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Fragment of the month

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Addendum to November 2011's Fragment of the Month

FRAGMENT OF THE MONTH ARCHIVE

## Fragment of the Month: November 2020

### *Al-Qaṣida al-Fiyyāšiyya* – an old–new poem found in Judaeo–Arabic manuscripts: T–S NS 224.4 and RNL Yevr.–Arab. II:1741

Rachel Hasson

#### General background

The song al-Qaṣida al-Fiyyāšiyya, or just al-Fiyyāšiyya, is a highly popular folk song. Today it is very well-known in Morocco and Algeria and is sung on the mawlid holidays. The song is performed during special events in other locations as well. The internet is flooded with modern-day performances of the song, and websites provide different versions of it with varying melodies and lengths. One official performance of the song was uploaded to YouTube as part of a gala event held in Morocco (المسرة الأندلسية الفخريّة 2016) in honor of Andalusian poetry.<sup>1</sup> Based on my familiarity with the song online, it appears the Moroccan singer, ‘Abd al-Rahīm al-Ṣuwayrī, is the singer most identified with al-Fiyyāšiyya and is known to perform the song at the aforementioned Andalusian poetry event. However, the song can be found in the repertoire of many other singers as well.<sup>2</sup>

Having said that, this song is far from new. It was composed over four hundred years ago by the 16th-century Sūfī Sīdī ‘Uthmān b. Yaḥyā, otherwise known as Sīdī Amḥammad al-Buḥlūl al-Sharqī. His ancestors were most probably born in Meknes (Morocco). However, his biography remains unknown. The song al-Qaṣida al-Fiyyāšiyya deals with several topics, including the positive impact of God’s power on human beings, salvation following adversity (al-Faraj) ba da al-Ṣidda), being content with little, avoiding greed, encouraging humble behavior, and so forth. Such themes strongly correspond with Sufi thought.

Al-Fiyyāšiyya falls under the genre of Arabic al-Malhūn poetry, a dialectical folk poetry that developed in the Maghreb. This rhyming strophic poetry in all probability grew over centuries among Bedouin and spread widely from the 16th century onwards, primarily in Morocco, Algeria and Tunis.<sup>3</sup>

It is said that Sīdī Amḥammad al-Buḥlūl al-Sharqī also worked as a jeweler. One day the Sultan sent him a pearl to pierce; the pearl split in two, and the jeweler feared he would be accused of fraud in an attempt to steal half of the pearl. However, at that moment, the sultan’s wife gave birth to twins, each of whom received one half of the pearl. According to tradition, this is the backdrop against which al-Buḥlūl al-Sharqī wrote al-Qaṣida al-Fiyyāšiyya.<sup>4</sup>

The poem has been given an interpretation that is consistent with Sufi faith by محمد ابن محمد ابن عبد الرحمن ابن علي البهسي الغفلي الشعبي الفخري القسندي نسس in 1653, is held in the Berlin State Library. Al-Khalawātī’s interpretation is simplistic and is accompanied by many hadiths.<sup>5</sup>

The poem is written in a North African Arabic dialect, which is very interesting of itself. However, I will refer to this aspect of the poem, as reflected in the Judaeo-Arabic manuscripts below, in another study.

#### Research to date and Arab manuscripts of the poem

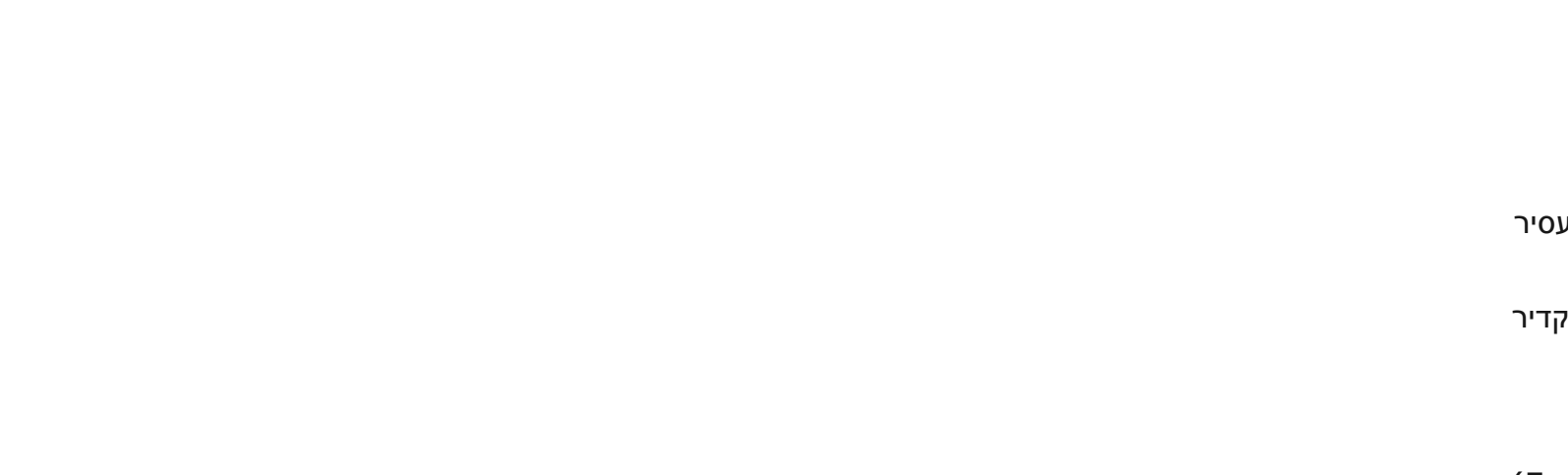
To the best of my knowledge, only two academic studies of al-Qaṣida al-Fiyyāšiyya have been completed to date. The first, conducted by Mustafa Waza<sup>6</sup>, examines an oral folk version of the poem compiled in Algeria. The second, by Haseeb Shehadeh, is based on eight Samaritan manuscripts of the qasida.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, at least ten Arab manuscripts are scattered among several libraries throughout the world, namely the Royal Library in Spain, the National Library in Jerusalem (a Damascus manuscript copied in the late 17th century from the Judean Collection), and eight more manuscripts in the Royal Library in Berlin.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, two more versions of the poem, found in Cairo at the end of the 19th century, were published in the early 20th century by M. Bouriant.<sup>8</sup> The song is found in a pamphlet entitled القصيدة الوصفية لوالي المصالح سيدي بهلول الترمي during the 20th century and can be found online.<sup>9</sup>

#### The Judaeo–Arabic Manuscripts of al-Qaṣida al-Fiyyāšiyya

To my surprise, eleven Judaeo-Arabic manuscripts of the poem were found in the Cairo Genizah. Ten manuscripts belong to the Karaite Firkovitch collection<sup>10</sup> and one manuscript belongs to the Taylor-Schechter Collection (T-S NS 224.4). Based on the handwriting, it appears that the manuscripts were copied in the 17th century. The manuscripts did not survive in full, and the poem only appears in its entirety in MS RNL Yevr.-Arab. II:1741. The Judaeo-Arabic material of the qasida is new and unknown.



#### T-S NS 224.4 recto

The qasida is entitled ‘Qṣṣat al-Buḥlūl’, קצת אבֿהלול (‘The story of Buhluḥ’, relating to the author’s name), in all of the Judaeo-Arabic manuscripts, whereas we find a range of titles in the Arabic manuscripts, such as: قصيدة الوفاة المعروفة بالمغربية (‘Qasida of fidelity known as Maghrebian’, in a manuscript belonging to the Yahuda Collection) or القصيدة البهلولية (in the manuscripts preserved in Berlin).

Below is the opening of the qasida (المتن), followed by the stanza found in the Judaeo-Arabic versions of the qasida (which is not found in the Samaritan version, for example):

נקלק מן רזקי לאש ואל כאלק ירחוקי

אנא מא לי פיאש אש עלייא מני

דור

אנא עבר רבון ליה קודרתון ייהון ברא כול אמרן עסיר

ואן סונת עברון צעוף אל קוא פריב עילא כול שיאן קדיר

דור

(From MS RNL Yevr.-Arab. II:1741, fol.11v.)

#### Free translation

Why should I be worried about my livelihood, surely the Creator will provide my livelihood;

I am not boastful, and what am I obligated to do?

Stanza (actually marks a musical break)

I am a servant of a God who has power, with which He eases every hard matter;

And I was a servant with minimal strength, so (I have) my God who is omnipotent (see below).

#### The Jewish ‘adaptation’ of al-Qaṣida al-Fiyyāšiyya

Al-Qaṣida al-Fiyyāšiyya was copied by Jews, in spite of its Muslim Sufi source.

The poem’s Muslim origin is evident in the incorporated Quranic verses:

קרבי עילא כול שיאן קדיר

קרבי עילא כול שיאן קדיר

This line is a clever translation of the opening line of the well-known poem written by the Jewish poet and philosopher of the Golden Age of Spain, Yehuda Halevi (1075–1141):

לבי בקדורן ואנוכי בסוף מערב

(Brody, 2, 155)

Free translation: My heart is in the East, and I am at the end of the West.

Yehuda Halevi’s poem is full of contradictions and conflicts that aim to express the poet’s storm of emotions, as he resides in the West, in Spain, while longing to be in the East, in the Land of Israel. The poem expresses not only the poet’s intense yearning, but the emotional conflicts that hamper his ability to experience pleasure. Furthermore, he describes how he would rather leave all the riches of Spain, in exchange for seeing the dust of the destroyed Temple.<sup>19</sup>

To some extent a similar dissonance appears in our poem. The poet, Sīdī ‘Uthmān, is in a precarious situation. He sits in his birthplace, the West, while longing for the East, which is most likely a reference to Mecca, home of the Ka’aba.<sup>20</sup>

This example may suggest that the author, Sīdī ‘Uthmān, was either influenced by or, at the very least, familiar with Yehuda Halevi’s poem. However, this speculation requires further examination.

#### In conclusion

Al-Qaṣida al-Fiyyāšiyya is a popular song that dates as far back as the 16th century in Arabic-speaking countries. The song is also currently well-known in Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria. The song relates to matters concerning contentment with little, repentance, God’s love for human beings, and more. The song originated in North Africa and was composed by the Sūfī Sīdī ‘Uthmān b. Yaḥyā, known as Sīdī Amḥammad al-Buḥlūl al-Sharqī. Apart from well-known oral versions, Samaritan manuscripts, and Arabic versions in manuscripts and print, I found eleven unknown Judaeo-Arabic manuscripts of the poem in the Cairo Genizah, most of which came from the Firkovitch collection. The adaptation of the poem by Jews from Muslim sources confirms the strong intercultural relations that existed at that time between Jews and the Muslim society around them. This poem joins a corpus of Judaeo-Arabic written literature found in the Genizah, which reflects close ties between Jews and their Muslim neighbors.<sup>21</sup>

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#### Footnotes

1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M62E0Kjv930>

2 For example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KFLWsGYQfaI> ساني يوسف <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTWhNSzaYNc>

3 Pellat.

4 Shehadeh, 74.

5 <https://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/werkansicht?PPN=PPN771028881&...>

6 Shehadeh, 69–78.

7 Real Biblioteca del Monasterio, MS Árabes 523. Wust: NLI Yah. Ar. 790. Ahlwardt: We.1735, We.1238, We.294, Spr.490, Spr.162, Spr.1101, Pm.654, Pet.9.

8 Bouriant, 106–121.

9 <https://www.scribd.com/document/322942673/>

10 RNL Yevr.-Arab. II:1741, II:1742, II:1743, II:1763, II:1765, II:1766, II:1804, II:1927, II:1928, II:1971.

11 Found, for example, in Quran, al-Baqarah 20 *وَلَا تُلَاحِظْ عَنْكَ نَافِثَاتُ الْفِتْرِ* and very frequently.

12 Found, for example, in Quran, al-Baqarah 117 *وَلَا تُلَاحِظْ عَنْكَ نَافِثَاتُ الْفِتْرِ* and frequently.

13 Honko, 12–33.

14 Davidson, No. 2664.

15 Brody, 33.

16 Beeri, 147.

17 Davidson, No. 3730.

18 Margoliouth, 2, No. 728. I thank Dr Sara Cohen for the ‘The Ezra Fleisher Institute for the study of the poetry found in the Genizah’ who helped me to identify the poems.

19 Elizur, 444–447. For the possibility that Yehuda Halevi used in his poet motifs he absorbed from Muslim poets, see Razhabi, 343–344. I thank Dr Almog Raz for this reference.

20 I thank Dr Shoey Raz for this comment.

21 For a general description of the corpus of Judaeo-Arabic popular literature in the Genizah see Hasson.