al-SHA'RéRÂNÎ
Abdulwahhâb b. Ahmad
(b. 1491- d. 1565)

LIFE

Sh. was one of the most distinguished and prolific writers in 10th/16th century Egypt, who produced works on a variety of subjects such as mystical, legal, and theological matters, as well as the history of Sufism in Egypt. Sh.’s voluminous literary output, somewhat paradoxically, obscures our view of his personality. His biographers drew heavily on his writings and "Abdurra’üf al-Munâwî (d. 1031/1621), a disciple of Sh., wrote a short and disappointing biography of his master, even though his work on the lives of Sufis is more helpful in that it provides information about the decades after Sh.’s death and sheds light on his rivalry with Karîmîn Muḥammad ibn Ahmad al-Ḥalwatî (d. 986/1578), the most important Sufi shaykh in Cairo after Sh.’s death. An important biography was written in 1109/1697 by Muḥammad Muḥyiddîn al-Malîjî, a member of Sh.’s ṭariqa who was initiated into the order by a descendant of Sh. Al-Malîjî adds details about persons and events not known from other sources, including Sh.’s physical description. The author quotes Sh.’s manuscripts and relies on "Abdurrahmân, Sh.’s son.

Sh. wrote a lengthy, interesting, but not entirely reliable, autobiography, entitled Latâ’îf al-minan, in which he relates among other things the many miracles that happened to him. According to a passage in the book, one of his ancestors was Mūsâ Abû ‘Imrân, a son of the sultan of Tlemsen. Mūsâ preferred Sufism to worldly power and became a disciple of Abû Madyan (d. 594/1197) who is considered the spiritual master of the Shâdîliyya order. Mūsâ’s grandson Aḥmad (d. 828/1424) moved to the village Sâqiyyat Abû al-Shâ’ra in the Minûfiyya province; hence the nisba al-Shâ’rânî. Aḥmad’s son and Sh.’s grandfather Nūraddîn ‘Alî (d. 891/1486) is presented by Sh. as a model of purity and piety. He studied at al-Azhar and unlike his illiterate father he became a scholar. He was a follower of Shaykh Ibrâhîm al-Matbûlî (d. ca. 877/ 1472), an uncouth and opinionated mystic to whom later Sh. dedicated his long treatise of ethics, al-Ahâlq al-matbûliyya. Al-Matbûlî was also the mentor of ‘Alî al-Ḥawwâṣ al-Burulluşî, an illiterate illuminati mystic, who was to become Sh.’s chief Sufi instructor. ‘Alî al-Sha’rânî had a zâwîya (Sufi convent) in Sâqiyyat Abû al-Shâ’ra through which he maintained his contacts from Cairo with the countryside. This pattern of rural contact from an urban zâwîya was typical of the family’s activity for a long time.

Sh. had less to tell about his father Shihâbaddîn Aḥmad whose biography he did not include in his al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrâ among the Sufis, since he was a scholar but not a Sufi. Like his father ‘Alî, he studied the various disciplines with the outstanding ‘ulamâ’ of Cairo, but remained firmly rooted in the family’s native village. Shihâbad-
dīn earned his livelihood in agriculture, and occasionally served as a witness-clerk, registering the fellāhs’ taxes. He died in 907/1501. Sh. was then about ten years old. After Ahmad’s death, Sh.’s older brother ʿAbdulqādir cared for him. When Sh. reached maturity, his brother took him to the hajj for the first time.

In 911/1505 Sh. was brought to Cairo by a certain government official, who gave him a sum of money for reasons that are not traceable. In Cairo, he settled in the al-Ḡamrī mosque at the northern entrance to the city and remained there for seventeen years. The founder of that mosque was Muḥammad b. ʿUmar al-Ḡamrī, a Sufi shaykh who had been active in Cairo and the adjacent countryside. Sh. was a friend of his grandson, Abūlḥasan al-Ḡamrī (d. 939/1532-33). The young Sh. spent his time in study, prayer and ascetic exercises. Aminaddīn al-Najjār al-Dimyāṭī, the imam of the mosque, initiated Sh. into the religious milieu of Cairo. Through Aminaddīn, Sh. became acquainted with several leading Sufis.

Sh.’s increasing popularity aroused the jealousy of a group of his comrades, and he had to leave the mosque. He moved to Madrasat Umm Ḥond in Ḥāṭṭ Bayna al-Sūrayni, where he found peace. Powerful emirs participated in his mahyā prayer sessions, a newly established custom of praying all Friday night long in honor of the Prophet. He attained recognition and economic success after a certain qadi had established for him a large zawīya, generously supported by charitable endowments (awqāf), where Sh. lived with his family. The zawīya provided food for as many as 200 people a day, most of them temporary residents. It was also a place for study and devotion.

Owing to his charismatic personality, meek character, and also thanks to his broad education and readable style, Sh. had many friends and admirers. Among his teachers and friends, he mentions many men of the ruling class, the greatest scholars of Cairo (of all the madāhib, legal schools, not just his own Shāfiʿī one) and especially many Sufi shaykhs. Among his early teachers in fiqh, Sh. mentions Zakariyyā al-Anṣārī (d. 926/1520), a famous scholar and judge, who educated in his long life generations of ‘ulamā’. Sh. also had (unnamed) enemies at al-Azhar college-mosque. He writes that he was maliciously accused of claiming ijtiḥād muṭlaq, the claim to make independent rulings in Islamic law without following the recognized authorities of early Islam. He also had a Sufi rival named Karimaddīn, head of the Ḥalwāṭī Sufi order that was at the time unorthodox. Typically, Sh. only hints to that rivalry, but a later biographer gives the details of the quarrel that was not only based on personal jealousies, but also on a different understanding of Sufism: Sh. accused Karimaddīn of being careless with regard to the rules of the shariʿa, and the latter regarded Sh. as a faqīh, that is, a jurisconsult, rather than a true mystic. After Sh.’s death the zawīya deteriorated. ʿAbdurrahīm, his only son, was less devoted and did not possess his father’s talents for religious leadership. The Shaʿrāniya order, however, survived into the 19th century.
WORKS

In his writings Sh. showed a strong social awareness, and sympathy with the weak segments of society, especially women and the poor. He opposed injustice, and he and his Sufi comrades tried to spread normative Islam especially in the villages, where there were no scholars or institutions to fulfill that task.

As a meek Sufi, he expressed the need to obey the rulers and to respect them. He praised Süleymān I (926-74/1520-66), and even calls him “the visible pole” (al-Quṭb al-ẓāhir), a Sufi expression of adoration. On the other hand, he criticizes “the unjust ones” (al-ẓalama), unnamed members of the ruling class. Ever cautious, he refrains from any open attack on the Ottoman occupation of Egypt. Yet there are a few hints that reveal his dissatisfaction: in a religious text he introduces a cryptic remark that somehow knowledge disappeared from Egypt at the beginning of the year 923/1517, exactly when the Ottomans occupied the land. More than once he refers negatively to the qānūn, the Ottoman administrative law that was applied to Egypt and was regarded by many as un-Islamic. As other contemporary historians, Sh. notes the diminishing role of Arabic-speaking judges, in favor of Turkish speakers.

Lawāqīḥ al-anwār fī ṭabaqaṭ al-sāda al-ālyār or al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā

Also known as the “Great ṭabaqāt,” this work was completed in 952/1545 and consists of 430 biographies. It starts with the four Rāshīdūn, i.e., the ‘rightly guided caliphs,’ and ends in Sh.’s own days. The older biographies are not original and often contain only sayings attributed to the Sufis. The part of the work where Sh. writes about those Sufis who lived from the second part of the 9th/15th century is especially interesting for historians. The lives of these Sufis, some of whom had been the direct or indirect teachers of himself or his colleagues, were a part of Sh.’s own tradition.

The popularity of the book resulted in several editions, none of which is actually a critical edition of all the existing manuscripts. The most recent is by ʿAbdurrahmān Ḥudā Mahmūd (Cairo, 1992). The editor declares that this edition is based on manuscripts at al-Azhar library and compared to the Būlāq edition of 1292/1875, but does not mention the manuscripts he used. J.-Cl. Garcin prepared an excellent index of the Ṭabaqāt (1966).

al-Ṭabaqāt al-ṣuğrā

In 961/1554, Sh. wrote a supplement (Dayl) to his first biographical dictionary. The supplement which is also known as the “Small ṭabaqāt” comprises 106 biographies, beginning with that of the famous scholar Jalāladdīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505). The work is divided into four parts: 1. Biographies of those who taught him Sufism. 2. Those whom he met personally, did not learn from directly, but whom he may have consulted occasionally. 3. ‘Ulamāʾ who belonged to other madhabs, besides his own Shāfīʾi. 4. Mostly ‘ulamāʾ who were alive when he was writing the supplement, arranged by madhab.
Sh. does not strictly adhere to his division. For example, in Part 1, he writes a short biography of Jalālāddīn al-Suyūṭī who died when Sh. was only fourteen years old and had just arrived in Cairo, too young to be al-Suyūṭī’s disciple. Yet, the Ṭabaqāt al-ṣuğrā includes important information about distinguished Sufis, which does not appear in other sources. Sh. provides information about the early founders of the Sufi family-ṭarīqa of the Bakrī al-Ṣiddīqī, which was prominent in the religious life of Egypt until the 20th century.9

The only edition (1970) seems to be based on the same manuscript that Garcin used for his index (Cairo, Dar al-kutub, Ta’rīh 513).

9 Lawāqīḥ al-anwār al-qudsiyya fī manāqib al-‘ulamā’ wa-l-ṣāfiyya or al-Ṭabaqāt al-wustā

Sh. finished his third collection of Ṭabaqāt which is known as “the Middle Ṭabaqāt” in 965/1557. This unpublished collection is divided into three parts: 1. Early Sufis and ‘ulamā’ whom he did not know personally, up to his grandfather ʿAlī. 2. Sufis whom he knew from the beginning of the 10th century. 3. Other ‘ulamā’. Al-Ṭabaqāt al-wustā was meant to add anecdotes and new themes that Sh. felt he had omitted in the first collection.

Sh. often states that he writes for the moral edification of his readers. Notoriously careless with his dates and sometimes with the facts,10 Sh.’s writing is sometimes naïve. With the miraculous ever-present in his writing, he tells many anecdotes of uncertain historical worth. Yet, as J.-Cl. Garcin correctly notes, there is life in the Ṭabaqāt.11 The anecdotes provide a credible picture of the religious (particularly the Sufi) milieu in Cairo in the second half of the 9th/15th century and during the first decades of Ottoman rule. The networks and Sufi relationships become clear, as well as the attitudes of orthodox Sufis. Sh. also includes several biographies of majdūbs, or malāmaṭīs, namely “distracted ones”, weird and sometimes ignorant illuminati who were roaming the streets of Cairo. In their appearance and behavior they were far from the ideal of saintly men, and Sh. obviously did not approve of them. Nonetheless, they were believed to be endowed with supernatural powers, and some of them were considered to be “natural saints.”

Sh. was and still is a popular writer thanks to his readable style and humanistic approach. It is no wonder that many of the manuscripts of his works survived, including several autographs. Most of them are kept in Cairo, and Garcin primarily relied on Dār al-Kutub al-Misriyya, the Egyptian National Library. Yet as we learn from Carl Brockelmann’s Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur, many manuscripts can be found in libraries outside Egypt.12

Sh. has several other works on Sufism and other religious topics.
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