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Ines Weinrich

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# Between Poem and Ritual: The *Burda* by al-Būṣīrī (d. 1294-1297)

*Ines Weinrich*

During my fieldwork in Beirut, I came across a particular poem again and again. In the beginning, I did not always recognize it, as it appeared in different forms regarding both its text and melody. It was the renowned poem *al-Burda* by the Mamluk poet al-Būṣīrī, and soon I had the opportunity to attend a performance of the complete poem of which I had hitherto only heard selected parts. Two features struck me: firstly, the performed versions differed from the original poem and secondly, there were parts to it which seemed to belong to it but could not be found in any of its scholarly editions.

Suzanne Stetkevych has convincingly shown how the poem works as an exchange ritual between the poet, or the reciter of the poem, and the subject of praise (here the prophet Muḥammad) and has coined the term “supplicatory ode” for this kind of praise poetry.<sup>1</sup> This notwithstanding, Stetkevych’s analysis relies on a written version of the poem. In the following, I will compare her findings with my observances of contemporary performance practices. In what ways does the vocal rendition of the poem differ from the written text? And what impact would these differences have on the meaning, function, and efficacy of the poem?<sup>2</sup>

## *The poet and his poem*

Despite the wide circulation of his poems, biographical data about the poet is sparse.<sup>3</sup> Sharaf al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Būṣīrī was born in 1212 in Upper Egypt and died between 1294 and 1297 in Cairo. He earned his living as a scribe, a reciter of the Qur’an, and as a minor administrator. He repeatedly addressed his

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<sup>1</sup> Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, *The Mantle Odes: Arabic Praise Poems to the Prophet Muḥammad*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2010, chapter two, for the supplicatory ode esp. 91.

<sup>2</sup> This article is part of a broader research project on the functions and manifestations of religious chanting (*al-inshād al-dīnī*) in Islamic religious practice. The project deliberately focuses on Sunni Islam, as mystic and minority groups tend to be overrepresented in the study of auditory dimensions. The presented examples are based on fieldwork conducted between 2009 and 2011 in Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>3</sup> The earliest available information on the poet is found in Muḥammad b. Shākir al-Kutubī, *Fawāʾid al-wafayāt*, ed. Ihsān ‘Abbās, vol. 3, Beirut: Dār al-Šādir 1974, 362-369; Khalil b. Aybak al-Šafadi, *al-Wāfi bi-l-wafayāt*, ed. Sven Dederig, vol. 3, Beirut: Klaus Schwarz 2008, 105-113; Taqī al-Dīn al-Maqrīzī, *al-Muqaffā al-kabīr*, ed. Muḥammad al-Ya‘lāwī, vol. 5, Beirut: Dār al-gharb al-islāmī 1991, 661-669. See also Th. Emil Homerin, “al-Būṣīrī”, in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, ed. Gudrun Krämer et al., Brill 2011, Brill Online (accessed 9 November 2011).

poems to Mamluk officials like Zayn al-Dīn Ya‘qūb Ibn al-Zubayr and the vizier Bahā’ al-Dīn ‘Alī Ibn Muḥammad (known as Ibn Ḥannā). His poems are credited with being a useful source on Mamluk society, with their sometimes witty and harsh critique of persons and incidents.<sup>4</sup> His religious poetry – praise poems to Muḥammad – represents only a small part of his poetic oeuvre; yet today it is the best known part of it.

If there is anything that could be called a standard written version of the *Burda*, it would be the one in al-Būṣīrī’s *dirwān* edited by Muhammad Sayyid Kilānī.<sup>5</sup> The *Burda*, as it appears here, has 160 verses, rhymed in *mīm*; the metre is *basīṭ*. A reference to the famous poem *Bānat Su‘ād* (Su‘ād has Departed) by Ka‘b Ibn Zuhayr, a contemporary of the prophet, the poem is technically a *mu‘āraḍa* (imitation in rhyme and metre) of ‘Umar Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s (d. 1235) *Hal nāru Laylā* (Was that Laylā’s Fire).

Shortly after the death of al-Būṣīrī, his *Burda* became the subject of numerous commentaries and poetic imitations.<sup>6</sup> It became conventional to divide it into thematic sections (*fuṣūl*). Stetkevych follows the division of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century commentary by Badr al-Dīn al-Ghazzī into ten parts which can be also found in other commentaries.<sup>7</sup> I encountered the same division with only minor changes in some of the section’s titles during my fieldwork. I agree with Stetkevych that such a division does not only have advantages. Acknowledging its usefulness for

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Th. Emil Homerin, “‘Our Sorry State!’ Al-Būṣīrī’s Lamentations on Life and an Appeal for Cash“, *Mamlūk Studies Review* 14 (2010), 19-29; see also the examples quoted in al-Kutubī, *Fawāṭ*, 363-367 and the assessment of Zakī Mubārak, *al-Madā‘ih al-nabawiyya wa-madīh abl al-bayt* [Cairo 1935], rev. ed., Damascus: Maktabat al-Sharḥ al-jadīd 1997, 142-147.

<sup>5</sup> *Dirwān al-Būṣīrī*, ed. Muḥammad Sayyid Kilānī, Cairo: Maktabat wa-maṭba‘at Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī 1955, 190-201. This edition is used by Sperl for his analysis and translation, cf. “al-Būṣīrī”, in: *Qasida Poetry in Islamic Asia and Africa*, vol. 2: *Eulogy’s Bounty, Meaning’s Abundance. An Anthology*, Stefan Sperl and Christopher Shackle, eds, Leiden: Brill 1996, 388-411 (Arabic text with English translation), 470-476 (analysis). Stetkevych used the text in al-Ghazzī’s commentary (Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Ghazzī, *al-Zubda fi sharḥ al-Burda*), supplemented by the commentaries by al-Bājūrī and al-Azhari (Stetkevych, *Mantle Odes*, 274, n. 46); the verse numbering in Stetkevych and the *Dirwān* shows no differences. Therefore, for the Arabic text I use al-Būṣīrī, *Dirwān*. There are numerous books, leaflets, and prayer collections that contain the *Burda* in slightly different versions with respect to the number of verses and single words.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the listing in Carl Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Literatur*, vol. 1, Leiden: Brill 1943, 265f.; Suppl. 467 f. The editor of al-Azhari’s commentary gives a list of “famous commentaries“, cf. *Sharḥ al-Shaykh al-Imām Khālīd al-Azhari ‘alā matn al-Burda al-būṣīriyya fi madh khayr al-bariyya*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Alī Hasan, Baghdad: Maktabat al-Andalus 1966, 15 ff.

<sup>7</sup> Stetkevych, *Mantle Odes*, 90f. Although the ten-part division is a very common one, it is not the only one. See for instance the translations by von Rosenzweig and Ralfs who used manuscripts dividing the poem into eight parts: Vincenz Edlem von Rosenzweig, *Funkelnde Wandelsterne zum Lobe des Besten der Geschöpfe. Ein arabisches, insgemein unter dem Namen Gedicht Burde bekanntes Gedicht*, Vienna: Anton Schmid 1824; *Die Burda. Ein Lobgedicht auf Muḥammad von al-Būṣīrī (sic). Neu herausgegeben im arabischen Text mit metrischer persischer und türkischer Übersetzung, ins Deutsche übertragen und mit Anmerkungen versehen von C.A. Ralfs, bevorwortet von Dr. Walter Bebrnauer*, Vienna: Kaiserliche Hof- und Staatsdruckerei 1860.

a thematic and structural overview, she states: “The division is neither original nor essential to the poem and has the effect of breaking up the poetic sequence or flow of the lines and the transitional passages.”<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, as the division is relevant for contemporary performances, I shall present it here in order to give a structural overview, using the titles I encountered in fieldwork which are sometimes slightly simplified in comparison with the titles in al-Ghazzi<sup>9</sup>.

<u>No.</u>	<u>title</u>	<u>verses</u>
I	worldly love and complaint	1-12 <sup>10</sup>
II	warning against the desires of the soul	13-28
III	praise for the noble messenger	29-58
IV	about his birth	59-71
V	about his miracles	72-87
VI	about the noble Qur’an	88-104
VII	about his night journey and ascension	105-117
VIII	about the <i>jibād</i> and military campaigns of the messenger	118-139
IX	supplication	140-151
X	prayer and petition	152-160

Figure 1: The structure of the poem, divided into ten sections.

The poem opens with a lyric-elegiac prelude (*nasīb*), naming topographical places of the Hijaz region in the first two verses, which indicates a religious connotation. Typically, however, the identity of the beloved is not revealed; it shifts between a worldly love, a love of God or of the Prophet, thus remaining ambiguous.

<sup>8</sup> Stetkevych, *Mantle Odes*, 90.

<sup>9</sup> See for his titles Stetkevych, *Mantle Odes*, 90 f.

<sup>10</sup> 11 (Stetkevych, *Mantle Odes*, 90) is obviously a misspelling, as in the Arabic text in the appendix the second section starts with v. 13 (p. 245). See also Badr al-Din Muḥammad al-Ghazzi, *al-Zubda fi sharḥ al-Burda*, ed. ‘Umar Mūsā Bāshā, Algiers: Wizārat al-thaqāfa 2007, 6, 52 (this edition of al-Ghazzi’s commentary contains two additional verses, 58 and 64 according to his numbering).

- 1 Was it the memory of those you loved at Dhū Salam  
That made you weep so hard your tears were mixed with blood?<sup>11</sup>

This opening section is followed by a warning against the desires of the self, epitomized by the soul (v. 13). The wilful soul, which needs to be tamed, is a typical topos in Sufi teaching and poetry. al-Būṣīri uses the term “al-ammāra bi-l-sū” (“the persistent inciter of evil”, Qur’an 12:53), an expression which was frequently explained when the verse was performed on various occasions during my fieldwork.

The *madīḥ* (praise for the prophet) is introduced by the setting up of a contrast between the poet and the prophet; the poet’s inclination towards the amenities of life stands vis-à-vis the prophet’s commitment to vigil prayers which extends to the embracing of physical suffering:

- 29 I have profaned the Path of him whose night prayers brought the darkness to life  
Until his feet complained of pain and swelling.

This comparison leads to the famous verse 34 which is characterized by Stefan Sperl as a “ringing fanfare which marks the true beginning of the *madīḥ*”<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, this verse is, like verse 36, often inserted into performances of general *inshād*.

- 34 Muḥammad, the master of all who dwell in both the seen and unseen worlds,  
Of both corporeal species, men and jinn, of the two races, ‘Arab and ‘Ajam.  
36 He is the beloved of God whose intercession is hoped for  
In the face of every dread and unexpected horror.

The *madīḥ* is further divided into thematic units following the prophet’s life and deeds: his birth (*mawlid*), his miracles (*mu‘jizāt*), the Qur’an, his night journey and ascension to heaven (*al-isrā’ wa-l-mi‘rāj*), and his *jihād* and military campaigns (*ghazarawāt*).

The last two sections are devoted to petition (*tarwassul*) and fervent prayer (*munājāḥ*). The poem ends by asking God to eternally bestow blessings upon Muḥammad, a request enveloped in the metaphorical semantic field of water as a blessing in the physical and social environment of the Arab Peninsula:

- 159 And let clouds of prayer from You rain down unceasingly upon the Prophet  
In heavy downpours and in steady rains  
160 For as long as the eastern breeze stirs the bough of the ben-tree  
And the camel driver stirs his light-hued beasts with song.

<sup>11</sup> Throughout the article, I use the English translation of Stetkevych, *Mantle Odes*, starting 92, except for using “God” instead of “Allāh”. Dhū Salam is a place between Mecca and Medina, cf. al-Bājūrī, *al-Burda li-l-imām al-Būṣīri. Bi-bāmiṣbihā Mukhtaṣar sharḥ shaykh al-Islām al-shaykh Ibrāhīm al-Bājūrī*, Cairo: al-Ādāb 1998, 33. It is impossible to do justice to the literary quality of the poem here. In our context, the short description serves simply to make the readers acquainted with it. See, for a literary evaluation, Stetkevych, *Mantle Odes*, chapter two.

<sup>12</sup> Sperl, “al-Būṣīri”, 471.

The story line of the poem, with regard to the inner states of the lyrical I, would run as follows: awareness and acknowledgment, repentance, self-abasement, praise, and imploration. As Stetkevych points out, the poem follows the structure of the panegyric *qaṣīda*, with the prophet replacing the role of the ruler. She characterizes the poem as a “panegyric pact”<sup>13</sup> between the supplicant and the supplicated, the poet and the subject of praise. The subject of this mutual agreement is praise from the one side and protection – in the language of court poetry – or intercession (*shafāʿa*) – in religious language – from the other side.

### *The double Burda*

Together with the poem comes the story of its composition in the early sources:

al-Būṣīrī said: [...] I was stricken with hemiplegia that left me half paralyzed, and I thought of composing this poem, the *Burda*, so I composed it. I asked with it for intercession with God the Exalted so that he would give me strength. I repeated its recitation, and I wept and prayed and plead. Then I fell asleep, and I saw the prophet pbuh who stroked my face with his beneficent hand and covered me with a mantle. I woke up and found myself able to get up. So I left the house and did not tell anybody about what had happened.<sup>14</sup>

This story provides the link to Kaʿb Ibn Zuhayr who, according to tradition, was granted a mantle (*burda*) for his poem by the prophet. Of course, a link already exists through the shared thematic progression of both poems.<sup>15</sup> It is noteworthy that the link to Kaʿb Ibn Zuhayr’s *Burda* is reported early on: both al-Ṣafādī and al-Kutubī died less than seventy years after al-Būṣīrī, namely in 1363. Another eighty years later, al-Maqrīzī (d. 1442) introduces al-Būṣīrī as “ṣāhib al-burda” (the one who wrote the *Burda*).<sup>16</sup>

The story does not end here. Significantly, the poet mentions that he has not told anybody about it, because outside his house he meets a Sufi (*faqīr*) who says:

“I want you to give me the poem you praised God’s messenger pbuh with.” I asked: “Which one?” He said: “The one you composed while you were ill”, and he quoted its first

<sup>13</sup> Stetkevych, *Mantle Odes*, 91.

<sup>14</sup> al-Ṣafādī, *al-Wāfi*, 112; an almost identical version appears in al-Kutubī, *Fawāʾiḥ*, 368. Translations are mine unless indicated otherwise. al-Ṣafādī does not give his source for the story, although he notes that he has obtained al-Būṣīrī’s poems from Athīr al-Dīn Abū Ḥayyān who had received them from al-Būṣīrī (al-Ṣafādī, *al-Wāfi*, 111); see also Homerin, “Lamentations”, 20 f.

<sup>15</sup> Stetkevych, *Mantle Odes*, 69, 92.

<sup>16</sup> al-Maqrīzī, *al-Muqaffā*, 661. Both al-Ṣafādī and al-Kutubī place the story of the *Burda* at the end of their entry about the poet, whereas in al-Maqrīzī’s biographical lexicon the reference to the *Burda* figures prominently at the beginning as a means to identify the poet. The poem also appears under the title “al-Kawākib al-durriyya fī madḥ khayr al-bariyya” (Pearly Stars in Praise of the Best of All Creation), as al-Būṣīrī himself had named it (Kilānī, “Muqaddima”, in: al-Būṣīrī, *Dirwān*, 5-47, here 29); besides these, a handful of other names, mostly epithets, exist.

line. [He continued:] “By God, we heard it yesterday when it was recited in front of God’s messenger pbuh, and I saw him pbuh swaying because he liked it. And he covered the one who recited it with a mantle.” So I gave it to him.<sup>17</sup>

The Sufi spreads the story, until it reaches the vizier Bahā’ al-Dīn who asks for a copy and subsequently forms the habit of listening to the poem together with his family.

And there is a third story: later, a certain Sa‘d al-Dīn al-Fāriqī suffered from an eye infection. Threatened with blindness, he had a dream in which he was told to put “the *burda*” on his eyes in order to recover. He went to the vizier and told him about his dream, but the vizier wondered: “I don’t know anything about such a relic of the prophet pbuh like the *burda* [thinking of the actual mantle, a relic that was used by Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs]”. After some thinking he proposed: ‘Maybe the poem “al-burda” is what is meant’. He ordered the box of relics to be opened and the poem to be brought to him. And the end of the story goes: “Sa‘d al-Dīn took it and put it on his eyes and recovered. From that day on, it [the poem] was called ‘al-Burda’”.<sup>18</sup>

In all these stories, we encounter a beautiful climax. Not only does the poem provide healing for its composer, other people also seek to receive its blessing, as the message of its power has spread without any effort by the poet. Whereas the link to the mantle in the first story is established only in the dream, in the last story the poem reaches the same (physical) status as the mantle. This story teaches two things: there are two *burdas*, and the poem-*burda* is, as a relic, as effective as the mantle-*burda*. Whereas the mantle was a relic for the caliphs<sup>19</sup>, the poem is available for everybody and this has further added to the appeal of the poem. Throughout history, it has been recited communally and collectively in public on various occasions.<sup>20</sup>

### *Performance practices*

How is a 13<sup>th</sup>-century *qaṣīda* (poem) of at least 160 verses performed? *Qaṣīda* also exists as a vocal genre in Arab musical culture. Here, it denotes a soloist genre, performed by a solo singer and a small instrumental ensemble. In comparison to other vocal genres like *dawr* or *mūwashshah*, no fixed form (*qālib*) is prescribed for this genre. The singer may take great liberties in both melodic and rhythmic exe-

<sup>17</sup> al-Ṣafādī, *al-Wāfi*, 112; with only minor modifications in al-Kutubī, *Fawāṭ*, 368 f.

<sup>18</sup> al-Ṣafādī, *al-Wāfi*, 112 f.; with only minor modifications in al-Kutubī, *Fawāṭ*, 369.

<sup>19</sup> On the mantle relic, see Rudi Paret, “Die Legende von der Verleihung des Prophetenmantels (*burda*) an Ka‘b ibn Zuhair”, *Der Islam* 17 (1928), 9-14.

<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the poem was used as an amulet, single verses of it were prescribed for the treatment of certain problems, and a whole branch of literature (*khawāṣṣ al-Burda*) emerged on these issues. During my fieldwork, these aspects had no relevance; only the healing of the poet and his encounter with the Sufi were frequently cited.

cution. He or she can choose to insert repetitions of lines, phrases, or words and include melismatic passages as much as he/she feels necessary to deliver the text to its listeners. This is the way the legendary Egyptian singer Umm Kulthūm (d. 1975) performed the poem *Nahj al-Burda* (The Way of the Mantle) by Aḥmad Shawqī (d. 1932).<sup>21</sup> For the traditional yet modernized *qaṣīda* composition by the renowned musician Riyāḍ al-Sunbātī (d. 1981), 30 out of its 190 verses were chosen.<sup>22</sup> A studio recording takes only 21.40 minutes<sup>23</sup>; live performances could take more than double that time. Whilst no strophic structure emerges in this composition, we find an acoustic structuring through the change of melody corresponding to the changes of theme in the text.

The performances of the *Burda* presented here differ remarkably from this model. They stem from the context of various religious celebrations which include festive commemorations of important events in the prophet's life and Islamic history, of the birth or death of prominent religious figures, Ramadan ceremonies, or prayer gatherings. Such celebrations feature a small performance ensemble (*firqa*) which carries out the *inshād* (chanting). *firqa* is the technical name for any musical performance group; *firqat al-inshād* (performance ensemble for religious chanting) designates groups which perform on religious occasions. A *firqa* consists of a solo singer and a chorus of four to eight men; often one or two frame drums are also employed. *Inshād* is used here to denote various genres of the artistically elaborate articulation of religious texts, like prayers, benedictions, doxology, or praise for the prophet. In the following, I shall present three different contexts, versions, performance practices, and possible functions of *Burda* performances.<sup>24</sup>

### *Performance context 1: laylat al-qadr in 2009*

One of my first encounters with the *Burda* was during the commemoration of *laylat al-qadr*<sup>25</sup> in 2009 in the Muḥammad Amin Mosque in Downtown Beirut, organized by *Dār al-fatwā*, the Sunni representation at government level. The performance took place around 2.30 a.m. and was framed by the solo performance of a prayer

<sup>21</sup> The Egyptian poet Aḥmad Shawqī wrote *Nahj al-Burda* as an imitation of al-Būṣīrī's *Burda*. See Stetkevych, *Mantle Odes*, chapter three for the poem.

<sup>22</sup> See for the text Khalīl al-Miṣrī and Maḥmūd Kāmil, eds, *al-Nuṣūṣ al-kāmila li-jamī' aghbāni kawkab al-sharq Umm Kulthūm*, Cairo: Muḥammad al-Amin 1975, 265 f. The *qaṣīda* was first performed in 1946. For more about the composition and its context see Virginia Danielson, *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthūm, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1997, 110-117, 148 f.

<sup>23</sup> *Oum Kalsoom*. MANTEDB513. Union Square Music Ltd. London 2007.

<sup>24</sup> The more general and comparative remarks are based on 15 field recordings of the *Burda* and observations of more performances that were not recorded but documented in field notes.

<sup>25</sup> *Laylat al-qadr* commemorates the sending down of the Qur'an. It is celebrated on the uneven nights of the last third of Ramadan, most commonly on the 27<sup>th</sup> night.

(*duʿā*) and vigil prayers (*ṣalāt al-tabajjud*). I could not see the performing group<sup>26</sup> as the mosque was overcrowded and we were sitting on mats that were spread outside the mosque on the street. The performance was broadcast via the minaret's loudspeakers, while the group was inside the mosque. The group featured a soloist and a chorus of about five men. The performance started with the following text:

*Mawlāya ṣalli wa-sallim dāʿiman abadan / ʿalā ḥabībika khayri l-khalqī kullibimi*  
*al-Ḥamdu li-llābi munshi l-khalqī min ʿadamin / thumma l-ṣalātu ʿalā l-mukbtāri fi l-qidami*  
*A min tadhakkuri jirānin bi-Ḍbi Salami / mazajta damʿan jarā min muqlatin bi-dami*  
*Mawlāya ṣalli wa-sallim dāʿiman abadan / ʿalā ḥabībika khayri l-khalqī kullibimi*

Of these lines, actually only one is part of the *Burda*, namely its first verse starting with “A min tadhakkur ...”. The line “Mawlāya ṣalli wa-sallim ...” (“O my Lord, send your blessings and salutations always and forever / upon your Beloved, the Best of all Creation”) is an antiphon which is subsequently performed as a refrain between verses. The second line – praise to God and calling down God’s blessings upon Muḥammad – often precedes vocal renditions of the *Burda*, but is rarely included in text editions. The refrain is typically repeated after two verses of the *Burda*. It is sung by everybody, i.e. the chorus and all participants; occasionally the soloist joins in for a few notes to give impulses. The verses are performed by the soloist.

The singing is rhythmic and syllabic, the tempo being rather moderate (about 72 beats per minute). The melody has the range of only a fifth and moves in small steps with the exception of the initial upbeat: here, the melody jumps from the tonic to the fifth from where it descends back to the tonic. Throughout the performance, the melody stays the same, and the refrain is sung to the same tune as the verses. There are, however, some melodic variants: before the refrain, the soloist’s tune at the end of the verse temporarily ascends to the seventh and ends on the fifth. This clearly functions as a means of communication to signal that the refrain will follow<sup>27</sup>. Besides this, the soloist sometimes modifies the melody within a verse, also by ascending to the seventh, in order to mark certain words, for instance *ḥabību* [beloved] (v. 36), *khayra* [best] (v. 45), *raḥmata* [mercy] (v. 156)<sup>28</sup>. Despite these minor variants, the pace, the repetitions, range and line of melody suggest a litany character.

For the performance of the poem, only twenty-five verses of its 160 verses are included. One verse is performed twice and two verses are repeated, so that twenty-eight lines are performed altogether. Several verses follow which are not part of the *Burda*. Again, this is often found in *Burda* performances. Whilst the seven verses

<sup>26</sup> But I have seen the group performing on other occasions.

<sup>27</sup> When the refrain is inserted after three verses instead of two, the melody rises only after the third verse, i.e. before the refrain.

<sup>28</sup> The performance group sometimes uses different words than in al-Būṣiri, *Dirwān* and in Stetkevych, *Mantle Odes*: “khayra” instead of “faḍla” (v. 45), “khalqī” instead of “ruslī” (v. 117 and v. 152).

which continue and expand the plea to send down blessings and add a general plea for forgiveness (see p. 117) are typical of other performances, here, only three verses of the seven are performed. Instead, three verses of a different poem are inserted after the *Burda*. These are taken from the *Bā'iyya* by the Yemeni poet and Sufi 'Abdallāh b. 'Alawī al-Ḥaddād (d. 1720). It was the only occasion that I came across these verses which fit nicely in terms of their content, in their appeal for forgiveness for one who has to account for not having performed enough good deeds. The complete performance takes twelve minutes and ends with the refrain.

Three extraordinary features characterize this performance: the responsorial performance technique featuring an antiphon which also serves as a refrain, its framing by prayer verses before and after the text of the poem, and its reduction to only a few selected verses. Of these, we will first take a closer look at the selection of verses itself. A schematic overview (see figure 2) shows immediately that the verses are not chosen in the original order of their appearance in the poem. Four verses are taken from the *nasīb*, two from the section of the warning against the desires of the soul, but the latter appear at a very late stage of the performance (v. 23 and 24). Seven verses of the praise section are performed, two of them twice. No verses from the sections on birth, miracles, the Qur'an, *jihād* and military campaigns feature. Instead, eight verses from the section about the night journey and ascension appear, but not in their original order and at different stages of the performance. Finally, one verse from the supplication section and three verses from the last section are performed.

A closer look at the composition of verses reveals that in spite of the 'new' order the inner structure of the poem remains: we find an abridged *nasīb*, a more extensive praise section, and supplication. The praise starts with the same verses as in the original poem, saving the very popular verse 34 for a later stage. Of the night journey and ascension section, only four verses actually deal with the night journey and ascension (v. 107-110), whereas two serve as triumphant praise for the "noblest of nations" (v. 116-117) and two praise and emphasize the prophet's quality as an intercessor (v. 105-106), a quality already introduced in the praise section (v. 36). Intercession (*shafā'a*) and repentance, combined with the hope for mercy, are the central features of the supplication part.

1 – 3 – 8 – 9		<i>nasīb</i>
29 – 30 – 31 – 36 – 43 – 45 – 116 – 117		praise
107 – 108 – 109 – 110		
34 – 34 – 36		praise + <i>shafā'a</i>
148 – 105 – 106 – 152 – 152		supplication + <i>shafā'a</i>
23 – 24 – 155 – 156		repentance + forgiveness

Figure 2: Verses sung in the performance of the *Burda* during *laylat al-qadr*, 2009.

The emphasis on repentance and intercession is not surprising, given the occasion of *laylat al-qadr*, a festive night towards the end of Ramadan, a period of intensified ritual activity and self-reflection. Furthermore, popular ideas connected to *laylat al-qadr*, termed in the Qur'an as "better than a thousand months" (97:3), have evoked the notion that acts performed during this special time would also prompt special reactions. An often quoted saying of the prophet states that "Whoever spends *laylat al-qadr* in prayer out of sincere faith and hoping to attain God's reward will have his sins forgiven."<sup>29</sup> Thus *laylat al-qadr* is a preferred time for intense ritual activity, repentance, petition and the resolution for a 'fresh start'. In this sense, it may gain the function of a New Year. The selection and arrangement of the *Burda* verses support this idea.

*The composition of verses in the laylat al-qadr performance*<sup>30</sup>

- 1 Was it the memory of those you loved at Dhū Salam  
That made you weep so hard your tears were mixed with blood?
- 3 What ails your eyes? If you say, "Cease!" they flow with tears;  
What ails your heart? If you say, "Be still!" its passion flares once more.
- 8 Oh yes, the phantom of the one I love did come by night  
And leave me sleepless; love does indeed impede delight with pain.
- 9 O you who fault me for chaste 'Udhri passion, forgive me!  
For were you fair, you would not censure me.
- 29 I have profaned the Path of him whose night prayers brought the darkness to life  
Until his feet complained of pain and swelling,
- 30 Who tied a stone to his belly to blunt the hunger pangs,  
Concealing beneath the stone his tender flank.
- 31 Haughty mountains of pure gold sought to tempt him,  
But, oh, with what disdain he turned them down!
- 36 He is the beloved of God whose intercession is hoped for  
In the face of every dread and unexpected horror.
- 43 Don't claim what the Christians claim for their prophet,  
But praise him as you judge best and proper.
- 45 For surely the merit of God's Messenger is without limit,  
And so exceeds what any tongue could ever express.
- 116 Good tidings are ours, O community of Islam,  
For we have a pillar of Providence that cannot be toppled;
- 117 When God called him who called us to obey  
"The noblest of Messengers", we became the noblest of nations.

<sup>29</sup> *Man yaqum laylat al-qadr imānan wa-ḥtisāban ghufira labu mā taqaddama min dhanbibi.* Quoted from *Ṣaḥiḥ al-Bukhārī*, Damascus and Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathir 2002, 19. It is, with minor variations, also included in other collections.

<sup>30</sup> A line space indicates the insertion of the refrain.

- 107 You traveled by nights from one sacred precinct, Mecca, to the other, Jerusalem,  
Like the full moon traversing the pitch-dark sky.
- 108 Through the night you ascended until you reached a station two bows' length from God,  
A station that no one else had ever attained or even dared desire.
- 109 To it the other Prophets and Messengers bade you precede them,  
Like servants giving deference to him they serve,
- 110 As you, passing by them, pierced the seven levels of heaven,  
In a procession of angels of which you were the standard-bearer,
- 34 Muḥammad, the master of all who dwell in both the seen and unseen worlds,  
Of both corporeal species, men and jinn, of the two races, 'Arab and 'Ajam.
- 34 Muḥammad, the master of all who dwell in both the seen and unseen worlds,  
Of both corporeal species, men and jinn, of the two races, 'Arab and 'Ajam.
- 36 He is the beloved of God whose intercession is hoped for  
In the face of every dread and unexpected horror.
- 148 No one who hopes for his generous gifts is ever denied;  
No one who seeks his protection is ever dishonored.
- 105 O best of those whose courtyard the supplicants seek, hastening on foot  
Or on the backs of she-camels whose heavy tread leaves traces on the ground,
- 106 You who are the greatest sign to him who considers  
And the greatest benefit to him who will seize it.
- 152 O most generous of all Creation, I have no one to turn to  
But you, when the dreaded Day of Judgement comes.
- 152 O most generous of all Creation, I have no one to turn to  
But you, when the dreaded Day of Judgement comes.
- 23 Purge with tears an eye sated with forbidden sights;  
Adhere to a strict diet of repentance.
- 24 Disobey your willful soul and Satan, defy them!  
And if they offer you advice, don't trust them!
- 155 O my soul, do not despair of pardon for a sin, however grave,  
For mortal sins in God's forgiveness are like venial ones.
- 156 I hope that my share of my Lord's mercy, when He apportions it,  
Will be in equal portion to my disobedience and sins.

Compared with the complete text, we find a slight thematic shift in content alignment. Although the general thematic sequence remains, the topoi of repentance, intercession, and forgiveness become condensed: they form a fugue-like stretto in the last five verses of the performance and thus make the text a perfect prayer for *laylat al-qadr*. With respect to Stetkevych's theses, we can ascertain that the structure and function of the supplicatory ode is retained and intensified through the other two features of the antiphon/refrain and the framing.

The terminology of antiphon and responsorial singing stems from the terminology of Christian liturgical singing. By using this terminology I am not alluding to any possible origin here but to the very function of this technique in religious contexts: liturgical singing, here the collective performance of rogation. In liturgical singing, the text's performance alternates between the congregation and

religious specialists, here: religious chanters. I furthermore differentiate between antiphon and refrain: the antiphon is a framing verse which is sung by everybody before and after the performed text. It may be inserted between verses, but this technique is particularly typical of alternate singing between two choruses or between chorus and congregation, whereas the use of a refrain (*responsum*), i.e. a verse which is inserted between verses or groups of verses, is characteristic of the responsorial singing between a precentor (soloist) and the congregation.<sup>31</sup>

The antiphon/refrain has occasionally found its way into manuscripts of the *Burda*. It is not included in early copies but features in later ones where it is graphically distinct from the rest of the poem.<sup>32</sup> This differentiation suggests that the verse is not considered as part of the poem's *matn* (corpus). In our case, reflecting the performance practice, it also indicates a change of performance roles, i.e. between the solo reciter and the audience. Here, we find a case in which oral practice has clearly influenced the written form.

The words of the refrain constitute a *taṣliya*, i.e. the invocation of blessings upon the prophet. The practice and wording of calling down blessings upon Muḥammad refers back to the Qur'anic verse 33:56: *inna llāha wa-malā'ikatahu yuṣallūna 'alā l-nabī yā ayyuhā lladbina āmanū ṣallū 'alayhi wa-sallimū taslimā* (God and His angels bless the Prophet. Oh believers, bless him and greet him with the full greetings of peace)<sup>33</sup>. Various formulas for invocation exist, the most common being "ṣallā llāhu 'alayhi wa-sallam". Thus, the refrain has the function of a *taṣliya*, which, again, is not surprising in the context of supplication. Scholars turned their attention to the *taṣliya* and its relation to the supplication early on, within the first centuries after Muhammad's death.<sup>34</sup> The main idea in these discussions was that God would not reject a petition which is combined with a eulogy. Interestingly, the postulation of including the *taṣliya* at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of a supplication<sup>35</sup> would conform exactly to the framing and performance practice of the present case: the refrain/*taṣliya* at the

<sup>31</sup> For terminology and historical background see Karl-Heinrich Bieritz, *Liturgik*, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter 2004, 130 ff. Of course, tracking down the relation to and possible influences of singing practices in the Oriental Church liturgies would be fascinating but is far beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>32</sup> Information kindly provided by Frederike-Wiebke Daub who wrote her dissertation on the layout of manuscripts at the collaborative research centre 'Manuscript Cultures in Asia, Africa and Europe' (SFB 950), Hamburg University ("Formen und Funktionen des Layouts in arabischen Manuskripten anhand von Abschriften religiöser Texte: al-Būṣīris *Burda*, al-Ġazūlis *Dalā'il* und die *Šifā'* von Qādi 'Iyād", PhD Dissertation, Jena University 2015).

<sup>33</sup> All English Qur'anic citations are from *The Qur'an. A new translation by Tarif Khalidi*, London: Penguin 2009.

<sup>34</sup> For a discussion of various scholarly positions on the quantity, place, and efficacy of the *taṣliya* with respect to supplication see Fritz Meier, "Die segensprechung über Mohammed im bittgebet und in der bitte", in: *Bausteine. Ausgewählte Aufsätze zur Islamwissenschaft von Fritz Meier*, vol. 2, Erika Glassen and Gudrun Schubert, eds, Istanbul: Harrassowitz 1992, 837-875, here 839-851.

<sup>35</sup> Meier, "segensprechung", 840, quoting Shams al-Din al-Sakhāwī (d. 1497).

beginning, in between the verses, and at the end. The words of the performance's second line serve as *ḥamd* (praise to God) and *taṣliya*, which is a typical introduction for religious speech. Thus, we find a careful composition which is in accordance with the occasion and function of the text: *ḥamd* and *taṣliya* at the beginning, the poem/supplication interspersed with *taṣliya*, followed by a *du'ā'* asking for acceptance and forgiveness, concluded with *taṣliya*.

The refrain thus has a double function: it serves a practical purpose as a means to involve the audience, and it serves a ritual purpose in its quality as *taṣliya* to ensure the supplication's efficacy. On a textual level, it turns the linear structure of the poem into a strophic structure of the prayer-performance. To sum up, all elements – the framing by an introductory verse and by *du'ā'*, the responsorial singing with *taṣliya*, the litany character of the melody with its narrow range, repetitions, and simplicity, and the selection of verses tailored for the occasion – sustain the poem's function as a supplication. Whereas the poem is socially framed by stories to mark its special status, the poem's performance is framed by prayer verses.

### *Performance context 2: mi'raj in 2010*

The abbreviated version by no means indicates that a complete performance of the *Burda* does not exist. Shortly before the commemoration of Muḥammad's night journey and ascension<sup>36</sup> in 2010, I came across a poster announcing "Majālis al-Burda" (*Burda* sessions) in a Sunni middle-class neighbourhood. The *majlis* (sing. of *majālis*) featured an *insbād* ensemble (*firqa*) and the head of Qur'an reciters in Beirut (*shaykh qurrā' Bayrūt*) who was offering explanations of the poem. The event was held by a mosque in the Ra's al-Naba' area and took place on a Thursday evening immediately after the sunset prayer.<sup>37</sup> The mosque was crowded, but not as crowded as during the *mawlid* celebration that same year, when additional rooms in the basement of the building had had to be used. Approximately three to four hundred people filled the mosque, men downstairs, the women on the gallery, and the *firqa* in the front area downstairs. The *firqa* featured at least eight men and two frame drums of about 40 cm in diameter.<sup>38</sup>

After the sunset prayer, a few minutes of Qur'an recitation opened the *majlis*, followed by the *fātiḥa* (first Sura of the Qur'an). The *Burda* performance was divided into three parts, interrupted once for a speech and the second time by the *adbān* for the night prayer, followed by a section of general *insbād*. A general *insbād*

<sup>36</sup> *Laylat al-isrā' wa-l-mi'raj*. The nightly journey from Mecca to Jerusalem (as most modern interpretations have it) and the ascension to heaven are nowadays commemorated together on 27<sup>th</sup> Rajab.

<sup>37</sup> The described *majlis* was not an exception; it was followed, for instance, by *majālis al-Burda* to welcome Ramadan a few months later in the same year.

<sup>38</sup> Sometimes it was difficult to catch sight of the whole *firqa*, and the number of chorus singers occasionally differed. The mentioned *firqa* often performed at religious celebrations, but was different from the one performing on *laylat al-qadr* in 2009.

section was also added after the end of the *Burda* before the night prayer was performed.<sup>39</sup> Clearly, the participants were expected to sing along. For this purpose, small booklets containing the text of the *Burda* were distributed. Here, the text was divided into the aforementioned ten parts. As in *laylat al-qadr* in 2009, the *Burda* started with the antiphon which was subsequently implemented as a refrain. The performance began with the same melody as the 2009 performance on *laylat al-qadr* but continued by switching between five different melodies. Melodic change often occurred with the beginning of a new section or a new thematic aspect. The melody of the refrain changed according to the melody of the verses.

The verses were sung by the *firqa* or a soloist of the *firqa*, the refrain by everybody (though sometimes only by the *firqa*, especially when they used a less well-known melody). Occasionally the soloist or even the chorus fell silent so that the participants could hear themselves better, a common technique that encourages the involvement of the audience. All melodies were rhythmic, syllabic, relatively simple, and fast. The melodies predominantly moved in small steps, and the melodic range was that of a fourth or fifth. The refrain was inserted between every verse; with the exception of after verse 119 when the refrain was repeated only between two sections. Thus, the litany character of this performance was stronger, mainly due to its duration and tempo.

However, several techniques were occasionally employed to maintain the awareness of the attendees:

- the first hemistich started on the fifth instead of the tonic
- at the start of the refrain, the word “mawlāya! (o my Lord)” was shouted
- members of the *firqa* shouted “sawā! (all together!)” to encourage singing
- the pace quickened
- people were invited to call down blessings upon the prophet by shouting “ṣalli ‘alayh!” at the end of a line.

At the end, a *du‘ā’* (prayer) of seven verses was added. This *du‘ā’* – or parts of it – is often added to *Burda* performances. Of the print editions I consulted, only al-Bājūrī has included these verses, introduced with just a terse comment: “Some of the copies feature verses that nobody in the commentaries has mentioned, but it is not a mistake to give them here: [verses follow]”.<sup>40</sup> From this remark, we learn that the verses are well known and in use, but not considered part of the poem’s *matn* (corpus). As they are not mentioned in any secondary literature, I include them here:

<sup>39</sup> The *inshād* featured praise for God and Muḥammad and some special songs on the occasion of *mi‘rāj*.

<sup>40</sup> al-Bājūrī, *Mukhtaṣar*, 70. According to Ḥasanayn, the very common print edition of *al-Maktaba al-maḥmūdīya al-tijārīyya bi-l-Azhar* includes these seven verses as well. See Aḥmad Ṭāhīr Ḥasanayn, “Iṭlālā ‘alā ‘Burdāt’ al-Būṣīrī wa-tarāsulātihā”, *Alif: Journal of Comparative Literature* 23 (2003), 96-117, here 96, 115, n. 5. This might be influenced by the fact that al-Bājūrī was Shaykh al-Azhar between 1847 and 1860.

Thumma l-riḍāʿan Abi Bakrin wa-ʿan ʿUmarin / wa-ʿan ʿAliyyin wa-ʿan ʿUthmāna dbi l-  
 karami  
 Wa-l-āli wa-l-ṣabbi thumma l-tābiʿina fa-hum / ablu l-tuqā wa-l-naqā wa-l-ḥilmi wa-l-karami  
 Yā rabbi bi-l-muṣṭafā balligh maqāṣidanā / wa-ghfir lanā mā maḍā yā wāsiʿa l-karami  
 Wa-ghfir ilābi li-kulli l-muslimina bi-mā / yatlūna fi l-masjidi l-aqṣā wa-fi l-ḥarami  
 Bi-jābi man baytuhu fi Ṭibatīn ḥaramun / wa-ismuhū<sup>41</sup> qasamun min aʿzami l-qasami  
 Wa-hādbibi Burdatu l-mukbtāri qad kbutimat / wa-l-ḥamdu li-llāhi fi badʿin wa-fi khatami  
 Abyātuhā qad atat sittina maʿ miʿatin / farrij bibā karbanā yā wāsiʿa l-karami

And be pleased with Abū Bakr and ʿUmar / and with ʿAlī and ʿUthmān the noble one  
 And with the family of the prophet and his companions and their successors / for they  
 are people of piety and purity, forbearance and generosity.

O Lord, for the love of the chosen one grant us the fulfilment of our goals / and forgive  
 us for what has passed, o most generous one.

And forgive, my God, all Muslims who / recite in the Furthest Mosque and in the Sa-  
 cred Precinct

For the glory of whose house is in Ṭiba<sup>42</sup> / whose name is the paramount oath.

Here, the *Burda* of the chosen one has finished / praise be to God in the beginning and  
 the end.

Its verses are one hundred and sixty / ease with it our sorrows, o most generous one.

In the performance under discussion here, the last verse was repeated twice, the second time with the phrase “heal with it our ill ones” instead of “ease with it our sorrows”. The performance concluded with the refrain. The sole performance of the *Burda* that evening, including the seven prayer verses, lasted 45 minutes.

The whole setting – the distributed booklets, the responsorial singing, the *duʿāʿ* – shows that this gathering was meant to be a prayer gathering and not a religious concert where one goes to listen only. Also, the poster clearly invited attendees to *participate* in the *majlis* (“li-l-mushāraka”).<sup>43</sup> This is further supported by the performance mode: the simple melodies with syllabic singing which enables almost everybody to join in, the double-function of the refrain which serves as a benediction for the prophet as well as a participation strategy, and the interaction between members of the *firqā* and the attendees. The performance practice, the framing by the *taṣliya* at the beginning and end, and the added *duʿāʿ* show that the poem’s performance is meant to be a ritual act.<sup>44</sup> It is meant to provide spiritual healing by a

<sup>41</sup> The *hamza* is pronounced due to the syllable allocation of the melody.

<sup>42</sup> Ṭiba [in other cases pronounced Ṭayba] as a name for Medina appears in many praise poems/songs for Muḥammad.

<sup>43</sup> This does not necessarily mean that everybody in fact participated with the same vigour.

<sup>44</sup> I use a very general definition of ritual here which encompasses a sequence of action which can be repeated, is executed with an intention, and aims at transformation. This definition is very close to the one Alexander gives, although it lacks in our case the notion of spontaneity (which is present in other articles of the volume, cf. the contribution by Farra-Haddad) and furthermore features an acquired form of authorization: “Ritual defined in the most general and basic terms is a performance, planned or improvised, that effects a transition from everyday life to an alternative context within which the everyday is transformed.” (Bobby C. Alexander, “Ritual and Current Studies of Ritual: Overview”, in: *Anthropology of Religion: A Handbook*, Stephen D. Glazier, ed., Westport, CT: Greenwood Press 1997, 139-160, here 139).

re-enactment of its transformative progression of admit-repent-praise-supplicate. In a more literal understanding, its recitation expresses the hope or confidence that the poem, or its recitation, will bring physical strength and health as it has done to so many people before, starting with the poet himself. Here, the very act of reciting constitutes the ritual efficacy independently of the participants' grasp of the full semantic meaning of the verses.

### *Performance context 3: mi'raj in 2011*

The third performance took place during the actual celebration to commemorate the prophet's night journey and ascension in 2011. The celebration started on a Saturday evening a few days before 27<sup>th</sup> Rajab after the sunset prayer and was held in the 'Assāf Mosque in Downtown Beirut. Here, the *Burda* verses were part of a roughly one and a half hour *insbād* which was interjected by a speech by the mosque's imam. This time, the same *firqa* as during the complete *Burda* in 2010 performed. Of the poem, only two verses were chosen. These represent the core of the poem's section on the night journey and ascension. Moreover, verses 107 and 108 connect the sparse references to the prophet's night journey and ascension that are found in the Qur'an.

107 *Sarayta min ḥaramin laylan ilā ḥaramin*  
*kamā sarā l-badru fi dāḡin minā l-zulami*

108 *Wā-bitta tarqā ilā an nilta manzilatan*  
*min qābi qarṣayni lam tudrak wa-lam turami*

107 You travelled by night from one sacred precinct, Mecca, to the other, Jerusalem  
Like the full moon traversing the pitch-dark sky

108 Through the night you ascended until you reached a station two bows' length from God  
A station that no one else had ever attained or even dared desire.

Verse 107 evokes Qur'an 17:1<sup>45</sup>, whereas verse 108 refers to Qur'an 53:7-10.<sup>46</sup> al-Būṣiri follows the occurrences as they are described in popular interpretations and narratives by using "tarqā (you ascend)".<sup>47</sup> And this is the very aspect which governs the performance of these verses.

<sup>45</sup> *Subḥāna lladbi asrā bi-ʿabdībi laylan minā l-masjidi l-ḥarāmi ilā l-masjidi l-aqṣā lladbi bāraknā ḥawlabu li-nuriyabu min āyātinā.* Engl.: Glory be to Him Who carried His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Furthest Mosque, whose precincts We have blessed, to show him Our wonders!

<sup>46</sup> *Wā-buwa bi-l-ufuqi l-aʿlā / thumma danā fa-tadallā / fa-kāna qāba qarṣayni aw adnā / fa-awḥā ilā ʿabdībi mā awhā.* Engl.: He took his stand, being on the upper horizon, / Then drew near and hung suspended, / And was two bows' length, or nearer. / And He revealed to His servant what He revealed.

<sup>47</sup> For alternative interpretations of 53:7-10 see Josef van Ess, "Vision and Ascension: *Sūrat al-Najm* and its Relationship with Muḥammad's *mi'raj*", *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 1 (1999), 47-62, esp. 50-57.

The musical rendition is quite distinct from the renditions presented before. It is performed by a soloist, it is metrically free, marked by repetitions of single passages, and it contains long melismatic passages (i.e. one syllable is performed on many musical notes). In the beginning, there is not much melodic movement; the melodic line is mildly arch-shaped, with two moderate elevations on the words “ḥaramin”. The rendition of the second hemistich is more lively, but still light. Eventually, the movement of the protagonist described in verse 108 is imitated quite dramatically by the melodic line. The melodic line is characterized by a gradual ascension in sequences, which is emphasized by several repetitions of the word “tarqā”. In the last repetition, the singer holds the last syllable for twelve seconds, moving also to a higher register – which provokes fierce responses from his audience. The rest of the verse is rendered in a slightly descending melos, with the pitch at the end of the verse still higher than at the end of verse 107. The short rest on “manzilatan” (station) is noteworthy. The complete verse is repeated with several internal repetitions and finally repeated a third time. The complete rendition takes three minutes. A transcription of the text may give at least a visual impression of how these verses are performed, as it shows the repetitions and stretching of syllables. It also includes the audience responses.

Sarayta min ḥaramin laylan ilā_ ḥaramin	ah_____
kamā sarā l-badru fi_ dājin mina l-zulami	
Sarayta min ḥaramin_ / laylan ilā_ ḥaramin	ṣalli ‘alayh!
kamā sarā l_-badru fi dā_jin____ mina l-z_ ulami	ah
Wa-bitta tarqā_ / tarqā____	
bitta tarqā tarqā tarqā tarqā_____	various exclamations
ilā_ an nilta manzilatan	
min qābi qawsayni lam tudrak wa-lam turami	ah_____
Wa-bitta tarqā_____	ah_
Wa-bitta tarqā ilā an nilta manzilatan a_____h bitta tarqā	ah! ṣalli ‘alayh!
bitta tarqā ilā an nilta manzilatan__	
min qābi qawsayni lam tudrak wa-lam / turami_____ yā rasūla llāh	ah__
a_____h	
Wa-bitta tarqā_____ ilā an nilta manzilatan	
min qābi qawsayn / lam tudrak wa-lam__ turami	

Figure 3: Verses 107 and 108 as rendered by the soloist.  
/ indicates a short pause; \_\_\_\_ indicate how long a syllable is held.

Regarding the audience responses, we have to distinguish, on the one hand, between affirmative exclamations of “ah” or the call to invoke blessings upon the prophet which show the emotional involvement of the audience members and their enthusiasm about the performance and the artistic skills of the performer. On the other hand, we find a longer syllable of “ah\_\_” at the same pitch at which the melodic phrase ends which is usually performed by one or more members of the *firqa* and functions as a tonal support for the soloist.

The performance is further characterized by careful articulation of the words (*lafz*), the resting of the voice on the geminate consonant, and the selective employment of nasal vocal quality (*ghumma*). This voice quality evokes a religious context in many Arab listeners, as it is not only a voice ideal associated with an older musical repertory (prior to World War I) but also an obligatory device demanded at specific points of Qur’anic recitation. This is the case here, for instance, with the letters n and m which by assimilation become geminate m (line 4 of the transcription). Nasality was a highly regarded vocal quality in non-religious performances as well, until it gradually faded out after World War I due to aesthetic changes in the wake of European influence.<sup>48</sup> In modern *qaṣīda* performances, *ghumma* is occasionally employed to provide religious or emotionally intense colouring (*laww*). In our context, the performer brings his rendition not only close to Qur’anic recitation by applying certain rules of *tajwīd* (here: orthoepy) but also fulfils the listeners’ expectations.

Indeed, this performance may be termed a *qaṣīda*-style performance, as it features the main characteristics of a *qaṣīda* performance. We find the artistic endeavour of “painting” the meaning of the words through vocal rendition (arab. *taṣwīr al-ma’nā*), especially in the second verse: the ascension, that is the movement from low to high, is reproduced by a gradual movement from a lower to higher register of the voice.<sup>49</sup> As Josef van Ess points out, the prophet’s movement in the night journey (Sura 17:1) was horizontal: “He remained on the surface of the earth; he had moved horizontally, not vertically”.<sup>50</sup> The vertical movement is generally ascribed to the verses in Sura 53. The *Burda* verses link both movements, as does the melodic line of the soloist.

Another important element of the *qaṣīda* performance is the involvement of the listeners who respond to the musical process with exclamations, sighs, and comments. The Arabic term for this social and acoustic interaction is *tafā’ul*. This phenomenon is not only part of listeners’ *ādāb* (here: codes of behaviour) in Arab

<sup>48</sup> Ali Jihad Racy, *Musical Change and Commercial Recording in Egypt 1904-1932*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Illinois 1977, 290.

<sup>49</sup> In modern music history, the Egyptian composer Sayyid Darwish (1892-1923) is credited with having introduced this technique of imitating a spatial movement with the melodic line into Arab music; see Yahyā al-Laythī, “Mūsiqā Sayyid Darwish bayn al-ta’bīr wa-l-taṣwīr”, in: *Sayyid Darwish. Hayāt wa-nagham*, Muḥammad ‘Alī Ḥammād, ed., Cairo: al-Hay’a al-miṣriyya al-‘amma li-l-kitāb 1970, 64-74.

<sup>50</sup> van Ess, “Vision and Ascension”, 48.

secular musical culture but also of the *ādāb* towards Qur'anic recitation.<sup>51</sup> *tafā'ul* denotes both the emotional involvement of the listener and encouragement for the performer, as it is already indicated by the morphological structure of the term which signifies a reciprocal relation. Interviews and field observations have shown that the audience response forms not only an integral part of the performance but is regarded as highly positive and even necessary by the performer.

Finally, the soloist employs various techniques of textual stretching which are typical of *qaṣīda* performances. The metrically free rendition allows the performer to take great liberties in the rendition of the text by breaking the lines up into several parts: through the repetition of single passages or words, the insertion of pauses, the interpolation of exclamations (here: “yā rasūla llāh”), or the musical elaboration of single syllables, which triggers responses from the listeners. Naturally, performing in the *qaṣīda* style is more time consuming. The performer needs three minutes for the two verses – three minutes of performance in the litany style would allow him to perform about twenty verses of the poem within the same amount of time.

The public character of the *qaṣīda*-style performance indicates a different function from the litany style. Here, the rendition aims at the poetry, not the prayer. The careful delivery with the utmost artistically expressive repertoire and ability is the main concern. Yet, it is not the only concern. The text is not secondary but rather serves a religious function: *madīḥ* (praise). Of course, the choice of the two verses is governed by the occasion of the celebration. From a more general perspective, however, the night journey and ascension is regarded as one of the prophet's miracles (*mu'jīza*), by which the prophet has confounded his opponents. Night journey and ascension constitute a distinction only granted to Muḥammad. The respective verses thus speak of the superior status of the prophet and his mission. This praise is uttered in a form which aims at preparing the listeners for the experience of that greatness and at generating veneration and love for the prophet.

### *Excursus: the Burda's antiphon*

Before summarizing the presented performances I would like to draw upon the technique of including an antiphon/refrain. This technique, which is central to most of the poem's performances, is hardly mentioned in any of the written material about the *Burda*.

The origin and timing of the antiphon/refrain are not quite clear. What is clear is the fact that the *Burda* was performed and listened to repeatedly very early on,

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<sup>51</sup> For *ādāb* in the context of Arab music see Ali Jihad Racy, *Making Music in the Arab World. The Culture and Artistry of Ṭarab*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003, esp. 37 f.; for the context of Qur'anic recitation see Kristina Nelson, *The Art of Reciting the Qur'an* [Austin 1985], Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press 2001, 57 ff.

starting with the aforementioned Bahā' al-Dīn and his family. There are even indications that the *Burda* was performed by specialists, a group of professional reciters called *qurrā' al-burda* (reciters of the *Burda*)<sup>52</sup>. And there is a second version of al-Būṣīrī's dream which is reported by Mubārak and Kīlānī. This version has a further episode added, including a dialogue between the poet and the prophet. Mubārak introduces his rendition of the second version with "And the dream of al-Būṣīrī has (produced) phantasms in the minds of the Sufis." He continues:

They liked one to recite after every verse: *Mawlāya ṣalli wa-sallim dā'imān abadan / 'alā ḥabībika khayri l-khalqi kullihimi*. [...] They said (qālū): The underlying reason to choose this verse and not another one is that he, may God have mercy upon him [i.e. al-Būṣīrī], when he composed this poem, he saw the prophet in a dream: [al-Būṣīrī] recited the poem in front of him, and [the prophet] swayed out of delight like a bough. When he finished saying "Fa-mablaghu l-'ilmi fihī annahu basharun" [the first hemistich of v. 51], he could not complete the verse. [The prophet] pbuh said: "Recite!"<sup>53</sup>, and [al-Būṣīrī] answered: "I can't execute the second hemistich, oh messenger of God." The messenger told him: "Say 'wa-annahu khayru khalqi llāhi kullihimi'", and al-Būṣīrī inserted this hemistich [...] into the preceding verse [51]. And he made it a prayer (*ṣalāt*) to be repeated after every verse, out of consideration for the prophet's pu words.<sup>54</sup>

The version of the dream including the refrain is not found in the early accounts of the composition of the *Burda*: neither al-Ṣafadī nor al-Kutubī nor al-Maqrīzī mention the episode. Therefore, it is safe to assume we are dealing with a later addition. If it did stem from an earlier period, there is no reason why these authors would not have mentioned it in the same way as the other stories they related. A systematic evaluation of the commentaries is beyond the scope of this article. The earliest hint of a special position of verse 51 I found in the commentary by Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī (d. 1567) who remarks with reference to the 14<sup>th</sup>-century scholar al-Zarkashī: "This verse is, as al-Zarkashī said, one of the best and most praiseful (*amdaḥ*) verses of the poem."<sup>55</sup> The commentaries by al-Azharī, al-Ghazzī, and al-Bājūrī make no reference to the refrain.<sup>56</sup> The German translations from the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see footnote 7) used early commentaries, but do not refer to any refrain.

Besides his criticism of the inventions with respect to the *Burda*, Kīlānī offers an explanation: the hemistich stems from one of al-Ṣarṣarī's (d. 1258) poems, he

<sup>52</sup> Kīlānī, "Muqaddima", 30, without mentioning a source.

<sup>53</sup> Arab. "iqra", this has almost Qur'anic connotations (cf. Sura 96:1); Kīlānī has the less loaded "qul!".

<sup>54</sup> Mubārak, *al-Madā'ih*, 149 f.; Kīlānī reports a shorter version ("Muqaddima", 28). Both authors view the stories in an extremely negative way, labelling all of them "Sufi inventions". Unfortunately, neither of them give a detailed source for the refrain dream.

<sup>55</sup> Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī, *al-'Umda fī sharḥ al-Burda*, ed. Bassām Muḥammad Bārūd, Dubai: Dār al-fāqih and Amman: Dār al-fatḥ 2003, 286. Abū 'Abdallāh Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Zarkashī (1344-1392) was a scholar of *ḥadīth* and *fiqh*.

<sup>56</sup> al-Azharī, *Sharḥ*; al-Ghazzī, *al-Zubda*; al-Bājūrī, *Mukhtaṣar*; al-Bājūrī, *Hāshiyat al-Burda*, Cairo 1855.

suggests: *Muḥammadun kbayru kbalqī llābi kullihimi / wa-burwa lladbī li-fakhāri l-majdi yantasibu*.<sup>57</sup> Various similar expressions, as in the first hemistich quoted by Kilāni, can also be found in other praise poems for Muḥammad, including the *Qaṣīda al-muḥammadiyya* by al-Būṣiri.<sup>58</sup> This may provide a possible origin of the words, but it does not explain why the refrain was introduced and why its introduction was so successful.

The answer to this question may be better approached if we take the recitation practice into consideration. If we take the label of “Sufi” in Mubārak and Kilāni as an allusion to a broader historical period, we can try to contextualize this practice within other religious developments during that period. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Sufism started to feature more prominently as a religious, social, and political force. At the same time, the commemoration of the prophet’s birthday became a widely followed practice. In this context, a genre of narratives emerged about the life and birth of Muḥammad which was predominantly meant to be recited publically. Some of these narratives feature the invocation of blessings upon Muḥammad which are inserted into the text, often at the end of a section. It is safe to assume that these are not merely employed as a means of dividing the text into sections or as an embellishment but are meant to be recited collectively, to be performed as a prayer between sections. Marion Katz defines the *taṣliya* formulas as “a participatory element of *mawlid* performance”<sup>59</sup>. Although no instructions for the recitation are included in the texts and the *taṣliya* may very well only be included later in the related manuscripts and printings, it appears obvious that its inclusion reflects the reading practice. In a contemporary collection of *mawlid* texts from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, almost every text features *taṣliya* formulas; further, more recent texts in this collection have quite detailed instructions for recitation roles.<sup>60</sup>

*Taṣliya* was already a feature of an early repertory of pious utterances. However, it gained more public notability – or acoustic publicity – towards the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century when it became common practice for muezzins to add eulogies after the call to prayer.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, various forms of *taṣliya* became central to Sufi

<sup>57</sup> Kilāni, “Muqaddima”, 28.

<sup>58</sup> al-Būṣiri, *Dirwān*, 224 f. and numerous editions and booklets for practical use. al-Būṣiri’s *Muḍariyya* (*Dirwān*, 226 f.) contains verses very similar to the seven added. Due to the congruent number and quality of syllables, all three poems can be (and sometimes are) performed to the same tune.

<sup>59</sup> Marion Holmes Katz, *The Birth of the Prophet Muḥammad: Devotional Piety in Sunni Islam*, London and New York: Routledge 2007, 81.

<sup>60</sup> Nawāl Abū l-Faṭḥ, *al-Muṭāḥ min al-mawālid wa-l-anāshid al-milāḥ*, 2 vols, [Damascus]: Dār al-Shādi 1995. The use of certain verses as antiphon/refrain is a widespread performance technique of *inshād* today. The verses may be combined with different poems.

<sup>61</sup> Taqī al-Dīn al-Maqrīzi, *Kitāb al-Mawā‘iz wa-l-ṭibār bi-dbikr al-khiṭaṭ wa-l-āthār*, vol. 2, Beirut: Dār Ṣādir n.d. (offset printing), 272; Jalāl al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Suyūṭi, *Husn al-muḥāḍira fi tārikh Miṣr wa-l-Qāhira*, ed. Muḥammad Abū l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, vol. 2, Cairo: Dār ihyā’ al-kutub al-‘arabiyya 1387/1968, 306.

congregations, culminating in the emergence of weekly meetings especially devoted to the recitation of benedictions for the prophet in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Such developments were fostered by prayer books like the immensely popular *Dalāʿil al-khayrāt* (Directives to Good Deeds) of al-Jazūli (d. 1465).<sup>62</sup> The *taṣliya*'s popularity and attractiveness was further nourished by the notion that its very recitation was a religiously meritorious act and would bestow blessing upon the reciter. The idea of receiving rewards for the invocation of blessings upon the prophet is illustrated by various sayings by the prophet. Two sayings, both quoted in the popular compilation *Riyāḍ al-ṣāliḥin* (The Gardens of the Righteous) by the 13<sup>th</sup>-century scholar al-Nawawī, are particularly significant: "Whoever invokes a blessing upon me will be blessed by God ten times" and "Those people will be nearest to me on the day of resurrection who have invoked the most blessings upon me".<sup>63</sup> In this light, the *taṣliya* of the *Burda* performances even gains a triple function: it enables participation, it ensures its efficacy, and it constitutes in itself a reward-winning act.

The *taṣliya* refrain seems to be a later addition, derived from new forms of piety and the recitation practices connected to these. It subsequently became legitimized by a dream account in parallel with the early stories related to the *Burda*. Several reasons suggest the thesis of a later addition, probably during the 15<sup>th</sup> century: the fact that the refrain dream is not included in early accounts about the composition and healing effect of the *Burda*; a growing veneration for the prophet from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards which is manifested in *mawlid* commemorations and public eulogies after the *adhān*; and the *taṣliya* as powerful tool, developed and practiced especially but not exclusively in Sufi piety. This assumption is backed by the findings of Frederike-Wiebke Daub who found that the refrain was only included in later copies of the *Burda* (see footnote 32).

### Conclusion

Three different performance contexts and manifestations of the *Burda* have been presented: the first one featured the *Burda* as a supplication during *laylat al-qadr*, framed by *duʿāʾ* and *ṣalāt al-tahajjud*. Only excerpts were performed, but the structure of the supplicatory ode remained and had been tailored for the occasion. The *Burda*'s verses were framed by *ḥamd* and *taṣliya* and a concluding *duʿāʾ*. Only one melody was employed, the singing alternated between the *fırqa* (verses) and the at-

<sup>62</sup> See Ignaz Goldziher, "Über den Brauch der Maḥjā-Versammlungen im Islam" [1901], in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Joseph Desomogzi, ed., vol. 4, Hildesheim: Georg Olms 1970, 277-294.

<sup>63</sup> Muḥyi l-Din b. Sharaf al-Nawawī, *Riyāḍ al-ṣāliḥin*, n.p.: Dār al-zayn li-l-turāth 1987, 375. The first saying is frequently mentioned in the context of *mawlid* editions (Katz, *Birth of the Prophet*, 79 f.), the second one was often quoted on invitation posters for commemorative celebrations or prayer circles which I saw during my fieldwork.

tendees (refrain). The second context was a *majlis* (session) for a complete *Burda* performance, which also alternated between the *firqa* and the attendees, but using five different melodies. Here, the ritual character dominated, not least due to the concluding *du'ā'* which asked for (spiritual) healing through its recitation. This meeting was conducted independently of any religious holiday. The third performance consisted of only two verses from the *Burda*, chosen for the commemoration of the prophet's night journey and ascension and serving as *madīḥ* (praise for the prophet). The metrically free solo rendition did not include any refrain/*taṣliya*.

Judging by the musical form, we can identify two different modes of rendition: the first mode is what I have termed the litany style, the second is the *qaṣīda* style (see figure 4). The litany style is characterized by syllabic and rhythmic singing and a moderate to fast tempo. The melodic line moves in small steps, including repetitions of tones and embracing only a narrow range (forth to fifth). The litany style is used for collective singing, in a responsorial technique between the congregation and the *firqa* or soloist, and includes the antiphon/refrain. The *qaṣīda* style features melismatic singing and a wide melodic range. It is performed by a soloist and is metrically free. The tempo is rather slow and features several short pauses and prolonged tones. Techniques of textual stretching and musical painting are employed, and a relationship is built up between the solo performer and the audience which results in mutual involvement and encouragement. No antiphon/refrain is used.

	litany style	<i>qaṣīda</i> style
singing style	syllabic	melismatic
melody	moves in small steps, repetition of tones, narrow range	more melodic movement, prolonged tones, wide range
rhythm	rhythmic	metrically free
tempo	moderate to fast	slow
performers	<i>firqa</i> /soloist and everybody, responsorial	soloist
antiphon/refrain	with refrain	no refrain
special techniques	encouragement to sing along	textual stretching, musical painting, establishing <i>tafā'ul</i>

Figure 4: General characteristics of litany-style and *qaṣīda*-style renditions.

The litany style conveys both supplication and ritual whereas the *qaṣīda* style is employed when the poem serves as *madīḥ*. The musical features of both styles correspond to features of the two major styles of Qur'anic recitation, *murattal* and *mujawwad*. *Murattal* denotes the plainer style which is speech bound, mostly syllabic,

and rarely crosses the range of a fourth or fifth. *Mujawwad* denotes the artistically elaborate style which employs melisma, an extremely wide range, and a variety of musical devices like *maqām* principles<sup>64</sup>, ornamentation, and various voice registers. Moreover, the styles correspond also in function. *Murattal* is used for educational purposes, for private recitation, and in ritual. *Mujawwad* is used for public recitation; its main purpose is to elaborate on the meaning of the words and in doing so to “produce an emotional and religious effect on listeners”.<sup>65</sup>

Today, we encounter al-Būṣīrī’s *Burda* in various manifestations and with different functions and, thus, as a versatile text. One of the most striking differences between the printed poem and the poem in performance lies in the refrain which has been connected to practices of piety towards the prophet Muḥammad that emerged from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The refrain is generally added when the *Burda* is collectively performed; it indicates the primary dividing line between the poem as general *madīḥ* and supplication. The *Burda*’s function as a supplication does not require the entire poem. It is not the text, but the performance mode which primarily defines its function.

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<sup>64</sup> Rules and melodic elements which are bound to the modal system of Arab music.

<sup>65</sup> Nelson, *The Art of Reciting*, 102; see also 102-116 for both styles.