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Abstract

Certain poems and stories are buried as cultural artifacts; others never die; and still others are revived from death. The thirteenth century *Qaṣīdat al-Burdah*, composed by Muḥammad ibn Sa'īd al-Būṣīrī (d. 693/1294), is a love poem dedicated to the Prophet Muhammad. The exemplary Arabic-Islamic work has seen renewed popularity among Muslim communities in the last two decades, from its origins in Egypt to Indonesia to locations where Muslims are a religious minority, and hundreds of youtube recordings with millions of views that demonstrate this. The poem has been dramatically staged, academically researched, and devotionally recited. In this article, I analyze the entangled devotional commitments to the *Qaṣīdat al-Burdah* as demonstrated by its modern iterations in Egypt, Indonesia, and South Africa and consider what we can learn about the role of audience and community in creating meaning.

Key words: *Burdah*, Performance, Voice, Sound, Audience, Community, Arabic

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Introduction

In the late 1990s, prior to increased travel restrictions and surveillance of Muslim communities after the events of September 11, 2001 in the United States, an Islamic center in South Florida often invited young seminary students from England and South Africa to lead prayers during Ramadan (Ali, 2018). The inconspicuous center was housed in an abandoned supermarket. The congregation was largely comprised of Caribbean and South Asian Muslims and led by an Imam from Trinidad who completed his seminary studies in the historical Darul Ulum in Deoband, India (Metcalf, 1982). On one occasion, the imam invited a former classmate who specialized in *Qirā'āt*—the discipline of Qur'ān recitation—to be the main feature of a community celebration for the life of the Prophet Muhammad (Nelson, 2015; Gade, 2004). The award-winning *Qāri'* was known in his circles for singing beautiful Urdu *na't* and *ghazal* (Kugle, 2003; Narang and Matthews, 2014). After several opening acts, the *Qāri'* was invited to the stage. He began with recitation of the Qur'ān, demonstrating his vocal range with only several verses from *Surah al-'Alaq*. Then he transitioned to singing poetry in Urdu. At a certain point, my ears were attuned to the fact that he repeated the following chorus line in Arabic:

مولى يا صل وسلم دائماً ابدا
على حبيبك خير الخلق كلهم

O my Lord, bless and grant peace always and forever
Upon Your beloved one, the Best of All Creation (Spiker, 2012).

At the time, all I knew about Arabic was how to recite the Qur'an and basic grammar and vocabulary. I knew how the language sounded, which is why I knew those lines were in Arabic and not Urdu.

Around the same time, Hamza Yusuf Hanson—a white American Muslim

convert from California—was becoming increasingly well-known for his speeches about the "Islamic tradition." During the early 2000s, he toured the United States giving lectures about a poem called the *Qaṣīdat al-Burdah* by the poet Imam al-Būṣīrī in order to promote his new English translation, *The Poem of the Cloak*. The published translation was accompanied by a CD-set with a recording of the poem recited by a Moroccan company of singers from Fez. During his lectures, Yusuf would share the famous story about the paralysis of Imam al-Būṣīrī that was the occasion for the poet composing the ode. He also mentioned his own personal encounters with the poem's cultural impact during his studies in Mauritania, Morocco, and other Arab countries in the Gulf (Hanson, 2002). After hearing the same chorus line repeated during those lectures, I realized the Arabic verses I heard the Indian Qari weave into his Urdu *ghazals* were from the *Burdah*.

While Hamza Yusuf worked on his translation, a British Muslim seminary student gifted me a copy of an Arabic text with an English translation and commentary from South Africa (Busairi, 1995). Many seminary students like him were born and raised in working class Bangladeshi, Indian, and Pakistani neighborhoods in cities like Bradford and Birmingham during a time their communities faced immense gang violence, alcoholism, drug addiction, and racism. Their families sent them to seminaries in hopes to keep their sons, who were often their translators, off the streets; and these students learned to read and write classical Arabic without ever having been to a predominantly Arabic-speaking country. Through their studies, they knew and heard of the *Burdah Sharif* and were familiar with its popularity and the respect it garnered as a devotional poem.

The South African translation itself includes information about a Pakistani publisher, a U.K. distributor, and a foreword authored by a Sufi Khanqah in South Africa with no single translator identified as responsible for the work. The only indication of why the translator(s) might be left anonymous is included in the conclusion to the foreword as "a word of advice to the

honoured reader." The writer says,

> May Allah Ta'ala accept the effort and grant abundant reward to all who have assisted in the publication of this book, whether by personal effort, financially or in any other way. May Allah make this a means of granting us true love or His beloved Rasul Sallallahu Alayhi Wasallam and his Sunnat, and bless with His Divine Love and Nearness. Ameen.
>
> Khanqah-e-Sheikh Zakariyya
> Jamaadul-Oola 1415/October 1995
> Lenasia
> South Africa

I include this narrative introduction in order to foreground the highly mobile and varied paths of transmission of this particular thirteenth-century poem that complicate some of the previous scholarship concerned with the ode. Medievalist Arabic scholars who have taken literary interest in the *Burdah* have located the ode within the development of classical and medieval Arabic literature (Ullah, 2016). They have identified the formal structures, styles and thematic turns that define the genre to which the ode belongs as well as the sub-genres the ode has inspired. Others have taken an anthropological interest in the function of such a devotional poem in the history of Arabic and the construction of Arab identity (Stetkevych, 2006; Musawi, 2015). Scholars of the classical *qaṣīdah* have also traced how the poetic form has travelled into other languages and influenced literary cultures outside of Arabic literature (Sperl and Shackle, 1996; Reichmuth, 1996). Other medievalists have argued that the performance of poetry—not only what is considered popular, but even courtly poetry—is as critical to meaning-making as the language of the text itself while also acknowledging the difficulty of tracing audience reception outside of written records (Ali, 2010).

Medievalist Arabic studies, however, does not explain the contemporary life of the *Burdah* among Muslim communities outside of the poem's original

geographical and temporal context and particularly outside the Arabophone world. The combined academic interest in the poetics of the *Burdah* and its pop cultural status among self-identifying Muslim artists complicates multiple categories of analysis including but not limited to orality, elite and popular culture, cultural capital, literary production, ritual, and performance (Sterne, 2011). In this article, I am interested in the entangled devotional commitments to the *Qaṣīdat al-Burdah* as demonstrated by its modern iterations in three different contexts including a highly produced and nationally televised performance of the *Burdah* in Alexandria, Egypt in the 1970s; a community celebration within the space of congregational worship in Surabaya, Indonesia in 2015; and a private gathering of students and devotees in a home in Capetown, South Africa in 2013. There are expected salient differences in the understanding and practice of Islam based on differences in the historical, political, and social development of the three contexts I have selected. Egypt is the place of the text's origin; Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world; South Africa is located at a strategic historical and geographical crossroad for both Indian Ocean trade routes as well as European colonialism. Those differences inform audience participation and reception. They also amplify the role of the audience in creating meaning. For those reasons, although the same text is being recited and performed, each recording can be read as a separate text.

Through a critical reading of selected recordings of recitations and performances of the *Qaṣīdat al-Burdah* shared on youtube from the aforementioned locations, I will consider the social media platform as a public archive of recorded material as well as the network connecting *Burdah* texts and performances across the globe. I agree with scholars who have argued that youtube —or any social media platform that does not overtly require membership fees—is not a democratic space considering the role of corporate sponsorships as an intervention; on the other hand, the same scholars also recognize its usefulness as an archive (Gehl, 2009; McDowell, 2015). Early

Modernists of Shakespeare Studies, for example, have done a deep dive into the youtube archives to study contemporary adaptations of Shakespeare. Kate Rumbold writes about the shift in perspective from considering "the appropriation of Shakespeare by new media" to "the appropriation of new media by traditional institutions" like theaters that traditionally staged Shakespeare (Rumbold, 2010; Shohet, 2010). Youtube is the medium through which the performances of these texts circulate.

In the case of the *Burdah*, in addition to the selected excerpts of the text being recited within the recordings, I will interrogate how the visibility of the performance context as well as participatory audience present inform and shape the meaning and reception of the poem. Moreover, I will consider the following question: what does the audience inscribed in the recitation event demonstrate about devotional commitments to the poem that facilitates the continued circulation of a text such as the *Burdah*?

The Poetics of Nostalgia and Devotion in the *Burdah*

In the mid-thirteenth century, during the Mamluk period, Abū ʿAbd-Allāh Muḥammad ibn Saʿīd al-Būṣīrī (d.694/1294) wrote the poem *al-Kawākib al-Durriyah fī Madḥ Khayr al-Bariyah*—better known as *Qaṣīdat al-Burdah* or, as will be referred to in this article, the *Burdah.* A love poem dedicated to the Prophet Muhammad by its poet in the form of an exemplary classical Arabic-Islamic *qaṣīdah*, the *Burdah* is considered a panegyric that falls within the sub-genre of *al-madīḥ al-nabawī* (pl. *al-madā'iḥ al-nabawiyyah*) or prophetic encomium.[1] Al-Būṣīrī was said to have been ill and possibly

[1] The *qaṣīdah* form has persisted through eras of empires and aesthetics. The Arabic *qaṣīdah*, much like other poetic traditions of the ancient world, has been used to praise (*madḥ*) or, in reverse, to mock (*hijā'*); to mourn (*rithā'*) the dead; and to celebrate (*fakhr*) conquests and victories.

suffering from paralysis when he decided to compose the ode (Ibn Ajība, 2015). After its completion, the poem is attributed with healing properties because of the widely circulated narrative about the occasion for its composition.

Al-Būṣīrī's *Burdah* may have travelled further and is more widely circulated across ethnic, political, and socio-economic boundaries than the Arabic *maqāmāt* (Pomerantz, 2016). It is arguably the most recited Arabic devotional poem by Sunni Arab and non-Arab Muslims, including those among minority contexts in the Americas, Europe, and Asia. Moreover, not only is the poem ritually recited, studied, and performed in various Muslim communities; the text exists as a part of pre-modern culture including Mamluk manuscripts and Ottoman decorative calligraphy; emerges in intertextual references in other genres of literature such as the nineteenth-century *Maqāma of the French* by Ḥasan ibn Muḥammad al-'Aṭṭār (1859) and Ahmed Toufiq's twentieth-century novel *Abu Musa's Women Neighbors* (2007); and has been appropriated by contemporary twenty-first century writers like the African-American Muslim poet Amir Sulaiman (2012).

The ode's one-hundred and sixty verses is divided into ten chapters. True to *qaṣīdah* form, the poem begins with a *nasīb* or erotic prelude which is then followed by the second chapter on disciplining the *nafs* or ego. The third chapter includes the first time the Prophet's name Muhammad is actually mentioned, and it is the chapter of effusive praise that includes some of the most famous verses of the poem. The fourth chapter is about the Prophet's birth; the fifth chapter includes descriptions of the miracles associated with him; the sixth chapter is a celebration of the Qur'ān as the signature miracle his prophethood witnessed; the seventh chapter is about the *Isrā'* and *Mi'rāj* or the night journey to Jerusalem and ascension to heaven; the eighth chapter is about the Prophet's battles; and the ninth and tenth chapters are seeking the Prophet's intercession in supplication to God.

In large *mawālid* gatherings in celebration of the Prophet's birth, it is more common that only certain sections or verses from the *Burdah* are sung along

with the chorus I noted earlier. One of the most well-known verses of the poem that is often sung is from chapter three:

محمد سيد القرنين والثقلين
والفريقين من عرب ومن عجم

Muhammad is the lord of two worlds, of jinn and humans
Master of both parties, Arabs and non-Arabs

The poet reveals that Muhammad is the poetic beloved to whom the poet-lover is devoted; Madina is the place of yearning; and sacred history is the source of memory and nostalgia. The ode begins and ends with the self-referential lyrical "I" of the poet who confesses the pain of longing in being separated from the beloved and expresses a desire for redemption and intimacy.

In the process of re-imagining pre-Islamic and courtly conventional tropes and motifs, the expansion of the repertoire of poetic beloveds in the Arabic ode to include sacred characters is indicative of the literary impact of Islam and a larger public outside of the discursive borders of courtly love poetry. On the other hand, the contemporary popularity of al-Būṣīrī's poem suggests a particular success on the part of the poem to invite its audiences to engage in nostalgic recollection and celebratory praise. Moreover, audiences are invited to continuously reproduce a cultural memory of the Prophet by way of the poem notwithstanding the illegibility of the text's classical Arabic for many of its reciters, including contemporary Arabs. This last point, in particular, indicates that the devotional commitments readers and reciters demonstrate through their connection to a medieval Arabic poem are not necessarily tied to the construction of an Arab identity (Ullah, 2016).

The Devotional Commitment to Arabic as a Sacred Language

In 2015, a video went viral on social media about a public health initiative launched in Bangladesh (Ministry of Religious Affairs of People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2015). The video reported that the ministry of religious affairs launched a campaign to stop public urination by using Arabic signs prohibiting the act instead of Bangla. The campaign was reported to have been successful in multiple news sources. One report notes,

> Although most Bengalis are not even able to read Arabic, the recent decision of the Religious Affairs Ministry to put up signs telling people not to pee in public seems to be working (*RT International*, 2015).

Another from the *Hindustan Times* observes,

> For most in the mainly-Muslim country, Arabic is sacred because it is the language their holy book, the Koran, was revealed in. "This campaign has received a great positive response so far," Anwar Hossain, a ministry spokesperson, told AFP. "Bangladeshi people respect Arabic and we've just utilised that" (*Hindustan Times*, 2015).

The campaign worked not because the Bangladeshis being targeted could understand the Arabic statements. They were not Qur'ānic citations; rather, they were simply signs written in Modern Standard Arabic saying, "Urination is prohibited here." Readers were not responding in comprehension of the prohibition; they were responding to a representation of the sacred and a cultural awareness of what is taboo or even sinful (i.e., urinating on or near sacred script) and abstained because of their reverence for the actual script itself.

Within a multiethnic and multilingual medieval Islamic literary world, Arabic held unique prestige among Muslim scholars not because it was their "mother-tongue" but because it is the language of a shared sacred text and interpreter—the Qur'ān and the final Prophet. The study of the Qur'ān is what drove the disciplinary development of grammar, morphology, and rhetoric in the pre-modern period. The discursive tradition that emerges on the point of the *i'jāz al-Qur'ān*—the miraculous inimitability of the sacred Arabic text—is demonstrative of the devotional commitment to the language. For that reason, medieval pedagogical texts on grammar and rhetoric begin with introductions that express the sacredness of the language and the devotional nature of its scholarly study (Ibn Hishām, 1998). The assumption is that knowledge of the language would lead one to better understand and connect with the sacred text and the primary teacher of that text — the Prophet. This remains the case in Arabic language departments in historical Muslim seminaries like Al-Azhar University, Qom, or any of the Darul Ulooms in the subcontinent or South Africa.

This point in particular is important when considering the abiding popularity of devotional poetry like the *Burdah* when there are hundreds, if not thousands, of devotional poems composed by Muslims in other languages like Swahili, Bangla, Bahasa, and Turkish. More than any other kind of Arabic poetry, it is the devotional poems that have been an inspirational cornerstone of poetic composition in other historically Muslim languages as can be seen in the Persian and Urdu *ghazal* and *qawwali*. Such poetry is recited among Muslims who are not necessarily scholars of Arabic. On the other hand, reverence for Arabic alone does not explain the commitment to the *Burdah* that is more often than not devotional and referential rather than scholarly or academic.

Making the Audience Visible: Modern Renderings of the *Burdah*

An audience is integral to received meanings of a text.

In different genres of prose and poetry, writers construct the character of an audience and illustrate audience response within the text in order to invite, give permission, affirm, or dismiss particular kinds of engagement by readers or listeners outside of the text. In other words, the construction of an audience demonstrates a recognition by the writer that audiences shape the meaning of a text.

For example, the final story in Boccacio's fourteenth-century work *The Decameron* is told by the character Dioneo (2011: 783-797). The story is about a poor woman named Griselda whose loyalty is tested by her husband Gualtieri. The story ends with Griselda being praised for suffering patiently, passing every single one of her husband's tests. Boccaccio constructs multiple audiences in the telling of this story. In the voice of Dioneo the storyteller, Boccaccio writes,

> Gualtieri was acknowledged to be very wise, though the trials to which he had subjected his lady were regarded harsh and intolerable, whilst Griselda was considered the wisest of all (2011: 794).

After Dioneo completes the story, Boccaccio writes that the storyteller's audience responds with "some taking one side and some another, some finding fault with one of its details and some commending another, had talked about it at length (2011: 795)." They are conflicted about the meaning of Griselda's story. By making the audience's engagement with the story visible, the writer indicates that Gualtieri's conclusion about the virtues of an obedient wife is not necessarily the right conclusion. The constructed audience models what is expected of the text's readers-audience. Without multiple audiences, the tools

for resisting a singular patriarchal interpretation of the story is removed.

Although the poet of the *Burdah* is said to have written the poem in secrecy, he also constructs multiple audiences including an audience of critics, an audience of the self, an audience with God, an audience of the Prophet, and a participatory audience of lovers. In moments of supplication, the poet uses the pronoun "we" demonstrating a social awareness of shared desires of redemption. The lyrical "I" speaks from a personal place that is also aware of the possibility of shared experience with the audience (Williamson, 2013).

The meaning produced from a live performance event is iterative because the performers and audiences are constantly changing (Worthen, 1998). Thus, a writer can model within the text what is expected of the audience; but the writer cannot control what happens outside the material text. I will read three selected video recordings in which the *Burdah* is recited as separate texts very much like different published editions. I will read the space and the audience inscribed in the recording as integral to the meaning of the recitation (Taylor, 2006). My analyses of the recordings of the *Burdah* will be concerned with the following questions—who is the immediate audience of the poetic performance; how does space interact with the notions of the public and private poetic-lover; and how does space influence our understanding of a text's community and the role of devotion in the process of transmission and interpretation? Finally, what does the audience inscribed in the recitation event demonstrate about commitments to the poem and how a text such as the *Burdah* continues to circulate?[2]

[2] Another factor that impacts the interpretive lens through which we, the viewer and listener, experience the *Burdah* is the mediation of a camera, videographer, and/or photographer as an editor of the text. For the purposes of this article, however, this will not be included in my analysis.

A quick youtube search of the word "*Burdah*" typed in English will result in hundreds of video uploads, with Mesut Kurtis's *Burdah* among the top five receiving over twenty-five million views. youtube, a social media platform that is increasingly the subject and site of analysis of classical and medieval texts, offers a window through which the production, circulation, transmission, and reception of the medieval poem in the contemporary world can be understood. The *Burdah*, more often than its treatment as a subject of literary study in very limited academic circles, is recited among different communities as a means of *dhikr* and collective supplication as well as public celebration. The content offered by a single youtube publication includes viewership and comments that partially reflects audience reception and engagement outside of the live event. For vloggers and short film clips made specifically for youtube, the online audience is the intended primary audience. For the three texts I have selected, however, the online audience is secondary. The intended primary audience is captured by the audio recording and within the camera frame. The presence of a video recording—like the act of pre-modern transcribing —expresses an intentionality in ensuring that the performance or recitation has multiple audiences beyond the primary one.

Alexandria, Egypt

Published in 2016, the first, oldest, and longest of the three texts I have selected is a one-hour and ten-minute recording of the *Burdah* from Alexandria, Egypt (Republic of Egypt, 2016). The youtube video currently has over 62,300 views and is a recording of a professionally edited program produced by the Egyptian government—specifically the Ministry of Cultural Affairs—for 1970s Egyptian television before the age of the internet. The broadcaster Durriya Sharaf al-Din introduces the recitation of the *Burdah* by contextualizing it as the second episode in a series of programs produced by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs intended to educate and celebrate Arab art and

literature as heritage or *turāth*. The first program in the series, she reminds her audience, was a celebration of the works of the twentieth century neo-classical Egyptian poet Ahmad Shawqi, nicknamed *Amīr al-Shu'arā'* or the Prince of Poets. The staged production is clearly meant for a national audience including those present at the live event.

The video begins with credits including the names of the director, conductor, and ensemble of solo reciters which includes famous Egyptian actors and artists. The credits alone with the inclusion of high profile characters in the national landscape underscores that the *Burdah* performance was a fairly large-scale production expected to a high quality *experience*. The broadcaster, after contextualizing the program, gives a historical overview of the circumstances of the poem including the miraculous stories surrounding its composition. She notes the names of those on the production team and describes them as well-known artists (i.e., *fannān*) including the librettist Ibrahim al-Ibyari and director Karam Mutawi'. Although Sharaf al-Din mentions the miraculous story of the poet being cured after composing the poem and seeing the Prophet in a dream vision, the framing of the program foregrounds the poem's historicity and cultural value to the national imaginary rather than the poem's function as a talisman with metaphysical power regardless of time and place.

Staged in the mosque square of Alexandria, the location dramatizes the *aṭlāl*—or the camp ruins of the beloved—as national and cultural heritage by emphasizing the relationship of the Egyptian audience to the poem and poet. Al-Būṣīrī was born in Upper Egypt to the Sanhaja tribe who migrated to Egypt from the Maghrib or Morocco, and he is buried in Alexandria. The tomb is across from the mosque of Abu 'Abbas al-Mursi, the revered thirteenth-century Andalusian Sufi who was the teacher of al-Būṣīrī after the poet decided to leave his administrative post within a Mamluk bureaucracy and join the Sufi path. The audience is not only reminded of the Prophet through the content of the poem — but the staging of the performance also

foregrounds the poet's presence and legacy.

In terms of performance space, the mosque steps leading to the main gate are used as the outdoor stage where the ensemble of reciters, choir, and orchestra from the Alexandria Center of Arts or *Qaṣr Thaqāfāt Al-Hurriyyah al-Iskandariyyah* are gathered. They are directed in a staggered semi-circle facing their audience presumably in the square where a relatively large audience can be accommodated. The choir is flanked on both sides by large columns and behind the choir, a large door to the mosque as well as chandelier lights are visible to the camera and presumably the audience.

Although the camera does not pan out to give a view of the audience, the audience can be heard applauding after the completion of each chapter and solo recital. It's possible many of the Egyptian patrons present are local to Alexandria or have come from outside Alexandria. The applause as a form of audience participation indicates an audience habituated to opera and concert-style performances. The applause signals appreciation and approval as well as transition. Audience applause also means that they are being prompted to experience the *Burdah* performance as theater-goers. Because the performance is aired on Egyptian television, the larger intended audience of the production is not only those present in the mosque square experiencing the live performance but includes all of 1970s Egypt under Sadat, post-Nasser, the wars of 1967, and the resulting disaffection with the politics of Pan-Arabism and increasing interest in political Islam. For that reason, the national politics of investing in and staging such a production that is described as a concert of religious heritage and poetry is important to consider.

As the producer, the state is foremost committed to Egyptian culture as a national institution. A national commitment to the *Burdah* is one means of ensuring that the devotional poem maintains visibility, continuous circulation, and a large audience. It also raises questions about the appropriation of devotional poetics by the state and its effect on the reception, transmission, and consumption of the poem primarily as literary art. The city of Alexandria,

on the other hand, is the city in which the tomb of the poet and his Sufi shaykh is prominently preserved as a popular hub for Muslim devotees, spiritual seekers, and Sufi orders as well as commercial tourists and academics interested in Mamluk history, architecture and culture.

Another point of interest to consider in the meaning-making of the Burdah production in this particular recording is that the *Burdah* is recited weekly by a Sufi devotee inside the tomb of the Al-Būṣīrī. Others may join the reciter or recite on their own or with their group when performing a visitation of the poet's tomb. The weekly inconspicuous ritualistic recitation that would be known to a community of devotees pales in comparison to scale of the national event filmed for television. Moreover, the national performance takes place outside the mosque with the reciters standing and facing an audience rather sitting and inviting an audience to join as reciters. Unless the recitations within the tomb, the staged production is directed at an audience that may not necessarily have a devotional commitment to the Prophet but rather a devotional commitment that could be described as national, cultural, and/or secular. Although the secular is assumed to relegate religion into the private sphere, in the case of this highly produced performance of the *Burdah*, the private devotional voice of the poet is performatively expressed as a public good and artifact of cultural heritage and identity.

The refrain "Muhammadun" sung by the choir of women and "Rasulullah" sung by the male choir makes visible and centers the Prophet in the celebration of the poem. Rather than replacing the poetic-beloved as a subject with a symbolic image or figurative language, the vocalized repetition of "Muhammadun" punctuating the chapters of the poem aestheticizes nostalgia and devotion for the poem's subject.

The entire poem is read in sections largely by the ensemble of reciters positioned in front of the choir of women and men, who at times repeat as a group some of the verses read by a single voice. The reading of the first

chapter of the poem, known as the erotic prelude, is led by three famous men with rich baritone voices. They are directed to take turns reciting verses with their recitation punctuated by a chorus of women reciting the refrain "Muhammadun" as mentioned above. As the chapter comes to a close, the chorus of men and women sing together "Muhammadun Rasulullah." They are followed by a female soloist offering a set of verses in praise of the Prophet, separate from the *Burdah*. It's important to note that the prelude of the *Burdah* never mentions the name of the beloved for whom the lover-poet expresses longing. The beloved, who the lover has full knowledge of but has difficulty in the experience of remembering, is indirectly named by way of the symbolism present in the opening verses. The softness of the choral interpolation and gentle repetition naming the subject dramatizes the internal experience of remembrance. The name is hidden on the tip of the poet's tongue—or pen—but always at the forefront of the poet's consciousness. The performance then does more immediately what the text does not; the performance directly informs the audience of who is the subject of the poem.

During the reading of the fourth chapter on the birth of the Prophet, the choir repeats after the reader:

والجن تهتف والأنوار ساطعة
والحق يظهر من معنى ومن كلم

The jinn were shrieking and the lights were flashing out,
As the truth was made manifest in both meaning and word (Spiker, 2012: 27).

The repetition of verses by the chorus emphasizes the magnitude of the event being narrated. For this particular verse, the choral repetition following the singular voice highlights the soundscape being illustrated by the verse in which the sounds of many (i.e., the jinn) is overcome by the voice of one (i.e., the truth) (David W. Samuels, Louise Meintjes, Ana M. Ochoa, and Thomas Porcello, 2010). Each section is punctuated with musical and vocalized interpolations of

choral refrains or selections from other poems sung by others in the choir. If the interpreted meaning of each text can be shifted by its vocalization, then each voice has the ability to convey a distinct interpretive imprint on the meanings of the text for an audience-reader. For this reason, the singers vocalize interpretive variation. Each reader-reciter of the evening gathering is differentiated by name and personal narrative that the audience may know giving their fame and this contributes a distinct element of meaning to the collective gathering.

In the poem, Al-Būṣīrī introduces himself as a lovesick poet who is unambiguously present in the first person and transparent in his vulnerability. He performs the acts of past poet-lovers, who weep until their eyes bleed and who cannot sleep; conscious of the judgment cast by their peers; and defensive of their character deemed as excessive. Although the *Burdah* text gestures toward the incorporation of the audience as empathetic lovers and gives access to the private singularity of the poet's subjectivity, this particular performance does not necessarily encourage or facilitate the audience's enactment of the poetic persona; rather, they are more passively observing and listening to the performers on stage embodying and vocalizing longing, nostalgia, and devotion. The audience remains privy to the private suffering of the poetic voice that at once wavers between bold confidence and defensive anxiety but at a distance.

This leads me to the next more recent *Burdah* recording from Surabaya, Indonesia in which the participatory reenactment of the audience as lovers is not only apparent but essential for the purposes of the gathering.

Surabaya, Indonesia

Indonesia is currently the largest Muslim country in the world with over 219 million Muslims and approximately 13% of the world's Muslim population (Diamant, 2019). When Islam arrived in Indonesia is disputed with some placing the arrival as early as the eighth century and others during the twelfth or thirteenth century (Ho, 2006). Colonized and ruled by the Dutch for 126 years, Indonesia celebrates their pre-colonial history of exchange and trade with Yemeni sea merchants, some of whom were believed to be descendants of the Prophet and are celebrated as the saints of the Indonesian islands (Rahimi and Eshaghi, 2019). These saints are known as the Wali Songo or Wali Sanga and their graves are mostly located on the island of Java (Soenarto, 2005).

The recording of the *Burdah* from Surabaya, Indonesia is of a celebratory community gathering held in order to commemorate the Prophet's birthday or *mawlid* in 2015 (Akbar). Surabaya is the capital of East Java and the second largest city after Jakarta, the country's capital. The *Burdah* of al-Būṣīrī may have come to Java as early as the sixteenth century as evidenced by a sixteenth-century Malay translation of the poem. The poem is recited for many kinds of occasions include for resolve in fulfilling prayer obligations and for those about to leave for the hajj (Millie and Syihabuddin, 2005). Millie and Syihabuddin write,

> The authority accorded to the *Burdah* is not only attributed to the properties of individual lines. Due to two of its basic features, the text has also come to function as a *pasantren* art form of didactic value. Firstly, the context of the poem is of didactic primacy; in it can be read the exemplary character of the Prophet and also his life story. Secondly, it is written in verse, and is this readily adapted to song form (Millie and Syihabuddin, 2005: 113).

Uploaded by an individual Indonesian vlogger named Fitrah Akbar, the nine-minute recording has over 390,000 views on youtube. The video describes the gathering as "Majelis Dzikir wa Maulidurrasul." Whereas most of the comments posted underneath the Alexandria recording are in Arabic, the 141 comments posted underneath the publication of this video are primarily in Bahasa, the official language of Indonesia, suggesting that most of the audience engagement of this particular version of the *Burdah* is Southeast Asian.

It is evident from the wide panning of the camera that the space is not constructed or being used as a performance space for a passive audience; rather the intended primary audience who are also visible participants in the recitation of the poem is a community. The uploaded video recording includes an opening slide with a title page superimposed on the image of the gathering only naming the gathering as "Shalawat Burdah" and the location "PP Al Fithrah Surabaya" without including any credits and individual names of participants. Pondok Pesantren As Salvia Al Fithrah Surabaya is a religious school that includes a mosque on the campus. The room in which the participating reciters have gathered includes decorative curtains, a grandfather clock, and a *minbar* or podium for someone to deliver sermons or speeches. The participants are sitting on the floor instead of chairs, and its possible the space is also used for prayer.

The clothing worn by the participants indicates that the *Burdah* is being recited in a homosocial space in which young boys and men, who are most likely students and teachers, are dressed very similarly. They are, with a few exceptions including an older man sitting on a chair and facing the crowd, wearing white prayer caps and tunics. The almost uniform appearance and lack of visibility of individual faces guides the attention of the viewer-listener to the swaying movements of the bodies responding to the sound of text being

recited and the drumming accompanying the recitation. The Egyptian recording does not include a view of the audience; rather, the performance emphasizes the art of the *Burdah* and its cultural legacy through the incorporation of individualized vocalization, a formal chorus, an orchestra, and the presentation of the poem in its entirety. It is staged for statewide consumption. This semi-public gathering in Surabaya, in contrast, emphasizes the collective devotional experience of a localized community connected to a school as the primary audience.

The lead vocalist on the microphone can be heard most prominently but he is sitting among the others within the gathering. No one is standing. What distinguishes the lead vocalist from the audience is the microphone and where the vocalist sits in between the teachers and students. At certain points, he turns to face the crowd of students and at other points, he faces the teachers. He does not recite the *Burdah* in its entirely; instead he recites selected verses from different chapters in non-linear fashion that are either supplicatory invocations or verses of celebration and praise emphasizing the devotional aspect of the recitation.

The recitation itself begins *in media res*—that is, the first verse the lead vocal recites is the verse 36 of chapter three in praise of the Prophet,

هو الحبيب الذي ترجى شفاعته
لكل هول من الأهوال مقتحم

He is the beloved one, whose intercession is hoped for
Againsts all the terrifying things that take us by storm (Spiker, 2012: 16)

As I mentioned, the most globally recognized verses of the *Burdah* in non-Arabic speaking contexts are from the third chapter. The verse is indicative of the abiding belief in the concept of the Prophet's unique right of *shafa' ah* or intercession for his community on the Day of Judgment. The verse offers consolation to the lover that her or his devotion will be met with

solicitous protection. The verse articulates the purpose of the poem's composition that is meant to transcend the historicity of the text. For that reason, reciting the *Burdah* is viewed as a means of becoming close to the prophet, a means of intercession and a means of cure not only for the poet but for those in the present and future.

The vocalist introduces and concludes singular verses, instead of complete chapters, with the chorus. The next verse he recites is verse 116 from chapter seven on the night journey of the Prophet in which al-Būṣīrī writes,

بشرى لنا معشر الإسلام إن لنا
تم العناية ركنا غير منهدم،

Glad tidings for us, O assembly of Muslims,
For truly we have a pillar of support and solicitude
That can never be destroyed (Spiker, 2012: 46)

Moreover, instead of applause punctuating the end of a performance and the beginning of another as in the Egyptian recording, the voices of the participants in the gathering can be heard joining in the recitation such as when the lead vocalist repeats the following verse from chapter ten as a chorus line:

يا رب بالمصطفى بلغ مقاصدنا
واغفر لنا ما مضى يا واسع الكرم

O my Lord, by the Chosen One, let us attain all that we are hoping for,
And pardon us for what has passed, O Boundlessly Generous One.
(Spiker, 2012: 64)

Rather than occupying the space of a major national cultural institution and historical place of worship, the participating audience sits closely together on

the floor of a school building as large congregations of Muslims in a mosque would do during congregational prayers. Although the faces of most of the participants are not visible, the proximity of each person in the gathering establishes a sense of intimacy that is also cultivated by the collective listening and recitation of the *Burdah* (Hirschkind, 2009; Danielson, 2008). They embody a devotional commitment to the poem's ability to cultivate intimacy with the Prophet and with a community that affirms this belief and aspiration. In this particular context, the audience recites together with the lead vocalist in order to enact what Būṣīrī describes as an act of love for which the beloved promises to reciprocate.

Cape Town, South Africa

The final *Burdah* text is from Cape Town, South Africa in 2013 (Rabin, 2013). Cape Town is known for a strong Sufi community with roots in the Shadhuli and Ba'Alawi heritage as well as different strands of political Islam (Hellyer, 2019). The arrival of Islam to South Africa can be traced to at least the late seventeenth century when Muslims from the Indonesian islands were forcibly sent by the Dutch (Jeppie, 1996). The expansion of Islam in Cape Town is attributed to Shaykh Yusuf, a Javanese Muslim who was exiled from Java by the Dutch for leading the anti-colonial resistance in 1694 (Jeppie, 1996: 140). During the eighteenth century, many of the Muslims who instructed a small community of enslaved and free Muslims were freed prisoners from Robben Island—a place used as a prison for almost four centuries and currently a South African National Heritage and UNESCO World Heritage Site (Jeppie, 1996: 140).

Of the three youtube recordings of *Burdah* recitations selected for analyses, the four-minute South African recording is the least edited and has the most limited social media presence with 5,765 views. The publisher of the

recording, Shamiel Rabin, does not write or include a detailed description under the video which has the quality of a phone recording which the individual uploaded to share with a larger audience. The publisher does include the detail that a special guest by the name of Maulana Abdul Hafeez Makki is present which would indicate that the gathering may have been held in honor of this guest.

The *Burdah* recitation takes place in a private gathering in what appears to be someone's living room given the space. The participating audience that is visible are men and boys seated on the floor and on a couch. All of the men are wearing head coverings, including some who are wearing turbans which may indicate their status in the space as scholars or students. At a certain point, the camera turns and women can be seen walking in another room indicating the presence of women, although it is not clear whether they are also reciting with the group that is visible.

In addition to the clothing, there are several other visible indications inscribed within this particular *Burdah* text that this is not only a devotional recitation for the *Burdah,* but an ecstatic event of prayer and supplication in which the text offers words of prayer that the gathering mimics. Like the Indonesian gathering, the participants sit in close proximity facing each other and recite together while being led by a lead vocalist who can be heard through a microphone but who is not identifiable at all; unlike the Indonesian gathering, all the participants appear to have texts in their hands from which they are reading. Also unlike the Indonesian gathering, the group recites an entire chapter according to the textural arrangement of verses by the poet rather than selected verses thematically similar but from different sections of the ode. Although the video clip only includes a recitation of the concluding chapter of the *Burdah*—the chapter of intimate conversation with God—it is possible the gathering recited other chapters, if not the entire poem, given the presence of texts.

As the group goes through the final chapter, the voices increase in volume

and intensity, the melody changes and becomes faster paced, and a number of people in the gathering raise their hands in supplication. The ecstatic quality of the conclusion is embodied in such performative gestures of longing. The gesture is one of *du'a* or supplication and mirrors what the poet is doing in the text. The participating audience demonstrates their reverence of the poet and the poem by reciting the words of the poet rather than their own in personal supplication. In this case, through the ritual of supplication, the words of the poet become their own. For example, the poet writes,

واغفر الهي لكل المسلمين بما
يتلون في المسجد الأقصى وفي الحرم

And, O God, forgive all the Muslims their wrong actions
By that which they recite in Masjid al-Aqsa,
As well as in the Ancient Sanctuary (Spiker, 2012: 64)

That is, the words invoke God and ask for forgiveness for not just the self but the community. One of the elderly men can be seen weeping, which is not uncommon at the conclusion of a *Burdah* recitation. As the event of recitation demonstrates, the poetic persona of the lover becomes ritually performed and embodied by the reciters. The lyrical "I" in this case is not one that alienates the self from other selves; rather it allows others to become lovers by way of mimesis, and therefore, become intimate with the subject of poetic love.

Conclusion

Performance is iterative, and the method of *Burdah* recitation as well as the context in which it is done contributes significantly to how the poem is understood, received, transformed, and transmitted. The affective experience of the poem by an audience is first and foremost a sensorial experience

cultivated and carried by voices and the musicality of the recited text as well as the environment or context in which the text is recited. The voicing of the text is of primary importance when accounting for the sensual experience of poetry as the first point of access to both memory and sentiment. For a text to be transmitted, it is not enough for that text to be read aloud; it must be remembered. Amanda Weidman writes,

> Voices are constructed not only by those who produce them but also by those who interpret, circulate, and reanimate them: by the communities of listeners, publics, and public spaces in which they can resonate and by the technologies of reproduction, amplification, and broadcasting that make them audible. Individual voices are created, in this sense, by audiences, fans, critics, and cultural commentators as well as by the larger spirit of their times (Weidman, 2014: 45).

The entangled devotional engagements with the *Burdah* can make the ode both intimate and distant. It can be reproduced for a national imaginary as a medieval poem that is a cultural and historical artifact without social continuity; it can also be reproduced as a living tradition and source of community without reference to a literary corpus. Through a poetics of nostalgia and devotion, with its metaphysical and emotional layers of meaning not only in textual language but in live recitation and performance, the *Burdah* has been used to reproduce cultural memory as Arab literary heritage and has maintained its communal function of affirming spiritual aspirations for Muslims who are racialized in a post-colonial context but are located outside of an Arab nationalist project.

The contemporary popularity of the *Burdah* outside of its original geographical and temporal context points to the incredible role of devotional transmission and circulation and indicates it is not a neglected scholarly text. Moreover, contemporary recitations and adaptations are inspiring and changing the signification and soundscape of the poem as can be seen on

youtube. Moreover, it's popularity among audiences who do not understand Arabic is sustained by a referential relationship to the sound and idea of the poem itself.

To this final point, the *Burdah* functions much like the signposts of Madinah within its prelude—as a source of longing and creative catalyst for remembering sacred history in the present. Through a devotional commitment by a community of reciters, communities, artists, and writers mirror al-Būṣīrī's longing and joy through new iterations and adaptations of the poem. In order to speak to twentieth century and twenty-first century readers, the poem remains enveloped in a process that necessitates the performative engagement of emotion and memory.

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