

# Following the Traces of the Sons of Hilal

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While the epic is absent from classical Arabic literature, the genre – although long ignored – plays an outstanding part in popular culture throughout the Arabo-Islamic sphere.

In order to give an idea of the scope of the heroic cycles that constitute the epic genre, let us cite just two of the many instances: first, the “Hilali epic,” an epic poem of the pastoral nomads known as the Banû Hilâl, or “Sons of the Crescent”; and second, the “Romance of Baybars,” a romance of the Mamelouk sultan who ruled over Syria and Egypt in the thirteenth century.

The example of the Hilali epic illustrates the importance of oral transmission in Egypt: as the people of Saïd say, the poetico-musical tradition that they hold so dear requires ninety-nine consecutive nights, from sunset to sunrise (Abnoudy, 1987, 17). The assertion has something of a hyperbole; and yet, as recent studies by Dwight Reynolds (1995) have attested, in the Delta region a hundred hours, on average, are needed for one of the fourteen “poets” (*shu 'arâ*) of the village (Al-Bakatush) to sing the epic to his audience.

The Baybars romance is another example of a monumental tale. Its length speaks for itself: the episodes that make up the narrative chain can reach as many as 216 (Lyons, 1995, III, 236) and cover, in some Syrian manuscript, a total of 36,000 pages – that is, the equivalent of sixty volumes in the French translation, according to estimates by the translators themselves (Bohas and Guillaume, 1985).

Such preliminary remarks give an immediate idea of the past and present scope of these vast epic compositions that are so plentiful in Arabic folk literature. These examples also suggest the diversity of their modes of transmission – oral, with or without musical accompaniment, written, or printed – which, depending

on the case, the region, and the particular circumstances, coexist with, interweave, or exclude one another.

## The Genre: Al-Siyar Al-Sha 'Biyya

Avoiding the use of approximate synonyms ("epic," "chanson de geste," "romance") borrowed from foreign typologies, let us situate the genre within the context of its own culture. The genre is designated by the term *sîra*<sup>1</sup> (plural: *siyar*), or "biography," as can be seen from the recurrence of the term in the titles of these narratives: *Sîrat Banî Hilâl*, *Sîrat 'Antara*, *Sîrat al-Zîr Sâlim*, *Sîrat Sayf ibn Dhî Yazan*, *Sîrat Dhât al-Himma*, and so on. Interestingly enough, the term *sîra*, derived from *sarâ* ("to walk," or "to behave,"), can apply, thanks to both its physical and moral senses, to movement as well as to behavior. Thus the epic genre designated by this term lends itself to a "biographical" (or allegedly biographical) narrative about a distinguished figure from the past. The narration follows the course of an entire life, even of successive lives through several generations, within a family extended sometimes to a whole people. Perceived as biographical, these *siyar* represent, in the eyes of the most avid devotees, their true history.

The fourteenth-century historiographer Ibn Khaldûn noted with astonishment the absolute faith which the Hilali nomads of southern Algeria had in the veracity of the events they narrated. They were then recounting the facts that determined the departure of their ancestors from Arabia three centuries earlier: "Whoever is bold enough to question their authenticity, or simply to express doubts about it, risks being accused of madness or of ignorance, so widely accepted is this tradition among them" (1856, 41-42).

Closer to us, in the twentieth century, an Egyptian audience that is deeply familiar with the Hilali *sîra* rejects the notion that the narrative's fidelity to history can be questioned (Slyomovics, 1987, 13). In the case of the *Sîrat 'Antara* and according to the people concerned, the reliability of the historical contents is recognizable by the "serious" (*'aqli*) character of the tale: in their opinion, it contains lessons in eloquence, nobility of soul, and political mat-

ters. All of these elements account for the fact that this repertoire has traditionally been the exclusive domain of men.<sup>7</sup>

If proof of authenticity is required – at least on the surface – , various devices are possible. Within the narrative, especially in its written form, one resorts to genealogies<sup>3</sup> that link the heroes to a prestigious, often sharifian, ancestry. In everyday life, toponyms<sup>4</sup> recalling the passage of familiar heroes and heroines are used to anchor the story to the places inhabited by the listeners.

Nevertheless, each of the *siyar* has historical elements at its origin: heroes whose existence is in most cases documented, events that occurred in a past that is relatively well-known and in places that can sometimes be identified. We are dealing with legendary biographies, in which history is reinterpreted for the purposes of the genre.

## Sketching a Hero

### *An Extraordinary Birth*

From the very beginning, the events surrounding the birth of heroes or heroines set them apart as exceptional, like the particular destiny that awaits them. The conception of the child often results from an extraordinary phenomenon. Let us examine the Hilalian heroes Abû Zayd, Jâzya, and Dyâb.

The first of these, Abû Zayd, is conceived thanks to supernatural intervention, following an “unwise wish” made by his mother Khadrâ. She has a desperate desire to provide a male heir for her husband, the emir Rizq. Suddenly, out of admiration for one particular bird she is watching in the sky, she exclaims: “If only I could give birth to a son as noble as that bird, even though he were as black as this one!” (Baker, 1978, 4). The child was indeed born black – a recurrent feature among the heroes of *siyar*<sup>5</sup>. As a consequence, Khadrâ is repudiated and with her son driven away from the land controlled by Rizq.

The heroine Jâzya is presented, sometimes, as the fruit of an ephemeral union between the Hilalian sultan Sarhân and the daughter of the king of the Genii (Saada, 1985, 69-71), producing a hybrid being, halfway between the human and the supernatural.

As for Dyâb, he was born in the middle of the desert, his mother having been abandoned<sup>6</sup> at the time of childbirth: the name given to the child associates him with the jackals (*dyâb*) among which the birth took place. In fact, he resembles them in some aspects of his personality – his propensity for remaining alone, intimate knowledge of the environment, and the practice of divination (Galley and Ayoub, 1983, 76, n. 17).

*Prodigious Gifts and Deeds*

Another characteristic of the heroes is their intellectual as well as physical precocity. Very early on, they surpass their teachers in knowledge. One of them “recites the Koran according to the seven readings and writes it according to the seven writings”; another speaks seven languages, or even all of the foreign languages. Like Antar and Dyâb, they are generally endowed with a Herculean strength that is revealed by their ability to wolf down enormous amounts of food and drink, to shatter a silver cup with their breath alone, to pierce through rock with their urine, to paralyze the enemy with their voices, and to fight wild beasts bare-fisted – to say nothing of their sexual power, which is less frequently, or more discreetly, suggested.

The impression of strength that radiates from the hero is underlined by some odd detail of his physical appearance – from the intensity of his gaze, to the strange color of his hair (red, in Dyâb’s case), or the queer position of his knees protruding beyond the neck of the horse he rides ...

As for the women, such as Abla and Jâzya, femininity and beauty are emphasized. Jâzya is associated with her opulent black hair, long enough to veil her completely except for her toe when, having lost or feigned to lose the first part of a celebrated chess game, she must take off her clothes in front of her opponent (Bel, 1902).

Nevertheless, whatever innate qualities he possesses, a hero has also to assert himself simply by his courage in the face of a thousand trials. Becoming the savior of the group to which he belongs either by blood or by adoption, one who often started out as a marginal figure because of the circumstances of his birth<sup>7</sup> is eventually acknowledged as the ideal knight. He has mastered the art of horsemanship and, in perfect harmony with his lightning-swift steed,<sup>8</sup> he

performs countless feats of war: he fights his foe with firm determination, not devoid of respect if the enemy is, like himself, a true *fâris*.

With his sword of almost magical powers, he emerges from combat triumphant, piercing his enemy's eye, cutting his body from top to toe, or beheading him.<sup>9</sup> Further, for the good of his people, he unhesitatingly faces and destroys anything symbolizing the forces of evil: devastating ghouls, those who sully the waters and those who abduct young maidens, seven-headed hydras, and so on.

Before going into battle, he seeks to find out what destiny has in store for him through the interpretation of dreams and through divination: Dyâb the Hilalian scours the natural environment for the least premonitory signs – the flight of birds, the direction of the jackal, and especially the lines drawn in the sand (*khatt al-rmal*), for geomancy is a common practice. Thus we see Dyâb's enemy, Khalifa Zenâti, questioning his diviner about the outcome of the battle that he has been fighting against the Hilalian for forty days:

Listen, O Leader, I shall reveal to you  
what I have seen in the sand  
You have enjoyed might and prosperity  
But I shall unveil the truth to you:  
Victory is in the hands of the Jackal (*Dyâb*),  
Victory will go to the Jackal.  
His good fortune is superior to yours; it has no limits ...  
Enough with your lamentation, young girls, enough!<sup>10</sup>

*"A Thousand and One Feats of Intelligence"*<sup>11</sup>

It is also a distinctive feature of the hero to possess a set of intellectual abilities that are generally associated with clever tricks, but that in fact have much in common with the Greek *mêtis*.<sup>12</sup> Predominant among these attitudes and pragmatic behaviors are intuition and mental flexibility, the inner sense of what is appropriate, and a long acquired experience. Abû Zayd excels in the art of disguise: the warrior assumes the form of a dervish, a physician, or, more usually, a bard accompanying himself on the rebab (*rabâba*). Thus he travels incognito, in the guise of an itinerant poet.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Dyâb has at his disposal an infinite store of stratagems: during a horse race, he behaves like a madman in order to trick the other competitors (Galley and Iraqui-Sinaceur, 1994, 73) – exactly as Antilochus does in a chariot race (*Iliad*, Book XXII).

However, among the Hilalian family, it is Jâzya who is the best incarnation of that quick, watchful and subtle form of intelligence. She is always on the lookout, anticipating her adversaries' tricks, which she thwarts at the crucial moment. On one occasion, Khalifa Zenâti, the Zanata enemy, sends a group of women to the Hilalian camp with secret instructions to obtain Dyâb's famous mare from their hosts. While strictly observing the rules of hospitality, Jâzya has to invent some stratagem to direct her visitors, without their knowing it, to choose another horse. Such a capacity to "disentangle" (*dabbar*) intricate situations earns Jâzya the name of *dabbîra*, or *sâhbat al-tadbir* in the Maghribian versions: in the eyes of her people she is the "counsellor" par excellence.

*Shared Features, Distinctive Features*

At first glance, the salient image of the heroes portrayed in these epics appears to be one of total self-control, as in Jâzya's case, or of virtual invincibility, as with Antar, Dyâb, and others. Closer examination, however, reveals more complex features. These features seem to belie such stereotypes, as exemplified by the heroes' emotional vulnerability.<sup>14</sup> Their compassion towards women and orphans whom they protect is indeed to be expected; but in many cases, we see a hero falling prey to extreme emotions. As soon as he is struck by the loss of a cherished companion – a favorite steed, in particular – he is overcome with a grief whose intensity, matched only by his gigantic strength, provokes torrents of tears, swoonings, a state of stupor, or unending vigils by the grave of the deceased.

When love appears on the scene, the heroes are submerged in passion: merely to hear the beauty and virtues of a young woman praised is enough to inspire an indomitable desire to possess her, for according to the saying, "The ear falls in love before the eye."

Then begins the quest for the beloved. Sometimes, the fascination works its spell at first sight. Jâzya inspires such overpowering sentiments in a foreigner, the son of Khwaja Amer, that the young man forgets his filial duty in order to place himself at the service of the Hilalians:

"When he hears her voice and sees her face,  
He loses both his breath, his mind goes astray"  
(Guiga, 1968, 51).

Women are not immune from amorous passion. The Zanata princess Sa'ada has been haunted by the image of the handsome Hilalian who is imprisoned by her father, ever since she heard the enthralling tale told by her slave about him. She will not rest until she is entrusted with the captive's custody and attaches him to her by all the means within her reach: she uses magic to blind him.

If the heroes of the *siyar* have a number of characteristics in common, as I have tried to show, each one nevertheless has distinctive traits that set him apart from the others. Let us consider Abû Zayd and Dyâb, the Hilalians. The personality of the former, who left his real identity as a warrior to assume a feigned identity as an itinerant poet, is marked by duality. The latter, in contrast, seems to be all of a piece, bellicose and incorruptible, with his self-regard on the alert. Each one has his own individuality – which doubtless bears some relation to the fact that one or another meets with the public's preference.<sup>15</sup>

#### *A Paradoxical Hero*

Sometimes the central character of a *sîra* behaves in an utterly unpredictable way, doing almost systematically the contrary of what would rightly have been expected of him. He then appears as an atypical hero, on whom his entourage does not hesitate to inflict the most humiliating insults. Such is the case with Zîr Sâlim<sup>16</sup> (Gavillet Matar, 1994), who "weaves fine poetry" (*Muhalhil*), loves wine and keeps his distance from human conflicts and affairs; he lives in an almost solitary retreat, surrounded by lions, which he rides or fights in order to defend the donkeys. Finally, under pressure from others, he resolves to accomplish the mission that is incumbent upon him: to avenge his brother's death. And he does so in a hero's fashion, proving his valor and courage as a warrior as well as his virtues of kindness, wisdom, and nobility, of which every true hero is a model.

## **Sîrat Banî Hilâl: An Epic of the Desert**

### *A Living Oral Tradition*<sup>17</sup>

Let us restrict ourselves to one of the *siyar*, the story of the Sons of Hilâl, which unlike other epic poems remains a living oral tradi-

tion. It is recited and/or sung, not only – and more specifically – in Egypt, but also in other regions of the Arabo-Islamic world, such as Tunisia, as we shall see. Over the course of history it has spread through quite a large area: from east to west, from the Arabian Peninsula and from Syria to the Atlantic; and from north to south, from the shores of the Mediterranean to the heart of sub-Saharan Africa: Sudan, Chad, Niger, Nigeria, Mali.<sup>18</sup>

As it spread from one region to the other through the centuries, this tradition has diversified itself in its modes of transmission and its structure, in the prevalence of certain characters over others, and in its themes and functions.

In Egypt, the musician-poets (*shu'arâ*), who until recently were illiterate, sing versions of the epic entirely in verse, using the local dialect and skillfully combining memory and improvisation (Reynolds, 1995; Canova, 1996, 7-14). In Syria, on the other hand, semi-literate reciters (*hakawâtiyya*) read and chant the text from manuscript in which prose alternates with poetry, in a style that tends to be literary Arabic<sup>19</sup> (Canova, 1989, 38-39).

In Tunisia, the oral tradition, no longer musical, survives in the form of poetry or, more frequently, prose interspersed with rhymed prose (*saj'*) and poetry. Elsewhere in the Maghreb, in Algeria and in Morocco, the *sîra* is broken into small tales (*qissa*) focused on two central sequences, one about the strong opposition between father and son, Ghânim and Dyâb, and the other about the rivalry between Dyâb and Jâzya, which usually leads to their marriage.<sup>20</sup>

### *The March Westwards: An Algerian-Tunisian Tradition*

#### a) The Historical Substratum

What is the historical basis for the Hilalian tale in Tunisia's most popular cycle, the "March Westwards"? We are in the fifth century of the Hejira: the Fatimid ruler of Cairo exhorts the Banû Hilâl to head for Ifrîqiyya, or present-day Tunisia. In the preceding century, they had arrived in Egypt in great numbers, fleeing Arabia which had fallen into the grip of famine. They made up the second wave of Arab Conquerors of Ifrîqiyya, where their arrival had momentous consequences, not only for their own destiny, but also for the local population. In the *sîra*, however, it is as if the sociopo-



litical reasons for the event, and its impact, were dwarfed by problems related to the living conditions of the Hilalian protagonists.

In reality, the Banû Hilâl have from time immemorial experienced a precarious living as pastoral nomads in the Arabian deserts, which may suffer drought for years at a stretch. Thus the only thing that counts in the *sîra* is the search for a land that would be hospitable to men, women, children, and herds, waiting at the end of a long March to the West which resembles an exile (*taghrîba*):

Where is the tribe of the famous name?  
Their drinking troughs are dry,  
They have exiled themselves, bringing their camps far and wide.

## b) Narrative Themes

The entire *taghrîba* unfolds under the sign of drought and all the attendant hardships. Drought is a permanent threat, an ever-recurring reality.

Once, even before their distant exile far from the Nejd, the Hilalians had been compelled in agony to accept a treaty of alliance with a rich foreigner, Sharif Ben Hâshem of Mecca. He gave them food, pasturage, and wells; in exchange he took from them the beautiful Jâzya. To the central theme is added that of separation.<sup>21</sup>

Once again, drought sets in, even more severely than before:

During seven entire years  
Not a single lightning announcing the rain,  
No cauldron placed on the tripod  
Nor grain stirred (on the fire).  
A bushel had grown dearer,  
It cost a three-year she-camel.

The Council of Elders decides to send Abû Zayd on a reconnaissance mission with his three nephews, the sons of his sister Shîha, in order to be better prepared for the group's migration. Abû Zayd returns alone from this exploratory operation: one of the young men is taken prisoner in Tunis and the other two have lost their lives.<sup>22</sup> The absence of the three brothers whom Shîha had entrusted to their uncle's protection unleashes general hostility toward Abû Zayd:

They threw at him all that was at hand.  
"That's him!," they shouted. "He is back! He's alone! He's alone!"  
Someone who held a hobble for a camel threw it and wounded him.  
"Praise be to God" – said Shîha – "who allowed that he were wounded  
And that his blood flowed to wash out all our worries!"

But the time has come to break camp and undertake the *taghrība* towards Ifrîqiyya. As if to give his people a better idea of the objective of the migration, one of the Hilalian chiefs,<sup>23</sup> perhaps Abû Zayd himself, generally resorts to visual metaphors of which there are many variants, all incorporating objects with positive connotations: a rug unrolled on the ground, a large dish placed in the center, filled with *'asîda*. The rug – considered a sacred space which is not to be trodden upon but rather carefully rolled up – stands for the many-staged journey that is to be accomplished towards the center; the dish containing the tasty *'asîda*, associated with feast days, is shaped like the city of Tunis, ringed by ramparts. Its contents represent opulence and a gentle way of life. The profound meaning of the *taghrība* is embodied in the concrete image: the goal to be reached at the end of all ordeals is Tunis, that is to say: Paradise on Earth.

The name of Tunis conveys a dream of abundant food, water, and greenery. Everywhere the *taghrība* is recounted, including in the societies south of the Sahara – in Darfour and in Kordofan, among the Yesiye of Bornou and the Toundjour of Chad – the place dreamed of by these nomadic herders as they pursue this “long march” with their scrawny herds is none other than “Tunis the Green” (*tûnis al-khadrâ'*), also known by the epithets “the Prosperous,” “the Blessed,” and “the Well Named.”

The journey is long, full of hardships and sufferings: “You would have taken them for dried-up branches.” Progressing from one stage to another of the journey across a desert furrowed by deep gorges, they finally reach the steppe heralding the green grass of pasture lands in the distance. But as the advance scouts' mission had anticipated, their way of life runs counter to that of the sedentary inhabitants, with whom a confrontation is inevitable.

Sometimes we witness the advancing tide of Hilalian riders as described by an amazed Zanata hunter:

And behold!  
Waves of horsemen, squadron after squadron,  
Their burnouses flapping in the wind  
Like birds with ruffled feathers.  
And behold!  
Waves of horsemen, squadron after squadron,  
Deep in sockets,  
Their black eyes sparkling like fragments of pottery.

And behold!  
Waves of horsemen, squadron after squadron,  
They used to play with swords in their childhood ...  
And behold!  
Waves of horsemen, squadron after squadron,  
The first one leading a bridge of horsemen across the ford,  
The last one still distant amidst the dunes ...

(Galley and Ayoub, pp. 119, 121)

Bloody battles ensue, which *turn the hair of little children white*.  
The Zanata enemy has the upper hand and he imposes his law:

I grant you a truce but I forbid you water ....  
For the losers have no rights!

There remains one way for the Hilalian camp to avoid disaster: to inform Dyâb, who had been sent against his wishes with the herds in transhumance. He alone, if he consented to return, would be capable of defeating the Zanata leader, Khalifa Zanatî. At the news of defeat, Dyâb trembles with rage; roaring like a lion, he mounts his fiery mare and rushes towards his people's camp. Starting the next day, framed by the Hilalian and Zanata women on either side of the arena, the heroes hurl abuse at each other and shout their war cries, and a lengthy duel begins, raising clouds of dust and deafening din, until the fatal moment for the Zanata hero.

Thus end most versions of the oral tradition, as if the Promised Land had finally been reached, holding out prospects for a better life. However, in some cases, especially in manuscript and published versions (Grech, 1989), the narrative develops into real tragedy: (Saada, 1985): power struggles pitting brother against brother break out within the Hilalian community. Extreme behavior, exceeding the bounds of the acceptable, prevails. This terrible fate leads to the dispersion of a people and the death of its most prestigious members. Dyâb, who despite his victory remains humiliated and frustrated, kills the sultan Hasan and refuses mediation by Abû Zayd, whom he also kills.

Jâzya becomes the leader of the orphans who seek vengeance. She challenges Dyâb to a duel; trying to avoid this fight he clumsily unhorses her, and the fall proves fatal. Dyâb himself is killed by the generation of the sons who avenge their elders. Fresh internal schisms lead to renewed vows of vengeance. As the poet laments, "There will be no one left to blow on the fire ..."

The epic closes with a description of the end of the world (Basset, 1885), unless it rebounds with the hope apparently placed in the person of Nasr al-Dîn, the youngest son of Dyâb. Having killed Hasan's son, he becomes the "undisputed master" of the Land of the West (Grech, 1989).

c) Landmarks of Identity

The heroes die, but their memory lives on in the hearts of men who recognize themselves in these models of "heroism," "virility," and "dignity, according to Mohammed Marzouqi (1978).<sup>24</sup> Those who recited the epic exalted these models for their audience, as in Blida at the turn of the century, a period marked by the need to reinforce feelings of identity (1939). Likewise, during the Algerian War of Independence, the exploits of the familiar heroes who were brought back to life by means of oral performance whetted the underground fighters' national pride in the face of the enemy and spurred them to fight.

## The Laws of the Desert

The glory of these heroes is eternal. If this is true it is because, beyond their individual prestige, they represent a communitarian ideal linked to the way of life of the desert people. The tale is the reflection of this ideal. It conveys a particular sense of honor which seems to determine all the individual behaviors, acting to regulate social life, like a moral code of "tribal humanism," to use the expression adopted by Maxime Rodinson (1967: 38). Let us determine the essential components of this code by examining texts from the oral tradition.

First, family solidarity or *esprit de corps* ('*asabiyya*) which demands self-denial, endurance, and self-mastery from each individual. Jâzya must accept to sacrifice herself, to be given in marriage to a foreign prince, even though she is generally considered to be promised to Dyâb. For the general interest – in this case, the very survival of the group – takes precedence over any individual consideration.

Later, whatever her pain as mother and wife, she will be wrested from her children and their father. The Hilalians practiced exogamy

only in extreme cases, when an alliance with other groups or an increase of prestige was required. Endogamy was preferred. Marriage to one's own kin – ideally, a man should marry the daughter of his paternal uncle – was a promise of security:

Knead your own clay.  
What does not become a cauldron  
Becomes a steam saucepan.

In other words: with your own clay – a woman chosen among your own group – you will create a proper cauldron (*borma*), the symbol of the female body, source of nourishment and a guarantee of offspring; with a clay that did not belong to you, you could only make a steam saucepan, riddled with holes – a sign of loss.

To have male descendants is a requirement that involves the honor of men in the Hilalian family. As proud descendants of their eponymous ancestor, the Sons of Hilâl owe it to themselves to perpetuate their lineage.<sup>25</sup> Female barrenness is a calamity and brings dishonor. Emir Rizq, still without a son after seven years of marriage, says to his wife Khadrâ:

I married you an honourable woman to increase my honour  
It turns out you are barren, in you there are no offspring ...  
Woe to him whose strength Fate has destroyed.

(Reynolds, 1997: 236)

But, let us recall, a miracle occurs, and a black child is brought into the world: Abû Zayd. Rizq's honor is downtrodden, as is the case with a man whose wife appears to be guilty of adultery. He must act ruthlessly, all the more so because of strong social pressure:

It was an insult, so the Arabs convened  
No good is expected from an infant born in adultery!  
Divorce Khadra, O Rizq ...  
When Rizq the Hilali heard these words he was overcome.  
He swore an oath and a vow. In anguish he said:  
I will not receive Khadra again nor do I want the child.

(Slyomovics 1997: 246)

The sense of honor always includes the rule of hospitality, characterized not only by the host's generosity under any circumstances, but also by his duty of discretion towards the guest and his attention to the latter's desires. To satisfy the request expressed by the woman to whom he has given hospitality, Abû Zayd

launches himself into a perilous, yet absolutely disinterested, adventure: he steals a mare in retaliation for the misdeeds she has suffered (Blunt, 1914).

Another basic virtue in which the Hilalians take pride is eloquence. They refer to themselves as “people of allusion” (*ahl al-m’âna*). The Banû Hilâl of pre-Islamic Arabia are known to have attached great importance to the art of poetry, organizing verbal contests at the Okaz oasis: at these times, in periods of truce, feats of war gave way to rhetorical exploits. In the *sîra*, the characters themselves evince a taste for language; in keeping with the context, they use all the linguistic resources and subtleties available, playing on word sounds and polysemy. Being well-spoken becomes the criterion for belonging to the lineage: a father recognizes his son as worthy of him by his ability to solve riddles.

But language wields the power of life and death. To punish a failure in some fundamental matter of honor, the power of words is infallible. When Dyâb’s daughter, a child, commits the offense of not recognizing her father upon his return from transhumance, she is cursed: “May God make you blind!” The little girl is stricken with blindness. When a woman is guilty of slander, accusing Dyâb of cowardice, he confounds her verbally:

She uttered a shriek – her last outcry – and collapsed.  
Because, in olden days, they would die when openly abashed.

Death entails a codified ceremony. The body is surrounded by ritual cares, ceremonial laments are sung, respect is paid to the deceased in keeping with his personal prestige, even if he is a foreigner. Such is the case with the son of Khwâja ‘Amer, the valorous ally of the Banû Hilâl. At his death, the expression of mourning takes the form of sacrificed animals and the destruction of wealth:

To honour our lord, Khwâja ‘Amer, we have sacrificed a hundred horses  
and mares which were saddled only that day.  
To honour him, a hundred cauldrons of fine copper have been shattered.  
To honour him, a hundred wide-brimmed plates have been broken.  
To honour him, a hundred litters with their straps of new leather have been  
torn to pieces.  
To mourn for him, ninety young maidens who left their tents only that day,  
have lacerated their faces ...

(Guiga, 1968: 76)

In contrast, it happens that the Hilalian Jâzya<sup>26</sup> – the very one who is entrusted with leading the choir of mourners – remains clearly indifferent to the death of one of her people. She justifies her behavior before the Council of Elders:

O Hilâl Bû 'Ali, only three kinds of men deserve to be wept and mourned for:  
The first faces danger so that war be extinguished.  
The second offers hospitality in years of drought and famine when giving a  
sip of water to the thirsty one requires great efforts.  
The third is witty and eloquent, imposing his own rights as well as the others'.  
The rest, O Hilâl Bû 'Ali, are nothing more than the dim glitter which a  
blind man can hardly perceive.  
They deserve neither tears nor laments.

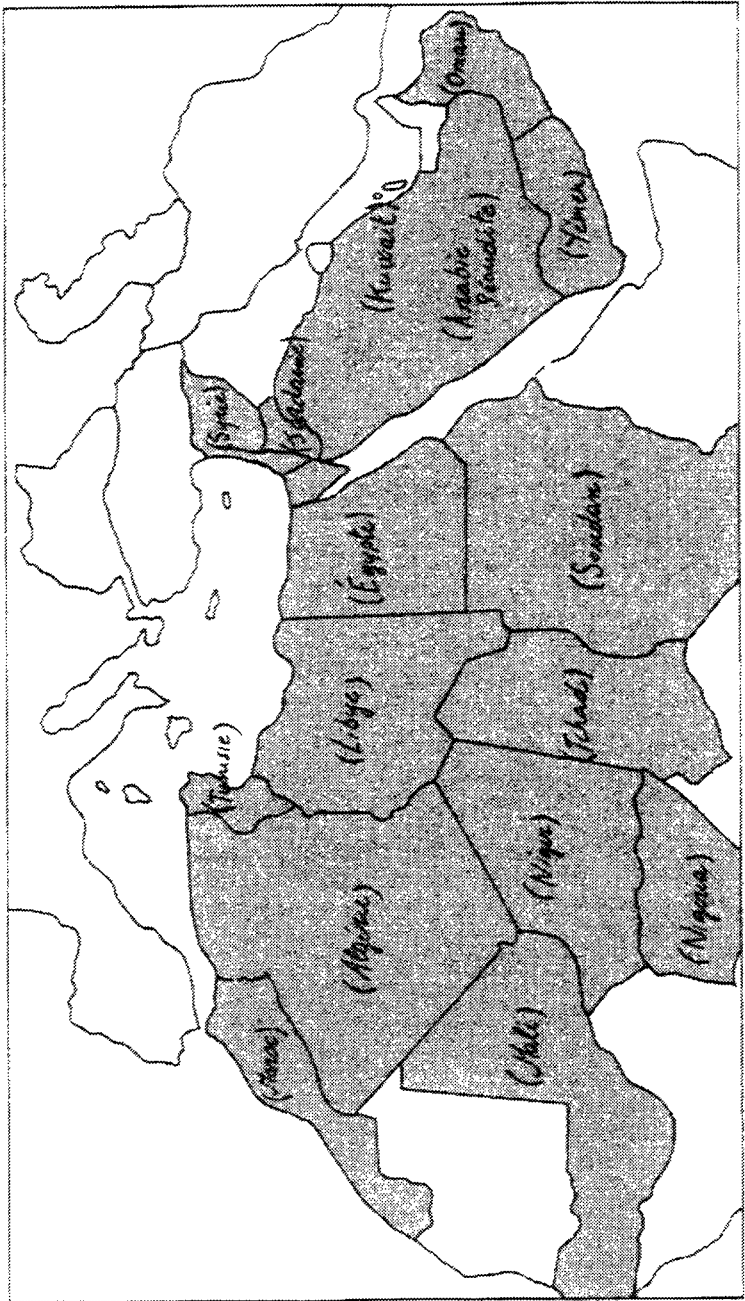
(Guiga, 1968: 27-28; 80-82)

Such is the law of the desert, an absolute imperative that makes men great. It is to be hoped that it may inspire those who perhaps have lost their bearings in our day.

Where is the tribe of famous renown  
Divided and destroyed by Destiny?  
Who could have assumed such adversity?  
Who could have endured, so patiently, the accomplishment of such Fate?  
Oh, lend your ears to the song of their sorrows ...

*Translated from the French by Jennifer Curtiss Gage*

The Hilalian Sira





## Notes

1. Alongside this profane, "popular" usage, the term *sīra* conveys a sacred meaning when it refers to the "Biography of the Prophet" (*al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya*).
2. In contrast, the *Thousand and One Nights*, and other "completely made-up stories," were considered frivolous, extravagant, and superstitious tales fit for the world of women.
3. These genealogies (which are by and large fictional) cast light on the social status of the central characters, indicating whether or not they belong to the most influential lineage.
4. "Road," "stopping place," "well," "spring," and "ford"; "mountain" and "promontory," "rock" and "breach," "hoofprint," women's "lamentations" (to designate the place trampled down by mourners after a defeat), and so forth: all of these words are used in toponymic formations.
5. Other examples of this trait: Antar is born black for natural reasons, as his mother is an African slave; Abd al-Wahhāb is born black because of the rape-like circumstances of his conception: his mother was impregnated under the influence of a narcotic.
6. This abandonment is the result of a co-wife's jealousy. The theme of the abandonment of a newborn and his survival thanks to the wild animals is found elsewhere, as for example in *sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*, where Sayf, a posthumous child, is abandoned by his mother and nursed by a gazelle.
7. For example, Antar starts out as a slave, but thanks to his chivalrous qualities he will end up being recognized as worthy of succeeding his father and marrying his cousin Abū.
8. The horse's speed is suggested by the use of hyperboles: like the flight of a bird, a bolt of lightning, a torrent of water ... The affective bond between the rider and his stallion or mare is reflected in the name given to the animal. Often vague, the names are nevertheless fraught with "sentimental nuance," or simply familiar epithets such as "the whinnying one."
9. Scenes represented in folk imagery, particularly in Egypt and Tunisia.
10. (From the original: Canova, 1980.) I am grateful to Professor Giovanni Canova for drawing my attention to the specific meaning of the phrase *bi-zyāda* in Egyptian, "that's enough!"
11. The expression is borrowed from the title of the 1974 work by Marcel Détiénne and Jean-Pierre Vernant.
12. "*Mêtis*, rather than brute force, is what gives the woodcutter an advantage. *Mêtis* is what enables the tillerman to steer the racing boat despite the wind. *Mêtis* is the means by which the chariot driver surpasses his rival" (Détiénne and Vernant, 1974, 18-19).
13. This process of doubling, whereby the hero alternates between warrior and poet, enables the real poet who sings the tale of Abū Zayd (in the Egyptian tradition) to identify with his model.
14. This characteristic is also seen in other epic traditions, such as the Homeric texts.

15. Of these two heroes, Abû Zayd is more popular in Egypt and south of the Sahara; in the Maghreb, particularly in Algeria, Dyâb is unquestionably the favorite in the public eye.
16. The wife of his brother declares that he is sodomized by the shepherds.
17. Quoted herein are excerpts from Egyptian, Tunisian, and Algerian oral traditions.
18. The interested reader is referred to the bibliography for further information.
19. In actuality, a heterogeneous language in which classical and dialectal forms are mixed.
20. Of nineteen versions recently collected by Youssef Nacib (1994, 185-310) in the Algerian highlands, eight are devoted to the antagonism between father and son, nine to the preconjugal relation, based on the choice of a partner who is well matched in verbal intelligence. Let us note the new emphasis on religion in this corpus: versions 1, 2, 3, and 5 present the Hilalians as bearers of the Islamic message; as a general rule, the Hilalian *sîra* is not presented as an epic of Islam, even if certain versions preface it with a prologue to the glory of the Creator and in homage to the Prophet. The Hilalians who lived in the Arabian Peninsula early in the history of Islam seem to have resisted the Prophet's preaching and to have been involved in the movement of the Karmates.
21. Jâzya's departure represents an immeasurable loss to her family. They later bring her back: the stratagems used by the Hilalians to this end (a hunting party in the desert with the sharif) are described in numerous versions, including the one recorded by Ibn Khaldoun (1856, I: 41).
22. Yahya dies in a confrontation with the owner of an orchard; Mar'î is bitten by a snake (in the episode of the descent into the well).
23. The historical chief Mounes is said to have used the "parable of the rug" in order to calm his troops as they approached Kairouan (Idris 1962, 212).
24. Marzouqi authored a literary adaptation of the Hilalian epic in order to bequeathe such "models" to the younger generations. He was awarded the Bourguiba Prize.
25. This imperative does not exclude the joy of fatherhood, which is expressed in the following riddle:

"What is the sweetest thing in the world?"  
"Nothing is sweeter than the child at play on the bed."
26. It should be noted that the texts recently collected in Algeria reflect a nostalgia for the time when Jâzya herself and Dyâb served as models:

In the old days people used to drink milk as white as their hearts  
And today they drink coffee as black as their hearts.  
In the old days people used to be free and true like Dhiab and Djazia ...  
We followed their example ... (Nacib, 1994: 269)

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- an international colloquium, in 1985, convened by N. Ibrahim (University of Cairo) and M. Galley (Association internationale d'étude des civilisations méditerranéennes).