

THE *SĪRAT BANĪ HILĀL*:  
NEW REMARKS ON ITS PERFORMANCE IN UPPER  
AND LOWER EGYPT

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### Introduction

The *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* is, as far as we know, the only Arabic folk epic that is still narrated on the basis of oral tradition, on the amateur — as well as on the professional level. Egypt is one of the countries where the practice still continues, and where audiences still experience the *Sīra Hilāliyya* as an expression of their historical past. The present article gives some results of a field study on performances of the *Sīra Hilāliyya* carried out by the author in a number of Egyptian governorates. Particular attention is paid to the following matters:

- nature and context of performances;
- differences between amateur- and professional reciters, or Poets (*shu'arā'*) as they are called;<sup>1</sup>
- differences between Upper and Lower Egypt in such respects as preference for certain poetic forms, use of musical instruments, and apparel.

The field study was carried out in the governorates of Qena and Sohag (Upper Egypt), and in the governorate of Gharbiyya (Lower Egypt). Oral texts were collected in all three governorates. In this article, a specific part of the results will be presented, notably new information on oral performances in different contexts. Earlier studies, notably that of Bridget Connelly (1986), Susan Slyomovics (1987) and Dwight Reynolds (1995) have been taken into account.

The oral performances studied were carried out by the following reciters: Nūr Malkī Ḥasan and Muḥammad Maḥmūd Ibrāhīm (Abū Fahmī),

<sup>1</sup> The use of the word *shu'a rā'*, Poets, for *Hilāliyya* reciters has already frequently been discussed in earlier publications. Especially noteworthy is Reynolds 1995, p. 49, n. 1, who mentions that the people in the Delta village where he did his research make a distinction in pronunciation between ordinary poets (*shu'a rā'*, with accent on the final syllable, long ā, and glottal stop) and *Hilāliyya* Poets (*shu'a rā'*, with accent on the first syllable, short final a, and no glottal stop). To highlight the specific meaning of 'Poet' referring to a *Hilāliyya* reciter, we have capitalized the word in this article.

amateur reciters from Qena, as well as the following professional reciters: ‘Izz al-Dīn Naṣr al-Dīn, ‘Antar Riḍwān, Muḥammad al-Yamanī, and Sayyid al-Ḍawī (all from Upper Egypt), and Aḥmad Ḥawwās (Lower Egypt).

### **Performance of Al-Hilāliyya**

Definitions of the term ‘performance’ include a number of aspects, of which the following are especially relevant in connection with the performance of folklore literature such as discussed here. Lauri Honko emphasizes the relation between performance and text, stating that performance is not a mere reproduction of a text that is learned by heart, word for word, but implies that the story is in fact born anew with each performance, particularly when produced to suit specific occasions.<sup>2</sup> Aḥmad Mursī, in his definition of performance, focuses on the pose taken by the performer, and thus defines performance as the specific pose taken by the narrator, or singer, while facing the audience. Such a pose varies in different degrees from his position or role in daily life. In order to be able to perform or present his tale or his song to the audience and communicate its meaning, he has to prepare himself and to assume the pose that suits the purpose. The nature of the performance and its effectiveness depends on these factors.<sup>3</sup> Muḥammad Diyāb gives the following general definition: performances of folklore narratives are “an act of creation, based on seeking inspiration from the heritage of folk biographies through oral continuity and live interaction with the participants, with the aim of fostering their sense of identity and unity.”<sup>4</sup> This, of course, is a general definition, and does not take into account specific aspects or settings of the performance of folk narratives such as the *Sīra Hilāliyya*.

### **Performance Occasions: Occasional Moneymaking**

Coffee house performances of the *Sīra Hilāliyya*, as described by Lane gradually disappeared in the middle of the twentieth century. Such performances were especially popular during Ramadan, when the owner of a coffee house would make an arrangement with a particular singer to come and celebrate Ramadan evenings at his coffee house.<sup>5</sup> The singer would

<sup>2</sup> Honko 1989, p. 334.

<sup>3</sup> Mursī 1995, p. 110.

<sup>4</sup> Diyāb 2003, vol. 1, pp. 81 and 82.

<sup>5</sup> Lane 1954, pp. 397-406.

then divide the narrative into thirty episodes, one for each evening of the month, so that he could complete the narrative in the course of the month.

Next to performances in coffee houses, which no longer take place, performances of the *Sīra Hilāliyya* used to be associated with certain social occasions. One of these was the harvest season, when reciters used to perform the *Hilāliyya* as a means of collecting money. The reciter would go to the farmers' fields at harvest time and sing some passages of the *Hilāliyya* in sad tones, accompanied by the tunes of the *rabāba*. He would stress verses that emphasized the need for generosity and would also pray to Allah for Him to bless the farmers' crops. In return, the farmers would offer him something of the harvested crops. Susan Slymovics refers to the connection between *al-Hilāliyya* and the harvest of particular crops, describing how 'Iwaḍallāh 'Abd al-Jalīl, the reciter who was the focus of her study, used to accompany his father to the fields at harvest time when he was fourteen years old, in order to obtain a bit of grain from the farmers in return for singing to them some passages of the *Hilāliyya*.<sup>6</sup> The singer 'Alī Muḥammad 'Abd al-Raḥīm Qinawī Mitqāl refers to the same kind of dealings, mentioning that measures of cereals were given to him by some farmers.<sup>7</sup>

Another reference to the reciting of small parts of *al-Hilāliyya* for purposes of collecting money is the information provided by amateur narrators, some of which have said that their interest in *al-Hilāliyya* arose through the 'roaming Poets' (*al-shu'arā' al-mutajawillūn*). Such Poets used to go and recite small parts of the *Hilāliyya* at railway trains, village markets, and *mawlid*s, birthday celebrations of certain holy sheikhs. This has been confirmed during the researcher's field visits to the most famous *mawlid*s of Qena Governorate (among them the *mawlid* al-Ṭawwāb in Qūṣ). Al-Ḥajjājī also reports this phenomenon, mentioning that such money collecting is practiced in Luxor and Qena by Poets accompanied by a group playing the *rabāba* or the tambourine.<sup>8</sup> He tells us that a young lad of sixteen stopped with his donkey to collect bread from houses during the *mawlid* days, singing and playing the tambourine:

Yūnis, son of *al-Hilāliyya*, passed by the market;  
So sick, so sick am I! No use to examine me any more!  
Fully examined have I been, by ninety-nine physicians,  
Not counting the nurses.

<sup>6</sup> Slymovics 1987, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Abū l-Layl: Interview with 'Alī al-Qinawī in summer 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Al-Ḥajjājī 1991, p. 22.

### Religious Occasions: Organized Performances at *mawlid*s and *laylas*

While, as illustrated above, it was not unusual for Hilālī singers to peddle their craft during the numerous *mawlid*s that took place in Upper Egypt, people also used to invite *Hilāliyya* Poets to participate in the celebrations with their performance. This practice continues to the present day. Of the most famous *mawlid*s associated with the performance of *al-Hilālīyya*, we might mention the *mawlid* of Sīdī ‘Abd al-Raḥīm al-Qinawī (Qena), Abū l-Ḥajjāj al-Uqṣurī (Luxor), al-Ṭawwāb (Qūs), and Sheikh Muḥammad (Esna). It was noted during the field study, however, that the performance of *al-Hilālīyya* at *mawlid*s is slowly disappearing. This development is speeded up by the circumstance that Hilālī singers were replaced by laudatory Poets (*maddāhīn*) and religious ballad singers (*munshidīn*) at the two most famous *mawlid*s in Qena province, namely Sīdī ‘Abd al-Raḥīm al-Qinawī and Abū l-Ḥajjāj al-Uqṣurī. Nevertheless, traces of *Hilāliyya* performance still take place, though rarely, at certain *mawlid*s, such as that of al-Ṭawwāb (Qena) and Sheikh Muḥammad (Esna).

*Mawlid*s, however, are not the only religious occasions for performing *al-Sira al-Hilāliyya*. Families sometimes make a vow to organize a religious *layla* (evening festivity) to which they would invite either a Qur’ān reciter, a laudatory Poet (*maddāh*), or a *Hilāliyya* Poet (*shā‘ir*). The latter option, till recently, was the most favored.

The researcher once was invited by the Poet ‘Izz al-Dīn Naṣr al-Dīn al-Sa‘īdī to attend a *layla* during which the singer would perform the *Hilāliyya*. This happened on Wednesday, June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2005. The *layla* was organized by a certain notable family of Zunayqa village, Esna District, in celebration of the *mawlid* of Sheikh Muḥammad.

In the context of religious occasions, it is custom not to ask payment for the performance. However, Poets do accept reward which in this case is not given to them in the name of a certain family (like on family occasion, see below) but *maḥabbatan fī rasūl Allāh*, ‘out of love for the messenger of God.’

### Family Occasions

In addition to *mawlid* celebrations, *Hilāliyya* Poets are often invited for the celebration of family occasions, such as the so-called ‘donation evenings’ (*layālī l-nuqūt*), the circumcision of boys, and weddings. Donation evenings are organized in situations of financial straits. Since the host has usually attended many such occasions himself and donated money



Fig. 1. The poet Sayyid al-Ḍawā and his musical troupe at the celebration of the circumcision of a boy.

presents accordingly, he can be fairly sure that staging such an event, a *laylat an-nuqūṭ*, will yield a substantial sum of money.

The circumcision of boys is an important social occasion which still offers good opportunities for the performance of *al-Sīra al-Hilāliyya*. Performance at such occasions does not differ from that wedding celebrations, either regarding the financial (or material) remuneration for the troupe or in the manner it the troupe is welcomed, apart from the fact that the special nature of the occasion would naturally be reflected in the songs chosen and in the passages of *al-Hilāliyya* selected for the occasion.

### Weddings

We will deal somewhat more extensively with wedding performances, on the basis of our observations at weddings attended in Qena Governorate during the field study (2004-2005).

The number of members of a *Hilāliyya* troupe ranges between five and eight, although most of the troupes whose performances we recorded consisted of seven members. Each of those members has his specific role in the troupe. There are always three *rabāba* players, each having a certain role. The Poet himself may act as the third *rabāba* player, such as in the case of the Poets ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Ṣa‘īdī, ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ Faraj Madbūlī,

Sayyid al-Ḍawī, and Diyāb ‘Abd al-‘Azīm. Then there is one drum (*tabla*) player (for rhythm) and another for playing the tambourine (*duff* or *riqq*). One member of the troupe collects the money gifts (*nuqūṭ*) in a bag, and there is also a singer of popular songs, who has a warming-up role at the start of the evening ceremony. He may also sing during the times when the Poet pauses for a rest.

Each *rabāba* player has his particular function: one takes care of the *anīn*, ‘plaintive sound,’ that suits each event described by the Poet, such as sorrow, rejoicing, dueling, etc; the second plays the *taqsīm*, ‘prelude,’ and the third musically supports the *qaṣaṣ*, ‘narration.’ The role of the *rabāba* player is not limited to mere performance, but he also acts as activator of the Poet’s memory, since the music helps the Poet to remember the stanzas and stimulates him to select the stanzas that are most suitable. That this is one of the functions of the music was confirmed by the Poet ‘Izz al-Dīn Naṣr al-Dīn, who said that “as long as he has no *rabāba* in hand, he finds it difficult to remember.”

The most famous of the *Hilāliyya* troupes in Qena Governorate are those of the Poets Sayyid al-Ḍawī, Muḥammad al-Yamanī and Ashraf Fārūq al-Qinawī. There are also some other troupes in Sohag Governorate, such as that of the Poets ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Ṣa’īdī, ‘Antar Riḍwān, and ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ Faraj Madbulī. In Lower Egypt, the troupes of the Poets ‘Abd al-Sattār Fathī Sulaymān and Sayyid Aḥmad Ḥawass (Gharbiyya Governorate) are among the most famous of the region.

As to the performance of *al-Hilāliyya* at weddings, people at Qena still stick to the invitation of a *Hilāliyya* troupe, either from Qena Governorate or from Sohag Governorate, to celebrate one of the two wedding evenings: either the wedding evening itself (*laylat al-dukhla* or *laylat al-zifāf*) or the preceding evening, the so-called ‘henna evening.’ After the person in charge of the wedding has come to an agreement with the troupe, as represented by the Poet or by any other members, about the financial remuneration, the most convenient time for the performance is decided. Such agreements may be made during the celebration of another evening performance of the troupe concerned, or through specialized brokers or intermediaries. Upon its arrival at the place of the celebration, the troupe first has its evening meal and then starts its performance.

The celebration usually consists of two parts. The first part starts immediately after the call for evening prayer (*al-‘ishā*), and occasionally already after the sunset prayer (*ṣalāt al-maghrib*). In the latter case, the celebration has to stop during the call for evening prayer. The first part of the *layla* is performed by the troupe accompanying a popular singer

who sings *mawwāls* (traditional form of vocal music) and *aghānī sha‘biyya* (folk songs) which suit the nature of the festival. The purpose of this part is to create an atmosphere of rejoicing. It also gives the troupe the opportunity to fulfill the audience’s musical requests and collect as many money presents as possible. The people who attend like to greet the troupe by offering some money, as a courtesy to the hosts of the *layla*. The troupe naturally prefers to stretch out this part as long as possible, until finally the audience becomes impatient and begins to call for the Poet to appear on the stage.

Money presents are offered in the following manner: one of the guests goes to the troupe’s popular singer, holding a certain amount of money in his hand. He then asks the artist to repeat after him certain names and acclaim them, saying “so and so greets so and so together with greetings to the bridegroom.” He mentions a large number of names, so as not to expose himself to any blame from the non-mentioned. Once all the intended names are mentioned by the guest and are repeated by the artist (in this context called *al-shubāshī*, ‘the artist who receives money from the audience and repeats the names and greetings’), the money is finally handed over to the popular singer. He is then asked to sing a certain song or snatch of a song, or to make the music players of the troupe to play dancing tunes, so that he can perform the dance known as ‘*ashara baladī*, a well-known upper-Egyptian dance. The troupe has to comply with his request. The amount of money varies from one location to another, ranging from one or two pounds in one place to five pounds in others, such as in some villages to the north of Qena, for example the two districts of Dëshna and Abu Tesht. It may range between five and twenty pounds in some places south of Qena, particularly in the districts of Esna, Qūṣ, and Qift.

Fig. and 3

The popular singer continues in this way up to around eleven o’clock. By that time, the audience has become very eager to listen to *al-Hilāl-iyya*, and starts calling for the Poet. The singer then ends his performance, and the second part of evening begins. The Poet proceeds to the stage, which consists of a number of wooden benches.<sup>9</sup> Then he starts performing the *Sīra* in his own style and manner. Some Poets start with

<sup>9</sup> Muḥammad Diyāb has described the wooden bench (*dikka*), the chairs, or other contraptions used by the Poet as a stage, and also discussed the place and time of performance of the *Hilāl-iyya*: according to him, the period between the night prayer (*‘ishā’*) and dawn is the proper time for the performance of folk narratives (Diyāb 2003, p. 80).

a prayer for a satisfactory performance, invoking God's blessing on the audience.

Fig. 4 and 5

It should be mentioned that the Poet's performance is not limited to mere reciting, but that he may also act on the stage, impersonating various characters of the narrative by making certain gestures, mimicking, and using different voices. He may also lean on a stick that he is carrying, or on another member of the troupe.

Fig. 6 and 7

Most *Hilāliyya* Poets are in the habit of taking drugs before or during recitation, such as hashish, henbane (*banj*) or opium. They may also smoke the *narjīla* or drink wine. They do this before or during recitation in order to boost their confidence before they start to impersonate the *Sīra* characters. This, at least, is the reason which the Poet Muḥammad al-Yamanī gives for the use of intoxicants.

Fig. 8

Fig. 9

Fig. 10 and 11

The performance continues for approximately two hours, which may be interrupted from time to time by someone from the audience rising to greet the Poet and the troupe with a gift of money, in the same manner as was done with the popular singer during the first part of the evening. No long lists of names are summed up, however, so as not to spoil the audience's enjoyment of the *Sīra*.

Fig. 12 and 13

The audience does not restrict itself to passive listening. They may join the Poet in reciting certain passages, point out errors he makes, or react to his performance when he describes fighting or love. Just like the Poet, they may take wine or drugs. When he notices murmuring or noise among the audience, the Poet stops and asks: "Would you like to invoke



blessings onto the Prophet?” Then they respond by saying: “Blessings and peace be upon him.” The place becomes quiet again, and the Poet resumes his narration.

Fig. 14

Fig. 15

After about two hours of reciting *al-Hilāliyya*, the Poet asks the audience’s permission for a rest, singing:

My healer has come in secrecy,<sup>10</sup>  
 Fair and decent is he.  
 With your pardon, I will drink the tea  
 And then come back to ye!

After the interval for rest and tea, the Poet resumes his reciting, and the performance continues up to the early hours of the following day, or until the call for daybreak prayer. The Poet concludes his performance by invoking Allah’s blessing for the Prophet (peace be upon him).

Fig. 16

In certain villages, particularly in the district of Deshna, the second part of the festival may be especially devoted to the women, who can then dance and participate in the celebration, voicing joyful shrill sounds (*zaghārīd*). This happens particularly when the hour is so late that the still remaining audience consists mainly of family members. Under such circumstances, a woman sees no objection to hailing the troupe and offering money presents, asking them to sing specific songs. After that, the troupe ends its performance and returns home.

### **Amateurs and Professional Narrators**

Most researchers who wrote on the difference between professional performers of the *Hilāliyya* and amateurs, focused on the fact that the professional performer receives a financial reward, as opposed to the amateur. Studies have often focused exclusively on the professional reciters, largely disregarding the amateurs. This paper will attempt to bring into

<sup>10</sup> With the word *ṭabīb*, ‘healer, physician’, here the beloved one is meant who can heal the heart of the lover.

focus significant differences between the two categories, and show that these are connected to matters of social class and performance context.

### Amateur Narrators

When we speak about an amateur narrator, we mean a person who at some stage of his life became so enchanted by *al-Sīra al-Hilāliyya*, or 'struck' by it, that he started gathering knowledge of the text wherever and in whatever form he could find it: evening performances of various kinds, tape recordings, written or printed texts, etcetera. In this way, he gradually managed to learn the text by heart, either the complete text or specific stories and episodes. Thus he would be able to recite it upon the request of a private audience at certain private occasions, or even spontaneously. He would do so without being unaccompanied by any musical instruments, depending only on his performance abilities. He would not receive or accept any material return from the audience, his only reward consisting of their admiration.

Thus, the performance contexts in which the amateur reciters recite *al-Hilāliyya* is often some kind of family context. For more details, we refer to earlier publications on the subject.<sup>11</sup>

This category of *Hilāliyya* reciters or transmitters is termed 'narrators' (*rāwī*). An important reason why the amateur narrator only performs without being rewarded for the performance and without being accompanied by the musical instruments used by the professional Poets, lies in the social position of the professional reciters. These are classified by the people as 'gypsies,' and as such, social outcasts. Thus the amateur would bring social blame upon himself and his tribe by performing in the manner of a professional.

This social stigma made it difficult for the researcher to record performances of amateur reciters. Most of them refused to be recorded for fear of being considered as Poets, and consequently as gypsies. Al-Ḥajjājī has referred to the social difficulties that would face the amateur narrators, when he explained that Ḥajjājī 'Abd al-Zāhir, an amateur narrator who performs without music, was at first unwilling to recite *al-Sīra al-Hilāliyya*, because he was afraid to be seen as a professional narrator.<sup>12</sup> Susan Slyomovics also paid attention to the music aspect and the social stigma

<sup>11</sup> For further details, refer to al-Ḥajjājī 1990, p. 24; and Abū l-Layl 2007, pp. 104 and 105.

<sup>12</sup> Al-Ḥajjājī 1990, pp. 22 and 23.

involved when she described ‘Abd al-Salām Ḥāmid as a reciter singing his tales at the markets, refusing to be accompanied by a band of musicians in the way a Poet would. This reluctance could not even be overcome by the fact that according to what people said, ‘Abd al-Salām was a genuine Hilālī himself, a true descendant of the Hilālī tribe.<sup>13</sup>

Similar reluctance of amateur reciters to perform in the way of professional Poets has been observed by the present researcher in discussions with a large number of amateur reciters whose performances he recorded, such as ‘Ādil Muḥammad Ṣiddīq (Qūṣ District), Jābir al-Sayyid (Qeft District), Ḥasan Muḥammad Majīd, Ramaḍān Muḥammad ‘Alī, and Nūr Malkī (Qena District).

Fig. 17

### Professional Reciters (Poets)

Professional narrators, as was pointed out in earlier publications such as that of, for instance, Slyomovics (1987) and Reynolds (1995), were often associated with a specific social group with a very low status, namely that of the gypsies (*ghajar*). They were also referred to as the ‘Berefts’ (*maslūb / masālīb*), the Aleppans (*ḥalab* or *ḥalaba*),<sup>14</sup> or the Tatars (*tatar*). Their professional name is *al-Shu‘arā’*, Poets.<sup>15</sup>

As stated above, the word *al-shā‘ir* in Upper Egypt usually refers to a person who performs the *Sīra Hilālīyya* accompanied by a musical band or troupe, and rewarded for his performance with a financial remuneration which differs according to the context in which the recitation takes place, and also depends on the position and social reputation of the Poet.

Since, as also stated above, such a person is usually described by the community as a gypsy, the Upper-Egyptian tribes strongly oppose any inclination in their sons to become a professional reciter and to earn his living in that way, in spite of the fact that they acknowledge the importance of learning *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* by heart, and strongly appreciate its narration within a domestic context. But if the son became a professional, he would be classified by the community as a gypsy, and would thus bring shame on the tribe.

<sup>13</sup> Slyomovics 1987, pp. 14-15.

<sup>14</sup> See Reynolds 1995, p. 49. Reynolds explains that *ḥalab* is only used in private by the Poets themselves and their family members, never by others.

<sup>15</sup> See footnote 11.

Thus, in order to become a professional singer, a Poet, the reciter has to cut himself off from his tribe. Occasionally, however, a singer manages to avoid this dire consequence by performing only within his own tribal community, such as Abū Badawī al-Qutṭ, <sup>16</sup> of the Hawāra tribe (Naj' al-Shawwāf, village of Abū Diyāb West, Deshna District). When he, as he says, yearns to sing *al-Hilāliyya*, he sits down in front of his house on summer nights and recites *al-Hilāliyya*, playing the *rabāba* and being accompanied by some people from his village. He does not refuse invitations from his co-villagers to recite *al-Hilāliyya* at social occasions of their own, so long as the activity remains strictly within the range of his own tribe.

As opposed to amateurs, professional narrators learn *al-Hilāliyya* through 'inheritance' from their fathers or uncles or by accompanying another professional Poet. Following up the names and family connections of the members of *al-Hilāliyya* troupes clearly brings into focus the way in which the performance tradition of the *Sīra al-Hilāliyya* is passed on from one generation to another. The members of *al-Sīra al-Hilāliyya* troupes usually belong to one family. <sup>17</sup> *Rayyis* ('chief or leader') Muḥammad Al-Yamanī learnt *al-Hilāliyya* from his uncle al-Sayyid 'Abd al-Bāqī. His own troupe now includes his two brothers, 'Abdallāh al-Yamanī (*rabāba* player) and Maḥmūd al-Yamanī (Poet, *rabāba*), as well as his son 'Alā' Muḥammad al-Yamanī (*rabāba* player, 20 years old) and his nephew 'Ādil 'Abdallāh al-Yamanī (popular singer, percussion, 21 years old). The same is the case with the troupe of *Rayyis* 'Izz al-Dīn Naṣr al-Dīn, which consists entirely of his brothers, while he has been schooling his son since he was eight years old. As for *Rayyis* 'Antar Riḍwān, he has been teaching *al-Hilāliyya* to his son Riḍwān since he was fifteen years old.

Fig. 18 and 19

The same applies to the Poet Sayyid al-Ḍawī, who learnt *al-Sīra al-Hilāliyya* together with his brother Naṣārī al-Ḍawī from their father al-Ḍawī, the Poet. The troupe of Sayyid al-Ḍawī includes some of his relatives, next to his grandson Ramaḍān.

Yet another example is the Poet 'Alī Muḥammad 'Abd al-Raḥīm al-Qinawī Mitqāl, and also Ashraf Fārūq al-Qinawī, who says: "I learnt it

<sup>16</sup> Abū Badawī al-Qutṭ is exceptional in the sense that he is accompanied by music in his performances that however only take place in his own village.

<sup>17</sup> See Abū l-Layl 2007, Part 1, Index: "Al-Hilāliyya Troupes at Qena."

from my uncle Shawqī al-Qinawī, *Rayyis* ‘Izzat al-Qinawī, my father Fārūq al-Qinawī, and my uncle Kamāl al-Qinawī. I learnt from all of them.”

The Poet Diyāb ‘Abd al-‘Azīm (Naj‘ Ḥammādī) has a son by the name of Shabīb Diyāb (40 years old) who has obtained much of his knowledge of *al-Hilāliyya* from his father.

The troupe of the late Poet ‘Alī Aḥmad Jaramūn consisted mainly of his brothers Tarjī‘ and Muḥammad. When he died he left a son, Harrās ‘Alī Jaramūn, who was in the course of learning *al-Hilāliyya* and had learnt both text and performance from his father.<sup>18</sup>

In Lower Egypt, it also has been observed that the professional Poets learn *al-Hilāliyya* from their fathers. The late Poet Sayyid Ḥawwās was succeeded by his son Aḥmad Sayyid Ḥawwās, and the late Poet Faṭḥī Sulaymān was succeeded by his son ‘Abd al-Sattār Faṭḥī Sulaymān.

*Hilāliyya* singers (Poets) of the former generations were mostly illiterate, possibly with some very rare exceptions in the form of people who taught themselves to read and write or attended a very elementary kind of school, such as a village *kuttāb*. The matter is somewhat different with the present generation of *Hilāliyya* singers. These usually have attended regular schools, and some of them have obtained intermediate or pre-intermediate certificates. As came out during the field study ‘Alā’ al-Yamanī (then 20 years old, son of *Rayyis* Muḥammad al-Yamanī) and ‘Ādil ‘Abdallāh al-Yamanī (then 21 years old) both had obtained technical diplomas. Riḍwān ‘Antar held a Certificate of Secondary Technical Education. Al-Zanātī ‘Izz al-Dīn Naṣr al-Dīn left school at the elementary level because he wanted to give all his time to *al-Hilāliyya*.

### Differences between Upper and Lower Egypt

There are a number of differences between Upper and Lower Egypt regarding performance as well as other aspects of the *Sīra al-Hilāliyya*. Here, we present some observations about particular locations.

While the *Hilāliyya* epos is still fully performed by both professionals and amateurs at the Upper Egyptian governorates of Qena, Aswan, Sohag, Assiut, al-Gharbiyya, and Kafr al-Shaykh, only remnants of it are performed in Lower Egyptian governorates such as Fayoum, Beni-Suef, and Giza. Performances are only done by professionals, since no amateur narrators are found in those areas.

<sup>18</sup> All this agrees with earlier findings by Slyomovics 1987, pp. 6-7; and Connelly 1986, p. 59.

Performers of *al-Hilāliyya* in Lower Egypt, at least in the locations mentioned, seem to have a preference for the popular poetic forms such as *mawwāls* and folk songs, and occasionally ‘strophic poems’ (*zajal*). As to the preferred subject matter, the most common subjects in these locations are love stories about romantic couples, such as the story of ‘‘Azīza and Yūnis’ and the story of ‘Rizq and Ḥusna.’ As the *mawwāl* with its slow rhythm is the poetic form most used in the *Hilāliyya* as performed in these locations, the Poets there tend to use the musical instruments which suit the nature and rhythm of the *Hilāliyya* text as narrated in this form. These are the lute, the flute, and the violin or violoncello.

Fig. 20 and 21

The Poets in Lower Egypt are keen on putting on certain apparel while reciting, such as a white kaftan, a sort of overcoat called *kākūlā* and a red tarbush. This outfit resembles the dress of al-Azhar scholars, and is intended to confer an aura of sacredness and respect on their narration. This effect is strengthened by the language used by the narrators, a kind of classicalized colloquial.<sup>19</sup>

Fig. 22

In Upper Egypt, the narration is told in stanzas of four half-verses, interspersed with popular poetic forms, namely folk songs, *mawwāl* and *zajal* poems. According to the narrators, the Poet Jābir Abū Ḥusayn (1913-1980) was the first to recite the *Sīra* in stanzas of four half-verses, the first half-verse rhyming with the third and the second with the fourth, as illustrated by the following example.

*Awwal kalamī adhkur Allah,  
Ba’dīn amdaḥ Nabīnā:  
Ilāhī ḥayy wa-lā ma’būd siwāh,  
Illī khalaqnā mitkaffī bīna.*

Which may be translated (unrhymed) as follows:

At first I have to remember Allah,  
And, thereafter, to praise our Prophet:  
My ever-living God, none else to be worshipped,

<sup>19</sup> For further details on the performance of *al-Hilāliyya* in Lower Egypt see Reynolds 2006, pp 13-17.

He is our Creator and Sustainer.

As to the use of musical instruments: in the case of, for instance, stories of war and revenge certain musical instruments are used to suit the required quick rhythm, mainly the *rabāba*, the drum, and the tambourine (the small one: *riqq* or *mazhar*, the bigger one: *bundayr*). It is to be mentioned that the tambourine has replaced the tambour (*tār*) which was commonly used earlier to accompany narrations in Upper Egypt.

Fig. 23 and 24

A remarkable fact is that the Poet Jābir Abū Ḥusayn, the most famous of the Upper Egyptian Poets, used to put on the apparel of an Azhar scholar, as was customary among Poets from Lower Egypt. This he took over from them during the time that he worked in Alexandria. Later Upper Egyptian generations have not followed him in putting on such apparel. However, they have maintained his habit of wearing a finger-ring, believing that it inspires them to remember the *Sīra* at the moment of performance. This, anyway, is what the Poet Muḥammad al-Yamanī and the Poet ‘Antar Riḍwān told us.

Fig. 25 and 26

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Fig. 2 and 3. Handing over money gifts.

Fig. 4 and 5. The Poet enlivening his performance with manual gestures.

Fig. 6 and 7. The Poet leaning on a stick during his performance.

Fig. 8. A member of the musical band taking hashish during a performance.

Fig. 9. The Poet ‘Antar Riḍwān smoking the *narjīla* during a performance.

Fig. 10 and 11. Poet ‘Antar Riḍwān smoking the *narjīla* during his recitation of *al-Hilāliyya*.

Fig. 12 and 13. Some of the guests welcoming the Poet and handing over money gifts.

Fig. 14. People taking wine and drugs while listening to the Poet.

Fig. 15. The audience listening to the Poet.

Fig. 16. The troupe taking a rest during a performance.

Fig. 17. ‘Abd al-Raḥīm Ḥasanayn, amateur narrator.

Fig. 18 and 19. The Poet ‘Antar Riḍwān teaching *al-Hilāliyya* to his son during an evening performance.

Fig. 20 and 21. A musical band in Lower Egypt, using the violin, violoncello and the flute.

Fig. 22. The Poet Aḥmad Ḥawwās, dressed as an al-Azhar scholar, during performance.

Fig. 23 and 24. The main musical instruments used in Upper Egypt.

Fig. 25 and 26. Poets from the South, putting on finger-rings during performance.

