

Būsiri, Muhammed b-Said (021144)

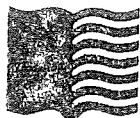
Kasidetü'l-Bürde (111669)

Performing Religion:
Actors, contexts, and texts
Case studies on Islam

Edited by
Ines Weinrich

01 Haziran 2012

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BEIRUT 2016

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Between Poem and Ritual:
The *Burda* by al-Būsiri (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-Būsiri, 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.¹ 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?²

The poet and his poem

Despite the wide circulation of his poems, biographical data about the poet is sparse.³ Sharaf al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Būsiri 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

¹ 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.

² 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.

³ The earliest available information on the poet is found in Muḥammad b. Shākīr al-Kutubi, *Fawā'id al-wafayāt*, ed. Iḥsān ‘Abbās, vol. 3, Beirut: Dār al-Ṣādir 1974, 362-369; Khalīl b. Aybak al-Ṣafādī, *al-Wāfi bi-l-wafayāt*, ed. Sven Dederling, 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-Būsiri”, in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, ed. Gudrun Krämer et al., Brill 2011, Brill Online (accessed 9 November 2011).