

Chapter V

Prophetic Panegyric and Biography

Although *madīh* (Prophetic panegyric) and *sīra* (biography) are distinct categories, they have much in common. *Madīh* involves praise of the Prophet; *sīra* the legendary account of his life, feats and miracles. When praising him the poets frequently make use of biographical material; and when they record the story of his life this invariably becomes, in part, a eulogy. This chapter will give Hausa examples of the two closely related genres and will discuss their sources in classical Arabic literature.

The Arabic Prototypes of Panegyric

Praise poems to the Prophet Muḥammad were composed even during his lifetime. By the thirteenth century such poetry had become established in a formal mould and was associated with a stock of images, miracles and pathetic fallacies known by the Arabic term *muʿjizāt*, the 'evidentiary miracles', that distinguished Muḥammad's life and demonstrated God's special favour towards him. These *muʿjizāt* were initially recorded in the *ḥadīth* literature and later collected together in prose collections such as *al-Shifā'*, 'The Quenching Draught', of the twelfth-century Qādī 'Iyāḍ¹ and the *Dalā'il al-khairāt*, the 'Proofs of Excellence', of the fifteenth-century al-Juzūlī.² But although *madīh* became formalized, it has nonetheless always been an outlet for the emotional needs of worship in Islam, and has provided relief from the dry rituals of orthodoxy. Also, it has long been associated with Islamic mysticism; and the appearance of the literary cult of Prophetic panegyric in a Muslim community probably indicates that it has received Sufism.

The work more responsible than any other for setting the pattern of *madīh* throughout the western Islamic world is the *Burda*, 'The Cloak', of al-Būṣīrī,³ a poem he wrote to celebrate his cure from paralysis, which he attributed to a visionary appearance of the Prophet. But equally influential in West Africa is al-Fāzāzī's *al-ʿIshrīniyyāt*, 'The Twenties', while *al-Qaṣā'id al-witriyya*, 'The Supererogatory Odes', of the thirteenth-century al-Lakhmī,⁴ and the *Simʿ al-hudā*, the

'Necklace of Guidance', of the thirteenth-century Egyptian poet, al-Tawzarī are also important exemplars.⁵ The vast amount of Hausa panegyric that has now accumulated conforms to the pattern of these Arabic poems and repeats their imagery and ideas. This is not plagiarism by Islamic standards and the result is no mere calque. On the contrary, the poet's success in incorporating echoes of the acknowledged masters into his own composition is the measure of his skill and of the religious merit of his verse.

The Verse of Asma bint Shehu

Asma, or Nana as she is sometimes called, was the daughter of the Shehu, Usuman ḍan Fodio. She had a reputation for learning and piety, was a competent Arabist, and composed several works in Fulfulde and Hausa. Historically, her most important vernacular work is *Wāḳar gēwayē*, the 'Song of the Wandering', a verse account of her father's life, in particular his period of peripatetic missionary work, the campaigns and other outstanding events of the *jihād* era. This will be discussed more fully in chapter x. She is also credited with a versification bearing the Arabic title *Qaṣīda fī 'l-munājā*, a work of little literary interest that merely recites the titles of the Koranic *sūras* or chapters and is supposed to protect the reciter from misfortune:

1. I beseech the Merciful, the Almighty King, I call out
2. By the blessedness of the *Sūra* beginning with 'Praise be to God', and also the '*Sūra* of the Cow',
3. And also the '*Sūra* of the Family of 'Imrān' together with that of 'The Women' and 'The Table',
4. And the '*Sūra* of the Cattle', 'The High Places', 'The Gifts' and also 'The Immunity',
5. And by the blessedness of the '*Sūra* of Yūnus', and 'Hūd' and 'Yūsuḥ'.

[XIV]

It is likely that this Hausa versification was inspired by a similar Arabic one attributed to the Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ.

Asma's most interesting work, from a literary point of view, is a Hausa poem bearing the Arabic title *Qaṣīda fī madh al-rasūl*, 'Ode in Praise of the Messenger'. For it is typical of the genre of *madhīh* as it evolved in the vernacular languages of Hausaland.

Ode in Praise of the Messenger

1. Let us for ever thank the King, the Lord of office,
Praise be to the King who created Muḥammad,

2. Let us for ever invoke blessing and peace
Upon the Prophet who excels all others, Aḥmad.
3. Accept the song of praise that I shall sing,
Accept, O people, let us praise Aḥmad,
4. God has enjoined us all to praise him,
Let us make firm our intention, that we may praise Muḥammad,
5. That we may obtain light and radiance of heart,
That we may be cleansed through the praise of the Best of Mankind, Aḥmad,
6. We beg forgiveness from the Glorious God who gives His generosity here and now,
May He give it to us because of the rank of Aḥmad.
7. We have prayed for pardon, that He may forgive us,
The generous King, for the sake of the Best of Mankind, Aḥmad,
8. The best of the best, he excels every other in rank,
According to the word of God Almighty,⁶ He has raised Aḥmad above all others,
9. Heaven is lofty but you know it does not reach
So high as to equal the glory of Muḥammad,
10. The throne of Heaven is beneath him in respect of glory
Because of his glory, our Prophet Muḥammad.
11. His light exceeds the light of the moon on the fourteenth day
of the month
Because there is no light like the light of Muḥammad,
12. So also there is no bravery, for no warrior
Equals the bravery of the Best of Mankind, Aḥmad,
13. Musk and camphor, you should know, none of them are as fine
as
The perfume of aloes-wood of the body of Muḥammad,
14. So also in beauty and in stature, none is like unto him,
For nowhere is there the like of Muḥammad,
15. There has never been created among mortal men the like of him,
Nor will one like him ever be created, Aḥmad,
16. Thus also in qualities of character which give delight, there is none like him,
In cheerfulness of disposition and the fine smile of Muḥammad,
17. As for him, you should know, it is true that he does not become angry,
Sin alone moves him to anger, Muḥammad,

18. Moreover, when he becomes angry none can persuade him
Through craving his patience, only by repentance, Aḥmad,
19. Thus also he shows great forbearance towards all men,
Like the rain cloud of the rainy season is the generosity
of Muḥammad.
20. God gave him many evidentiary miracles,
The Koran is a real wonder as regards Muḥammad,
21. The dying of the Persian fire is also a real [miracle],
The river of Sawa dried up because of Aḥmad,
22. The walls of the Khusrau's [palace] crumbled until the Magian
priests,
When one of their number dreamed his dream, knew the
fear of Aḥmad,
23. Thus also on the thirteenth day of the new moon that was split
in two,
Which al-Bukhārī⁷ and al-Tirmidhī⁸ recounted concerning
Muḥammad,
24. The Koran, you should know, has also spoken of it and explained
it
As his miracle, the Best of Mankind, Aḥmad.
25. One day a tree bent down [to give shade], it was the time of
afternoon prayer,
Because °Alī sought [its help] on behalf of Muḥammad.
. . .
26. He it was who was mounted on al-Burāqa, on a journey there to
Heaven,
No other has ascended save the Best of Mankind, Muḥammad.
27. He stroked the goat of Umm Ma'bad and there and then
On account of his miracle she gave milk, Aḥmad.
28. For him the cloud cast a shade, the she-camel
Brought her complaint there to the Prophet Aḥmad,
29. The horse of Surāqa became stuck fast in mud, because of a
miracle,
Upon hard rock, for the sake of his rank, Aḥmad,
30. The speaking of the monitor lizard, by God, is a real miracle,
And so is the gazelle, for the sake of the Best of Mankind,
Aḥmad,
31. A dove laid an egg, so said [the pursuer] and explained [it thus
to his companions]
Because of his miracle, the Prophet Muḥammad.
32. He gave Uqāsha a stick, it became
A dagger there in battle, our Prophet Aḥmad,

33. In the vanguard were the Angels, they bore witness, you know,
On account of his miracles, he, the Best of Mankind, Aḥmad,
34. The small remainder of water left over after his ablutions
Was ample for the beasts as well as for the army of Aḥmad.
. . .
35. Both the tears and the sighing of the large tree stump
Were on account of a miracle, because of being separated
from the Prophet Aḥmad.
36. You know they are many, they are beyond counting,
Ḥalfma saw many of the miracles of Aḥmad,
37. God alone knows them, the One, the All-Knowing,
The King who caused the Prophet Aḥmad to excel over all
others.
38. O My Lord, we pray you that we may escape from this world
For the sake of his rank, the Best of Mankind, Aḥmad,
39. Likewise, O my Lord, for an easy death,
For the sake of the majesty of our Prophet Muḥammad,
40. Thus also the answering of Nakīr and Munkar,
For the sake of the Best of Mankind, the Messenger,
Muḥammad,
41. O my Lord, we pray you for the comfort of Barzakh,
For the sake of the Best of Mankind, our Prophet Muḥammad,
42. O my Lord, we pray you for salvation in the Hereafter,
On the Day of Resurrection, for the sake of the Best of
Mankind, Muḥammad,
43. Concerning the weighing in the scales,
May the good deeds prevail, for the sake of the Best of
Mankind, Aḥmad,
44. And the receiving of the book, O Glorious God, King, our Lord,
May it be given us in the right hand, for the sake of Aḥmad,
45. O my Lord, cause us to enter into the salvation of the Prophet,
For the sake of his rank, the Best of Mankind, Aḥmad,
46. O our Lord, may we pass over the bridge of Jahannam,
For the sake of the majesty of our Prophet Muḥammad,
47. O our Lord, give us to drink of al-Kawthar,
The lake of the Best of Mankind, our Prophet Muḥammad,
48. O our Lord, save us on the Last Day from the Fire, take us
To the dwelling of ease, Paradise, for the sake of Aḥmad,
49. O our Lord, may we see on that Day, the face of the Prophet,
For the sake of his rank, the Best of Mankind, Aḥmad,
50. O our Lord, may we behold Thy presence, the presence of
The King of the Day of Judgement, for the sake of our
Prophet, Muḥammad,

51. Unite us, O King, with all our *shaikhs*,
And likewise our parents, for the sake of the Best of
Mankind, Aḥmad,
52. Unite us with *Shāikh* °Abd al-Qādir,
The one who will conduct us on the Last Day to our Prophet,
Muḥammad,
53. We thank God, now the song is finished,
May God accept it for the sake of the Best of Mankind,
Muḥammad,
54. May God for ever place His blessings and peace
Upon the Messenger who excels all, Aḥmad.
55. I invoke blessing upon all his Family,
And on all the Followers, and the Followers of the
Followers of Muḥammad.
56. The chronogram of his Hijra, the Best of Mankind is *rushdanā*
(‘our right guidance’, 1255/1839),
May God give us guidance according to the *Sunna* of
Aḥmad. [XV]

The poem falls into seven parts, each characteristic of the genre of *madh*:

- vv.1-7 The initial doxology and Prophetic honorific that are normal in all Islamic literary works;
- vv.8-19 The recital of the physical and moral excellences of the Prophet Muḥammad;
- vv.20-37 The enumeration of the *mu°jizāt*, the ‘evidentiary miracles’ of the Prophet;
- vv.38-50 The Islamic eschatological sequences that enable the poet to celebrate Muḥammad as the saviour of his community;
- vv.51-52 A prayer for union in Paradise with the venerated personalities of Islam;
- vv.53-55 Final doxology and Prophetic honorific;
- v.56 Pious punning chronogram (this feature is not usually found in the Arabic exemplars; see chapter xii).

The ‘Ode in Praise of the Messenger’ reflects the author’s familiarity with the great Arabic panegyrics mentioned above, as well as with the general fund of Islamic biographical and bibliographical writing, as the following references illustrate.

vv.9-10 refer to the well-known story of the *mi°rāj*, that is ‘The Ascension’, which tells how Muḥammad was transported up through the seven heavens and presented before the throne of God. The Arabic panegyrics abound in allusions to this. For instance

al-°Ishrīniyyāt of al-Fāzāzī:

I bear witness that God sent His servant on a night journey
From the farthest mosque, ascending to the throne,
[*Ḥarf al-shīn*, v.1]

and *al-Witriyya*:⁹

To the Throne and to the Seat Aḥmad drew near [p.5].

V.11 interestingly illustrates Asma’s familiarity with a well-known verse from al-Fāzāzī’s *al-°Ishrīniyyāt*:

He is not to be compared with the full moon which reaches only
halfway through its month,
For it increases in lustre only as long as time prolongs its
life. [Ḥarf al-wāw, v.7]

V.13 echoes such lines as:

For neither musk nor camphor are sweeter than his fragrance.
[*al-Witriyya*, p.10]

Vv.16-17 may be compared to *al-Witriyya*:

Patient, giving thanks, unselfish when in need [p.62],

and to *al-°Ishrīniyyāt*:

And patient towards the ignorance of the ignorant and
forebearing. [Ḥarf al-bā’, v.7]

Vv.21-22 refer to the well-known story of the collapse of the Persian Khusrau’s palace, the extinguishing of the temple fire of the Zoroastrians and the drying up of the river Sawa, all of which are said to have occurred at the birth of Muḥammad. Asma’s lines recall particularly the following passage from the *Burda*:

The day on which the Persians augured that they
Were warned of impending misfortune and chastisement,
During the night the palace of Khusrau split asunder,
As also the company of his companions became confused,
And the fire, for sorrow, extinguished its flames,
And the river, in grief, forgot its source,
And Sawa grieved that its lake diminished. [vv.60-63].

A similar allusion occurs in the Arabic *Simḥ al-hadā* of al-Tawzarī:

And the fire of Persia had not been kindled, nor had it been put
out

In a thousand years, and the river of the people did not flow.

Vv.23-24 refer to Koran 54 : 1:

The hour drew high and the moon was rent asunder.

V.26 may be compared with *Dalā’il al-khairāt*:

O God, bless the rider of al-Burāqa, [p.65].

and the notion that this miraculous journey singles him out from the rest of mankind occurs both in *al-°Ishrīniyyāt*:

And is there, after his journey to his Lord, a goal,
[*Ḥrf al-bā'*, v.18]

and *al-Witriyya*:

He was singled out by the *mi^crāj* from every [other] leader. [p.89]

V.27 refers to a well-known miracle recorded, for instance in *Simṭ al-hudā*, in which Muḥammad causes a woman's elderly goat to give milk again:

And the goat, when your palm stroked it,
The weariness of emaciation in its dried-up limbs was removed.

V.28 combines two miraculous happenings, first the cloud that shaded the Prophet from the heat of the sun, which is mentioned in the *Burda*, as follows:

Like the cloud, wherever he goes, it goes,
Protecting him from the fierce heat of midday, [v.74],
and then the story of the ill-treated camel that complained to the Prophet with a human voice, mentioned, for instance, in *Dalā'il al-khairāt*:

O God, bless him to whom the she-camel complained. [p.66].

V.29 is very reminiscent of *Simṭ al-hudā*:

And in the case of Surāqa, clear signs,
For the mare sank in mud where there was none,

and refers to an occasion when one of Muḥammad's pursuers found his horse stuck in hard rock as if it were in mud.

V.31 records the well-known and well-loved story of how the Prophet took refuge in a cave during his flight from Mecca to Madina. His pursuers were then deceived into thinking it deserted by seeing a dove's nest containing eggs in the entrance. The story occurs in the *Burda*, together with the accompanying one of the spider's web that God caused to span the mouth of the cave:

They thought that the dove could not have hovered,
Nor the spider spun his web over the Best of Creation, [v.78].

Again in *Simṭ al-hudā*:

The wild dove crouching [in its nest] was decreed [by God]
for you

As an artifice against every misguided mischief-maker.

Similar parallels could be quoted for all the evidentiary miracles listed by Asma, but this would be tedious. There is no doubt that her poem was inspired by the Arabic *madīḥ* literature of the Mamlūk period and that she shared a common source of Islamic folklore and hagiography with these earlier Arabic encomiasts. It also illustrates the extent to which this accretional hagiography of the Prophet and his Companions, the folklore of popular Islam, had penetrated Hausaland

by the nineteenth century. When such material circulates in vernacular languages as well as in classical Arabic, it is reasonable to conclude that Islam is no longer the preserve of an intellectual elite but has made a significant impact upon the common culture