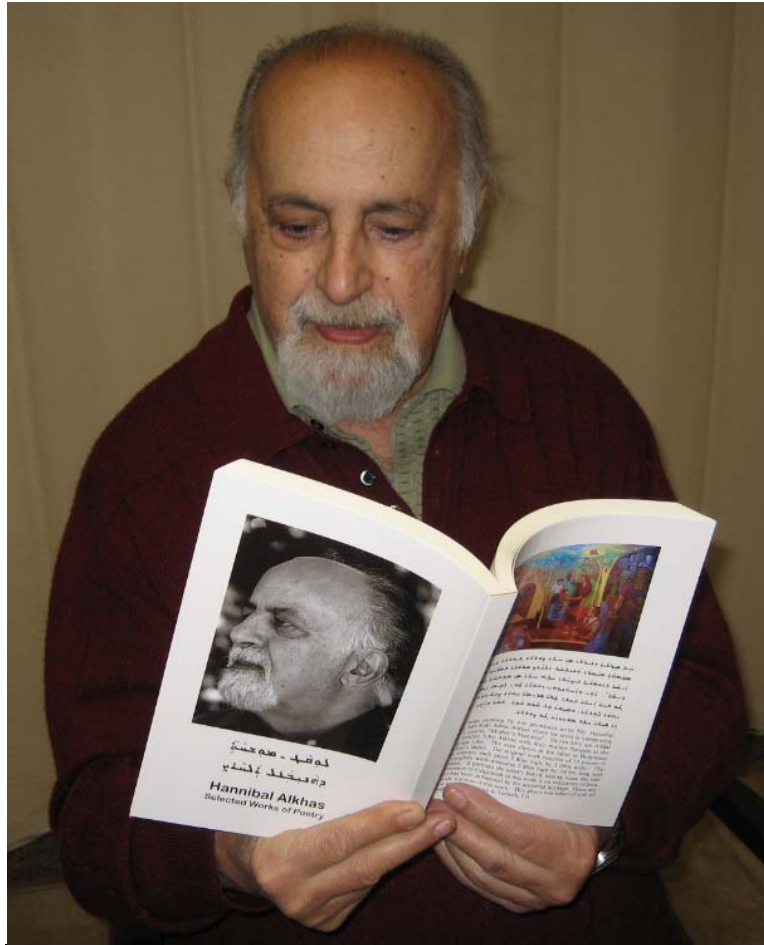


Hannibal Alkhas,

a painter with passionate love for his mother language



Born on June 15th, 1930 in Kermanshah, Iran
Died on September 14th, 2010 in Turlock, CA

I am very fortunate to have known closely our prominent painter and poet the late Rabi Hannibal Alkhas over the last few years of his life. Upon his passing I decided to write this material on his very unique personality and his poetry works in vernacular Syriac. I have selected a few of his personality dimensions and have shown how they are reflected in his poetry works in our beloved mother language, the Assyrian. I went through most of this material on Tuesday, October 12th, 2010 in an over 60-minute recording for Atour TV (San Jose, CA) in celebration of his life and Assyrian poetry. I also used parts of this material in my speech on Saturday, November 6th, 2010 in Almaden Community Center in an even held by the Assyrian American Association of San Jose for his commemoration.

Marcel E. Josephson
Sunday, November 7th, 2010

My first encounter with the late Rabi Hannibal Alkhas was in Tehran in 1971 at Sharif (formerly known as Arya-Mehr) University of Technology, the school I attended for my undergraduate studies. In a poetry night he held for his father's commemoration at this school, without any visual aid and merely from memory Hannibal drew a portrait of Nima Yushij (1897-1960), Iran's founding father of the contemporary poetry. As a young Assyrian I felt extremely proud of having within my community such a talented and skillful artist. Having known Hannibal through his works for many years and in person for the past few years, today I would say that Hannibal belongs to humanity and our Assyrian community should be proud that he was an Assyrian.

In this program I will share with audience some of the Rabi Hannibal's characteristics that I have known him for and how these characteristics have been reflected in his poetry works in our mother language. I want to also mention that Rabi Hannibal was known more as a great painter and I am hoping that someone within our Assyrian community would be able to provide a detailed insight to his painting artistry. That is indeed beyond me but I can definitely talk about his Assyrian poetry.

Although Hannibal had been encouraged and challenged by his father, the late Rabi Addai Alkhas (1897-1959) to write poetry in Assyrian since he was 15, but it was not until he was 40 when he started writing in Assyrian. His first work in Assyrian was a translation of one his own poems from Farsi, "White Friend, Black Friend". This was mostly because of the support and encouragement by late Rabi Nimrod Simono (1908-2004). The late Rabi Hannibal's works in Assyrian consists of some 700 hand-written pages and cover a wide variety of styles; quatrains, triplets, ghazals, tribute to friends and prominent individuals, and children poetry to name a few.

Hannibal had tendency to get his audience involved with contrasting elements. He would build a case around the elements that he had in mind. He would then draw a meaningful conclusion. His first poetry work in Assyrian "White Friend, Black Friend" well represents use of contrasting elements by Hannibal.

Once upon a time a little boy lived in a town where it never snowed. One chilly winter it finally did snow. Very excitedly, he made a snowman and called him "White Friend". He would play with his White Friend until he lost him to a meltdown as the weather warmed up. Disappointedly he complained to his mother about the loss of his White Friend. He then took his mother's advice and made another friend, this time a mud man and called him "Black Friend". The friendship between the two developed rapidly. Once again the temperature dropped and snow fell, covering the mud man. Next morning the little boy noticed that his White Friend had returned, but his Black Friend had disappeared. He was puzzled. Through the changes in the weather, there was another meltdown where his Black Friend was back but the White Friend had disappeared. Later on, the winter rain washed away the Black Friend as well. Perplexed and seeking comfort after the loss of both friends, he goes back to his mother. She teaches him that the key to longer lasting friendships is working harder at relationship. The moral of the story is that maintaining relationships is a demanding challenge. Let's take a look at an excerpt from "White Friend, Black Friend". These are the words of wisdom of the mother to her young son who is just getting to learn about friendship.

يَتِي عِيْدَهْ . دَعْبَتِي مِي .
مِي اَمِ نَجِي مَجْدِي
يَتِي عِيْدَهْ . دَعْبَتِي مِي .
نَدِي هُوَ كِي اَهْ دِي
يَتِي عِيْدَهْ . دَعْبَتِي مِي .
مِي اَمِ نَجِي مَجْدِي
يَتِي عِيْدَهْ . دَعْبَتِي مِي .
نَجِي دَحِي رَكِبِ مَمِ عِي
اَمِ دِي مِي . نَجِي
نَجِي مِي اَمِ نَجِي
مَمِ عِي دِي دِي
دِي مِي كِي
اَمِ مِي دِي اَمِ مِي
اَمِ مِي دِي مِي مِي
دِي مِي ، مِي ، مِي
نِي دِي مِي دِي مِي

نِي مِي مِي مِي
نِي مِي مِي مِي
دِي مِي مِي مِي
نَجِي مِي مِي مِي
نِي مِي مِي مِي
نِي مِي مِي مِي
دِي مِي مِي مِي
نِي مِي مِي مِي
اَمِ مِي مِي مِي ، مِي
مِي مِي مِي مِي
نِي مِي مِي مِي

مُؤْتِ كَاتِ دِيكْ دِوَذِمْب
مَكْمِ مَكْتَمِ اِ مَكْمِ كَاتِ مَكْمِ مِ
مَكْمِ اِ مَكْمِ كَاتِ مَكْمِ مِ
دِوَذِمْبِ مَكْمِ مِ مَكْمِ
مِ دِوَذِمْبِ دِوَذِمْبِ دِوَذِمْبِ

Hannibal was filled with loved. He followed his heart. He freely expressed his feelings when interacting with people. He was a very happy individual. His poetry is filled with references to love and heart. In 230 pages of his selected poetry works he has used words love and heart 218 times.

Hannibal was very critical with irresponsible stances within our Assyrian community. He would criticize and question the motives that were not aligned toward true interests of our nation. He has an interesting poem “A Heated Discussion” that clearly shows his disappointment with those who do not address real issues in our community. In an AAS-A’s event in Modesto on February 27th, 2010 he recited this poem that I would like to read in its entirety. In this amusing and well structured poem, Hannibal addresses one of the most troubling issues of our Assyrian community. Precious time and resources are consumed in our organizations in trying to solve imaginary problems. Little or no attention is paid to solving real problems that require practical and hands-on approach. The characters in the poem are typical elderly villagers who are having a heated discussion where each one claims if he were such and such known world leader, he would have done great things. This village is in an enormous need for fresh water that is being carried over to homes by the women of the village for daily use from a far away fountain up in the mountains.

The elderly are inconsiderate of this serious issue and are busy talking big business. Observant 15-year old young Ashur interrupts their discussion, calls their attention to the issue on-hand, and challenges them to get their shovels and start plowing a gutter to allow the water to flow from the fountain to the homes; and on the way down, to use it to run mills to grind grain. He gets rebuked by elderly for not thinking BIG! Finally, a wise man in support of young Ashur concludes the discussion by saying “those who just talk big are like fools who build their homes on the sand”. Let us read through.

مَكْمِ مَكْمِ دِوَذِمْبِ، دِوَذِمْبِ، دِوَذِمْبِ،
دِوَذِمْبِ، مَكْمِ مِ، مَكْمِ مِ، مَكْمِ مِ،
دِوَذِمْبِ، مَكْمِ مِ، مَكْمِ مِ، مَكْمِ مِ،
دِوَذِمْبِ، مَكْمِ مِ، مَكْمِ مِ، مَكْمِ مِ،
مَكْمِ مِ - دِوَذِمْبِ مَكْمِ مِ دِوَذِمْبِ
مَكْمِ مِ مَكْمِ مِ مَكْمِ مِ مَكْمِ مِ

سَدَّ ذَهَابَ صَدَقَ كَسَدَ مَكَّ وَكُهْ ذَا
دَبَّكَ مَجْتَبَ لَبَّهْ سَوَّهْ كَنَ هَبَّصَهْ لَمَّ ذَا
جَدَّهْ كَرَّ هَبَّيْتِي، بَسَّكِي، هَجَّيْتِي
بُكَ قِيَّيْ هَدَّوَيَّيْ حَمَّصَهْ سَوَّهْ كَتَّيْ
مَجْتَبَ مَلَّ وَذَكَّيْ، نَجَمَّيْ، هَجَّيْتِي
مَلَّ هَسَّيْ هَسَّكِي، بَسَّكِي هَمَّصَهْ
مَسَدَّيْ لَبَّيْتِي حَمَّوْ ذَا ذِيَّسَلَّ مَجْتَبَهْ سَوَّهْ
سَوَّهْ بَدَّ حَمَّيْ كَرَّ كَرَّصَهْ لَبَّيْ

بَجَبَّذَا لَبَّيْتِي تَمَّ مَلَّ دَهْ مَلَّ
هَبَّكِي سَوَّهْ كَرَّ بَ تَكَبَّيْ حَمَّصَهْ
حَسَبِي سَوَّهْ قِيَّيْ مَجْتَبَا دِيَّسَدَّوْ
يَجَّيْتِي حَكَّ بَدَّ تَمَّ مَلَّ دِيَّسَدَّوْ

لَمَّوْ سَوَّهْ دَهْ بَدَّ تَكَبَّيْ حَسَبِي
كَبَّهْ كَبَّيْ مَلَّ بَدَّيْ لَمَّوْ
سَوَّهْ سَبَّكِي ذِيَّ - بَسَّكِي دَبَّكِي
جَدَّيْ سَوَّهْ مَلَّ مَجْتَبِي حَمَّصَهْ دَبَّكِي
جَدَّيْ دَهْ دَبَّيْ دَكَّصَهْ سَوَّهْ مَلَّ ذَا
دَبَّكِي سَوَّهْ مَلَّ بَدَّيْ دَبَّكِي

دَبَّيْ لَمَّوْ هَبَّيْ سَوَّهْ
دَهْ بَدَّ ذَكَّيْ يَكَبَّيْ حَسَبِي سَوَّهْ
دَبَّكِي سَوَّهْ دَبَّيْ دَسَّصَهْ كَبَّ مَلَّ
دَبَّكِي مَلَّ سَبَّ سَوَّهْ لَمَّوْ كَبَّ مَلَّ

لَمَّوْ سَوَّهْ لَبَّيْ ذَهْ وَا سَوَّهْ
بَسَّكِي دَبَّكِي لَبَّيْ حَمَّصَهْ سَوَّهْ
سَوَّهْ دَبَّيْ دَبَّيْ كَبَّيْ سَوَّهْ

كَمِيَلَكُمَا ۞ مَجْدُكَ تَعْبُ ۞

۞ جَعَلْتَ ۞ نَسَبُ كَب ۞ وَوَقَّ ۞
فَذِي ۞ لَحَبُ سَلْبِي ۞ بِي ۞
۞ مَقِي ۞ هَبِي ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞
كَبَد ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞
كَب ۞ مَبِي ۞ مَبِي ۞ مَبِي ۞
كَب ۞ مَبِي ۞ مَبِي ۞ مَبِي ۞
۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞
۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞
۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞
۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞

جَد ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞
مَبِي ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞
۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞
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۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞
جَد ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞ ۞

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قَدْ لَعَنَ ذِكْرُكُمْ حَبِيْبِي كَمَا حَبِيْبِي
حَبِيْبِي تَكُنْ ذِكْرِي أَهْ دَجْجَ مَهْمِي سَكِي
لَأَسْأَلَ بِذِكْرِكَ دِرْهَمًا لِي سَعْبَسَ حَقَّهْتِي:

"بِكُفْمِي صَبْرًا بِكُفْمِي حَبِيْبِي،
حَبِيْبِي تَكُنْ ذِكْرِي حَبِيْبِي حَقَّهْتِي."

Hannibal was very humorous. Those who knew him well will attest to his hilarious nature. In his poetry nights he often recited his works that amused the audience most. I have selected two types of his poetry works for this section, quatrains and triplets. We will discuss each separately and I will recite a few of each right after discussing that type.

A quatrain is a two line verse with two parts per line. Hannibal was influenced by Quatrains (Rubaiyat) of Omar Khayyam (1048–1123) a Persian poet, astronomer, and mathematician. In a typical quatrain each of the four parts has 11 syllables and is recited in a 1234 + 1234 + 123 count of syllables. Rare quatrains have 15 syllables per part and are recited in a 1234 + 1234 + 1234 + 123 count of syllables. Additionally, the end of the first, second, and fourth parts do rhyme but the end of the third part does not rhyme with the end of other parts. A quatrain is a stand alone verse that has a complete message. Hannibal's quatrains can be divided into three main categories; social, political, and love. In his quatrains Hannibal has used a basic vernacular Assyrian vocabulary and yet has effectively communicated quite complex social and political issues. He always gave credit to the richness of our mother language for being able to adopt this writing style. Use of idiomatic speech in his quatrains adds an exceptional value to these poems. Here are a few examples of Hannibal's quatrains.

Contrasting elements and exceptionally rhyming love quatrain.

حَبِيْبِي لَحْمِي لِي حَبِيْبِي هَمَّهْتِي مَهْمِي دِيكْتِي
لِي حَبِيْبِي حَبِيْبِي دَوْمَذَهْتِي مَهْمِي دِيكْتِي
لِي حَبِيْبِي حَبِيْبِي دَوْمَذَهْتِي مَهْمِي دِيكْتِي
لِي حَبِيْبِي حَبِيْبِي دَوْمَذَهْتِي مَهْمِي دِيكْتِي

A social critique on how artists and poets live a poor life.

بَدَّيْ لِي دَوْمَذَهْتِي حَبِيْبِي حَبِيْبِي حَبِيْبِي
سَوِي لِي دَوْمَذَهْتِي حَبِيْبِي حَبِيْبِي حَبِيْبِي
بَدَّيْ لِي دَوْمَذَهْتِي حَبِيْبِي حَبِيْبِي حَبِيْبِي
سَوِي لِي دَوْمَذَهْتِي حَبِيْبِي حَبِيْبِي حَبِيْبِي

She declines his request for some wine and a kiss through a proverb meaning "No Way".

لِي حَبِيْبِي: "لِي دَوْمَذَهْتِي حَبِيْبِي حَبِيْبِي حَبِيْبِي."
لِي حَبِيْبِي: "لِي دَوْمَذَهْتِي حَبِيْبِي حَبِيْبِي حَبِيْبِي."

keeps his company as a true friend.

بِ مَلَكُوتِكَ دَسْمِب كَسُومِب مُعَدِوِي
فَبِي مَ . تَبُوب ، حَبِي دَسْمِب جَدْبَد
مُذَكَمِي يَكِي تَكِب سَمِي بَمَمِي

Describing a scene where the painter is mixing colors to start painting in nature. Clouds have been described as sheep and sky being a blue curtain for the sea.

بَحِي تَحْمَلِي يَدِي سَهِي دِي دِي
تَحْمَلِي تَحْمَلِي هِي دِي مَبِي يَسِي
لِي يَكِي فَبِي كَمِي بَد تَمِي
مَبِي دُودِي هَمَمَلِي تَحْمَلِي يَسِي

You cannot teach an old dog new tricks.

لِي لِي لَتِي دَكِي لَهِي . هَبِي لَبَلَمِي
بِي دَبِي تَبِي يَدِي مَسَلَمِي
تَحْمَلِي مَبِي تَمِي هَمَمَلِي تَحْمَلِي
جَلِي هَبِي لِي هَبِي فَعِي مَلَمِي

Questioning the void and emptiness, looking for stars and moon in the sky and also looking for wine and her love.

هَم جِي تَحْمَلِي لِي مَبِي مَبِي لِي
دَهِي دِي دَهِي دِي تَمِي لِي لِي لِي
لِي مَبِي مَبِي دِي دِي مَبِي
سَمِي تَحْمَلِي مَبِي تَحْمَلِي تَحْمَلِي لِي لِي

Serenity of nature. A scene describing the dawn where the yellow leaves of trees are moved around by the gusting wind.

هَم دِي دُودِي مَبِي لَحْمِي حَمَلِي
كَمَلِي لَحْمِي مَبِي لَحْمِي دِي تَحْمَلِي
يَحْمَلِي مَبِي تَحْمَلِي تَحْمَلِي
وَدَمِي تَحْمَلِي هَم دِي مَبِي فَعِي

Triplets called RAVIs in Assyrian are believed to be originally an Assyrian folkloric poetry style. RAVIs are three-line verses where each line has seven syllables. The ends of the three lines do rhyme. A RAVI by itself communicates a complete concept. RAVIs can be compared and contrasted with Japanese haikus. A haiku has 17 syllables in three unrhymed lines of five, seven, and five syllables. Hannibal was fascinated by this poetry style and having studied haikus, had concluded that the extraordinary richness of our mother language is capable of producing a far more superior and pleasing poetry compared to haikus. He used Urmian vernacular Syriac vocabulary in his RAVIs. The reader will conveniently notice Hannibal's skillful usage of very simple words to produce these captivating verses. In addition to conventional (single-versed) RAVIs, Hannibal has also written multiple-verse poems using this poetry. Here are some examples of Hannibal's RAVIs.

For the love of Assyrians both of mountains and the plain, I have sculpted in boulders.

كَلَّ سَمَكًا دِجْهَ دِي
حَبَّتْ دِيحَّةً بِي جَمَّ دِي
حَصْبَتَا مَ رَ بَرَهْ دَهْ بَ كَتِّي

This is a call on the nation to love and respect its artists.

سَدَّ ۲ مَكَّةَ دِيحَّةَ ۲ مَعْمَقَا
كَلَّ كَهْ سَمَكًا كَهْ حَنَمَا
حَدِّي حَاهْ بَ مَعْمَقَا

Pearls before pigs or eye glasses for blind are like reading psalms to a deaf. This is another fine triplet by Hannibal.

مُدَّ كَعْبِي حَدَّرَ سَوَّ دِي
بِي وَجْفِيحَّةً كَلَّ حَمَّ دِي
بِي دِيحَّةً سَدَّتْ مَوَمَّ دِي

I had been in Hannibal's atelier quite a few times. He had a verse of Persian poetry on his wall by Saeb Tabrizi (1601-1677), a Persian poet and one of the greatest masters of classical Arabic and Persian lyric poetry. This verse is a claim by the poet on his own transparency that has resulted in his acceptance by multiple factions. Hannibal had translated this verse in vernacular Syriac right underneath of the original verse. Hannibal's translation is so thorough and skillful. It has simple vocabulary and flows very pleasingly. By translating this verse, Hannibal has truly claimed this transparency to be his. He truly sought meaningfulness in life. Interestingly enough, I have a photograph of these two verses on the wall of atelier.

مرا از صافی باطن ز خود دانند هر قومی
که هر ظرفی به رنگ خود بر آرد آب روشن را

كَلَّ بَ مَوَمَّ ۲ دَحْتَبَ حَسْتَبِ كَبِ بَحْتَبِ مَكَّ
دَمَبْتَا بَرَقْتَا حِي حَصْبَا كَلَّ جَمَّ مَكَّ دَمَّ

The last piece of poetry work I received from Hannibal was on Sunday, April 11th, 2010. It is translation of a quatrain by Omar Khayyam. This quatrain is the theme of one of his paintings (dated 9/16/09) and appears in both Persian and Assyrian languages on the painting. I have a photograph of this painting. Hannibal made a small change in the arrangement of translation in his note that I will keep as a precious memento from our friendship and mutual trust. An astute reader of Persian and Assyrian languages from this quatrain alone will recognize Hannibal's skills and artistry in composing poetry in vernacular Assyrian.

آن قصر که بر چرخ همی زد پهلوی
بر در گه او شهان نهادندی رو
دیدم که بر کنگره اش فاخته ای
بنشسته همی گفت که کوکو کوکو

ܐܘܫܐ ܩܘܪܕܐ ܕܕܝܡܝܢܐ ܠܫܘܢܐ ܕܡܘܨܝܘܢܐ ܘܕܡܘܨܝܘܢܐ
ܕܕܝܡܝܢܐ ܕܕܝܡܝܢܐ ܕܕܝܡܝܢܐ ܕܕܝܡܝܢܐ ܕܕܝܡܝܢܐ
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I did not cover Rabi Hannibal's ghazal. He has ghazals of his own as well as translation of ghazals by Hafez (1315-1390), the most celebrated Persian lyric poet, from Farsi to Assyrian. Although Hannibal started poetry late in his life compared to painting that he started in young age, he created a massive selection of fine poetry in our beloved mother language. The late Rabi wanted to also be known as a poet. In the introduction to his selected poetry works he wrote:

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And he persistently endeavored to show the richness and adaptability of our vernacular language to different styles of poetry. These are his own words in the same introduction:

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I want to conclude with saying that the late Rabi Hannibal Alkhas was truly an exceptional poet. His works in any style he wrote as far as technicality did comply with the requirements of that particular style. Furthermore, the artistry element in his works that is very unique to him makes his poetry timeless pieces of literature in vernacular Syriac. He always gave credit to the richness of our mother language for enabling him to compose poetry in so many styles. He often used idiomatic speech or made references to our ancestral heritages in his works. His eloquent writing style was influenced by his intellectual capability and imaginative talent. He did a tremendous service to our nation by helping the survival of our mother language through his works. He truly followed the footsteps of his late father in this regard. In my opinion, any reader of his works will acknowledge these statements. **To me however, Hannibal lives for ever.** I will cherish his friendship for as long as I live. I feel so fortunate to have known him at a very personal level that resulted from our comprehensive interaction in the last few years of his life. I learned the quatrain technique while putting Hannibal's selected poetry works in a book for him and I composed two quatrains for him. The last time I recited these two quatrains to him was on Saturday August 20th, 2010 in Turlock when I saw him for the last time. I would like to wrap-up my speech with reciting these two quatrains.

نَا أَهْبَابُكَ:

جَدُّكَ جَدُّكَ ذِي كَمِ حَمَلِكُمْ إِذْ مَمَّ سَأَلْتُمْ
يَكْفُرُ بِكُمْ تَأْسُفًا سَأَلْتُمْ هَمَلِكُمْ
ذِي كَمِ حَمَلِكُمْ تَأْسُفًا سَأَلْتُمْ
بِهِمْ هَمَلِكُمْ تَأْسُفًا سَأَلْتُمْ

نَا أَهْبَابُكَ:

مُذَكَّرٌ بِكُمْ ذِي كَمِ حَمَلِكُمْ
ذِي كَمِ حَمَلِكُمْ تَأْسُفًا سَأَلْتُمْ
ذِي كَمِ حَمَلِكُمْ تَأْسُفًا سَأَلْتُمْ
بِهِمْ هَمَلِكُمْ تَأْسُفًا سَأَلْتُمْ