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[English translation of the original text in Italian]

A new Berber Ibadite poem

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Some twenty years ago, Luigi Serra published some excerpts of two religious Ibadite poems he had collected in 1969 in Jebel Nefusa (namely in Mezzu) after a research triggered by a report of F. Beguinot (1921).

This important study revealed for the first time the existence of an oral religious literature of the Ibadite Berbers of Libya, consisting of texts dating from the early nineteenth century.¹

These texts are all the more interesting, because they helped improving our knowledge of the previously little known Berber lexicon in the domain of religion. Indeed, the poems collected by Serra contain several terms though not completely new, at least not well known, especially in their use in the domain of religion, for example, *iser* “prophet”,² *abrid* “religion” (lit. “path”), *ajellid* “God”,³ *ammuden* “the Pillars (of Islam)”, etc.

The sources of F. Beguinot and L. Serra ascribe both works to a named Abu Falga, said to have lived in the first half of the nineteenth century. This author alludes to himself in one of the poems (Serra 1986: 531):

da-lyā sa d-ēmlūn māmō a yēmlūn awāl
ēmlūt-āsen Bu Fālya uḡūn s imaelāl

and if they ask: “Who said (these) words?”
tell them “Abu Falgha, one of the defective ...”

The poems collected by Serra are most likely the same as those formerly reported by Beguinot: even though the latter did not publish anything in the original language, the Italian translation he made of their first lines seems to

¹ In 1921 Beguinot reported that the poems had been composed about one century earlier.

² This word, already listed in the lexicon of ancient Nafusi published by Bossoutrot in 1900 (p. 496: *wiser* “Prophet” pl. *isaren*), was also reported by Motylinski (1885, p. 130), but is lacking in the lexicon of Beguinot. As far as I know, the only comparable word outside the Ibadite area is the Kabyle *asrir* “messenger”.

³ For this word, which elsewhere means “king” but in Nafusi is not used in that sense, cp. also Motylinski p. 130 (“Dieu” *ajellid amoqran*).

fit perfectly to the openings of the Berber texts gathered by Serra. The content is essentially religious. One of the poems turns out to be an exhortation to follow the precepts of Islam in order to enjoy Paradise in the afterlife, while the other one appears to be a systematic exposition of the five “Pillars of Islam” (the 5 *'arkān*, in Berber *ammuden*).

Recently, I have made an interesting discovery in Jerba. In this Berber-speaking island in Tunisia, where the indigenous language is preserved along with the Ibadi faith, a religious poem, quite similar to the two Nafusi poems by Abu Falgha, is still known by some elders of the village and has been put down in writing some time ago in manuscripts kept by some families. This poem, entitled *Tmazixt*, has been mentioned to me since my first visit to Jerba for my studies in that dialect, but for a long time I could not find anyone who knew it by heart, or any of the existing handwritten copies. Probably one of the reasons for this “elusiveness” is related to the circumstances in which the poem was traditionally chanted, that is during the mourning ceremonies.

Thanks to Abderrazzaq Ben Cheikh, chief of *baladiya* of Guellala, who has provided indispensable aid in my researches, I finally managed to find at first a written copy of the poem, subsequently two more written versions (shorter but equally noteworthy), and eventually even someone who was capable and willing to chant it in the traditional way.

Another reason accounts for the difficulty in obtaining this text: the great difference existing between the language used in it and today's dialect of Guellala, one of the few villages where Berber is still spoken in Jerba. At present, I cannot determine the reasons of this difference: maybe it can be explained in plainly diachronic terms, as the result of changes occurred during the last two centuries, maybe it goes back to a difference between the dialect of Guellala and that of the author, who according to a manuscript lived in the village of Azyan near Ghizen, a part of the island nowadays completely Arabised.

Anyway, it is an undeniable fact that a close relation links both poems of Jebel Nefusa with that of Jerba. Not only the metre, the subject and the time of composition are the same, but also the opening words of the latter are almost identical to the incipit of one of the poems published by Serra, the only real difference being just the word which provides the rhyme characteristic of each poem.

As a matter of fact, the poem of Abu Falgha says (Serra 1986: 527):

*Af isr-ennay zallût ay imexlaq
teslûm may emmaley es ul amhaqqaq*

On our Prophet pray (bless our Prophet), oh creatures
listen to what I say with true heart

Similarly, the Jerbian poem begins in this way:

eẓẓall af Mḥemmed a w'yellan isel
tesled mag emmaley s wul-iḳ yeedel

Pray on (bless) Mohammed! Whoever hears,
 hear what I say with a pure heart

The name of the author of the Jerbian poem is badly preserved. The most complete manuscript reports that it was recited by a certain sheikh Chaabane El-Qanouchi in the first third of the 13th century of the Hijira (that is, between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century). But this name seems unknown to his countrymen today, and a conjectural name El-Mennouchi was repeatedly put forward, since it seems that such a family name exists in the region of Ghizen.

As to the form of the poem, it is composed of 42 verses (“stanzas”) of two lines each (except the first one, which consists of just one line and is repeated as a refrain after every verse). Each line is clearly divided into two hemistichs so that a verse can be considered as consisting of 4 hemistichs, rhyming with each other, following the well-known model of “chained” rhymes AA BBBA CCCA DDDA ...

The content of the poem is the description of what awaits the souls after the death, with the implicit warning not to fall into the sins that lead to damnation.

After the brief introductory verse, the poem begins by previously admonishing the audience to believe in what will be said, since it is based on the true tradition of what has been handed down:

2
uc-id ul-iḳ tfehmed mag emmaley
tesled eddwi-w d elḥeqq d enṣeḥ elbalay
we yr-is-c tikerkas la lqul elfaray
yebna af essah we yr-is-c di-s eẓẓel

Give me your heart, understand what I say
 you'll hear that my speech is genuine, it is an eloquent advice
 devoid of lies and empty words
 built on firm ground, devoid of mistakes

3
s mag nezra g lektub en baḥ-ennay
ed wag yedker a ysir sa ken-t-id-emley
af jjmie man a yṣar ačča di-nay
eyyak ul-iḳ a ysel si-yi a yeqbel

with what we have read in the books of our fathers
 and what will happen, as they say, I am going to tell you

concerning everything that will happen to us tomorrow:
 come on! may your heart listen and accept it from me

Subsequently, the subject switches to death and afterlife:

4
yewwa Rebbi kull hedd yexs a yemmet
d ardal ney d awennehli g elxeşlet
baed tmettant we-yr-es kan eljennet
ney timsi ijjen seg senn-uh yehşel

God said that he wants everybody to die⁴
 righteous or evil in their actions
 after death there is but Paradise
 or Hell: one of these two will take him

5
yewwa Rebbi w' yexsen eljennet yekker
a yexdem fell-as kulyum s mag yezmer
a yzall a yzum w'yehmel eşşqie edd elherr
baed din a yeđleb Rebb' a yeqbel

God said: He who wants the Heaven should arise,
 and toil always aiming at this goal as hard as he can
 he should pray, fast, endure cold and hot
 after this, if he asks God will fulfil

6
ay ayeťma tarzeft-enney teqreb
w'yellan w-ihayyi eleawin-is a yeđeeb
w-yettif-c mam as-yuc lemmi yeđleb
kull ijjen yugeđ eleawin-is a yekmel

oh brethren, our journey is approaching
 he who has not prepared his provisions will suffer
 he will not find anyone who gives him some when asked
 everyone refuses to fill his supplies

After some warning concerning the behaviour recommended in order to attain the Paradise, the poem goes on showing what awaits the departed:

⁴ It is possible that here, as well as in a couple of following passages, the verb *exs* “will” is actually used as a grammatical tool for a sort of periphrastic future. The sense would thus be: “God said that everybody will die”.

13

*yir lem̄mi a k-ifareq erruh̄ a t-ezreḡ
 seg ssaet-tedd̄in a ḡezneḡ ney a ferheḡ
 amkan-ik̄ yella elli yer-s ta raḡeḡ
 cek̄k eḡ mag temmudeḡ aṣennaḡ u qabbel*

when the soul separates from you, you will be able to see it
 and since that moment you will be sad or happy
 your place is the one to which you will go
 you with what you did yesterday and earlier.

14

*baed̄ tamettant a zreḡ man a qasid̄
 tamezward̄ elli l̄ewreḡ sa t-eerid̄
 etyusah̄ lli testeh̄fed̄eḡ yexs a tirid̄
 seg fus en w'yejneb̄ siy-es a yadeḡ*

after death you'll see what you will suffer
 first of all, you'll be stark naked
 and the well preserved thing (the body), he wants it washed (will be washed)
 the hand by which he contracted no impurity (the right), from this he will start

15

*a t-sirden̄ elkul̄ eggen-t g ucelliq̄
 we t-ewin̄ irnawn-is̄ eggen-t g eḡḡiq̄
 g leqber̄ eḡ elweḡc̄ mani yuqā errfiq̄
 ernin-as̄ elyemmet̄ n̄ ijdī yeqqel̄*

they will clean it thoroughly and wrap it in a shroud
 his relatives will take him and put him in the grave
 in the grave together with the animals, where there is no friend
 moreover, there will be the suffering of the weight of the earth

After a quick mention of the “distress of the grave”, which folds on itself to the point of crushing the ribs of the wicked, the poem then moves to the description of the Doomsday:

18

*ayuh̄ elkul̄ yeflā qabbel̄ ass̄ azirar̄
 ass̄ elli sa nekcefen̄ diy-es̄ lesrar̄
 ass̄ elli ta twuferzen̄ lektub̄ jehar̄
 kul̄ ijjen̄ sa s-d-yas̄ lektab-is̄ a t-yeqbel̄*

all this will take place before a long day
 the day when the secrets will be disclosed
 the day when the books will be publicly examined
 everyone will receive his book and accept it

19

ijjen as-d-yas g ellimin ay esseed-is
a yeezem a yeddeş yetmara ul-is
s mag yuc-as Rebbi seg elfeđl-is
am wernaw arnaw elemr-is yezhel

To someone it will come to the right, oh lucky one!⁵
 as soon as he learns, he will smile, open-hearted
 for what God will grant him of his favours
 like a relative, it is easy to follow the order of a relative

20

ijjen sa s-d-yas g ellisar ay ettehs-is
a yeezem yettam elhemm i wul-is
yetteyben mag yemmuđ g læmr-is
yetteendem ah lu yufa a yedwel

To someone it will come to the left, oh unhappy one!
 as soon as he learns, grief will invade his heart
 he will feel remorse for what he has done in his life
 he will regret, oh if he only could come back!

The description of the Day of Reckoning goes on (“a day as long as fifty thousand years”), depicting the Gehenna turbulent and boiling. It is personified and speaks to the wicked, spelling out a long list of sins that lead to it:

26

temmal mani w'iyeflen af ettubeđ
mani w'yellan g elemcaşı al d-yemmeđ
mani yella w'yuguren s elhileđ
ass-uh sa s-yehder mag yemmuđ qabbel

She (the Gehenna) says: “where is he who has neglected to repent?
 where he who kept committing sins unto his death?
 where is he who went on cheating?
 today it will be clear what he has done previously

27

mani yella w'yeččan errzeg n imselmen
mani yella w'yeyyan eđ w'idelmen

⁵ We have here a very close parallel with one of the Nafusi poems: *Ay essaed-ennes yawwót ithenná* “Oh happiness! He has arrived (in Paradise). He is calm...” (Serra 1986: 531).

ayt-et-id al dah netta ed yemuermen
saşlet-ı-id w'yuşlen al yer-i yuşel

where is he who has stolen the wealth of the Muslims?
 where is he who has transgressed and has been unfair?
 bring him to me along with the wrongdoers
 let him attain me: who attained me has really attained (the end)

28

mani yella w'iqetteen jar eljiran
mani w'yessefyen esserr en yudan
mani yella w'yettyumnen ettixan
*mani w'yekksen aymir baed mag yenḥel*⁶

where is he who spread gossip among neighbours?
 where he who revealed the secrets of others?
 where is he who has been believed (while acting) disloyally ?
 where he who removed the boundary stone after it was embedded
 in the ground?

29

mani yella w'ihekmen byir elḥaq
mani yella w'iqedhen jar imexlaq
mani w'igan esshur yexs a yferraq
jar argaz ed eleeyal-is g elbaṭel

where is he who has ruled unjustly?
 where is he who spread calumnies among people?
 where he who practiced sorcery to divide
 husband and wife (acting) in the wrong?

The list goes on a long way, and includes some sins peculiar to women:

31

mani tidin ettinineṭ tmeyriwin
mani tidin charneṭ tiliwliwin
mani tidin ehfelneṭ s tyusiwin
ttegneṭ irgazen lehza ed ezzel

Where are those who sang at weddings?
 where, those who yelled “youyou”?
 where, those who have flaunted jewels
 making their husbands object of mockery and deceit?

⁶ This term is interesting, since it shows a phonetic treatment of the group *md > nḥ* which hitherto had been found only in Tuareg (cp. Vycichl 1980).

(...)

35

*mani teddin tesgejdur tetteg g leh̄sis
tetnewweh̄ tetreqqeq yeedel g essuṭ-is
bac a mlen d aflan ay esseed-is
turu esseed-is a t-tzer g litu-wuh yuṣel*

Where is she who mourned scratching her cheeks and letting everybody hear,
complaining, crying out loud with a strong voice
so that the people say: “How lucky, So-and-so! ”
how lucky he is, now she sees it in this bed, having attained (his end).

36

*tettekker essuṭ am tidett teḥqiq
nettaṭ g elmeṭl-is d qlilt ettufiq
lemmi tudef temsi eggen-teṭ g eddiq
a s-emlen newweh̄ g temsi w-eṭbetṭel*

she raised her voice like a real bitch
she and those like her are insane
when she has entered the fire they will put her in a grave
they will tell her: “mourn in the fire and let it be over!”

Looking at the list of sins gathered in this poem is particularly interesting because it shows which topics were considered most important by the Ibadi doctrine for a correct behaviour. For example, the above-mentioned disapproval of the mourning lamentations and the warning, repeatedly expressed in many parts of the poem, not to neglect the prayer.

After the list of sins, the description of hell ends with the advent of its “keeper” (*elxazen*) who reproaches the damned, asking them, rhetorically, whether they have not been warned by the Prophet during their lives. He eventually carries them away, amid the flames and anguish.

As usual in North African religious literature, the poem comes to an end with a request to God for forgiveness towards the author of the text as well as towards all attendants:

41

(...)

*a Rebbi tubey baed mag eggiy eggeṭ
ayfer-id aydin ifaten qabbel*

O God, I am very sorry for what I did
forgive me for what happened in the past

42

teyfered i bava ejmie n ibekkaḡen
teyfer i yemma mag temmuḡ ezzman
teyfered i inselmen an yesseydan
et_temselmin an yeḡderen dah g elmehfel

Forgive all the sins of my father
 forgive my mother for what she did in (her) time
 forgive the Muslims who have listened,
 men and women, attending this assembly.

This Jerbian poem demands several commentaries concerning, among other things, the relationship between this and the other poems from Jebel Nefusa, and I feel confident that in a short term I will be able to provide a comprehensive study, written in collaboration with Luigi Serra himself, containing a complete and philologically accurate edition of all texts. Prior to this, I will simply make here a couple of remarks.

First of all, it is undeniable that the three texts are “complementary”: all together, they form a sort of “oral catechism”, visibly aimed at spreading the Islamic faith among a largely illiterate population. As a matter of fact, summarising their content, one may consider that the text of Jerba contains warnings not to sin so as to not incur the punishments of hell, which are described in detail, while the first of Abu Falgha’s poems shows, conversely, the rewards of heaven reserved for those who follow the right path. Finally, the third poem, about the “Pillars of Islam”, completes as a whole the description of the obligations of the believer.

Moreover, it is worth noting some linguistic features of the poem. Actually, the language of this text shows a considerable morphological fluidity, with many “doublets” performing the same morpho-syntactic functions. For example, it is remarkable that the following allomorphs occur simultaneously:

- prefixes of future *sa* and *ta*
- various forms of the neuter relative pronoun “what”:

man (3.3., 22.4)

mag (1.2, 2.1, 3.1, 5.2, 12.2, 12.3, 13.4, 19.3, 20.3, 22.1, 26.4, 28.4, 30.3, 33.4, 40.3, 41.3, 42.2)

ag (in the annexed state *wag* 3.2, 24.2)

- two forms of a 2nd plural pronoun affixed to the verb (indirect case):
sa ken-t-iḡ-emley “I shall tell it to you” / 3.2, *we-wwen-yewwi-c* “didn’t he tell you” 37.3

Such a state of affairs can only to some extent be accounted for by the coexistence of different oral traditions. It seems, rather, that we have to do

with a polymorphism that is typical of a *koine*. One could perhaps put forward the hypothesis that these poems belonged in fact to a larger poetic *corpus*, intended for use in Ibadi communities making use of different Berber varieties, so that it could be more or less well understood by all of them. One has the impression to deal with the same linguistic feature that Beguinot considered objectionable in the texts of Chemmakhi (Motylinski's informant), since they ultimately did not represent correctly either the Nafusi or the Mzabi language: "From the standpoint of linguistic reality, it follows that the mentioned materials do not actually correspond to any of the dialects spoken in the Gebel, and indeed many of the natives do not understand them at all, someone understands them partially, and only two among those I met, who had lived in Mzab and other Berber regions and had a knowledge of various dialects, could understand them well enough" (1942: VIII). Maybe Chemmakhi too tended to use, more or less unconsciously, this sort of Berber Ibadi *koine*.

A strong hint in favour of the circulation of these poems in the whole Ibadi area is the presence, in Mzab, of a verse from the Jerbian poem, collected as a Mzabite text in Melika in 1885 by René Basset (1893: 115):

Zallet f Oumoh'ammed aoui illan isel :
Tesled ma kemmeler' s ououl etch iâdel,
Ouch i d ouletch tesled ma kemmeler'
Tesned annaho d elh'ak'k' d enneçah' elbaler'
Oul r'eri tikerkas oul elk'oul elfarer',
Ibna feççah' our r'eri dis izzel
Oui ikhsen eljennet a ikker fellas koull ioum it'leb Rebbi a ik'bel.

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Résumé

Un texte religieux découvert récemment à Jerba (Tunisie) présente des ressemblances évidentes avec deux poèmes anciens provenant du Jebel Ne-fousa (Libye). On donne ici une courte description du contenu du texte jerbien et on se pose la question des rapports entre celui-ci et les poèmes nafousis. Compte tenant de l'existence de ces rapports et de quelques indices linguistiques, on peut envisager l'existence, dans le passé, d'une sorte de "koiné ibadite" utilisée pour l'enseignement religieux dans les régions ibadites berbérophones.

Religious text from Jerba - The first page of a manuscript

