

A Brief Look at My Life

I still remember how my father took me for the first time to the local mosque where al-Tarawih prayers were performed during the month of Ramadan. I was then ten years old. He introduced me to the men who could not hide their astonishment.

I knew previously that the tutor had arranged for me to perform al-Ishfa¹ prayers for two or three nights. It was customary for me to pray behind the man with some local children, and wait for the Imam to arrive at the second part of the Qur'an, i.e. Surat Meriam. My father made sure that we learnt the Qur'an at the Qur'anic school as well as at home through private lessons given to us by a blind man, who was related to us and who could recite the Qur'an by heart. Due to the fact that I learnt to recite the Qur'an at an early age, the tutor tried to show his good influence on me by teaching me the kneeling points in the recital. He tested me repeatedly to make sure that I had understood his instructions.

After I passed the test and finished performing the prayers and the recital, as well as I was expected to do, all the men came and congratulated me and my father, and thanked my tutor for his good efforts and blessings, and thanked Allah for Islam.

The memories of the days that followed are still with me today. I acquired so much admiration and my reputation went beyond our alley to the whole town. Those nights of Ramadan have left their religious marks on me to this day, and every time I go through an episode of confusion, I feel that there is a strange power which pulls me and puts me back on the path.

Every time I felt the weakness of the soul and the meaningless of life, these memories come to me to elevate me to a spiritual level and light in my conscience the flame of belief so that I can carry the responsibility. The responsibility which was given to me by my father, or more appropriately by my tutor, to lead the group in prayers at an early age made me feel as if I was not doing enough, or at least not up to the standard which was expected from me.

Therefore I spent my childhood and my adolescence in relative rectitude, but not without some innocent playing and an eagerness to know and to imitate. Throughout that period I was surrounded by the divine care which made me distinguishable amongst my brothers for my calmness and composure and for

being on the right path and away from all immoral acts.

I should not forget to mention that my mother, may Allah bless her soul, had a big influence on me. She opened my eyes as she taught me the short chapters (surahs) of the holy Qur'an, the prayers and the rules of ritual purity. She took special care of me because I was her first son, and perhaps she found pleasure in educating me, as she was sharing the household with my father's first wife and her sons.

The name Tijani, which was given to me by my mother, has a special meaning in the al-Samawi family which had adopted the Tijani Sufi tariqa (order) ever since it was visited by a son of Shaykh Sidi Ahmed al-Tijani who came from Algeria. Many people of Gafsa – my family's home town – adopted the Tijani sufi order, especially the wealthy and educated families who helped to spread the order.

Because of my name, I became quite popular in the Samawi House and outside it, especially with those who were connected with the Tijani order. Therefore, many of the elders who were present at the above mentioned night during Ramadan came to congratulate my father and then kissed my head and hand and said, "These are the blessings of our master Shaykh Ahmad al-Tijani."

It is worth noting that the Tijani Sufi order is widely spread in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Lybia, Sudan and Egypt, and those who believe in it are, somehow, fanatical about it. They do not visit the graves of other sages because, according to their belief, they acquired their knowledge from each other, whereas Shaykh Ahmed al-Tijani acquired his knowledge from the Messenger of Allah Muhammad (s.a.w.) directly, despite the fact that he came thirteen centuries after the Prophet (s.a.w.).

It has been said that Shaykh Ahmed al-Tijani used to communicate with the great Prophet (s.a.w.) by talking to him while he was awake and not in his sleep. Also it is believed that the complete prayers which were devised by the Shaykh are better than finishing the Holy Qur'an forty times.

In order to be brief I shall stop talking about the Tijani Sufi tariqa at this stage of the book, and if God wills it, I will refer to it elsewhere.

Thus I grew up with this belief, like any other youth in our town. We were all – praise be to Allah – Sunni Muslims following the teaching of Imam Malik ibn Anas, Imam of Dar al-Hijra. However, we, in North Africa, are divided in our Sufi orders. For example in Gasfa alone there are al-Tijaniyya, al-Qadiriyya, al-Rahmaniyya, al-Salamiyya and al-Isawiyya.

For each of the above orders, there are followers and supporters who could recite the order, poems and Dhikrs (invocation of God) in all special ceremonies such as weddings, circumcisions and vows. Apart from some negative aspects, these Sufi Tariqas played an important role in preserving the religious rites and in maintaining the respect for the sages.

1. Al-Ishfa prayers, also called al-Tarawih, because of the rest taken between every second prayer. Named "al-Ishfa"

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