ʿAšig maʿbad (The Passion of Maʿbad): The Epic Confronts Hilali History

Why did the Bani Hilal Bedouin Arab tribes depart their ancestral lands in the Arabian peninsula to march westward against North Africa? Beginning in the eighth century with westward migrations to Egypt, by the eleventh century their descent on the Maghreb would be compared to "clouds of locusts." This famous description of the Hilalis North African incursions characterizes the influential analysis proposed by fourteenth century historian Ibn Khaldun, who sought the causes of the Hilali invasion in the complex political intrigues that opposed Egyptian and Tunisian rulers: when al-Muʿizz Ibn Baḏis, ruler of Ifriqiyya, switched allegiance from Cairo to the ʿAbbasid Caliph of Baghdad, the Egyptian Fatimid leaders sought vengeance by unleashing the Hilali tribes against Tunis. Scholars also point to severe cyclical famines in the Arabian peninsula which historically have contributed to waves of tribes migrating westward towards the more fertile coastal areas along Mediterranean shores.[1] While famine and international politics are readily acknowledged as the twin precipitating factors for Hilali migrations and invasions, in contrast many epic poets and storytellers of Upper Egypt, who recite the popular cycle of tales about the Hilali tribes known throughout the Arabic-speaking worlds

as *Sīrat Banī Hilāl,* present an alternate literary history and reading from traditional chroniclers such as Ibn Khaldun.

According to the performed version by the Upper Egyptian epic poet ʿAwadallah ʿAbd al-Jalil ʿAli, it is a father-daughter tale of incest that frames, indeed instigates, the occasion of the Hilali invasion of North Africa. The incest theme is enshrined in the opening sequence of Part II of the customary tripartite division of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* entitled the *riyada* or "reconnaissance," even as it is enunciated in the opening tale's subtitle as given by the poet ʿAwadallah: "The Passion of Maʿbad for His Daughter" (ʿašig maʿbad maʿ bintuh).

ʿAwaḍallah ʿAbd al-Jalīl ʿAli is an epic poet from the province of Aswan in Upper Egypt. He sings in the surrounding southern Egyptian marketplaces, in cafes, during public ceremonies, and at people's homes to celebrate births, weddings, circumcisions, a return from the hajj to Mecca, and Ramadan break fasts. I have described elsewhere the complex status of the epic poet in southern Egypt as well as my research project to record versions of the epic by professional reciters.[2] ʿAwadallah begins his "elicited" performance, recorded 13 March 1983 in Luxor, Egypt,[3] first with the title, then with a brief praise-poem or *maḏīḥ* (lines 1-2):

1. yā ʿēnī -iṣṣabr awlāli[4]

Patience is foremost [first]

2. -iṣṣabr awla min ilgalagān

Patience is more important than worry

The tale continues as he recounts how the ruler of Tunis, Sultan Maʿbad, chances to ascend the upper levels of his vast palace there to encounter, presumably for the first time, his grown-up and now beautiful daughter, ʿAzīza. Overcome at the sight of her, Maʿbad falls to the ground in a swoon causing his daughter to gather him up in her arms (lines 3-33):

3. maʿbad jālis ʿala –lkarāsi

Maʿbad is seated on his throne,

4. ʔabu ʿazīza rajil sulṭān

father of ʿAzīza, a sultan.

5. tišūru jamīʿ ilʿarab

All the Arabs seek his counsel,

6. tišūru jamīʿ ilfirsān

All the horsemen, seek him.

7. illa fī yōm min illayāli

Then one day among the nights,

8. tammit-lu -šhūr wa-zaman

months and destiny came to pass,

9. lam ṭilʿaš ilgaṣr ilʿali

he never ascended the lofty palace

10. ʿand mirātu fōg abu ʿimdān

to his wife atop the many-pillared castle,

11. ṭiliʿ il-gaṣr ilʿali

he ascended the lofty palace,

12. wa-yišarraf fōg il-binyān

and looks down from atop the building.

13. huwwa wi-ṭāliʿ ʿa –ssalāl̈im

While ascending the stairs,

14. yibuṣṣ bi -ʿēnu bi –lʿayān

he glances with his eyes,

15. yunzur essaf̈ira ʿaz̈iza

he looks on the elegant ʿAz̈iza

16. lakinni xārja min ilḥammām

as she was leaving the baths,

17. ṭalga –lmisk I maʿ -ṭṭ̈ib

wafting musk with perfume,

18. wa min šammu –lʿaɬil yiṯib

from her scent, the sick are cured,

19. izā kān rāgid ʿal mōt darkān

if one lay near death, a last breath,

20. jara –lmirwād fi –lʿēn

when she lines the kohl stick along her eye

21. wa –tfaṭir ṣāyim ramaḍan

she makes those who fast, break Ramadan

22. labsa tōb šimini wa –rxini

wearing a robe, scented and diaphanous,

ʿAwadallah: inšabak

he is ensnared

23. ḥalig wisnig min giddām

watch how her breasts break loose in front.

24. šūf ilbint I xāyil ʿādalha āh[5]

See the maiden, beautifying her form, ah,

25. min fōg ʿali –ṣṣarāya

from atop the high palace,

26. koḫl ilʿēn maʿna ʿāda ɬiha

kohl-darkened eyes as was her custom,

27. galīl waṣfiha fi –ṣṣabāya

few of her description among the maidens.

28. yā mā jamīla

O how beautiful she was,

29. mabrumt issāg

rounded, firm legs,

30. yā ʿēni mabrumt issāg

O her rounded, firm legs,

31. u mīn fi -ṣṣabāya jamīlha

and who among the maidens has her beauty,

32. tigūl ṭīn jazīra lamma sāg

you would say a silted island when the water rises

33. ilbint I xāyil jammālha / jamīlha[6]

the girl, imagine her beauty.

As ʿAzīza tends her fainting father, father and daughter meet in a seemingly innocent physical embrace (lines 34-46) and ʿAzīza presciently inquires if her father's fainting spell means he has lost his reason.

34. u maʿbad waʔI -lʿazīza

Maʿbad gazed on ʿAzīza,

35. ʿaglu -ssalīm andār

his sound reason became twisted,

36. ṭāḥ ʿa -lgasr ilʿali

astray above the high castle,

37. wagaʿ bēn ijjirdān

he fell down the staircase.

38. ʿazīza tlimm abūha

ʿAzīza gathered up her father

39. bēn innihūd maʿ -rrumān

between her breasts, they are like pomegranates.

40. šamm ilmisk maʿ -ṭīb

He smelled musk and scent,

41. karaf irrīha -ssulṭān

the sultan smelled perfume from afar.

42. galit ya abūya ʔismallah ʿalēk

She said, “O my father, God protect you,

43. ʔismallah ʿalēk ya sultān

God protect you, O sultan,

44. ya –buya ēh illi jarālak

O my father, what happened to you?

45. ʿaglak issaɫ̄im mindār

Your sound reason is turned around?"

Succoured between her perfumed breasts, Maʿbad falls in love with his own daughter using phrases well known to amorous Upper Egyptian partners (lines 46-54): "when are lovers to be blamed."[7] Love conquers all, according to the sultan, even permitting him the authority to marry, rather than marry off, his own daughter:

46. gāl ya ʿazīza xallini fi ḥāli

He said, "O ʿAzīza, let me be,

47. mettā ʿa-lʿašagīn malām

when are lovers to be blamed,

48. ya bit ana ʿašigtak

O daughter, I desire you,

49. ilḥubb budʿa lam ʿazar insān

love is a marvel, a person cannot be blamed.

50. ya ʿazīza ʔana ʿašigtak

O ʿAzīza I desire you,

51. u-galbi ktēr liki māl

and my heart yearns for you.

52. ya biti ana kātib li-waḥdi

O my daughter, I will draw up a marriage contract myself,

53. ʔaktab ʿalēki

I will draw up one with you,

54. w-ajri ʿalēki li-sunna ḥalāl

and proceed with you according to lawful custom."

Comparing ownership of his daughter 's body to his stewardship over the land, he demands his rightful sexual rights equating them to agricultural bounty. "Who is like your father?" he demands of his daughter, reversing the kin relation most socially taboo, to promote the closest member. Though the preferred marriage partner in Upper Egyptian society for a daughter is in the first cousin line, especially the father's brother's son, Macʿbad's questions to his daughter are disconcertingly direct and sexual to an Upper Egyptian listener: "peaches" and "pomegranates" to be harvested are common similes for a women's breasts, the "orchard" to be "entered" stands for penetrating the female genitals and "to rule and trace the riverbeds" describe the interior fold of the vagina and sexual intercourse.[8]

55. ya bit mi̱n zayy abūki

“O daughter, who is like your father

56. yigni –lxūx maʿ -rrumān

to harvest the peaches and the pomegranates?

57. ya ʿaziza u mi̱n zayy abūki

O ʿAzi̱za who is like your father

58. yixuš ilbusṭān

to enter the orchard?

59. ya biti mi̱n kēf abūki

O my daughter, who is unto your father

60. yuḥkum wa-yirsim bi –lwadyān

to rule and to trace in the riverbeds?

61. ya biti xūdi abūki

O my daughter, marry your father

62. wi-tiʿIši fi̱ hanā wa-ʾamān

and you will live in joy and safety.”

ʿAzīza protests marriage with her father and calls for supporting legal protections, the Muslim *sharʿia* that regulates and ordains lawful unions as interpreted by clerics:

63. ya –buya ʾismallah ʿalēk

"O, my father, may God protect you,

64. yak ʿaglak is-salīm andār

truly your sound mind wanders.

65. mīn gablak axad bitu

Who, before you, has married his daughter

66. fi šarʿ naṣāri wila ʿislām

according to Christian law or in Islam?

67. ya –buya ḥat ilʿulamā

O my father, bring the clerics,

68. ahl ilfaḍl wi –lqurān

people of moral virtue and of the Koran.

69. ʾinn galūlak xūd ʿazīza

If they tell you, marry ʿAzīza,

70. ʾaktib ʿalayy bi-sunna ḥalāl

then write me a marriage contract according to lawful custom."

Maʿbad convenes his clerics and presents them with a series of questions. As Otto Rank observes in his study, *Incest in Literature and Legend*,[9] it is noteworthy that cross-culturally an element of the father-daughter incest theme often includes riddles posed by the father to suitors. Maʿbad's questions to the clerics are prefigured in the rhetorical series already asked to his daughter, ostensible riddles whose meanings are fully understood by ʿAẕiza. The father's purpose, avers Otto Rank, is to set up impossible tasks by asking riddles thereby keeping rivals and suitable love objects from the daughter and permitting the father to possess his own daughter. Rank draws on numerous medieval European tales, ancient Greek, Babylonian and Persian legends, to compare the ways in which suitors must solve impossible riddles or, functionally another substitutable narrative element for a riddle, suitors must overcome dangerous obstacles set by the father before the daughter is awarded to the winner. In these cases, the daughter is an important love object but otherwise she is absent during the important exchanges between the father, her current owner, and a future owner-husband.

In ʿAwadallah's rendition, the Muslim clerics precede, perhaps stand in for potential suitors, because they represent the surrounding religious and social sanctions. Maʿbad's riddles are equally transparent to them and even

though they are in need of more food and clothing as the month long Ramadan approaches, not even material concerns can buy the clerics acquiescence to Maʿbad's requested transgression:

71. maʿbad tawwir munādi

Maʿbad sent around a crier

72. ʿala ahl il-ulama fi kull I bakan

to scholars every place.

73. firḥit ilulama jamiʿan

The scholars all rejoiced,

74. ilmifattaḥ gād ilʿamiyān

the sighted lead the blind.

75. illi yigūl rāḥ yiksīna

Some say he will clothe us,

76. ʿalēna daxil ʿId ramaḍan

for Ramadan is soon upon us,

77. w-illi yigūl hayigataʿ ruʾusna

and others say he will cut off our heads

78. taji –lxsara ʿa –lʿamyān

he will come to cut off the blind.

79. itlammu juwwa –ddawawīn

They gathered inside the diwans,

80. fi diwān maʿbad issulṭān

in the diwan of Maʿbad the sultan.

81. nadaḥ wi-gāl ya ulamā

He called out and said, “O clerics,

82. ʿalēkum wila ʾagati kalām

to you I do not conceal my words:

83. ʿandiyya tamra fi –lbēt, tamar

I have a date tree at my home,

84. ṭaraḥit min gir ʿawām

it became ripe out of season,

85. yiṣaḥḥ nakūlha

is it permissible to eat it

86. wila nizakiha ʿa –laytām

or give it as charity to orphans?”

87. rayis ilulamā yigūllu

The chief cleric said to him:

88. ilkān hiyya tamra

If indeed it is a date tree,”

89. yigullu akl ittamra ḥalāl

he said to him, “ eating dates is permissible,

90. wi-za kān izzēna ʿazīza

but if it is the beauteous ʿAzīza

91. yibga ḥarām ya sultān

it will be a crime, O sultan.”

92. Maʿbad saḥab issēf

Maʿbad wielded his sword

93. ʿalēhum walad ilyaṭagan

against them, he brough forth the javelin,

94. Maʿbad saḥab issēf

Maʿbad wielded his sword.

95. ṭilʿū ramḥīn bi –lmišwār

They emerged fleeing this commission,

96. ilʿulama ṭilʿū ramḥīn

the clerics emerged fleeing,

97. ilmifattaḥ ṣaḥḥ ilʿamyān

the sighted dragging the blind.

Since Maʿbad, the sultan, cannot possess his own daughter according to law or her own consent, as her father and ruler of Tunis, he swears that he will

prevent any other man from having her. Otto Rank notes that in the myths of Perseus, Gilgamesh and Romulus, the father secludes the daughter presumably to preserve her virginity. Frequently, the father's persecution of his daughter arising from rejected love takes the symbolic form of her isolation in a tower:[10]

98. maʿbad xalaf bi yimīn

Maʿbad swore an oath:

99. ana min ṭūl ḥayy ʿa –ddunya

As for me, during my entire life in this world,

100. ʿazīza ma titjawwiz rijāl

ʿAzīza will not marry men."

101. maʿbad nadam il banayīn

Maʿbad summoned builders,

102. jū-lu ḥafyin min arḍ iššām

they came to him, shoeless, from Syrian lands,

103. yindah ʿa –ṭṭawabīn

he summoned brickmakers

104. ʿašra tšaraʿ fi –lbinyān

ten to lay out the building,

105. ilmuhandisīn šayy kaṯīr

engineers, so many of them,

106. šaraḥ ilgaṣr abū -lʿumdān

they laid out the many-pillared castle,

107. šaraḥ gaṣr ʿazīza

they laid out ʿAzīza's castle.

108. ḥalaf wi-watag ilaymān

He swore msking stronger his oaths:

109. min ṭūl ḥayy ʿala –ddunya

"For my entire life on this earth

110. ʿazīza ma dugg rijāl

ʿAzīza will not taste a man."

Aziza is immured in her castle with a maidservant, Mayy, who will serve as the link between Tunis and Arabia. It happens that Mayy is a Hilali Bedouin who appears in the slavemarkets of Tunis. She has been purchased by the sultan to care for ʿAzīza, and she whiles away time amusing the miserable and bored ʿAzīza by recounting tales of her Arabian home and its mighty warriors. Through narrative and storytelling, ʿAzīza falls in love with Yūnis, the hero Abu Zayd's nephew. The two women contrive to send messages back to the Hilalis in Arabia to inform them that Tunis is weak

and easily invaded. The daughter's revenge against the father is powerful, personal, and political. Maʿbad the sultan will lose possession of his daughter just as he will be toppled as ruler. In both instances, his nemesis are the Hilali Bedouins.

What does this performed tale mean to the audience, to the storyteller, and to the folklorist collector? During the performance, Ṣaʿīḍi listeners clucked their tongues disapprovingly as the narrative unfolded. During discussions after the performance, most listeners denied that any instance of father-daughter incest had ever occurred in ʿAwadallah's village of Najis al-Hajʿ. In our private conversations, ʿAwadallah remembered specific village examples and recounted one flagrant case of a daughter impregnated by her father whose child was adopted by her family as her sister at the same time as the sinning father was banished from the village. While these contested and often repressed village histories may or may not support actual cases of known incest in Upper Egypt, what is emphasized in my analysis is the fantasy and the fantastic dimensions of folklore in general, and of popular transmitted folk epic in particular.

According to Otto Rank, the fantasy creations and substitutes emerging from the father-daughter incest complex are always presented from the father's perspective, not the daughter's. Rank larger claims are that

"artistic activity is intended to gratify and justify male sexual fantasies."[11] Comparing father-daughter incest with psychiatry's assertion of the more serious infraction of mother-son incest, Rank notes a diminished degree in kinship between father and daughter and no serious age difference to impede the realization by males (e.g. fathers) of their violent and satisfying expression of fantasies. The father-daughter incest theme in this Upper Egyptian epic shares elements that correspond to many of Rank's characterizations, but at one extreme. The incest is conscious and must be consciously foiled. Therefore it cannot be contained within the family context, instead this instance of father-daughter incest is resolved within vast social and political frameworks: extreme political upheaval will ensue completely reorganizing for centuries to come the geography, boundaries, even the ethnic and religious composition of North Africa. An historical catastrophe for a region, in Ibn Khaldūn's words meriting a description of "locusts descending," can only have as its motivating source, according to Upper Egyptian epic singers, the wrath, incest fear, and ultimately, the realized passion of a woman who cannot be thwarted.

[1] For viewpoints on the geographical and political causes of Hilali movements westward, see Ibn Khaldūn, *Kitab al-ʿibār wa đīwān al-mubtadaʾ wa-al-khabar*, trans. W. MacGuckin de Slane, *Histoire des Berḇres et des dynasties musulmanes de l'Afrique septentrionale* (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1925-26); H. R. Idris, Hilal," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, IX?, p.; and Jacques Berque, "De nouveau sur les Banu Hilal?" in *Studia Islamica* 36 (1972), pp. 99-111.

[2] See my *The Merchant of Art: An Egyptian Hilali Oral Epic Poet in Performance,* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988; "Methodes de transcription et traduction d'une performance de geste orale arabe," in *Le Conte,* ed. Pierre Lyon and Paul Perron Montreal: Didier, 1987), pp. 127-139; "The Death-song of Amir Khafaji: Puns in an Oral and Printed Episode of Sirat Bani Hilal," *Journal of Arabic Literature,* 18 (1987), pp. 62-78; "Arabic Folk Literature and Political Expression," *Arab Studies Quarterly,* 8:2 (Spring 1986), pp. 178-185; and "Praise of God, Praise of Self, Praise of the Islamic People: Arab Epic Narrative in Performance," *Classical and Popular Medieval Arabic Literature: A Marriage of Convenience? Festschrift in Honour of H. T. Norris,"* ed. Farida Abu-Haidar and Jareer Abu Haidar, London: Curzon Press, in press.

[3] The text of ʿAwaḍallah's story is based on my unpublished fieldwork tapes recorded in 1983 in Upper Egypt. A complete set of ʿAwaḍallah's version of *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* is available in the Folk Arts Center, Tawfiqiyya, Cairo, Egypt.

[4] Transliteration protocols for Ṣaʿīḍī Arabic follow Slyomovics, *The Merchant of Art*, pp. 269-273: Appendix A: Notes on Translation and Transliteration.

[5] See *The Merchant of Art*, line 237, p. 114 for ʿAwaḍallah's multiple puns of the phrase.

[6] Ibid., line 1036, p. 221 for ʿAwaḍallah's multiple puns of the phrase.

[7] ʿAwaḍallah employs variants to the phrase, "when are lovers to be blamed," in his rendition of a tale from *A 1001 Nights*, where the theme of a royal father who locks up his daughter because she falls in love with a prince is repeated. See my "Performing *1001 Nights* in Egypt," *Oral Tradition* 9:2 (1993), pp. 390-419.

[8] Ibid., pp. 398-399 where ʿAwaḍallah compares metaphorically the folds of a woman's genitals to delicate bird tracks.
[9] Otto Rank, *The Incest Theme in Literature and Legend: Fundamentals of a Psychology of Literary Creation*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991, especially pp. 300-337 on father-daughter incest.
[10] Ibid., pp. 313-314.
[11] Ibid., p. 301.