

# A Brief Life Sketch of Shaykh Ibn Arabi al-Shaykh al-Akbar

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*Qaddas Allah Sirrahu*

It is well known that when our lord, master and beloved, the Prophet of Allah, Muhammad al-Mustafa <sup>saw</sup> went on a missionary tour to the city of Taif, he was rejected by its citizens. They pelted him with stones to the point where it was difficult for him to take his shoes off because of the encrusted blood on them. At one point, when the Prophet <sup>saw</sup> was sitting sad and dejected, the angel Gibril <sup>as</sup> appeared to him and informed him that if he wished, God would order the angels to topple the two mountains besides Taif onto the city to punish its citizens, most of whom belonged to the Tay tribe. As only the Mercy to the Worlds <sup>saw</sup> could answer, he had requested that the people of Taif be spared perchance they, or their descendents, might become believers.

Through the *baraka* of the Beloved of Allah's <sup>saw</sup> prayer, nearly six centuries after him, one of the greatest saints of Islam was born to a pious Arab family of the Tay tribe that was originally from Taif, but had settled in far away Murcia in al-Andalus, Spain. The name of the child was Muhammad ibn Ali ibn Arabi al-Tayi <sup>qs</sup>, who later came to be known as al-Shaykh al-Akbar Muhyi al-Din Ibn Arabi <sup>qs</sup>.

al-Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup> was born to a religious and influential family on Monday, the 17<sup>th</sup> Ramadan 560 AH/28<sup>th</sup> July 1165 CE . He was to be his parents' only son. His father, Ali ibn Muhammad al-Arabi al-Tayi al-Hatimi <sup>qs</sup>, was a well respected court official under several Andalusian rulers, and according to al-Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup>, a *wali* in his own right. His mother, whose name according to some sources was Nur <sup>rh</sup>, was a very pious lady and came from a saintly family. Two of al-Shaykh al-Akbar's <sup>qs</sup> maternal uncles, namely, Abu Muslim al-Khawlani <sup>qs</sup> and Yahya ibn Yughan <sup>qs</sup>, and one paternal uncle by the name of Abd Allah ibn Muhammad al-Arabi al-Tayi <sup>qs</sup> were also *walis*.

It is small wonder that having grown up in such an environment al-Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup> himself went on to become one of the greatest luminaries of the firmament of Sufism. After completing his education in Arabic literature and belle letters in Seville, where his family has moved, he soon turned towards the study of the Quran, *Hadith* and *Fiqh*, and while still an adolescent, he started experiencing spiritual illumination. His fame spread quickly so that no less a personality than the well known Spanish philosopher, Ibn Rushd, requested to meet him and asked him about spiritual matters.

Despite his early and extraordinary spiritual development al-Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup> never ceased learning from other *shaykhs* and *ulama* until almost the end of his days. When he spent the latter part of his life traveling in the Muslim lands, he would always seek out prominent *shaykhs* and *alims* wherever he went and become their disciple even though he often traveled with a large entourage of his own students and disciples. He started his study of the sciences of the Quran with Abu Bakr ibn Khalaf al-Lakhmi <sup>rh</sup> in Seville and continued with many masters. He learnt *Hadith* and *Fiqh* from Ibn Zarqun <sup>rh</sup>, Abd al-Haqq al-Ishbili al-Azdi <sup>rh</sup>, Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Abi Jamara <sup>rh</sup>, Abu al-Walid al-Hadrami <sup>rh</sup>, Abu Jafar ibn Musalli <sup>rh</sup>, Abu Muhammad ibn Abd Allah <sup>rh</sup>, Abu Hasan ibn Abi Nasr <sup>rh</sup>, Abu Muhammad Abd al-Munim ibn Muhammad al-Khazraji <sup>rh</sup>, Ibn Samhun <sup>rh</sup>, and Abu al-Qasim al-Khuzistani <sup>rh</sup> among many, many others.

One of his first *shaykhs* of *suluk* (Sufi training) was Shaykh Ahmad al-Uraybi <sup>qs</sup> whom he met in Seville. There he also met and was initiated by Sayyidna Khadir <sup>as</sup>. While he learnt from many of the prominent living *shuyukh* of his day, he also had strong *uwaysi* links to past masters, especially Shaykh Abu Madyan <sup>qs</sup>. In his quest for knowledge he traveled widely in Morocco and other parts of North Africa. He made extended trips to Tunis and Fez to learn from prominent *Hadith* masters and *shaykhs*. In Tunis he spent time with Shaikh Abd al-Aziz al-Mahdawi <sup>rh</sup> and Shaikh Ibn Khamis al-Jarrah <sup>rh</sup>. In Fez he learnt *Hadith* from Shaykh Muhammad ibn Qasim al-Tamimi <sup>rh</sup>. al-Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup> returned to Seville for a while, but having met and learnt from most of the prominent *shuyukh* of al-Andalus, he bade a permanent farewell to his native land in the closing years of the sixth century of the Hegira, and set off on a long journey through the western Muslim lands, Egypt, and Palestine on his way to the Hijaz. He was never to return to al-Andalus.

After visiting the resting place Sayyidna Ibrahim <sup>as</sup> and his holy family <sup>as</sup> in al-Khalil, al-Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup> visited al-Quds al-Sharif, and went on to pay his respects to the Mercy to the Worlds, Rasul Allah <sup>saw</sup> in Madinah al-Munawwara. He arrived in Makka al-Mukarrama for Hajj in the fortieth year of his life in 598 AH.

By this time al-Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup> had become an eminent *muhaddith* and *faqih*. His high spiritual status had been affirmed by many *awliya* of his time, and he had been given *ijazas* by many *shaykhs* in many *tariqas*. He would often impart his spiritual and textual knowledge to his teachers in return, forming a reciprocal bond with them. In keeping with this practice, he sought out the famous *ulama* and *shaykhs* of Makka al-Mukarrama to benefit from them. Prominent among these were Shaykh Abu Shuja Zahir al-Isfahani <sup>rh</sup> and Shaykh Jamal al-Din Yunus ibn Yahaya al-Hashimi <sup>qs</sup>. Shaykh al-Hashimi <sup>qs</sup> conferred upon him an *ijaza* for the *Sahih* of Abu Dawud <sup>rh</sup>. He also invested al-Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup> with the *khirqah* of al-Ghawth al-Azam Shaykh Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani <sup>qs</sup> in front of the Rukn Yamani of the Holy Kaba.

The conferment of the Qadiri *khirqah* upon al-Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup> highlights the special relationship between the al-Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup> and al-Ghawth al-Azam <sup>qs</sup>. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the way Mawla Ali <sup>as</sup> had a special relationship to the *wilaya* of Rasul Allah <sup>sa</sup>, similarly al-Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup> was a special inheritor of al-Ghawth al-Azam's <sup>qs</sup> spiritual knowledge. It is small wonder then, that al-Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup> had the privilege to systematically explain the spiritual insights of the *awliya*, which others before him had only hinted at. The near universal acceptance his works received among the *awliya* since his time attests to the fact that al-Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup> accomplished this task to perfection. This would have been impossible had he and his works not been blessed by Allah and Rasul Allah <sup>sa</sup>. In fact, it was only after he had a profound spiritual experience in front of the Hajar al-Aswad in Makkah that al-Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup> started composing his opus magnum, the *Futuhat al-Makkiya*.

After staying in Makka al-Mukarramah for about two year, al-Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup> resumed his travels. He first paid another visit to Rasul Allah <sup>sa</sup> in Madina al-Munawwara and then visited various places in Syria before arriving in Baghdad. From there, he went via Mosul to Konya in Anatolia at the invitation of its ruler, Sultan Kaykaus. All this while, he continued to meet prominent *ulama* and *shaykhs*, among them Shaykh Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi <sup>qs</sup>. His circle of disciples expanded greatly wherever he went.

Finally, in 620 AH, Al-Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup> permanently settled down in Damascus with his family and disciples. He spent his remaining years teaching and guiding his disciples and writing many works for their edification. He continued to meet members of the religious and spiritual elite. Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi <sup>qs</sup> also visited him in Damascus.

Al-Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup> produced many tracts and treatises throughout his life, the most famous among them being *al-Fusus al-Hikam*, which to this day remains one of the key texts on Muslim prophetology, the *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq*, a *divan* of his poetry, and *al-Futuhat al-Makkiya*, in which diverse topics of *Tasawwuf* are illuminated in the light of the Quran and *Hadith*. All three were composed or completed in Damascus. In 632, he composed a second draft of the *Futuhat* with modifications.

And thus it was that, having traveled all over the Muslim world, having scaled the heights of *Tasawwuf* and trained many disciples, and having composed major works of spirituality and Divine knowledge, al-Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup> bade farewell to this world on the 22<sup>nd</sup> Rabi al-Thani 638/17th November 1240. He lies buried near Mount Qasyun in Damascus, where his tomb is the fount of spiritual lights for all who visit.

While he was always revered in Sufi circles, al-Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup> became controversial for some *ulama* a century or so after his death. It is perhaps understandable this would be so, given the highly technical and symbolic nature of most of al-Shaykh al-Akbar's <sup>qs</sup> writings. It is quite easy for those not familiar with Sufi terminology, and al-Shaykh al-Akbar's <sup>qs</sup> own complex

terminology to misunderstand him. Matters are not helped when people ignore the context in which his works were written and meant to be read. They were not meant for general consumption, but for those traveling the Sufi path and engaged in Sufi exercises and contemplation.

Based on superficial misreading, some alleged that al-Shaykh al-Akbar's<sup>95</sup> teachings implied the negation of the *Sharia* or at least its outer aspects. Nothing could be further from the truth. As can be seen from his biography, he was particularly concerned with *Hadith*, and was an accomplished *muhaddith* himself. Not only that, he followed the Dhahiri *madhhab* and considered it a must to take revelation literally, whether it was the recited revelation (*wahyi matlu*) of the Quran, or the un-recited revelation (*wahyi ghayr matlu*) of the *Hadith*. His *fiqh*, like his spiritual insights, was based on taking seriously the literal meanings of Quranic verses and wordings of *Hadith*. At the same time, he never tried to impose his *fiqh* on others, nor did he condemn or allowed his students to condemn other *fuqaha* or their schools of *Fiqh*.

Like all major Sufi saints, al-Shaykh al-Akbar<sup>95</sup> was particularly concerned with the five pillars of Islam, and gave elaborate explanations of the spiritual meaning and benefits of each. Just the way he derived his spiritual insights from the literal meaning of revelation, similarly, he considered it essential to follow the outer aspect of the *Sharia*, like the rituals, if one were to acquire and benefit from its inner dimension.

In any case, the majority of *ulama* and nearly all Sufis affirmed his lofty status. Even Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi al-Mujaddid<sup>95</sup>, who initially criticized some of al-Shaykh al-Akbar's<sup>95</sup> teachings based on his own spiritual insights, later came to accept the Akbari position, as is attested in some of the later letters he wrote that can be found in the third volume of his *Maktubat*.

In fact, in his own spiritual journey, as Shaykh al-Mujaddid<sup>95</sup> acknowledges, the only person with whom he could have a discourse all the way was al-Shaykh al-Akbar<sup>95</sup> with whom "sometimes he was at war, and sometimes he was at peace". Shaykh al-Mujaddid's<sup>95</sup> own insights give an explanation for this. According to him, the status of a *wali* depends upon his nearness to God. This, in turn, is manifested by the amount of Divine knowledge revealed to the *wali*. This criterion gives ample proof of the lofty status of al-Shaykh al-Akbar<sup>95</sup> and why other *awliya* gave him this title.

Sadly, in our times, as many Muslims have moved away from the true teachings of their religion, the unfair criticism and condemnation of al-Shaykh al-Akbar<sup>95</sup> has increased on the one hand, while on the other, many have started misusing his teachings. As more Muslims have rejected *Tasawwuf* they have also rejected one of its greatest saints. It is much like Sayyidna Yusuf<sup>95</sup> and his brothers. They did not care for him and got rid of him, while the Egyptians vied

with one another to buy him in the slave market. Something similar has happened with *Tasawwuf* as a whole and al-Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup> in particular.

These days, it seems, admiring non-Muslims write more about al-Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup> than Muslims. Similarly, non-Sufis and pseudo-Sufis seem to have more to say about him than Sufis. In either case, motives other than trying to get a genuine understanding of *Tasawwuf* and a sincere attempt to travel the path of *suluk* are brought in that cause people to distort his teachings to the point of slander.

A good example would be Mirza Ghulam Ahmad Qadiani, the founder of the Ahmadiyya religion, who had the audacity to distort the teachings of al-Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup> and al-Shaykh al-Mujaddid Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi <sup>qs</sup> to justify his own claims for prophecy. Disregarding the many explicit statements about the end of prophethood with Rasul Allah <sup>saw</sup> with which the works of these two Sunni luminaries are replete, and ignoring the elaborate explanations both give as to why this was so and what it means, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad chose convenient extracts from those sections that deal with the bestowal of the lights of the sainthood (*wilaya*) of some prophets upon some accomplished *awliya*, and having done a diabolical cut-and-paste job, tried to claim that these two saints of Sunni Islam were in agreement with him on the possibility of the continuation of prophecy after Rasul Allah <sup>saw</sup>. *al-'Iyadh billah*.

Some of the Perennialists have also fallen into a similar error. In their zealous attachment to the Virgin Mary <sup>as</sup>, because of which they call their movement al-Tariqa al-Maryamiya, they too have played fast and loose with al-Shaykh al-Akbar's <sup>qs</sup> technical terminology and his distinctions between sainthood (*wilaya*) and propethood (*nubuwwa*), and incorrectly claim the status of a prophetess for her in the name of his teachings, and in open contravention of the Quran (12:109, 16:43, 21:7).

The Perennialists and other Western "experts" on al-Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup> have gone even further, and try to portray him as a universalist who considered all religions to be equally valid and all spiritual paths equally efficacious. Again, these claims are often buttressed with convenient cut-and-paste quotations. Such people need only read the last will and testament of al-Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup> to his son to understand his real belief about the primacy and finality of Islam. There are also his letters to rulers urging them to fight a jihad against non-Muslims.

As a Dhahiri, Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup> paid serious attention to, and affirmed the literal meaning of the Quran and *Hadith* as mentioned above, and those verses and *ahadith* dealing with the abrogation of earlier revealed religions and Islam being the sole path of true and complete salvation were no exception. In fact, he likened the earlier revealed religions to stars and the *Sharia* of Rasul Allah <sup>saw</sup> to the sun, and said that just as when the sun rises the stars are eclipsed, similarly, with the advent of Islam and its all inclusive *Sharia*, all previous religions were abrogated (*naskh*).

People living in the modern era fail to appreciate one key assumption of this analogy, which is not valid for modern astronomy any more. For the pre-moderns, there was only one source of light in the heavens and that was the sun, the light of the stars was believed to be a reflection of the light of the sun, just the way the light of the moon was. That is why with the advent of Islam, according to al-Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup>, earlier religions did not become false (*batil*) but were abrogated (*mansukh*), for their light was the reflected light of the Sun of Muhammadan <sup>saw</sup> Guidance, and with the rising of the Muhammadan <sup>saw</sup> Sun in its full glory, the reflected lights are not rendered false, but unnecessary.

Furthermore, for modern people the sun and the stars are the same type of heavenly body, with the sun being the nearest star to Earth, but for the pre-modern this was not so. The sun was unique as the only source of light in the sky, and al-Shaykh al-Akbar's <sup>qs</sup> likening the *Sharia* of Rasul Allah <sup>saw</sup> to the sun is highly significant and shows the importance he attached to it.

It seems, like post-modern critics, some of al-Shaykh al-Akbar's <sup>qs</sup> Western admirers can read between the lines and understand al-Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup> better than he himself. They can even come up with sociological explanations as to why al-Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup> did not say what he should have said according to their presumptions. However, al-Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup> is neither a literary writer, nor a theologian, nor a philosopher, in either the Islamic or modern Western sense of the term, that one can use clever reasoning to manipulate his writings and decide what he really meant to say, or not say, or should have said, or should not have said and then claim to understand his Sufi doctrines. His writings are the product of *kashf* (spiritual intuition), and are meant for those traveling the path of *suluk*. People who have never been to Paris have no business discussing the flavor of the coffee of its cafés based solely on an elaborate street map of the city. It is all about *dhauq* (tasting). As Mulla Jami <sup>rh</sup> has said:

*Khvahi kih shavi dakhil-i arbab-i nazar*

*Az qal bah hal bayadat kard guzar*

*Az guftan-i tawhid muvahhid nah shavi*

*Shirin nah shaved dahan bah nam-i shaker*

If you wish to become one of the people of insight

You have to pass from mere words to actual (spiritual) states

You do not become a (spiritual) monotheist just by verbal affirmation

The mouth does not become sweet just by saying 'sugar'

One can only say to those, who want to portray al-Shaykh al-Akbar <sup>qs</sup> as a New Age free spirit who is not really concerned with organized religion, or as someone who thinks all exoteric forms are equally valid and all esoteric traditions equally right, or those who want to imply some sort of anti-*Sharia* heterodoxy to him: with friends like you who needs enemies?

To learn more about al-Shaykh al-Akbar Muhyi al-Din Ibn Arabi <sup>qs</sup> and his path, please contact Shaykh Amin <sup>db</sup> at [contactus@sulook.org](mailto:contactus@sulook.org).

*Wa akhir dawana an al-hamd lillah Rabb al-Alamin wa al-salat wa al-salam wa al-barakat ala al-inbiya wa al-mursalin wa al-malaika wa al-muqarrabin khususan ala sayyidihim shams al-risala wa al-nubuwwa al-wilaya sayyidina wa habibina wa mawlana wa hadina wa shafina Muhammad al-Mustafa wa ala alihi wa azwajih wa sahibi wa ala sulha wa shuhada wa awliya ummatihi wa ala sair al-muslimin ya Rabbana ya Karim innaka Hamidun Majidun amin.*