Oludamini Ogunnaike. *Poetry in Praise of Prophetic Perfection: A Study of West African Arabic* Madīḥ *Poetry and its Precedents*. Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2020. x + 166 pages.

Scholarship on Islam in Africa has long been in need of comprehensive work on West African *madīḥ* (*i.e.* Arabic poetry in praise of the Prophet Muhammad). Recent articles have explicitly called for such an endeavor,[1] and the time has come to fully exorcise the "Islam noir" specter[2] that has compelled those who write on West African *madīḥ* to characterize it pejoratively as, in the words of John Hunwick, "often highly stylized, deeply stamped with the metaphors and clichés of Arabic models of former ages … sometimes manag[ing] to rise above the merely imitative or artificial."[3] Oludamini Ogunnaike's *Poetry in Praise of Prophetic Perfection* is remarkably brief, but as the first monograph on the subject in English, it does the necessary work of sketching out the contours of the corpus and demonstrating how it should be understood and appreciated.

The central argument of *Poetry in Praise of Prophetic Perfection* is that West African *madīḥ* serves important devotional functions within the Sufi traditions of the region, and it is only through the lens of Sufi cosmology, epistemology, and virtue ethics that it can be fully appreciated as the dynamic and refined tradition that it is. Ogunnaike takes some of the most popular *madīḥ* poems written by West African scholars and analyzes them with reference to tracts of Sufism and philosophy that span different eras, localities, and languages. The book has three main sections: Part I explains the uses of West African *madīḥ*, Part II notes the sources from which West African *madīḥ* draws, and the Appendix includes translations of several major works of the tradition.

Ogunnaike begins Part I with a brief description of what *madīḥ* is and what it attempts to do: represent a "double portrait" of both the author and the subject of the *madīḥ* (9), "produce a shift in consciousness" in the reciter and listener (11), demonstrate the "apophatic and mystical uses of language"

1 See Andrea Brigaglia, "Sufi Poetry in Twentieth Century Nigeria," *Journal of Sufi Studies* 6.2 (2017): 200.

2 During the colonial period, French Orientalists and colonial administrators saw Islam in Africa as a syncretistic "Black Islam," which was less intellectually developed and less militant than the Islam of the Arabs, and this view characterized much scholarship on Islam in Africa for decades. For examples of this, see Vincent Monteil, *L'Islam Noir: Une Religion à la Conquête de l'Afrique* (France: Seuil, 1980), and J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Influence of Islam upon Africa* (New York: Praeger, 1968). For critique, see Scott S. Reese, "Islam in Africa: Challenging the Perceived Wisdom," in *The Transmission of Learning in Islamic Africa*, ed. Scott S. Reese (Boston: Brill, 2004), 1–14.

3 John Hunwick, "The Arabic Literary Tradition of Nigeria," *Research in African Literatures* 28.3 (1997): 218.

© KONINKLIJKE BRILL NV, LEIDEN, 2021 | DOI:10.1163/22105956-12341321
Downloaded from Brill.com04/07/2021 10:14:00PM
via Harvard University

necessary for texts of Sufism (18), and praise God by praising "the most perfect mirror of God's Names and Qualities," namely, the Prophet Muhammad (23). He then details how *madīḥ* serves as supplication (*duʿāʾ*), verbal iconography (*ḥilya*), and remembrance (*dhikr*). After this, Ogunnaike expounds upon Sufi cosmology to explain how *madīḥ* ultimately serves as a representation of the very nature of existence, and how it is meant to pull author, reciter, and listener closer to the heights of human perfection.

Part II discusses the various source materials that inform much of the content and allusions of West African *madīḥ*, and frames the tradition's "hyper-intertextuality" as a function of the "hyper-intersubjectivity" that the authors are trying to represent and evoke as they aim for annihilation (*fanāʾ*) in the object of their praise (115). The sources of *madīḥ* include: Qur'anic verses and hadiths; works of prophetic biography (*sīra* and *shamāʾil*) and devotion (*ṣalawāt*); pre-Islamic and early Islamic poetry; both universal and local classics of *madīḥ*; and non-Arabic poetic traditions of the region. Part II ends with an overview of the formal features that distinguish the *madīḥ* tradition in West Africa, and proposes the concept of "Big Arabic" to describe how the tradition stretches the limits of the language. In the Appendix, Ogunnaike attempts to address the paucity of good quality translations of West African *madīḥ* by including his own translations of eight poems he considers to be among the most notable exemplars of the tradition.

Poetry in Praise of Prophetic Perfection is a significant accomplishment. Some of the features and allusions it highlights have been covered by others, but only piecemeal;[4] Ogunnaike's synthesis is original, and offers us a necessary assessment of the state of the field. More than this, his most significant contribution lies in wresting the analytical lens of the tradition away from the trappings of a uniquely Western aesthetic cultural history, and towards an indigenous analytical lens crafted by Sufi metaphysicians and philosophers. Ogunnaike is also a gifted and engaging writer. His extended metaphors are illustrative, his humility is refreshing, and the cultural references he directs towards the reader – which draw from the likes of Miles Davis and Bruce Lee – are both helpful and amusing. His inclusion of YouTube links throughout the work offers to expose the reader to this tradition beyond the black ink of the pages.

4 Ogunnaike's own citations throughout the book demonstrate that his observations on the intertextuality of the tradition expand on previous scholarship that has noted this feature in specific poems, and some of the terms he uses, such as "double portrait," were coined by others (10). However, he is the first to synthesize this work, and no previous writing contains an assessment of the purposes behind the features of the genre as well developed as Ogunnaike's.

Downloaded from Brill.com04/07/2021 10:14:00PM via Harvard University

However, the book is brief, and there are several ideas and arguments that deserve to be explored further. Chief among these is the idea of "Big Arabic," a term that Ogunnaike derives from Nigerian intellectuals' conception of "Big English," which entails "tak[ing] the … language to areas of being that the owners of the language had not thought imaginable; or … had once thought imaginable but had irrevocably lost and can recover now" (115–16, quoting Biodun Jeyifo). Ogunnaike introduces the concept at the end of Part II and devotes less than a page to it; his words are tantalizing, but we are left waiting for an elaboration on and a defense of this analytical offering that never come. There are several other concepts in the work that are frustratingly underdeveloped, given how convincing Ogunnaike proves to be otherwise. At one point, Ogunnaike states that poetry serves as "a *barzakh* [isthmus] between silence and speech" (22), and although he refers the reader to an article of his that addresses this theme further,[5] his full thoughts on the subject deserve attention in this book. What are the unique features of poetry that make it a better vessel than prose to convey praise of the Prophet Muḥammad? Surely much more can be said about the capacities and significance of classical Arabic prosody. At other points, Ogunnaike mentions that the *madīḥ* tradition is primarily oral, but does not lend us his thoughts on what significance orality holds in light of the tradition's purposes. One thinks of the nature of oral traditions as time-bound, dependent upon personal relationships between transmitters, and both manifest in their performance but hidden in their preservation by memory, and one would want to read Ogunnaike's thoughts on the subject. Also, since translation of the poetry is a key aspect of Ogunnaike's project, one would expect him to comment more critically on that endeavor. His words that he has "tried to stay close to the literal sense of the original Arabic" (6) would likely irk many a scholar of translation studies, for is there ever such a thing as a "literal" translation?

Ogunnaike's method and source work invite further scholarship as well. Although he draws on his own fieldwork and on performances from the region uploaded to YouTube, his approach is largely textual, relying primarily on the published versions of *madīḥ* poetry available in the region or online and on widely available works of Sufism. Further fieldwork is needed to delve into unpublished manuscripts and collect more of the *madīḥ* that is not written down, as is ethnographic work that allows us to know how reciters and listeners of the genre themselves perceive, experience, and articulate the significance of

5 Oludamini Ogunnaike, "The Presence of Poetry, the Poetry of Presence," *Journal of Sufi Studies* 5.1 (2016): 58–97.

Downloaded from Brill.com04/07/2021 10:14:00PM
via Harvard University

it in their lives. But textual work is still valuable, and the limits of his method should not detract from our appreciation of Ogunnaike's scholarship.

All in all, these shortcomings do not diminish the importance and strength of Ogunnaike's analytical contribution. As it stands, *Poetry in Praise of Prophetic Perfection* is an important read for scholars of Islam in Africa. Beyond this field, the book should be of interest to those working on Sufism more broadly, African history and literature, Arabic literature, and comparative literature. Those teaching in any of these fields will find material appropriate for both introductory and advanced courses: for the former, translations (the Appendix) and discussions of sources (the bulk of Part II), and for the latter, the more analytical sections (Part I and the beginning and end of Part II). With *Poetry in Praise of Prophetic Perfection*, Ogunnaike has given us a well-written and engaging piece of work that not only restores dignity to a poetic tradition that has too often been dismissed, but also sheds light on the cultural devices West African Muslims have developed to connect with their past and be inspired towards the pursuit of virtue.

Adnan Adrian Wood Smith
Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA
awoodsmith@g.harvard.edu

Downloaded from Brill.com04/07/2021 10:14:00PM
via Harvard University