‘Aṣīg ma‘bad (The Passion of Ma‘bad): The Epic Confronts Hilali History

Why did the Bani Hilal Bedouin Arab tribes depart their ancestral lands in the Arabian peninsula to march westward against North Africa? Beginning in the eighth century with westward migrations to Egypt, by the eleventh century their descent on the Maghreb would be compared to “clouds of locusts.” This famous description of the Hilalis North African incursions characterizes the influential analysis proposed by fourteenth century historian Ibn Khaldun, who sought the causes of the Hilali invasion in the complex political intrigues that opposed Egyptian and Tunisian rulers: when al-Mu‘izz Ibn Badis, ruler of Ifriqiyya, switched allegiance from Cairo to the ‘Abbasid Caliph of Baghdad, the Egyptian Fatimid leaders sought vengeance by unleashing the Hilali tribes against Tunis. Scholars also point to severe cyclical famines in the Arabian peninsula which historically have contributed to waves of tribes migrating westward towards the more fertile coastal areas along Mediterranean shores. While famine and international politics are readily acknowledged as the twin precipitating factors for Hilali migrations and invasions, in contrast many epic poets and storytellers of Upper Egypt, who recite the popular cycle of tales about the Hilali tribes known throughout the Arabic-speaking worlds
as *Sirat Banū Hilāl*, present an alternate literary history and reading from traditional chroniclers such as Ibn Khaldun.

According to the performed version by the Upper Egyptian epic poet ʿAwadallah ʿAbd al-Jalil ʿAli, it is a father-daughter tale of incest that frames, indeed instigates, the occasion of the Hilali invasion of North Africa. The incest theme is enshrined in the opening sequence of Part II of the customary tripartite division of *Sirat Banū Hilāl* entitled the *riyada* or “reconnaissance,” even as it is enunciated in the opening tale’s subtitle as given by the poet ʿAwadallah: “The Passion of Maʿbad for His Daughter” (ʿašig maʿbad maʿ bintuh).

ʿAwadallah ʿAbd al-Jalil ʿAli is an epic poet from the province of Aswan in Upper Egypt. He sings in the surrounding southern Egyptian marketplaces, in cafes, during public ceremonies, and at people's homes to celebrate births, weddings, circumcisions, a return from the hajj to Mecca, and Ramadan break fasts. I have described elsewhere the complex status of the epic poet in southern Egypt as well as my research project to record versions of the epic by professional reciters. ʿAwadallah begins his “elicited” performance, recorded 13 March 1983 in Luxor, Egypt, first with the title, then with a brief praise-poem or *madīḥ* (lines 1-2):
1. yā ēnī -iṣṣābr awlāli

Patience is foremost [first]

2. -iṣṣābr awla min ilgalagān

Patience is more important than worry

The tale continues as he recounts how the ruler of Tunis, Sultan Ma'bad, chances to ascend the upper levels of his vast palace there to encounter, presumably for the first time, his grown-up and now beautiful daughter, ‘Azīza. Overcome at the sight of her, Ma'bad falls to the ground in a swoon causing his daughter to gather him up in her arms (lines 3-33):

3. ma'bad jālis āla –lkarāsi

Ma'bad is seated on his throne,

4. ?abu ‘azīza rajil sulṭān

father of ‘Azīza, a sultan.

5. tīṣūru jamī‘ il′arab

All the Arabs seek his counsel,

6. tīṣūru jamī‘ ilfīrsān

All the horsemen, seek him.

7. illa fi yōm min illayāli

Then one day among the nights,
8. tammit-lu -shūr wa-zaman
months and destiny came to pass,

9. lam ṭilaš ilgaṣr il'ali
he never ascended the lofty palace.

10. ‘and mirātu fōg abu ‘imdān
to his wife atop the many-pillared castle,

11. ṣili‘ il-gaṣr il'ali
he ascended the lofty palace,

12. wa-yiṣarraf fōg il-binyaṣ
and looks down from atop the building.

13. huwwa wi-ṭāli‘ a-ssalālim
While ascending the stairs,

14. yibuṣṣ bi -‘ēnu bi –l’ayān
he glances with his eyes,

15. yunzur essafīra ‘azīza
he looks on the elegant ‘Azīza.

16. lakinni xārja min ilḥammām
as she was leaving the baths,

17. ṣalga –lmisk I ma‘ -ṭīb
wafting musk with perfume,
18. wa min šammu –l'ālīl yīfīb
from her scent, the sick are cured,

19. izā kān rāgīd ‘al mōt dārān
if one lay near death, a last breath,

20. jara –lmirwād fi –l‘ēn
when she lines the kohl stick along her eye

21. wa –tfaṭīr šāyim ramaḍān
she makes those who fast, break Ramadan

22. labsa tōb šimini wa –rxini
wearing a robe, scented and diaphanous,

‘Awadallah: iṃṣabak
he is ensnared

23. ḥalīg#wisnig min giddām
watch how her breasts break loose in front.

24. šūf ilbīnt I xāyil ʿādalha āh⁵
See the maiden, beautifying her form, ah,

25. min fōg ‘ali –ṣṣarāya
from atop the high palace,

26. koḥl il‘ēn maʿna ʿāda ƚīha
kohl-darkened eyes as was her custom,
27. gahil wasfiha fi –ssabaya
few of her description among the maidens.

28. yā mā jamīla
O how beautiful she was,

29. mabrumt issāg
rounded, firm legs,

30. yā ‘ēni mabrumt issāg
O her rounded, firm legs,

31. u mīn fī -ssabaya jamīlha
and who among the maidens has her beauty,

32. tugul fin jazira lamma sāg
you would say a silted island when the water rises

33. ilbint I xāyil jammālha / jamīlha6
the girl, imagine her beauty.

As ‘Aziza tends her fainting father, father and daughter meet in a seemingly innocent physical embrace (lines 34-46) and ‘Aziza presciently inquires if her father’s fainting spell means he has lost his reason.

34. u ma‘bad wa‘l-‘azīza
Ma‘bad gazed on ‘Azíza,
35. ‘aglu  -ssalim andār
his sound reason became twisted,
36. ṭāḥ  ‘a -lgasr il‘ali
astray above the high castle,
37. waga‘ bēn ijjirdān
he fell down the staircase.
38. ‘azíza tlimm abūha
‘Azíza gathered up her father
39. bēn innihūd ma‘ -rrumān
between her breasts, they are like pomegranates.
40. šamm ilmisk ma‘ -ṭīb
He smelled musk and scent,
41. karaf irrīha  -ssulṭān
the sultan smelled perfume from afar.
42. galit ya abūya ?ismallah ‘alēk
She said, “O my father, God protect you,
43. ?ismallah ‘alēk ya sultān
God protect you, O sultan,
44. ya –buya ēh illi jarālak
O my father, what happened to you?

45. ‘äglak issalim mindār

Your sound reason is turned around?”

Succoured between her perfumed breasts, Ma‘bad falls in love with his own daughter using phrases well known to amorous Upper Egyptian partners (lines 46-54): “when are lovers to be blamed.” Love conquers all, according to the sultan, even permitting him the authority to marry, rather than marry off, his own daughter:

46. gāl ya ‘azīza xallīnī fī ḥāli
He said, “O ‘Azīza, let me be,

47. mettā ‘a-l‘ašāgīn malām
when are lovers to be blamed,

48. ya bit ana ‘ašigtak
O daughter, I desire you,

49. ilḥubb bud‘a lam ‘azar insān
love is a marvel, a person cannot be blamed.

50. ya ‘azīza ?ana ‘ašigtak
O ‘Azīza I desire you,
51. u-galbi ktēr liki māl
and my heart yearns for you.

52. ya biti ana kātib li-walḥīdi
O my daughter, I will draw up a marriage contract myself,

53. ?aktab ʿalēki
I will draw up one with you,

54. w-ajri ʿalēki li-sunna ḥalāl
and proceed with you according to lawful custom.”

Comparing ownership of his daughter’s body to his stewardship over the land, he demands his rightful sexual rights equating them to agricultural bounty. “Who is like your father?” he demands of his daughter, reversing the kin relation most socially taboo, to promote the closest member. Though the preferred marriage partner in Upper Egyptian society for a daughter is in the first cousin line, especially the father’s brother’s son, Macʿbad’s questions to his daughter are disconcertingly direct and sexual to an Upper Egyptian listener: “peaches” and “pomegranates” to be harvested are common similes for a women’s breasts, the ”orchard” to be “entered” stands for penetrating the female genitals and “to rule and trace the riverbeds” describe the interior fold of the vagina and sexual intercourse.8
55. ya bit mǐn zayy abūki

“O daughter, who is like your father

56. yigni –lxūx maʿ -rrumān

to harvest the peaches and the pomegranates?

57. ya ʿaziza u mǐn zayy abūki

O ʿĀzīza who is like your father

58. yixuš ilbusṭān

to enter the orchard?

59. ya biti mǐn kēf abūki

O my daughter, who is unto your father

60. yuḥkum wa-yirmsim bi –lwadyān

to rule and to trace in the riverbeds?

61. ya biti xūdi abūki

O my daughter, marry your father

62. wi-tiʿīšī fī hanā wa-ʿamān

and you will live in joy and safety.”
‘Azīza protests marriage with her father and calls for supporting legal protections, the Muslim *sharīa* that regulates and ordains lawful unions as interpreted by clerics:

63. ya –buya ʿismallah ʿalēk

“O, my father, may God protect you,

64. yak ʿaglak is-salīm andār

truly your sound mind wanders.

65. mīn gablak axad bitu

Who, before you, has married his daughter

66. fī šarʿ naṣāri wīla ʿislām

according to Christian law or in Islam?

67. ya –buya ḥat ilʿulamā

O my father, bring the clerics,

68. ahl ilfaqī lqrān

people of moral virtue and of the Koran.

69. ʿinn galūlak xūd ʿazīza

If they tell you, marry ‘Azīza,

70. ʿaktīb ʿalayy bi-sunna ḥalāl

then write me a marriage contract according to lawful custom.”
Ma'bad convenes his clerics and presents them with a series of questions. As Otto Rank observes in his study, *Incest in Literature and Legend*, it is noteworthy that cross-culturally an element of the father-daughter incest theme often includes riddles posed by the father to suitors. Ma'bad's questions to the clerics are prefigured in the rhetorical series already asked to his daughter, ostensible riddles whose meanings are fully understood by 'Azīza. The father's purpose, avers Otto Rank, is to set up impossible tasks by asking riddles thereby keeping rivals and suitable love objects from the daughter and permitting the father to possess his own daughter. Rank draws on numerous medieval European tales, ancient Greek, Babylonian and Persian legends, to compare the ways in which suitors must solve impossible riddles or, functionally another substitutable narrative element for a riddle, suitors must overcome dangerous obstacles set by the father before the daughter is awarded to the winner. In these cases, the daughter is an important love object but otherwise she is absent during the important exchanges between the father, her current owner, and a future owner-husband.

In 'Awadallah's rendition, the Muslim clerics precede, perhaps stand in for potential suitors, because they represent the surrounding religious and social sanctions. Ma'bad's riddles are equally transparent to them and even
though they are in need of more food and clothing as the month long Ramadan approaches, not even material concerns can buy the clerics acquiescence to Ma'bad’s requested transgression:

71. ma’bad tawwir munādi

Ma’bad sent around a crier

72. ‘ala ahl il-ulama fi kull I bakān
to scholars every place.

73. firḥit ilulama jami‘an

The scholars all rejoiced,

74. ilmifattaḥ gād il‘amiyān

the sighted lead the blind.

75. illi yigūl rāḥ yiksīna

Some say he will clothe us,

76. ‘alēna daxil ʿId ramaḍān

for Ramadan is soon upon us,

77. w-illi yigūl hayigataʿ ru‘usna

and others say he will cut off our heads

78. taji –lxsara ‘a –l‘amyān

he will come to cut off the blind.

79. itlammu juwwa –ddawawīn
They gathered inside the diwans,

80. fi diwān maʿbad issulṭān
in the diwan of Maʿbad the sultan.

81. nadaḥ wi-gāl ya ulamā
He called out and said, “O clerics,

82. ‘alēkum wilā ʿagati kalām
to you I do not conceal my words:

83. ‘andiyya tamra fi –lbēt, tamar
I have a date tree at my home,

84. ṭaraḥḥit min gīr ‘awām
it became ripe out of season,

85. yiṣāḥḥ nakūlha
is it permissible to eat it

86. wilā nizakīḥa ‘a –laytām
or give it as charity to orphans?”

87. rayīs ilulumā yigūllu
The chief cleric said to him:

88. ilkān hiyya tamra
If indeed it is a date tree,”

89. yigullu akl ittamra ḥalāl
he said to him, “eating dates is permissible,

90. wi-Za kān izēnā ‘azīza

but if it is the beauteous ‘Azīza

91. yībga ḥārām ya sultān

it will be a crime, O sultan.”

92. Ma‘bard saḥāb issēf

Ma‘bad wielded his sword.

93. ‘alēhum walad ilyāṭāgan

against them, he brought forth the javelin,

94. Ma‘bad saḥāb issēf

Ma‘bad wielded his sword.

95. ṭil‘ū ramlīn bi –lmišwār

They emerged fleeing this commission,

96. il‘ulama ṭil‘ū ramlīn

the clerics emerged fleeing,

97. ilmifattāḥ saḥāḥ il‘amyān

the sighted dragging the blind.

Since Ma‘bad, the sultan, cannot possess his own daughter according to law
or her own consent, as her father and ruler of Tunis, he swears that he will
prevent any other man from having her. Otto Rank notes that in the myths of Perseus, Gilgamesh and Romulus, the father secludes the daughter presumably to preserve her virginity. Frequently, the father’s persecution of his daughter arising from rejected love takes the symbolic form of her isolation in a tower:\textsuperscript{10}

98. ma‘bad xalaf bi yimīn

Ma‘bad swore an oath:

99. ana min ṭūl ḥayy ʿa –ddunya

As for me, during my entire life in this world,

100. ‘azīza ma titjawwiz rijāl

‘Azīza will not marry men.”

101. ma‘bad nadam il banayīn

Ma‘bad summoned builders,

102. jū-lu ḥafyīn min arḍ iššām

they came to him, shoeless, from Syrian lands,

103. yindah ʿa –ṭṭawabīn

he summoned brickmakers

104. ʿašra tšaraʿ fī –lbinyān

ten to lay out the building,
105. ilmuhandisín ṣayy kafir

engineers, so many of them,

106. ṣarah ilgaṣr abū -l ʿumdan

they laid out the many-pillared castle,

107. ṣarah gaṣr ʿazīza

they laid out ʿAzīza’s castle.

108. ḥalaf wi-watag ilayman

He swore making stronger his oaths:

109. min ṭūl ḥayy ʿala –ddunya

“For my entire life on this earth

110. ʿazīza ma dugg rijāl

ʿAzīza will not taste a man.”

Azīza is immured in her castle with a maidservant, Mayy, who will serve as the link between Tunis and Arabia. It happens that Mayy is a Hilali Bedouin who appears in the slavemarkets of Tunis. She has been purchased by the sultan to care for ʿAzīza, and she whiles away time amusing the miserable and bored ʿAzīza by recounting tales of her Arabian home and its mighty warriors. Through narrative and storytelling, ʿAzīza falls in love with Yūnis, the hero Abu Zayd’s nephew. The two women contrive to send messages back to the Hilalis in Arabia to inform them that Tunis is weak
and easily invaded. The daughter’s revenge against the father is powerful, personal, and political. Ma‘bad the sultan will lose possession of his daughter just as he will be toppled as ruler. In both instances, his nemesis are the Hilali Bedouins.

What does this performed tale mean to the audience, to the storyteller, and to the folklorist collector? During the performance, Şa‘Tdi listeners clucked their tongues disapprovingly as the narrative unfolded. During discussions after the performance, most listeners denied that any instance of father-daughter incest had ever occurred in ‘Awadallah’s village of Najis al-Haj’. In our private conversations, ‘Awadallah remembered specific village examples and recounted one flagrant case of a daughter impregnated by her father whose child was adopted by her family as her sister at the same time as the sinning father was banished from the village. While these contested and often repressed village histories may or may not support actual cases of known incest in Upper Egypt, what is emphasized in my analysis is the fantasy and the fantastic dimensions of folklore in general, and of popular transmitted folk epic in particular.

According to Otto Rank, the fantasy creations and substitutes emerging from the father-daughter incest complex are always presented from the father’s perspective, not the daughter’s. Rank larger claims are that
“artistic activity is intended to gratify and justify male sexual fantasies.”

Comparing father-daughter incest with psychiatry’s assertion of the more serious infraction of mother-son incest, Rank notes a diminished degree in kinship between father and daughter and no serious age difference to impede the realization by males (e.g. fathers) of their violent and satisfying expression of fantasies. The father-daughter incest theme in this Upper Egyptian epic shares elements that correspond to many of Rank’s characterizations, but at one extreme. The incest is conscious and must be consciously foiled. Therefore it cannot be contained within the family context, instead this instance of father-daughter incest is resolved within vast social and political frameworks: extreme political upheaval will ensue completely reorganizing for centuries to come the geography, boundaries, even the ethnic and religious composition of North Africa. An historical catastrophe for a region, in Ibn Khaldūn’s words meriting a description of “locusts descending,” can only have as its motivating source, according to Upper Egyptian epic singers, the wrath, incest fear, and ultimately, the realized passion of a woman who cannot be thwarted.


3 The text of ‘Awadallah’s story is based on my unpublished fieldwork tapes recorded in 1983 in Upper Egypt. A complete set of ‘Awadallah’s version of *Sirat Banũ Hilål* is available in the Folk Arts Center, Tawfiqiyya, Cairo, Egypt.


5 See *The Merchant of Art*, line 237, p. 114 for ‘Awadallah’s multiple puns of the phrase.

6 Ibid., line 1036, p. 221 for ‘Awaḍallah’s multiple puns of the phrase.

7 ‘Awaḍallah employs variants to the phrase, “when are lovers to be blamed,” in his rendition of a tale from *A 1001 Nights*, where the theme of a royal father who locks up his daughter because she falls in love with a prince is repeated. See my “Performing 1001 Nights in Egypt,” *Oral Tradition* 9:2 (1993), pp. 390-419.
8 Ibid., pp. 398-399 where ‘Awaḍallah compares metaphorically the folds of a woman’s genitals to delicate bird tracks.
10 Ibid., pp. 313-314.
11 Ibid., p. 301.