



Arabic Literature in America: Sufi Poems Quoted by Omar ibn Said

*Amerika'daki Arapça Literatür:
Ömer bin Seyyid'in Atıfta Bulunduğu Tasavvufi Şiirler*

Carl W. ERNST*

Abstract

One of the most remarkable figures in the history of Islam in America was Omar ibn Said (‘Umar b. Sayyid, 1770-1863), a Muslim scholar educated in West Africa, who was captured in warfare in his homeland and sold into slavery in America in 1807. For over half a century he lived in North Carolina, enslaved by the prominent Owen family of Fayetteville, and he left behind a small body of writings in Arabic that have for the most part been misread and misunderstood. In this article, I would like to present three short poems quoted by Omar in his writings, which provide a clear indication of the intellectual and theological range of materials that he was familiar with.

Keywords: Omar ibn Said, Islam in America, *al-Qaşıda al-Dimyāṭiyya*, *Maqşūrat al-jawhara*, *Wāsiṭat al-sulūk*.

Özet

İslam tarihinin Amerika'daki en dikkat çekici isimlerinden biri, Batı Afrika'da eğitim görmüş, ana-vatanında savaşta esir düşmüş ve 1807'de Amerika'da köle olarak satılmış Müslüman bir âlim olan Ömer bin Said'dir (1770-1863). Yarım asırdan fazla bir süre Kuzey Carolina'da yaşamış, Fayetteville'in önde gelen ailelerinden biri olan Owen ailesi tarafından köleleştirilmiş ve ardında, çoğunlukla yanlış okunmuş ve yanlış yorumlanmış Arapça küçük çaplı bir lîretatür bırakmıştır. Bu makalede, Ömer'in

* William R. Kenan, Jr. Distinguished Professor Emeritus, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Department of Religious Studies,

E-mail: cernst@email.unc.edu.

Received: 02.09.2024 **Accepted:** 13.09.2024 **Published:** 30.11.2024

Cite as: Carl W. Ernst, "Arabic Literature in America: Sufi Poems Quoted by Omar ibn Said," *Journal of the Institute for Sufi Studies* 3, 2 (2024): 127-140.



This article is distributed under license CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 International
(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

yazılarında alıntı yaptığı ve âşına olduğu entelektüel ve teolojik malzeme yelpazesini âşikâr eden üç kısa şiir sunulacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ömer bin Said, Amerika’da İslam, *Kasîde-i Dimyâtiyye*, *Dîvânü Ebî Medyen*, *Şerhu Vâsıtâtü’s-sülûk*.

Introduction

One of the most remarkable figures in the history of Islam in America was Omar ibn Said (‘Umar b. Sayyid, 1770-1863), a Muslim scholar educated in West Africa, who was captured in warfare in his homeland and sold into slavery in America in 1807. For over half a century he lived in North Carolina, enslaved by the prominent Owen family of Fayetteville, and he left behind a small body of writings in Arabic that have for the most part been misread and misunderstood. In a recent study, my colleague Mbaye Lo and I have produced a new interpretation of his eighteen surviving documents, systematically establishing their meaning, and using them to correct the lies and misrepresentations of Omar that were widespread among missionaries and advocates of slavery.¹ They maintained that Omar had converted to Christianity and had refused to consider going back to Africa because of his happiness as a Christian slave.

Our reading of Omar’s documents has yielded convincing evidence that this belief in Omar’s conversion was false. Not only did he habitually employ in his writings Islamic formulas from the Qur’ân and blessings upon the Prophet Muḥammad, but he also quoted and made reference to a significant range of Islamic texts in Arabic, something that has barely been recognized until now. He quotes twenty-five

1 Mbaye Lo, and Carl W. Ernst, *I Cannot Write My Life: Islam, Arabic, and Slavery in Omar ibn Said’s America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2023). A preliminary version of the *editio princeps* of the Arabic texts can be seen online at https://openiti.org/projects/Digital_Editions.html as part of the Islamicate Texts Initiative (Open ITI).

passages from the Qur’ân and only five brief excerpts from the Bible. Arabic sources that he quotes include grammatical works by al-Ḥarîrî and Ibn Mâlik (the only sources previously discovered in Omar’s writings). In addition, at critical junctures Omar cited fundamental works of the Mâlikî legal school, such as the *Mukhtaşar* of Khalîl and the *Risâla* of Ibn Abî Zayd al-Qayrawânî. All this escaped the notice of white enslavers and missionaries, who assumed that there could not possibly exist in Africa any literature to speak of, so they firmly believed that literate Muslims could only read the Qur’ân and nothing else.

In this article, I would like to present three short poems quoted by Omar in his writings, which provide a clear indication of the intellectual and theological range of materials that he was familiar with. In evaluating his use of these texts, as John Hunwick pointed out some years ago, several preliminary assumptions can be made. First, any text from which Omar quoted one or two lines was probably known to him in its entirety, since these texts were commonly memorized in West African Islamic academies. Second, it is reasonable to treat his quotations as intentional and not random; they should be interpreted both in terms of their location in Omar’s documents and with reference to their original context. Third, the items that we know he quoted were not the only texts that he had read.²

Analyzing Omar’s documents and the texts that he quoted highlights a paradox that faces

2 John Hunwick, “‘I Wish to Be Seen in Our Land Called Afrika’: ‘Umar b. Sayyid’s Appeal to Be Released from Slavery (1819),” in *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 5 (2003): 62–77.

any investigator of an unknown archive. That is, it is challenging to interpret a text without knowing the intellectual milieu that framed it, yet one cannot understand that situation without having read the texts. As a researcher on Central Asian Sufi texts put it,

In order to have a more or less adequate understanding of how the sufi brotherhoods evolved in the region and which transformations they underwent, it is indispensable to study the corresponding body of source materials; but in order to describe them according to the standards set, it is likewise indispensable to have a clear understanding of the phenomenon itself which after all is reflected in a given manuscript.³

Thus, the translation of the texts quoted by Omar is an important step for the comprehension of his writings as a whole.

While the full analysis of Omar's quotations from these writings is found in the monograph by Mbaye Lo and myself, I offer here translations of these three poems in their entirety, to provide a larger context for his writings. The text he quotes are the following: (1) a recitation of the 99 names of God in a poem of 61 verses, of uncertain authorship, known as "The Damietta Poem" (with some variations, *al-Qaṣīda al-Dimyāṭiyya*, *al-Manzūma al-Dimyāṭiyya*, or *al-Da'wa al-Dimyāṭiyya*); (2) a poetic sermon in 120 lines by the famous early Sufi of the Maghrib, Abū Madyan, entitled "The Pearl Poem in A" (*Maqṣūrat al-jawhara*); and (3) a theological poem in 144 verses on the fundamentals of Islamic belief, "The Pearl Necklace of the Path" (*Wāsiṭat al-sulūk*), by al-Ḥawḍī al-Tilimsānī. All three of these poems have a strong resonance with the themes, prac-

tices, and traditions of Sufism, which is not surprising in light of the strong presence of Sufism in West Africa over the centuries. To my knowledge, none of these poems has been previously translated into English, so this will be an opportunity to present sources of the Islamic literature of Africa that have not only been preserved in their original milieu, but also have played a part in the diaspora of African Muslims across the Atlantic under the appalling conditions of slavery. Space does not permit a detailed examination of these poems here, but they are presented as a notable example of the extent of the literary traditions connected to Sufism. Omar ibn Saīd's allusions to these texts two centuries ago is an important reminder that Islam and the Arabic language have had a role to play in America from its very beginning.

1. The Damietta Poem (*al-Qaṣīda al-Dimyāṭiyya*)⁴

Aside from being associated with Damietta in the Nile Delta, nothing is known of Nūr al-Dīn al-Dimyāṭī, the presumed author of this popular Arabic ode on the names of God, which circulated widely in the Maghrib and West Africa due to its magical and therapeutic virtues. Its commentators include the prominent Moroccan Sufi, Aḥmad Zarrūq (d. 899/1494). It is popular today in Arabic-speaking Internet forums and YouTube videos, where it is presented as having an exceptionally strong power over celestial and terrestrial bodies, as well as over humans and jinn, especially as protection against occult

3 Jürgen Paul, *Handlist of Sufi Manuscripts (18th - 20th centuries) in the holdings of the Oriental Institute, Academy of Sciences, Republic of Uzbekistan* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2021), ix-x.

4 Nūr al-Dīn al-Dimyāṭī, "al-Qaṣīda al-Dimyāṭiyya," al-Ṣafḥa al-Rashīdiyya al-Idrīsiyya li-aḥbāb wa-tilāmīdhāt al-sayyid al-sharīf Maḥmūd ibn 'Uthmān Baṣrī (blog), 13 September 2018, accessed August 19, 2022, <https://hi-ain.facebook.com/386896678322561/posts/729043544107871/>, a convenient source that has been used in the absence of any modern published edition. The divine names are capitalized in this translation.

influences.⁵ Its key feature is the inclusion of the 99 names of God mentioned in the Qur'ān, according to the standard list, generally presenting two names in a single verse. Omar cites verse 12 on God's forgiveness and wrath as the fourth quotation in a short undated text (Document 15 in our reckoning, listed as no. 8 in the ITI online version) that presents an outline of salvation. His quotation is inexact and even omits the two divine names mentioned in this verse (Forgiving and Wrathful), presumably out of respect for the divine names, and under the assumption that those familiar with the text would instantly be able to supply the missing names.

I begin first with "in the name of God" and "Praise be,"

for the uncountable gifts in revelation.

Among them is God's praise of himself for himself, since no reciter accounts for him.

And among them is God's blessing, then his peace

on Muṣṭafā, the perfect secret of existence.

And another is when a problem is solved by reciting the names of God when secluded.

5. We ask you, God, for safety and mercy, and in safety, O Merciful, no fears endure. O Compassionate, make my weak strength compassionate, O King, make me a helper and a refuge. O Lord, O Holy One, make me a transcendentalist, and a changer of evil to peace, O Peace! O Faithful, give me sound security, and a long full veil, O Preserver. O Glorious, remove my lowliness, for by your glory, I always have plenty, O Overpowering.
10. Reduce and humble the arrogant, O Lofty One, O Creator, make for me a retreat from people.

5 Ruggiero Vimercati Sanseverino, "al-Dimyātī, Nūr al-Dīn," in *EI3*, accessed August 19, 2022, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_26037.

- O souls' Originator, I'm exonerated;
 O Shaper, by you my sickness is removed.
 I've asked you, O Forgiver, for forgiveness and repentance;
 O Wrathful, by your wrath remove the obstacles.
 And give, O Giver, knowledge and wisdom.
 and ease my sustenance, O Nourisher.
 Open the way, O Opener, with guidance and goodness,
 and favor me with knowledge, O Knower.
 Seize the spirit of every enemy, O Seizer;
 and O Releaser of grace, overwhelm me completely.
15. And O Diminisher, reduce every opponent's power,
 and O Exalter, raise me up despite the hater.
 By your strength, O Strengtheners, my power is strengthened;
 O Abaser, be the one who humbles oppressors.
 You heard my prayer, O Hearer, so now become
 the Seer of my condition, with generous mercy.
 They complained of oppression to a Judge;
 he is the Just – how much hard tyranny has he destroyed!
 He is Gracious toward my state, merciful to my complaint,
 and Knowing of my weakness if I am disturbed.
 20. I keep making mistakes, but the Gentle one conceals them;
 my Lord is Great at forgiving when I stumble.
 Pardoning one, cancel and forgive my sins and my missteps,
 Grateful one, maintain thanks in my heedless heart.
 And raise my station, Lofty one, for by your mention,
 my worth is glorious, O Mighty one.
 Preserver for my spirit, keeping me won't burden you,

- the Guardian, so send me sustenance, O Lord.
Your protection is enough, Sufficer, so save me;
you are Splendid, so illuminate my worth.
25. You are Judging, O God, so excuse me;
Loving one, make love descend into my heart.
My Lord Noble in giving, make my gift the best;
Watcher of enemies, that is enough, though they be none.
I've asked, O Answering one, for acceptance of something,
O Comprehensive good, the source of wondrous gifts.
Exalted one, make my memorial great for the people,
and raise my victory's army soon, O Quickener.
O Witness of a people in what they have done,
O Truth, take revenge upon them soon!
For you are my Protector, O Protector for them all,
and my sufficiency, since the Powerful one is guardian.
30. Strong one, strengthen my force, and preserve me,
and your first ones in my friendship, O Ruler!
I praise a Praiser who continues favor,
a Reckoner for those who seem cheerful destroyers.
And Lifegiver, extend for me a precious life;
Deathgiver, hasten death for my slanderous foes.
You began with your own goodness, Maker of gifts;
and you are the Restorer of all that fades or dies.
O Living one, bring back to life my dead heart, so I keep remembering you, Eternal one, while I am connected.
35. And O Finder, find for us every objective,
and O Supreme one, raise me, make me trustworthy.
O Single one, I have no relief but you;
O Everlasting one, relieve me, say, "Your worry's gone."
O Forceful one, destroy my enemy in his trap;
O Destiner, ruin the lying gossiper.
O Quickener, let my memory continue in the heights,
as my enemy's memory sinks, O Delayer.
For precedence, O First one, say, "You are the first,"
O Last one, decree that I die in prayer to you.
40. My God, show me the truth, you are the Outer,
and O Inner, cancel one who is a liar.
O Ruler, preserve people's rulers, when they become just and lofty, O Sublime one.
O Good one, drench me with goodness, serve me
with my fate; forgive and accept me, O Absolver.
O Avenger, my lord, avenge me on enemies,
be kind and pardon me, O Exonerater.
Be kind to me, O Kind one, and helpful,
you've been my fortress, Master of the Kingdom.
45. Pour your majesty on me, Majestic one;
your goodness keeps flowing, O Generous one.
O Apportioner, base my intention on justice;
Encompasser, collect for me satisfaction's rest.
O Rich one, replace my poverty with wealth,
O Enricher, sweeten my drink with contentment.
Preventer, prevent me from evil and protect me;
Damager, be a punishment for enviers.
Provider, provide me with knowledge, guide me;
Light, be the lamp for the light in my heart.

50. O Guide, guide me to the truth with wonders;
O Renewer, increase my gain of knowledge.
Keep guidance in my heart, O Subsisting one,
and be my link to the mind's knowledge,
O Inheritor.
Set my prayers on guidance, O Leader,
O Patient one, give me adornment for patience.
By your beautiful names! I prayed to you,
my lord.
As a beggar I brought them, my creator.
By your beautiful names! I prayed to you,
my sustainer.
As a beggar I brought them, my creator.
55. By your beautiful names! I prayed to you,
O God.
As a beggar I brought them, my creator,
In supplication to you, my lord, by their grace,
and by them I hope for every hoped-for goal.
So accept, O God, with your own satisfaction,
and help me against troubled times, many or few.
Be good, forgive, have mercy, suffice, and help quickly,
turn, guide, and save everything completely.
For after that, the names of God are many,
and the greatest is most beautiful to the wise.
61. So recite them, you there, repeat again,
And you'll see all things made easy and simple.
And God, be responsive to our prayer,
and please bestow your best bounties upon us.

2. The Pearl Poem in A (*Maqṣūrat al-jawhara*)⁶

Abu Madyan Shu'ayb al-Ghawth (d. 1198) is one of the most famous Sufis of the Maghrib, born near Seville and buried in Tlemcen where his tomb is a prominent place of pilgrimage. His Arabic poems have been widely known throughout the region.⁷ This particular poem, which includes some stern sermons on the topic of hellfire, was extremely popular in West Africa, and hundreds of copies of the text are known to exist. It is known as a *maqṣūra*, i.e., a poem rhyming in *alifmaqṣūra*. Its distinct character justifies its title, "the pearl" (*jawhara*). Especially noteworthy is the section in verses 20-26, where the author provides a list of the most prominent Sufis of Baghdad in the ninth and tenth centuries. This demonstrates a wide range of appreciation of the Sufi legacy, from the ecstatics such as Abū Yazīd and Maṣṣūr (Ḥallāj) to the founders of the four major Sunnī schools of law. Omar quotes lines 64 and 65 in his 1819 letter (Document 1 in our inventory, listed as no. 13 on the ITI website), addressed to his enslavers, Jim Owen and John Owen, as part of a strong warning against sin and invitation to repentance, accompanied by his request to be returned to Africa.

The poem in A that I have called the Pearl is a polish for the rust that stains the mind.

6 Abū Madyan Shu'ayb al-Ghawth, *Dīwān*, ed. 'Abd al-Qādir Su'ūd and Sulaymān al-Qurashī, (Beirut: Kitāb-Nāshirūn, 1432/2010), 89-95. The title refers to the use of *alifmaqṣūra* as the end rhyme. Fourteen additional lines not found in this edition (numbered 40, 50, 81, 83, 92, 95, 99-102, 111-114 in my translation) have been supplied from the Spanish translation by Ahmed Shafik, who discovered them in a manuscript in Libya. See Ahmed Shafik, "Poema de Exhortación Piadosa: Maqṣūrat al-Īawhara de Abū Madyan: Traducción y Notas," in *al-Andalus Magreb: Estudios Arabes e Islámicos* 23 (2016): 93-126.

7 Denis Gril, "Abū Madyan," in *EI3*, ed. Kate Fleet et al., accessed August 19, 2022, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_24740.

- Don't keep company with others, except those who
guide you from error to guidance.
Don't be at peace with the world, for it
is a violent poison without a cure.
There is no hope of strength or healing
for one sickened by its disease.
5. One who does not study sciences and wisdom
is like the insects in the grass.
One who does not look away from the forbidden -
nothing can be expected from his heart but
obscurity.
One who seeks no counsel from the wise
and pious
is blackened inside from his regret.
We have no abode except the letters,
nor do we have knowledge except for virtue.
Save provisions for a lonely grave,
where a man has lost what he acquired.
10. So do a good deed for the day of judgment
to be rewarded at death when meeting
God.
My brother, practice repentance, patience,
silence, fasting, and nightly vigil.
You must do retreat and meditate
to be safe from speech that causes harm.
For death comes suddenly, so be afraid;
you'll meet it either by night or by day.
Repent what's past, and anticipate now
what still remains of life that is decreed.
15. Awake from sleep, you heedless one,
and study hard, and be aware –
Travel the path of one who surpasses men,
Muḥammad, best of messengers and prophets.
Be careful, boy, of wandering from his
path,
for innovations are the worst of deeds.
Beware of greed, and likewise envy,
avarice, vain wishes, and arrogance.
The best virtues are abstinence and humility;
practice good morals and be generous.
20. Follow Ma'rūf al-Karkhī and then Sarī,
then Ibn Adham, the pure and pious.
- Then Uways, and after him Abū Yazīd,
and Junayd – how beautiful these loyal
ones!
Then follow Masrūq, and Dhū al-Nūn
and Shiblū, and Malik the pure,
And Thābit al-Banānī, Ibn Wasī',
then Ḥabīb al-'Ajamī who came,
Sāliḥ al-Madd, and Faṭḥ al-Mawsilī,
Sufyān, Ṭāwūs al-Yamāniyā,
25. Also Shaqīq, al-Munkadirī,
and Khawāṣṣ, and Maṣṣūr were famous.
And Mālik and Shāfi'ī excelled,
and Ḥanafī and Ibn Ḥanbal.
They are the ones illuminated by light of
him
who is beyond all other lights,
The noblest born of woman,
the best example of generosity,
More bountiful than a flood during a
drought,
braver than a lion when facing the enemy.
30. Beg help from him, when battles clash
where there is conflict, and trouble centers.
Those who follow his tracks are saved,
but those who oppose him perish.
Of all who rebel, one seeking his intercession
perhaps will be saved from crimes he
committed.
Recognizing his guilt in this disaster,
paradise may be hoped for by their rank.
Then after this what he wants is attained
in pleasure in the highest paradise,
35. With clothing, food, and drink,
and then he weds his fair houri.
He attains great rank, including
a station alongside the chosen Prophet.
One who fights his soul over what it desires
finds his lord's satisfaction on judgment
day.
One who attains knowledge to practice it
reaches his desire and is saved from the
fire.
And one who is obedient to his parents
gets to eternity with full satisfaction.

40. One who is disobedient to his parents and does not repent, has a hard heart.
One who performs prayer at its times you'd call blessed and satisfied.
One who does prayer at other times you'd count cursed and destroyed.
One who fasts in heat and wakes by night receives all that he wants in paradise.
One who fails to give alms on what he earns,
his face and back will burn.
45. One who swears an oath as a criminal fire will scorch his face and scalp.
One who cares not from where his food comes,
his abode is hell, unlucky youth!
One who never stays within the laws will perish with swift retribution.
One who is slack in repentance himself will be burned until death.
The cause is your love of that which is worth
a gnat's wing to humanity's creator.
50. One who does not proceed with intention free of vanity only gains fatigue.
One who does not purify himself from usury
will be like lion's prey, all unaware.
One who does not abstain from fornication tomorrow becomes like a great mountain.
One who is with the crowd committing crime
licks the pus that drips from him.
One who does not save his tongue from lies—
consider hypocrisy as his profession.
55. One who kills a soul without any right receives eternal punishment from hellfire.
Snakes and scorpions bite him;
their poison won't abate in seventy years.
The serpent is the size of a camel,
and the scorpion is like black mules.
The serpent travels six months,
while the scorpion's journey is for a month.
One who doesn't struggle with his soul is lost,
and it won't stop calling him to ruin.
60. So protect yourself from enemies, these four:
the soul, the devil, the world, and desire.
Do not harm a Muslim in his possessions, his family, his honor, or his body.
Don't approach oppression, or orphans' goods,
don't drink wine, and you get salvation.
False testimony, slander of women,
and back-biting lies are great sins.
By God! You're turning gray – what are you waiting for?
my brother, do you grasp the fate of those departed?
65. Are you crazy, or are you a fool?
your hair is white, but the heart is black.
You have seen how death destroys,
turning lovers' houses into wasteland.
It alarms them no matter what they own,
orphaning children and burdening women.
You will think them hunters after happiness
in the narrow grave in suffering.
How shall one who seeks heaven ease up or sleep, if he obeys the lord?
70. How shall he laugh if he fears hellfire?
Amazing! how the weakling enjoys himself!
How can we be safe from hell fire,
before we reside in highest heaven?
For beyond us there will be the balances,
then the bridge, and scrolls unfurled –
A man will not recall his family there until he sees salvation from those three.
Don't pay attention to your soul, or an innovator,
and don't accompany the ignorant.
75. Do not follow the erring and lustful,
or those who invite you to vanity.
Stay with the wise and the insightful,
my brother, so they save you from desire.
Hold the image of death before your eyes to make poverty and suffering easy for you.
Then remember the grave and the fear of Munkir
and Nakīr and their dreadful task.

- Their eyes are like blazing lightning,
 And their voices sound like thunder,
 80. When they come with dragging hair
 to question the dead in the grave.
 The dead man remains terrified to see
 these angels and becomes confused.
 God supports those who have faith
 as they answer, in this world and the next.
 The transgressor remains terrified,
 as they beat him with iron goads and
 hooked rods.
 And after this reproof and mustering,
 the sun's heat, as it comes close to people,
 85. Finally multiplies seventy times,
 boiling the brains of all who disobey.
 God will question all the worshippers
 about four things, so think about them:
 Their lives and what has perished of their
 youth,
 that's lost, and what they purchased,
 What they did with what they learned—
 store up rewards, so you can answer this.
 The lord will put a seal upon their mouths
 so that their limbs will tell about their sins.
 90. "Would that this creation never existed,
 and that the day of judgment were not
 seen!"
 This day will be difficult, and feared
 by every prophet, and every near angel.
 Out of ignorance we have forgotten it.
 Alas, our hearts distracted to indifference!
 For everything you did is written down
 what you seek pardon for, both great and
 small.
 For death is unavoidable for all,
 no doubt of resurrection and reward.
 95. Our sins surround us;
 we weep over them and never tell them.
 Our eyes don't see, as if by night,
 blinded from guidance by worldly desire.
 Our life is fated to be heedlessness
 of guided paths on which the race is run.
 Our ears do not listen to the preacher;
 their hearing's deafened by obscenities.
 We spend the day in search of sustenance
 and pass the night in deepest sleep.
 100. It's a loss that has been aggravated
 to an extreme well known to the insightful.
 One who sells his religion for interest,
 will disobey during a fleeting life.
 One who invests it for the benefit of oth-
 ers,
 will be in the most precious of assets.
 I warned you of corruption and rebellion,
 I guided you with counsel and advice.
 I told you what to do, but I didn't do it,
 I forbade you, but my heart didn't cease.
 105. I preached to others, but I should have
 preached to my soul,
 for it had abandoned the castle of guid-
 ance.
 Preaching to others is a torch that sancti-
 fies –
 it burns itself but is a light for people.
 It's a whetstone for sharpening another's
 spearpoint
 made of iron, although it cannot cut.
 By my soul! Be first to copy its command
 and prohibition in everything traditional.
 Command the right, forget about yourself,
 As you have read in revelation's book.
 110. My soul, why do you say what you don't
 do?
 The word of one who doesn't act is hateful.
 I hope you will make efforts for salvation
 In order to become intelligent.
 Abandon vanity, open up to the guide,
 And be sincere, to round up enemies.
 This is advice I give
 to the sensible, the sane,
 And every Muslim longing
 For a fate that leads him to the right path.
 115. I've asked you, God almighty, who looks
 over him
 with a pure prayer, who is a host,
 And by the Hashemite prophet Ahmad
 Who seals peace and victory for me to-
 morrow,
 For all the Muslims, each and every one,
 Living or dead, and underneath the stars.
 May God the Creator bless
 the Messenger, the chosen sea of faith,
 As many times as he numbers his crea-
 tures, in heaven

And earth, as grains of sand, plants, and pebbles.

120. May God bless his companions and family,
The stars that guide the travelers by night.

3. Pearl Necklace of the Path (*Wāsiyat al-sulūk*)⁸

This poem was written by another scholar from Tlemcen (modern Algeria), a poet known as al-Ḥawḍī, who was a close disciple of the famous theologian Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Sanūsī (d. 895/1490).⁹ The latter was the author of many important works on Islamic theology and mysticism, and was particularly famous for his creeds, which are available in short, medium, and long versions. Al-Ḥawḍī transformed the short creed of al-Sanūsī into a poem of 144 verses, making it a neat summation of Islamic doctrines, handily available for memorization because of its verse form. Al-Sanūsī was so appreciative of his disciple’s poetic summary that he wrote a detailed commentary on it. The poem’s Sufi tendencies are evident in passages like lines 25-26, where the author reflects on the prophetic saying that describes creation as the vehicle by which God is known. Omar quotes verse 2 at the beginning of his 1819 letter to the Owen brothers, and also as the first quotation in Document 15, mentioned above. For him, it functions as a declaration of divine transcendence that is a fitting way to begin any writing.

[Invocation]

Praise be to God, proved by our creation,
then by our need of him,

8 Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Sanūsī al-Ḥasanī, *Sharḥ wāsiyat al-sulūk*, ed. Nizār Ḥammādī, (Damascus: Dār al-Taqwā, 1440/2018), 249-257. Since the poem of al-Ḥawḍī covers a number of themes, section titles have been added in brackets; the author had already inserted the word “section” in several places, evidently with the same intention.

9 H. Bencheneb, “al-Sanūsī,” in *EI2*, ed. P. Bearman et al., accessed August 18, 2022, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_1001.

The first, the only, without beginning,
the last, the eternal, without ending.

I praise him in thanks at all times,
for guidance to the faith.

Then blessing and eternal peace
upon the chosen Prophet Muḥammad,

5. His fine, gracious, and noble family,
and his companions, pious men and caliphs.

[Introduction]

Now the noblest science is theology,
since he on whom it rests is its foundation.
I have asked God to make easy for me
a poem in *rajaz* meter with clear meaning,
Close to the source and the topics
that youths study in academies,
Which take the reader outside narrow dogma,

requiring an insight that’s correct.

10. Many a just man among the great
gets from it what he needs, since it’s a
summary.

I named it “the Pearl Necklace of the Path,”
since it explains the nature of the path.

And we ask our lord for success
towards guidance, towards realization.

[Reason in Theology]

The subject is in dividing intellect’s judgment

by clarify of proof, not by tradition.

The intellectual realm is restricted to proof
by necessary, possible, and impossible.

15. So intellectual necessity is everything
that is not impossible for the active intellect.

And the impossible is all that is not found
as a concept in intellect when intended.

The possible can correctly be nonexistent
or existent, but its eternity is impossible.

Then for adults it is legally required
to know the truth of God decisively

From the necessary, possible, and impossible,

not by tradition, but by proof.

20. In this way, the truth of the noble prophets
flows for them by these principles.

[Proof of God as Creator]

The first, whose existence is necessary—
his proof is our existing world.

For it requires an originator
independent of any other,

So that the subject is not thought to depend
on circular reasons or endless chains.

That is itself the proof of eternity,
the everlasting denial of nothingness.

25. Before, God was a solitary treasure
who had no need to create anything.
But he made creatures so they would know
him,
and worship him, and proclaim his unity,

[The Nature of God]

And his existence, different in its essence
and attributes from anything temporal,

Is not a body, no! Not bodily,
and not a place, not spatial.

And nothing is above to overshadow him,
nor any foundation beneath to lessen him.

30. He has no left or right or before
or behind or sleep or state of slumber.
For if he were to incline to the temporal —
glory to him!—he would be created,
Because of the preceding conclusive
proofs of eternity and permanence.
For he the most high exists by himself,
and independent in his holy attributes.
He does not stand in need of any place
or position to produce a journey,
35. For permanent eternal attributes
require the attribute of transcendence.
And he is solitary in his kingship,
and all is under his wrath and possession.
He has no second and no peer,
no administrator or minister,
For if by fate such were to be the case,
there would be two gods, or even many.
Impotence unavoidably negates
description of God, due to difference.
40. But proof and demonstration is correct,
because he is one without a second.
Living, knowing, wishing, decreeing,
conversing, hearing, and seeing,
Knowledge, power, and wish,
with life: you have won a gift.

Were a single one of these attributes de-
nied to him,
all being from him must have been de-
stroyed.

[Creator and Creation]

But the creator's power has influence,
and every being is measured by it.

45. And with the wish he is the specifier
and by it every measured thing is speci-
fied.

They both have connection to the possible,
not to the impossible, by clear proof.

And servants have an elemental power
through the creator's own created power.

But he is not subject to influence
from servants; that is the teaching of guid-
ance.

Just as they have an intended purpose,
he has one in his healing and beneficence.

50. The servant is compelled by this expres-
sion
in a frame chosen without coercion.
But our lord does as he wishes,
fate flowing according to his desire.

[God's Knowledge]

And his knowledge absorbs what is known,
containing existence and nonexistence.

He has encompassed everything named
in knowledge, in number, and in splendor.
The universal is not hidden from his
knowledge

among the rest of things, nor the partic-
ular,

55. On land or sea or in the heavens,
or anything else in existence.
His hearing, sight, and speech are all
existent, having no cessation,
Eternal, like his sublime essence,
and like his lofty radiant attributes,
Which have the book and saying as a
scripture—
denying that to him would be a defect.
But defect in his attributes is impossible—
no, he is first and truest in perfection.
60. He hears the footfalls of ants and mosqui-
toes
whether in desert or in deep ravine.

He hears the worry in one's thoughts
and what is uttered in one's mind.
He sees the atom and what is yet smaller;
nothing is hid from him in any station.
And he sees food on the path
of its journey through veins to limbs.
All that is heard and all that is seen
is unveiled to our powerful lord.

65. His hearing and seeing are both connected
to everything existing, as verified.

[God's Speech: the limits of scripture]

His speech is eternal, without discrepancy,
without sounds, and without letters.
Moses heard him on Mt. Sinai,
and our Prophet heard him in the heights.
But all that's thought within the heart,
the conceptions, and the limbs –
Our lord God the powerful king
is glorious and mighty beyond that.

70. Resemblance does not apply to one who
lacks
resemblance or likeness, which he tran-
scends.
Intellects are confounded by describing
him;
there is no path to comprehending him.
How different are they who are guided to
him
by his creation, from those who seek proof
of him.

Section. [God's Attributes]

And the attributes that are mentioned are
for negation, for the soul, or for the essence.
So it is incumbent on mature believers
to firmly know that these are all correct,
75. In our lord's truth, just as it's impossible
for their opposites to be in his transcen-
dent truth,
Since he is prior and truer in majesty,
in ornaments of glory, and qualities of per-
fection.

Section. [God's Actions are Free]

As for what he permits in his actions,
the possible proclaims his perfection.
Therefore what he originates for people,
and sustenance that he conveys to them,

- And benefits that he has shown to them,
and all the bounties and the gifts,
80. And the guidance and the faith,
and deviation and disobedience,
And generosity and reward,
and permission and punishment—
There is no duty for him in all these;
rather, he is deserving of praise.
If he is kind to the sinner and harsh to the
good,
and merciful to all, yet punishes the whole,
That is the possibility that was ordained,
and his action was fine and beautiful.
85. The one who has absolute ownership
has control that is verified.
If some affair were obligatory for him,
or if his possibility became impossible,
Permissible would turn into impossible,
or necessary – that's incomprehensible.
And seeing God is proven intellectually;
how, in this world or the next, comes from
tradition.
Just as God sees us without direction,
we shall clearly see his sublime essence.
90. The view of one who denies this is refuted,
for he who is transcendent is existent.

Section. [Revelation]

The mission of the noble prophets
to humankind is in accord with reason,
Despite their challenge to the miracles
according with the prophets' call to people.
For this is in the role of the divine word,
addressing people without any error:
"My servant speaks truth; accept what he
brings,

- and follow him in everything he does."
95. Then in the prophet's case, it is necessary
to meet what he calls for with acceptance
Or the miracle that they challenged,
according with his call when it appeared.
Honesty, purity, and eloquence
are parts of prophecy to him entrusted,
And his authority is to be seen
over his people, likewise his command.
And they prefer him over their posses-
sions,
life, and children, and their family.

100. It is right that none can accuse him,
of lies, deception, or sinfulness,
Or hiding any part of revelation,
or abandoning advice for violent force.
He defies every description attached to
him
by faultfinding and all that it implies.

[The Prophetic Role]

The Prophet is permitted necessities
recognized as the human condition,
Such as eating, drinking, marriage,
sleeping, sickness, war, and conflict,

105. Lodging, riding, wearing clothes,
and everything else on which life is based,
And other things required by the body.
His words and deeds are all beautiful!
The right of one prophet is like the right of
all of them,
since they are the people worthiest of
highest honor,
For they are in the attribute of prophecy,
made equal or superior to humanity.
Some exceed others in their gifts,
distinguished by superior degrees.

[Uniqueness of Muḥammad]

110. But the best of the prophets and the mes-
sengers
is our prophet, Muḥammad the faithful
guide.
Existence was created from his light,
so proof and demonstration then appeared.
For he has brought the established Qur'ān,
a miracle to last through the ages,
And miracles whose number is uncounted,
whose worth is proclaimed among the
prophets.
Every prophet's miracles came to an end
when he expired, while his law remained.

115. But the signs of Ahmad did not expire
nor were they voided over time by resis-
tance.
The everlasting miracle of the Qur'ān,
one of the greatest proofs, will be enough,
And his completed mission to the wise,
the strongest evidence he was the best of
men.

And if tomorrow he holds the flag among
the prophets,
his community will thereby be the best.
This is proof by intellect and tradition,
which intellects don't contain by counting
it.

[Faith]

120. Faith and confirming it are necessary,
with everything that sums up or defines it,
Like duty, the exemplary, or virtue,
that constitutes his glorious community.
And faith in the angels is required,
and their reality, so don't neglect it.
And all that is affirmed, delivered, and
corrected by his words, should be estab-
lished.
And everything that's finished or will fin-
ish now,
and things that are concealed in the future,

125. Like what will happen at the end of time –
corruption, opposition, and dissent,
The question of the grave and its reward,
and punishment and forgiveness,
Resurrection, bridge, and balance scales,
garden of paradise and fire of hell.
When all associations are cut off,
and justice is delivered to the people,
Then one who obeyed or rebelled in action
is rewarded in measures weighing a mus-
tard seed.

[Judgment]

130. There is no one who escapes his own in-
justice
in anything, even if it's only nail clippings,
Except if God wishes it from generosity,
bestows forgiveness, and satisfies oppo-
nents,
With hidden things other than that,
and every strange thing that is controver-
sial,
Like the night of the ascension and what
it entails,
and everything good that it produced for
him;
That is an ocean that does not have a shore,
nor do buckets muddy its water.

[Prayer]

135. Let us be satisfied with them to this extent,
since it contains enough for happiness.
And let us ask God, who inspires us
with his grace, for the poem on what he
taught us,
That it closes beautifully for us and with
proof
both for a question and at time of death.
Let him show forgiveness to the fathers
and the mothers, so too the prophets,
and our shaykhs from whom the light
of their influence shines on us and explains,
140. And every reciter and every scribe
and kindly overseer and master,
By the glory of the best of prophets,
Muṣṭafā,
illustrious leader and best possession,
Muḥammad the praised, the best of prais-
ers,
the chosen one, beloved of creation's lord.
The best of blessings and peace be upon
him,
the dawn that dispels the shadows of dark-
ness,
And his family, companions, and all who
follow him privately and publicly.

Bibliography

- Abū Madyan Shu'ayb al-Ghawth. *Dīwān*. Edited by 'Abd al-Qādir Su'ūd and Sulaymān al-Qurashī. Beirut: Kitāb-Nāshirūn, 1432/2010.
- al-Dimyāṭī, Nūr al-Dīn. "al-Qaṣīda al-Dimyāṭī-yya," al-Ṣafḥa al-Rashīdiyya al-Idrīsīyya li-aḥbāb wa-tilāmīdhāt al-sayyid al-sharīf Maḥmūd ibn 'Uthmān Baṣrī (blog), 13 September 2018, <https://hi-in.facebook.com/386896678322561/posts/729043544107871/>, (accessed August 19, 2022).
- Bencheneb, H. "al-Sanūsī," in *EI2*, ed. P. Bearman et al. 2012, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_1001, (accessed August 18, 2022).

- Gril, Denis, "Abū Madyan," in *EI3*, ed. Kate Fleet et al., 2016, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_24740, (accessed August 19, 2022).
- Hunwick, John. "'I Wish to Be Seen in Our Land Called Afrika': 'Umar b. Sayyid's Appeal to Be Released from Slavery (1819)," in *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 5 (2003): 62–77.
- Lo, Mbaye, and Carl W. Ernst. *I Cannot Write my Life: Islam, Arabic, and Slavery in Omar ibn Saïd's America*. Chapel Hill NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2023.
- al-Sanūsī al-Ḥasanī, Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Yūsuf. *Sharḥ wāsiṭat al-sulūk*. Edited by Nizār Ḥammādī. Damascus: Dār al-Taqwā, 1440/2018.
- Shafik, Ahmed. "Poema de Exhortación Piadosa: Maqṣūrat al-Ŷawhara de Abū Madyan: Traducción y Notas," in *al-Andalus Magreb: Estudios Árabes e Islámicos* 23 (2016): 93–126.
- Vimercati Sanseverino, Ruggero. "Al-Dimyāṭī, Nūr al-Dīn," in *EI3*, 2015, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_26037, (accessed August 19, 2022).