

Retracing the Path of the Sons of Hilal¹

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To “retrace the path of the Sons of Hilal” let us first follow the poet as, recalling the prestigious past of the Hilali people, he gazes upon the vestiges of their abandoned camp in the desert:

Where is the tribe of the Sons of Hilal
Have their traces disappeared forever
Or are they still distinct ...
Where is the tribe of illustrious renown?
Parched are her water troughs,
Exile has taken her far from her camp
Men, women, children,
The tribe is scattered, broken by ages.
Who could abide such ill,
Who could face such destiny with such constancy?
Lend your ears to the song of her misfortune ...
For seven entire years
We did not see a single lightning announcing the rain
Nor did we place the cauldron on the tripod
And stir the grain on the fire
A bushel had grown dearer
It cost a three-year she-camel ...²

وين نجع اولاد هلال
غبي رسمه والّا ما زال...
وين نجع شهير سماه
انزاح جياه
وطوح حيه وابناه
تريسه ونساه
تفرق والدهر فناه
من يحمل داه
ومن يصير صيره وقضاه
اصغو نشداه...
سابع وسناه
ما ريناشي بارق ماه
ولا ركبناه
قدر نعيم وحركناه
والصاع غلاه
حقه وبننت اللبون شراه

The poem from which this extract is taken originates from the Nefzaoua region of southern Tunisia (Gilbert Boris fund). It has a single rhyme in *-ah* (ا هـ), a rhyme which is retained as a breathing marker to accompany the long lamentation over the sufferings of the Hilali people.

As one hears this text, the sufferings that provoked the exile of the whole tribe are immediately apparent. Thus begins the migration encapsulated in the word *taghrîba* (تغريبة) or “March to the West”. But who were the Hilali of history?

They belonged to a confederation of Arab clans claiming descent from an eponymous ancestor: they were “sons of Hilal”, Banû Hilal (بنو هلال). Since time immemorial their home region had been the Arabian Peninsula where they led an extremely precarious existence as nomadic herdsmen, occasionally travelling up towards Iraq and Syria in search of pasture and water-holes. Maxime Rodinson refers to the “ghastly wretchedness” in which these people of the desert struggled to subsist in an area where it might not rain for years at a time. They were forced at times to indulge in raiding and the pillage of caravans. But periodically there were truces arranged between hostile desert groups, which allowed them to participate enthusiastically in the pleasures of poetry in the form of verbal exchanges of wit. The oasis of Okaz was renowned as a site for such gatherings.

However, in the 10th century, the very precariousness of their mode of living seems to have drawn them in large numbers towards Egypt. There they settled in the Delta, then in the Saïd (the region of Luxor and Karnak), up till the time when the Fatimid government in Cairo – for political reasons – incited them to quit Egypt to go and conquer Ifrîqiyya, the modern-day Tunisia. The speech of exhortation made to them was designed to appeal to their aspirations: “He who journeys to Ifrîqiyya” they were told, “will find bounty there, and even greater bounty”. They set off in successive waves of migration, with their women, children and flocks, reaching Ifrîqiyya by the middle of the 11th century.

Let us pause a moment over the historical event of the arrival of the Hilali in Ifrîqiyya.

For linguists, one of the most significant consequences of the Hilali expansion was the Arabicization of the open plains and the pastoral lands which had remained Berber-speaking up until that time. For only the cities had become Arabicized by the first wave of conquerors carrying the new faith, four centuries previously. But with the arrival of the Hilali, there occurred an assimilatory phenomenon, studied by William Marçais – by which the major nomadic Berber peoples, the Hawwara and the Zenata, adopted the language, the dress and the customs of the Hilali, who were nomads like they were. But according to a popular saying, “if (the country) was Arabicized (*‘uribat*, اعربت), it was also devastated (*khuribat* خربت)”. What is the historians’ view?

For these latter – at least up until recently – the Hilali invasion had a dramatic impact on the region. This is apparent from the choice of words and imagery adopted by several historians, such as E. F. Gautier (1937), Georges Marçais (1946) and Roger Idris (1962), who used expressions like “the Arab scourge”, a “devastating cyclone”, the “twilight of civilisation”, even “the end of a world”. This interpretation is based on a prestigious source, that of Ibn Khaldûn, to whom is due the striking expression that a “cloud of locusts” had descended upon Ifrîqiyya. In short, an “historical Vulgate”, as Jacques Berque wrote, “made an ancient people from out of Arabia, the Banû Hilal, responsible for a major breach in the history of the Maghreb”. To be sure, more recent work has cast a different light upon the matter: interpretive work undertaken by Yves Lacoste tends to prove that the contentions of the

above-mentioned historians served to underpin a colonialist ideology; as for S. D. Goitein, he demonstrates with documentary support that the alleged prosperity of pre-Hilali Ifrîqiyya was highly relative: it no longer had pride of place as the granary of Rome.

That said, the impressions left by the Hilali in the popular consciousness clearly reflect a negative judgement in their regard. A certain number of proverbs still express the distrust inspired by these Bedouins with their poverty, their ragged dress and their unpleasant manners: “don’t open the door of your house to them!” (ما تحلّ شى باب الدار). Paradoxically nevertheless, as evidenced by travellers’ tales, the same person who may have just denigrated them will inevitably, the next moment, praise their moral qualities, exalt their talents as poets and even quote long passages in verse of the Banû Hilal epic. So what is this epic – the epic tale that recounts the history of the Hilali people?

It is often referred to as the “Hilali (*chanson de geste*)”, an expression which has come into usage since Tahar Guiga published under this title (*La Geste hilalienne*) the French translation of a Libyan-Tunisian version of the epic in 1968. This version was assembled at the beginning of the last century by Tahar Guiga’s father, Abderrahman Guiga, who is well known for the monumental study he made in collaboration with William Marçais on Takrouna (1958).

The Hilali *Geste* is divided conventionally into three cycles. The first two cycles recount events which occurred in Arabia and in various countries of the East. The third and final cycle, which this discussion will particularly concentrate on, tells – as its title *taghrîba* (تغريبة) indicates – of the Hilali migration towards Ifrîqiyya, as well as the wars against their enemy, Khalîfa Zenâti, sometimes referred to by them as the “king of Tunis”.

To gain an idea of the diffusion and spread of this masterwork of Arab popular literature as a whole, let us first take a look at the map in Fig. 1:

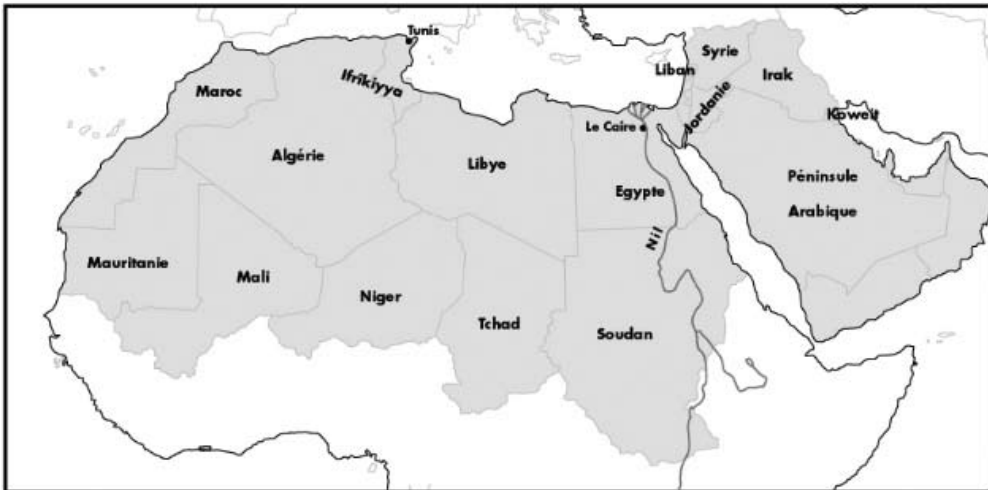


Fig. 1 Presence of the *Geste*

As can be seen from this map, drawn up from the findings of sound research, the presence of the Hilali epic is attested over this whole area, both from Syria to Morocco, following an east-west axis, as well as from the shores of the Mediterranean to the edge of the Sahel, following a north-south one. It is thus observable that its diffusion zone is much broader in fact than the territories through which the Banû Hilal passed or in which they settled.

Over the centuries and from one region to another, this tradition has been passed down through a diversity of modes of expression.

As an example one may consider the traditional mode practised in Egypt: it both was, and remains today, of an exceptional richness. We need only to reflect that in the 19th century, as the English orientalist Edward Lane reported, in the city of Cairo alone there were no fewer than fifty poet-storytellers whose single repertoire consisted of the Hilali epic, and that some of them specialised just in the cycle of a single one of its heroes. Thus there were the *abuzaydiyyah* (those specialising in the story of the hero Abû Zayd) and the *zenatiyyah* (who concentrated on the story of the Zenati enemies). Today, recent studies carried out in the Nile Delta region (1995) reveal that one particular village possesses fourteen professional poets whose vocation is

to sing the tale in the manner of the poetico-musical tradition that is proper to Egypt, a performance that on average extends over a hundred hours (Fig. 2). The tradition they follow is strictly oral without reference to any written text, and derives (if the poet is highly skilled) from a subtle interplay between memory and improvisation, between the formal constraints imposed by the narrative and the possibilities of individual innovation.

In contrast, the mode of transmission prevalent in Syria makes no appeal to improvisation or to any musical accompaniment; it depends rather on a chanted reading from a manuscript. The reciter is then appreciated for his diction and the quality of his voice.

An impressive number of manuscripts of the epic are to be found disseminated through both public and private libraries in the Arab world (Fig. 3) and in European libraries. Among these latter can be mentioned the Berlin library where Abderrahman Ayoub has catalogued nearly two hundred manuscripts of the epic, and the Vatican Library (Fig. 4), one of whose



Fig. 2 Poet-musician of the Said region of Egypt (photo from the booklet accompanying the recording of Giovanni Canova).



Fig. 3 Page of a richly illuminated 18th century manuscript (Bibliothèque Nationale de Tunis).

manuscripts of the epic I studied in collaboration with my linguist colleague, the late Omar Bencheikh (2003).

In the Maghreb, where the epic is in decline, we are dealing with an oral transmission without a musical accompaniment – at least, at the present time. The narrator alternates between prose, rhymed prose (سجع) and verse.

The above provides a brief overview of the diverse modes of transmission – an



Fig. 4 Vatican Library Manuscript (on the right, example of the patterns of calligraphy which give rhythm to the text).

oral performance with or without musical accompaniment on the one hand, a written transmission on the other in the form of manuscripts or, more recently, through publication of little “yellow books” (as they are called from being printed on an ordinary paper of a yellowish tinge) – hence a variety of traditions which, depending on their regions, exist side by side, intermingle or are mutually exclusive.

The *Hilali Geste*, together with various other epics, belongs to a genre that occupies a privileged place in Arab popular literature. Among the most well known of these epics is one which held a fascination for Europeans of the Romantic era: the epic of Antar. It was introduced to Europe by a Viennese orientalist at the beginning of the 19th century and was very quickly translated into a large number of European languages. As viewed by the Romantics, Lamartine in particular, Antar embodied the hero *par excellence*, the “prince of the desert” who was the son of a slave through his mother and an Arab prince through his father, and who demonstrated great qualities of chivalry thanks to which he won the recognition of his father and the hand in marriage of his beloved cousin Abla.

This epic genre is referred to as a *sīra* (سيرة), that is, a “biography” – in this case a collective biography. Put otherwise, the epic fits into the tradition of history and, for its most committed partisans, the veracity of the story that it recounts is incontestable. So let us examine the texts of the *taghriba* (تغريبة) to see the extent to which the story reflects (if such is indeed the case) the Hilali incursion into Ifriqiyya. We notice that all the events unfold as if the historical circumstances which led to the Hilali

invasion of Ifrîqiyya are of secondary importance to the relation of the particular real (and so precarious) conditions under which the protagonists of the epic had to live. For them it was a question of fleeing the scourge of drought, however painful the exile would be. That was why, in their eyes, the only thing that mattered was the search for a land where they and their herds could live in security. They prepared this search in an extremely practical manner. The Council of Elders first decided to send an advance party to Tunis to scout the land. This mission was entrusted to the hero Abû Zayd (Bouزيد) and his three nephews, Yahia, Yunis and Mer'î. Wracked by dark forebodings, the mother of the young men urged her brother Abû Zayd to bring her sons back to her safe and sound. But Yunis would remain a prisoner in Tunis, encapsulated in the saying *Yûnis fi bab tûnis* (يونس في باب تونس), while the other two would perish on the journey. Only the uncle returned: it fell to him to report the terrible truth:

Then Bouزيد told of all their trials,
When he had spoken water ceased to flow....

خبر بشقاءه
وقف كل ما في مجراه

This is how he relates the episode during which Mer'î succumbed to a viper's bite; this took place at Bir Nagwa (Nagga), a real placename near Gabès:

We left Mer'î behind
We left him on the edge of a well where
We went to draw water
At Nagga there we left him and the sand
Has covered his body
In the deep well of the lonely places
In the deep well of the deserts
Scored by the rifts of deep gorges
A veil of sand covers him
And his loss is as ash on the tongues
Of those who remain alive
Dead are they, swift was
Their passing....

مرعي ززناه
علي جالة بير وردناه
ثمة خليناه
في نقاه ورمل غطاه
في بير رقااف
هي وسط فيافي ونقااف
وعليه روااف
رمل يهيل دار جبال..
وفرااف الدنيا ببسال
ماتوا وقصر الميجال

(adapted from the French translation by Galley & Ayoub 1983: 58–59)

Once the scouting expedition had been undertaken, the Sons of Hilal determined to set forth. Thereupon, to bring clearly home to his companions the irrevocability of their migration, Abû Zayd had recourse to a visual metaphor (Saada 1985: 166; Galley 1990: 161–163). The metaphor was built around three physical elements: a carpet unrolled on the ground, a large bowl set in the middle of it, itself filled with a broth of *assida* (عصيدة), a wheaten gruel topped with melted butter.

The carpet, associated with a sacred space which must not be trodden upon but carefully rolled up as the travellers progressed towards their destination, symbolised the journey to be undertaken in successive stages until the centre was reached; the bowl containing the tasty *assida* of festal days, represented, by its shape, the city of Tunis girt with ramparts, and by its contents, the bounties and pleasures of life. Thus the yearnings of this people cast into destitution became crystallised around

the name of Tunis, associated with an abundance of food, water and green vegetation. Wherever the tale of the *taghriba* (تغريبة) is told – as for example among the sub-Saharan societies of Darfur, Kordofan, Bornou or Chad, – the place dreamed of by those nomadic herders forever pursuing their long marches with their scraggy herds, is none other than “Tunis the Green” (*tûnis el-khadrâ*, تونس الخضراء), which through the play of epithets becomes “the Prosperous” (*al-âmrâ*, العامرة), “the Blessed” (*al-sa’îda*, السعيدة).

The journey is long, filled with severe tests, confrontations with sedentary populations, murderous conflicts which the poet says “turn the hair of little children white”. From one year’s journey to another the caravan plods on until the day when:

Borne up by hope	
The tribe came together in eagerness	المُتَّيِّعَةُ نَجَعِ اتَّقَلَّفُطُ سَافَتْ
For the departure.	
They entered the great desert,	خَشْنُ الرِّقْرَاقِ
The home of wild beasts.	وَيَنْ الْوَجُوشِ يَدِيرُ أَوْجَافُ
Great was the haste of their steps	إِنْسَاقُ زُرْبِ
Fast was their pace	قَبِيلِ الْمَغْرِبِ
Until, at the setting of the sun,	حَطَّ صَبْغَرُ وَحَوَاضُ الشَّبِّ
They drew to a halt at Sanghar and	وَلِقَاهُ عَشْبِ
Hawâdh Eshab.	وَالْقُودِ لَعْبِ
At last they reached the place of green grass	مَخْلَلُ وَجِوَاشِي وَنِيَاقِ حَلْبِ
Where the herds romped about,	وَبَنَاتِ حَسْبِ
Camels with their young and their colts,	يَعْنُوا بِالضَيْفِ التَّاعِبِ
She-camels in milk,	
While the young maidens of noble line	
Cared for the weary guest.	

(adapted from the French translation by Galley & Ayoub 1983: 62–63)

Thus the prospects of a better life lay apparently before them.

But let us pause for a moment at the final line of the poem which evokes the spirit of hospitality, the essential virtue of nomadic peoples. He who fails to exercise the law of hospitality, declares Abû Zayd, is worthy of scorn. He lays great importance on the quality of the welcome which must be offered totally unreservedly, and of such a kind that he who receives it puts himself at the service of his host:

I am, he said,	
The servant-slave of my guest.	
Fulfilled is the man	أَنَا عَبْدُ ضَيْفِي
Who, bearing a smile upon his lips,	أَجَادَ غَلَامٌ يَنْطَحُ الضَّيْفِ بِاسْمِ
Shares his meal with his guest	يَلُو كَانُ فِي بَصْلِ وَخَبِزِ شَعِيرِ
Even when this meal should be nothing more	
Than an onion and a barley loaf.	

(adapted from the French translation by Galley & Bencheikh 2003: 315)

The heroine Jâzya, the inspiration for the whole of the epic, associates along with the sacred duty of hospitality two other Bedouin virtues. This she does when addressing the Council of Elders. In normal times she sat as a member of it, but in the present

case her peers had charged her to explain why she had not led the choir of women mourners weeping at the death of one of the Hilali:

O Hilal Bou Ali, three kinds of men deserve to be wept for with hot tears and loud cries.
The first confronts peril and smothers the fires of war.
The second receives guests during years of drought when to offer a sip of water to one who thirsts demands great mastery of onself.
The third is the man of spirit and eloquence able to assert his own rights and to defend the rights of others.
As for the rest, o Hilal Bou Ali, they are worth little more than the faint gleam perceived by a blind man. Their life is no more than getting women with child, engendering brats who will swell the ranks of the imbeciles and who will gorge themselves on *assida* from the grand ceremonial bowls of feast days...
They deserve neither mourning nor tears.

ثلاثة من الرجال يا هلال بو علي يستاهلو البكا وعليهم تُنقّ العين يغرد نحبيها.
الاول منهم اللي يعرض راسه للبللا ويطفي نار سامر لهيبها.
والثاني منهم الي يفرح بالخاطر إلبالقي في سنين الشدة والشحايع منين الرجال شربه من القرية
يكدها.
والثالث منهم خفيف النفس فصيح اللسان اللي ياخذ حقه وحق من يريداه.
وباقيةم يا هلال بو علي غير بص على العمى جيابات نراري. حرأزات نسا كتأرات رموز و كآلات مثاريد
عصيدها. لا يستاهلوا لا حزن ولا بكا.

(adapted from the French translation by Guiga 1968: 27–28)

Thus, according to the moral code that *Jâzya* reminds her peers of, eloquence, the art of using words to convince and to move, is a distinguishing mark of people of quality. This talent lies in particular in the use of allusion. A narrator of the epic declares that the Hilali are “people of allusion” (*ahl al-m’ana*, اهل المعنى). For them, to express oneself through use of allusion, to have the skill to suggest and capture the inner sense of things, forms an intrinsic part of eloquence. This quality, or this particular gift, is so highly prized that it becomes the determining condition in the choice of a husband or, as case may be, in the search for a wife. We find the epitome of this in the Maghrebian versions of the epic in the formation of the idealised couple of *Jâzya* and *Dyâb*. Taking the initiative, *Jâzya* subjects her suitors to a test of their skills at discerning allusive language. *Dyâb*, the most popular hero of the epic in the Maghreb, excels in this domain; he is the chosen one.

This allusive art thus consists in what it suggests rather than what it directly describes. A particular poem, for example, which speaks of a caravan, is in fact implicitly alluding to the Hilali women and of the nobility they symbolise when on the surface it is simply describing the lofty litters in which they are borne on the backs of camels (Fig. 5).

One specific usage of allusion is particularly appreciated by lovers of the epic: that of use of short descriptive phrases or formulae associated with the central characters. Thus, for example, the expression “*Jâzya* of the loosened hair” (*mkhabbâla fî sha’arha*, مخبلة في شعرها) immediately conjures the image of a woman of incomparable beauty with an abundance of long black hair. But for anyone steeped in the epic’s tales, the image of the loosened hair calls up other mental pictures which are associated



Fig. 5 Image of a litter on a cassette of the Hilali geste (recording by Abderrahman Abnoudy, Egypt).

with it in the story: it will call to mind the sequence of the chess match between the heroine and her foreign husband and whose outcome is crucial for her. During the first round, which she purposefully loses, she is required by the stakes of the game to remove her garments, but at that very moment her nakedness is concealed by her long hair which falls right to her feet:

(They played, she lost) and
shedding her garments she was revealed
cloaked in a
dark robe like the plumage
of the crow.
It was her hair, cascading
free from all ties.
Only her nose was espied
by the cherif, along with her heel
beneath her
ankles; but her body did he not
see, hidden as it was by
a long
black gown...

ذاط اللباس فقلعته كسهاها غراب
شعور راسها طاحوا بالتخييل

النيف بان له و قدم تحت الكعاب
والبدن ما شافه كسها التحييل

(adapted from the French translation by Galley 2005: 39)

Finally, the third of the virtues which, in the words of Jâzya, should inspire any man worthy of the name and which will grant him the right to receive funeral honours on the day of his death: the virtue of courage, the kind shown, in Jâzya's mind, by the warrior dedicated to peace; and, for us who hear the tale, the kind which marks its characters and which will take on a heroic dimension, as the genre requires. Let us see in what way.

From the very outset, due to the extraordinary circumstances which preside over the moment of their birth, the central characters of the epic are to be found at the boundary between the human and the supernatural worlds. The name they are given at birth furthermore reflects the miraculous or wondrous aspect of their advent into the world. One was named "*Barakât*" (بركة) because he was considered the fruit of divine grace; another was given the name "*Dyâb*", meaning "jackals" (sing. *dhîb*, ذيب; plural *dhyâb*, ذياب) amongst which he was born in the midst of the desert. These are exceptional figures whose future marvellous deeds will be exalted and lauded in the epic. From a very young age they will demonstrate great intellectual and physical precocity: one possesses a knowledge which far exceeds that of his master, he can speak seven languages, or even every foreign language; another has Herculean strength which, for example, permits him to fight wild beasts with his bare hands or strike an enemy rigid with his shout.

However, whatever innate qualities he may possess, the hero asserts himself by his courage alone in the face of multiple trials. He achieves many warlike feats, faces his foe in a single combat which can last forty days, from sunrise to sundown; he confronts and destroys all that symbolises the forces of evil: devastating ghouls, foulers of water, abducters of maidens. In short, he is the saviour of the group to which he belongs, and he is recognised by it as the epitome of valour, the "*fâris*" (فارس). As a consequence his fame is hallowed by dubbing him with epithets such as "the Knight who brings honour to the East and the West": *fâris el mashâriq w-al-maghârib*, (فارس المشارق و المغرب) (Guiga 1968: 15), or else by means of hyperbolic expressions describing him as "leading 99,000 horsemen" and astride a steed whose swiftness is as lightning: "his bound was as sixty times sixty paces ...". The horse is the hero's indissociable companion in war, in the hunt, in equestrian games; it is the essential attribute of the *fâris*, most frequently named after a colour that hints at tenderness. For example, *al-shahba* (الشهباء) was the name given to Dyâb's favourite mare, deriving from a term which suggests a light colour, a silvery white, but more than that, "a hue of tender feeling" as Gilbert Boris defined it (1958).

A further attribute of the *fâris* was his sword whose exploits are comparable with those of Durandal, the famous sword of Roland. The scene during which the victor cleaves the body of his enemy from head to foot, sends his head flying off his shoulders or pierces his eye is often represented in popular imagery (Fig. 6).

We are here in the realm of epic with its familiar stereotypes. But over and beyond the ostentatious feats of heroism just mentioned, noble behaviour is always grounded in a fundamental virtue which derives from practical life – a type of pragmatic intelligence generally associated with cleverness and guile, and which Hellenists refer to as *mêtis*, from the name of the Metis, the first spouse of Zeus whose virtues the latter assimilated by swallowing her.

Jean-Pierre Vernant and Marc D tienne define the *m tis* as a set of intellectual



Fig. 6 Duel between Dyâb the Zoghbi, son of Ghanim, and the Zenati, Abû Sa'ada Al Zanâti Khalîfa (from Giovanni Canova's record).

powers where predominate vigilance, sharpness of perception, suppleness of mind, the sense of the right moment to act, swiftness of thought, aptitude for pretence – all attitudes and ways of acting which allow the individual, in his interactions with the natural environment and with his fellows, to forge a genuine strategy. It is through this skill that the heroes of Homer are able to escape from the most threatening of dangers. Think of the guile employed by Ulysses to deceive the Cyclops and escape alive. Like Ulysses, the Hilali hero is “the man of infinite stratagems”; he is given the title of *Abû Hiyal* (أبو حيل), *çâheb el-makr u-l kîd* (صاحب الكيد و المكر), or indeed *al-muhtâl* (المحتال). Abû Zayd himself excels in the art of dissimulation: from being a warrior, he changes into a dervish, then into a doctor or, most frequently, into a bard singing to the notes of the rebab and travelling incognito. Neither is Dyâb, another Hilali hero, deficient in this skill: during a horse race, he acts like a man gone mad so as to better deceive his competitors, as Antilochus does in the *Iliad* when taking part in a chariot race.

At the heart of the Hilali family, there is a woman, Jâzya, who also embodies this form of lively, perspicacious and shrewd intelligence, always alert for traps that her adversary may have laid which she is able to counter at the crucial moment. When the Zenati enemy, Khalîfa Zenâti, sends a group of women to the Hilali with secret instructions to request that their hosts hand over to them the famous mare of Dyâb, Jâzya must, without infringing the laws of hospitality, devise a stratagem which will unwittingly direct the choice of her visitors towards another animal. This skill at “disentangling” (*dabbar* دبّر) tricky situations, of “undoing the knots”, has

earned Jâzya, in Maghrebian versions, the title of *dabbîra* (دبيرة), or *çâhbat at-tadbîr* (صحبة التدبير). She is, for her people, the counsellor *par excellence*, who always devotes herself to their good – which on occasions demands that she, as much as any other individual, show qualities of self-abnegation, endurance and self-control in the name of solidarity with her family (*al 'açabiyya*, العصبية). This quality is demonstrated in the sacrifice that Jâzya had to consent to, however unwillingly, during a period of famine which preceded the March to the West. She accepted to be given in marriage to a prince of another people, because the group interest – in this case its very survival – took precedence over any individual consideration. This marriage alliance guaranteed the Hilali access to food, grazing and water. Later, when they were forced to undertake the *taghrîba* (تغريبة), the Hilali would make use of cunning ruses to take back their sister, Jâzya, without consulting her, and, according to some versions, despite whatever grief she might have felt at being separated from her children and their father.

Having complete mastery over themselves as does Jâzya, near to being invincible as are Abû Zayd, Dyâb and the others – such is the initial image that we retain of these heroes from the way they are portrayed in the epic. Nevertheless, we also discover in them some more complex traits which reveal their vulnerability, which contrasts with the impression of power and self-control that we can gain of these characters. We discover in them all the ambivalence of the human spirit. On numerous occasions we find them in the grips of emotional turmoil. From the moment they are stricken with the loss of a creature dear to them – their favourite horse in particular – grief overwhelms them with an intensity equalled only by their gigantic strength, provoking a torrent of tears, fainting fits, lethargy and interminable vigils over the tomb of the one lost.

When love comes upon them, they are swept away by passion: they merely have to hear the beauty and qualities of a young woman being praised for an irresistible desire to possess her to be born within them, for, it is said, “the ear is enraptured before the eye”. This then incites an ardent quest for the beloved. Sometimes, this fascination takes hold at the very moment of first meeting. Jâzya inspires such an overwhelming feeling in a stranger, the son of Khwaja Amer, met during the course of the *taghrîba* (تغريبة), that he completely forgets his filial duty in order to put himself at the service of the Hilali.

When he heard her voice
And perceived her face
He could no longer breathe
And his reason was lost.

ولما سمع صوتها وتمكّن من رؤيتها عقله من
الراس تسلّب،
وذهبت عنه الصميه

(adapted from the French translation by Guiga 1968: 51)

Neither are women immune from the power of love. The Zenati princess Sa'ada, obsessed by the image of the handsome Hilali Yunis after hearing her slave tell of him, employs all her means to obtain custody of the captive and to bind him to her in any way she can: she uses magic to make him blind.

Even Jâzya herself – she who represents the active conscience of her people, she who is, as the saying goes, the “central pillar of the tent” – even she was known on

occasion to lose the sense of moderation. This is revealed in certain relatively recent Algerian versions of the tale (Breteau corpus) in which it appears that the fundamental spirit of group unity is somewhat attenuated in favour of individual aspirations. In this episode Jâzya is Dyâb's wife. Before departing on the annual flock migration until the fair season arrives, Dyâb urges his wife to let him know of the blossoming of the almond tree the moment it occurs. But, in Jâzya's heart and mind, the time passes too slowly. So she impatiently arranges for the almond tree to be watered with warm water, and so bring on the blossoming prematurely. The tree brings forth flowers and she sends off the arranged message. When Dyâb receives it, he starts back, but his flocks perish in the cold and snow. The codes of the herding life have been violated. The land becomes barren. It therefore requires the intervention of a holy man, a mediator of the sacred forces, in order to re-establish the rhythms of nature and restore fertility.

Thus, the narrator of the epic endows his heroes with powerful and deeply human feelings, sometimes including violent fits of anger to which Dyâb, the impulsive hero, is subject, he whose sense of personal honour is always worn on his sleeve. He is capable of condemning to death with one all-powerful word someone deemed guilty of affronting that honour. When a woman of his entourage besmirches his character by calling him a coward, he mortally abashes her:

She uttered a cry – a rasping choke –
And fell down dead.
For in times gone by death came
Upon those abashed in such a way.

شبهت هي ماتت.
ما هو قبل يموتوا من العزارة

(adapted from the French translation by Galley & Ayoub 1983: 200–201)

Cowardice is abhorred by the Hilali. When their gallant ally, the son of Khwaja Amer mentioned above, is treacherously struck in the back (Fig. 7), the entire community reproves this vile act and weeps for him. Magnificent honours are rendered to the dead hero in the form of animal sacrifices, destruction of precious objects and funeral rituals performed by the Hilali women:

To mourn my lord Khwaja Amer were sacrificed
one hundred horses and mares unsaddled until that day;
In mourning him, one hundred fine copper cauldrons were rent apart;
In mourning him, one hundred broad-brimmed wooden platters were smashed to pieces;
In mourning him, one hundred litters with new leather thongs were ripped to shreds:
Bewailing his death, ninety-nine young maidens who had come out into the world only
that day tore their faces ...

موتة سيدي الخواجة عامر انفلقت عليها مائة مهر ومهرة اللّي ما اسرّجت الا نهارها.
وكسروا عليها مائة قدر اللّي للخاطر سريع أفاؤها.
وكسروا عليها مائة قصعة اللّي للخاطر سريع مدارها.
وكسروا عليها مائة جحفة اللّي بالعلباء جديد إسارها،
وندبت عليه تسعة و تسعين عذراء بنت بكر اللّي ما ظهرت من الحجبة الا نهارها،

(adapted from the French translation by Guiga 1968: 76)



Fig. 7 The traitor Mutâwi strikes Al-Khafaji (or Khwaja Amer) in a fight.

The respect due to a courageous warrior is an absolute imperative – even where he is an enemy. This is the reason why Dyâb repents for having slain (too easily, he thought) his enemy Khalîfa Zenâti, by striking him in his most vulnerable spot – the point where his vital forces were concentrated – his kneecap. Seeing his opponent fall dead, he cries out: “A valiant knight such as he did not merit such an end!” And he heaps curses upon his own daughter who had suggested the deadly thrust so that, in her mind, an end might be brought to a duel that could prove interminable (Galley 2005: 53).

In retracing the path of the Sons of Hilal, we have tried to follow their journey through a profusion of real and imaginary place-names as they travelled towards the verdant lands of Tunisia. We have observed that the epic, which purports to be historical (as suggested by the *sîra* genre with which it is associated), relates not so much the history of the Hilali conquest of North Africa, but rather, building on this historical substrate, the history of a nomadic people driven from its ancestral lands and one which, at the end of its western migration, was doomed to suffer internal divisions, fratricidal feuds and eventual disappearance. It is a tragic story, but one lived with a spirit of indomitable endurance that is indescribable. In his novel *Nedjma*, Kateb Yacine took pleasure in inverting the image of the destructive “cloud of locusts” adopted by certain historians to transpose it into the emblem of Algerian resistance: under his pen, the Sons of Hilal became the founders of a nation.

Through the series of extracts chosen most often from Maghrebian versions of the tale, we have seen come into focus the essential features of a tribal humanism



Fig. 8 “Jâzya scans the horizon”, by Khéreddin Ennouri (2006).

consisting, as we have observed, of the sacred code of hospitality, of eloquence and courage, as well as the unflinching solidarity with the family which welds its members together, along with the pragmatism acquired through confronting the difficulties of that particular form of living. This moral code by which the life of that society was regulated is embodied by the heroes of whom the epic provides an exalted vision, able to lift up the hearts of men. At the time of their War of Independence, Algerian insurgents drew from the Hilali epic their inspiration, the pointers to their way ahead and a reason to exalt their identity in confronting the foreign foe.

But at the same time, the epic presents these heroes as people of flesh and bone who are not immune from human passions, who thus arouse our emotions, and who recently gave inspiration to a Tunisian artist, Khéreddin Ennouri, in his depiction of one of the most gripping moments of the poem’s action: the moment when Jâzya catches sight of the Zenati army as it pours down towards the Hilali camp. The battle is imminent; it will lead to the defeat of the Hilali. Jâzya is no more than a gaze fixed on the threatening horizon and some words uttered by a mouth that can just be discerned (Fig. 8).

Here, in translation, is what she says:

I raised myself up on top of my litter to see better
And I scanned the horizon as far as I could see.
I raised myself up on top of my litter to see better
And I thought: here is where our history repeats, o ancestors of our tribe...

تعلّيت في راس جحفتي أوميت
وهزيت عيني ما قابلوني حدودها
تعلّيت في راس جحفتي أوميت
وقلت العادة يا مراسم جددها

(adapted from the French translation by Galley & Ayoub 1983: 127)

I trust I have enabled the reader to catch a glimpse of the significance and the richness of this great *chanson de geste*, which is today included among UNESCO's Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. Despite the dismissals of its value from which it has suffered over the course of its history at the hands of grammarians and theologians – dismissals which in our view seem rather the result of inherent prejudice, and which were already denounced in his time by Ibn Khaldūn, the Hilali epic has never ceased to be handed down and to maintain its vitality. Yet it remains little known in the West, outside of a limited circle of researchers. However over the last sixty years, methodical research has in fact been devoted to it both in the Arab world and in Europe and America. There were fifteen of us who gathered in Hammamet in 1980 for the first Round Table that I had the pleasure of organising under the aegis of the International Association for the Study of Mediterranean Civilisations and with the support of the National Institute of Art and Archaeology of Tunis. I believe it fair to say that the intense interest that these researchers have brought to their study of the Hilali tradition goes hand in hand with a profound attachment to the beauty of the human experience that these texts carry with them. That at least is the deep-seated feeling that has dwelt within me over all these years.

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Notes

1. This article revisits the themes discussed in one I published with a similar title (Galley 1998) some ten years ago in the light of more recent research and analysis.
2. Extracts from the epic are quoted here in their original version as transmitted, in the majority of cases, by the oral tradition. Indeed, such tales have been handed down through oral channels since at least the 14th century, as established by Ibn Khaldūn, who in his time was a fervent advocate for the literary qualities that he perceived in this form of Bedouin poetry. The first quotation is taken from a long poem belonging to the tradition of the *Mu'allaqat*, which were famous pre-Islamic odes on the theme of vestiges of abandoned encampments. The language of the poem, which is lexically rich as well as in its play of sounds, and which is made up of diverse elements and interesting archaisms, was the object of a thorough in-depth study by the linguist Gilbert Boris, regrettably prematurely deceased. The subsequent extracts originate from the south and the north-west of Tunisia (Guiga 1968, Galley and Ayoub 1983) then from western Algeria (Bel 1902–1903, Galley 2005). They have their own individual

characteristics which reflect a level of dialectal language of great expressivity. I have also quoted a short extract derived from a Syrian manuscript which also presents its own particular linguistic aspects, analysed by Omar Bencheikh (Bencheikh and Galley 2003).

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