



BOOK REVIEW

Oludamini Ogunnaike, *Poetry in Praise of Prophetic Perfection. A Study of West African Arabic *Madīh* Poetry and Its Precedents*, London, The Islamic Texts Society 2019

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The work of Oludamini Ogunnaike is among the few recent (and less recent) studies that take into account contemporary Sufi poetry from a literary point of view, acknowledging not only their intrinsic value, but also their profound roots in the tradition of Arabic verse. The author is aware of the importance of the figure of the Prophet for contemporary Muslims in general, and in West Africa in particular. Ogunnaike pays attention to the doctrinal and spiritual foundations of this devotion, successfully showing how it is not a later development within Sufism, but the result of a long-term process. Poetry in praise of Muḥammad was not invented by contemporary Sufis, who, on the contrary, based their verses on well established traditions about the excellence of Muḥammad, both mundane and spiritual. The book is divided in three parts, one devoted to the doctrinal aspects implied by *madīh* (pp. 7-72), another on the literary sources of West African praise poetry (pp. 73-116), and finally an appendix with an anthology of texts, transcribed in Arabic and translated (125-59). All sections include large quotations from medieval and contemporary Arabic poetry, transcribed and translated in English. Transcription is not always vocalized and seems to follow the one found in the sources quoted, including some youtube recordings. This aspect makes Ogunnaike's work even more valuable, as it demonstrates the living connection between pre-Islamic poetry and contemporary media. The only downside, not depending on the author, is that web links are not easily reachable from the printed text. Considering that the book is not sold in any electronic format, adding the title of the video resource to the links would have made the reference more accessible for the reader. This, anyway, does not diminish the value of Ogunnaike's attention to the fact that Sufi poetry in West Africa is a popular phenomenon that is not limited to the *zāwiyas*, but enters the streets, houses and smartphones of a large majority of Muslims. The reader can approach this text from different points of view. Ogunnaike makes use of a large number of poetic quotations that make his work a reliable and rich anthology



of *madīh*, not only in West Africa (a feature more evident in the Appendix, where the “peaks” of local production of the genre are presented), but in the whole world. The presence of an index of names and, possibly, also of first verses, would have constituted a useful research tool. This is compensated by the excellent work done in translating Arabic verse, which makes this book a profitable reading also for those who cannot read Arabic. In the first section Ogunnaike discusses the function played by *madīh* in Muslim societies, with a phenomenological approach. Poems have been used as invocation (*du’ā’*, pp. 25-36), as *dikr* (pp. 42-51), to describe the figure of the Prophet (pp. 36-42) and to convey spiritual and esoteric teachings (51-72). Ogunnaike enters into some detail about how this transmission works and focuses on some key points of Sufi doctrine as centered on the figure of the Prophet and the ideas of Ibn ‘Arabī. Here the discourse is not centered on a specific figure, but on a progressive deepening and rarefying of the object of the poetry itself, showing how some ideas like that of the “Perfect Man” (*al-insān al-kāmil*) are part of Sufi poetry regardless of periodizations. Already in this first part the figure of Ibrāhīm Niyass (d. 1975) constitutes both the background of the discussion and the reference figure. All the other figures and related quotations are (more or less explicitly) put in relation with him and his verses, acknowledging his paramount importance for contemporary West African Sufism and Islamic literature. From this point of view, the book is also a work on Niasse and his poetic production that provides the reader with several references and links that constitute the context of production and fruition of his verses. The second part of the work has a more literary focus, identifying the main textual sources for *madīh* poetry in West Africa. Ogunnaike follows the path of classical Islamic literature, starting with Qur’ān and *hadīt* (pp.78-84), followed by biographies of the Prophet (78-84), and by classics of praise poetry (96-106), like the *‘Iṣrīniyyāt* of al-Fazāzī (d. 1230). Throughout the discussion, Ogunnaike identifies some core *topoi* like the Muhammadan light (*al-nūr al-muhammadi*), exploring their declination in diverse literary contexts. The author also addresses the questions of non-Arabic literary interactions with West African Islamic praise poetry (pp. 106-11). The discussion, although admittedly brief, shows how the latter’s roots in the Arabic poetic tradition have been adapted by local authors to the needs and the forms of a new context. All these topics are exposed with an abundance of examples that, as in the first part of the work, are seen as a witness of a wholesome phenomenon, i. e. *madīh*. This synchronic approach offers the reader a broad picture, with some glimpses on the details. Considering the centrality of Ibrāhīm Niasse in this part of the work as well, testified by the number of quotations of his texts, the reader would have expected a more accentuated focus on his sources. Nonetheless, Ogunnaike provides the fundamental elements for a preliminary inquiry in a domain that requires the efforts of multiple scholars, specialized in diverse aspects of the poetic tradition, if we consider the interactions between local languages and Arabic in the production of popular praise poetry. In this sense this book is an important first step in multiple directions. The doctrinal background of West African *madīh* poetry, the way in



which verse is used and diffused as a mean to disseminate Sufi doctrines, the literary roots and developments of praise to the Prophet and their interactions with local languages are few examples of the possible topics of future researches that this book can inspire. A first step in this direction would be to produce a study that engages more directly with the diachronic dimension of West African *madīh*, making the effort to reconstruct the development of this genre in a specific area, or focused on a single author (Ibrāhīm Niasse being but one possible example), allowing also a more direct engagement with literary analysis and theories. The effort put in this work is remarkable for the quantity and variety of sources used and properly translated, which offers the reader a complete overview of the *madīh* as a literary genre, providing also a proper doctrinal and social contextualization. Ogunnaike has the merit to have opened the door for future studies on West African poetry, that will hopefully appear in the years to come.