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 friends⁰ be amazed,
   For I have seen wonders with my eyes.
2. The most amazing thing occurred,
   In the year ⁰ y. and q.r.sh.b.a²
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: طي و قرشبا reads: ط = 9, ق = 100, ق = 1000, ش = 200, 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 رأيا, 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 serenity among people,
   For them to say he was well-behaved.
14. And then he covered his head,
   With hooded cloak,
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.
18. Not for viewing the Maqām,
   Nor the waterspout was he away.
19. That was Mūsā playing his tricks,
   Scaring people with threats.
20. But that was all a ruse,
   To ascribe to himself outstanding traits.
21. Most people believed in him,
   And held him in high respect.
22. They strongly believed in what he said,
   And welcomed him with open arms.
23. Perhaps 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.

13. الصمت, silence or quietness.
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 حبا, 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. عل, the shorter form of للعل
29. And we\textsuperscript{21} are people who can differentiate 
Between earthen jar and chicory.
30. Likewise we can differentiate 
Between young locust and locusts\textsuperscript{24}
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 Salaga\textsuperscript{25} they contrived, 
To introduce new sects.
37. One of them 
Went to Nanumba\textsuperscript{26} land.
38. Husayn was the name of this, 
He was nothing but a cranky ogre.\textsuperscript{27}
39. In Wulensi,\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{29}
43. Thereon he continued to Nkoranza,\textsuperscript{30} 
Where he settled like a plant.\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{21}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.
\textsuperscript{22}Meaning learned people like himself.
\textsuperscript{24}Al-dabā is a small locust before it flies; the plural is dabā’. It can also be read as al-dubbīy meaning someone.
\textsuperscript{25}صلغ, 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.
\textsuperscript{26}نأننبا, or Nanumba, an ethnic group in northern Ghana.
\textsuperscript{27}مقرطب From Lisānal-\textsuperscript{Arab} (http://www.baheth.info/all.jsp?term=قرطب) 
العَدْوُ، ليس بالشديد؛ هذه عن ابن الأَعرابي 
والـمُقَرْطِبُ الرجلُ إذا عَدَا عَدْوا شديداً. (وقيل: فَرَطْبُ هَرَبُ أَبُو عَمرو: فَرَطْبُ الرجلُ إذا عَدَا عَدْوا شديداً.)
\textsuperscript{28}وولنش, or Wulensi, a town in the region historically inhabited by Nanumba peoples.
\textsuperscript{29}كنتنفو, or Kintampo, a major market town in the early twentieth century.
\textsuperscript{30}كرنسا, 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 leader\textsuperscript{32} 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-possessed\textsuperscript{33} and old witches.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{31} Qushlub or Qishlib is some sort of plant.
\textsuperscript{32} Literally “sultan” in Arabic, it refers to a political leader.
\textsuperscript{33} بوري , a Hausa word referring to bori the indigenous religious beliefs and practices about spirit possession and illness among non-Muslim Hausa people.
\textsuperscript{34} Literally shahrab or “very old lady.”
He came with soldiers\textsuperscript{36} 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;\textsuperscript{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 laughingstock\textsuperscript{38}
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 Adam\textsuperscript{39}:
"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 Yeji\textsuperscript{40} as his goal.

76. Spreading his authority
Like a novice to power.

77. Thence to Atebubu\textsuperscript{41}
He went to deceive them.

\textsuperscript{35} Dhambu\u0161 probably a descriptive word for the district chief. The word \textit{bārik} is Hausa and refers to the English word for barracks, but also is used metonymically for a military officer.

\textsuperscript{36} السوج, Hausa word referring to soldiers.

\textsuperscript{37} أنكفو, Hausa word referring to handcuffs.

\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Maskhar} infinitive of \textit{sakhara} in Arabic, meaning to laugh at revile, scoff.

\textsuperscript{39} Probably a town leader.

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

\textsuperscript{41} أوتوب, 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 Christians\textsuperscript{42} based in Kumase\textsuperscript{43}
    Warned him to stay away.
84. Frightened of them he fled,
    Crestfallen and in great distress.
85. He fooled his gullible followers\textsuperscript{44}
    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,\textsuperscript{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,

\textsuperscript{42} Naṣārā refers generally to Christians and here it refers to the British who had occupied Kumase.
\textsuperscript{43} كماس, or Kumase, the capital of Asante in Ghana.
\textsuperscript{44} Qawm here refers to partisans.
\textsuperscript{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 milk.\(^{46}\)
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 Kabres\(^ {48}\) to be confined?
104. Were they sent to the Konkombas\(^ {49}\)
    Excluding the Hausa?\(^ {50}\) That is but crap!\(^ {51}\)
105. Between Basare and Tchamba\(^ {52}\)
    Messages are consolidated for them?
106. Have you ever heard of a messenger
    Who had grown up in Zuku\(^ {53}\)?
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 hypocrite\(^ {54}\) will not return,
    Or we shall be young again\(^ {55}\).

\(^{46}\) The word \(ḥalbaba\) is obscure; the closest term that makes sense within the context is \(ḥalīb\), milk which could have been a misprint from the copyist.
\(^{47}\) \(ḥabā\) has a meaning to oppose i.e. \(I'taraḍa\).
\(^{48}\) or Kabre, an ethnic group in northern Togo.
\(^{49}\) or Kankomba, an ethnic group in northern Ghana and Togo.
\(^{50}\) or Hausa.
\(^{51}\) \(Dhā habā\) is Arabic for “that is dust,” a reference to the Qur’an 25:23 “وَقَدِمْنَا 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, \textit{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).
\(^{54}\) \(Munāfīq\) is the past participle of \(nāfīqa\), 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, Suyuṭi⁵⁷ was criticized
   By his enviers, to be ostracized.
126. He had written books numbering
   Nuqṭa Raqin,⁵⁸ for modesty.⁵⁹
127. Majma‘u al-bahr⁶⁰ 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. Ḥariri\(^{61}\) had also been envied;
   And Ḥallāj\(^{62}\) was slain.

131. And Bukhārī\(^{63}\) himself
   Was chased away and plundered.

132. Thus was Shāzali\(^{64}\) also
   Driven out and was forced to emigrate.

133. Likewise Ibn Ḥanbal,\(^{65}\)
   They demeaned him like a tender maid.

134. Even Ali\(^{66}\) 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 “Sharfān\(^{67}\)” 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.

\(^{64}\) Abū al-Hasan as-Shādhī (1196-1258) was the founder of the Shādhiliyya Sufi order.

\(^{65}\) Aḥmad bin Muḥammad bin Ḥanbal Abū Ṭālib (870-941) is the founder 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 shuyūkh\textsuperscript{68} as well,
    And mothers and fathers too.
148. Save us the evil of envious men:
    Strangers and kindred\textsuperscript{69} ones.
149. Bless O Lord and save,
    The Prophet who lies in Qubba,\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{68} Plural of Shaikh meaning elder or senior scholar.
\textsuperscript{69} ‘aprab, near ones.
\textsuperscript{70} The tomb of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina.