from Lamīs, a sign,
3. And from Sumay and Laylā,³
From each one, an envoy.
4. My love for them is old.
Their dalliance is fiery.
5. I had a dialogue with a dove.
She will not fly from her bough.
6. Their hearts are surely empty.
Their promises are rumbling noises.
7. They have enthralled my soul and heart.
It has become like snoring sound.
8. Then they left me in agony,
As if I am dead and buried.
9. They have discerned grey on my chin,
And said: this is an old camel.
10. But he kept chasing them,
Until the day was spent.
11. The night became dark, but he still kept running,
Until dawn was approaching.
12. He did not sleep, the whole night.
He was suffering from cold and hunger.
13. But he kept listening to their voices.
Like birds attentively hearkening,
14. To the sound of an eagle hovering.
As if it was a mandolin.
15. Alas! He has missed his heart’s desire.
That is sufficient as great loss.

¹ Pre-Islamic era in Arabia.

² Verses 1-16 of this poem structurally represent the *nasīb* or amatory prelude of the classical *qasīda*, in which poets apostrophize one or more named female beloveds.

³ Female beloved names in the *nasīb* or prelude by the poet (see note 2 above).

16. He became effete and bereft,
As if he was an old ugly lizard.
17. Will you become my helper,
O you glower?
18. If you will not be my helper,
I have a mighty helper.
19. That is Ṣalaw⁴, the leader,⁵
The famous lion.
20. Scion of people of Kumayo⁶,
As well as Zayi, Takoraw and Guraw.⁷
21. Al-ḥājj gave him his blessings,
Al-ḥājj Dikko,⁸ the amīr.
22. He anointed the head of Ḥussain.
This is wonderful and joyful.
23. He said, “O! God bless him.
For so has this been ordained.”
24. And Kunkiya⁹ said amen,
And Shaikh Bar’uh¹⁰ loudly.
25. And they have all paid him homage.
As such he became exalted.
26. This is benefaction from God,
Not from other power or stratagem.
27. Hallowed and glorious, He is;
The giver, the reverent.
28. He gave him more than that.
O you deluded bigots!
29. He gave him knowledge and discernment.
He is like the indomitable camel.¹¹
30. He also graced him with modesty.
He is modest and highly noble.
31. Listen to what I am saying,
O chosen people of mankind.
32. And those who deny my words,

⁴ The subject of the praise poem

⁵ Literally *amīr*, Arabic for “commander,” here as a reference Malam Ṣalaw’s appointment by British colonial officials to a titled political role in Kumase.

⁶ Glossed in IASAR/239 as: “By people of Kumayo, (he meant) that which was the first city inhabited by the Katsinans and they became known by it. Then they moved to settle in Zay when their numbers increased and that was during the reign of their king Koraw. He was the one who constructed that city i.e. Zay and made it the capital of the land of Katsina until today. With regards to Guraw, it was a famous small ancient town. It is said the prince of Katsina resides there. End of the gloss.” This gloss was probably written by the owner of the ms.

⁷ Presumably towns in today’s Ghana, now with different names.

⁸ Al-ḥājj Dikko was the *Amīr* of Katsina. Glossed in margins of another copy (IAS.AR. 239), probably by the owner or copiest of the manuscript, as “the late *Amīr* of the kingdom of Katsina.”

⁹ The margin gloss is: “Kunkiya is originally the name of the chiefs of Katsina, he is also germane.”

¹⁰ Probably the two men are the jurists.

¹¹ *عيسجور* in the text but probably it is *عيسجور* a hard and swift female camel.

- They are surely immoral.
33. And those who criticize my verse,
They are surely malicious people.
34. Do not speak distastefully of me,
O you simpletons.
35. And those who appreciate my verse,
They are truly the learned.
36. Ṣalaw's epithets are many.
Here they are, all on record.
37. Of these, he is most generous leader,
And also mighty and generous.
38. When I say he is a jurist,
Say, a jurist and *amīr*.
39. And when I say, he is elegant.
Say, elegant and radiant.
40. And when it is said he is a lamp,
Say, a luminous lamp.
41. When it is said he is a scholar,
Say, a very patient scholar.
42. And when I say, he is courageous.
Say, courageous and bold.
43. When it is said, he is worthy.
Say, worthy and deserving.
44. And when it said, he is generous.
Say, generosity that conquers.
45. And when it is said, he is pious.
Say, pious and grateful.
46. When it is said, he is chaste.
Say, chaste and pure.
47. When it is said, he is a cloud.
Say, a cloud full of rain.
48. No doubt, no question about it,
These are his qualities, O sages.
49. Any time you behold him,
He is cheerful, never frowning.
50. His face becomes radiant,
Like the pomegranate flower.
51. He is dignified and venerable,
As if he is a shining star.
52. There are many commanders¹² of the *zongo*¹³
But he is the mighty camel.
53. He is indeed their sun,
And they are all his moons.
54. Come you, envious of him,

¹² أمراء , plural of *amīr*

¹³ Hausa word referring to a settlement founded by immigrant Muslim merchants and other travelers.

- Answer me, do you dispute,
55. The gift of the king of heavens?
Repent, revert and revolve!
56. O envious people,
Are you all become deluded?
57. God has foreordained,
That Ṣalaw will be amīr.
58. The heavenly hosts also concurred.
O God, this is befitting,
59. That he has become chief.
As long as Time¹⁴ revolves,
60. His enviers shall only have
Calamity and ruin,
61. Sore feet and alienation,
The colic and melancholy.
62. After a long time has passed,
You will find no house of them remaining.
63. Recompense of envy, long ago,
Whenever it persists, is the gallows and death.
64. O you enemies, one and all,
Repent together and come to him,
65. And humbly submit.
Be not abased by vanities.
66. Has the devil deluded you?
Or has the ignoble one ensnared you?
67. Ṣalaw's castle stands aloft,
Like a mighty citadel of sand.
68. It's foundation does not flounder,
And there are no cracks in it.
69. Grotesque you are, come and listen.
Submit to him and be sustained.
70. If you refuse repentance, all of you,
You will be blasted by tornado.
71. If you refuse to submit to him,
You will woefully suffer hunger.
72. And very soon you will all die,
And then you shall all be entombed.
73. Your words are lies indeed,
Calamities and delusions.
74. We appeal to you, O Lord of mankind,
O Living one, Conqueror,
75. Shield Ṣalaw instantly,
From those who seek his harm:
76. Be they men or women,
Or be they young or old.

¹⁴ الدهرير pl. of الدهر signifies absolute time

77. And anyone who speaks wrongfully
About Şalaw is truly despicable.
78. He shall never attain his goal.
And he is crooked indeed.
79. Say, he is nothing but a fool,
And truly pervert he is.
80. He shall die hungry and angry,
Were he to be Qatfir¹⁵ himself.
81. He shall earn no money,
And he shall have nothing, at all.
82. He shall not be able to ride a horse.
And he shall wear only tatters.
83. And he shall feed on dog food.
And his bred shall be pocket dust.
84. There is lot of food in Şalaw's house,
As well as meat and candies.
85. As for that enemy, he shall die lowly,
Like the mirage.
86. And then he shall be buried undignified.
And he shall be visited by long snakes.
87. There will be all sorts of worms in his tomb,
As well as Munkir and Nakir.¹⁶
88. Because he died sorrowfully,
As if he was smeared with tar.
89. O Time, never let them at peace,
And sober, that is what they deserve.
90. O my people, truly, shade
Is never the same as heat.
91. And who can be equal to Şalaw?
Confound it! His deeds are famous:
92. Knowledge, reasoning and serenity,
And wisdom that never deviates.
93. How many predicaments,
He has resolved without wavering at all?
94. And he is composed when he sits.
He shows no weakness in his entourage.
95. And how many were the judgments he has passed
Judiciously? Many indeed!
96. And how many serious and malicious plots were hatched:
Among them are big treacheries,

¹⁵ The copyist notes that this man was in charge of the Pharaoh's granary but he died hungry. According to Muslim historians, Qatfir was the man who bought Yusuf (Joseph) and kept him in his house and then later Joseph was imprisoned. Qatfir was then in charge of the national granary. But when subsequently Joseph succeeded in interpreting the Pharaoh's dream, he dismissed him and replaced him with Joseph. (See al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-'Umam wa al-Mulūk* 2nd edn., Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1:335).

¹⁶ In Muslim eschatology these represent two angels that interrogate the dead in the grave.

97. Among them are fleas,
And fat she camels,
98. And all their plots have turned out to be,
All but lies without effect.
99. And who could equal him in generosity?
Today, he has no equal
100. In generosity among men.
Indeed, his sea knows no dwindling.
101. He gives of every precious thing.
Pay attention, O malicious one.
102. He gives away horses with their saddles.
This is a trifling in his eyes;
103. And felt hats and vestments,
And crockery and kola nuts.
104. He also gives gowns,
That is loved by all;
105. As well as many burnouses
That cost a lot of wealth,
106. And silver as well as gold.
And how beautiful this vest is!
107. His gifts are innumerable.
His beneficence is lauded.
108. He gives to closest ones as well as those remote.
And all this is well known.
109. As for the people of Kumase,
Their houses are overflowing.
110. They are all in affluence.
Their blessings shall not decline.
111. All the people's families
Have owned clothing and houses.
112. O people, say together,
What a blessing is this leader!
113. And from the time his youth
He has acquired distinguished virtues.
114. And anyone who envies my servant,
He is nothing but a hornet.
115. And fear not the idiot ones,
Even if they are in their thousands.
116. And have you heard of a generous man,
O you night companion,
117. The like of this leader?
He is surely unique.
118. Şalaw is resolute and righteous.
Hear this, O ugly monster,
119. Şalaw's reign is glorious indeed.
His era is a radiant one.

120. If not for the fear of my Lord,
I will say you are light itself.
121. O Lord, O mighty one,
We pray you, O Veiler,
122. Assist him in his endeavors,
O Vanquisher,
123. Fortify him in every situation .
O Lord, O Helper,
124. Answer my prayer instantly.
O Reverend, O Omnipotent,
125. Give him genial
Offspring that will always be successful.
126. Augment his sons, O God,
O Creator, O Discerner.
127. And cover him with invincible veil;
For you are the Expert in all things.
128. Destroy all his enemies.
Overwhelm them with ruin.
129. And protect him from all plots.
You are Peace and Mighty.
130. O God, have mercy on his father.
You are merciful and forgiving.
131. And put him in blessed abodes
In which rivers constantly flow.
132. And his uncle, have mercy on him too.
He was a venerable man.
133. They called him Mūsā, the sincere.
He was a good conversationist.
134. As well as his brother Sānī,
Have mercy on him too, O Almighty;
135. Amen and amen, a thousand times.
And saying amen brings light.
136. We earnestly hope for your answer,
Without doubt and without denial.
137. We are gladdened with sincere intention.
By God, we shall never turn our back.
138. His virtues are indeed endless,
Until the wheels of time themselves should stop.
139. Yes, it is with the mentioning of his brother
That we intend to conclude these verses:
140. Our beloved one; that is Khidir.¹⁷
He is the shopkeeper,
141. His brother, one father and one mother.
But he is the oldest in age.
142. I offer this to you,

¹⁷ The name of one of God's messengers, mentioned in connection with Moses (see Quran 18: 60-82).

- O chief.¹⁸
143. This is my gift to you
O famous one.
144. Its verses are luminous.
Its words are virgins.
145. O you poets,
I am but a blinded fool.
146. I am not skillful in poetry.
I am however a nightingale.
147. Whoever discerns some fault in it,
Should correct it, it is no shame.
148. Shower peace and blessing, O God,
As long as spiders weave webs,
149. Upon the Prophet,¹⁹ and his kin;
As well as his virtuous disciples.
150. In the year *b.sh.m.s*²⁰ is my composition;
And its rawy²¹ is the slanted *r*,
151. At beginning of the year,
In the month of muḥarram,²² the celebrated.
152. Its verses are *n.ā.d.m.ī.n.ā*²³,
Repentance that does not recoil.

It is completed and may its blessings be extensive; and Lord, forgive me and my parents as well as our Muslim people and also those who preceded us in faith.

¹⁸ يا أيها these are Arabic forms of address, it has no equivalence in English as it used to be in the form of O! The formulaic convention is followed by a person's name or as a form of poetic apostrophe. Literary the phrase means O, this commander!

¹⁹ Formulaic closure of Muslim discourses

²⁰ The letters *b.sh.m.s* add up to 1342 by Arabic letter computation: b = 2; sh = 1000; m = 40; s = 300. It corresponds to the year 1923/1924 CE.

²¹ Rhyming letter.

²² First month of the Islamic calendar.

²³ The letters *n.ā.d.m.ī.n.ā* add up to 157 by Arabic letter computation: n=50; ā=1; d=4; m=40; ī=10; n=50 and ā=1. Note that this copy of the document has only 152 verses.