

AL-BUSIRI AND MUHAMMAD MSHELA: TWO GREAT SUFI POETS

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1. Introduction

In this paper I give biographical sketches of a thirteen century Egyptian poet, best known as al-Busiri, the original composer of *Kasidatul Burdah* in Arabic and the Swahili translator of the said epic best known as Sheikh Muhammad Mshela, from Shela in Lamu, Kenya. *Kasidatul Burdah* (The Mantle Ode) or *Kasida ya Burudai*, in Swahili, is the most famous qasida in the Muslim world. I transcribed this qasida from Arabic to Roman script and analysed it (wa Mutiso 1996). My intention is to show how these poets share the same world view concerning Sufism and Islamic culture in particular.

2. Life and Work of Al-Busiri

2.1. Sharafud'-dini Muhammad bin Sa'idi bin Hammadi bin Muhsini bin Sanhaji Hilali as-Sanhaji al-Busiri (1213-1294): a short biographical sketch

Sharafu'd-Dini Muhammad bin Sa'idi bin Hammadi bin Muhsini bin Sanhaji Hilali as-Sanhaji al-Busiri is variously referred to as Muhammad ibn Saeed ibn Hammad, Sharfuddin Abi Abdullah al-Busairi, Sharaf ad-Din Abu 'Abd' Allah Muhammad B. Said B. Hammad al-Misree, Abu 'Abdi 'Allah Muhammad B. Said and Sharaf ad-Din Muhammad Said B. Hammad B. Muhsin al-Buswairy.

He was an Egyptian poet of Berber Origin (Morocco) and was born on 1st Shawwal 608 H/March 7th, 1213 at Busir (Abusir) or near Dalas (Dilas) in Upper Egypt. His parents immigrated to Egypt from Morocco. He grew up in the town of Busir hence is nisba (*nom de plume*), al-Busir. He was also known by the nisba of Dalas (Dilas), it being said that one of his parents originated from Dalas, hence his nisba (Dalasir/Dilasir), and the other from Busir. His other cognomen was Shariffud-Din (Honour by Religion).

Al-Busiri attended the lectures of the Shadhili Sufi Shaikh Abu 'Abbas Ahmed al-Mursi (al-Marsi) who died in 684 H/1287 AD. al-Marsi was himself a mystic and must have influenced al-Busiri a lot. He was a pupil of the famous Maghribi mystic Abu l-Hasan al-Shadhili. As a Sufi, al-Busiri was involved in the first development of the Shaddhiliya order (EI 1981:158-9). In Cairo, at the mosque of Sheikh Abdal Dahir, he studied a number of Islamic sciences as well as the Arabic language and literature.

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Like Mshela, he studied principles of Islamic jurisprudence, history and development of Islamic thought, Qur'anic exegesis and recitation, the Hadith, classical Arabic Literature and Linguistics, logic and Sufism. al-Busiri's Sufi tutor, al-Mursi, was a well-known interpreter of the *Holy Qur'an* in Alexandria. He, al-Busiri, had his early education in the traditional religious schools of his time. By the time he was thirteen, he had committed the *Holy Qur'an* to memory and was studying the allied religious disciplines particularly the Hadith (the Traditions of the Prophet Mohammed). He had a thorough knowledge of the *Holy Qur'an* and the Traditions and he soon attained the fame of being a religious divine and a renowned traditionist. He also learnt Sufism and calligraphy, which in those days was regarded a dignified avocation of the learned. He, like Mshela, became a skilled calligrapher, a notable Sufi, a Traditionist and a celebrated reciter of the *Holy Qur'an*.

Al-Busiri also had keen interest in the study of Oriental languages. He, however, was not highly educated, by those days' standards, for he was not assigned a teaching post which was considered the best job for a highly educated person, by then. He came from a poor family and was forced by circumstances to earn his living at an early age. He earned his bread by doing some calligraphy work. He also worked as a copyist and scribe.

His fame, however, depends not so much on his proficiency in calligraphy but on several eulogistic poems which he wrote about the Prophet Muhammad. He spent ten years in Jerusalem and then resided at Medina before settling at Bilbis (a town in the eastern Nile delta), where he once held a minor administrative job of an accountant in the office of his patron, the Mamluk Minister, Zainuddin Yaqub bin Zubair (a court minister). This minister knew the poetic talents of al-Busiri and persuaded him to compose occasionally poems for which he would often richly reward him. It was in Bilbis where he first earned living as a scribe and calligrapher. He soon rose to the rank of court poet. In Bilbis (Bilbays) he used to challenge his Christian and Jewish workmates on the *Torah* and the *Holy Bible*. Their challenge inspired him to study both Christianity and Judaism.

Al-Busiri was a short and thin man whom people used to ridicule. He, however, used to fight them back with a lashing tongue calling them anything bad under the sun. Most people hated him because of his arrogance and his lashing tongue.

In his poetry, he praised the wealthy and the powerful of his country and that earned him money and prestige. He was known to have liked being dependent on others for material gains. He did not like being a husband. He wished he did not marry and had no children. He wished his wife was barren and that he was somebody's servant rather than a father. He even wished he was a homosexual, like most of the Sufis of those days (Kilani 1973:22).

He never settled in one place permanently but travelled throughout Egypt praising wealthy people with his poems. He, for example, praised the mayor of al-Mahala, a town in South-East of Cairo, and the mayor paid him a monthly salary.

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He used to get angry with the mayor whenever he delayed his salary. He hated the Christians of al-Mahala, who worked at the mayor's office. Even after leaving al-Mahala, he never forgave those Christian working mates. His hatred for these Christians is evident in his poetry (see Wamutiso 1985:171-177). In his old age, he became more devoted to Islam and had contacts with Abdal-Salam bin Mashish al-Husun, a Muslim leader, like his mentor - Abul 'Abbas Ahmad al-Mursi al-Ansari.

Like Muhammad Mshela, he belonged to the Shafiite School of Law and was a Sufi from the Shadhiliyah order and wrote many poems. The praise of the Prophet surpasses in quality all other themes in his works. His other themes consist of praise, satire, responses to Christians and Jews and humour. Most of his poems were written at the desire and suggestion of Zainuddin Yaqoob bin Zubair.

Citing ibn Hajr al-Haythami, Lubis (1983:10) says that al-Busiri's excellence is not in poetry but also in prose. Muhammad Sayyid Kilani (1973), however, rejects this opinion since there is no work in prose by al-Busiri and the prose he wrote as a commentary on his poem, *al-Makhray wa al-Mardud 'ala al-Nasara wa Yahud* does not show his excellence in writing. The first edition of the *EI Vol.I* (1911-38:252, 804) has an article by the late Rene Basset, on al-Busiri. In this article, Rene Basset claims that al-Busiri's grave is near that of the Imam as-Shafii, i.e. at Cairo. The same opinion has been echoed in the Arabic version of the Encyclopaedia *DMI Vol. IV* (1933:329) and in the famous Carl Brockelmann's *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur*. In the Urdu Encyclopaedia, *UDMI Vol.V* (1971:52) again, the same opinion is repeated. Other sources, however, establish that al-Busiri's grave is in Alexandria and not in Cairo.

Sa'adat Ali Basha Mubarak (1886-88:70), for example, says that al-Busiri's tomb is in Alexandria and that the late Said Basha renewed Masjid al-Busiri and allocated it funds that could keep up its ceremonials and that he made arrangements for perpetual lectures therein. Zaki Mubarak (1935b:141) also confirms that al-Busiri's tomb is in Alexandria and that a big mosque is attached to it. He points out that in this mosque, religious education is imparted.

During my research in both Cairo and Alexandria I was able to confirm that al-Busiri's grave is not near that of the Imam as-Shafii, as claimed in the *EI* (1911-38:108) or by other scholars like Knappert (1971b:167). al-Busiri died at Alexandria and his grave is famous and is visited by pilgrims. It is found in Alexandria's old city centre, near the mosque of Shadhili Sufi Shaikh Abu 'Abbas Ahmed al-Mursi al-Shadhili(al-Marsi). His Mosque-Mausoleum is said to contain *baraka* (blessings) and is today primarily visited by women carrying their little children.

Some scholars confuse Abul Qasim Hibat Allah bin Ali bin Masud al-Ansari al-Khazraji al-Munastiri (d. 1201 AD), who is also called al-Busiri and was a much more senior scholar than al-Busiri, with al-Busiri. al-Khazraji is called al-Busiri because his grandfather, Masud migrated from Munastiri to Busir Quridis (al-Iskandari/al-Inani (1950:312). It is also possible that the view

that al-Busiri's tomb is in Cairo is based on what the widely read and travelled Louis Massignon wrongly wrote in his famous study on the Cairene cemeteries.

2.2. Al-Busiri's works

Al-Busiri's works can be divided into two periods: those he wrote before and those he wrote after his pilgrimage. Among those he wrote before his pilgrimage are: *al-Qasidah al-Lamiyah*, *al-Qasidah al-Haiyah*, *al-Qasidah al-Daliyah* and *al-Qasidah al-Mimiyah*. The works he wrote after the pilgrimage are: *al-Qasidah al-Hamziyyah (Umm al-Qura fi Madh Khayr al-Wara)*, *al-Qasidah al-Baiyah* and *al-Qasidah al-Mimiyah (al-Kawakib al-Durriyah fi Madh Khayr al-Bariya or al-Burdah)*. *al-Qasidah Hamziyyah* is also referred to as *Hamziya fi'l Madaih la-Nabawiya*, *Banat Su'ad al-Qasidah al-Khamriya*, *al-Qasida al-Mudariyya fi'l-salat 'ala Khayr al-Bariyya*, *al-Qasidah Ya'iyya* and *al-Tawassul bi 'l-Kur'an*. A number of his contemporary Sufis are said to have been active promoters of his immortal *Burdah al-Madih*, which he composed in while he was living in Madinah and is an imitation of Ka'b bin Zuhair's celebrated ode, *Dhukhr al-Ma'ad 'ala wazn Banat Su'ad*

3. Life and Work of Muhammad Mshela

3.1. Sheikh Muhammad bin Athman Hajji al-Hilali Mshela (1840-1930)

Sheikh Muhammad bin Athman was born in Shela in c. 1840 and died in Shela at the age of about ninety years (1930). His grave can still be seen behind the Shela Mosque. Mshela is his *non de plume*. He received all his education in Shela and Lamu and never travelled a lot. He dearly loved the Prophet Muhammad and was a *Hafidh Qur'an* (one who has committed the whole of the *Holy Qur'an* to memory). Committing the whole *Holy Qur'an* to memory is an archetypal idea. According to Caliph 'Uthman, the Prophet is related to have once said, "The best person amongst you is he who has learnt the *Qur'an* and teaches it".

Sheikh Muhammad bin Athman was also a *twabibu* (a doctor of medicine or one who practices the "Science of Medicine") in Shela. His wife, Fatmah binti Abdallah, relates that on every Thursday evening, he used to pray and on the eve of Friday morning, he would actually see the Prophet Muhammad. He was a Sufi and he used to get revelations about the future events from the Prophet Muhammad and his *Maswahaba* (Companions and Associates). He once dreamt that Sayyidna 'Ali gave him a *Kijoyo* (a kind of bread). When he woke up, he narrated this to his Sheikh. His Sheikh's interpretation was that the Prophet Muhammad was going to make him (Sheikh Muhammad bin Athman) a great scholar.

According to my informants in Shela, Mshela had the secret of the revealed knowledge and at one time, he heard a lizard 'crying' and this worried him a lot. He was so confused about this in-

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cident. When his wife, Fatmah, enquired from him what was bothering him, he refused to reveal to her what had happened. After a short time, Sheikh Muhammad died. It was then when a close friend and a relative of his, whom he (Sheikh Muhammad) had revealed to him what had happened, informed Fatmah that the lizard's 'cry' was a premonition warning of a great impending doom.

According to his son, Muhamad bin Athman Hajji, now living in Mombasa and also an *Hafidh Qur'an*, he had a good knowledge of the science of Astronomy. He was quite jovial, humble, God-fearing, generous, caring, honest, responsible, dependable, kind-hearted, and hard-working. He was quite rich but he spent his riches on the poor. He used to treat the sick free of charge.

Mshela, according to my Shela informants, had three wives (some informants claimed he had concubines) - Binti Ali Kadhi, Fatmah binti Abdullah and Bi. Khadijah Hassan (Mwana Kha). He dearly loved them all. He lived with his first wife Binti Ali Kadhi almost all his life. His last wife died recently.

For a long time, he wished to get a child. He prayed to God day and night. After some time, he dreamt and in his dream, the Prophet Muhammad appeared to him the same way he appeared to al-Busiri, and informed him that he would get a son and that he should call him Muhammad. In 1923 he, indeed, got a son and called him Muhammad.

Although he had sworn to educate his son very well, at the age of four years, he could not pronounce the *Shahadah*. He again prayed to God and in his dream the Prophet Muhammad appeared again to him and advised him to spit on his son. He did so and held a party and then took the child to school. He gave his son a second name, Faraji. His full name was, therefore, Muhammad bin Muhammad Athman (Faraji). Mshela died when Faraji was about six years. After his father died, Faraji was taken by his uncle Bwana Maka, who brought him up. Bwana Maka was a taxi driver in Mombasa and he is the one who educated Faraji.

According to Sheikh Ahmad Sheikh Nabhany, Faraji and him worked in Lamu as coconut plantation consultants. They were recruited on the same day at Kipini, by one Young, an agricultural officer by then. Mr. Faraji later joined Matuga Agricultural College to study horticulture, focusing his studies on citrus cultivation. He later worked with Kenya Ports Authority. He married Bi. Rukiya Ali al-Bakary with whom they got four children (three sons and one daughter). With his second wife, B. Kalathumi Basalama, they got seven children (three daughters and four sons). He got (a son) with his third wife, Bi. Saida and when he (Faraji) died in Mombasa, in 1993, he was still with his second and third wives. As we can see from the above information, although Sheikh Muhammad took long time to get children, he had many grand children (one of his grandchildren was also called Muhammad).

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Mshela's second wife, Fatumah binti Abdullah bin Muhammad Fadhil, bore him a daughter by the name Siti Amama. Muhammad died before she was born. According to my informants in Shela, somebody sat on this girl while she was sleeping. She got sick and later died.

Athman was Sheikh Muhammad's son by a different wife. He is the current Imam of Anisa Mosque Bondeni, Mombasa. I was fortunate to interview him. As mentioned earlier, he is *Hafidhi Qur'an* and one of the most prominent Swahili Muslim scholars in Mombasa.

Some of the students of Sheikh Muhammad are Sheikh Muhammad bin Amin, Sheikh Ahmed bin Ali, Sheikh 'Umar bin Ali bin Athman Zakwany, Ahmad Bwana bin 'Umar, among others. His student, Sheikh Muhammad Amin (Imam Karia) was quite famous in Shela. Imam Karia taught Mwalimu Amati Shafi and Muhammad Umar al-Amudy, among others. Mwalimu Amati Shafi is still a teacher in Shela and is a notable scholar. He informed me that he gathered a lot of information about Sheikh Muhammad from his teacher Imam Karia.

Sheikh Muhammad knew all types of Maulidis. Some of our informants claimed that he is the one who translated *Kasida ya Hamziyyah* into Swahili. One even claimed that he is the author of *al-Inkishafi* and some claimed that he used to perform miracles. He was recognized by all the Muslim scholars of Lamu. He neither talked volumes about himself nor craved for recognition. Some informants claim that he was intellectually better than his teachers.

He completed his education under the guidance of the most notable Muslim scholars. During his youth, Lamu was most famous for many outstanding Muslim scholars and men of integrity and piety. Like al-Busiri, he covered a wide range of Islamic subjects like the Quranic exegesis, Arabic literature, the Islamic Traditions, Islamic Theology, Islamic law (Tawheed and Shariah), Medicine, Mathematics and Sufism.

He shares two names with al-Busiri-Muhammad and Hilali and both had *nom de plume*. They were both visited by the Prophet Muhammad in their sleep and they were both rewarded in their dreams.

He qualified as a *Mwanachuoni* (A Muslim scholar) and later became the most famous Lamu *Holy Qur'an* teacher. At the time when he was about to complete translating the *Holy Qur'an* from Arabic to Swahili, he invited the famous Muslim scholars to complete the task but they declined. They argued that he was the best qualified person for that job. He was fluent in both Arabic and Swahili.

3.2. Mshela's works

He translated, Sheikh Mohammed al-Azabi's Arabic *Maulid* into Swahili, besides translating *Kasida ya Burudai* from Arabic to Swahili. He called his Swahili version of *Maulidi*, *Maulidi ya Dali* (*Maulidi* rhyming in letter *Da*).

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Maulidi ya Dali has a prologue of the translator (23vss), (the translation, 125vss) and (the translator's epilogue, 53vss). The poem is divided into ten sections (excluding the prologue and the epilogue). Section one is in praise of the Allah and prayers to the Holy Prophet, section two about the creation of the Holy Prophet, section three explains his genealogy, section four is about his miraculous conception, section five about his miraculous birth, section six explains the miracles which accompanied his birth, section seven about his youth, section eight about his Ascension, section nine about his migration from Makkah to Madinah and section ten is about his noble qualities.

Each verse has two lines of 15 mizani each. When this *Maulid* text is being recited, the participants stand up between verses 44 and 80. This stage is called Maqam - the point at which the actual birth of the Holy Prophet is mentioned. It is the stage or degree of the Sufi path.

Sheikh Muhammad used to be a group leader of *Maulidi Barzanji*, and many other Maulidi recitations. During Maulidi competitions in Lamu, he always emerged the winner and was well recognized because of this fact. He was a renowned Swahili poet too. He translated *Kasida ya Burudai* from Arabic because, the *kasida* itself is a charm and he was a *twabibu*.

He also translated from Arabic to Swahili a number of panegyrics on the Prophet Muhammad (*Khaswaisi*).

Abbreviations

EI	-	Encyclopaedia of Islam
DMI	-	Dairat al-Ma'arif al-Islamiyya Vol. IV 1933
UDMI	-	Urdu Da'ira-i Ma'arif-i Islamiyya

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