

English translation of al-ḥājj ‘Umar b. Abī Bakr historical poem: Epidemic

In the name of God, the most Beneficent, the most Merciful
God’s peace and blessings be upon Muḥammad and his family.

1. Stop¹ and hear this recitation about Tunkuyau.²
We have seen amazing things about Tunkuyau.
2. It begins with severe headache,
And after a while, proceeds Tunkuyau.
3. It is said that its first (sign) is bitter taste;³
And soon after comes Tunkuyau.
4. It is also said, headache, dizziness and palpitation,
Then rumbling stomach, after that, Tunkuyau.
5. It appears bilious, but it is not of bile,
And it is not phlegm, but Tunkuyau.
6. Three afflictions converge
And accumulate in Tunkuyau:
7. Heavy groaning, severe cold,
And whimpering, all that are signs of Tunkuyau.
8. Three apertures open up
To exude, when comes Tunkuyau:
9. Sound of farting, lot of urine,
Frequent vomiting, that is Tunkuyau.
10. Its heat is like furnace flames;
It convulses the entire bowels, Tunkuyau.
11. You will see a man throw off his clothes,
And cast them away, when comes Tunkuyau.
12. His legs will quiver from severe pains,
And he will ruffle things, from Tunkuyau.
13. He will not endure sitting or
Standing still, such is the effect of Tunkuyau.
14. He will remain naked without his clothing
Until he is covered by the family, Tunkuyau.
15. It is as if spurs and gouge
And razors have lacerated the body, from Tunkuyau.
16. No sense of shame remains in him
Or honor when afflicted by Tunkuyau.
17. He becomes oblivious of women, likewise his children
He divulges secrets, because of Tunkuyau.
18. He makes his will, discloses his debts,
And returns trusts entrusted to him because of Tunkuyau.
19. If you are asked, my brother, which ailment

¹ The plural form is used

² Following G.P. Bargery’s Hausa-English dictionary, this term refers to *mai baushe*, epidemics that occurred in the early twentieth century (see: <http://maguzawa.dyndns.ws/>)

³ مر ريق literarily bitter saliva

- Afflicts people the worst; say, it is Tunkuyau.
20. Were you ‘Antarah⁴ on the day of battle,
You would be powerless against Tunkuyau.
 21. I ask you, O people,
Do you know of any medicine against Tunkuyau?
 22. As powerful and valiant that a man can be,
He will be thrown down instantly by Tunkuyau.
 23. Many a leader can be seen cowering,
Wailing at home from Tunkuyau.
 24. We have known no ailment like it before.
Our medicines are ineffective against Tunkuyau.
 25. Is it from an ailing stomach that it originates?
We know not, except that, it is called Tunkuyau.
 26. Or is it from blood or moisture?
How will I know about Tunkuyau?
 27. Is it pleurisy, or jaundice
Or the colic? No. It is Tunkuyau.
 28. Man has no power or strength
Or bravery to withstand Tunkuyau.
 29. When it descends it affects all the people,
Save a few, [behold!] Tunkuyau.
 30. Were you a lord from the Quraish,
You would be powerless, when assailed by Tunkuyau.
 31. You would loath all food,
Drink and meat, when stricken by Tunkuyau.
 32. Many were those who by night were stricken,
And passed the night snoring and shambling from Tunkuyau.
 33. Many were those who by day got stricken,
And were left rolling in pain from Tunkuyau.
 34. Moaning and groaning or crying aloud
He whimpers from the caresses of Tunkuyau.
 35. Many a bashful person became afflicted
And was unmindful of his in-laws because of Tunkuyau.
 36. In spite of all that,
No one had died from Tunkuyau.
 37. We have not seen, and we have not heard,
Of any sickness like Tunkuyau.
 38. Its pains were many, uncountable:
All agonies are found in Tunkuyau.
 39. But it does not last for long,
Except in few cases, hear me: Tunkuyau.
 40. How many a woman had wailed aloud,
When it afflicted her husband, she did not appreciate⁵ Tunkuyau.

⁴ Pre-Islamic Arab hero famous for his bravery in battle and persistence during travails; his mother reportedly was a black woman and his father was an Arab.

41. And many are seen saliva flowing
From the mouth when afflicted by Tunkuyau.
42. The young and the old
Become restless when they are visited by Tunkuyau.
43. When an aged fellow is afflicted by evening
He does not know how 'Ishā'⁶ came by, Tunkuyau.
44. And many crone old women
Were afflicted and toiled from Tunkuyau.
45. And many buxom rural ladies
Were visited and cuddled by Tunkuyau.
46. And many a scholar was attacked instantly;
He passed the night without [reciting] his litany because of Tunkuyau.
47. And many a worshipper glorifying his Lord at home,
He was visited and sullied by Tunkuyau.
48. The blind and the cripple, both male
And female all toiled from Tunkuyau.
49. We cannot count
All who suffered from the flames of Tunkuyau.
50. O Lord, O Benevolence, O Protector,
We ask your safety from Tunkuyau.
51. O Most Merciful, O
Savior, save us from Tunkuyau.
52. O Forgiver of sins, O Mighty Lord,
Protect us, protect us from Tunkuyau.
53. Hear Lord, hear Lord, hear Lord, hear Lord,
Take us under your protection from Tunkuyau.
54. By the Tōra⁷ of Mūsā⁸, and the glory of al-Zabūr,⁹
As well as your Injīl,¹⁰ save us from Tunkuyau.
55. We call upon you, O Repeller, O Mighty Lord,
By our Furqān,¹¹ save us from Tunkuyau.
56. By the of *Hawāmīm*,¹² O Absolute One,
Conceal us, conceal us from Tunkuyau.
57. By what is in the *Ṭawāsīn*,¹³ of your secrets,
Deliver us, deliver us from Tunkuyau.
58. By the chapters of Fāṭir and Dhāriyāt,¹⁴

⁵ The wording is ambiguous. ما حجا به خيرا means not to think well of someone or something. On the other hand, considering that حجت is derived from the verb حجّ , to perform the ḥājj, then it would mean that when (ما) Tunkiyau visited. The first ما would be a negative particle while the second would be a relative pronoun.

⁶ العشاء if read *al'ashā* it would mean dinner or its time; on the other hand if read as *al'ishā* it would signify the evening or the evening prayer.

⁷ Jewish scripture

⁸ Moses

⁹ The Psalms

¹⁰ The New Testament

¹¹ Reference to the Qur'an.

¹² Reference to seven chapters of the Qur'an beginning with the letters *H. M.*

¹³ Reference to three chapters of the Qur'an beginning with identical letters *T.S/T.S.M.*

- Fortify us, fortify us against Tunkuyau.
59. By grace of those who circumvent mausoleums,¹⁵
Keep us away, keep us away from Tunkuyau.
60. And shield the rest of Muslims
With your shield, O Living One, from Tunkuyau.
61. From East to West,
From South to North, eliminate Tunkuyau.
62. For the sake of your Messenger, best of humankind,
And his companions, safeguard us against Tunkuyau.
63. Shower blessings upon him as well as his wives,
And his family and companions; protect us from Tunkuyau.
64. Ḥṣ¹⁶ are the number of its verses without any
Rhyming save our word Tunkuyau.¹⁷

¹⁴ Reference to Qur'an chapters 35 and 51, respectively.

¹⁵ Probably the tombs of Sufi saints.

¹⁶ The letters *H. ṣ* add up to 65 by Arabic letter computation: h=5 and ṣ = 60.

¹⁷ In the gloss the copier added "In another version, the last verse appears like this 'ṣḥ it has no other rhyme or/rawy (rhyme letter) save our word Tunkiyau'"