

THE TRAVEL POEM OF °ABD AL-RAḤMĀN AL-SANŪSĪ OF BORNUN

A.F. AHMED

The travel poem under study is numbered 82/21 in the W. Kensdale's *Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts* preserved in the University of Ibadan Library.¹ It consists of 4ff of twenty-one lines each and entitled:

الدرر ألسنية في ذكرى لكعبة البهية والمدينة المنورة الشذية وشيء من مدح
ساكنها خير البرية سيدنا محمد

The Glowing Pearls of the Remembrance of the Splendid Ka°ba and the Fragrant Illuminated Medina; and Some Praises of its Inhabitant, the Best of Creatures, Our Leader Muḥammad.

According to the author, it was composed in Medina after pilgrimage to Mecca and completed on Saturday morning in the holy month of Dhū 'l-Qā°da in the year 1338 A.H. corresponding to 1919 C.E.

The travel poem consists of sixty three verses rhyming in letter *rā°*. In the first to the seventh verse, after a brief doxology, the author expresses his delight for having the opportunity of visiting Mecca which he describes as glorious city of mercy and peace, and birth place of the best of creatures the Prophet Muḥammad.

From the eighth to the seventeenth stanza, he congratulates himself on sighting the Ka°ba and its sanctuaries and on performing pilgrimage rites in its holy

1 A list of manuscripts has also been published in pamphlet form by the Ibadan University Press, 1955-58.

precincts. From the nineteenth to the thirty-fourth stanza, he gives an account of his departure from Mecca to Medina and his emotional feelings on his arrival at its Holy mosque. The mosque's architectural aesthetics and beautiful constructional components are all given befitting descriptions. He really appears to be in a state of ecstasy, showing gratitude to Allāh who made it possible for him to see *al-qubba al-khadrā'*, the green tomb which contains the remains of the prophet Muḥammad.² The next fifteen stanzas, thirty-fifth to forty-ninth, are about the attributes of the prophet Muḥammad and his unique characteristics. The rest of the poem consists of supplication except for verse sixty in which he says the number of the verses is sixty-three like the age of the Prophet Muḥammad and line sixty-two in which he gives his own name.

The language of the author is simple and elegant and the manuscript contains interlinear linguistic commentaries.

The author

The author of the manuscript under study was °Abd al-Raḥmān b. al-Khaṭīb Muḥammad al-Sanūsī al-Khazrajī, the Imām of Kukawa and for some times, the Chief *alkali* (chief judge) of Borno (d. 1922).³

All efforts to ascertain his date of birth, early life history and Arabic training background from available reference works yielded no fruits. However, he came from a lineage full of erudite and devout Muslims. His father Muḥammad al-Sanūsī was one time the *khaṭīb* (sermon deliverer) of Borno. He had a work to his credit entitled *Sullam al-Irtiqā'*⁴

- 2 The dome, constructed on the four pillars where the room of the Prophet Muḥammad used to be, is situated right inside the Prophet's mosque in Medina. For a history of the dome, see Šāliḥ Muḥammad Jamal, *Dalīl al-ḥājj* (9th edn.), Mecca: Dār Thaḳāfa 1984, 135-6.
- 3 This is a note found on Kensdale's manuscript no 82/23. His informant is said to be one Muḥammad Bukar Ja°far, the chief *alkali* of Bornu.
- 4 See M.T. Yaḥyā, 'A Study of the Structural and Thematic Innovations of the Arabic Poetry of Kanem-Borno', Ph.D. thesis, University of

which is a versification of the contents of *Matn al-°Ashmāwī* on acts of worship according to the Mālikī school of Islamic jurisprudence, prevalent among the West African Muslims, in 448 stanzas.

His grandfather, Yūsuf b. °Abd al-Qādir al-Qargharī was a student of the celebrated *shaykh* Muḥammad al-Amīn al-Kānimī, the Borno ruler between 1835 and 1880. He was also famous as the chief imam of Bornu during his time having many works to his credit. Copyists' notes on some of his works or notes of students who learnt them provide evidence to corroborate this fact. So also are the notes found at the end of his eulogy on Muḥammad al-Amīn al-Kānimī, his teacher. Our man °Abd al-Raḥmān was responsible for the interlinear commentaries found in the copy of his *Jimiyyah*.⁵

His great-grandfather °Abd al-Qādir was also versed in the twin disciplines of Arabic language and Islamic studies, and for some times, chief imam of Kukawa. He had a very brilliant Arabic verse consisting of seventeen stanzas in praise of Ḥasan Zāfir al-Ṭarablisī. Yūsuf's description of his father indicates that he was a Gnostic and died a martyr.⁶

The Text

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ وَصَلَّى اللّٰهُ عَلٰی سَیْدِنَا مُحَمَّدٍ وَآلِهِ وَصَحْبِهِ
وَسَلَّمَ.

حَمَدَتِ الهِي بَكْرَةَ وَعَشِيَّةَ

1 عَلَى مَنَّةٍ جَلَّتْ عَلَى الْعَدِّ وَالْحَصْرِ

بِحَيْثُ حَدَانَا لَطْفَهُ وَقَضَاءَهُ

Ibadan 1986, 179.

5 Yaḥyā, 'Study', 45.

6 *Ibid.*, 44, cf. Adam °Abdullāh al-Ilūrī, *al-Islām fī Nījīriyā* (2nd edn.), Beirut: Dār al-°Arabīya 1991, 59.

إلى مكة العزّ المعظمة القـدر
 حوت عزّة جرّت بها ذيل فخرها
 على سائر البلدان من غير ما نكر
 وحازت خصال السبق من غير مريّة
 وذلك لا يخفي على كلّ ذي خبر
 وكم جمعت فيها مشاهد رحمة
 5 وأمن كما قد جاء في محكم الذكر
 كفاها ثناء ثم قدرا ومنصبا
 بمولد خير الخلق فيها ومن فخر
 عليه صلاة الله ثمّ سلامه
 بعدّ الحصى والرمل والنبت والشعر
 هنيئا لنا من رؤية الكعبة التي
 بها تفرج الأهوال والضيق في الصدر
 فلما شهدناها استراحت قلوبنا
 وبدل منا الهمّ والعسر باليسر
 وما قد حوته ليس يقدر وصفه
 10 لسان بنطق مفصح مدة الدهر
 وحسبك فيها أنها بيت ربنا
 وذلك قد يغنى اللبيب عن الذكر
 وطفنا بها كل الطواف فيا لها
 من الآية العظمى المحيّرة الفكر

وزرنا البقاع الطاهرات جميعها
 مضاجع أهل الفضل والسعد والبيدر
 رجونا بفضل الله كلّ سعادة
 وتخفيف وزر كان أنقض في الظهر
 ولطفًا جميلًا ساعة النزع ثم في الـ
 أمور التي تخشى على المرء في القبر 15
 وبعدا عن النيران والفوز بالرضي
 وأمنا من الأهوال في موقف الحشر
 قضينا بها كل المناسك جملة
 فله ربّي دائم الحمد والشكر
 ولما قضينا النساك والسعي كلّه
 صرفنا عنان العزم والحزم والصبر
 لطيبة ذات الضوء والنور والبها
 ومقصد أصحاب العناية والخير
 رمنا إليها طائرين تشوقا
 لطائف ربّي بالسرور وبالبيشـر 20
 وحين حللناها استزاد سرورنا
 بزورة خير الخلق والسادة الغر
 من الآل والأزواج والصحب كلّهم
 عليهم رضي الرحمن دوما بلا فتر

- ففي حرم الهادي المشفع رونق
ونور مضيء مخجل ضوءة البدر
وعرف كعرف المسك بل هو فوقه
وشتان طيبا ما يدوم وما يجري
قناده تعلق عن الدرّ بالسنا
- 25 منارته بالحس تزهو على الزهر
شباييكه قد أعجبت كلّ ناظر
محاربه تربوا على الأنجم الزهر
ومنبره أعلى المنابر كلّها
على الأرض طرا غير شك ولا نكر
حللنا به من حيث يغفر حوبنا
وننجوا به من كلّ باس ومن مكر
حططنا الرحال عنه نرجو سماحة
ولطفنا وأمنا في الحياة وفي النشور
شهدنا به حقا عثرنا به على
- 30 عجائب ما لم تراء بالعين في العمر
شربنا لذيد الشرب من حب أحمد
بكاس وفّي من رحيق من الخمر
سكرنا به حتى لقد صار سكرنا
على غاية الصحو المنزه عن سكر

وذلك فضل الله يؤتيه من يشاء
 عليك بشكر الله في السر والجهـ
 ففي القبة الخضراء غاية مطلبي
 وتوقى إليه دائم أمد الدهـ
 هو المصطفى الداعي إلى دين ربنا
 35 جميع الورى من كلّ طاع وذى كفر
 هو الظلّ من يأوى إليه فقد نجى
 من الضيم والخسران والشر والضيـ
 هو الملجأ الواقى من الشر حصنه
 هو المسند الماحي لما كان من وزر
 هو السيد المأمول في كلّ أزمة
 وفي كلّ ضيق كان في البر والبحـ
 هو المجتبى المختار من صفوة الورى
 هو المرتضى المنعوت بالحلم والصبر
 محمد من حاز المكارم والعلـ
 40 ومن قد حوى فضلا وفخرا بلا نكر
 له الشرف العالى على كلّ رتبة
 يخصصه في الأنبياء ذوى القـ
 إليه انتهى سير المفاخر كلها
 لذلك دانوا خاضعين أولو الأـ
 فمن ذا الذي قد نال ما نال أحمد

من المصب الأعلى لدى ربه البرر
 لقد خصه المولى الكريم بمنه
 بما قد يكل الوصف من غامض السرر
 وجمله في ذاته وصفاته
 45 ونزهه عن كل وصم ومن قذر
 شمائله أزكى من المسك نفحة
 أنامله أندى من الغيث والمطر
 فضائله انمى من الرمل كثرة
 طبائعه أحلى اللذات من التمر
 وما قد حواه من خصال جميلة
 يقصر عنه النطق في النظم والنثر
 لذلك صار المكثرون وضدهم
 سواء لديه في التمدح والذكر
 أي سيد السادات يا أكرم الورى
 50 ويا كنز محتاج وغنية ذي فقر
 ويا أوجه الشفعاء يا أمن خائف
 ويا جنة النيران يا منتهى السير
 ويا منقذ الغرقى ببحر ذنوبهم
 ويا كاشف الأدواء من كل مضطر
 أتيت إليك ضارعا متوسلا
 بقدرك أرجو العفو عن ذنبي الغمر

بجاهك عند الله نرجو شفاعته
 فليس لنا الاك في الضيق والعسر
 فخذ بيدي عند الشدائد كلها
 55 وعند الأمور الهائلات لدى الحشـر
 فحاشا وكلا أن أضام وليس لي
 سوى حبك المملؤ في أحرف الصدر
 فيا الله يا ربي دعوناك نبتغي
 لديك قبولا ثم عفوا عن الـوزر
 وسترا جميلا في الأمور جميعها
 وعونا وأمنا في المرور على الجسر
 وختما بحسنى مع جوار نبينا
 محمد الداعي إلى الله باليسر
 وأبيات هذا النظم إن رمت حصرها
 60 كعدّ سنين المصطفى النير الثغر
 وصلّى عليه الله دوما وسرمدا
 صلاة تنال الآل مع صحبه الغر
 فناظم ذي الأبيات عبد مبلد
 أضيف إلى الرحمن في أزمنة الدهر
 وللوالدين اغفر والإخوان كلهم
 من أمة خير الناس هم أمة الخير.
 انتهت بحمد الله وعونه وتأييده على يد ناظمها عبيد ربّه وأسير

ذنبه عبد الرحمن ابن الخطيب محمد السنوسي الخزرجي
 صيحة يوم السبت أواسط شهر الله ذي القعدة الحرام عام
 1338 (1919م) من هجرة سيد الأنام عليه أفضل الصلاة
 والسلام وكان إنشاء هذه القصيدة في المدينة المنورة .

Translation

In the Name of Allāh, the Beneficent, the Merciful. May the
 Divine Blessings and Peace abide with our Prophet
 Muḥammad and his Households and Companions.

[1] I praise my Lord, morning and evening
 for his innumerable, and incalculable blessings,
 since his benevolence and decree led us
 to Mecca, the splendour, the august.

It has attained a dignity, with which it boasts,
 over all other towns that no-one denies,
 and it scored a great success without doubt
 that is clear to all who experienced it.

[5] Many a sign are there, of blessing
 and security, as mentioned in the Perfect reminder
 [Qur^{ān}].

Sufficient for its praise, dignity and rank, is
 the birth of the best of creatures in it, and the glory
 of him, may the Peace of Allāh and His blessings be upon
 him,
 is as numerous as pebbles, sand, plants and the hair.

Congratulate us on our seeing the Ka^{ba} by which
 all dismay and anguish is relieved from the heart.

When we perceived it our hearts relaxed,
 all anxieties and difficulties exchanged with ease.

[10] Its content cannot be described by
 the tongue in eloquent speech were it to go on for ever.

It suffices that the house of our Lord is there,
 and that is enough for the wise to mention.
 We ran all the circuits around it, how excellent is it,
 a great sign that baffles the mind.
 And we visited all the holy places;
 the graves of eminent, dignitaries and benevolent
 people.
 We prayed, from the grace of God, for all bliss
 and forgiveness of sin which weighed down our backs,
 [15] and for kind treatment, when in the throes of death and
 then
 in the dreadful matters of men in the grave,
 and for distance from hell-fire, and attainment of pleasure,
 and security from horrors on the Day of Resurrection.
 We performed there all the rites completely.
 So, for God, my Lord, are praises and thanks.

And when we finished the sacrifice and the *sa^cy*,⁷ all of it,
 we strove with determination, resolution and steadfast-
 ness
 towards Tayba,⁸ the town of illumination, light and grandeur
 and the target of men of providence and blessing.
 [20] The kindness of my Lord drove us there, flying
 and longing with happiness and bliss.
 And when we reached there our happiness increased
 by visiting the best of creatures, and shining leaders
 of the household, the wives and Companions, all of them,
 the pleasure of the Beneficent be on them for ever
 unabated.
 So, in the *ḥaram* of the Guide, the Intercessor, a splendour
 and a gleaming light detracting the light of the moon.
 And a scent like the scent of musk, rather, it surpasses it,
 and how different they are: the permanent and the

7 *Sa^cy* is the hastening of the pilgrim between the two hills of Ṣafā and Marwa within the precincts of the Ka^cba as part of the pilgrimage ritual.

8 Tayba is an ancient name for the city later known as Medina.

temporary.

[25] Its lamps surpass the pearls in radiance,
its light boasts of beauty over the flowers.

Its windows had amazed all the onlookers;
its *mihrabs* are more than the glowing stars.

Its pulpit is the highest of pulpits, all over
the earth without doubt or denial.

We halted there, where our sins would be forgiven
and where we were safer from harm and evil plans.

We stopped there hoping for pardon; and
kindness and security alive and on the Day of
Resurrection.

[30] We saw there, actually we found there
wonders, never shown to the eyes in life.

We drank sweet drinks from the love of Aḥmad
with a cup full of exquisite wine.

We were intoxicated by it until our intoxication reached
the climax of consciousness, pure from intoxication.

That is the blessing of God. He gives it to whom he likes,
thanks to you openly and in secret.

In the green Dome is the apex of my aspiration⁹
and my longing to it is for ever and ever.

[35] He is the chosen, who called to the religion of our Lord
all mankind, the obedient and the infidel.

He is the shadow, who takes refuge in him is saved
from harm, loss, evil and prejudice.

He is the shelter whose castle protects from evil.

He is the support, he erases the sins committed.

He is the leader and the hope in every crisis
and every hardship, on land and on sea.

He is the chosen, the selected from the best of mankind;
he is the pleased described with patience and mildness.

[40] Muḥammad who attained nobility and greatness
And who achieved honour and pride acknowledged.

He has the high honour above all ranks

9 I.e., the remains of the Prophet.

that are restricted to the Prophets, men of dignity.
 With him all stories of praise end;
 for that, they yielded humbly, men of authority.
 Who has achieved what Aḥmad had achieved
 with regard to the high rank from his Lord, the kind?
 The generous Lord has favoured him with His blessings,
 indescribable because of concealed secrecy.
 [45] He beautified him in his person and attributes
 and cleared him of all blemish and defect.
 His characters are more pleasant than musk in odour,
 his fingers are more generous than shower and rain.
 His virtues are more than sand in quantity,
 his manners are more pleasant in sweetness than date
 fruits.
 And what he had attained in good character,
 words are incapable of depicting it in poetry and prose.
 That is why the most elaborate and their opposite
 became equal in their praise and remembrance of him.
 [50] O leader of leaders, O most generous of men!
 O treasure of the destitute and wealth of the poor!
 O the most eminent of the intercessors, O the security of he
 who fears!
 O the shield from fire and end of journey!
 O saviour of the drown in the sea of their sin!
 O the deliverer of people from ailment of all painful
 things!
 I come to you beseeching and supplicating,
 in your name I beg for pardon from my copious sin.
 With your dignity in the eyes of God, we beg for interces-
 sion,
 we have none but you in hardship and difficulty.
 [55] So hold my hand in all the difficulties
 and in all the dreadful matters on the Day of Resurrec-
 tion.
 God forbid and never shall I be wronged when I have naught
 but your love that filled the edges in the chest.
 O God, my Lord! We call you seeking

acceptance from you, then pardon of sins,
 and good protection in all affairs
 and help and security while crossing the bridge.¹⁰
 And a good ending with the closeness to our prophet
 Muḥammad who invited to God without force.
 [60] The number of this composition if you want to count it,
 is like
 the number of the years of the chosen, the brilliant in
 front of Allāh.
 May God bless him for ever and ever,
 a blessing that will reach the household and his shining
 companions.
 The composer of these verses is the dumb *‘abd*,
 added to Raḥmān, protect him from crisis of time.
 And forgive the parents and the brethren, all of them
 are followers of the best of man, they are the best
 people.

This ode was completed, thanks to God and His help and support, by the hand of its composer, the servant of his Lord and captive of his sin *‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. al-Khaṭīb Muḥammad al-Sanūsī al-Khazrajī*, on the morning on Saturday, the middle of the divine month of Dhū ’l-Qa’da 1338 AH/1919 CE.¹¹ May the best of blessings be with the leader of men who undertook the *hijra*. And the composition of the poem took place in Medina the divinely illuminated.

10 A narrow bridge is believed to have been stretched across the hellfire, thinner than a hair and sharper than a sword. The righteous will pass over it safely, sinners and unbelievers will fall into the abyss; see T.P. Hughes, *Dictionary of Islam*, London 1895, 595.

11 Actually Saturday, 31 July 1920.