Oludamini Ogunnaike, *Poetry in Praise of Prophetic Perfection: a Study of West African Madīḥ Poetry and its Precedents*, Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 2020, pp. x + 166, Paperback: £19.99.

West African Arabic poetry encapsulates the tensions within the study of Islamic Africa. It is at once dismissed for being a derivative commentary on original productions, marginalised for being a vulgarised mirror of an authentically "Arab" art form, avoided for being an elitist literary form disconnected from African identities, and simply ignored because very few academics have the skills to read this poetry. But within Islamic traditions all around the world, the Arabic poem (*qaṣīda* or *madīḥ*) has long been considered the summation of scholarship, which simultaneously bridges the gap between learned and unlearned, and between text and religious experience. Aimé Césaire argued in his *Discours sur l'art africain* that the same was true for all cultures: "it is in poetry that the divine finds refuge … it is from poetic imagination that the fierce passion of people seeking light gets its flame."

Ogunnaike's masterful *Poetry in Praise of Prophetic Perfection* is the first monograph to take up the challenge of understanding the West African Arabic poetical tradition. The book's central argument is that poetic eulogies for the Prophet Muḥammad invoke "the utmost limits of human potential, intended to help actualize this potential in both the poet and listeners" (11). The West African *madīḥ* tradition thus represents more than a "stilted" appropriation of a foreign literary genre (4) and should command the sustained engagement of those studying Islam in Africa (9–10). Elsewhere recognising that "praise poetry" is perhaps best rendered as "love poetry" (56–57), Ogunnaike observes that the transcendent function of this literature can be defined as "one of the greatest forms of devotional practice" for its ability to sweep away the participant in the act of divine love (55). This emphasis helps us understand the widespread popularity of Arabic *madīḥ* in West Africa, and the preponderance of performed poetry in new geographic and digital spaces marked by West African Sufism.

The author covers a lot of ground in a remarkably short book. The first section of the book provides an overview of the themes of the *madīḥ* tradition in the region. Here Ogunnaike draws on earlier antecedents from the larger Muslim world to demonstrate the long historical resonance of themes such as love for the Prophet, annihilation in the Prophet, and claims to saintly authority. Against this background, he refreshingly puts diverse West African poets in dialogue with each other, demonstrating the similarity in themes between the "Mauritanian" Shādhilī Muḥammad al-Yadālī (d. 1753), the "Nigerian" Qādirī

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ʿUthmān b. Fūdī, the Senegalese founder of the Murīdiyya Aḥmad Bamba, and the Senegalese Tijānī shaykhs Mālik Sy and Ibrāhīm Niasse.

The book's second section focuses more closely on the poetry of Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse, described as the "region's most popular Arabic-language poet in recent times" (7). Ogunnaike uses the poetry of this seminal figure to demonstrate the "extreme intertextuality" of Sufi poetry (75), interwoven with references to a rich Arabic literary tradition including pre-Islamic ("*jāhilī*") poetry, early Prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth*) and biography (*sīra*), and certain antecedent classics of the *madīḥ* genre itself. If the reader can follow the mesmerising fabric of inter-stitched references here, the author's conclusion is anticipated: "West African poets were and are self-consciously engaged," Ogunnaike suggests, "[in] reviving the ontological power of the Arabic language, demonstrating their mastery and even leadership in this endeavor" (116).

As much of the book is based on the author's own translations of sometimes ambiguous Arabic references, the critical reader may benefit from considering alternative translations of key poems and verses. This is true with all translations, and the author admits (125) that he was unaware of preexisting alternative translations of many of the poems he uses, most significant being Zachary Wright's *Pearls from the Flood: Select Insight of Shaykh al-Islam Ibrahim Niasse* (2015). There also appears to have been only a superficial engagement with Rudolph Ware, Zachary Wright, and Amir Syed's *Jihad of the Pen: the Sufi Literature of West Africa* (2018), in this case probably as a result of the proximity of publication to his own work. But diversities in available translations of complex language are important; and in some cases the reader may have desired to see the author's own translations of work for which he relies on previous translations. For example, his reliance on Ware's translation of Bamba's poetry is certainly warranted, but alternative translations can provide more depth to the poet-saint's expression. Fortunately, Ogunnaike provides the Arabic original of the poems to facilitate such reflection. Here is Ware's translation of one key line of Bamba's *Mawāhib al-nāfiʿ*, relied upon by Ogunnaike:

> Praise welled in me, and flowed profitably
>   Ending disgrace and difficulty.

Based on the Arabic provided, I would translate the Arabic with the following variation:

> My longing to praise him delighted me
>   Sufficed me from disgrace that affrighted me.

Again, this is not a question of right versus wrong translation, just that variant renderings can be productive of deeper understandings.

Sometimes, differences in translation can produce remarkably different understandings. For example, Ogunnaike translates one half-verse of Niasse's poetry, "Ahmad is the secret of the Essence, and the Essence is Its secret" (53). But when read with the remainder of the verse, an alternate reading would be, "Ahmad is the secret of the divine essence, and the essence is a secret not known by anyone in creation" (loose translation). Elsewhere, Ogunnaike translates Niasse's famous line, *waṣūl jamīʿ al-mālikīn bi-ḥabliyā,* as, "The union of all the slaves is by my rope." But the dominant Arabic reading here (based on my own field research in Senegal) employs the word *māsikīn* rather *mālikīn*, giving the alternative, "May all those who hold to my rope arrive (in the divine presence)," or perhaps, "the arrival of all aspirants (in the divine presence) is by my rope."

The author cannot be faulted for such variant translations, nor for the conclusions he reaches on their basis. A prime example is Ogunnaike's understanding that apparent references Niasse makes to his own spiritual station are best understood within the context of Ibn al-ʿArabī's concept of "the station of no station" (*maqām lā maqām*). In other words, that saintly articulations of spiritual rank emerge from a place of spiritual intoxication with the Prophet's station, and therefore reflect the Prophet's "absolute freedom of human perfection beyond all limitations" (121). Students of Ibrāhīm Niasse no doubt understand statements such as "the arrival of all aspirants is by my rope," or "the saintly poles have failed to realize my objective" (63) as clear proof of Niasse's axial sainthood (*quṭbāniyya*). As Rüdiger Seesemann remarked in his book, *The Divine Flood:Ibrahim Niasse and the Roots of a Twentieth-Century Sufi Revival* (2011), "poetry functioned as a powerful medium in publicizing these claims" of Niasse's supreme sainthood. Nonetheless, Ogunnaike's reading emphasises the ways in which Niasse's poetry has been likely understood by audiences external to his own followers; an understanding that Niasse perhaps also cultivated: "The people know that I am his [Prophet's] servant … and all of this is from the love of the lord of messengers" (146–147).

Like all thoughtful research, Ogunnaike's work raises important questions that he cannot answer in one short book. The relationship between effacement in the spiritual presence of the Prophet and individual saintly identity is one such question. Another philosophical question is raised by the author's reflection on the capacity of poetic rhythm to produce spiritual states. Here the reader may be reminded of Souleymane Bachir Diagne's discussion of the importance of rhythm in the Negritude artistic movement of Léopold Senghor and Césaire. "Rhythm acts, despotically," said Senghor, "to make us enter into the spirituality of the object; and this attitude of abandon that we have is itself rhythmic" (Diagne, "Négritude," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2018). In other words, Arabic poetry in West Africa may have articulated itself within a pre-existing African aesthetic or ontology, as an art form that forced both artist and audience to transcend or abandon themselves.

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