UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

An episode in the life of a hero in the Sirat Bani Hilal: Abu Zayd as a schoolboy

Schippers, A.

Publication date

2004

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Oriente Moderno

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Schippers, A. (2004). An episode in the life of a hero in the Sirat Bani Hilal: Abu Zayd as a schoolboy. In *Oriente Moderno* (pp. 347-359)

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

ARIE SCHIPPERS

(UNIVERSITEIT VAN AMSTERDAM)

AN EPISODE IN THE LIFE OF A HERO
IN THE *SĪRĀT BANĪ HILĀL*:
ABŪ ZAYD AS A SCHOOLBOY

As we know, the Banū Hilāl legends are a sequence of cycles devoted to Hilālī heroes of various generations and times. For each period there is a different hero, and the geographical situation varies according to generation and hero.¹

The *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* romance has come down to us in several ways. It appears with many faces in many versions and poetic and prosaic genres, already ages ago attested in vernacular poems as reported in the *Muqaddimah* by Ibn Ḥaldūn (1332-1406),² and in all kinds of different forms of *qaṣīdahs* and prose recitals. In present-day Egypt we even find versions of the romance in *murabbaʿ* poetry sung by various performers, including very famous contemporary singers, such as Ġābir Abū Ḥusayn, al-Sayyid al-Ḍūwī and Fārūq.³ In the present-day Egyptian *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* version a conspicuous place is occupied by the story of 'the Birth of Abū Zayd', of which we will treat some episodes which show some realistic descriptions of the shame and dishonour the mother and her son suffered from a hostile surrounding: it is the story of a black boy born to the princess of Mecca, Ḥaḍraʿ, who becomes the wife of the hero Rizq after he has failed to produce a male heir.⁴

This story has come down to us in many variants. Lyons, in his account of the events,⁵ mentions that in one of the stories at the beginning of the Banū Hilāl romance, apparently during their presence in the Naǧd, the king of the Byzantines (Rūm) plans an attack on Mecca, because the emir of Mecca has dreamt of a rain of fire announcing this attack. The emir of Mecca asks the Hilālīs for help, offering his daughter to the one who kills the king of the Byzantines. The Hilālī emir Rizq succeeds in this and marries Ḥaḍraʿ, the Meccan king's daughter. But she only gave birth to a daughter until she prayed for a son, 'even he is black', and her prayer is answered. Then Ḥaḍraʿ takes refuge with the emir Zaḥlān,

1 – Cf. Canova, 'Banū Hilāl'; Canova, 'Epic Poet'. Reynolds, *Heroic Poets*, p. 10-15.

2 – Cf. Reynolds, *op. cit.*, p. 10, Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddima*, III, p. 412-440.

3 – Cf. Canova, 'Epic Poet'; Abnoudi, *Sīrah*, I, p. 12-43; Connelly, *op. cit.*, p. 66-75, 93-103 et passim.

4 – Cf. Connelly, *op. cit.*, p. 57, 76-79; 91-97; 119-129; 130-133; 144-145

5 – Cf. Lyons, *op. cit.*, II, p. 120-121.

because she fears that she will fall into disgrace because her family cannot explain the blackness of her child.

The boy Baraka or Abū Zayd goes to grammar school and learns seven languages, astronomy, medicine and mathematics. He beats his fellow students and threatens his teacher. He is provided with a horse. He then kills a man who demands tribute from Zaḥlān, after which the Hilālīs – who are suffering from a drought – move into Zaḥlān's territory. Fighting starts and Rizq wounds Zaḥlān. Baraka returns from hunting and captures a number of Hilālīs. When Rizq returns, father and son fight. Baraka is then told the story of his parentage by Ḥaḍrā'. He captures Rizq and drags him to Zaḥlān, and only releases him on Zaḥlān's advice. Zaḥlān then marries Baraka to his daughter and appoints him as his successor. The story ends with the return of Ḥaḍrā' to Rizq.

We will base ourselves on the variant collected by Abnoudy, which in turn is based mainly on al-Sayyid al-Dūwī.⁶ We will recount their version of the story and then deal with some significant passages. The tragedy of Rizq ibn Nāyil ibn Ġaramūn ibn 'Amir ibn Hilāl – leader of the Hilālīs, their knight and emir – is that he has reached quite an age without producing a son to succeed him as head of the army of the Hilālī federation. He is so worried that he is staring into the abyss of insanity. He flees into the mountains with his horse, trying to escape his preoccupations.

One day a crying ghost (*hātif*) from heaven appears saying: 'O Rizq, if you want to have noble offspring, you must marry someone from the Ḥiğaz.' Rizq does not know whether he is listening to his imagination or to a real crying ghost.

His cousin Sirḥān advises Rizq to go on pilgrimage to the house of God: God will help him find an appropriate wife to produce what his other wives have failed to produce. It happens by chance that year that the noble prince Qurḏah – protector of the two holy cities and keeper of the key of the noble garden – is there during Rizq's pilgrimage to Mecca. This Qurḏah has a beautiful, learned daughter who knows the Koran and its sciences by heart and is acquainted with the poetry of the Arabs, their history and their battle days. Until now she has refused everyone who has proposed to her. Qurḏah and his wife Ṭayyibah bint Maṣṣūr decide to go on pilgrimage so that God will solve the difficult problem.

From afar, Ḥaḍrā' looks attentively at the emir Rizq and his sleeplessness at the caravans. She is impressed with his character, sagacity and chivalry, and so – despite their age difference (45 years) – decides to become engaged to him. She asks her father to invite the knight and his men to have a meal at their home.

The prophecy of the crying ghost comes true: the emir Rizq becomes engaged to Ḥaḍrah, and when he brings her back to the Nağd, all the people rejoice: Ḥaḍrah has given birth to a daughter named Šiḥah – after which she stops bearing children for 11 years. Despair tears at the heart of the great Hilālī knight and he starts quarrelling with his wife.

6 – Cf. Abnoudi, *op. cit.*, I-II.

With the women of the Banū Hilāl, Ḥaḍrā' goes to the Birkat al-Ṭayr – the birds' pond, and a wishing pool – which all kind of birds visit. The women stop there and everyone wishes for a child according to the qualities of some bird. Ḥaḍrā' is especially impressed by a black bird which dominates all the other birds, and she prays that God will give her a child who bears the characteristics of that black bird. All 80 women give birth to a child on the same night, and Ḥaḍrā''s is a boy who has the colour of the black slaves.

In the office of the ruler on the seventh day the face of the child is unveiled: the scandal breaks out and Ḥaḍrā' is accused of committing adultery with a black slave. It is decided to expel Ḥaḍrā' from the land of the Banū Hilāl. Ḥaḍrā' wants her son's share of the possessions of his father, and the ruler Sirḥān stands at her side and support her in dividing up Rizq's property. She gets horses and camels and then goes on her way with her female servant Sa'īdah bint Sannār, who had also given birth to a black child on that night.

Ḥaḍrah does not dare to go to Medina, where her father lives. She stops before the gates of the border town of al-ʿAlamāt. The ruler of the town – King Fāḍil, ruler of the tribes of Zuḥla (Zaḥlān) – goes out to receive them and does not know anything about their situation. His people welcome the strange guest who establishes herself in his country. When he asks her about her country, she reacts severely whereupon he decides not to ask again.

The king empties one of the palaces of his wives and separates the other palaces from it because of his wives' jealousy of the foreign woman. Fāḍil takes possession of Abū Zayd's horses and Ḥaḍrā' keeps al-Ḥamrah, the horse of her son which she feeds and looks after waiting for a certain day. Ḥaḍrā' lives five years in the abodes of al-Zaḥlān under the protection of King Fāḍil. She educates her son in science and chivalry, and when she realises that she has given her son all she can, she sends a message to King Fāḍil, in which she reveals her wish to send her son to the school of the princes. Salāmah becomes a pupil at the school and believes that he is a son of King Fāḍil. His mother has not told him about what happened with the tribes of the Hilāl; the secret remains with Ḥaḍrā' and her slave girl Sa'īdah. At the school, Salāmah's knowledge and deep science astonish his teacher, and Sheikh Ṣāliḥ enjoys himself very much and smothers him with care, which makes the other pupils jealous. Ġūdah – son of Prince Salīm, who is the brother of King Fāḍil – sets himself against Salāmah. Salāmah gets his revenge on him in the presence of the other pupils, who rush off to tell the people of the houses.

The king helps Salāmah and supports him, because he was not the first one to be blamed. The mother of Ġūdah incites Sheikh Ṣāliḥ against Salāmah, and the sheikh turns around and tells lies. Salāmah is furious: how could the learned man be a liar?

Salāmah (Abū Zayd), the child, fought his first wars against the Banū ʿUqayl – the tribe of Ġūdah's mother and Sheikh Ṣāliḥ – without knowing that they are the enemies of his tribe, the Hilālīs. In the end, the ʿUqaylī leader asks the knights of the Banū Hilāl for help against the little black slave. Salāmah struggles with all these persons against the will of his 'father', King al-Fāḍil. The latter

is a man of peace, and being in Zuḥlān he is the backbone of the great Hilālī alliance.

Salāmah defeats the knights of the Banū Hilāl and kills his uncle (not a full one), the emir ʿAsqal, without knowing the truth about the mean role this man played in chasing him away from his tribe when he was only seven days old.

The Hilālī sultan Sirḥān asks help from Rizq against Abū Zayd. Rizq had left the tribes accompanying his daughter Šīḥah and his servant Nağāḥ, after having chased away his wife Ḥaḍrāʾ. Then he had gone to live in the middle of the desert. But now he helps the Hilālīs and without knowing each other's true identity, father and son engage in battle with each other. In the war the father does not defeat his son, nor the son his father. Their hands are withdrawn and the swords are hanging in the air. Salāmah takes his sister as a captive when she tries to help her father in his war against the black child. In the palace Šīḥah discovers that Salāmah is her brother. Through Šīḥah, Rizq discovers that the black knight is his lost son. Fāḍil learns after 14 years the story of the princess Ḥaḍrāʾ and her son Abū Zayd. Banquets are arranged, and at the formal dinner Salāmah refuses to have anything to do with his father when he distributes the meat to the Bedouins. When Rizq becomes irritated, Salāmah says: 'You left me in al-Qumāt, I forgot you in al-Sumāt. You should feel the humiliation of abnegation and rejection'.⁷

Salāmah says that he surrenders his own right (to compensation) but he insists on his mother's right (to compensation), and that her camel must walk on the silk from al-ʿAlamāt so that they can make her living in the Nağd. Now the innocence of Ḥaḍrāʾ is clearly announced.

One episode from the preceding story particular struck me, namely the episode of Abū Zayd as a schoolboy who has to confront the aggression of the other pupils. This situation, which we are going to analyse in the following, is in a certain sense familiar to anyone in the east or the west, because it is a typical school situation, with such problems as the non-acceptance of certain pupils by their classmates for several reasons, for instance because the pupil is brighter or is better accepted by the teacher or has something in his outer appearance which has the effect that he is discriminated by his classmates. In the case of the young Abū Zayd there are several reasons, including the affection of his schoolmaster, his blackness and his apparently being a bastard. The action proceeds along these traditional lines. The boy Abū Zayd enters the class as a new pupil and acquires the master's favour, which provokes jealousy in the other pupils. The other pupils look down on him because he is black and seems to be a bastard. Abū Zayd, on the other hand, thinks he belongs to the family of King Fāḍil, just like the other little princes in his classroom.

Through the poem we have the well-known *murabbaʿ* rhyme, quatrains with the rhyme sequence *abab*, which seem to be typical for the Egyptian gypsy performers.⁸ As far as the rhythm or metre is concerned this must depend to a

7 – Cf. Abnoudi, *op. cit.*, II, p. 150.

8 – Cf. Canova, 'Epic Poet'; Connelly, *op. cit.*, p. 105-112.

great extent upon the musical performance, since the counting of syllables of the verses of the strophes does not produce any congruence at first sight.

The first two strophes of our episode⁹ deal with one subject, namely the love and affection shown by the teacher for his new pupil. A general characteristic of these kinds of verses is the paratactic structure of the lines together with the overwhelming number of cases of direct speech.¹⁰ There is also much repetition and parallelism, for instance in strophe 1 'embraced him and kissed him', and the schoolmaster's dedication and love for his new pupil is mentioned several times, and this love is seen as a godly inspiration.

1. *naẓar-luh š-šēḥ wa-qal-luh: ta^c āl/
wa-ḥadan-u w-bāsub f-ḥudūd-uh/
wa-qal-luh: ^caṭā-k ilāhī -l-muta^c al/
wa-firiḥ tamām bi-wuḡūd-uh//*

1. He looked at him and said: 'Come here'/
He embraced him and kissed him on his cheeks/
And said: 'My God has sent you [to us]'/
And he enjoyed fully his presence//

2. *Ḥad bāl-uh minn-uh wa-tarak il-ḡamī^c/
fidil mirā^c i l-ibn il-Hilālī/
inzara^c ḥubb-uh fi-qalb-uh ṭabī^c/
wa-nẓur li-amr mawla -l-mawālī//*

2. He dedicated himself wholly to him/
And took care of the son of the Hilālīs/
The love for him was planted in his heart in a natural way/
Look at the wisdom of the Lord of the Lords//

But the other pupils of the school are not very pleased with the preference shown by the schoolmaster for the young new pupil. They 'grew angry' and 'could not suppress their anger'. Then again the direct speech: they observe that the schoolmaster's attention is totally absorbed by what they call 'this nigger, son of a pernicious woman'. Because of his black skin, they do not consider him as belonging to the royal family. Blackness has the connotation of being a slave, not of noble birth, although it should be noted that several heroes in Arabic heroic romances are black, as a kind of 'polarity' by which the normal system of values is deliberately turned upside down. Perhaps one of the pupils had heard that the 'Negro' does not belong to the royal family, or concludes such from the

9 – Cf. Abnoudi, *op. cit.*, II, p. 21-24.

10 – Cf. Connelly, *op. cit.*, p. 71 ff.; what Parry called 'adding style', see Albert B. Lord, *Singer of Tales*, Harvard, 1960, p. 54, referring to Adam Parry (ed.), *The Making of Homeric Verse. The collected papers of Milman Parry*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1971.

boy's black skin. The boy himself thinks that he belongs to the royal family, in other words, that King Fādīl is his father. In the fourth strophe the jealous pupils make a plan to tease and bait the young hero and to let him swallow a bitter experience. The device of punning (what we call with reference to Classical poetry, paronomasia) is one of the fundamental figures of speech in this kind of poetry reciting, serving perhaps a memorising tool in this kind of oral recitation.¹¹ In strophe 4 we twice see the rhyme *ḥālīs*, meaning 'totally' or 'all' in the second line and 'white' in the fourth line. In the fourth line is described how the heart of the pupils became 'other than pure white', in other words, 'black' by jealousy. The real 'blacks' are the white-skinned other pupils because their heart is black. Then in the fifth strophe apparently Ġūdāh – son of the king's brother, from whom we will hear later on – is introduced. He looks grudgingly at Abū Zayd/Salāmāh as though he wants to kick him out. Significantly, the pun on the name Salāmāh in line four, means in line two 'Yallah salāmāh', 'Go away'.

3. *Lamma -š-šēḥ ḥayyaz biḥ/
za^c lū wilād al-akābir/
kullu-lli ḥawalē-h wi-ḡanbī-h/
aḡar ma fi-hum ma-^c ad-ši ṣābir//*

3. When the shaykh occupied himself with him/
The sons of the most prestigious people grew angry/
All the people who were around him and besides him/
Even the smallest among them could not suppress his anger//

4. *Qālu: l-^c abd dah ibn ar-radiyya/
yāḥud riḍa-š-šēḥ ḥālīs?/
la-nsharrib-uh kas al-murra diyya/
wi-l-qalb biqī ḡēr ḥālīs.//*

4. They said: 'This nigger, son of a pernicious woman/
takes all the satisfaction of the shaykh/
Let us give him to drink a cup full of bitterness'/
And their hearts became black by jealousy.//

5. *'Ibn akḥu-l-malik' zaḡar-luḥ šēn,/
zaḡar zaḡar-uh 'Yallah bi-s-salāma'/
atāri-h munāfiq bi-wiṣṣēn/
wi-nawa li-ḡadrat Salāma. //*

5. The 'nephew of the king' looks at him with resentment,/
He looks with resentment 'Go away'./
You see that he is hypocrite, with two faces/
He planned to betray Salāmāh//

11 – Cf. Connelly, *op. cit.*, p. 106-107; Abnoudi, *op. cit.*, I, p. 22-23.

Then the plan is made: they set an ambush for Abū Zayd. Also here there is repetition in paratactic structures; several times it is said that they wait for him on his way returning home. Then in the next strophe they say that he is pernicious, a dog and a bastard. The punning is on the word *ġaribah* in lines two and four which means 'foreign woman' as well as 'ravens':

6. *Istanḡaru-h wa-huwwa rāġi^c /*
mirawwah wa-qasadu-l-balāwī /
naḡaru-h fi laḡzit ma huwwa ṭāli^c /
wa-l-^c izz wa-l-faḡr dāwī //

6. They waited for him, when he went home/
 He returned home, and they were planning to harm him/
 They saw him from the moment he appeared/
 in all his glory and brightness'.//

7. *Qālū lub: 'Ila ayna, ya rādi.*
Ya kalb ya ibn al-ġariba;
Kulli l-balāwī wa-lā di
Waġha-k kih ḡanāḡ al-ġariba'

7. They said to him: 'Where are you going, o pernicious one,
 o dog, o bastard, son of a foreign woman!
 All the worst is better than you!
 Your face is black as the wings of a raven!'

Then Salāmah's irritation about the lack of respect paid by what he thinks are the members of his family is described. Abū Zayd/Salāmah is unaware that he does not belong to the royal family. His mother has not disclosed her origin to him or Fādīl. Therefore he is irritated as well as amazed about the attitude of the other schoolboys, who do not recognise his rank. Abū Zayd repeats in direct speech, asking in anger his 'cousin' Ġūdah 'Are we new to each other, are we foreigners to each other, aren't we family?', but Ġūdah has heard from the women in the women's apartments that Salāmah's origin is not quite clear, that he is a bastard. We are told this by prose lines inserted between strophes 10 and 11. In the strophes there are several examples of paronomasia: in strophe 8 *ġarāyib* is 'shoulders' in line two and 'foreigners' in line four; in strophe 9 the punning on the names Salīm (Ġūdah's *kunyah*) and Ġūdah in lines one and two are echoed in lines three and four where, *salīm* means innocent and *ġūdah* means new. In the 10th strophe, *šaḡiq* refers to full cousin in the second line and to split heart in the fourth.

8. *Salāma qal-luh fawwarte dammi*
wa-l-himl dašš-il-ġarāyib
tiġi minna-k wa-nta ibn 'ammi
ēš ḡāl qūl al-ġarāyib?

8. Salāma said to him: 'You made my blood boil,
While the burden broke my shoulders into pieces
This comes from you, who are my cousin?
(If you treat me like this) how would foreigners treat me?

9. *Da-nta ibn ʿammi yā Bu Salīm?*
Waḷḷāhi di ʿēbah minnak yā Ġūda
Ma ṭhalli qalbak salīm
mita iḥna ʿalā baʿ ḍ ġūda.

9. You are my cousin, Abū Salīm,
By God, this is ignominious of you, o Ġūdah!
Let your heart be innocent
Since when are we new to each other?

10. *Mita iḥna ʿalā baʿ ḍ ġūdād?*
da-nta ibn ʿammi šaqiqi
huwwa dah illi qalbak bih ġād
al-ġarḥ malak iš-šaqiqi.

10. Since when are we new to each other?
You are my full cousin
Is this where your heart led you to?
The wound that you have inflicted on me has ripped open my heart

ʿĠūda... min kalām an-nisa fi-d-diyār illi byismaʿ u-ṣ-ṣiġar, ʿārif dilwak
anna Salāma dah ibn il-ġarība wa-inna-hu nāzil ... qom maʿ a l-karāhiyya
ṣaḥ wa-bi-s-sirba.

ʿĠūdah now knows from the words of the women in the women's apartments,
which the children hear, that Salāmah is a bastard and an offspring of men with
bad habits and lawlessness.'

Accordingly, in the next passage, Ġūdah denies that he is Abū Zayd's cousin:
Abū Zayd is a refugee. Very effective in the next passage is the wordplay *ʿamm-*
ak, which means '(son of) your uncle' in line two and 'your swimming (in your
blood)' in line four. Then the action develops into a struggle between the two
men. In strophe, 12 Ġūdah hits Abū Zayd in the face, saying that he has to go
quickly, with the punning *salāma* (go away 'in peace') and the name Salāmah, in
lines two and four. Strophe 13 repeats the contents of 12, and in the final line
there is Abū Zayd's furious reaction, which is developed in the following strophes,
where Ġūdah is hit until he bleeds.

11. *Qal-lub: min feen ana ibn ʿammak?*
Dah inta ġay lāġi? ḥadāna
Ḥaykūn fi-d-dammi ʿammak
Wa-billāhi ma tqīm ḥadā-na

11. By God! How I could be the son of your uncle!
 You have come to our house as a refugee!
 Your swimming [word play: your uncle] will be in your own blood,
 By God, do not stay with us!

12. *Ġūda ḥaṭṭa bi-l-qadamēn*
min al-hōl: yallāh as-salāma
Šayya^c iduh bi-l-qalamēn
Fi waġh-il-Hilālī Salāma

12. Ġūdah stepped forward with his two feet
 in order to frighten: 'By God! Go away immediately!' ¹
 He accompanies his hands with two blows
 on the face of the Hilālī Salāmah.

13. *Qalamēn innama^c al-waġh*
^cal-yamīn... wa-^calā šimālī
Qāl: 'Zay ma waġhak waġġih
Gidīb wald-l-Hilālī.

13. Two blows on his face
 One on the right, one on the left
 He says: 'Go away, wherever you go'
 The Hilālī son became angry.

14. *Misk-uh-l-Hilālī wa-hazz-uh*
min^c ēn-uh faġfaġat dumū^c uh
Fi ṭabqit-uh taḥta bizz-uh
ramā-h^c al-arḍ qaffaṣ^c ḍulū^c uh

14. The Hilālī grasped him and shook him
 From his eyes came tears abundantly
 He punched him in the solar plexus
 And threw him to the ground, smashing his ribs.

15. *Wa-saḥab^c aṣāya-h ḥazarān*
wa-ḥad-uh yamīn wa-šmāl
Qam baḥdal-uh fi kulli makān
Lamma dammu^c al-arḍ sāl.

15. He drew sticks of bamboo
 And seized him left and right
 He kicked him everywhere
 Till his blood streamed onto the ground

Ġūdah and the other pupils go home complaining about Abū Zayd's behaviour. Even Ġūdah's mother, an 'Uqaylī lady, is involved and she bribes the schoolmaster – who is from the same 'Uqaylī tribe – to support her son Ġūdah against Abū Zayd.

The whole episode shows how the equilibrium in the original school situation has been disturbed by the arrival of Abū Zayd. The equilibrium is restored only when the disgrace of Ḥaḍrah finally has been removed and her innocence is proclaimed. Different analyses are made to clarify the narrative line of the whole story. Bridget Connelly speaks about the sequences of broken contracts, conflicts and reconciliations during the whole 'Birth of Abū Zayd' story.¹² She stresses the fact that in the version by Ġābir and Sayyid al-Ḍūwī, the schoolteacher belongs to the religious establishment, and how odd it is that this respected personage is revealed later on as a liar and a hypocrite. In calling Abū Zayd a black bastard and his mother a slut, he ranges himself against the prophet's family. The fact that the schoolteacher repeats the false accusations of adultery and illegitimacy first uttered by Ġūdah and his comrades, is a broken contract. Apparently what was the good relationship between schoolmaster and pupil in the beginning is now broken. In reading the text, what I found more pernicious was the role of Ġūdah's mother: she bribes the schoolmaster, and perhaps he has no choice other than to follow her orders.

Of importance in the appreciation of the whole story is the social background of the reciter. This determines the image education and learning is given. One can grasp from Lyons' version of the story that the education Ḥaḍrah wanted to give her son was meant to be fashionable for a person from the elite. The mentioned subjects of learning are wide-ranging and secular and by no means confined to religious bigotry or elementary education, such as learning the Koranic text by heart.

On the other hand, the simple gypsy reciters used by Abnoudi have a totally different, far more limited conception of education: they have no idea what learning is. To them, it is not much more than the Koranic school where the Egyptian boy learns the Koran by heart. Another gypsy reciter apparently placed learning in the perspective it has in the common, present-day Egyptian situation, where the brightest pupils with the highest marks at secondary school do not study arts or law, but rather medicine in order to be able to open a clinic later on.¹³

Among the explications of the story of Ḥaḍrah and Abū Zayd, and particularly of the schoolboy episode, also the role of unofficial Islam as opposed to institutional Islam is stressed: the lying schoolmaster then represents the 'literate officialdom [which] converges against Abū Zayd and his mother'.¹⁴ On the whole, I wonder to what extent Islamic dogmas such as its egalitarian and anti-genealogical tendencies really belong to the value system of the Arab world and

12 – Cf. Connelly, *op. cit.*, p. 75 ff.

13 – Cf. Connelly, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

14 – Cf. Connelly, *op. cit.*, p. 172; Reynolds, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

the Near East. The tribal element is very strong in, if not the *raison d'être* of these stories. Therefore the contrast between unofficial and institutional Islam, between slave and free man, between black-skinned and white-skinned people, is emphasised notwithstanding the officially egalitarian Islam. It could be that the gypsy reciters in Egypt who know that they are considered as belonging to an inferior rank of society, want to stress that in reality they are the incarnation of the Hilālī tribesmen, and therefore in reality belong to an elite. They try to turn the ranks of society upside down. Their blackness as well as the blackness of their heroes is not to be considered inferior – as it is in normal Arabic and Middle Eastern society life – but as superior. In Arabic epics there are a number of black heroes who convert the 'natural' inferiority of blackness and slavery into superiority and whiteness. So there is a polarity in some of these *Sirah* tales which underlines that black heroes such as Abū Zayd, 'Antarah and Sayf ibn Dī Yazan, although they are black-skinned, are capable of noble and courageous exploits and are 'white' in as far as their noble heart is concerned. Thus in one of the recitals, Abū Zayd says to his stallion:¹⁵ 'You are black and I am black, but our honour is whiter than a turban', thus confirming that white is the superior colour.¹⁶

On the other hand, we may find a similar polarity in epic tales such as the *Sirat Dāt al-Himmah*,¹⁷ where the 'weaker' sex does what one would only expect from the 'stronger' sex: female warriors play a conspicuous role and are as courageous as male warriors. Abū Zayd, unlike the rest of his people (the Bedouins or 'Arabs' of Banū Hilāl), was born black and as a consequence he suffered, just as his mother suffered because she was accused of adultery. He was forced to grow up away from his father and the land of his paternal ancestors, and yet he came to be more valiant and worthy than others who did not have his blackness and did not suffer because of their colour.

In nineteenth-century printed editions the slave motif seemed to be developed at greater length and detail. A manuscript used by Lane elaborates on Abū Zayd's position as a slave in his early years as a refugee in the Zaḥlān tribe and reveals his true nobility only in his confrontation as a slave on the battlefield with his father.¹⁸

In the mind of the reciters, the story of Abū Zayd could also be interpreted politically, even explaining the politics of a time to come: thus Abū Zayd's story could be a prefiguration of the historic anomaly of the mamluk government in Egypt, with its great black military leaders who attained their position by virtue of their innate superior qualities.¹⁹

15 – Cf. Slyomovics, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

16 – See the respective articles by Canova about the global contents of these Romances in Julie Meisami (ed.), *Encyclopaedia*.

17 – See the respective article by Canova, in: Julie Meisami (ed.), *Encyclopaedia*. About some of the female warriors cf. Kruk, *op. cit.*

18 – Cf. Connelly, *op. cit.*, p. 176-177; Reynolds, *op. cit.*, p. 11-14.

19 – Cf. Connelly, *op. cit.*, p. 174-177.

The outcast and refugee motif also is of importance to make plausible the merger of several tribes which earlier had been enemies. The child Abū Zayd is cast out of his own tribe and taken into the Zaḥlān, the enemy group. After the quarrel with his teacher he becomes the strongman of the Zaḥlān. Then Abū Zayd, without knowing his own origin, is sent to fight the Hilalis, and even his own father. The family reconciliation afterwards mirrors the merger of the two groups into one large united community.²⁰

There are perhaps still many things to say about the various other interpretations of the 'Birth of Abū Zayd' story in general and the schoolboy episode in particular, such as the narrative explanations offered above (the broken contract) and the Marxist one based on the contrast between sedentary and Bedouin society,²¹ or that of Abū Zayd's oedipal relationship with his mother,²² not to forget the interpretations linked to the identification of the 'black' audience in the Sudan or Upper Egypt with the hero (which does not mean that a 'white' audience would not undergo the same identification with the hero when listening to the story). However, the first meaning of the schoolboy episode is a recognisable class situation in which the hero for some reason, for some deviation perhaps, is not accepted by his jealous comrades. In this light, the episode has its equals elsewhere in world literature and should perhaps also be studied in a more comparatist way.²³

20 – Cf. Connelly, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

21 – Cf. Connelly, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

22 – Cf. Connelly, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

23 – I was thinking particularly about the persona of Julien in Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir*, who has similar experiences with his 'comrades' at a religious seminary, but undoubtedly there are other examples in world literature of this theme, worthy to be dealt with comparatively.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abnoudi,
Abd al-Rahman (ed.)
[al-Abnūdī, ‘Abd al-
Raḥmān], 1988
al-Sirah al-Hilāliyyah, Cairo, II, p. 21-24.
- Canova, G., 1996
“The Epic Poet in Egyptian Tradition”, *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, 6/1 (1996), p. 7-14.
- , 1996
“Les Banū Hilāl et la conquête de l’Afrique du Nord: Récit arabo-yéménite”, in: Petr Zemanek (ed.), *Studies in Near Eastern Languages and Literatures, Memorial Volume of Karel Petráček*, Prague (Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic / Oriental Institute), p. 171-179.
- , 1998
«‘Antara, Romance of», in: Julie Scott Meisami, Paul Starkey (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, I [a-j], II [k-z], London/NY, Routledge.
- , 1998
“Dhāt al-Himma, Romance of”, in: idem.
- , 1998
“Sayf ibn Dhi Yazan, Romance of”, in: idem.
- , 1998
“Banū Hilāl, Romance of”, in: idem.
- Connelly, B., 1986
Arab folk epic and identity, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Ibn Ḥaldūn,
Abū Zayd
‘Abd al-Raḥmān b.
Muḥammad, 1967
al-Muqaddimah, Beyrouth.
- Kruk, R., 1993
“Warrior Women in Arabic Popular Romance: Qan-nāṣah bint Muzāḥim and Other Valiant Ladies”, *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 24 (1993), p. 213-230; 25 (1994), p. 16-33.
- Lyons, M.C., 1995
The Arabian epic, Heroic and oral story-telling, Vol. 2: *Analysis*, Cambridge, p. 120-121.
- Reynolds, D.Fl.,
1995
Heroic poets, poetic heroes: the ethnography of performance in an Arabic oral epic tradition, Ithaca and London, Cornell U.P.
- Slyomovics, S., 1987
The merchant of art: an Egyptian Hilali oral epic poet in performance, Berkeley, University of California Press.